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Owens, Jimmy Interview 1

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Jimmy Owens
Interviewer(s): Dr. Mark Naison, Jim Pruitt and Joe Orange
Bronx, NY
Session #1, 10/7/04.

Transcriber: Colleen McCafferty

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): The fifth interview of the Bronx African American History Project. Today we're interviewing Jimmy Owens, a world-renowned jazz trumpeter who grew up on 168th Street, in the Morrisania Section. And we're joined by Jim Pruitt, who is a community researcher with the project who also grew up on 168th Street and by Joe Orange another great musician to come out of the Morrisania neighborhood who has been working closely with the project for some time. So the first question, Jimmy is how did your family find the Bronx? Where did they move to the Bronx from?

Jimmy Owens (JO): They moved to the Bronx from Harlem. My mother and father got married in 1936, lived in Harlem until 1939 when they moved to the Bronx. And in speaking to my father, I recalled him telling me that it was because the rents were cheaper in the Bronx. He worked in a post office from 1937 to 1967. So in '39 they moved to the Bronx and lived on Tinton Ave, no not Tinton Ave, Union Ave.

MN: Between where and where?

JO: And 163rd Street. I think the number was 975 Union Ave. I have a video tape that we're looking for right now, my deceased sister, my father and myself were in the car going around to all of the places where the children were born, it's a great piece of history. From there they lived there for four years and in 1943, I think it was in January, February, something like that, they moved to 810 E. 168th Street, where I was born. That was between Union and Prospect Ave.

MN: Now when your family moved to the Bronx did they still attend church in Harlem or did they begin attending church in Morrisania?

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JO: I think my mother was the only one who really attended church and she started to attend church in the Bronx. Although I'm sure when I was small my father may still have been going to church every now and then; and their church was St. Philip's Church in Harlem.

MN: Now did your family have friends that lived in the Bronx? How did they know that the Bronx was a realistic option?

JO: Well I really can't answer that question, I can surmise, my father worked for the post office and this was before zip codes or any kind of codes and his job was a mail sorter. So he would have to look at the address and throw that piece of mail in the appropriate box. So I guess he knew of various areas of New York, ok, all of New York. So I think that he knew about the Bronx. He probably had some friends who lived in the Bronx.

Jim Pruitt (JP): What Branch did he work out of?

JO: He worked out of Morgan. Which is 9th Ave and thirty, what street is that? 35th Street, 36th Street, something like that.

MN: Now were your parents born in New York City?

JO: My father was born in New York City; my mother was born in Charleston, South Carolina. My mother was born on November 10, 1911. And my father was born in New York, 17 June 1911.

MN: Now what level of education did your parents have?

JO: High school. Actually, junior high school into high school for my father. And for my mother she went straight through high school.

MN: Was there a musical tradition in your family before your - -

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JO: The musical tradition was very very minimal in my immediate family. My sister, my middle sister Marcere, who was born in 1939, she played cello for one year in junior high school 40. Ok, but the real musical element in the larger part of the family was from my father's side of the family. And he had uncles and cousins who were professional musicians.

MN: Now when your - - Were you the oldest child?

JO: No. My sister Yvonne, she was born in 1937, January 28, 1937. And my next sister was Marcere, was born 15 April 1939. I was born December 9, 1943. And then the joke of the family was the mistake, my brother, who was born November 14, 1953.

MN: So was the family already on 168th Street when you were born?

JO: Yes, yes.

MN: Now what are your earliest memories of 168th street and that immediate neighborhood?

JO: well my earliest memories go back to about 1946, I was three years old and my father would always play great music in the house. It was always Duke Ellington music, Billy Holiday's music - - Well I recall that we had a huge mirror in our living room and my father would pick me up and dance with me in front of this mirror and I used to just love it. It was just so amazing to see my image and my father's image twirling around to the music. And I remember some of the music, not from that time I'm sure, well my parents told me about it, the music that I liked, but things like Tulip or Turnip by Duke Ellington, and Stomp Jones - Duke Ellington, and Lover Man by Billy Holiday.

MN: Now was there a piano in your house?

JO: No.

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MN: So the music came through the radio or the phonograph.

JO: Right. And mostly through the phonograph, I mean as we got older and there were jazz stations on my father would listen to the jazz stations, Jumping with Symphony Sid, or Mort Fieger Show. Because I would come home from school and he would listen to those. My father worked just about all of those thirty years in the post office on the twelve to eight shift, twelve midnight to eight in the morning. So he would come home, take a nap, and when I would come home from school at 3 o'clock he was usually up, listening to music or whatever. And we would have early dinner and he would take another rest before leaving at eleven o'clock and get to work.

MN: Now what was the street - -

JO: Can I can I continue?

MN: Ok sure.

JO: I recall the big snow storm of 1948, it was a blizzard and the snow and the storm managed to damage two huge trees that we had on 168th Street. one in front of my house and one diagonally across the street, maybe two buildings down, not quite as far as your house. And those trees had to eventually be cut down. And that one tree in front of my house used to come into the house. I mean the branches - - it was so high, it was higher than my building.

MN: Now what floor were you on?

JO: I lived on the top floor of a private house. Small building and we had eight rooms.

MN: For four children?

JO: For four children. Actually, well yea in the later year four children, most of us grew up up until 1953 the three of us, my brother Brent came, they lived in that house until

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1965 when they bought another house on Woodycrest Ave in the Bronx. I remember 168th Street and going to school; I remember days when it was cold and walking down the street, and always stopping at my friend's house, Freddie Petters, who lived at 820, on the corner, which is still there. And was renovated a few years ago and Freddie and I were up in the Bronx, and they were renovating the building and we went into the building and, "you can't stay - - you can't come in this building - - you can't." And Freddie said, "Listen, I just want to see the apartment I grew up in." "You grew up in this building," the guy says. Says, "Yea, its right here, come on." So he took us in the apartment where Freddie grew up, the apartment had been completely renovated from the standpoint of the walls being knocked down and sheet rock being put up, but the rooms were the same. It was just two rooms, and it was two rooms in - - [laughs]

Joe Orange (JOr): Do you remember - - can I ask this question?

MN: Sure, of course, I mean, this - -

JOr: Do you remember 168th Street, when it was cobblestone and they just cemented and - -

JO: Sure, sure, I remember the cobblestone. I remember - -

JOr: And we used to call it Cobblestone Street.

JO: I remember, yea, we used to play stickball, right; you know stickball right on 168th street. And the home plate was down around your house - -

JOr: Right.

JO: We played up the hill. [Laughter]

MN: Now did you have a stoop at your house?

JO: Yes, I had a stoop, and the owners of the building, first it was Mr. Held, ok.

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JOr: I remember that name.

JO: I had signs up “no sitting on the - -” I think it said steps, it didn’t say stoop. And then when the new owners bought the building, who lived in the building, Mr. Dudley, that sign was still there.

MN: So you didn’t play stoopball?

JO: not from that - -

MN: - - from that stoop.

JO: And we were always chased when we - - And ours was one of the - - well no on the other side of the street they had them. On my side of the street my stoop was the only brick stoop, the rest of them were all wooden. On the other side, where you lived, were stone.

MN: Ok, so you were on the other side of the street then?

JOr: Yes.

JO: And those buildings are still standing.

MN: Yes. When you moved to 168th street was it an entirely African American block or were there still some white families?

JO: When I grew up there were a few white families. There was a white family that lived right across the street from us.

JOr: Used to call her the German lady.

JO: Right, the German lady.

MN: The German lady.

JOr: She lived in the basement.

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JO: And, for being rather young I remember that Puerto Rican people had started to move in. and most of them were light-skinned, so we looked at them as white.

MN: now what elementary school did you go to?

JO: I went to PS 99, and that's where in the 6th grade I took the special exam to get into special music class. On graduating to Junior High School 40, Mr. Lightner was the teacher who came and gave us the exam and that was my first music teacher who taught me how to play in the 7th grade when I went to Junior High School 40. So I'm a product of the New York City Public music system, public school music system, which is fantastic.

MN: Which is fantastic and which collapsed after the fiscal crisis which we should talk about.

JOr: Did you have Mr. Greenford?

JO: No, he left before - - my older brother Freddie was under Mr. Greenford, he used to talk about him, but by the time I got to school Mr. Lightner and there was a trumpet player, Mr. Wogul - -

MN: Those were the people in Junior High School 40. Now, for a young child crossing Prospect Ave, did your mother take you to school initially or at what age did you start going to school yourself, or did your siblings take you?

JO: My sisters took me, because when I was very small Marcere, my middle sister was in 40, I mean in 99, so she would take me to school. And that's kindergarten, first grade, second grade, then she graduated to go to 40 and I guess I was able to go to school by myself.

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MN: Now where there crossing guards or were there older students who were like the safety patrol, do you remember?

JO: I remember there was a safety patrol - -

JOr: I was on the safety patrol.

MN: You were on the safety patrol, ok!

JOr: Before crossing guards.

MN: But you didn't go to 99.

JOr: I went to 99.

MN: You went to 99 also?

JO: And they wore a white thing - -

JOr: A white band. [Crosstalk] It went across the chest and angle- -

MN: Now were you near 99 or did you do Prospect Ave?

JOr: No, I did Stebbins Ave and Home Street, right there, that corner.

JO: And I think what I recall doing is I would walk down to the corner of 168th Street and Prospect Ave. And I remember my mother teaching me how to cross that street. you always have to watch for the cars that's because most of them would make a right turn onto Prospect Ave. she says if no cars are going to come then you can go across the street there. Then she said, after a while, I could go up to Home Street and cross Prospect Ave at Home Street. I think that that's where a guard was. I don't recall a guard being at 168th Street and Prospect Ave.

MN: Now were there candy stores on the way to the school that offered temptations?

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JO: Well the candy stores were, from my house, in the opposite direction from the school. I would have to walk half a block to this candy store and one was diagonally across the street.

JOr: Miss Keel.

MN: That was on Union?

JO: On Union Ave, ok, the two candy stores was on diagonal corners. But then the most famous candy store for us was the one on Prospect Ave, around the corner - -

JOr: Miss Josephine's. [Laughter]

JO: Miss Josephine's. Yea. [Crosstalk] Yea and I used to love my squirrel nuts.

MN: Your squirrel nuts?

JO: Candy, what a great candy that was! You had squirrel nuts didn't you?

MN: I don't recall having them in Brooklyn.

JP: They probably called them by a different name.

JO: No, but that was the name of the candy, it said squirrel nuts.

MN: Squirrel nuts. Ok, now I recall, did they sell pomegranates in the candy store?

JO: No not in the candy store - -

JOr: In the fruit store.

MN: In the fruit store were those little red things, I remember those.

JO: Chinese apples.

MN: That's right, they were Chinese apples.

JO: I never heard pomegranate until I was in high school.

JOr: That was an SAT word.

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MN: Right right, now were members of your family involved in the PTA at PS 99, were they active in community - -

JO: Well you know for like most of that period my mother didn't work, so I assume since Yvonne, my older sister, and Marcere and myself were all members of PS 99 I'm sure my mother had some affiliation with the PTA at some point in her life; my father never did.

MN: Right, sure.

JO: Because he was working.

MN: Now were there any elementary school teachers that stood out for you?

JO: Miss Togert. I will never forget Miss Togert because in the fifth grade I said something and she said, "What did you say? Come here." And she made me come up to the front of the class and she made me sit in her lap.

MN: in fifth grade?

JO: Yea, maybe it was third grade, no no it must've been fifth grade and said, "Well you shouldn't say things like that." but it was affectionate. And the whole class laughed and they laughed at me and they were teasing me and I remember saying to the guys afterward, "yea, yea well you made me sit in her lap but I felt her titties man, her titties were on my head!" [Laughter] Miss Togert, yes, Miss Inlander.

JOr: Inlander, yes, Miss Borkstead, the librarian - -

JO: Miss Borkstead, yes, what a monster!

JOr: She was horrible, horrible.

JO: Miss Seagle was my teacher I think in sixth grade; I have pictures, I have pictures of my class.

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JP: [crosstalk] - - an African American teacher, wasn't there an African American teacher?

JO: I had an African American teacher in the third grade.

JOr: I had Singletary.

JO & JP: Singletary!

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

JOr: Yea, I had her, yea, she came.

JO: Was she the only one?

JOr: No, well in the third grade I had a teacher named Miss Lady, who was white, and she died at the end of the first month of school, and she was replaced by a woman named Lottie Smith who lived on Lyman Place. And Lottie Smith and her husband owned a candy store on Prospect Avenue and 167th. Her husband ran the store - -

JO: Next to the bus stop, right across from the bus stop.

JOr: Right across from RC Seagle, the RC Pharmacy, and right across was a candy store and they owned that. And she was a substitute and she was very musically talented; she was a vocalist. And she was replaced by Inez Singletary, who just graduated from Hunter College, and my sister Harriet had been in classes with her and so she knew her from college. So it was kind of strange going to school with your sisters friend, was the teacher.

JP: She didn't seem that young to me.

JO: Yea.

JOr: She was older, she was quite older. And I met someone the other day who knows where she is; she lives in Greenburg, outside of White Plains.

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MN: Now where classes in PS 99 tracked by ability? So there was 1 through what number?

JO: Yes, 6.

MN: Six. And where most - -

JO: 6A, 6B, 6C, 6D whatever.

MN: Now did you find that most of your friends were from the higher tracked classes or did it break down that way?

JO: I can't remember that in particular, I remember incidents with students who were in my class, but I can't recall if they were in - - if other people were in higher classes because they were supposedly smarter.

JOr: You weren't in the 1 class?

JO: no I think I was in the 2 class, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3 - -

MN: One of the interesting things about the project is the vast preponderance of people who were in the ones and two classes.

JP: I was in the 1 class after the third grade I was in like 3.3 then I went to 4.1, 5.1, 6.1. But I noticed that the one classes had more of the white students, I somehow became conscious of that.

MN: Now was there a lot of testing in the schools? Standardized testing; and what form did it take?

JO: I recall in the 6th grade there was some kind of test that we had to take. That's the first time I recalled any kind of standardized testing. So that was like 1955.

MN: Right, was the - - did you feel you learned more at school or at home in terms of reading, math, basic?

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JO: I was a very very poor student in spelling. And it was in the sixth grade that I wrote a note to my would-be girlfriend. I wanted her to be my girlfriend. Her name was Livia Citron. And I asked my mother how to spell every word just about, she was reading looking at the television or something, she wasn't paying any attention to me, "mommy, how do you spell 'dear'?" "D-e-a-r." "Thank you." "How do you spell such-and-such word?" And the only word I could spell was in the last line of this note I wrote "And I want to have your pussy." And I folded the letter up and put it in an envelope and gave it to a friend of mine who lived in her block. And this was on a Sunday afternoon; I think my mother was reading the newspaper or something. And about - - say that was twelve o'clock - - about four o'clock the bell rang. We live on the top floor. And it was Livia and her father [Laughter] who came to the house and he showed my father this note that I had written to Livia; and with that sentence. Of which my father put me over his lap, in front of Livia, and spanked me! [Laughs] Sixth grade now. And I'll never forget that, it was very embarrassing. And she stayed out of school for two days after that, thinking I was going to beat her up, which I was - - [Laughter] So I was a poor speller, that's what I - - [crosstalk]

MN: you knew how to spell that one word.

JO: [laughs] Well I recall a few other incidents that happened. I remember Norman Band, B-a-n-d, was a classmate of mine in the sixth grade. He was a white student who lived on the other side of the school and we went this afternoon to his house, cause he said - -

MN: This is down the hill toward Kelly Street?

JO: Yes.

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JOr: Towards Intervale.

MN: Intervale.

JO: Intervale and Kelly; I think he lived on Kelly Street.

JP: Isn't that where most of the white students lived?

JOr: Yes, they all over - -

JO: Yes, they all lived over there.

JOr: On the Intervale Avenue side.

JO: So I went to his house and he brought me in his house, and his grandmother, she was sitting in the window, so she saw us come into the house. And when I came into the house, he said something about, "well this is my grandmother, this is jimmy, my friend James." And I remember his grandmother saying, "Get that nigger out of our house!" and I was frightened and we left. And that was, I think that was my first racial incident that I can remember. That's what she said, and he apologized, you know, "he's my friend," and somehow we broke up our friendship after that. I have to look through the things that I have, because I have pictures of Marcere's class.

JOr: Oh really?

JO: And I've been in contact with some people, you know Warren Green, ok, and a few other people. And I have pictures of my class, PS 40. I have my autograph book from PS 40. So I have some interesting things.

MN: now when you were in elementary school what were your major forms of recreation after school?

JO: Playing baseball; playing cowboys and Indians; playing in the backyard. The backyard, we had two backyards; there was one on my street, on my side of the street,

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and there was one on your side, yes. And that one connected to Union Ave, you could go through people's backyards.

MN: so running from back - - now when you were playing cowboys and Indians, did you dress - - did people dress - -

JO: Sometimes, at that early age you know Christmas time I would always have my cowboy outfits given to me and my guns and my caps.

MN: Are there pictures of you in cowboy outfits?

JO: Yes, we have to go through that. My father died on the 28th of March, and we have suitcases and suitcases of pictures, as well as books and books of pictures.

MN: Now how early did your family get a television?

JO: I think we were one of the first people on the block to get a television; we had the television in 1948. We had an RCA Victor console.

JOr: You had a combination, I remember that.

JO: and there was a television screen and up here was a 45 player, a place to put records and down at the bottom was a, an LP player, you know 78s and 33s, and then there was a place - - then there was a speaker.

MN: So was watching television something people in your family did together?

JO: yes, I think I recall my mother and my sisters and myself watching television. Before that radio was it. And there was a teacher who had moved downstairs and his wife, they were both teachers, his name was Royce Philips. And his wife's name was Alice, yes. And Alice used to invite me down to listen to the radio and all of those programs that used to - - I can't remember any of them now, like Batman and Spiderman and the Shadow and things like that. I don't think - - I think Amos and Andy was one of the

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programs that was on radio at that time. And when the television came in I recall the family looking at The Children's Hour, which is a [indiscernible], Ed Hurler, or something like that. And seeing people perform, what-not, I remember Milton Burle. And that was a very very popular thing to have at that time, the television.

MN: Did people come to your house to watch it?

JO: My sisters brought all of their friends to the house to watch television programs.

MN: Did you play any organized sports or was it street games? Anything like today we would call Little League or - -

JO: I didn't play, no. I didn't play any organized sports that I can recall, we only played street games; we played skelly, ok. And stickball, kick-the-can, which I used to always play with my new shoes and my mother would get angry with me.

MN: Now this may seem like a strange question, but where was your first exposure to the word 'pussy'? Because, was this something you heard from older kids in the street - -

JO: It was from older kids. And it was, probably very young, third grade I would say, because I recall fifth and sixth grade there was one girl, her name was Burina Williams, and she was in my grade. She was like the school whore; or as the movies that had been made, hoe. [Laughter] I think from the fifth and sixth grade, at least twice a week a gang of boys would always have sex with her in the school yard, 99, ok after school. And they were all lined up. And they, I remember the guys saying, "Well you're too little to have any pussy."

MN: So this was in a corner of the school yard?

JO: It was in the part of the school yard, right in back of the school towards Intervale Avenue. So people who were walking along Intervale Avenue could see this, but there

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were always a gang of boys around her so nobody could see what was happening. And I think that was my first introduction to that word. And I was one of the boys who took part in that by the time I was in the sixth grade, she was still doing that.

MN: Now were there gangs when you were growing up, and were you - - how were you made aware of them?

JO: There were gangs because there were a number of gang fights. Now I remember the Sportsman, the Seven Crowns, and then there were the Spanish gangs, that were down around Prospect Avenue around Longfellow.

MN: Right; below the El?

JO: Right; and I forgot the names of those gangs, but my sisters were sometimes friends with a lot of Puerto Rican boys, and they would always come back and say, "such-and-such gang's going to fight such-and-such gang," you know, it was always frightening to me. Now I remember a gang from up this area of the Bronx called the Fordham Baldies.

MN: Yes, we had heard of them in Brooklyn.

JO: Ok and the Fordham Baldies decided to attack our neighborhood. And I remember the big gang fight because the Seven Crowns and the Sportsman, who were always against each other came together to fight the white gang, the Fordham Baldies.

MN: Now did this happen in Crotona Park?

JO: Well it happened in Crotona Park and then it came down around, it came down into my neighborhood around Union Avenue and 168th Street. And I remember the mess that was left after, ok. I was in the house, because I was frightened to death.

MN: Now did these - -

JO: I guess I was in the sixth grade.

MN: So what year would that be?

JO: '55

MN: Now did they come down by train or did they come in cars?

JO: I think they came, they walked.

MN: They walked all the way down?

JO: Yes, wherever they were from.

JOr: They might have come by bus.

JO: maybe they came by bus or something.

JOr: Because the bus from here to Fordham went around Prospect Avenue.

JO: Through Crotona Park. There were times when they fought, maybe they fought in Crotona Park and our gangs, the Sportsman and the Seven Crowns, brought them into the neighborhood. And I remember the mess after, because what our gangs did was they took all of the garbage cans up on the roof and they took bricks up on the roof and when these guys came through the block they threw these garbage cans and bricks down on them and it was a mess. I remember the way the street looked the next day.

MN: Now when you were going to elementary school did you ever feel physically afraid to go to any places in the neighborhood, were there any blocks where you worried about walking down because there were gangs or tough kids?

JO: Mostly in junior high school. There were places on Ritter where you wouldn't go because there were gangs or there were bad boys that wanted to beat you up, and the thing at that time was to rape you.

MN: A boy raping a boy?

JO: A boy raping a boy.

MN: So this was part of the gang culture of humiliation?

JO: I think so.

MN: It's interesting because none of the other people I've talked to - -

JO: Well a couple of the boys from, not from elementary school but mostly from junior high school, had had this happen to them. And most of the time they had dropped out of school, their parents had moved or something. I recall a couple of my classmate having - - supposedly having this happen.

MN: Now do you recall your childhood as being basically a pretty safe happy one?

JO: Well, yes, I do because I had these two sisters who were very glamorous. I mean my older sister Yvonne she won the beauty pageant and what-not.

MN: You remember this?

JOr: Yes, they're gorgeous, both of them. [Laughter]

JO: And my younger sister had all of the boyfriends and everything, you were one of them.

JOr: Yes, yes.

JO: And my younger sister Marcere, who was five years older than me, had - - I say younger sister because she's younger than my older sister, had a boyfriend, his name was Isaac Richardson - -

JOr: Who was my best friend.

JO: and he became my protector. Now of course he's five years older than me, but he let everyone know, because he was going boyfriend and girlfriend with my sister, that if anyone bothers Jimmy they're going to have to answer to me. And I remember a big fight that transpired in front of my house with Girkman.

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JOr: Bobby Girkman.

JO: Bobby Girkman - - no not Bobby, Bobby was my age, the next brother who was the age of Marcere.

JOr: Oh, ok, right.

JO: And that fight was a really bloody fight between the two of them and Isaac beat him up real bad. He became my hero. But other than that I don't recall anyone really bothering me, now by the time I got to junior high school I was so involved with music; it was music that took me away from playing baseball, football. Matter of fact the story that I tell people all the time is that I recall playing football in the dirt yard of PS 40, before they changed it over on Ritter Place. Ritter Place, right across the street from where the great singer Maxine Sullivan was. Well we're playing football there and I had just started to play the trumpet in the seventh grade, and I went to tackle the guy, and getting him around his waist, but by the time I got - - he was running so fast - - by the time I got to his waist I was around his feet. And he just started kicking me all in the face. And at that point I said, well I don't know if I said it but I thought it, I want to be a trumpet player more than I want to be a football player; so I quit playing football.

MN: Now when you were growing up did you think of yourself as living in a tough neighborhood?

JO: sometimes, there were some bad boys. I mean there were a couple of boys when I was in junior high school, one of them had, and most of these kids were deranged in some way, this boy had gone up to another school, and I think this school was up on Southern Boulevard, and got in a fight with a kid and had beat him with a bat and the boy

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died. And they put this boy who did this into prison; I guess the prison at that time was Spotford.

JOr: yes.

JO: Yes, and he was always getting into trouble, I forgot his name. And there was some people who lived on Prospect Avenue who were known to be bad, like where Joe lived, around the corner. And you didn't want to mess with them, because, as my mother used to always tell me, "that boy is crazy, you don't mess with him, you just walk away from him."

JOr: The guy who lived around the corner from us Norman - - Norman was one of the assassins of Martin - - Malcolm - -

JP: Oh Norman Butler.

JOr: Norman Butler.

JO: Oh yes!

JOr: Of Malcolm X. He was one of the assassins; he lived right up across the street from you.

JP: You see, can I? Well there seemed to be certain streets, like I was always afraid of Union Avenue - -

MN: Where?

JP: Between 168th and Home Street. And Home Street, I never would've gone down.

JO: I never walked on Home Street.

MN: Home Street between where and where?

JO: Prospect and Union.

MN: That was considered a tough block?

JP: I was afraid of all the kids over there.

JO: I never walked around there myself because my mother used to always tell me, “listen, all of those drunks come out of that bar and they always have fights in that bar, and you’ll get - -”

MN: And which bar is this?

JO: This was the Bucket of Blood. [Laughter]

JOr: There was a bar on Home Street and Prospect Avenue.

MN: What was it called?

JOr: The Bucket of Blood. [Laughter]

MN: You called it the Bucket of Blood?

JO: my mother called it that; it had a name - -

JOr: It had a TV, you know before anybody else had TVs. And during baseball, especially here during the series, kids would leave school PS 99, and peek in the window and try and watch the game.

MN: Now where there people who were visibly involved in the underground economy?

Men like who were bookies or pimps or - -

JO: Oh sure; I don’t know about pimps, I mean I’m sure they were there but I didn’t know about pimps, but I knew about all the numbers runners.

MN: The numbers guys.

JO: I used to help out one of the numbers guys who used to give me dollars. I would take all of his change, because everything was change then, and I would hide it in my hallway under the steps from him. This was Jimmy; Jimmy was a very light-skinned guy. And then I remember Big Melvin.

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MN: Big Melvin.

JO: OK, he was - - he used to run his numbers out of flower shop on Union Avenue around the corner, between 168th, 169th, but closer to the - - right on the other side of the entrance way to the big courtyard building.

JOr: Oh ok.

MN: Did most people you know play the numbers? The adults?

JO: My father played the numbers. And many people played the numbers, but I remember these guys because Melvin was someone who my mother used to always get on my father about because he was crazy and he had - - like I said he was big and fat and he had a brand new Cadillac. He always had a brand new car. And I remember this time him having a brand new - - I think it was grey - - what kind of car was it? It may have been a Cadillac; it was a big car. And he did not pay someone, and I remember they went up on the roof and they had taken garbage cans and a big stone, I don't know where they had got this stone from and they threw it off and it just went right through the roof of his car, not a convertible - -

MN: It went through a metal roof?

JO: Metal roof. From the top of the building, right there, the first building on Union - - Union Avenue. Whatever that building was.

JOr: With the courtyard?

JO: Yes; no, not - - across the street from that.

JOr: 1216 is it.

JO: Yes. And it's so wild, I recall looking at that hole and saying, "wow". And the rock was right in the front and poor Melvin was out there crying about his car, "oh my car!"

MN: were there any people who were visibly winos or - -

JO: oh sure.

MN: And where would they congregate?

JO: Miss Mulligan. Miss Mulligan lived in 802.

MN: On, on - -

JO: East 168th Street. Miss Mulligan was the grandmother of a very pretty girl who was in my class named Lorraine. And Lorraine she was always ashamed of her grandmother because she was - - first of all she was crippled, one leg was, one foot, ankle or something, and she was always drunk. And then there was Harry, across the street from my house, in the alleyway there, the building with the courtyard on Union Ave.

JOr: Yes, yes.

JO: He was - - he lived there. He did work, he was like a janitor or something, and I recall a couple of other people. And I recall my father would drink to excess some times. So instead of coming home at 8 o'clock in the morning, he's go out with his buddies now. I never could understand, as I got older, where someone would go at 8 o'clock in the morning to get a drink. Because bars weren't open, I didn't think at that time; but obviously they were.

MN: They were; I've seen bars open at 8 in the morning.

JP: Yes, they [Crosstalk] used to be open early in the morning.

JO: Up here? It wasn't up in the Bronx. Yes, but this was downtown, and him and his friends - - And then he'd come home at 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock and he'd be soused, ok. The next day he didn't have to go to work or something, he was off, and I remember the kids teasing me about the fact - - "hey man, you're daddy's coming up the street drunk, man,"

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and it was always embarrassing. I remember my good friend Freddy Petters, his mother and father used to drink to excess sometimes, and then they would get into arguments, and curse at each other, fight each other, and what-not.

MN: And would they do it in the street or in their apartment?

JO: In their apartment and sometimes they would roll out onto - -

JOr: They lived on the first floor.

JO: First floor. And sometimes they would roll out into the hallway, sometimes out into the street. Now this was the stoop - - 820. And - -

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

JO: - - East 168th Street were buildings that both had stoops. And Langston Hughes would come up to the neighborhood, because his brother lived in 823.

JOr: Mr. Clark.

JO: Mr. Clark, yes. His name was Langston Clark, ok. And Freddie Petters is in contact with Carol - - [Crosstalk]

JP: With Gwendolyn.

JO: Gwendolyn [Crosstalk]

JP: Was a younger brother - -

JOr: Yes, I saw him in June.

JO: Yes, Langston is his son, right. Langston Hughes would come up there and gather all the kids around. And put us on the stoop, and then tell us stories about Simple.

MN: That - - those were his columns!

JO: Used to make us all laugh, and he was writing a column at that time, so I'm dealing with 1954, '55 maybe, '56. I don't recall it being something when I was in junior high

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school; I think I would think that I was too big to do that, so it was before 1955, in '55.

So it was always Freddie Petters, myself, Bobbie Girkman, and some of the girls. He would tell us these stories about Simple.

JOr: I remember [indiscernible] as teenagers one day you and Freddie Petters and I went up to St. Augustine Church and Langston Hughes was giving, was having a book signing, giving a lecture, I don't know if you remember this? And by then we were into reading Langston Hughes, and we were late and we got there at the tail end, right as he was finishing his last reading and beginning to sign autographs and we looked up and it was at that point that we realized, that the guy - - we made the connection between the Langston Hughes that we'd been seeing on 168th Street, at least to me and the Langston Hughes - -

MN: So you hadn't known that this was a famous author?

JOr: I didn't know who this guy was; I was in the sixth grade.

JO: My father, well my father told me.

JOr: Oh, I didn't know.

JO: You see what happened was, I went back one of the times, I says, "Oh, this nice man," I don't know if I knew his name or anything at this time, "was telling us stories about Simple" and I guess the Amsterdam News at that time was running columns on Simple.

MN: And so later did the New York Post. I recall reading his columns in the New York Post when I was growing up.

JO: And I recall my father said, "Oh that's Langston Hughes, that's his brother, your friend's father is his brother.

JOr: Who was one of the drinkers by the way.

JO: Oh sure, that's right. He used to get drunk and beat up his wife, that was the talk of the neighborhood.

JOr: He had this beautiful whistle he would use to call the kids when he was coming down the block. He'd be making it three steps at a time, you know staggering all the way from Boston Road all the way down 168th Street. And then he would whistle, and the kids would run out of the house and they would come down to greet daddy down the block.

MN: Now when you say he beat his wife, again, this is in the apartment? Or it spilled out?

JO: They lived on the top floor, so it never really came downstairs, but maybe one or two times, I recall, that the mother had come downstairs after this had happened. And like all the people were consoling her or what-not. I mean we had a neighborhood that was lively from A to Z.

MN: Yes, that's what Freddie Petters said, you had everything there. It wasn't you know - - you had your problems you had some violence, but you also had a lot of people who were working hard - -

JOr: I think also there's the period that Jimmy's describing is pre-drug, before - -

JO: At night actually, actually, because I want to tell you that my cousins were some of the first people to get strung out in the Bronx. I guess they were born in maybe '35 and '37.

MN: Come in. ok why don't we - -

[Tape cuts out and back in]

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MN: Ok one of the things we were talking about was the size of the families and just how many kids there were, and you were saying that when you drive through the neighborhood it seems empty relative to - -

JO: Well Joe said that; you want to say something?

JOr: Oh no, well yes, its just that PS 99 for example was just a school yard in three parts, there was the playground, where we used to play handball, and another section - -

JO: Another section of the playground, that's where we used to meet the classes every morning.

JOr: And there was another section, small right off of Intervale Avenue. And all three sections, as I recall were always crowded.

JO: wait a minute, which small section off Intervale Ave? That was a big section.

JOr: That's were the handball courts were.

JO: But the handball courts were up.

JOr: There were two sets of handball courts.

JO: Oh that's right.

MN: So those were - - when kids were waiting to go to school every section of the school yards, all three school yards were packed. [Crosstalk]

JOr: After school on the weekends, that's where a lot of kids played. And I went through there and I was the only one in the schoolyard, and the schoolyard was empty.

JO: What I feel, the times when I been up there. There not a lot of people living there because many of the buildings that used to house large families are down, ok. Right on my block 802 is gone - -

JOr: 823 is gone.

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JO: and 823 is gone.

MN: Now those were four or five story walk-ups?

JO: No, no - - Yes, they were walk-ups. And on each floor there were like four families.

MN: Right. [Crosstalk] Now another question I have is were the adult men in the neighborhood a strong public presence or were they busy working all the time?

JO: I have to tell you I don't recall many adult men in the neighborhood other than my friend's fathers. I recall Freddy Petterson's father, who died when Freddy was in the seventh grade. I recall a few other friends' fathers and that was it.

JOr: You remember Mr. Anderson? Tyrone and Timmy's dad.

JO: Yes. I remember him. I don't recall seeing a lot of men like that but I think the influence that I had from the older people were primarily from friends of my parents who would come to my house; the people who lived in the neighborhood, because the first thing was they would let your mother or father know what you were doing wrong.

MN: Ok, so there was supervision in the street, or at least people watching what you were doing?

JO: In my family that was the case. Because they knew my sisters and myself and we were basically good kids so when they saw us doing something bad the first information was right to my mother and father. I do now recall being in seventh grade, Joe's uncle, the great trombonist J. C. Higginbaum, who played at the metropole. And joe and I would go down to the meteropole, we were too young to get in but we'd stand outside the metropole which was at 48th Street and 7th Ave, it was a jazz club that had a bar that was a long bar the whole length of the club, and musicians had to lineup single file on this bar ok and there was a mirror across the other wall so you could see the mirror and look at

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the other musicians and give cues to the other musicians. Well J.C. worked there with many of the great musicians, one of the musicians was Henry Red Allen. And Henry Red Allen lived at the corner of 169th Street and Prospect Ave, and everyday coming home from school, 3 o'clock, most of the time, Henry Red Allen would be standing out in front of his building for whatever reason, and after about a month of seeing him a number of times I got up enough nerve and I walked up to him with my trumpet case and I said, "Hello, Mr. Allen, my name is James Owens and I play the trumpet." And he became a friend of mine, always talking to me when he saw me come by and then when I was old enough, at that time by the time I was in ninth grade, tenth grade, I was in high school and we used to go to see J.C. and whatnot. I recall telling him that he used to talk to me all the time, this time in high school almost a professional musician because I was working with this band that band, and he was an influence just to see him. My heart used to jump everytime I'd see him, "Oh it's Henry Red Allen." Great trumpet player!

MN: Now, before we move on the music section. In looking back on the atmosphere of the block, neighborhood in the period prior to junior high school are there any things that you haven't said that you think were important about that period of your life?

JO: Well some of my friends my same age who had very little direction who eventually by the time they got to junior high school, either dropped out of junior high school or were put in some kind of juvenile delinquency home. My parents specifically my mother, was the one who was always warning me "don't go and hang out with this person or that person because they're no good, their family's no good" this was the one thing that I used to get, "he's a bad boy or she's a bad girl" she'd tell my sisters that type of thing. And low and behold most of the time she was right.

MN: So she was assessing families as well as kids who seemed to be heading - -

JOr: I think all the parents did; my mother did the same thing! It wasn't just the kids.

MN: But these were people living in the same building or on the same block, it wasn't people living four blocks away?

JOr: Right. But also it was like, "don't go around the corner." Because around the corner just happened to be Union Avenue, there were a lot of negative type people around there. Or we didn't know them, our parents didn't know them, so we were - -

MN: When you're saying negative type people you're talking about the adults or the children?

JOr: Kids who got in trouble.

MN: And so they were kids in other words that you were playing with in third and fourth grade who by seventh or eighth grade were going to Spotford or Wilkwik or - -

JOr: Yes.

JO: And then some of the supposedly bad kids or ones who were hanging out with bad kids, especially around the corner, around the corner being again Union Ave around 168th, 169th. There, there was one family, she became a concert pianist, the kid who went straight from 99 straight through high school with me and we fought on the trumpet all the time to see who was going to be the best, Thomas Windem. Thomas became a psychologist; he lives out in Boulder, Colorado, ok. And his younger brother, who we used to always chase away, "come on kid get out of here, get out - - this is for the big boys." He became the education director of the New York Philharmonic for many many years. [Laughter]

MN: Now what did a bad - - yes?

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JOr: Richard White lived in 1204 - -

MN: 1204 Union?

JOr: 1204 Union. Who his father became principal of PS 63; but Richard White became the concert master for the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

JO: He's a violinist.

MN: He's a violinist?

JO: I bumped into him many years ago playing a concert out - - [Crosstalk]

MN: What, ok, in talking about bad kids, what were the things that bad kids did that got them in trouble?

JO: Right from killing someone, like I said with a bat - -

MN: Ok, that would do it.

JO: Killing someone, robbing people, and you know beating up a kid beyond the point of beating him up.

JOr: Back in the day they used to make what we called zip guns where they tore the antenna off a car and that became the barrel of a device. The kids would have weapons - -

MN: And those were knives, zip guns - -

JO: Switchblades.

MN: A switchblade.

JOr: Switchblades, right.

MN: Was there a particular way of dressing that would identify someone who was let's say perceived by your mother as a bad kid. Were there styles?

JO: Kids looked nice, there were some families that dressed their kids very well because they worked at it; either the parents worked and bought clothes or their mother made

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clothes, in my family that's exactly what happened, my mother made my sisters dresses.

My father would go down to Best & Company from work and pick out two dresses each for my sisters, he would buy the dresses, now Best & Company on 5th Avenue was very exclusive at that time. He'd bring the dresses home, my mother would make a pattern of the dresses, and then the next day he'd take the dresses back and say they didn't fit and he got his money back. [Laughs] and this is how my mother would make fantastic clothes for my sister. He'd make - - she made me a jacket, and we talked about this right before my mother died, she died in 2002, I wanted a jacket that I could be like daddy, I wanted a jacket that had an inside pocket. So she made me this beautiful herring bone jacket, she used to get all the patterns and made me this beautiful herring bone jacket and made me an inside pocket, I'm in the sixth grade. It was fantastic. So I think my family, we dressed very well. There were friends next door and they had many children and they were basically on welfare, or what we would call at that time relief.

MN: Yes.

JOr: One of the things about negative kids, who got in trouble, who were troublemakers, the neighborhood was so stable, most people lived in the neighborhood for a long period of time, ten years, twenty years, so you knew who lived in the neighborhood so when a new person - - and you knew whether they were to be hung out with, whether our parents would let them hang out with them. So if a new family moved in and nobody knew them, then you kind of shied away until you found out what they were about.

MN: Right. Now now but today there are certain forms of dress or symbols which separate a tough kid from a - -

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JO: Those were fluid times, their really were no fluid times then, when we wore dungarees it was because that's what we had to wear. It wasn't going out to buy dungarees - -

JOr: It wasn't going out to label us.

MN: Right.

JOr: I think too, there was not a wide disparity in income. I mean there were people on welfare and there were working class people, but the difference wasn't monumental. But I think there was a wide diversity in values. Different families had - - you instilled different qualities in their children. Some of the families did - - like Jimmy's mother - - but then there were the bad kids that didn't have nothing, I don't know if you'd agree with me on that Jimmy - -

JO: Oh I do. I remember kids used to go and steal things from Woolworths, the five-and-ten cents store, right there near Prospect Avenue Station.

JOr: I did it once, and I got caught.

JO: [Laughs] And they would do that because it was fun to do that and because sometimes they wanted this little item and there was no money to buy it.

MN: Ok, now to switch gears slightly. You had mentioned earlier that your musical talent was a product of the New York City public school system. So you had not played an instrument when you were in elementary school?

JO: No there was no music program in elementary school.

MN: And your parents didn't give you music lessons for - - and you didn't play an instrument?

JO: No.

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MN: So how did it come - -

JO: Well, I didn't play an instrument, but in the fifth grade my friend on the block, a friend of all the kids, on the block, his name was Al Henshaw.

JOr: He lived across the street.

JO: He was much older than us, he had been in the Korean War, much older than us, he may have been ten years older, a little older than that, maybe fifteen years older. He was getting ready to go away for a long time, I guess it wasn't the Korean War, because he'd been back from the Korean War, he'd showed us all his stuff from Japan, Korea, and whatnot, and he gave the kids - - he invited the kids up to his house, his friends, and gave them what they wanted. And I remember Donald Cullum, lived in 802, had a big family, he wanted the barbells. He had a trumpet, that I wanted; so he gave me the trumpet, and the trumpet was no good, and missing a piece, a very important piece the tuning slide, and he had put a piece of rubber tubing there just to connect the instrument, the sound was pitiful, but that was my first interest. So he taught me a little bit about playing, I could get a sound and I practiced on it, fifth grade, sixth grade. And I got it meaning to play Taps when I was a cubscout, I never got to be a boy scout, stayed a cubscout - - no I was a boy scout, I never got to be an explorer.

MN: Or we called it Eagle Scout.

JO: No, that was later. Cubscouts and then boy scouts, I became a boy scout. And I played Taps a couple of times. I remember we had a friend who went and played on the train tracks, three of them. Two of them got killed and one got maimed for life, and Webster made me play Taps at the Ortiz Funeral Home.

MN: On 149th Street?

JO: No, right across from Morris High School.

MN: Oh ok. what train tracks had they gotten killed on?

JO: Park Avenue. So that was the reason that I wanted to play this trumpet. So I guess that was my first real thing of playing the trumpet. And going back to when I was three years old with my father, many of the records he played had the sound of the trumpet on it, Charlie Shavers, one of my favorite records was called "She's Funny That Way" and on the other side was a song called "Dizzy's Dilemma." I guess this was about '48, something like that, it was a picture record, and on one side it was a picture of a white woman, and on the other side it was a landscape scene. I have the record, '78. well the sound of the trumpet was in my ear, so I think that helped me to want to play the trumpet, when it came to - -

MN: Now, you knew you were going to JHS 40 and you knew they had a music program
- -

JO: Well Mr. Lightner came to PS 99 and gave a select group of students the special music exam. And I passed the special music exam to get into the special music class when I went there.

MN: Now was the same thing true of you? Did the school identify you to be tested?

JOr: I think they just took all of the 6.1s and 6.2s.

MN: Ok so it was basically - -

JOr: What they gave was a musical aptitude test.

JO: Yes.

MN: It was a musical aptitude test but did it involve instruments?

JOr: No, no, no. You had to distinguish between the high notes and low notes.

MN: Oh so they played things - -

JO: [claps in sequence] Do this and we had to do it. He'd pick on someone - - I remember how I did it at that time, cause I remember sitting in the auditorium of PS 99, I was frightened, because I really wanted to get into the special music class. So I was very attentive to everything that he said. And he would clap something and then he would point to someone, "do that back." and I did it, and then what's your name, ok.

MN: Do you recall taking this test Jim?

JP: Yes, I did; I failed. [Laughter] and they shipped me off to class 7.5. And I didn't get tested until 8th grade so I got sent to 9.1.

MN: So you were actually in 7.5? Wow.

JP: In 7.5 with all of my friends. Well it went up to like 7.9 or 10.

MN: But when you - - were you told you passed the test on the spot?

JOr: No.

MN: You got sent a letter?

JO: They notified the teacher, and the teacher, my teacher, I think her name was Miss Sovel, S-O-V-E-L - -

JP: Oh I had her.

JO: And I remember her going through one day and announcing the students that had been assigned to the special music class, and I was one of them.

MN: Now, when it was announced, were you very excited?

JO: I was elated, elated. And he said, one of the first questions he asked, "Does anyone own a trumpet?" I said, "Oh I have one!" Oh no, "Does anyone own an instrument?" "Yes, I own a trumpet." Oh, "so do you play trumpet?" "No I can't play it because its

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broken.” And I brought it to school one day; only case I had was a paper bag. I put it in the paper bag and I showed it. And he said, you need to take this, see if they can fix it; take it to Bronan’s music, ok. I don’t know, I never took it to Bronan’s music or I took it to Bronan’s and they couldn’t fix it, it meant finding a new tuning slide that fit, you’d have to take that horn - - and that horn was made in like Czechoslovakia.

MN: Right right, now when you got to PS 40, junior high school 40, how quickly did you, after your first arrival, did they send you to this music class?

JO: I was put in the special music class in the very beginning.

MN: Oh in other words this was your homeroom class, everybody in it was in the special music class?

JO: Right.

MN: Wow. And so music was going to be part of your daily curriculum.

JO: Okay, we studied music with Mr. Lightner and we studied out of a book called “Easy steps to the Band” [laughter] [crosstalk]. I’m going to tell you, I did a concert in a private school in Connecticut and they were teaching the kids how to easy step to the band and it brought tears to my eyes. I said ‘I started with that book! That was my first music book!’ [laughs]

JOr: And then you got to lesson 16. If you passed lesson 16, they put you in the band.

[crosstalk]

JO: Yes.

MN: Did that happen in 7th grade?

JO: Yes, I think so.

MN: Now did you get an instrument before you were in the school band?

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JO: I only had one instrument, that one that I was talking about

MN: Okay, so that was your trumpet?

JO: Oh no, no, no, they let me hold the trumpet.

MN: The school?

JO: The school gave an instrument.

MN: Did they give you an instrument even before you made the band? Was that part of the - -

JO: No, you got the instrument the very first day.

MN: The first day you come to school, you get an instrument which you can take home?

JO: In actuality, I think we had to tell Mr. Lightner in 99 when he came that day what instrument we wanted to play.

MN: Now we're talking about how many students who got this opportunity?

JO: 20 students, 25 students in a class, so they were, - -

JOr: but there were more than one [?] in the class. We had 2 or 3 special instruments.

MN: Right, and everyone here was given an instrument which they could take home to practice, which today - -

JOr: In every special music class.

MN: In every grade?

JOr: In every grade.

MN: So you're talking about maybe 70 kids who have this opportunity - -

JO: Yes, we were in a concert band, eventually.

MN: Now so how was the instruction, let's say not everyone was a trumpet player.

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JO: He taught us how to play music in the band and I think we had sessions where we played and practiced, I remember being in the class with clarinets and trumpets and trombones where he taught us so it was the [cough] concert type of thing.

MN: Was it like the kids had such powerful motivation and talent that even without private lessons, they could make themselves musicians.

JO: I don't remember any students taking private lessons, not at all. Except Harry [crosstalk]

MN: But taking private lessons in other words was the exception.

JO: [by the time I had got to] junior high school he had graduated. He left in the 8th grade.

MN: But other words, here we have people of which a number of whom became world-class professional musicians who were in this [root] program and were learning how to play this instrument without private lessons.

JO: Right, Mr. Lightner taught us, we had easy steps to the band, he would give us assignments, and we had to go back and learn that. I remember learning F and learning A Flat, those notes.

MN: And where did you practice?

JO: At home.

JOr: In the front room, well the stoop [laughter]. When he practiced, everybody on the street knew he was practicing.]Laughter] [crosstalk] open the window so it sounded out of the apartment.

JO: Bess used to be my manager and she once wrote something for me that said 'Jimmy started practicing just as school ended and he got home in enough time to change his

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clothes, and pick up his trumpet, and practice and when he stopped practicing, we knew it was time to make dinner'. [laughter]

MN: Were there other people on the block who were playing instruments?

JO: In actuality, after being in the 7th grade knowing of Henry Red Allen living practically around the corner, I discovered that there was a guy who lived in the building next to you. His name was Sykes, Mr. Sykes, and he played trumpet and he found out that I played trumpet and invited me up to his room sometime, and my parents, I never told them about it.

MN: Did he live in a furnished room?

JO: He lived in a furnished room, and he had a little room the size of my bedroom, 8x10, with just a bed and a bureau and what not, and he showed me the trumpet, and it was a wonderful trumpet, he showed me some things to play and showed me all of this music, and he was reading this music and what not. So he was like a spark for me. I think the most important spark was the fact that, and I talk about my two sisters, well, the Christmas that, I guess it was the Christmas after I got the trumpet, which was in 1953, my old trumpet, I think so it must have been '54, my sisters got a tape recorder, a big tape recorder, a Pintron, and they became the hits of the school with all the boys who played music. Because the boys would come over to the house, put on the [?] Monk records, the Miles Davis record, the Gerald Mulligan and Chet Baker record, and play along with it and record it. When I say the boys, I mean trumpeter Oliver Beaner, trumpeter Vinnie McKewick, saxophonist George Brate, Brate-[Weight] at that time, now George Brate, and there were a couple of other people - -

MN: And these were older guys.

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JO: These were guys who were 2 years older than me, I mean 7 years older than me.

JOr: Johnny Ray, the trombone player knew your sister so, but you probably don't remember Johnny Ray.

JO: I know the name, Johnny Simon [crosstalk], well they used to come and play on the tape recorder. Well hearing a trumpet player play live in my livingroom was what did it for me. I wanted to play trumpet more than anything, so that's what sparked me to practice, to learn. And that was very important, I once mentioned that to George Brate, and Vinnie, and Oliver Beaner. That was for me at age ten, so - -

MN: So this was happening when you were still in elementary school and it was one of the things that - -

JO: No, I was in junior high school

MN: Right, so you first heard them when you were in junior high. [crosstalk]But You had already had your trumpet - -

JO: A messed up trumpet - -

MN: But they were showing you what could be done in person.

JO: Right, and my cousins who I started to talk about, who were a little older than my sisters, who I said were the first to be strung out in the neighborhood, heroin, one of them played trumpet, and it was only in later life, meaning maybe I'm 18 years old now, that I got to appreciate how well he played. When we got together one time, he said, 'well I haven't played in a long time' and he took out a music book, and he opened up this music book and he played all of this stuff out of this music book, and this stuff was impossible to play. It was what Dizzy Gillespie had played in his transcribe solo, and he played all of this stuff. So [?] used to play that, and that kind of stuff and none of the

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other trumpet players could even think about doing anything like that, so they were very special, these cousins of mine. It's unfortunate that they got strung out and that was part of my parents warning to us about getting involved with bad scenes with drugs and what not. 'You don't want to be involved with your cousins'.

MN: Are they still alive?

JO: No, they're both dead, no,

MN: Now when did you start realizing, or getting positive feedback that said 'you're really good at this', how quickly did it come?

JO: Well by the end of the 7th grade, I was pretty good. At the beginning of the 8th grade, we still had Mr. Lightner and it was fine and I was getting better. Me and this other trumpet player, Thomas Wyndham, we were always fighting to see who was going to be the best, who's going to play first trumpet and what not, and he was good. So that sparked both of us on to practice, to study. And by the 9th grade, Mr. Lightner left, and it was the first time we got this lady teacher and I remember the students now, I'm the best trumpet player in the school, 'you going to be in the band that she's putting together?' 'Man I don't want to play none of that old Beethoven and Bach and stuff. No man I'm not going to play that, I'm not going to be in the band'. So I didn't go out for the band on their first rehearsal. I went by her room to see this teacher, her name was Edna Smith. And boy, I listened when she got the band to play, and they played [imitates musical notes] 'WOW' now I'm at the door just 'Can I be in the band?' And she taught us jazz, and she prepared me to take the exam, from the 9th grade to get into the High School of Music and Art. Edna Smith was a bass player who played with The Sweethearts of Rhythm in the 40's and her dear friend was Carline Ray, who was a bass player, who was

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a vocalist, she sings all kinds of stuff from opera or what not, she's now 73 years old, still alive, told me two years ago that Edna, I asked about Edna, she said Edna just died last [month?]. I wanted to look her up because she had taught out at Medgar Evars. When Royce - - he was something out of Medgar Evars - - Royce Philips.

MN: Jimmy let me ask you a question. We were talking about the legacy of Bronx trumpet players and there was a female trumpet player who lives around the corner on Prospect Ave and she had a brother that you knew who played drums, Eugene Davis - -

JO: She still plays trumpet.

MN: Gene?

JO: Yes, Gene Davis. She still plays. She plays - -

JOr: She lives in the same building as Carol Jefferson.

JO: Yeah, she doesn't play too often now, but most of their lives, with the exception of two people right off Mary Hall and Oliver Bean. Most of their lives were involved with having to work another kind of job to support themselves. So Gene Davis was like that, she had to eventually work another type of job. It took her further and further away from music. But she played on the weekends and she, well last that I know, about five years ago, she still plays. I bumped into her and we talked.

MN: Did the bands and orchestras of Junior High School 40 travel around the city, or they mainly played in the building?

JO: No, we were in a, if you were good enough, you auditioned for the All Bronx Band or All Bronx Orchestra. I was in the All Bronx Orchestra. I got into the All Bronx Orchestra. And we used to have rehearsals on Saturdays, this was in junior high.

MN: Okay, I'm going to stop it here - -

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[End of tape]