

9-25-2015

## Crier, Arthur

Crier, Arthur. Bronx African American History Project  
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Mark Naison: This is the 38<sup>th</sup> interview for The Bronx African American History Project. We are here today with Arthur Crier who is one of the organizers of The Morrisania Review and one of the leading figures in Doo-Wop and Rhythm and Blues in the Morrisania community and also I believe has done many, many shows examining the musical heritage of The Bronx. So it's a pleasure to be with you Mr. Crier. I want to start off by asking about your childhood. When did your family first move to The Bronx?

Arthur Crier: I was born in Harlem, but I was raised in The Bronx, I was born in the hospital, that same hospital I was born in - -

MN: What hospital was that?

AC: 165<sup>th</sup> street and Broadway.

MN: Columbia Presbyterian.

AC: Right yeah I was born there.

MN: And your family was living in Harlem at the time?

AC: I don't know. I know I grew up on Prospect Avenue.

MN: So your first memories are growing up on Prospect Avenue. What was the cross street?

AC: Jennings Street

MN: Okay so Prospect and Jennings. Do you remember the number of the building?

AC: No, I was about two or three.

MN: Two or three years old. And this was in the forties?

AC: In the thirties.

MN: In the thirties, boy you look much younger.

AC: Thank you

MN: So your family moved to Prospect Ave in the thirties. Did they live in Harlem first?

AC: They lived in Harlem first.

MN: And then they moved to that, yeah. What sort of work did your father do?

AC: My father was one of the first black postal officers in New York City, so he worked at GP offices, you know supervising.

MN: That's very interesting because the Pruitt family told me that almost all of the black families who moved to Prospect Avenue in the thirties were either postal workers or window workers.

AC: Yeah, yeah, that's what it was.

MN: Now what elementary school did you go to?

AC: I went to P.S. 23.

MN: And what street was that located on?

AC: That was on 165<sup>th</sup> street and Tenth Avenue, between Tenth and Eleventh.

MN: Now at the time that you went there, were there other African American children in the school?

AC: Yes there were, but there also was a good mixture there. When I got to PS 23, I had moved to Tenth Avenue.

MN: Tenth Avenue and what?

MN: Tenth Avenue and what?

AC: 166<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: So it was a very mixed school at the time?

AC: Yes it was.

MN: And who were the other groups these, were, - -

AC: [inaudible] Italian, Irish, mixture

MN: And was it a successful mixture, did everybody get along?

AC: When I blinked they were gone.

MN: Oh okay, so there was a...

AC: Our neighborhood's kids, those were some of the times in my live we used to buy the two by fours and the skates and make our own little scooters, and then we had the pea-shooting time, we had kite flying, the roof was like where everybody hung out. A lot of kites out there and stuff like that.

MN: And what sort of street games did you grow up playing?

AC: Arelio, Box-Tag, Catch the Robber, Cowboys and Indians, you know. Those types of things. Stickball was the main game that everybody played on all the different blocks.

MN: Now did you play by bouncing the ball or pitching it directly?

AC: We played by bouncing the ball.

MN: Hitting two sewers was [inaudible]

AC: Yeah, we also played single, double, triple, which is hit it off the stoops, off the steps.

MN: Stoopball, we called it stoopball in Brooklyn

AC: And [inaudible] and we played handball.

MN: Now when you were growing up, I guess on tenth and 166<sup>th</sup> street, did you live there longer than you did at Prospect?

AC: Yes.

MN: So was being on a certain block very important when you were growing up? Did everyone know each other and look out for each other?

AC: Yes, it was definitely like that, everybody looked out for each other and leave your doors open. It was just a nice situation.

MN: Now did you go to the movies a lot when you were a kid?

AC: Lower East Browning and the Archill Browning.

MN: How far was that from your house?

AC: That was, from my house, about three blocks.

MN: Did your family belong to a church in the neighborhood?

AC: St. Augustine's

MN: St. Augustine's Presbyterian?

AC: Yes.

MN: And was reverend Hawkings there?

AC: Reverend Hawkings lived right next door to us.

MN: He lived next door to you?

AC: This was when I was on [inaudible] street, before I moved to Tenth. Our house was the fellowship house, it's not the fellowship house any more - -

MN: Because he comes across as a very legendary - -

AC: He was a very good friend of my father's, and my family.

MN: Did you know the Davidson family? The gentleman who put out the Newspaper  
The Listener?

AC: No, names sometimes [inaudible] but they escape me.

MN: Now when you were growing up, was there a lot of music in your family, did you  
grow up - -

AC: My father sang in a quartette before he became a postal employee, and my mother,  
well they both sand in the choir, so that, you know - -

MN: At the church?

AC: Yes.

MN: When you're saying a quartette, what sort of songs did your father sing?

AC: I never heard him.

MN: Oh, you never heard him?

AC: [inaudible]

MN: Were there a lot of records in the house?

AC: A lot of records.

MN: What were some of their favorites?

AC: Dominic Spots, Count AZ, The Gunton, Sirvon, Golden Gate Quartette, Billy  
Williams Quartette, Swing Quartette, Guido Jordan, - -

MN: Now what about the radio, were there particular radio programs that you remember  
as a child?

AC: Well I was in love with station WJZ because they used to have barbershop  
quartettes. That's when I started to fall in love - -

MN: WJZ, where was that on the dial?

AC: Ooh, I can't remember.

MN: Okay, did your family ever take you to live music, was that part of you - -

AC: Yeah, they took me to The Paramount to see [inaudible] spots.

MN: What were the schools like educationally?

AC: All the schools seemed to be good in those days, yeah.

MN: The teachers were - -

AC: The teachers really cared.

MN: Were your parents involved in the school's PTA and stuff like that?

AC: My father was a Area Gordon. Do you know what that was, Area Gordon?

MN: It's a little before my time.

AC: That's like the sirens go off, the Area Gordon would have to come out. If there's a blackout, then people would get in their house and turn off their lights and that type of thing. Yeah and so it went on like that.

MN: It sounds like your father was a kind of community leader. Was he involved in politics? Was he a member of a political club?

AC: No, he coached a lot of recreation at the church, St. Augustine, so he worked with Cloyd Lane and people like that.

MN: Oh so he was a coach, now were you an athlete as a young man?

AC: I was great as a young man [laughter].

MN: Wow, what was your sport?

AC: I was baseball.

MN: You were baseball?

AC: Yes.

MN: Did you play high school, or any - -

AC: I came up, before we had a league, so we just sort of had the 25cent party baseball caps, we had uniforms, so we did all of that on our own.

MN: And your father coached basketball?

AC: Yeah my father coached basket ball.

MN: What junior high school did you go to?

AC: I went to P.S. 51

MN: Is that still there?

AC: no, every school that I went to is gone.

MN: Wow, so, was that junior high school in the neighborhood?

AC: No it was right on 165<sup>th</sup> street, and Jackson Avenue, maybe twelve blocks from me.

MN: Was that also a racially mixed school?

AC: That was a mostly black school.

MN: When you were going to junior high school, were gangs starting in The Bronx.

Yeas, there were gangs. There were Sixers, and, I can't remember all of the names, but there were quite a few gangs.

MN: Were the Sixers from the Bronx?

AC: The Sixers were from 165<sup>th</sup> Street between Prospect and Union, where St. Anthony's is.

MN: Did they have a club house?

AC: No, no clubhouse.

MN: Because Howie Evans told me they were a tough group.

AC: Yeah, they were



MN: Now that was an all black gang?

AC: Yes.

MN: Were there any other gangs you remember?

AC: The Scorpions, the Nutralistics from Jennings Street, from 165<sup>th</sup> street there was another gang, I forget their name now, but there were quite a few gangs around.

MN: Were kids scared to go out of their immediate block because of this?

AC: You didn't want to go on their turf. You would be in trouble. Unless you were a singer. If you were a singer you could go wherever you wanted to go. [laughter] that's why it was good to be a singer. I guess they realized that we had to record there, to do the talent shows, and then if you were a singer, it was like a stripe.

MN: Now was it the same thing if you were a basketball player, or that didn't carry?

AC: I don't think so.

MN: When did you start singing?

AC: When I was fifteen, I started recording with Heavenly Five, and we sang gospel, and we would go to church and pass the hat around.

MN: Were you singing in your home before that, or in school?

AC: One time as a kid, my father tried to get me on the piano, but I was tone deaf and when he tried to teach me I couldn't get it.

MN: Was this in junior high or in high school when you started singing?

AC: I was in junior high school.

MN: And that's when you began Ebony Five - -

AC: Heavenly Five.

MN: Heavenly Five. Who were the other members?

AC: Franklin Douglass, Charles Richardson, and I can remember Howard Senemie.

MN: And you started singing gospel.

AC: Yes, and Charles Collin, was a great bass and center piece; all state, city of course.

MN: Were any of you in choruses, or churches or choirs?

AC: Charles Collins, Like I said he was an all star.

MN: What year was this?; so we can identify the time.

AC: I was 15 years old so it had to be about 1950.

MN: It was 1950.

AC: Yeah. I was born in 1935

MN: Now, were you aware that there was something going on with singing groups ?

When you did this, were other kids in your neighborhood doing this?

AC: No.

MN: So this is something that the four of you guys started doing?

AC: Right. There were gospel groups, but that was it.

MN: What was the response when you sang for those people?

AC: [inaudible] [laughter]

MN: What about girls? Was that part of the motivation?

AC: No, I wasn't thinking of girls at the time. [inaudible] When I was 15 I was just into baseball and sports.

MN: What high school did you go to?

AC: I went to New York Vocational in Harlem on 138<sup>th</sup> street and Eleventh.

MN: When you went there, were there other kids that were singing in the school?

AC: No.

MN: When did you move from gospel into secular music?

AC: I can remember a guy by the name of Gary Curtis, Gary Marsiman, I hadn't seen him in years, I went into the service and I got hurt in the service, so I got out and when I saw him I was 17 years old.

MN: So you went into the service when you were, how old were you?

AC: I was seventeen when I went in; I was seventeen when I got out.

MN: You went into the service at 17, you were allowed to enlist at that age?

AC: Yeah.

MN: And what branch of the service was that?

AC: Marines.

MN: And that was in 1952?

AC: 1952.

MN: And that was during the Korean War. Did they send you over there?

AC: I got hurt in training, so I came home. They gave me a big going away party. I joined October the 28<sup>th</sup> and I got discharged November the 24<sup>th</sup>.

MN: How did your family feel about your enlisting?

AC: It was a great thing, it was the honorable thing to do, go into the service.

MN: And this was before you graduated from high school?

AC: Yes

MN: So you came back from the service, did you get a job or did you go back to high school?

AC: No, I didn't go back to high school, but let me continue my story, I didn't go back to high school. I dropped out because I didn't like the school, I should have went to

Morris High School. I didn't like the trade school, I was taking radio and I just didn't like it. So anyway, that's when the army service came out and a friend of mine, Gary, whom I had went to elementary school with, I hadn't seen him in years, and he came up to me and told me he was starting a group and he would like me to come and try out for the bass for the group, there would be other guys there trying out also, so I went to try out and got the job.

MN: And what was the name of the group?

AC: The Chimes, I mean the Gay Arts, I mean the Gay Tones at the time.

MN: And this is what 1952?

AC: 1952.

MN: Now by this time were rhythm and blues groups like that starting to record?

AC: yes, the Five Keys, and others, they were out there in a whole different situation in the same streets and all that.

MN: So between 1950 - -

AC: And '52.

MN: There was a big difference.

AC: A big difference.

MN: And were people singing on the street in The Bronx as well as in Harlem?

AC: Yeah, definitely. You have to realize, I think it was 47, I'm not sure if my year's right, the Ravens came out first, then the Orioles came out. And you know the Orioles took over. I think the Orioles [inaudible] between the Orioles and the Ravens.

MN: Were the radio stations - -

AC: All of the black stations, Henry, Dr. Jive, I can't remember all of the names.

These songs were featuring on the radio, you came home from school and put on your radio right away.

MN: Somebody said they turned on Dr. Jive in the afternoon, WWRL.

AC: yes, WWRL [inaudible] it was about 4 or 5 [inaudible]

MN: Were there venues that groups like the Gaylords - -

AC: Gay Tones.

MN: The Gay Tones. When you started performing live, where would you perform?

AC: Talent shows

MN: Where were the talent shows held?

AC: P.S. 99.

MN: P.S. 99 had talent shows?

AC: Yeah, that Was the Motown of The Bronx.

MN: Okay, who sponsored these talent shows?

AC: [inaudible]

MN: They were in the evening?

AC: They were in the evening, yeah.

MN: That's very interesting - -

AC: We would go there at night and listen to music, or have group rehearsal - -

MN: So this was like part of an after school center in the schools?

AC: Yes.

MN: Mow when you were in junior high school, did you get music education in the schools?

AC: No, I'm sorry, in high school, yeah, I wanted the trumpet because that was the thing at the time. [inaudible]

MN: Was that part of the high school band?

AC: Not the band, they were teaching music.

MN: You ever take home an instrument?

AC: Yeah, you would take your instrument home.

MN: So you were able to take your instrument home from a vocational high school on Harlem?

AC: That's right.

MN: Now how did you get to school? By public transportation?

AC: By bus. I don't know which bus I got on, I think I probably took the [inaudible] bus to 138<sup>th</sup> street, transferred, and went over the bridge. Now you didn't worry about somebody taking your instrument?

AC: nobody was doing that.

MN: And so you basically look back on your childhood as being pretty safe?

AC: Very safe, yeah. [inaudible] You know, when I would make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, they would come and take my sandwich from me.

MN: But you never felt like your life was in danger at any point?

AC: No.

MN: In 52 and 53, was Morrisania predominately a black neighborhood at the time?

AC: Yeah.

MN: And was there any significant Puerto Rican Population moving at that time?

AC: [inaudible] I don't think it was at that time. There was one Spanish American barber shop that everybody went to on 167<sup>th</sup> street and Union.

MN: The 99 talent shows, how many people would they have on the venue in the evening performing?

AC: I'd say probably ten.

MN: Then there would be voters and then first, second, and third place?

AC: It was by applause, we had the rawest talent show in the first place.

MN: So everybody is cheering, did you start to then get like a neighborhood reputation?

AC: We got a great reputation.

MN: Did it spread beyond the neighborhood to other places?

AC: We would go to, 99 would put their contract out to Jersey where there would be other singing groups, so the talent show would be our time to sing.

MN: That's fascinating, so you would have somebody at 99, would this be like a music teacher?

AC: Yeah, I can't remember [inaudible]

MN: That sounds like a pretty important person. And he would take the winners of these talent shows out to New Jersey and you performed with other singing groups out there.

AC: Right.

MN: Do you remember what communities in New Jersey?

AC: I can only remember the first one, Englewood, that's what it was.

MN: Were people dreaming about recording contracts at the time or that wasn't quite on the radar screen?

AC: Oh, that was on the radar. T Wills was our lead singer, [inaudible] his father was with [inaudible] and he was also with the [inaudible] Quartette at the time, so we didn't have any problem getting a recording deal, and we didn't have to go around and audition.

MN: Now when was your first record put out?

AC: 1953, by the way we changed our name because somebody thought it was for gay men [laughter] so we were renamed the Chimes.

MN: The Chimes, oh wow. What was the first record?

AC: Dearest Darling.

MN: Dearest Darling. And what was it like the first time you heard it played on the radio?

AC: We jumped up and down in the room, we thought we were becoming stars, we thought we were superstars you know, it was great. And our first gig was with Charlie Barker, Lester Young, The Solitaires, The Velvets, at the Rockland Palace.

MN: At The Rockland Palace. That was 53?

AC: That was 53.

MN: Wow, and where else did you perform live in those years?

AC: Regular talent shows, we were there, but our bass was P.S.99 and they always had talent show there, about once every four or five months.

MN: Was there a monetary reward for the talent shows?

AC: I don't remember them doing anything.

MN: Did everybody have day jobs in addition to the music?

AC: In my group?

MN: Yeah.



AC: No

MN: So you were basically able to support yourselves through the music?

AC: Oh no, we were still living with our mommas, we were 17, with our parents you know. To be honest, my first job was at Western Union, actually, which I loved. But even before that, [inaudible] I was like 15 years old, that's my first time [inaudible] he would pay me like ten dollars to help him carry stuff into the drug store.

MN: People tell me that Morris High School produced a number of groups in the 50s?

AC: It certainly did. We had a teacher named Mr. Miller who wrote songs, and I can't remember the name of the group [inaudible]

MN: In hip hop, they talk about battling. Did you have street corner - -

AC: The talent show was that.

MN: Everything was at the talent show. If you sang on the corners, you would sing with everybody. My group might be if I run into you, or run into you.

MN: Did you ever perform at any of the clubs in Morrisania like Club 845 or Goodson's?

AC: No, but I used to go to those places.

MN: What was the music at those venues?

AC: Jazz, mostly jazz.

MN: Were top jazz artists playing at those clubs?

AC: top jazz artists.

MN: Who were some the people you saw at those clubs?

AC: Nancy Wilson when she first came to New York, Mackey Culpepper played at Goodson's Town, Fat Freddy's, 168<sup>th</sup> Street Pretty Cove, I can't remember all the names, so many, everybody came. They were all professional, as I think about it.

MN: Morrisania was a tremendous place for music.

AC: Yeah, [inaudible] came down to the Apollo Bar, and that was the big - -

MN: The Apollo Bar?

AC: Yeah, there was Freddy's, the New Rock, and The Apollo Bar about 3 blocks from there.

MN: That's the one place that hasn't been mentioned, The Apollo Bar.

AC: The Apollo Bar was between 169<sup>th</sup> Street and 168<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: That had performances also?

AC: Live performances, it had go-go dancers as well. And right down the street was Freddy's, on 168<sup>th</sup> Street and Forts Road, then Across the street down a little bit further, towards 167<sup>th</sup> Street was The New Morocco.

MN: Did people come from other boroughs too?

AC: They came from all over. It was really nice as a kid.

MN: So this was like a really special place to grow up?

AC: Yes, it really was.

MN: Did you get into Latin music in this period?

AC: Yeah, Tito Fuentes and Tito Rodriguez, on those shows, they were there also.

MN: Oh so he would sing and they would also be there also.

AC: So Tito Fuentes used to let me out and Tito Rodriguez used to battle each other.

MN: And did you dance at all?

AC: Oh yeah, I was the Mamba king. [inaudible] Five cents at the juke box.

MN: Did you ever add a Latin flavor to your - -

AC: We did once and somebody messed up. [Laughter] The band just couldn't get the beat right, we had to do one in Latin.

MN: Were you aware of the Allen Freid and Rock and Roll going national - -

AC: Howard Jackson who was also a disk jockey, he was the one that told us that. He said a white boy named Howard Freid was going to come to New York and turn the music around, and that's exactly what he did. Did you ever get on any of those shows at The Paramount?

AC: No I didn't. How did they decide which of all these great community groups ended up getting on the stage at those places?

AC: I guess it was just the agency that I had I guess, I really don't know.

MN: So it was The Gay Tones, your group?

AC: No it was The Chimes.

MN: The Chimes.

AC: When we recorded we were The Chimes.

MN: You were The Chimes. Did you have an agent?

AC: No we had another singer's father, more interest in recording us.

MN: And what company recorded you?

AC: Rose, which was a jazz label.

MN: It was a jazz label, and was it located in Manhattan?

AC: yes, it was in Manhattan, yeah.

MN: Were there any record labels in The Bronx?

AC: Not that I can remember.

MN: How long did this phenomenon with the Doo-Wop groups, how long did it last in terms of the peak of interest and enthusiasm?

AC: All through the fifties and the early sixties, then the Beatles and Motown came out.

MN: so you had about ten good years with this?

AC: Yes

MN: And what was your job down at Western union downtown?

AC: I was a messenger.

MN: Did you get married in these years?

AC: I got married in 54.

MN: In 54. And you still lived in this community - -

AC: on 165<sup>th</sup> Street and Caldwell Avenue.

MN: And did you have children that you raised in the neighborhood?

AC: I had a set of twins with my first wife. And two sets of twins with my second wife.

MN: Did you end up having to go back to school at some point?

AC: No I didn't go back to school.

MN: Now we have the Doo-Wop last until about 63 years old. Did you still keep performing?

AC: After a while, in 1961 we recorded Nack and so we traveled all over the place.

MN: Okay what was the name of that song?

AC: Nack.

MN: Nack. So you traveled around the country with that?

AC: Yea.

MN: did you move from group to group?

AC: No, actually what happened with the Hells, I was a song writer, we were song writers, [inaudible]. What happened to be downtown when Robin Spencer, who sang with the Cadillacs, he came and said [inaudible] if you go downtown you can make some money writing songs, and that's how I became a song writer. We would go down to 69<sup>th</sup> street, the big building at 1650 [inaudible] We would all go in and sing our songs to them, and they would say no, we would go to the next floor, they'd say no, then the next floor, but you always had to turn it up loud because there was always somebody at these auditions. From doing that, I got to know everybody [inaudible]. That's how I got to do [inaudible] with Curtis Lee and all that stuff.

MN: Oh so you were the bass in that? [inaudible] That was you? Oh, I can barely start interviewing. You did that? That's one of the great things in all of - wow.

AC: [inaudible] some people call it cues, who were also black, but they read music and had their thing, so they didn't have it raw just like we had, and raw was what they wanted at the time, so everybody was hiring [inaudible] and Every Breath I Take, by Jean Pitney.

MN: When you say, you did the arrangements or you were also in the - -

AC: We came in with ideas.

MN: and so you did the arrangements and you also did the backups?

AC: Yes.

MN: Wow.

Third Voice: Did you know about the publishing and the - -

AC: No, we got advanced from the publishing, but didn't know about our own

publishing. MN: Right, so this part of it at that point was - -

AC: Now we was in the group [inaudible] was the girl, so that was the main - -

MN: How old were you when you discovered the girls?

AC: When I got to play in the Gay Tones.

MN: That was at 17.

AC: They changed my whole life.

MN: You were in the middle of the industry. You were doing arrangements, you were doing backup, and did you remain in the music industry all through the late sixties and all that stuff?

AC: Yeah, then I went to Motown.

MN: You worked for Motown, arrangements?

AC: As a song writer and arranger.

MN: Wow. And then you went to Detroit?

AC: Yeah, [inaudible]

MN: Wow. How did they find you?

AC: A guy named Al Cleveland, we needed a singer, we were in 1650 Broadway and our lead singer didn't show up so we went down by the [inaudible] building because the Church Club was there and a lot of musicians hung out at the Church Club, that's where you got your musician's numbers. When you sold a song you have to make a demo, so when you sold a song to a publisher, [inaudible] to make a demo. And so we saw this guy standing in front of 1690 Broadway with Marcells, I think he must be a singer, so I said he must be a singer. So I said would you like to make some money, do you sing? And he said yes. He had been there about three months trying to make it as a singer. He came from Pittsburgh, he was getting ready to go home, the Greyhound bus was around

50<sup>th</sup> street at the time, and so he came up and he said [inaudible] He wound up writing

What's Going On with Marvin Gaye and [inaudible] and he called it Jeans and Smokey

Loved it and he came to Detroit to sign me up.

MN: Do you remember what year that was?

AC: That was 1968.

MN: 1968, now you were living on 142<sup>nd</sup> Street, that was in Harlem?

AC: Yes.

MN: So you moved from 161<sup>st</sup>, you moved from The Bronx to Harlem?

AC: Let me see if I can think about where was I at this time. I was with my mother, I was living in my mother's house, 1105 Tenth Avenue. We started making some money, so we got the suit across from [inaudible] and we was paying \$245 rent, when the rent was only \$40 a month.

MN: So the big money was in the arranging and the song writing, more than the performing, or - -

AC: Well, you know, at first I was skipping around. My first job was with Shapiro and Burnstein, Collins and I went to Shapiro and Burnstein, and we had a song called Turn the Page, and next thing you know we had a new publisher. And they signed us up, and we started making \$150 a week and we just had to bring in our music on Thursdays, so we had all the freedom in the world.

MN: You got paid \$150, that's a lot in those days.

AC: You better believe it.

MN: You made the transition from performer to song-writer, arranger, and performer, - -

AC: And manager, I had many groups.

MN: And manager. So when did you start managing?

AC: I guess I started managing between 62 and 68.

MN: Now this sounds like a great success story in terms of all the people who come from the streets and get into the music business, you figured out a way to make it a business that worked for you, and you did it dropping out of high school. What made you able to be so successful on the business end of this? Where did those skills come from?

AC: Well, you know, just from experiences, being around the scene, [inaudible] who was a friend of mine, he discovered Franky Hyman and The Teenagers and he discovered the [inaudible] - -

MN: Didn't he also write a song for the Chantelles?

AC: Yeah, yeah, and The Chantelles, [inaudible] or something like that, so he kind of hipped us about the business and all of that.

MN: So he kind of took you under his wing and said - -

AC: Really came out with [inaudible] for some money [inaudible]

MN: Now, did you know The Chantelles personally or - -

AC: Yes, they lived in my neighborhood by the way, on Prospect Avenue.

MN: I think they went to St. Anthony's.

AC: One of the girls lived in the building with my second wife. She knew her very well.

MN: So what was it like, you went to Motown in 1968?

AC: Yes.

MN: What was it like there in those days?



AC: Well first of all I was used to the big studios in Manhattan, we had big fabulous studios that we would use, and when I went to Motown, and I saw the studio was in a private house, it was in the basement, I said wow, all this [inaudible] it blew my mind. And he was the one that started Barry Gordy was, that was the college, Barry Gordy was the college, and when they had a son, they had a panel, song-writers, publishers, sales people, and they played the record up and down, including his records. Sometimes they were like no, you need more bass and things like that. It was great. The man was fantastic. People say Motown sound, but it was really his business to make it [inaudible]

MN: Now, there was a lot of publicity to the studio musicians.

AC: The Great Jamison, The Great - -

MN: Were they better than the studio musicians you had in New York?

AC: See the first thing I noticed, in New York, everybody sang at once. We sang, and it sounded good together. But he made tracks, he had to lay tracks because the studio was so small that the people couldn't separate. So he was the first one to start laying tracks. He laid tracks so all you had to do was concentrate on one thing, make sure your rhythm was straight. The, singer would take over, then you come back with the horns, the horns on top of the rhythm, - -

MN: So everything was done separately and then layered.

AC: Yeah.

MN: And that was not the way it was done in most places?

AC: No, everybody sang at the same time. The band played, so if they made a mistake or anybody made a mistake, you had to do it all over again.

MN: And he did that from the beginning, when he first started?

AC: Well, he couldn't get the sac note if he wanted to use horn because it would overload into to other mics and stuff. The studio was so small the drummer had to go in the place and shut the door.

MN: When you went to Detroit, did you miss New York at all?

AC: I loved Detroit, I didn't miss New York at all.

MN: And how long did you stay in Detroit?

AC: Until 1972.

MN: Did you move out with Motown to Los Angeles?

AC: No, I went to [inaudible] to another company in Manhattan, I can't remember the name now - -

MN: Right On Records?

AC: Yeah, and that was a mistake because it led me to cocaine and dealing and all of that stuff. I walked away from that after a while, I had a beautiful situation at a place up in The Bronx, where you could rehearse with groups and stuff - -

MN: You were called Right On Records, like the Black Panther's "Right on brother".

AC: Yeah. And that was when they didn't cut me my paycheck.

MN: And did you move into another company after that?

AC: No

MN: You left the business for a while?

AC: No, I never left the business.

MN: You just started to work as an independent?

AC: Yeah, I was still in the business.

Third Voice: How did P.S. 99 tie into the whole thing with the talent search, were you involved with that?

Multiple Voices: [inaudible]

MN: What year did you start running that?

AC: In 1972.

MN: In 72 you started running this program?

AC: It started out to get the job, they had the gangs, all the gangs up there, and I went down to the basement and they had this group called the Take Back this Block Association who was interviewing people for this job, and they had the Black Assassins down there, they had the guns and everything. And I think when Barry got to Motown, that kind of influenced them too, and that was it, I got the job, and I was supposed to lead recreation, that's what it started out to be, but what happened, I gave a talent show, and the director, Susan Boyd said I'll be out of town but I'll be back. So when she came back I sold five, but she didn't realize [inaudible] full time, and I started to do what I wanted to do. And I had a football team, I had a baseball team. Archie inspired me because his group was over there and they had the store fronts. They had a library and a place for recreation.

MN: Now how did The Bronx change when you came back to it from how you had grown up?

AC: Completely different. Drugs and everything man it was just messed up.

MN: What did it feel like? You know, here you are, you came up on these streets, you've been incredibly successful, you reached the pinnacle of the music business, and you come back to your old community. What are the emotions like?

AC: Well you know, I just figured I could change it. And I did. I stopped the gang problem. I had my own guys help me re-create the gang members with the talent show.

MN: Do you remember this program?

Third Voice: Oh Yes!

MN: And where were the events held?

AC: Right down Tremont, on 180<sup>th</sup> Street. What I did, we had them fix up the corner on 180<sup>th</sup> street. We had a basketball tournament that ran 7 days a week. The girls played on Mondays and Fridays. We had the team of younger boys play down the hill. I had my own little league team and we had two [inaudible] team, we had a football team, and we had the Family Day Picnic. We went to Van Courtlant Park and got money from the different stores and stuff. It was a big program. At that time I was working on Tremont and Mormian. Do you know Shirley Jones?

Third Voice: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Fourth Voice (female): Where at on Tremont?

AC: Vice Avenue and 180<sup>th</sup> Street. That's when the rap thing and everything started.

MN: So you were there when hip hop started.

AC: [inaudible]

MN: Now what was your response to this? Did you see that this was connected to early traditions or did you have trouble with it?

AC: I had a chance to record all of those young brothers, a guy named Hal had owned The Salt n Pepper, he owned that bar and he owned this place where the hip hoppers would go in there and get [inaudible]

MN: Was this on Jerome?

AC: Jerome.

Third Voice: The Disco Fever

AC: Disco Fever. I started managing Disco Fever.

MN: You managed Disco Fever?

AC: Yeah.

MN: You should write an autobiography.

AC: I am. I sat on it. I got all these groups I can't think of all their names - -

MN: The Funky Four, The Cold Cut Brothers - -

AC: Yeah I've got my pictures with them. I said nah, they're not going to make it. I threw it out.

MN: Music education had been eliminated from the schools so they couldn't play an instrument. Every time I saw it, I was a manager at another place, Foxide Plaza - -

MN: That was a club?

AC: A beautiful club. So this guy, he was the first guy to ever rap, had a podium, because the Sugar Hill Gang took all his rhymes and put it on record.

MN: Not Grandmaster Kaz, Kool DJ Hurt?

AC: No, no, no, I can't think of his name.

MN: Not Africa Bombada?

AC: No, Africa Bombada didn't do anything but talent shows and went to Bronx River.

MN: So they would do talent shows?

AC: Yeah, and they were feared, I forgot the name that they called themselves but everybody - -

MN: Zulu Nation.

AC: Right, everybody in the projects was a gangster.

MN: They were the Black Spades. Not Mellie Mel from Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five?

AC: This guy, I know he was the first one to get hired to, you would see at the Apollo.

[inaudible] This my son's group, that's my son here, GQ. Disco nitrates

MN: Oh I remember - -

[END OF SIDE A OF THE TAPE]

[BEGINNING OF SIDE B OF THE TAPE]

AC: I got that athletic background so - -

MN: Look at this. So, we're just toughing the tip of the iceberg. Oh, this is from your league?

AC: Yeah that's on 181<sup>st</sup> street around the corner. This was the football.

MN: Now Arch ran football leagues. Is that where you met him?

AC: No I met him before, I don't know where, but I know that he started it because he was in it before I was in it.

MN: He was working with the youth program in Morrisania.

AC: Morrisania, yeah.

MN: And then he had his football teams which he still has to this day.

AC: Right, right. I had a picture of The Cold Crush, I have one of their Albums, Live In Connecticut, they lived on my floor when I lived on 180<sup>th</sup> street.

MN: In the same building?

AC: Same building.

MN: Was this in a complex or, - -

AC: Lamburgh Houses.

MN: Oh Lamburgh Houses, okay sure.

AC: That's Cold Crush.

MN: That's Cold Crush?

AC: We were getting ready to go entertain at Riker's Island.

MN: That's unbelievable, [laughter] DJ Charlie Chase and Grand master Kaz. And they lived in The Lamburgh Houses with you

AC: Yes.

MN: Now, so you felt that okay, the fires have happened, the gangs have happened, and you are going to create this positive turnaround.

AC: That's right.

MN: Did you get involved with any of the housing groups that were rebuilding that year?

AC: Well there were six houses, [inaudible]

MN: Was that the church's or was the a - -

AC: [inaudible]

MN: Now do you have any contact with this woman Genovee Brooks from The Mid-Bronx Desperados? Does that name ring a bell?

AC: Yeah that rings a bell. [inaudible]

MN: Yeah because those were the areas that really burned longer and she would [inaudible] So you became, were you still doing recording stuff and writing in those days?

AC: In those days? Yes. My music was always recreation for me. I was thinking about those talent shows at Riker's Island and stuff like that. I went to hospitals and sang to senior citizens.

MN: This is fascinating because you were sort of inspired by 99 - -

AC: That inspired my childhood.

MN: And then began to bring it back to a different time.

AC: Right, exactly.

MN: And so from Doo-Wop to Hip Hop.

AC: Yep.

MN: When Hip Hop started, were kids still doing R&B and funk and that sort of stuff or did Hip Hop sweep away the earlier forms?

AC: Well, James Brown was the man at the time, James Brown was funk, that was the music then.

MN: Did you have kids who were still playing musical instruments in The Bronx?

AC: No. Not really

MN: See that's the thing that I guess is [inaudible] is that you lost that, you lost the instruments. So they had to sample James Brown to create the beats.

AC: Yep. Yep. It's a shame in a way because we had some good musicians in our days and instead of playing drums, people just get a keyboard because the keyboard had every sound on it - -

MN: You didn't have the horn players?

AC: No.

MN: Were you still doing this in the eighties?



AC: Yes.

MN: You were also there when crack hit?

AC: Yeah, when crack hit, I was working for, I was the youth coordinator for the mayor. Who was the mayor? Mayor Koch, [laughter]. Yeah they had 52 youth coordinators in the city and I was assigned to Family Board 6 in The Bronx.

MN: One of my former students grew up in Bronx Park South and she remembers at the time you were doing the talent shows it was really safe and then when crack hit, it really turned - -

AC: That turned around 1983 or something like that.

MN: It was as early as that?

AC: 83, it got popular in 85. That's when it really, yeah.

MN: Were you involved in the group that started the Old Timers' day in Crotona Park?

AC: That came from 166<sup>th</sup> street. That was the 166<sup>th</sup> street reunion. What happened, they came to fix up the park at 166<sup>th</sup> street so they had it at Crotona Park. They had it at both places.

MN: So it started out with the people who used to live on 166<sup>th</sup>?

AC: Or in that neighborhood.

MN: In that neighborhood. It was the Forest Houses and all of that.

AC: Right.

MN: So who were some of the people who were involved in that original group that, or was this thing just taking off?

AC: Actually [inaudible]. I know Doctry because, first of all he is a good role model, and he is still doing it, what he started doing, so I really honor him a lot, I really respect him.

Third Voice: He was a youth coordinator also right?

AC: No, I don't think he was a youth coordinator. I think he was working with, who I thought was messing around with that lady that got busted - -

Third Voice: Gloria Davis?

AC: Yeah, he used to mess with Gloria Davis, she promised him jobs and he never got it.

MN: He told me he came down to work in the Jackson democratic club - -

AC: Yeah, all that. [inaudible]

MN: When did you start the Morrisania Review?

AC: 19, it probably says on that record right there. It's got a little thing inside the book, it's a booklet in there.

MN: Historical Union, yeah, since 1994, wow.

AC: Yeah, there it is. I asked everybody who came from the Morrisania area, everybody who had a hit, [inaudible]

MN: And here it has Dearest Arlene,

AC: [inaudible] You have to give him a little credibility because he was on of the guys who really did it. He came back and - -

MN: Do you have a Show for Bronx Net?

AC: Yeah, I still have it.

MN: You still have it?

AC: Yeah, Doo-Wop is alive.

MN: And when is that on?

Fourth Voice (female): You were supposed to do The Bronx Net right here. [laughter]

AC: I don't know because I live down south, I know I saw it this week on Monday and Tuesday.

MN: So you do it from down south?

AC: No, no they're re-runs, and I've been re-running it for a long time. I get a lot of letters, people love it.

MN: When did you - -

AC: Start that?

MN: Yeah.

AC: About 13 years ago.

MN: Wow so these are shows from 13 years ago?

AC: Some of them from 6 years ago because I think we stopped around 6 years ago, 7, 5, or 6 years ago. [inaudible]

MN: Oh no this stuff is not going away. I also think it's important for the younger generation to realize the continuity between what you were doing and, because you were there to help jump start Hip Hop, having that experience.

Third Voice: Do you think the kids, most of your viewers are older right, for the program? [inaudible]

AC: [inaudible] A lot of white kids, they really love it; young kids. And older people like thirty up.

Third Voice: We were talking before about the political, it hard to get them in to about it, it's also hard to get them into any one, you know, like it's a group of four or five years old.

MN: This music has really lived on in addition to the Black community, the Italian-American Community.

AC: Yeah, that's right.

MN: Because I was involved in little league in my neighborhood, we used to have these fifties [inaudible] - -

AC: I went to a guy named Ronnie Idol, he had shows out in Jersey. And the first time that we had went out there, I was surprised because 95 percent of the audience was light, and I remember that [inaudible] I did a PBS show with the corps, this year, the show for New Year's Eve.

MN: Oh I saw - -

AC: The Doo-Wop.

MN: The Doo-Wop, I think I was wore out by champagne by them. So you were playing that crowd that all came out on the stage at the end?

AC: No, no, we just sang our song and - -

Third Voice: They did two or three of those shows.

AC: A lot of those shows.

MN: now the Festa Brothers were in the chorus?

AC: They were in the chorus, yeah. Form Jennings Street. When their record broke, [inaudible] Floyd McCray.

MN: Was that the Million Man Shaboom?

AC: Man Shaboom. 1954, I think Billy Williams' Quartette had to get with it, Stan Freeburg had a copy hit with it, there was Latin record, and naturally the [inaudible] and the Quartettes had five big record in 1954. The only thing bad about it is that nobody told me [inaudible] tone that down, tone that down, and then happy Days came out, and now they get a five way split and they get at least 80 or 90,000 a piece off of Shaboom that the - -

MN: From the show Happy Days?

AC: No, that's what started to bring back that music [inaudible] She copied my song Nag and sold ten million, ten million copies.

MN: You get royalties for that?

AC: Yeah but what happened was

Fourth Voice (female): Give me a call

MN: Okay, data, thank you so much for - -

AC: You know we should definitely try to get together and we need to try to do some census tracking, where it really was in my community.

MN: Right, we'll talk about that because you know how to do that stuff.

AC: Okay.

MN: Okay now what did it mean to the rest of you in 54? Was that important to your career in recording?

AC: Yeah, recording opened the door. They did the first crossroads. G By the Curls was actually about a month ahead of us, but to me that just opened the door for everybody.

MN: And then you realized that the whole - -

AC: That was my buddy, I used to hang out with him, I would go get him and go sing with him. That was my group, and my group would go outside now [laughter]. Because they all get, their families get all the royalties. It makes a lot of money, she makes a lot of money. It's been in all kind of movies, cartoons everything. Chainsaw Massacre, the song that, it's a big song.

MN: In terms of your musical career, which song brings you the most royalties now?

AC: That right there, Nag.

MN: That's because you wrote that so you get the song-writer's credit?

AC: Right, exactly.

MN: Is your family originally from the South or the Caribbean?

AC: My mother is from the South. She was from where I live now, at my grandmother's house right now, Warsaw, North Carolina.

MN: And where is the nearest city to Warsaw, North Carolina?

AC: I would say Fayetteville is about fifty miles away.

MN: And your father's family is from Yonkers?

AC: Are from Yonkers, yes.

MN: So they were long-time New Yorkers?

AC: Yes.

MN: Did your parents meet in New York City?

AC: I don't know.

MN: Now going back to those early days, is there anything that you didn't remember to say when we were going through them earlier, things you'd want to - -

AC: I had an amateur boxing career and won a championship.

MN: you were an amateur boxer?

AC: Yeah.

MN: In - - -

AC: In the Tri-State tournament, as a heavyweight. When I was fifteen I weighed 185 pounds.

MN: So this was with Golden Gloves?

AC: No, this was a Tri-State ting that 99 had hooked up.

MN: So they had a boxing program in 99?

AC: Yeah.

MN: See back then nobody told me that. They had a boxing ring in that school?

AC: No they didn't have a boxing ring there.

MN: So how did they train you?

AC: I went through the PAL.

MN: The PAL center, where was that located?

AC: On 152<sup>nd</sup> street, somewhere near Morris Avenue or something like that.

MN: And it was a PAL center which had boxing.

AC: Boxing, yes.

MN: Was that a popular sport for the guys in the neighborhood? Was that seen as a path to - -

AC: I don't know, I remember those guy on my block that were older than me, I saw them on T.V. get knocked out and everything. [laughter] But baseball was my main thing.

MN: Did you ever try to play professional baseball?

AC: Yeah, I went for a try-out and I remember that's why I joined the Marines

[laughter].

Fourth Voice (female): A question I had, how did you get hurt in the Marines?

AC: Climbing over those, we had to leap with our equipment and I hurt my hip real bad and they discharged me. And I was hurt at the time, but I'm glad now because I've seen now, the Marines are the first ones, they're waiting for you. They've got everything aimed at you when you go to war. [laughs]

Fourth Voice (female): Did you suffer permanent damage?

AC: no I didn't suffer permanent damage.

MN: Arch was in the Marines in Korea and he was one of the first African Americans in the integrated Marine Core, he was a tank guy.

AC: Yeah, it was rough stuff. Boot Camp was tough. What happened was I went to join the Navy, and I went down to 346 Broadway and they told me I had to go up to Fordham Road, so I was walking and I saw a sign that said join the Marines and I walked upstairs and joined the Marines.

Fourth Voice: But how was it in the Marines in, what period was that the forties, or, no you were in the fifties.

AC: Yeah, '50, '52.

FV: Did you experience racism? How was the set up?

AC: I don't know if it was racism, but the DI's were just nasty people. I got punched in my face because I didn't salute to the DI, I didn't know he was a DI. He just had a T-shirt with nothing on it. He punched me right in my face. Because they knew I was from New York, the especially didn't like New Yorkers.



MN: People told me that in the forties and forties, Fordham Road was not a place to go if you were Black. Were there certain boundaries which you knew you come to avoid certain neighborhoods?

AC: I never avoided any neighborhoods because I think, as I said, my music was - -

FV: A passport [laughter]

AC: Like a passport. Then once you made a record, that was really something.

MN: The music was like the magic wand. Do you have any other questions that you want to ask?

FV: What are some of the things that are still pertaining to your work no, what are some things you are doing now?

AC: I have a picture, I want to give you a picture too, I meant to bring it up here, I have to give both of you, so we can post it and organize it with all our groups - -

MN: Oh I'd love that.

AC: It was in my car.

MN: Okay, I'll walk you to your car.

AC: Okay alright and I'll give you the copy. And wait a minute, I just want to tell you a little something. Let's see, alright, it's in the car. I had a little- well I'll give it to you in the car

MN: Yeah, I'll walk you to the car

AC: That's something that we're doing. We took a picture on June the sixth, 1999, all the groups that we could get. The Chantelles, and Stevo and the Cadillacs and quite a few groups.

MN: The Cadillacs, they weren't from The Bronx - -

AC: They were from Harlem. Yes.

MN: Are The Chantelles still singing at all?

AC: Yeah they're still singing - -

MN: Together?

AC: Not together, Arlene doesn't get along with them so Arlene's doing her thing and Chantelles doing [inaudible].

MN: Okay so she's on her own.

AC: After the day that we gave out [inaudible], when we took the picture, she sang there but I have to look for that picture.

MN: Now she became a teacher right, Arlene?

AC: Yeah. The article, it's in the car, but I would need it back, you can Xerox it. Maybe you could mail it to me.

MN: Okay yeah, I'll get all of that information. Okay, well, I could ask you a million more questions, but what I'll try to do is, what I would love to have, sometime, I would like to get you together with my students and have a session where they talk to you so they get some, I would sort of greet them, and then we have them listen to the interview and then comment and ask you questions about music. Because I teach a course called from Rock and Roll to Hip Hop, and this is like, you know, we'll try to get you a lecture fee for this you know because I think people need to see this first hand.

AC: Right, right.

FV: It's a lot of other youth who are willing to listen to the interview.

MN: Yeah, but I want a chance to think about it.

AC: My platinum record, [inaudible]

FV: What are you doing no, live scene or uh- -

AC: No, I give a big show in Warsaw where I live. I called it the biggest talent show ever given in Warsaw. The newspaper devoted two weeks of these articles, so I'm still doing the same thing, I've got a band down there now, I'm getting ready to record and stuff.

MN: Who is the band you manage?

AC: I organize for them.

FV: What kind of group is that now?

AC: They play, they're in the band. And I am going to be recording some singers from my talent show. And Also, I'm going to be singing some Doo-Wop down in South Carolina, it's going to be Harriet Turner Day down there and then I'm coming up to talk when I get back home.

FV: So how do you find, it's a whole new era of young people. Do you find that it's any different, or is it any easier to bring youth into these talent shows?

AC: No, where I went, there was no place for them to really sing, there's no stage for them, so when I get a talent show, I get a great turnout. That's why I got a long write up for two weeks in a row, you know. See in the South, there's not much for them to do. There's a lot of things in New York, and you can do a lot of things in California, but I'm in a little town of Warsaw. If I have to go to Wal-Mart, I have to go 15 mile to go into Wal-Mart. There's nothing in my town really. Piggly Wiggly, that's our neighborhood supermarket you know.

FV: Now the teens down south, do they have more access to running music and [inaudible] is it all the same?

AC: None of that.

MN: Okay, well I've got to - - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]