



2-18-2005

Owens, Jimmy Interview 2

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Owens, Jimmy Interview 1. February 18, 2005. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham Research Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Fordham Research Commons. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu, bkilee@fordham.edu.

Interviewee: Jimmy Owens

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

18 February 2005

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the second interview with Jimmy Owens at Fordham University on February 18, 2005 and in our last interview we discussed Jimmy's experience growing up on 168th Street and the atmosphere in the neighborhood and how he began to become a trumpet player.

We ended the last interview with his experiences in Junior High School 40 and so we'd like to move from here from Junior High School 40 to Music and Art and the development of his career as a professional musician. Who were your teachers at Junior High School 40 that had the biggest influence on you?

Jimmy Owens (JO): Well, I think the first teacher was a person who was in charge of the music department. His name was Mr. Lightner. He was a person who would come to P.S. 40 to give the sixth grade class, or those students who were selected, the special music aptitude test to see if we could go into a special music class when we went to Junior High School 40. I was lucky to pass that exam and to be in the special music class.

So in the seventh grade he taught us how to play. *Easy Steps to the Band* was our book and we learned how to play our instruments, okay, and there were real good trumpet players and saxophonists, you know. Joe Orange had gone before that but Freddy Pettis was a saxophonist and he started to take the saxophone at the same time I started to play the trumpet.

After Mr. Lightner, in my eighth grade class a new teacher came in. Mr. Lighter left and a new teacher came in. Her name was Edna Smith and I remember I was one of the best trumpet players in the school. There was another guy. His name was Thomas Windham and Thomas and I were always battling to see who was the best, you know. A couple of the guys said to me, “Hey man, you going to take the band with that new teacher?” I said, “Man, I don’t want to be with no female teacher. She’ll probably have us play all the classical stuff.” The first rehearsal we stood outside the door – a couple of us – and listened to what the new instrumentalists were going to play and all of a sudden we heard them play, “Bee-ba-dabba-dooda-boo-boo. Bee-ba-dabba-dee-ba-do-boom.” She taught them how to play this Charlie Parker melody called “Buzzy.” At that point I said, “Yeah, I’m going in there! I’m going to be in the class,” so I went in and I got in the class and eighth grade was very, very good. She taught us a lot of little songs. I found out that she was a professional bass player and worked with a group called the *Sweethearts of Rhythm*.

In eighth grade I studied and learned a little bit. Ninth grade came time for the exam for the High School in Music and Art and I said to her, “I want to take the exam for Music and Art,” so she started to ask me some questions and I didn’t know them well. She says, “Oh, you have to learn this if you want to get into Music and Art.” So I said, “Really?”

She says, “Yes, you just can’t play good and get in. You have to know it.”

So she started to teach me the scales – the major scales – and she started to teach me the key signatures. I remember she taught me up to key signatures up to four flats and four sharps.

MN: So you had not been reading music before then?

JO: Well, I was reading music but I was kind of cold my reading of music. It wasn't something that was emphasized. Mr. Lightner emphasized it because we had to play in the band – the orchestra and whatnot. It wasn't a situation where we learned how to really read music. At least I didn't.

So she – Ms. Smith – taught me this stuff. I would go sometimes after school to the room and we had about three or four weeks before I took the exam and we'd go to the room sometimes after school. Then, on Saturday, sometimes I would go and meet her at her house.

MN: So you couldn't go into the school on Saturday?

JO: Not that I know of. Well, she wasn't around on Saturday. She lived over on Fulton Avenue near Bronx Hospital in that block and I remember I would go sometimes Friday - walk from my house there. Saturday, many times - - I never went to her house but she always met me in the beauty parlor because she was always in the beauty parlor getting her hair done and she would teach me stuff there in the beauty parlor. [Laughs]

MN: In the beauty parlor?

JO: In the beauty parlor. While she was in the chair she would say, "What's the key with one flat?"

MN: That's hilarious.

JO: "What is that flat? Explain the scale for me."

MN: What did the other people there think?

JO: I never really thought about them but she was very nice and introduced me to all the people I would cross and say, "He's going to be a great young musician."

I decided to play a song from really my very, very young times when I told you about my father picking me up at age three, four, five years old dancing with me in the big mirror in our living room. It was a Duke Ellington song that I [inaudible] Mary Lou Williams. Mary Lou Williams had written an arrangement called “Trumpets No End.” It was a song written by Irving Berlin called “Blue Sky,” and the end of that song they played this melody “Blue Skies” and I decided that that was one of the things I was going to play for my entrance exam for music and art. So, I had been working on it and I’d play it low and then I’d play it in the supper octave and wow.

I was prepared to take the exam for Music and Art and say I had to be at the exam on Tuesday. Friday my mother would say, “Well you make sure you wash the dishes,” or something. So I’m washing the dishes - I’m washing the glass – with the rag and I’m cleaning inside the glass and the glass breaks, cuts my finger here and it’s really, really bleeding. I don’t know what to do. I run down the street from my house, 810, down the street to the corner of Prospect Avenue to Freddy’s house, Freddy Pettis. I said, “Man, I cut myself! I cut myself!” He said, “Let me see it. Oh man, it’s bleeding real bad. Come on. Let’s go to the hospital!”

So we run to Bronx Hospital and at Bronx Hospital we’re waiting in the emergency room and now the band-aid that I have on with tissue is all wearing down. So finally they take care of me to put some peroxide or something like that and they say, “Okay, it’s alright,” and they wrap it up and it stops the bleeding. Years later they told me – another doctor told me – when he looked at my finger, he says, “You know that kind of cut was so bad you should have had about three or four little stitches.” Well, they never gave me any stitches.

Then I had to go now for my exam. I had this huge bandage on my pinky, the hand that I have to play the trumpet with. I guess it could have been, you know - - feel sorry for me, you know, I want to get into the school or something. So I told the teacher what had happened and she says, "Okay," so I went and played and I wowed them. I wound up getting into the High School of Music and Art, thanking Ms. Smith, graduating from Junior High School 40, and slightly staying in contact with her the first year of Music and Art going back to 40 sometimes. Then, she left about one or two years after and went to teach some place else. I lost of track of her. I finally got back in contact with her when she was teaching in Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn and I spoke to her one time but I never went up to see her.

MN: When you were graduating from 40, were you playing in any venues in the community?

JO: Yes.

MN: Where were some of the places you would be performing at that time?

JO: The only places that I could perform, you know – I'm real young – was at the community centers, the auditoriums. There was a group of us who were learning how to play and we would rent – free of charge – the auditorium, put in a requisition. Monday night it was here, Tuesday night it was here, Wednesday night, you know, and we had jam sessions.

MN: Who were some of the people in these jam sessions?

JO: Well, we would go into Harlem and there would be a trumpet player named Faruk Daud and Clifford Brown who wrote the song "Daud" for his father. His father's name is Talib Daud. He played with Dizzy Gillespie. Pianist Larry Willis and the musicians

from the Bronx. Johnny Simon was an alto saxophonist. The better musicians usually didn't come by because they were much better than us so Bobby Capers, who was older than me - - Cayman Grant; piano. Bobby Capers played the saxophone. Cayman Grant; piano. They wouldn't come by too often. Every now and then there was something happening.

At P.S. 99 we used to get the auditorium there because there was a guy there by the name of Mr. Tibbs. Mr. Tibbs was a real community person who took us all under his wing. He was a physical education person so we took physical education from him and he had lots of friends so he would present a concert and have Lou Donaldson come, Jackie Mclean come, and they would play in the auditorium.

MN: Was Lou Donaldson at that time living in the Bronx?

JO: I think so. I think he lived in the Bronx at that time.

MN: Was Mr. Tibbs – Howie Evans mentioned Mr. Tibbs as having been a real force in his life at that time. When you went to Music and Art, what was that experience like?

JO: Well, it was really great because there George and Freddy Pettis had gone to the local high school which was Morris High School where I would have gone and here they're both taking music but in my first two weeks at Music and Art, I had learned more than what they had learned in their first two weeks and they were really [inaudible] and had this book that they gave us and I showed them the stuff in the book that we had to do in class [inaudible]. They didn't know anything about this. They didn't learn this at Morris High School. They were learning how to play some - - they were in the band or whatever.

Other places that I played - - at the age of fifteen - this is 1958 – I think I graduated from high school at fifteen.

MN: Junior high.

JO: I mean junior high school at fifteen. I was taken to various places and I was allowed to sit in. I showed you one of the pictures from International Park in - -

MN: Yes.

JO: That was a concert that was presented by the Braithwaite Brothers. They presented a number of concerts and that particular concert in 1958, I think it was in July or something.

MN: Was that that group the African Jazz Art Society - -

JO: Yes.

MN: - - that Bob Gums was part of?

JO: Yes. They presented concerts in various places in the Bronx. That particular concert had Kenny Dorham; trumpet and Hank Mobley; tenor saxophone, Curtis Fuller; trombone, and I don't remember who the rhythm section was. My father took me up there and I sat in.

Before that, my father had taken me in June to *Small's Paradise*, okay, on a Sunday matinee to see Miles Davis. It was really one of the most fantastic things. When I walked in, the band was off the stage so my father had me - - we were standing at the bar and he was talking to friends that he knew and drinking something. So, I went up to the band stand which was right near the bar in the middle of *Small's Paradise* and I had heard all these stories and read all these stories about Miles Davis being such a nasty son-of-a-bitch so I was making sure I wasn't going to get too close to his horn but I'm

looking at the horn with my hands behind my back in the piano. It was resting in the piano and I look and I had never seen a blue trumpet. It was blue – tinted blue so all of a sudden someone sits down at the piano and its Miles and he says to me in his voice, “Hey kid, you play trumpet?” So I say, “Yeah.” So he’s playing some chords on the piano and finally he stops and he says, “Here, play me a tune,” and gives me his trumpet. So I proceed to take the mouthpiece out and he said, “What are you going to do? Play without a mouthpiece?” I said, “No, no. I have my own.” I put my mouthpiece in and I play “Walkin’,” okay, one of Miles Davis’ songs and hits. He says, “Yeah, sounds good man. Keep up the work,” and at that point all of the musicians are coming back to the band stand and he’s standing there with his horn and he says to Bill Evans, who’s the last one on the band stand, “Hey Bill, you hear this kid play?” and Bill said, “No,” and Miles says, “Here, play it again.” So I play “Walkin’” again and the band comes in and joins me. Bill Evans, Paul Chambers; bass, Jimmy Carr; drums, John Coltrane; tenor saxophone, Cannonball Adderley; alto and we play “Walkin’.” They let me sail and then after that, people are going crazy. They love it, you know. Miles says, “Play another one,” so I play “Bags Groove” - two blues, same key and that was my introduction to Miles Davis and my friendship began with Miles at that time.

Later on, the next month, I was up there at the International Park Inn, Miles and his wife came and they let me sit in – the musicians - Lonnie [inaudible] and Kwame and it was a fantastic experience. They took pictures of me at fifteen with Hank Mobley and Curtis Fuller and I got a big write-up in the Amsterdam News so that was a boost that made me feel real good.

MN: Well it sounds like your father was really proud of your playing and since he was a man about town, he knew a lot of people.

JO: Right. Other places that we played. I would go to *845 Club*. I was much too young to get in so we used to go to this street on the side. I guess that was 160th Street and there was a back door that you could hear the music coming through this door – like a stage door. That was very, very important so we heard a lot of musicians and we'd have to be home.

MN: But they were real careful. They wouldn't let kids in even with an adult?

JO: I really don't recall. I mean the first time that I recall being there I was too young to be there but I went in with Oliver Beaner, the trumpet player.

MN: Was Oliver Beaner from the Bronx?

JO: Yes, he grew up in the Bronx. He went to school with my older sister and so did George Bradt, Arthur Jenkins, the pianist – trumpet player who's in New York right now. He lives in California and I want him to get up here. He's going to be here until the seventh. I want to bring him up here to do an interview. I would like to do that.

MN: We can maybe do it that Saturday, after the concert.

JO: No, he's here now - -

MN: Now. Okay, we'll find a day.

JO: - - until the eighth.

MN: Okay.

JO: The seventh.

MN: Okay.

JO: He lives in California now. Let me see some of the other places. We played at the church – St. Augustine’s.

MN: Did you know Paula Morris?

JO: I didn’t know Paula at that time. I mean she was a little younger than me but I think I met her a little later because then I found out that her mother was this famous person who I had on record and I had seen her name on a lot of my father’s records – Maxine Sullivan.

MN: So when you were at Junior High School 40, no one knew that there was this really famous singer?

JO: Nobody mentioned it to me in the seventh grade but I think it the eighth grade Ms. Smith mentioned that.

MN: That she was living - -

JO: That she lived right there on Ritter Place.

MN: Exactly. Paula told me that Reverend Hawkins’ daughter went to Music and Art. When you had jams at St. Augustine’s, who organized those? Were you part of the - -

JO: Horace Donnell was a pianist that went to school with Joe Orange and he would organize a lot of that because he had very close ties to the church. He went to that church. His family had gone to that church and he organized a lot of the things there.

Harry Hall lived two blocks away. He was a trumpet player who went to - - he was in Music and Art. He used that place to present his group. It was a special group - I’m jumping ahead one year or so - from the Newport Youth Band. I’m in the High School of Music and Art now and my first year - sophomore year. No, freshman year. Freshman, sophomore – I mean, my first year was a sophomore year. I didn’t go here from eighth

grade. I went here from ninth grade. Harry Hall was a senior at that time. He was two years ahead of me along with other musicians who grew up in the Bronx – trombonist Ashley Fennell, a saxophonist by the name of Larry Morton. Oh boy, who else was in the Bronx? They managed to get in this band in 1959 called the Newport Youth Band. It was a special band organized by the Newport Jazz Festival the year before, 1957, they had an international youth band where players came from all over the world, they auditioned them, and presented a concert at the Newport Jazz Festival.

Then, Marshall Brown, who was the director of this band, put together the Newport Youth Band and Harry Hall, Larry Morton, Ashley Fennell, and Eddie Gomez - - no, someone else who was older than me got in the band. Well that was my thing. The next thing was I had to get into the Newport Youth Band. So, my junior year, Donald Byrd, who I had studied with when I was fourteen years old, who lived in the Bronx on Teasdale Place, okay. At that time I had studied with Donald.

MN: Teasdale, between where and where?

JO: Teasdale was just a short block that ran for one block. It was at Boston Road right as Boston Road met Third Avenue.

MN: Okay, so down the hill?

JO: Down that hill, okay? And it just ran that one block up to - - I think it was Caldwell Avenue and Donald lived in that block and he had a few musicians that were living with him at various times. He brought Herbie Hancock from Chicago and he lived there.

Well, Donald Byrd was my mentor after Ms. Smith. He was playing some place and Marshall Brown came down to see him with Pepper Adams. That was a group that they had and Donald said, “Now, I’ve got a student for you. He should be in your band.”

“Oh yeah? What’s his name?”

“Jimmy Owens.”

He says, “Give me a call and we can set up an audition for him.”

So, Donald did that I went to this audition. I played “Now’s the Time” and I remember Clifford and Marshall Brown loved the way I played. They said, “Okay, let’s go up in the trumpet section,” and he counted off something and the music went by so fast I couldn’t read any of it. It was much too fast for me to read any of it real good. So he told me, he says, “Okay, kid I like the way you play. You play good. I’m going to put you in the band but I’m going to give you two weeks to learn how to read the music. If you don’t learn to read the music, I’m on your ass.” Well, I did everything to learn how to read music in two weeks and I got pretty good and that was something very important for me in high school. So I was in the band that whole year of 1959 - - well the end of ’59 into ’60.

MN: Was Joe in it that year also?

JO: No. What happened was I was in the band first and then Ashley - - no. Some of the guys had to leave the band because they were seventeen so at that point I mentioned to Marshall Brown, “I’ve got a friend who plays trombone. He plays real good.” He says, “Well, bring him down. Let him audition.” So, Joe came down and auditioned. The saxophonist - - when the saxophonist left the band I had thought about Freddy until I heard what those saxophonists can do. I said, “Oh man, Freddy can’t play that good so we won’t even mention Freddy coming in.” So, Joe got into the band.

MN: One of the things – just reacting to this – is how many great jazz musicians either lived or came to the Bronx in that period.

JO: A whole lot.

MN: That there was a vital jazz culture.

JO: There was a vital jazz culture because a lot of those musicians lived in the Bronx and as we discussed before, the reason they lived in the Bronx is because that's where cheap rent was - large apartments and cheap rent. Right around me on 168th Street and Prospect Avenue we had lots of professional musicians who lived there. It was a good learning experience just to see them.

MN: What about the clubs on Boston Road? You were not allowed to go there and jam?

JO: We listened.

MN: You listened. Like in *Xavier's* or *Freddy's* or the *Gibson's*?

JO: We'd be sitting outside. I don't remember going to *Gibson's*. I remember going to *Freddy's* a lot and to the *Blue Morocco* and you could always hear - -

MN: Who were some of the artists who played in those places that you remember listening to?

JO: I remember trumpet players Willie [inaudible] and Oliver Beaner, and George Braithewaite, who is now George Braith. Arthur Jenkins played piano. George Braith was a saxophonist - is a saxophonist, which we have to get to come for an interview.

Kenny Grant was a pianist who played at *Freddy's* and played at the *Blue Morocco*.

MN: People told me Sarah Vaughan and people like that and - -

JO: They would work at the *Blue Morocco*. I don't know about 845 but I know at some point at 845 it had an illustrious history with Charlie Parker and Gerry Mulligan and all of the players of the 40s playing there. Miles Davis worked there. Jimmy Johnson, you know. Probably you'll have some advertisements with their names and whatnot.

MN: By this time you're a junior in high school. Are you beginning to think that you're going to become a professional musician?

JO: I knew I was going to be a professional musician.

MN: How early - -

JO: I knew I was going to be a professional musician when I had to make the choice of going to the High School of Music and Art or going to Brooklyn Technical High School or going to the High School of Performing Arts, which I had made all three of those.

My mother was very angry with me. My brother-in-law at that time was an electronic engineer working for some big firm making lots of money and my sister had gotten married in 1957 so that was a role model. She was looking at me and I wanted to be an electronic engineer. That was one of my main things but music was still very special to me so when I had to make a choice I made the choice of Music and Art and said I want to be a professional musician. My mother was not interested in that.

I didn't go to Performing Arts because I had been informed – and informed incorrectly – that it was a vocational high school and I wouldn't get any English, Math, or anything like that; that I needed to go to an academic high school so I went to Music and Art.

MN: Was your mother weary of the sort of culture surrounding professional musicians?

JO: She was weary of the culture in that her nephews – two of them who lived on 165th Street going down the hill to Stevens Avenue – were both - - had both gotten strung out, okay, in the 40s – the late 40s. They were two and three years older than my sisters. One sister was born in '37, one in '39 so they were a few years older. One of them played trumpet. He played very good, got strung out. The other one played piano or something

and wasn't a professional musician but they both got strung out in the neighborhood. So she was weary about me being a musician because this was something that could happen.

MN: Were you very aware of this in this world or is it something that just bounced off you and you didn't take that seriously?

JO: At that time I was aware of it only from the standpoint of my mother mentioning my two cousins to me and them having heroin addictions and every now and then it would be mentioning someone else who had a heroin addiction, you know.

MN: Was she talking about also people in the neighborhood who were not musicians when she was talking about heroin or was it more very specific?

JO: I guess she could have been talking about people in the neighborhood because, you know, "Don't hang out with that group of people," you know, that was the word for my sisters. They were seven years older than me, five years older than me and by the time I came along when she had to mention some of that, it was whole families. Don't hang out with this family because they're strung out. You know, not everyone in the family but there's six or seven people in the family and three of them are strung out.

MN: So by the late 50s there was a visible drug problem in Morrisania?

JO: Yes, it started in the late 40s. It started in '47.

MN: And then by the late 50s it was something that was hard to avoid knowing about?

JO: Right. A lot of players had gotten strung out in using a role model like Miles Davis, Billy Holiday, numerous other musicians who were doing that and it ruined a lot of people's lives.

MN: Were you planning to go to college after high school?

JO: Oh yes! My interest was to go to the Julliard School of Music. All through high school - - so my junior year of high school I'm in the Newport Youth Band. That summer – now this is the summer of 1960 – we play at Newport and we're going to premier a new composition that Marshall Brown had commissioned from the great composer arranger who had been writing for Count Basie, Early Wilkins.

Early Wilkins wrote a piece for Cannonball Adderley and our alto saxophonist, Andy Marsala. We rehearsed this in New York and people like Kenny Varero would come by rehearsals all the time and Andy and the Bass sisters were performing sometimes with the Newport Youth Band. We had a great number of important people. We had people who would teach us. Saxophonist John La Porte would teach the saxophone section. Friday night we had sectionals. Saxophone section, brass section. The teacher for the brass section was a trumpet player by the name of Lou Mucci who had been on numerous records in the bands with Miles Davis and Joe Evans and whatnot. He was a very, very fine trumpet player. [inaudible] jazz really but read all the music. These were our teachers at the Newport Youth Band so we were prepared to be professionals – top professionals – and the people who were in that band, many of them came out to be professionals.

I'll just tell you the names of a few of the ones who are living. The pianist named Michael Abene, A-B-E-N-E. Michael teaches at Manhattan School of Music. He's in charge of the radio orchestra in Germany. He has done arrangements for numerous people over the years. Leonard Ferguson he worked with, did arrangements for the big band. He was in the Newport Youth Band. Eddie Gomez was a bass player who was a little younger than me, went to Music and Art, graduated a year after me. He was in the

band – very fine bass player who’s out there now - worked with Bill Evans, was in Bill Evans’ trio for a number of years. The drummer was Larry Rosen. Larry went from the Newport Youth Band and started to work with Andy Williams and the trio that they had with Andy Williams and the big thing at that time – this is 1960 – was making \$1500 a week, okay, but working with Andy Williams. That was the big thing for all of us - “Did you hear about Larry? He’s making \$1500 a week with Andy Williams and doesn’t have to pay for hotels and they stay in the best hotels!”

Then, the people who grew up in and around the Bronx who were in the band – Larry Morton was an alto saxophonist. After Music and Art he went to Manhattan School of Music and gave up playing, went into teaching. Harry Hall graduated from Music and Art, went to Manhattan School of Music for a while, got terribly strung out and eventually died of an overdose in 1975 or ’76, something like that. Ronnie Cuber is a great baritone saxophonist who’s still around. He’s been through all of that. Another group of people who were in the band. Mike [inaudible] was a great saxophonist, got strung out, died after graduating from the band. Now, were talking about 1960, ’61, ’62. Matt [inaudible] was a trumpet player. He was a high note trumpet player who worked with Leonard Ferguson, got strung out, and he died a few years later. It was unbelievable. The trumpet section had Harry Hall and Matt [inaudible] in it with Leonard Ferguson.

So I mean this drug epidemic went into the 60s for many of the people that grew up in the Bronx. I was very fortunate. Joe was very fortunate in that we did not deal with that because we were so engrossed in learning music and we knew what alcohol and drugs

would do to us. In our immediate families and the families around us we saw all of that kind of stuff happening.

MN: That was a lesson that you knew?

JO: Right.

MN: Did the two of you talk about it with each other or was it a more unspoken thing?

JO: I think it was more unspoken.

MN: In terms of - - this is the whole thing when Freddy Pettis wrote in after that sort of rosy picture, that there was a lot going on, there was a lot of positive in the neighborhood but there was also - -

JO: The neighborhood was very heavy.

MN: People talk a lot about drugs but alcohol can be just as devastating.

JO: Yes. Well, you know, there was a drug and alcohol problem.

MN: Did you see people like winos, you know, if you were walking through Morrisania?

JO: On our block we had two of them: Pop, he lived right across the street from me in the basement across from 810 in the basement and later he live in 802 and there was Mrs. Mulligan and she had an ankle that was broken that was never fixed properly so she limped and she was very short and she was always drunk. So, I mean these were the people that our parents would throw up, "You want to be like Pop? You want to be like Mrs. Mulligan?" so that kept me and my sisters straight and we never dealt with any of that stuff in my immediate family.

MN: When were you first exposed to Latin music?

JO: Well, I was exposed to Latin music because of my sisters. When I was in school in 1957 at Junior High School 40, they had graduated, like I said five years, seven years

older than me, so they had gone through their phase of Latin music following Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, and others – Machito - in the Bronx and whatnot. There's somebody named Sugar, I think, who was a disc jockey and my older sister Yvonne, started to work for him. Roberto Sugar - - I forgot, something like that.

He produced a lot of concerts so she used to get in free to all these concerts and get my sister in free so they heard they music, they learned how to mambo and whatnot and of course my parents were against all of this because we lived on 168th Street and they had to go towards way down to the Prospect Avenue station, which was the Hispanic part of the Bronx at that time and hanging out there, of course, my mother was always saying, "You're going to get pregnant by some of those boys." It was always that kind of situation. Fortunately, none of that happened.

MN: So was that seen as a tougher neighborhood, you know, down at Hunts Point?

JO: Well, yes, but I'm talking about down to 163rd Street and Prospect Avenue and then over and then we met up with Long - -

MN: Longwood.

JO: Longwood Avenue.

MN: Yes, they call it the [inaudible] Kelly down there with Colin Powell and - -

JO: Well, maybe Colin Powell lived there at one time.

MN: On Kelly Street between Westchester and Longwood.

JO: When I heard of Colin Powell, he lived in 168th Street and Tenton Avenue in that building on the corner.

MN: So they had moved from Kelly Street to 168th and Tenton?

JO: Yes, and this is what I had known about only because my sisters had a friend who was going with Colin Powell and Olive lived in that building with Colin Powell and she was seven or eight years older than me and that was at the corner of Tinton Avenue and 168th Street. Her father - - that building had a candy store called Mr. Thomas's and in that building they had trombonist Tyler [inaudible] living there, drummer Dave Bailey, Colin Powell, and a couple of other musicians lived in that building. It was a big - -

MN: Did you apply to Julliard?

JO: Okay, so what happened is after - - I told you that I studied in the school with the Newport Youth Band. We performed up at Newport that year, 1960. We performed one time - this was with Cannonball Adderley and Andy Marsala - a matinee and then there was a huge riot, okay, a huge riot that closed down all of the Newport Jazz Festival. I remember that it closed down for a number of years and now there's not a Newport Jazz Festival in Newport, Rhode Island for that very reason. There were just too many people there - too many rowdy people - who were not really part of the Jazz scene. They came to pitch tents and be on the beach and whatnot.

At the same time that year, Charles Mingus and Max Roach had put together an alternative Jazz festival that they were angry that George William didn't book the right kind of Jazz artists - real Jazz artists - for the festival so they presented an alternative Jazz festival at a place called the Cliff Walk Manor and they had Ornette Coleman, Roy Eldridge, Kenny Dorham, Max Roach and his group, Charles Mingus and his group. Lots of musicians would play there and people were going there as part of their time up at Newport.

Well, this all came to a halt. Everything stopped and we only got one performance. We were supposed to perform it two more times during the festival. At that point - - the band pretty much broke up right after that. There were lots of problems and whatnot that some of us had with Marshall Brown. I left the band. I think Joe stayed in the band for a few more months and then he left and others left also.

After that I spent my whole last year in high school just studying, trying to become better. Mark, I should tell you, my first of the three years in high school - - my first year and a half was a total failure - a total failure from the standpoint of me as an academic student. My whole concept of life at that time was, "Man, I'm going to be a musician. Why the hell I gotta take Biology and English and Math." So, I mean, Biology exams I'd get twenty-three, you know, English exam I'd get thirty-seven, and they didn't have a policy at Music and Art that if you were failing academically you'd be kicked out of the school but if you failed musically, you would have to leave the school.

My music grades were high. My academic grades were ridiculous for the first three semesters and for some reason in English class the teacher had us read something. It was about Ralph Waldo Emerson called Self Reliance and I read this and it struck home and it did something to me that turned me completely around. "Speak your latent conviction." I just turned everything around and started to study and graduated with a good average - 82, 83, 84, something like that, whereas if I would have continued like that I would have never graduated. And that was very, very important so that year and a half I had to make up the year and a half that I didn't do anything. At the same time I was studying and practicing every day. I used to practice in my 168th Street home. Bess Pruitt was always

saying, “Whenever it was time for dinner you would know because Jimmy would stop practicing at that time.”

So I graduated from Music and Art and my intention was going to be to go to Julliard School of Music. Julliard School of Music at that time, 1961, cost \$900 a year tuition. Manhattan School of Music, where a lot of my friends had gone, cost \$750 a year. Both of those were out of the picture for my parents.

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE SIDE TWO]

MN: So you were saying about the tuitions.

JO: So the tuition was much too high so that summer I was sparked after graduating from high school. It was a summer – 1961 - that for about five months I practiced eight, nine hours every day and I would go out in the evening and come back to the Bronx. I would go to *Birdland*. I’d go to hear other musicians but I’d be up at nine o’clock in the morning practicing. If I got in at four o’clock in the morning, I’d still be up at nine o’clock in the morning practicing, taking the train from downtown to *Birdland* at 52nd Street and Broadway from the *Five Spot*. Many of these places I still couldn’t get in but by now a lot of the musicians knew me so if they saw me then they would bring me in with them. I did that for about five months, eight or nine hours a day, seven days a week and really started to improve. I was taking no gigs. I had a lot people calling me, “Hey man, can you work with me Monday night at *Birdland*?”

“No, I can’t. I’m just practicing.”

I was studying with a teacher by the name of Carmine Caruso. I used to go down to 53rd Street and Broadway. Joe was studying with Carmine. Joe started to study with Carmine first I think and he turned me on to Carmine. I used to pay six dollars a lesson

and I was working some gigs here and there making a little bit of money so I'd get together my money and pay eighteen dollars and I knew I had three lessons coming up instead of six dollars each lesson and the money would disappear. So that was very, very important - that learning experience.

My mother then made me become responsible in her opinion. "You're going to have to be responsible sometime. You're going to have a family to support. You're never going to make any money playing this music, you know. You have to get a job."

"A job?"

She said, "You're not responsible."

So I said, "I'm not responsible? I practice every day all day long."

So she made me look for a job. I'd get the newspapers and look for jobs and go down to the employment agencies and fill out cards and whatnot and then go to the movie [Laughs] down on 42nd Street or something. It was really pitiful and then finally, after about five months - so this must have been September, October, November of '61 - she got me a job at Lincoln Hospital where she worked. She worked in the clerical office. She got me a job because she found out that somebody had left for the military and this guy who had left was called a stationary clerk. He was in charge of all of the stationary supplies. It had a room that was about this size with shelves all on it and all of these paper supplies. I got this job and I worked real hard for two weeks out of the month taking requisitions, ordering the stuff, and then distributing it. The rest of the time I'd close my door and I could lock it with a big skeleton key from this side also and I used to practice. So I'd be in there practicing and someone would come knock on the door, I'd open the door, "Oh yeah, here's the requisition. I need this stuff."

So I worked at that job for a year and three months. First time in my life - only time in my life - I've ever worked outside of music and I saved my money to go to Julliard School of Music and I studied privately with Carmine Caruso and I saved good bit of money. I think my take home salary was like \$99.68 every two weeks, you know, ridiculous. I managed to save some money. I started to work a few gigs here and there to make some more money. Then, I quit and when I told my boss that I was going to quit, put in my pink slip – two weeks – she thought I was joking and she didn't put it in for the first week and I asked her the second week, "Did you put it in?"

"No."

"Are you serious?"

She said, "Yes. What are you going to do? Are you going to retire?"

I said, "Yeah, I will retire." I said, "No, I'm going to go out and I'm going to make more money in one night than I make a whole month here." I think I took home \$200 a month, something like that. Finally she put in the form. I had to get it all taken care of. I quit and I was out of work for about two days and Slide Hampton, who I knew, called me. He lived in the Bronx around the corner from 160th Street.

MN: Jesus. So he lived there too?

JO: Yes, and George Coleman lived there in the same building. This was the kind of situation that you found out where a good rent was and there were apartments in your building, you told George Coleman.

We went down to Greenville, North Carolina - made \$300. We played the concert, turned around, and drove right back to New York but that was more money than I had made in a whole month so I did what I said I was going to do and from that point on I just

practiced more and started to work more. While I was working on my job I played in a lot of rehearsal bands. Many of these bands I'd get Joe on or Joe would get me on.

Joe was working - - started to work with Eddie Palmieri. I'd go to some of the gigs and now I'm a very experienced reader. I can read anything that you put in front of me because Joe and I practiced trombone and trumpet. I can read any trombone music and transpose it immediately and play it on trumpet.

MN: That's incredible.

JO: I knew how to do that. We had practiced a couple of times - -

MN: Were you both still living in the same place?

JO: Same place.

MN: Do you have a booking agent or this is all word of mouth at this point?

JO: No, it's word of mouth. Musicians, you know, who like the way you play then they would call you for a gig. The first couple of gigs that I worked, I worked with guitarist Sal Salvador. I was in his big band. I wrote arrangements for Sal Salvador's big band and started to work with more people. Monday night at *Birdland*, you know, the *Village Gate*.

MN: Were you being drawn in for recording sessions during this period?

JO: Not at this time. Some recording sessions but Rock 'N' Roll gigs.

MN: So, Jazz musicians would get gigs for Rock 'N' Roll?

JO: Yes, well, you know, if you played good and many times Joe had a gig and he'd say, "I know a trumpet player."

"Well bring him."

MN: Who are some of the Rock 'N' Roll people you played with?

JO: Oh God, I can't even remember. The Persuasions, oh, it was always a sweetening situation. The record had already been made. They're going to put some horns on it.

MN: Okay, so it's in the studio?

JO: It's in the studios - in various studios.

MN: Was that like the Brill Building?

JO: Yes, downtown you know. There were no studios that I recall in the Bronx. Most of them were downtown and you know, now I'm really used to being able to get all around the city.

MN: Were you starting to think about getting your own place?

JO: No, I was living at home and I landed a gig with Lionel Hampton. First, I worked with Slide Hampton and we worked for about seven or eight months pretty regularly. It was a ten-piece band and we went – now it's like '62, '63 – and we went to Virginia Beach, Virginia - integrated the beach. Two days before they had passed an ordinance that black people could go on the beach but there were no black people going on the beach. We didn't know this. We just - - it was a beach and we were on the beach. It was an integrated band, okay, ten people and we caused a ruckus I'm sure. There's lots of little stories that happened with that.

After Slide Hampton I worked with Lionel Hampton and after a few months with Lionel Hampton, he needed another trombonist. I said, "I got a friend." Joe got the gig. I stayed with Lionel Hampton about a year, wrote music for him and by this time now I'm really getting better known. At the end of '63 I started to work with saxophonist Hank Crawford. I worked with him for about a year – a little less than a year, stayed in the south - deep south.

We lived in Mobile, Alabama for three months, worked out of Mobile, Alabama. We had a station wagon. There was nine of us in the band. Three seats, three seats, and the back - three seats face the back.

MN: Back, right. I remember those.

JO: We pulled a *UHaul* trailer that was wider than the car. The people who could sit in the back seat had to be the smallest people in the band. I was one of the smallest people. I sat in the back seat – could not see beyond this *UHaul* trailer. All it said was *UHaul*. [Laughter] Couldn't see where we had been. It was very interesting. We had New York license plates. It was a station wagon and then the *UHaul*.

In this band there was nine people. I think there were about eight guns in this band, okay. The manager had two guns or maybe it was eleven guns. It was a ridiculous amount of guns in the band. I think the drummer had two guns. So, we had our stuff together if we were ever stopped by these cracker cops, how we would have to kill them to get out of this - - fortunately we never had any problems but for those months we worked out of Mobile, Alabama. We worked in places in Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina. It was very, very heavy but it was a learning experience.

I left Hank Crawford and then went with Charles Mingus and the Mingus experience was really wonderful. We worked at *Birdland* and at *Birdland* we worked for two weeks. One week beside Billy Taylor and his trio which was Earl May; bass and Grady Tate; drums and that was the first time I had heard Grady Tate sing. I knew Grady Tate was a drummer but I didn't know he was a singer. And then the next week it was beside John Coltrane – great quartet. So that was a wonderful experience.

From there I started to work with Herbie Mann and I got Joe on that gig and Herbie Mann was trying to do something like Eddie Palmieri was doing so he had two trombones and I managed to get Joe on the gig and the other trombonist was Barry Rogers.

MN: So Barry Rodgers was playing with Herbie Mann?

JO: At first and then Barry left because he was too busy with the Latin stuff and then another trombonist that played live was Jack Hitchcock started to play trombone so it was the two of them and myself and Herbie played flute and he was playing tenor saxophone. We went to Japan and I started to record with Herbie and the first gig that we did with Herbie was a gig that he hired Oliver Nelson to write the music for two trombones, trumpet, flute, a horn and Herbie playing flute and Oliver Nelson really like my playing, said so, and proceeded to call me for concerts and everything after that – recording sessions and things like commercial jingles and whatnot.

From Herbie Mann I decided to basically give up the road because I had gotten married in 1965. Now it's 1966.

MN: Was this somebody you met in the Bronx?

JO: No, this is someone that a dear friend of mine, Garnet Brown, a trombonist and he introduced me to his wife. He played with Lionel Hampton and then he was going to play with Mingus and then decided not to and whatnot. So we were working at a place called *Mason Street East* - -

MN: I know it well.

JO: - - and with Sal Salvador and Garnet said, "Hey man, my girlfriend Hannah has somebody that she'd like to introduce you to." So she introduced me to this lady. Her

name was Lola Clark and we liked each other. We got a long well and started to make a thing of it and I was still working with people, going out on the road. I worked with Hank Crawford at that time and that's when we got married – during my sixth month with Hank Crawford in 1965. We got married in California outside of San Francisco in St. Marin County.

MN: When you got married, did you get a place in the Bronx?

JO: No. At that point Lola had a place that she lived because she had a daughter who was eleven years old at that time and I moved into her place which, was at 19th Street and Park Avenue South in 1965. I moved out of the Bronx. I had lived out of the Bronx but for a week or two weeks here and there. I had this girlfriend and that girlfriend and then we'd break up and I'd have to move back to the Bronx to my parents' house. I never moved my stuff out but this time I moved my stuff out of the Bronx and that's where I've been for the last forty years.

MN: Wow!

JO: We got divorced in 1991.

MN: What was happening back in the neighborhood? Was it deteriorating to the point your - -

JO: No.

MN: - - parents were starting to feel uncomfortable there?

JO: What happened was in 1965 in my parents decided to buy a house and they bought a house over on Woodycrest Avenue and 164th Street.

MN: I guess that's called Highbridge?

JO: No, that's not Highbridge. That's lower down than Highbridge. Highbridge is up further.

MN: Is this - -

JO: This is Yankee Stadium. The stop is 161st Street on the D train or on the number 4 train on River Avenue and then you could walk from the train station to their house or take a bus to their house and they lived in that house and my brother, who came ten years after me – he was born in '53 – kind of an accident. One more time for old time's sake. [Laughter] So he grew up at 164th Street and Woodycrest Avenue. I never lived in that house so that was a nice neighborhood that had gone down and come up.

Mark, I have to tell you this. Two weeks ago we closed on the house. We sold that house because my parents are both dead.

MN: Oh, they lived there all the way through?

JO: We just closed on the house two weeks ago and it was hard at first but I got over it you know. We spent a lot of money renovating the house.

MN: I mean that's nineteen. That's - -

JO: Sixty-five 'til - - you know they lived there forty years almost.

MN: That's amazing.

JO: Thirty-eight years. My mother died in 2003. My father died in 2004. So they grew up there.

MN: After your parents moved over there, did you ever go back to Morrisania?

JO: I went back to 168th Street a few times – a number of times because in 1988, I made an acquaintance. Me and my sister, Marcia, the one who was born in 1939, we took my father in the car and videotaped and he took us to the four places that we had all been

born: my sister in Harlem - my older sister Yvonne in Harlem, then where they lived when they moved to the Bronx on Tenth Avenue and 163rd Street and then moving to 168th Street. I was born when they moved to 168th Street, 1943. I grew up my whole time there except for when I would move, like I said, for a week or two weeks with this girlfriend or that girlfriend.

I went back at that particular time we stopped in on Bess Pruitt. It was about 1988. I had stayed in contact with Bess Pruitt a little bit because she had a management agency and I knew some of the people that she managed – Chuck Davis, the dance company. I had played concerts beside Chuck Davis and whatnot so I stopped in to speak to Bess Pruitt. My sister is a wheeler dealer and got Bess Pruitt to manage me, talked to her, “Jimmy’s great! This is what we should do,” and we managed to work together for a long time. We still, in a way, work together. So those are the times I used to go up to the Bronx. I had no friends in the Bronx. All my friends had moved, died, whatever, were in jail.

Like I said, in 1966 I decided to give up the road and stay in New York so I started to stay in New York and utilize the skills that I had of being able to read and phrase and to execute any music that was put in front of me, you know. Part of what I learned because of Marshall Brown and that worked for me always from Marshall Brown up until all of the time.

MN: Because you could do things that quickly, you could always get work?

JO: Right.

MN: Either studio work or sitting in - -

JO: I was always working, right, and like I said, after I left that job at Lincoln Hospital where Joe worked also. Joe was a nurse's aid so he was dealing with patients. I worked in that stationary clerk's position and every one weekend a month I had to work at the information desk - -

MN: Getting the information, right.

JO: - - getting information to people who call about such-and-such patient but Joe was dealing with patients and he had his green suit on. You see, we have a lot of things in common in our growing up.

MN: Is it in this period in New York when you create your own encore? Has it always been - when you talk about *Jimmy Owens Plus* - you've always had - -

JO: Okay, well that - - in 1966 I'm staying in New York. In '67 we have our first child, a daughter. I'm working studio gigs. I'm doing all of this kind of stuff but staying busy making money in New York. In 1968 I work with Duke Ellington. I work with Count Basie. I work with Max Roach. I work with all of these people during 1968 while staying pretty much in town, going out for one concert here or there but never like Lionel Hampton when we would go out for two months or Hank Crawford when we would go out for three months or something like that. I get to the point in 1969 when I start to work a television show with Billy Taylor. He calls me to work with David Frost television show and I stay on that show for three years until 1972 making a very good salary, still very busy as a trumpet player. "I need a trumpet player. Get me a good trumpet player that can read and play this music." Also working as Jimmy Owens, the Jazz trumpet player. So I was making lots of money - well over \$100,000 a year. That's a lot of money - -

MN: That's a lot of money in those days because I know what my starting salary was at Fordham then. That's a lot of money!

JO: I was making \$55,000 a year with the Frost show. Sometimes we'd work as little as three days a week and do five shows. Other times we'd work five days a week or four days a week and I was doing lots of other stuff where I was making money also. I started to do more writing. I started in 1967. I started to write for *Orchestra* and a friend Joe and I met in Japan – he invited me and people would invite me to Harlem to play concerts and to record with the Metropole Orchestra in 1967. I wrote my first piece for them in 1968 and had been doing that for the next twenty-five years – working with them and working with other radio orchestras in New York.

I started to get into education in 1967. The bass player who was working with me, Chris White, who would work with Dizzy Gillespie and Nina Simone, started something called Rhythm Associates. It first started out to teach rhythm players how to play - drummers, bass players, and pianists. He had Kenny Baron teaching piano. He had Rudy Collins teaching drums. That was the rhythm section of Dizzy Gillespie's band in the early 60s. Then he added horns and I became the person who would teach trumpet and Kenny Baron's brother taught saxophone.

That experience in education was very, very rewarding. It brought back so many memories of all of the people who helped me like Donald Byrd and Edna Smith and all of the musicians. People would help me when I would go to them and ask them questions – J.J. Johnson, Oliver Nelson, Ernie Wilkins, you name it, Thad Jones. All of these musicians who I could ask questions of and they would answer the questions and I then I'd go home and work on that stuff. People that I sat in the same trumpet section with

like Clark Terry and Ernie Royal, Jimmy Nottingham. And a lot of these people have some type of history of staying in the Bronx at one point or another in their lives, you know, so that was very, very rewarding for me to remember what they had given me free of charge in a way. So I started in the education and really started to love it. I had a few students through rhythm associates and I started to blossom out and take a few more students. I never charged a lot of money.

MN: Now this is where Robin Kelly started with you?

JO: Yes. I guess, I don't know what year that was but he was eleven years old, seven years old. I think he was seven and what happened was Freddy Pettis called me and said, "Listen, I have a friend and she has a son who wants to learn how to play the trumpet but they don't have a lot of money. Would you consider teaching him or helping him?" So I said, "Sure, it would be no problem. I'm making money, you know, I have money," so she used to bring him and I used to teach him for free. I never charged her or anything. I taught him for free and I really don't remember a lot about those lessons at that time but he was pretty good, I guess, and he studied with me for maybe six, seven, eight lessons or something like that. I gave him enough knowledge that he could deal with playing the trumpet or improving on the trumpet. As it was he dropped the trumpet and picked up piano and other instruments.

MN: I have to sort of get ready for class so is there any things you want to - - sort of in an overview - -

JO: Well, the most important stuff is, you know, I'm very happy for my beginnings in the Bronx, my beginnings in Junior High School 40 and being a part of the special music program, what doesn't happen often enough in the public schools. I'm a product of the

New York City public schools music system and that has taken me on to play with the masters that I have played with. When I started my first band in 1969 called *Jimmy Owens Plus*, I played concerts and my interest was not to play in clubs.

We had had another group called the New York Jazz Sextet. It was Roland Hanna; piano, Ron Carter; bass, Billy Carver on the drums, Tom Macintosh; trombone, originally Benny Goldstein; tenor saxophone, and myself; trumpet. Benny Goldstein left to go to California and we replaced him with a young flute player by the name of Hubert Loss, [Laughter] who played tenor saxophone also. So that was the group and we didn't play any clubs. We would only play concerts and we had a management agency that got us that stuff all from '68 into '69.

When that group broke up I took the nucleus of that group, which was Billy Carver and added Kenny Baron and Chris White and started to work as *Jimmy Owens Plus* and that went through all the time that I was working with the David Frost Show. Sometimes we had days off and we'd work out that sometimes I'd fly to Europe to do a concert and be back Monday, you know, fly out on Wednesday, do a series of concerts, be back Monday to work. I started to write lots more music for orchestra and for big band and recorded them for things in Europe, started to perform more in colleges and do workshops in colleges here all over the United States. And basically, that's how I make my living now. I perform in concerts and do workshops and concerts in colleges and universities all over the world and occasionally work with my group in tour. You saw some of the things that we have been lots of places. I've done State Department tours, North Africa, the Middle East and I've done lots of concerts in South America, Central America.

MN: And this all started in Junior High School 40?

JO: Yes, that's right.

MN: Which is - -

JO: Yes, it is. That was the beginning.

MN: I mean that itself, it says something and is also a powerful argument for why there should be top music programs in public schools.

JO: During the 60s I became much more of an activist looking at what the music industry had *not* done for the great Jazz musicians, what the great Jazz musicians did not know about the business and became very involved with learning about the business and teaching the business – teaching musicians about the things that they're going to come in contact with - copyright, all about the Performing Rights Society, [inaudible] and that's basically - - it takes me up to today and the kinds of things that I do.

I started to teach. My first college thing was Old Westbury, out in Long Island. I taught there from '82 to '86 and then '86 to '87 I taught at Queensboro Community College and then I left that in '87 just doing lots of concerts and private teaching and then in 1990 I started to teach at The New School.

MN: And you're still teaching there?

JO: I've been there at The New School. I just teach one day a week. That's all I can really give to that. My day is in the week – Wednesday – so I can do concerts and be back by Wednesday and I honor my commitment there unless I'm going like when I went to Japan in November I had to get someone to teach my class for me for a week.

Basically, Mark, I have to tell you I am very happy about my life. I feel very good about my life. I have two children who are grown – thirty-eight and thirty-three – and I

was married for twenty-six years and now I've been married for six years to my new wife, Stephanie. I travel all over the world. I have to say for the last ten years I only do what I want to do, what I like to do. I've had places to live in Italy and places to live in Paris and that's where we go now. We go to our place and relax in the summertime or the wintertime, whenever, and I like my life.

MN: That's a great place to stop. Thank you so much and this is - -

[END OF SESSION]

[END OF INTERVIEW]