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Partis, Michael

Partis, Michael Interview: Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Michael Partis

Interviewers: Mark Naison, Oneka LaBennett, and Cara Becker

Date: August 21, 2007

[BEGIN SIDE A]

Mark Naison (MN): We are interviewing Fordham senior Michael Partis and this is part of a new hip-hop history initiative of the Bronx African American History Project. With us today as interviewers are Professor Oneka LaBennett the project administrator for the Bronx African American History Project and a visiting assistant professor at Fordham University and the head of the hip-hop history initiative. And Cara Becker a doctoral student in linguistics at New York University, and we are at Fordham University. Now what we always do in the beginning of our interviews is ask people about their families and how they came to the Bronx. So Michael if you could talk a little bit about your family history on both sides and how your family ended up in the Bronx.

Michael Partis (MP): My grandmother came to America, I think she told me 1962. Originally she was born in Talla, Honduras, when she turned two her father and mother took her to Belize. Cause she was Belize raised up until the age of 22, 23. My grandma has about five or six brothers and sisters and she was the last one to come to America.

MN: Now was your grandmother from the Garifuna people of Honduras?

MP: Garifuna, yes my grandma is Garifuna one hundred percent. So she came, first she came to L.A., after she went L.A. for a while she didn't like it, she came to New York in 1972, 1973. My mother said she was ten. She lived in Brooklyn for a couple years and in 1974 she moved to Jerome Ave., right where the place for the blind and deaf people. Right off 165th kind of, she went there and then she moved to 1016 Bryant Ave. between 165th and all this is where I was born, raised grew up all my life. And that's how my mother's side of the family got to the Bronx.

MN: Now were they identified with Garifuna?

MP: See the interesting part about where I live is right immediately there, there weren't a lot of Garifunas but if you go like five minutes up towards Inovalé towards Kelly Park, is where we call it, they call it Rapporo. I don't even recall what it means to be honest, I used to know I forgot but in Rapporo they had a lot of Garifunas, like every Sunday they would meet and they would just like play the drums. Because a lot of the Garifuna is not that far away from like traditional West Indian culture, like the reggae music and all of that. So they would just on Sundays they would chill and that's what we would do.

MN: Were you aware of that growing up? Is that part of your heritage?

MP: Yes my grandmother speaks Garifuna, like she's very much still a part. Tied to the country. She's going back in November again, she said she's finished with me and my sister she's going back. She said she's going back to retire. So yes, we are well aware of Belize and that sort of thing, because my mother was born in Belize as well. It's my grandmother that really came here first and brought my mother here. But my mother spent ten years in Belize, so she's like- -. My father is a different story, my father came here, I really don't know the story as well. It's something along the lines of if you can trust what he told me. He's definitely is from Brooklyn, my mother verified that, so he's definitely from Brooklyn, he's from Brownsville. Something happened when he was younger and he needed to get out, so he left. He headed to the Bronx, met my mother and that's why he really doesn't function in the Bronx per se.

MN: How old were your parents when they first met?

MP: 21, 22? My mother was already out of high school.

MN: Did she go to high school in the Bronx?

MP: Actually no, my mother went to Fashion Industries.

MN: Which is in Manhattan right?

MP: Yes. She didn't go to high school in the Bronx, she went to junior high, like eighth grade. She went to Fashion Industries that's where she went. My father didn't do high school, whatever the case may be.

MN: Now, so you grew up 165th St. and Bryant Ave.?

MP: Yes.

MN: And what was that neighborhood like when you were growing up? What are your earliest memories?

MP: Earliest memories, two things, working class families and then drugs. At my youngest age, that's what I remember. I guess the drug part of it may come from my mother having drug problems, so maybe that's why associate drugs with the neighborhood. But there were a lot of black families, a few Latino, families a lot of black families. Working class and there were a lot of drugs. And I think it had a lot to do with across the bridge we used to always see and that was the overpass over the Bruckner Boulevard highway. Over the overpass on the other side of Hunt's Point it was kind of you know, a lot of drugs was there.

MN: Now, what year were you born?

MP: 1986.

MN: Wow, so you were born in the height of the, the beginning of the crack epidemic.

MP: Yes.

MN: Now, was your mother affected at the time you were born?

MP: Yes, actually, well the story that she tells, the story she told me is that it was my father that really kind of got her on it. So I'm figuring well, she met my father in like '84 and I'm born '86 and by '88 she's definitely heavily affected from what my grandmother tells me. By '88 she's

definitely affected, by '90 she had to go to rehab so that leads me to believe yes. Like right in the height of it she was starting to get affected by it.

MN: Now was your grandmother in the same apartment when you were growing up?

MP: Yes, my grandmother has lived there 31 years.

MN: So in the same apartment is, your mother, you, your father, and your grandmother.

MP: No, my mother, I think my mother lived with my grandmother off and on pretty much from when I was born. When I was physically born I was born at Lincoln Hospital because my mother was at my grandmother's house. So I was literally born from birth in my grandmother's house.

MN: And your grandmother became the major caretaker?

MP: Always, not became, she's always been.

MN: So your mother was in and out of your life? From the beginning? As you were growing up how did that affect you, or how did you become aware of that, you know when you are three, four, five years old?

MP: You know when I was younger I was real sensitive. I don't know why, I don't want to play into the whole gender thing, you know I was raised by my grandmother so I was sensitive. I don't want to play into that but I was definitely very sensitive. When they first told me that Santa Claus was not real, I kind of cried. It was like mommy Santa Claus, and I was like how my mommy Santa Claus, Santa Claus is a man and my mommy is not around. So when I was younger, I was very sensitive. I would cry for no reason, I mean this is like when I was four, five, six I was very sensitive. One thing good my grandmother always told me, your mother has a problem, my mother was always telling me I have a problem, so it was not like one day the whole world just collapsed and I'm like where my mother went? Forty years old like where my mother went? They was always like very upfront and honest about that so some of the things that

I ended up seeing, again maybe I was prepared because a lot of that sensitivity went away by the time I was seven or eight. I already knew the deal already so it wasn't like I was still all trying to figure out inside of me what's going on and where I'm from and all this stuff. I kind of knew the evils or the vices that I was coming along with. So that part was, but yes as a young kid I was affected.

MN: Was your grandmother caring for any other children than you?

MP: Just me.

MN: So it was your grandmother and you. And how did she deal with you, you know what was that relationship like as it evolved?

MP: When I was younger, my grandmother I know she tried to take care of me, like kind of spoiled me, like every Saturday we would go to McDonalds and she would try to like, you know. I liked Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, so she would like buy me the little man, like once a month she would try to get me a little toy thing because I guess I was somewhat traumatized. I think she was a lot worried I was traumatized, I'm living in a house with a mother who's a drug addict for a long time, not for a long time for like two years. So think before she took custody of me and told my mother to like you need to go get it together before you take him back. So I think in a lot of ways she felt like you know she wanted to care for me and provide so that's why we had McDonalds all the time and just you know, we just watched wrestling, because my grandma liked wrestling, and she liked the matches. So we did a lot of bonding because - - when my mother was around I would always be outside. But my grandmother was around she's an older person, she's not always outside per se, so we spent a lot of time just in the house.

MN: Now was your block safe to be outside on? Could you play in front of your house? Safely at that time, you know late eighties, early nineties. Was there a problem with like flying bullets?

MP: It wasn't a flying bullets problem. It was safe in terms of like, she wasn't afraid that she was going to get shot. But it wasn't safe in terms that, I think everybody was paranoid about drugs. Everybody was very paranoid. So it wasn't like there was shootings everyday, there were shootings on the weekend but maybe I'm desensitized to it. I don't ever recall it being a flying bullet problem, like we just always paranoid about being shot, ducking down in the house. It wasn't so much that. A lot of it was that, I think a lot of it was unsafe in that people there didn't want their kids to get caught up in the whole drug thing and end up not working, because most of us ended up involved in some capacity anyway.

MN: Now, could you describe your building and your apartment? The physical structure, like what did your building look like?

MP: My building is six floors, it's rather big. It's six floors, because Bryant Ave. between 165th and all this is actually a long block. It's really long, it'd be probably two city blocks in one. So you have these small three story buildings, that's like you really don't see them a lot. But these three story buildings, the Krauss Houses. The Krauss management they built these six story buildings that are kind of big and they have four facing each other, then there is the park, then there is the school, and then there is the highway.

MN: Was your building an elevator building?

MP: Yes.

MN: Six stories has to be an elevator building. What floor did you live on?

MP: Second.

MN: Second floor. What did your windows overlook? What could you see out the window?

MP: Nothing, building. I was in the back of the building.

MN: You were in the back so you overlooked the alley?

MP: That's all we saw.

MN: Now what did the street look like? Were there trees?

MP: Not when I was younger.

MN: Was there a park nearby?

MP: There was no trees when we were younger. Trees is a new thing, we didn't have trees when I was younger in the park. We just had concrete. But the park, the park had been right across the street from P.S. 75, so we called it 75 park. To be honest I can't say what the real name of it is, but in 75 park, that's like where the majority of our growing up, for me is done.

MN: Describe what was in that park.

MP: How was that for us? It was four basketball courts, but they've redone the basketball courts since. But it was four basketball courts and then they had set up picnic tables and then they had a little, alright so it would be the basketball court, then there would be the picnic tables, then behind that it would be like swings. But not even a swing, like the tire, you ever seen the chain and the tire swing. We had one of those, and we had some monkey bars, and we had I don't even know what to call it. These wooden tall things that you could just climb and be a kid on I guess. And then they had rubber mats, that was big deal when we got the rubber mats because we wouldn't get scraped up no more, anymore. And there were some benches, I guess that parents that wanted to watch their kids, would go see their kids on the benches.

MN: You mentioned you know your mother being in and out of the house. How did her being on drugs affect her behavior in the house? What are some of the things you saw, you know, that gave you pretty vivid images of what it meant to be on drugs?

MP: Well see, the thing about my mother is during her heavy usage I was one, two, three, four. You may have heard of Daytop?

MN: Certainly, Daytop Village.

MP: She went to Daytop when I was four. She came back when I was five and by that point we was living with my grandmother, and everything was like that. From that point to the rest of her life until maybe towards the end she was more like having relapses. She would disappear for like two, three days and we'd be like where did she go?

MN: But it was more disappearance, than things in the house that got, you know upset you?

MP: Right.

MN: It would be more her disappearance.

MP: But one of the differences is when, when I was younger, when I was like nine or ten. We moved to Castle Hill projects. Now when we was in Castle Hill Projects we wasn't living with my grandma anymore, it was just me her and my younger sister was born. And that was different. Because then, like towards when I was eleven or twelve, she started to have not so much relapses, but she was disappearing because she couldn't really disappear with us. But then now you could talk about relapses in the house. Like sitting there watching her do drugs type of deal and that was kind of like, firsthand of what a drug addict, what drugs do to people whatever like that. That was different from when I was younger it was just since she had my grandmother as a crutch she would just disappear, like alright go away two, three days.

MN: No what drugs were her primary addiction?

MP: I believe it was like an evolution of it. I think it started with cocaine, it was between crack and cocaine, off an on, whatever she could afford. Her usage at the time, you know.

MN: During the times you know, did your mother work also?

MP: Yes, actually.

MN: So she was able to hold the job some of the time.

MP: My mother and my grandmother told me when I was younger, my mother worked. That's why she had her own apartment, even though she was going off and on on the drugs, she was able to maintain it. But then it really fell apart and that's when we moved back with my grandmother and a little bit after that she was like you need to go to Daytop. And then towards the end of my life again, where my mother's drug use seemed to be a little more heavy or a lot more readily, she actually was trying to get her life together, trying to get off of welfare and she was working at a bank. She worked in a bank for like eight months, it was a part of this whole training program. They had her training and then they had job placement and then you could keep the job and she was working in Jersey, actually the last eight months or so of her life. So the last year she was working and before that, when she first got out of Daytop she had a job off and on, trying to pick up jobs you know.

MN: When your mother passed away how old were you?

MP: Twelve.

MN: And how did it happen?

MP: To be honest with you, I was in California and they sent me on a vacation to California. Because I think I told you when my grandmother first came to this country she went to Los Angeles and her family. Her sister, a lot of her brothers stayed there. So we had a whole set of family in Los Angeles and then there's a lot of us here. It's pretty much split, Belize, here, and Los Angeles. So my grandma decided that I needed to take a vacation because I had never been anywhere else besides the Bronx. At that point anyway I hadn't been anywhere else besides the Bronx and then my mother I don't even know where my mother's role was, maybe she thought it was good for me, I really don't know. But my grandma was definitely like yes send the boy away. I think they were worried about me getting in trouble and I had a lot of things, I was

getting in trouble, so they said send him away. So I went when I was eleven, then I went when I was twelve. When I went when I was twelve, I got there on a Thursday, Friday, I was supposed to spend like a longer time, like a month. And I remember that, it was a phone call and my auntie, my cousin, she just started crying and I was like I don't know what happened what's going on? And then my mother actually grew up with her cousin really close and he came and they was talking and he was kind of whatever, I was like what the hell going on with them? And I was alright, and then the next day they told me, they say your mother was killed. So that was like a Monday, I came back to New York on a Saturday, saw my grandma talked to my grandma and all of that.

MN: She was killed in the Bronx?

MP: Now the story as told to me is that she, she was doing drugs or whatever, because a matter of fact the way I definitely remember it, it was a Saturday, it was me my little sister and my mother and we was at LaGuardia airport. My mother was like yes you know they got a new bus that take you from LaGuardia, this is when the M60 first started. She was like they got a new bus to take you to home because you are going to do that. I was like alright and I got on the plane. My grandma said well you know, after I found out what happened to my mother, she said yes well she didn't, she got on the bus and she ended up taking her to auntie house, my little sister. And then she went and was doing whatever she was doing and something must've happened and they found her in the back of a van, strangled, like two days after she had passed away, so that was the story. I don't know there is supposed to be like more to this story but I honestly don't know the more to the story, I guess that's kind of perplexing. The cops they never found who did it. They had a suspect, they don't know if he did it or not, he used to live in our neighborhood, I know him you know what I mean, he don't live here no more, so they not sure like he did it or

not, but there is definitely like more to the story than just yes my mother was strangled in the back of a van and they found her. But I don't even know it. That's definitely what happened, asphyxiation, strangled.

MN: Was your father's family at all a factor in your life?

MP: My father didn't have family. My father's mother and father died in a car accident when he was twelve, ironically. When he was twelve his mother and father died, so he has a twin brother, him and his twin brother was taken care of their auntie, but like an older auntie. She took care of them as best she could, but I guess she couldn't get a handle of them and that's why they just like ran the streets. She took care of a lot of kids at one time and that's why they just ran the streets.

MN: How often did you see your father when you were growing up?

MP: I didn't. I met my father for the first time ever when I was ten. When Life After Death came out?

MN: So you do it by Biggie?

MP: Yes, I'm trying to think is that the first time I had met him? Might've been. Actually it was, so yes I was like eleven or ten, that was the first time I had met him. They was like, and everybody always used to say you look just like your father, you look just like your father. So I met him and I was like I don't even look like him like that, but that was the first time I met him. He came around like three or four times, and him and my grandma got into some argument or whatever like that, and I didn't see him again, and then when I was like sixteen, I seen him. He came back around, he was around for a little while like that and then he's been around off and on since eighteen. But I didn't meet him until I was like - -.

MN: Is he also your sister's father?

MP: No, my sister got another father.

MN: What was the role of men in the neighborhood you were growing up in? Were there fathers that you saw around who stayed with their families, went to work, you know who were providers? Was your family situation more typical?

MP: Most fathers wasn't around. Well actually, there were a lot of older men. So at the time, so I would say in the late thirties, forties, and they were working men. They worked, you know what I mean, they provided for their family. The ironic thing, I can only think of two, and they were working men. They would take care of their family, but the ironic thing is that a lot of them never end up having kids.

MN: Did you have any male mentors when you were growing up?

MP: I had this one man his name was Thomas, he tried when I was like five, six, seven because I didn't have a father he was Puerto Rican, he tried to like be a mentor to me but he had a drug problem too. He was a recovering drug addict, you know, and he was having problems dealing with, he tried to like be there for me, mentor me take me on walks whatever, like tried to be like father like. He ended up relapsing into drugs unfortunately, I don't know what happened to him, he just disappeared out the building because you know - -.

MN: So this was a community where very few men, who were strong sort of positive figures.

MP: Most of us were young boys. Like the younger men now are like 20, now they like 28, 29 so in '90 they must've been like teenagers and then it was us the younger ones. The males that were around were like doing dirt, getting in trouble, doing crime or whatever like that and it was us. We were kind of naïve we just played ball you know and listen to music.

MN: You mentioned your grandmother took you to McDonalds and you know you watched wrestling and Mets. Did she ever take you to zoos and museums and stuff like that?

MP: No. But what she did do, my grandmother knew she couldn't do that for me. So she sent me to daycare, she tried to send me to a daycare that did a lot of trips so that way I could get to these type of places. That's the way I end up getting to see you know museums and the zoo and because she took me to the programs that would get me there. She knew she couldn't get me there. She worked nine to five.

MN: What sort of work did she do?

MP: My grandma is a home health aid.

MN: Right. Now, what about things like reading books? Did your grandmother read to you at home?

MP: No. She tried to encourage me. I remember I used to see on TV like the kids would read to their parents so I would be like grandma let me read to you and she was like I just came home from work and I can't really do it right now, and I'd be like alright. So I just read like Berenstain Bears and the newspaper. I picked up a good habit from my grandmother, that she reads the newspaper every day and even though she only went to like seventh grade, she could read. So she reads the newspaper every day. So picked that habit off of her and once I got to be three or four, once I got to be three I read the newspaper every day.

MN: Now what was school like for you when you started? Did it come easily to you? Yes, I never had a problem in school, that's the one thing that's always saved me. School and learning and all that. Thank God that wasn't a problem for me. Learning wasn't a problem. When I was four, my grandma tried to maintain full custody of me. My mother wasn't ready, my mother was arguing, so they went down to the courthouse on 161st the family courthouse, 161st St. right across from the movies now. And they had me and they were like yes he's supposed to be a gifted kid, so they was like well read from the law book and I was able to read the words in the

law book, so they was like alright this kid is smart so he's supposed to go to a special school or whatever like that, but it never happened because courts don't follow up on that type of deal.

Learning wasn't a problem.

MN: Did your teachers recognize early that you were somebody, who you know was eager to learn and able to learn?

MP: Yes, in kindergarten, preschool.

MN: Do you remember the name, even preschool, do you remember the names of any of those teachers?

MP: I can remember one young lady, her name was Ms. Clara, she was like my Pre-K 3 teacher, Ms. Clara. Wow, I cant remember these peoples names, that's sad.

MN: What elementary school did you go to?

MP: I went to a Catholic school.

MN: So you went to Catholic elementary school? What school?

MP: A lot of kids did. St. John's.

MN: Which is on what street?

MP: Hone Ave., 1144 Hone Ave.

MN: So your grandmother you know sent you to Catholic school.

MP: Yes, my grandmother was absolute, definitive about that. She was like you are not going to public school. My mother was like yes, you are not going to public school.

MN: Were there other kids from your building who went to Catholic school?

MP: Yes, two other kids. But most of them went to 75. But a lot of kids from the neighborhood went to Catholic school, depending on what their parent's situation was.

MN: So this was a situation where if parents were sort of a little better off economically, they would try to avoid the public schools?

MP: I think it was more like worth it all type of deals. It depended on the level of involvement the parents or the guardians were in their kid's life. Like especially, two of the kids I know that went to Catholic school, they couldn't afford it but they parents felt like this was the best way for them. Like none of them had money, none of us had money, my grandma didn't have money but she tried like, she tried as best as she could to make it work to send me there. So it was like, it wasn't economically better, because nobody was economically better off.

MN: Now was religion a part of your upbringing?

MP: Yes, my grandma goes to church yes.

MN: Which one?

MP: She goes to St. John's she's Catholic.

MN: She's Catholic? So she's Catholic all her life?

MP: Yes.

MN: So you were brought up Catholic?

MP: Yes.

MN: Before I move into some of the music stuff, I want to hand it over to the two of you for any questions you have.

Oneka LaBennett (OL): I actually had music questions so - -.

MN: Cara any questions about - -?

Cara Becker (CB): No.

MN: I'm just trying to imagine, were there other kids you grew up with being brought up by grandparents or other relatives?

MP: Yes.

MN: So you didn't think of your situation as unusual?

MP: No, not really.

MN: What percentage of the kids you grew up with had two parent families at home?

MP: None, can't think of one.

MN: None?

MP: In my neighborhood, I can't think of any. I can think of one, alright one.

MN: See that's so different because the first interviews I did were people who grew up in the Patterson Houses in the '50's and everybody had two parent families in the fifties. And by your time it's no one.

MP: I can't think of two parent families for the life of me.

MN: Now the drug economy, because that's you know another issue. What percentage of the income, coming into your neighborhood was drug income? Was it very visibly, and how did that manifest itself?

MP: 70, 60, I guess I would say the men who were around, were selling drugs. And they were making more money than the mothers, the aunties, the grandmas, the cousins, the foster parents who were just trying to work and trying to get they kids along. A lot of the men, especially if they were younger, they were like twenties you know, so they was just coming up out being raised by single mothers, having a father leave or whatever like that, and that's what they did. They hustled, it was very visible in the sense that like, everybody knew like yo this is what he did. And they had like, what was hot back then? They had like fresh Filas and like chains you know, but it was like cars, so you knew that they was like getting it.

MN: If you saw a certain kind of car?

MP: Yes, usually color too, which is weird. Certain colors white, red that's normally like yes he's getting a black, depending on the car.

OL: I have a question. You said earlier that when your grandma started sending you to L.A. when you were eleven and twelve she was either worried that you were getting in trouble or you were getting in trouble a little bit, what kind of trouble were you getting into?

MP: A lot of kid stuff. Like what was I doing? A lot of just stupid, a lot of it was I was getting into trouble in the Catholic school. I was getting in a lot of trouble there. They was threatening to kick me out.

MN: What do you have to do to get in trouble in Catholic school?

MP: I was just defiant. I don't know if it was because I was a adolescent or it was because that's in my nature, because I was just very defiant. I would question everything, you know you would get in trouble, you know the baggy pants, coming to school with my shirt untucked, tie down and then trying to hurry up - -.

MN: You were supposed to wear a uniform?

MP: You were not supposed to, you did. Trying to sneak ways to wear different types of shoes than you were supposed to wear. So that's the school part.

MN: So you came to Catholic school with a hidden transcript?

MP: Yes, pretty much. But you know, then I think what was worrying my grandma most was that now I was getting to be at a age, and my mother too, I was getting to be at a age where I was beginning to spend a lot of time outside by myself. Because my mother, I told you when I was like ten, eleven my mother was trying to get back into work. So she wasn't around a lot in terms of in the daytime. And my grandma, she worked so it would be like I'm ten, eleven, twelve in the middle of the day by myself and me and my friends is just like, you know it's pretty much free

reign nobody could tell us what to do and my grandma kind of knew that. So I think she was like let's try to get him away. I was at Castle Hill and I was in the projects, she would be like why don't he just come around here, it's probably better for him to come around here and I was like for what, why?

MN: Now you weren't around a lot of men got up every day, went to work, you know supported their family, but you were around a lot of men who were involved in the hustling culture. Was that hustling culture attractive to you as a kid?

MP: Yes, to us that was how it was supposed to be, for the most part. Like you know you talk about the music, I think that played a lot into your head a lot sometimes too. But yes I mean it was, you were poor, you know like we didn't really have a lot, and this is for like a lot of my friends, a lot of people in my neighborhoods, we didn't have a lot, we didn't have anything really. So we had our little bit, and we would always strive to get more. And the people that had parents that did work, and they would want from their parents, what their parents couldn't give them. And sometimes their parents didn't try enough. And then you had the kids that knew their parents couldn't do it, and they would always want and long to have something more so that's really sort of attractive, like this is quick money. And we seen it so regularly all the time, it was like - -.

MN: What did you see out of the street, in terms of you know manifestations of the hustling culture? Did you see transactions taking place?

MP: Yes you would see transactions, you would see the drop. And the drop is like when, alright say the guy come in to get the buy and I was going to say a specific part, but I'm not going to say that, like the guy would come and they would call it the drop. So he would come and then he would throw the sign, he wanted whatever, and then they would go to wherever the stash is at

and they would go get the stash and they would come back around the other way and they would do the transaction like that. Like when you see it enough times no matter how young you are, repetition, you know repetition is how you learn. You would see how he did it, and especially in Castle Hill like you like would see it a lot, like all the time. Like this was like the deal. This is how they do it. Certain apartments in the building, these are the ones where it is going on, that's how it was so the hustling culture was very, it was visible like mentally. You knew people was on drugs because they would be like strung out, like you know either mad hyper and like mad hyper or always ask for a quarter or always selling something that it was like why are you selling this you know. So that's how you know these are the feigns, we would call them, these are the feigns these are the ones strung out because they always was out of place and just looking like frantic and scattered. So we was like alright, that's them. Then you always knew dudes was hustling and making money. A lot of times, not so much because they weren't like ordinate, you know they weren't like outwardly like you know flashing but it would be the little things and that's how we know, oh they was getting money.

MN: Now were younger people mentored by older people in the hustling culture, somebody would say hey go to the store for me, here's a ten spot, you know was it that kind of thing? Or could you just tell them watch out for me? So if you are ten, eleven, twelve are the older people going to try to draw you in?

MP: I mean like, ten, eleven, twelve, probably. When I was ten, eleven, twelve it was kind of like it was a little too young. It depends, when I was at 165th, when I was on Bryant it would be like you would be too young. Especially because everybody grew up with each other and it's very much like same people in the neighborhood, maybe these people had morals or whatever they'd be like alright you a little too young to be joining us now. Once you turned thirteen,

fourteen, fifteen well that's a whole other story. Once you get into high school, once you get into high school there's more of a market for you to like get off drugs and school or whatever. Your network grows so that would be alright, in Castle Hill it wasn't as much like people younger doing it. But the rules wasn't so steadfast. Like yes you're twelve, you're eleven you too young, it was like if you wanted to come up on it, then come on. But they were stray, it wouldn't readily be like yes come on.

MN: Did the local hustlers or drug dealers do generous things? Did they like sponsor barbeques or parties or anything like that?

MP: No not to my experience.

MN: And so your neighborhood they weren't benefactors?

MP: They would like, see I knew a lot of them from my mother too, because my mother like, in Castle Hill and on Bryant. So like I knew them, like they saw me in the store they'd be like little Mike here's a dollar, they would buy ice cream from Mr. Softee.

MN: But they didn't throw a big block party for anyone on Bryant or you know get everybody together for a summer jam, you know or give people Christmas turkeys or anything?

MP: No they wasn't making money like that. They wasn't making money like that.

MN: Even though they had more money than other people, they were just scraping by also?

MP: I don't want to say they was scraping by, they were doing well. But like - -.

MN: They didn't just think in that way? They weren't community minded hustlers?

MP: They were community minded where I'm from but that's about it. But they weren't like yes, you know let's give out toys because it's Christmas. I saw that in movies, I never like, I didn't know, I was like could be?

OL: Did you experience any violence, personally? Did you see anything?

MP: I have one vivid memory, of like when I was like ten. And I was sleeping in Castle Hill and one day you woke up, the cops chased this boy down to my building. And you could hear them, they must've had Tims on they was kicking him, kicking him, kicking him, kicking him, kicking him, kicking him, kicking him, where's your other friend? Kicking him, where's your other friend, where's your other friend, you know he's here, we know he's here. So that's a vivid memory I'll never forget, a lot of just people getting beat up you know what I mean. A lot of the shootings happened like at night, they had like alleys where they did them so we didn't necessarily see that, maybe that's why when you asked me the violence thing earlier I was like well the bullets and stuff, it wasn't that. Like they did their dirt, one of my mother's friends, this young kid, he's still in jail the rest of his life now, off of a shooting that he did, but it was very isolated type of deal. Like they, it wouldn't be in the middle of the block, like shoot them out wild wild west type style, but people were getting killed like regularly. Like I didn't witness a lot of the shooting, I've seen like maybe two, three in my life, but not like a lot you know. Not like a numerous amount that's all I remember, but you would hear the gunshots at night, so you knew that somebody was getting shot.

MN: Okay, well anymore questions?

OL: During your teenage years, after your mom died and you were in high school, what kind of high school did you go to? You talked about how the clothes were you know kind of playing around with your uniform in Catholic school was important, what happened in high school in terms of getting clothes. Could people afford things? Were you working to pay for your own clothes, did you grandma pay for your clothes?

MP: In high school I went to a Catholic high school. The reason why I ended up at a Catholic high school is not because of my grandma this time. The reason why I ended up in a Catholic

high school was because I got a scholarship and you know in the Catholic elementary and junior high it's like take this test, go to this Catholic school and I was like well, my grandmother had already told me, I can't afford it if you can get in and get some money you can go, if you can't you can't. I got the scholarship, my junior high they didn't, they didn't give me a recommendation like this is a good kid to go but the school took me.

MN: So basically it was because you did well on a standardized test, not because the school was.

MP: Not because they were lauding, it's not like they were lauding me.

MN: This is a solid citizen, this is.

MP: This is a smart kid, he gets in trouble a lot. They tried to kick me out, I've been trying to get kicked out of school since seven. So they were trying to kick me out for the longest. I think they kind of had some sympathy, especially the junior high, they had a little sympathy when my mother passed and probably that's the only reason why I survived. All my other friends got kicked out. So I think they felt, and I was smarter, so I think that's kind of what they was like, keep me in. So to answer your question that's how I went to the Catholic school. And in high school yes it was a lot, the dressing became a way bigger issue now. And everybody wanted to be fresh and that's what led more people to try to want to hustle because their parents couldn't give them that. A lot of the kids went on scholarship you know they was playing ball, they were on quote unquote scholarship. People were paying for them to go, you know so they couldn't afford to have like Prada shoes. That was the thing, like Prada shoes, Diesels, Diesel shoes was way big when we was in.

MN: Diesel shoes?

MP: Diesel, Diesel yes.

MN: Describe a Diesel shoe for the older generation.

MP: A Diesel shoe is like, it was like it was kind of leather and like a suede, three lines on it and a kind of buckle kind of deal like. This is when it first becomes like hip-hop is not just like baggy jeans. People trying to smooth it out a little bit, so that was a big deal, like Diesel shoes. Diesel has a store, right by 59th St. there was a big store.

MN: There was actual store?

MP: Well it was clothes.

OL: It's a brand.

MN: It's a brand, right okay.

MP: Diesel, Prada shoes. I never forget that.

MN: Prada?

MP: I was like what are you doing trying to get? People would spend their summer check, like Prada shoes. So yes, a lot of it, what to wear was heavily. Public school, Catholic school whatever school was driven by you wanted to have like this outward appearance. And the kids that couldn't keep it up were trying to hustle, you know their parents couldn't do it for them or whoever was taking care of them couldn't do it for them. So they would just be like I'll sell trees. Like nobody was doing coke or crack in school per se, for them to do it they'd be outside and they'd be like yes let's do it like that. But in the school, weed. A lot of people would sell weed because a lot of kids smoke weed, a lot of people smoke weed. So it was like easy access for them. And that's how they would try to keep up the fashion.

OL: How did you navigate that? Were you trying to keep up?

MP: This is how I did it. Like I've never been into like clothes and I was like I ain't got it you know so I never was like heavily into it. But what happened was I did work in the summers. So I ran track so I didn't really have time for a job, so I knew I was just going to get what my

grandma give me and that's it, the end. I was just going to take it and I was going to be happy. And I was just going to try to scrap by and match and try to look as clean as I possibly can with what she gave me. But I did get a summer job, and I've been working since fifteen. I always worked in the summer and I used that money to try to get white ups, like uptowns.

MN: Now when I was teaching the course and I asked who had been to jail and I raised my hand, you were the only other one who raised your hand.

MP: You want to know how I ended up?

MN: Yes.

MP: Am I allowed to tell the story?

MN: Yes. You'd be amazed what people say in these interviews.

MP: So like one day, you know when they had the black out in 2000? When was the black out?

OL: 2003.

MP: You had the blackout right? I'm in my house, we the last neighborhood, it's Friday now, the blackout happened Thursday, it's Friday four o'clock. We are the last ones to get our electricity we still waiting. So my friend, he already had pretty much, he used to go to Morris and he was in and out of the house, he was going getting trouble or whatever calls. Mike we still don't have electricity I was like word, why don't we have electricity? I was supposed to go pick up my check it was supposed to be the last day of work and I was like I don't have my damn check and we just sitting around. He was like you know what, we are going to drink; I was like why you want to drink? He was like yo we are going to drink, what else we doing? I was like you know what you right. So he says alright come down. So he comes down to my block where I live right get a chair and there is this liquor called Devil Springs, I don't know if you all have heard of it?

MN: What?

MP: Devil Springs.

MN: You can buy this? This is not a wine?

MP: 160 proof.

MN: They sell it at the local liquor store?

MP: Yes.

[END SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

MN: We're talking about Devil Springs.

MP: Yes. I was like alright let's have the Devil Springs. So we drink it, I was like this stuff is tough. And I end up being smacked, as we would say wasted, cooked, I just started acting a fool.

I had my bat; I used to walk around with a bat because I had a girlfriend she lived in Polo Grounds and 155th St., right across from Rucker Park, like literally right across. So I used to be like yo if it pop off yo I had my bat, whatever. Now I'm drunk with a bat and I'm like seventeen. So I went and I busted the windows on my second floor window, embarrassed my grandma.

MN: Of your apartment?

MP: No, not in my apartment. It was a building and then there was windows that you could see out to the front, the elevator and then the windows, you could see outside the building.

MN: Which building was this?

MP: This is back at Bryant, 1016. Busted the window, pow, pow, pow. Cops came, was like listen this kid, we don't want to take him in he's just being really reckless right now. So that was the first time and they did, but they let it go and it was whatever. And the second time I had some tickets, I had some nonsense tickets. I had like, you ever had menacing? I had a stupid menacing thing, I didn't go to the court.

MN: Some people say I'm menacing, what did you get to be menacing?

MP: Alright, this is some stupid cop, whatever, where was I? I was in one of them right off the two train, I was in the street and like these little houses. My friends we was just there, now apparently, they was in gangs. They had got into something with some kids, some kids two blocks on the other side of Kelly Park. So they had got into something with them, right, and then end up being like a fight, they came by and they beat him up. Whatever like that, and the kids filed a police report, like yes they were following us and they chased us down and they did whatever, whatever, so they gave me a menacing ticket or some warrant. Whatever it was called, right so I had that, and then I had like a lot of tickets from hopping the train because my Metrocard would run out. So one morning, while I'm in Fordham University, mind you, one morning my sophomore year I was at my house. Before I moved on campus I was sleeping in my house, all I hear is boom, boom, boom, boom ,boom and it's the police. And I woke up I was like Oh my God, and my grandma was like what the hell is going on? They was like turn on the light, I was like I'm not moving, I'm not going anywhere, you all turn on the light it's right here, I'm not moving. So they say you Michael Partis? I'm like yes. They was like yes, we have a warrant. I was like a warrant, for what and then I was like damn it's either these tickets or it's going to be the menacing, it's one of the other. I was like oh man. So they took me, and then they was like yes, they have a blotter. The things these cops do. They have a list of all the people by building who have outstanding warrants. How they even knew my building I have no idea, I definitely didn't tell them the truth when I got the first summons, the first warrant, ticket whatever thing. And I didn't go to the court thing, so I don't know how they knew it, but they found out. So they took us down to the jail and they was like you just have to wait. On the way to the jail they went to get coffee, they went to get this they went to get that, they had us sitting in the van, there was

like five us. My man was sick with an ulcer, then they took us down to the courthouse, to the criminal one. The front side of 161st one. Went in there, went down to the jail thing, then they would call you up when it was time for you to see the judge. Judge would do it out, he was like alright done, I was like wow all of this for like some damn tickets, or whatever the menacing summons. So yes, that was two times I visited the bars.

MN: Now, let's do the soundtrack of your life. What's the first music you recall hearing when you were a kid? Being played.

MP: Being played in my house?

MN: What did you grandmother listen to?

MP: My grandma you know is country.

MN: She likes country music?

MP: She like R&B, she likes country.

MN: What were some of the country artists she liked? Conway Twitty, Johnny Cash?

MP: I wish, I wish I could. She would listen to it on this little radio she had. I wasn't into it, I was just like oh you listen to country.

MN: What about the R&B? Did that make an impression on you?

MP: Yes, my mother liked R&B. She loved hip-hop, she loved R&B. Like it's Eva, I would say Boyz 2Men or Mary. That would be like one of the first two vivid songs I remember my mother playing. Because yes she played a lot of old school too, but even then it wasn't like old school per se. She played Mary and Boyz2Men. I would say she liked Mary more than she like Boyz2Men. She liked Boyz2Men but we had got a free tape, so we played it. She was really into Blue Magic and she was into Blue Magic and she liked Mary, those were the first ones.

MN: What was the first hip-hop you recall, hearing? And where did you get your first exposure to it?

MP: I want to say the first, just the first was probably Wu-Tang. That probably would be the first. I was just sitting in the park and they was just playing it, and they was playing Cream. So that would be the first one, they was just playing Cream, and I was listening to it. I didn't even know some of the words but it was like, cash rules everything around me, and I was like shit that's true. That was the first one.

MN: Now did they have, like a portable boombox?

MP: Boombox? Yes, everybody had batteries and a boombox. And would play it.

MN: Now were they sitting down, were they playing basketball, what were people doing?

MP: Everything. Everything. Playing basketball, the music would be. It would be like two different boomboxes, some people would be on one side of the park listening to this. Some people would be at the picnic benches, some dudes would play ball but the thing right down on the steps and listen to it. So there was like three boomboxes.

MN: So in the park there at Bryant Ave., the 75 park there was constant music?

MP: Yes. Mad boomboxes and people just listening to music.

MN: Now you said your neighborhood was more Black than Latino?

MP: At the time.

MN: At the time?

MP: Yes.

MN: And so the hip-hop was more prevalent than Latin music?

MP: Yes, you would hear, we would call it Spanish music. You would hear some Spanish music. Like sometimes if you would walk. I mean like anywhere else we would walk, if you walked a

couple of blocks up the block you would hear like salsa, salsa you know. And later on when I went to high school you would hear like Bachata, more Dominicans were coming. But in the beginning you would hear Spanish music if you walked up, if you liked Spanish restaurants. I mean there was a solid community there, you know what I mean. Yes but everybody liked hip-hop, so that was the prevalent music, period that you would hear, a lot of rap, a lot of R&B. Spanish, Black they liked it so that's what we hear a lot of.

MN: Was television important for you, when you started being aware of hip-hop?

MP: Kind of, because people would be like, did you see this video? That's when I was older though, that's like more eleven, twelve, ten.

MN: So Cream, how old were you when you first heard that?

MP: Seven.

MN: Now when you were talking before you mentioned Illmatic, as something that was really. How old were you when Illmatic came out?

MP: Ten. I don't know how old was I? Eight maybe, the first time I vividly remember hearing it I was like nine, ten. I was sitting there in the summer and they was just playing it. And I was like yo this dude has a tremendous way of like putting things. And he was like, and it hit me, I was like. It sounds like somebody telling a story to a life that I know.

MN: This is to me very interesting. Because so many people talk about hip-hop as like the beat or the party music and you are saying the thing that struck you was they were describing the world you were in. You were almost like, as a kid, you were like almost like a miniature social scientist. Which is to me unusual.

MP: Words, it was the words. Maybe with other songs I would say it was the beat, or it was the hook or it was the melody. But not Illmatic, not Cream, it was the words that first did it for me.

MN: I guess you know partly the story, the making of an intellectual. How did you, it sounds like you were both inside and outside the situation. You were both living it and watching it and analyzing it. Was that something that you were doing from a pretty early age?

MP: Yes, my mother. One thing about my mother, I've come to see with my father and my grandma is that they don't have higher education, but they are exceptionally bright people. Like my father, he's a bright, he knows all types of stuff when I talk to him. He put his brainpower selling drugs and doing crime. My mother was exceptionally bright, she had like common sense, and she always honed that in on me, use common sense, pay attention to where you at. Make sure you stay focused. Know what's going on around you, know your environment, know your surroundings. My grandma, watch the news know what's going on, make sure you watch the weather so you know what to wear. So I had all these people, well not my father he wasn't around, but my mother and my grandma were very like read, learn, and be aware of your surroundings. So I guess I was living the situation because like I ain't nowhere to go, this is my neighborhood this is where I grew up. But it was always afro-centric, black, black center, like black you need to know that and you need to understand that being black in this country, in not so many words, different. A different experience.

MN: So this was something that your mother was saying that to you? You know that, so she was giving you a kind of exposure to political consciousness.

MP: Yes. My mother was like you are black in this country you need to be smart you need to be educated, you know you need to about. My mother could tell you about Fred Hampton, she could tell you about Newton, she could tell you about all that stuff.

MN: Really?

OL: So you think that's why when the police told you to turn on the lights you were like I'm not going to turn on the lights?

MP: I didn't even think about it until you said it just now, maybe? Maybe it is. Maybe I knew, maybe I knew. I hate that self-consciously.

MN: Was there any political other exposure you had to political, were there political groups in your neighborhood? Were people selling the Muslim paper?

MP: No. I mean I had heard. My mother would be like Louis Ferricon on TV let's watch what he got to say or whatever. The first time we got cable he was on like Eddie Gordon I think, she was like let's watch him. I was like whatever, we watch it. But my father was a Muslim when I first met him. So he was talking about like Muslims, don't eat pork. I was like you just got out of jail that's what you talking about. I told him to his face, I was like you just got out of jail that's why you talking about you Muslim now.

MN: Now how important was reading to you as a kid?

MP: Reading was important. I would say like, yes it was important because the first time I heard about The Source, I got it. I started reading it, I would read like the WWF magazine, I was like I like wrestling, I used to buy magazines and read it. Books per se, I didn't really get into books until like junior high, high school. A lot of my information I read like magazines and I was like this interesting.

MN: Interesting. So how old were you when you got your first issue of The Source?

MP: Damn, I used to have it. I wonder do I still have it? Who was on the first cover of The Source I bought? First Source I bought was '95, you know what it might've been. The first Source might've been? Been the one when Big was on the cover and he had, not the crown, did he have the crown on his head? That was the one, it was a white background, and Big had on like

a grey suit, and he had on like a fedora, not a fedora, maybe it was a fedora. He had on a fedora cap that was the first Source I ever bought.

MN: So you were like ten years old?

MP: Yes, that was the first Source I bought. Big had on a fedora on the cover.

MN: Now were you unusual among ten year olds in your neighborhood? Would other kids read that also?

MP: For buying The Source, yes. For knowing Big, no. But for buying The Source yes.

MN: So the reading is what differentiated you? Everybody was totally immersed in hip-hop but you were reading about it.

MP: The older kids, they would like buy some things you know. Vibe wasn't a big deal to them, but The Source was. The older kids would read The Source.

MN: Now was there any live music in your neighborhood? Nobody was doing jams in the park? There were no DJ's who were spinning?

MP: There were at the parties though. At the parties, yes.

MN: But not outdoors? You didn't see any emcee battles?

MP: How young you talking now?

MN: I'm talking about Bryant. Nine, eight, ten?

MP: No.

MN: When was the first time you began to see an emcee battle? Or you know, high school?

MP: Maybe not even, maybe eighth grade. But I'm telling you, battling became a big deal because who was it in the battle. Battling became a big deal, a) because like the whole, the whole art of being a lyricist, of who could sound the hottest song to come about. Not lyricist in like content, who has the best content but like who was the best with the words type of deal. So you

see, you saw more people on the rap. It's not meant to differentiate alright you say you is good, who's better? So you all battle. I guess it was like a steady growing thing, you heard about Eminem and he came up through battling, so kids would battle. And then 106 and Park would have that whole battle thing. And that's what really hyped it up, you know battling is going to be a way. So kids would just clear out, and I also meant in Bryant. Anywhere you go, Times Square, anywhere we would go in high school, they would battle. That would be like a trademark, if you wanted, you would make your way through battling. And that's what it was.

OL: You mentioned before the first time you met your dad was when Life and Death came out. Is that something you do where you think about a period in your life, and you think about a hip-hop album or is it that, specific album that was significant with you?

MP: The significant album when I was growing up was Illmatic and Life after Death. Ready to Die was more like when I was in high school. It was kind of like, I forget what they call it. Like a flashback. I got Ready to Die and I was more into it. Like this is like how your mind would think, I was like this is how I would think. Life after Death, was more like aesthetic. It sounded good, because it was, it was very. You always talk about smooth, it was very smooth, and it was just Big in his element. It was like the hip-hop that I liked of it. And Illmatic I had just the content, Nas's rapping ability. But Ready to Die was when I was freshman, sophomore in high school I listened to it everyday. I listened to not Suicidal, I listened to Suicidal Thoughts, I listened to Everyday Struggle. I listened to that everyday my first two months of my sophomore year, every day. Because that was the line of thinking that, that was like what was going on when I was younger. So yes, but the definitive albums is Illmatic and Life after Death. Those were my favorite growing up.

MN: I want to ask you something about gender. When you were growing up were any of your close friends girls? Or were people pretty separated in terms of their sociability.

MP: I'm trying to think did I have friends that were girls? No, we were very like, we were brainwashed. We were very patriarchal, womanizing like. I'm not even going to lie, I was trying to think, maybe I could think.

OL: How much younger is your sister?

MP: My sister is twelve now, she's eight years younger. She's '94 born. She's eight years younger than me. She just did a really good critique of a paper he submitted for me.

MP: Yes, she did.

MN: Did you have this image of yourself as you were growing up that you had a plan for yourself?

MP: No.

MN: That you were going to end up in a place that was very different from the one you were growing up in?

MP: No. I think I figured like when I was a little younger and people would ask me and I'd give them the P.C. answer. Like yes, I want to have a job, I want to get a nice house, I want to move out. I think I did a lot of that but I didn't believe it, I figured that's what'd I'd say to people. Because people would ask me, so you know that's what you supposed to say but I didn't believe that shit, I didn't believe that. I didn't think that was going to happen.

OL: Did you start Fordham right after high school?

MP: Yes, I did.

OL: Did a lot of other kids from your high school go to college? Was that a big deal, you coming to Fordham?

MP: In my neighborhood it was a big deal. It was a big deal. It was oh, you going to Fordham, you going to Fordham, like that's good. It was like a big deal, everybody knew I was smart but it was still like you going to Fordham. It was real last minute me coming to Fordham anyway. Who knows where I would've ended up but yes coming to Fordham was a big deal. In my school, not so much because it was a Catholic school and I had like an elitist type education at the Catholic school. I learned Latin and classical civilizations and all that other type stuff. So going to college wasn't like Oh my God, like they kind of, they try to put expectations for you to go to college and really to be completely honest if I didn't go there I probably wouldn't have went to college. If I didn't go to a high school that emphasized it, I probably would have went. But I didn't see myself going.

MN: Your friends who didn't go to Catholic high school, what did they end up doing? Where are they now?

MP: Pennsylvania, jail, one of them went upstate. One went to Pennsylvania. I'm kind of glad he did because he was getting in trouble. It was time. That was my man that I got, busted out the window, drunk with him.

OL: Devil Springs?

[Laughter]

MP: Yes, he left. That was good for him, he got a little job now, you know trying to get by in Pennsylvania. Couple of them went down South or in jail.

OL: Anyone stay in the neighborhood?

MP: No. Alright, yes a couple, they not in school they quote unquote working. Everybody else is gone, some how some way they gone, it's over.

MN: Now today in the Bronx, gangs, and all around New York City probably all around the country, you know gangs are pretty big. What about when you were growing up?

MP: Yes. Like I remember in the fifth grade, I was in D.A.R.E. in the Catholic school I was in D.A.R.E. And D.A.R.E. was like Drug Abuse Resistance Education, or yes. I remember this lady's name, Officer Beecher, that was our D.A.R.E. teacher, she was a real city cop. So the gangs were getting to be a big deal, there was the Latin Kings, there was the Netas, there was the Bloods. Now the Bloods when it was starting to get heavy and everybody was afraid, it was like Halloween, nobody wanted to go outside because they was like yo we get a buck fifty, and that would be the slash from here in. That was the initiation to get into the Bloods. Buck fifty across your face.

MN: With a razor?

MP: Yes. And the funny thing, it was like, you know how back in the day you would see the dudes with the razor and they would flip it out. They wasn't even doing that, they was just, Bong, slice you right across your face. That was the big thing. Everybody was afraid, like yo, you don't want to get the Bloods.

MN: So what was Halloween like in your neighborhood?

MP: Bad, trouble. And I'm talking about like in Castle Hill and - -. It was horrible. Halloween was, bleach in balloons and throwing it at people. Frozen eggs, batteries in the roof, it was reckless.

OL: Did they throw Nair in girls' hair?

MP: Yes. Nair.

MN: This was Brooklyn?

OL: Yes.

MP: Word.

OL: You'd have to wear a hat to school or don't go to school at all.

MN: Do a lot of kids stay home from school?

MP: Yes. They didn't go to school. The kids was bad. We was mischievous. Except the Bloods they would try to slash you, but the rest of the kids was just reckless. Word Nair, I forgot about that. Nair you're right. That was a big thing, the girls were scared. Scared, scared, scared, Nair in the hair how mean is that? That was mean.

OL: Do you think your sister had a different time growing up than you? I mean she's still pretty young. And how would you say it's different for her?

MP: Time differentiate how she different from me, and how she's different in the environment. I would say the whole nature, there's still a lot drugs. But the nature of it is different. Personally I think a lot of it is like, like an aesthetics type of deal. People want to look a certain way, act a certain way, because now like there's a lineage behind it. When we was like younger it wasn't as much as a lineage behind it, it was like kind of still more of doing what you got to do type thing. But now I think it's more like I want to look a certain way, I want to be a certain way. Don't get me wrong, there was a lot of that too, but I think it's definitely more like hyped. And the external thing, coming in are the external forces, brainwashing them into thinking I need to hustle, yes I need to rap. And I need to do all that, and that's what I think is different.

MN: You think it's easier or harder to grow up now than when you were growing up? Let's say that ten, fifteen year difference.

MP: Harder.

MN: You think it's harder now?

MP: Because I think it's harder to be yourself. I think there's even more pressure than when I was young, I see even more pressure on my sister, these little high school kids. More than there was to me, more pressure for them to want to just be themselves. They are just always like trying to be something else. Or keeping up to a certain ideal. More kids when we were growing up were like forget it, this is who I am, you know?

MN: Do you think like consumerism is more powerful now?

MP: I think it's more powerful because hip-hop is more powerful. They still love hip-hop. The common denominator for me growing and my sister now how she's coming to age now is hip-hop. She listens to what I listened to, and I may bash it but you know, you listen to hip-hop. But the nature is very different. Now the nature of hip-hop is the ring tones and bright colors. Not even bright colors, but you know all types of other stuff. So the consumerism part is way bigger deal, now it's not like when I was even younger it was like, when I was real young it was like a Carl Carnive, Mecca shirt. When I was like ten or eleven, it was a Phat Farm shirt or a Girbaud shirt. Then I was like thirteen, fourteen it was like Iceberg. You see it getting more expensive as you go along. You go from Carl Canive, Mecca to Phat Farm, Fubu, type of Girbaud was a little expensive. To Iceberg, Burberry you know right. And now it continues to go upward, you know what I mean, that's the direction it's going. So I would say they were just as consumer driven as we are but the stakes is a lot higher now. The price is going up and to keep up with it they feel more pressure to do things that they wouldn't have necessarily had to do and it just becomes like you know, a driving force deal. To me, so I think it is harder.

OL: Because your grandma and your mom were so, big about giving you sort of this consciousness about being black when you were growing up and the political sort of aspects of

that. When you were becoming a teenager and buying clothes were you interested in brands like Fubu and Phat Farm? Did it matter to you?

MP: To me it mattered a lot. They were black, I was like this is black. Even like Fubu, For Us By Us, I was like that idea over that. I liked the idea of Mecca, only one I really wore that wasn't kind of like that was I wore Girbaud. I liked Girbaud so I wore that. And then Akademiks, we had like those, you know the lines become blurred the older we got. Between what's like, what was authentically hip-hop or whatever. But it becomes very blurred, now you can't even point to who made what, you know.

MN: Now when did you start getting into poetry?

MP: When did I get into poetry?

MN: He's a slam poet.

MP: Sixteen. Seventeen, I started getting into slam poetry when I heard it on, Def Poetry Jam. That's when I was like this is kind of dope. This is like an alternative type of thing. I mean when I heard it in the Love Jones, the first time I seen it, I was like yes they sound alright. But I had that kind of idea of what it was, so when I saw it on Love Jones I was like this is kind of, but it's a little different. And then when I saw it on Def Poetry, I was like oh no way this like not, this is like rap in a other type of way and I liked it, so I was like seventeen. But I didn't do it because I didn't think I could. But I liked it.

MN: Did you ever try to become an emcee?

MP: Yes. When I was in high school I thought I was like yo, you know what? Why don't I try to rap? I was like maybe I could rap. I was like why not? Let me try to.

MN: Do you have any of your old lyrics from high school? Do you remember anything?

MP: Yes, I do.

MN: Give us an example.

MP: You know what, how I would start, I never even got beyond this point. I would try to take existing rhymes and I was like let me try to twist it and then try to build off of it. So the Big L one, Big L was like, Fuck the glamour and glitz my plan is to get rich, I'm from New York and never was a fan of the Knicks, or something like that. And I was like alright I'm going to try to work on that and turn it around, but I couldn't do it, I couldn't, I just wasn't good. That's how, I would try to take the concepts of the songs I would like and the words and just build, and try to make something completely mine, completely different but build off of the direction, but I wasn't any good.

MN: Were any of your friends good?

MP: I had one friend who was good. I have a good friend now, he ain't in school, he really trying to make it rapping. He's good, and I had another friend who was alright, but he stopped. I had two friends who were good. A lot of them, a lot of the other ones it was like yes, you all just need to stop you can't rap. But everybody was trying to find a way to get out they situation, so that's why rap had such an appeal. It was like yes be a rapper.

MN: Now did you ever get any negative pressure in you neighborhood because you did well in school?

MP: Nobody really bothered me. I guess it goes with the whole authentic type thing, which is problematic. But you know it's because I had like grades and I had like. It's weird now they do. I was going to say, if I wore like, you know a polo shirt and some slacks and some you know wing toes, I would probably look out of place. But you know what now you probably wouldn't look out of place, they wear like bright, you know what I mean they wear bright colors joints and things like that. So now it wouldn't even look out of place. But back then I would. But if you had

on some pointy glasses or whatever like that, they would be quick to make fun of you like yes, you a sucker you a punk. But I never personally received pressure, and we never personally made fun of people, in the neighborhood anyway, oh you smart. No, there wasn't a lot of that, I see a lot of that going on with my sister and when I did this program called History Makers with these high school kids, I saw a lot of that going on. A lot of like counter intellectualism, is that what they call it. It's true though, there's a lot of that going on. People afraid to be smart and people afraid to know the answers. That's why when you said is it harder, like yes it's harder because we never had none of that. Like being smart wasn't necessarily a mark to say, you a punk or you can't hang out with us no more. But now it's like, its mad pressure on the kids to not be smart, that's something that we never had. I can't vividly remember that, like you would tease a kid - -.

MN: Do you think that's something connected to hip-hop? That you know you have like people like back in the day, like Nas and Biggie and Jay-Z who were all like honor students who went street and that's reflected in the quality of lyricism.

MP: Yes, definitely. You know the dumbed down lyrics, yes. The focus on it being melodic and sing songy, it makes a hot ringtone. Yes, I definitely think there's a lot of influence on it. The lack of, they are just mad afraid to be smart and it's kind of scary. But they just afraid.

MN: Now I just thought of this because of Michael Vick, were there a lot of pit bulls in your area?

MP: Yes. It was part of a image. You had a pit-bull.

MN: So this was like a lot of young people?

MP: Yes. If you mean twenties, early twenties, then yes. That's weird right?

MN: And this is in Bryant or in Castle Hill?

MP: Both.

MN: Both. So this is already been pretty developed when you were growing up?

MP: Pit bulls. I don't know if they were fighting them. But I definitely know people had pit bulls.

MN: Did you ever have them like jump up and grab branches.

MP: Yes.

MN: And hang by the branch?

MP: Or do the thing where they grab the thing with they teeth and pull it because it's supposed to make them stronger. They might've been training them to fight. I didn't ever think of it before. Could've been. A lot of them would do that, you know you'd grab the rope and you'd have the dog bite the rope and pull them and allegedly it was supposed to make his jaw stronger. But now that I think about it maybe they were just doing that. I don't know, I don't got firsthand knowledge of that though.

MN: Did anybody you grow up with play a musical instrument growing up? Were you taught to play a musical instrument in school?

MP: I didn't have music.

MN: Did kids have take home musical instruments from the public school or Catholic schools?

MP: Nope. Public school neither though. None of us, we didn't grow up with music. But that's like a school by school type of thing.

MN: Except in the fifties and sixties every junior high school had bands and the kids took it home.

MP: See my girlfriend she says she had the clarinet, she got that from junior high. She went like over there to junior high, but my neighborhood nobody had no instrument, nobody was learning music.

MN: Now what about like after school programs? Were there a lot of them in your neighborhood? Like supervised after schools?

MP: Supervised, no. Well you know, the PAL had a center on Longwood and sometimes if you felt like venturing up there you would go. But that's like fifteen, twenty minutes. But there wasn't like a night center at the local public school?

MP: Not on my block.

MN: You didn't go to like set you know. Because when I was growing up three to five, seven to nine, every public school was open for like basketball and knock hockey.

MP: Some blocks had that. Some blocks had like centers. I can think of, you would go to those places but directly on my block, on like a fifteen block radius, no, we didn't. There was a Boys and Girls Club on 174th St. There was a couple up in that direction.

MN: But it wasn't in the schools, in the public schools?

MP: No.

MN: Any other questions you guys have?

OL: What music are you into now? What are you listening to?

MP: Like right at this moment?

OL: Right now.

MP: Andre 3000. Andre 3000, Common's new album. Kanye, the more, Kanye, the reason why I say Kanye is the thing about Kanye is a lot of times the first time I hear his songs I be like it's alright. But for some reason, they grow on me in a different type of way, than like when I hear

50. Like I don't like 50. But if I hear 50, it's the catchiness of it, will catch you. But whenever I listen to Kanye's songs. Like the more I listen to them, it's not the catchiness of it that starts to take hold of me, it's either what he's saying, how he's saying it. I don't know, there's something going on. But I like Kanye, he's on my away message right now.

OL: Is it 50 and Kanye that have that thing where one of them say that when his album comes out if, was it 50 who said when Kanye West's album comes out, if 50's album doesn't sell more he's going to retire.

MP: No, it started 50, 50 started it. He does this before all his albums come out. And he basically is like, Kanye doesn't sell more records than me. He was like he wins awards, but I sell albums, I make money and then he was like his album can't compete with mine because it's coming out. When Kanye announced his was coming out September 11th too he was like he can't compete with me. He knows he can't compete with me. If Jay is smart they going to push the album back and Kanye was like no, so coming out, Kanye wasn't really feeding into it. But 50 was over, and he was like I'll quit. Was it on Rap City?

OL: Yes.

MP: Yes on Rap City he was like I'll quit. He was like I'll produce, I'll write but I won't make another album, if he outsells me. He probably won't, so unfortunately. But he might give him a run, he's giving him a lot more publicity than he thought he was that's for sure.

MN: Now what about instrumental music? Have you gotten into like jazz or - -?

MP: Yes. I was listening to Miles. I been listening to some Miles, some Thelonious Monk. I been just recently been getting into it, like the improv part of it. You know how it's just kind of like - -.

MN: Now were you exposed to jazz at all when you were growing up?

MP: No.

MN: Your mother didn't listen, your grandmother? It wasn't in your neighborhood, was there any live music in your life at all? No clubs, no outdoor concerts?

MP: No. I'm trying to think.

MN: I mean in a way, you mean I know, we've done this project for the last four years and we started with people growing up in the thirties, forties, and fifties. And you know kids your age grew up with live music everywhere in the fifties or sixties. You know they were taught it, they played it, there were clubs, there were theaters. It was played outdoors and it seems like your generation is entirely a product of mass media in terms of exposure in terms of music. It's all through, you know, radio, you know CD's, tapes and television. Now but one thing connected to that is the whole of phenomenon of mix tapes. Mix tapes, grassroots, you know marketing of hip-hop.

MP: I got some good archives for you. I have the first DJ Clue mix tape, and not like his first mix tape for mass production. The street kind of handout mix tape. I'll look in my house for it when I go home. I'm going to find it. But yes, mix tapes - -

MN: When were you first exposed to the culture of mix tapes?

MP: Me personally, like seventh grade. So whatever year that would be in. I was like thirteen right, so '98. That was the first time I heard about mix tapes. I think mix tapes had been around a little longer, before. But that's when they were in CD form, that's the first time I heard a mix tape and it was just like a DJ, quote unquote. Who would have just different songs from different people and he would try to have the hottest songs, the newest song before anybody found out. And I was like this is dope, this is the way to find out. But when I got to high school, it became an even bigger phenomenon. Like everybody was like yo, you cop this mix tape? DJ Clue didn't

have like monopoly on it anymore. It was like Kayslay was coming out and then it just slowly but surely. Mix tapes was just a way to get the hottest, new music before it came out. And that was because you know it was kind of going against the mainstream type of deal.

MN: Now where would you buy mix tapes or would you get a hold of them?

MP: The street. Like people would set up on the street. Bootleggers, quote unquote.

OL: Like it was bootleg music, like it was pre-released stuff that was going to get released on an album.

MP: It's hard to explain. Yes, it would be before an album came out, but it wasn't like here's the advance copy of the album, it would be a song and just a compilation of songs. And I guess the DJ, you know they have relationships with people, they'd be like let me get the song. Leak the song out.

OL: Play a hot song, yes.

MP: And you know in the studios a lot of times people are grimy. They'll just bag a song from off a disc and so it'd be a whole combination of that. And it was a big deal. It was kind of your way to knock at the mainstream, you wanted to have the hottest mix tapes. And then 50 changed that.

MN: Now where in the Bronx would go? Or would you buy your mix tapes in Manhattan?

MP: The Bronx, Fordham Road. Well, you could go, it depends, in the Bronx you would come right here on Fordham Road. Fordham better district improved whatever business, whatever they're called - -.

MN: Business improvement district.

MP: Before they came, the bootleggers were set up all along Fordham Road and you would buy your mix tape. And you would bargain you would hustle them DVDs. But slowly but surely they've disappeared, maybe I shouldn't blame the Fordham business people I don't know.

MN: Maybe it's the University.

[Laughter]

MP: Don't even get me started, I don't know I be on tape.

MN: So you can't do that now. The bootleggers have been kicked off Fordham Road?

MP: I don't want to say they've been kicked out but they disappeared. They not there no more and it wasn't like you know.

MN: Are there any other spots than Fordham Road in the Bronx where you would go to get this stuff.

MP: Yes, you could catch somebody on the corner with it. You know you could catch a bootlegger in some places. But in terms of like literally like laid out on the street, it's not as prevalent anymore. In the Bronx, on Harlem 125th St. you can still find a lot of it. In Brooklyn you can still find a lot of it. Not even in the mall, yes in the mall.

OL: Flatbush Avenue?

MP: Exactly, right there on the street you get your blanket out and you have your tapes and your everything out there like that. But in the Bronx there's not like a particular hot spot to go anymore. It's just you see somebody outside you bump into them with it. Fordham Rd. was that place for whatever the reason it is not anymore, so.

MN: Did you friends who had beat making equipment in their apartments?

MP: Yes, I did. I had friends in high school who were trying to make studios and trying to get like little MP3000 joint. That one. Trying to get that, so yes.

MN: So we were talking about mix tapes, studios. What about in like your neighborhood? Like Bryant or Castle Hill, did kids have studios in their apartment there?

MP: Yes, they tried to make them. Like the MP3000 things, all that, the beat machine, but the thing was, there was this one group called the Heatmakerz and they kind of changed how, they changed how it was done. And it was just real basic. You get the machine to loop it, you get pro-tools you know how to mess around with that. You get a Mac and you make a beat. You find a sample and just loop it. There you go, you got a beat. And you have an ear for it, you see they kind of took what like Kanye and Just Blaze was doing and simplified it to make it just, soul. Find a soul sample and just loop it, to make the like –knocks- in it, there you go you got a beat.

MN: Now we are about to wind this up, so I'm going to ask a final question. If you had your choice and could change the way kids in the Bronx today are growing up, what would you want to do to make their lives better?

MP: Create an institution that cultivates thinking. Thinking for yourself, independent thinking, art, expression, your own voice, finding yourself, not being afraid to use the colors in the box that people don't use. Not being afraid to like things that everybody else don't like. But to create an institution, I'm sorry I hate institutions. To create an organization or a place where they can just think for themselves, do for themselves, just be themselves and not be tainted. Their own ability to think.

MN: Okay well thank you very much for a great interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW; END OF SIDE B]