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Orange, Joseph

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Mark Naison (MN): This is an interview with the Bronx African American History Project, we're here with Joseph Orange who grew up in the Morrisania section and was a professional musician for about 15 years. He recently retired as a Vice President of Blue Cross/Blue Shield. So, to begin, when did your family first move to Morrisania?

Joseph Orange (JO): Yes, my family moved to Prospect Avenue and 168th Street in 1941, which is the year that I was born.

MN: Did they move there from Harlem?

JO: Yes, they lived right behind the Apollo Theater on 126th Street and it's interesting because I am the youngest in my family of eight. My oldest brother is 18 years older than me, just to give you some sense of the spread in age. But my older brothers and sisters spend a lot of time reminiscing about growing up on 126th Street. By the time we moved to the Bronx, they were already in their early teens.

MN: So, their most vivid memories were of growing up in Harlem?

JO: Yes, yes.

MN: Do you know why your family decided to move to the Bronx?

JO: I think the Bronx represented an upward mobility for most African Americans at the time, and with eight kids we needed space, obviously.

MN: So was the apartment bigger in Prospect Ave. than in the one they had left Harlem?

JO: I'm assuming that.

MN: How many rooms were there?

JO: That's interesting, I was thinking about that recently because really there were only three bedrooms. Fortunately, I guess because of the spread of age, we were never all there at the same time. When I was four years old, my brother was off in the army. I never remember all of us

living together, but I do remember us sharing rooms. My two sisters had a room together. My two brothers. I was the youngest; I was the baby so I was always out on the couch somewhere.

MN: Now, what sort of work did your father do?

JO: My father worked for the company called the Union News Company, which owned newspaper stands and restaurants in Manhattan. He worked in Grand Central Station.

MN: Was he from the West Indies or the South?

JO: Actually, he was a Gullah.

MN: Oh, Gullah, yes.

JO: The Gullah culture from South Carolina, from one of the Sea Islands and unfortunately my father died when I was only four years old so I don't have a very vivid memory of him, but my older brothers and sisters said he actually spoke Gullah language and that his English was difficult to understand because of that mixture of West Indian, African, and the Southern. My mother and her family was from a small town outside Atlanta called Social Circle, Georgia. Which is a very interesting little town, I never got to visit that town until about five years ago, we had a family reunion and we went back to Social Circle to see where my mother was born and the church where she was baptized and that type of thing.

MN: Now, did your parents meet in New York City or they met in the South?

JO: No, they met in the South, and as I understand it, my father was in Atlanta working and met my mother who, as I said, lived very close to Atlanta, and they married and moved to Savannah, Georgia for a while before moving to New York. They were married for about 15 years before they had any children and then they had children, one after another. First they couldn't have any and then all of a sudden - -

MN: - - Now, what level of education had they gotten?

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Interviewer: Mark Naison

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JO: My father had attended college. My mother did not. My mother married young; I think she was only 17 when she married my father. My mother had a grade school education even though her family, some of her older brothers and sisters graduated from college. In fact, one of her brothers, Alphemier Higgenbotham was a writer and wrote for the Amsterdam News and taught college. As a family, I think she came from a family of about 16 sisters and brothers as I remember. As I'm told they all went to Morris Brown College of Arts. There seemed to be a family connection to this institute - -

MN: - - Now, when we were talking earlier you had mentioned there were a number of musicians on your mother's side of the family.

JO: Yes, my mother had a brother who was a very famous trombone player in the 1930s, '40s, '50s, and into the 1960s, for that matter. But particularly, especially in the '30s and '40s he was considered actually the top jazz trombone player in the world. His name was J.C.

Higgenbotham. If you listen to the original version of Louis Armstrong playing, "Saints Go Marching In," the first time that song was ever recorded in the '30s, on that recording, you will hear him saying, "Here comes brother Higgenbotham walking down the aisle." And my uncle plays the famous jazz trombone solo on that recording, which is the original recording of "Saints Go Marching In." He went on to play with Louis Armstrong, he played with Fletcher Hinderson. Fletcher Hinderson was the premier jazz band to play with in the 1930s. Many people wonder why Fletcher Hinderson never became as famous as Duke Ellington, because he was a prolific arranger and composer. All of those songs that you hear by Benny Goodman, for example, "One O'clock Jump" and that, all written by Fletcher Hinderson, who was the ghost writer for Benny Goodman. He wrote all those songs for Benny Goodman's big band, but as an African American he never had as much success with his own band. The bands he had among musicians were

considered to be the best bands in the country at that time but not a lot of public acclaim, or notoriety, or notice, for that matter. So my uncle played with those bands, and then later in his career, spent many years with Henry Red Allen, another Bronxite, Henry Red Allen lived a block from me, and they used to play at the Metropol Café down in Manhattan at 48th and Broadway for years. And as a kid, I can remember Henry Red Allen, my uncle stayed at my house with my mother quite often, and Allen would drive his Cadillac, he always had a Cadillac, and he would come and honk his horn and pick up my uncle so he could go to work. And sometimes he would come up and have a drink with my uncle and sit and chat, so I knew Henry Red Allen as a kid growing up.

MN: Now did they every play at any of the local venues in the Bronx, to your knowledge?

JO: No, other than my sister's wedding, my uncle played his heart out at my sister's wedding, one of my sisters, when she got married. It was either Hunt's Point Palace her reception, or the other big dance hall up on Boston Road, the Boston Road Ballroom. I need to ask her, I am not sure which.

MN: Now, was this the sister that married this young Jewish guy?

JO: No, it was the other sister. But getting back to the music in my family, in addition to J.C. Higgenbotham being my uncle, my mother's brother, my first cousin, J.C.'s niece, was a woman by the name of Irene Higgenbotham and Irene was a songwriter and arranger and piano player, and back in the 1940s she wrote a lot of songs for Billie Holliday and other top jazz singers at that time. The most notable song that would be recognized by anyone still today is called, "Good Morning Heartache," (Singing "Good morning heartache, here we go again). So, she wrote "Good Morning Heartache" and quite a few other songs.

MN: Now, these were people who were in and out of your house growing up?

JO: Well, Irene actually lived in my house for years, and J.C. lived there coming and going.

You know, sometimes when he wasn't in town, for a while, he was living in Boston, and whenever he came to New York he stayed at my house, sometimes for months at a time. But weekly, he was very close to my mother. So, I would see J.C. at a minimum of once a week, and Irene actually lived with us when I was a small kid, but she later got married and moved to Brooklyn. I didn't see as much of her, but she remained always very close to my mother.

MN: Now, what are your earliest recollections of the Bronx, and the neighborhood, the first memories, was it of the apartment, the street?

JO: When did World War II end?

MN: 1945.

JO: That is one of my earliest recollections. I recall as a kid, everybody was out on the street saying, "We won the war. The war is over." There was a big celebration going on. I hope this is not like a false memory, it seems real to me and it seems as though there was a lot of people out on the streets. And I was a kid parading around the streets, "We won the war, we won the war!" I remember walking up and down the street by myself and that is actually the first time I can remember being on the street by myself. I'm sure my mother was within - -

MN: - - Now, was this Prospect Ave.?

JO: Yes, this is Prospect Avenue, between 168th Street and Holmes Street. And I can remember kind of wandering down the street at the end of the block and not having my mother in sight and being scared because I was off on my own for the first time. I guess I was four years old, but at that time as a kid, particularly in the 1940s, the Bronx just seemed like the biggest place and safest place in the world. I had this sense of security because everyone knew me. All of my neighbors knew me. I could never get in any trouble, even if I wanted to, (Laughing), because

some neighbor would be bringing me back to my mother saying, "I saw your son doing so and so." But I remember, I mean we lived in a five story tenement. There were four apartments on each floor and to this day I could tell you the names of every person of every apartment in that building. So, 5 times 4 is 20 families.

MN: Right, 20 families.

JO: And you figure at 4 or 5 people in each family because there were some large families, including my own. I could name every person that lived there.

MN: Now, was the building multi-ethnic or mostly African American?

JO: It was mostly African American, but I do recall a few years later, a few Puerto Ricans, maybe 2 or 3 Puerto Rican families.

MN: Now, were these families mostly two parent families, with fathers working or did it vary?

JO: Mostly, and this is interesting, mostly single families headed by females. There were a couple of two parent families, a couple 2 person heads of household, but not many. Actually, the second largest family in that building, which were the Martins, and they were very close to our family, I think there must have been 7 or 8 of them and I am still in touch with them. They were headed by a male, a man, Mr. Martin, who raised all of his kids right there, but for the most part, I would say it was single females raising their families.

MN: Now were these women in the labor force? Did they go off to work? Do you have any recollection of that?

JO: They seemed to be around a lot to me, but they may have worked.

MN: Now, you went off to school at P.S. 99. What was that like, to go to school?

JO: P.S. 99, which was only a block and a half away, wonderful experiences. Most of the teachers were not African American. In fact, I can only recall two African American teachers

being on staff and I didn't have either one of them, Mrs. Singletary, and someone else. But the teachers that were there, were so dedicated, so committed, so nurturing. You know, back in those days in the late '40s, '50s, we had kind of a tracking system, I don't know if they still have those today. You were doing 5-1 if you were very smart, and 5-15 if you were not so smart. I don't know if they still do that. I was fortunate because I was always in the 1 classes, now maybe I was getting all this attention and nurturing, and excellent training because we were the smartest kids. I don't know.

MN: Now, were your siblings always in the 1 classes also?

JO: Yes, I always followed them. When I came to school, which was a real disadvantage in some ways, all the teachers knew me because my brothers and sisters had preceded me.

MN: Now, was this the situation, if you were in the Orange family you were expected to be a good student? You had no choice - -

JO: - - Absolutely, absolutely. I can even recall, I'm jumping ahead now, but when I was in the 8th grade I started to move with the wrong crowd. I started to move and run around with some kids who were definitely not headed in any positive direction, and we would go to the P.S. 99 community center. I was never doing all the things they were doing, but I was there. I was an observer and they were my buddies. And I'll never forget one day I walking out of the center, and the director of the center, a wonderful mentor by the name of Vincent Tibbs, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to the side and put his arm around me and said, "Joe, it's time for you to cut these guys loose," and I said, "What do you mean, these are my buddies." And he said, "No, I know the Orange family too well. You're going in a different direction." And that's all he ever said to me and at the time it didn't really, you know how those things happen, impress me, but

later I thought about it, and I only mention that experience as an example of how there were adults in the community who knew you, who knew your family, and who observed you.

MN: Wow, Howie Evans said the same thing about Mr. Tibbs, said he saved his life.

JO: Yes, I believe that probably, literally.

MN: Yes, literally, because he was actually in a gang and there was a big fight with one gang that was rather ferocious, the “Slicksters” and so somebody really got hurt that night and most of the time they weren’t as life threatening.

JO: Right.

MN: But what was it that you think made your family have this standard that may have been different from some of the other families in the community? You had eight children who all - -

JO: - - Well, my mother’s family, actually even though she had eight children and our father died when I was very young, she had come from a quite prominent family in Georgia. And there was just an expectation, also a quite talented family. Like I said, her family was particularly educated, they were all musically trained. Music was such a part of our household, as a family every Christmas we’d sing Christmas carols, neighbors would come in. There was always music playing around. My sisters were dancers and singers. My brother was a singer. It was almost within the family, an expectation, number 1, that you would be a good musician and talented. And my mother had this real sense of pride about her children. I think that we had a certain respect from within the neighborhood because I can recall even the bad guys would, if they saw me doing something bad, would say, “No, Joe, not you.” Even the bad guys, because as I said around the age of 14, 15, I was trying to spread my wings, as my mother would say, in the wrong direction. But some of the guys who were already there, who were a little older than me and even some of my own friends my age would say, “No, Joe.”

MN: Were there also books in your house, and was there discussion of books and politics and things of that sort?

JO: My father, I'm told again, since my memory is not that clear, I'm told was a Garveyite, so he was quite political. (Laughs) I don't remember my mother being political. There were always books in the house, because there were always a lot of kids, we all went to school and we all enjoyed reading, other than our regular school books.

MN: Were there political discussions at the dinner table, do you recall that?

JO: No, I don't remember a lot of political discussions, I really don't, but my sisters, my older sisters, tell me that when my father was alive there was a lot, but I don't remember a lot of political discussion.

MN: Now, how old were you when you started playing an instrument?

JO: 7th grade, I guess that's 11.

MN: So, you hadn't begun musical training before then? It was just you were surrounded by music.

JO: I was surrounded by music. I could sing. Even in P.S. 99, in elementary school, I can remember standing on stage and singing. We didn't have a chorus or anything like that, but I do recall an auditorium. Certain kids would get up and perform and I was one of those kids.

MN: Now just to switch gears, were you very active in games and street life in the community?

JO: Yes, very much so.

MN: What were some of the games you played growing up?

JO: Every conceivable type of ball, softball, baseball, stoopball, punch ball, dodge ball, or dodge the ball. When I was very young, 6 or 7, I used to run behind my older brothers, they were like Howie Evans' age, they used to play in the backyard, they didn't play in the school yard. This is

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probably before Howie moved into area because he moved in later. But my older brothers would play baseball and softball in the backyard and they organized these leagues, they would actually have all-star games and only the best players would get into the all-star games and World Series, when you'd have one team playing against another in a series of best of 7, that type of thing. So, even before I was able to participate in all these games on my own, my older brothers were always babysitting me so I was along for the ride hanging out in the backyard and I remember around the corner from the street we lived on Prospect on the corner of 168th Street, I can remember 168th Street which was on a hill, was also cobblestone and we'd play baseball, imagine trying to play softball and baseball on cobblestone streets, but we did, but we played games on cobblestone streets, and I think when I was about 10 or 11 they paved over the cobblestone. Yes, so we played all kinds of ball. The girls didn't play, they played punch ball with us as I recall, but the other ball games were, for the most part, boy ball games and the girls played Double Dutch and pick-up the jacks, and they had their own games going on.

MN: Now, did you go to the movies a lot when you were growing up?

JO: Yes, Saturday was movie day. I think movies cost a dime. And the three movie theaters that I remember in the area were the Prospect Theater, which was down further, a little further on Prospect Ave., near the Prospect Ave. train station, near the 845 Club. There was the Loews, which was at about 165th Street, which we used to call the 'Low-ees,' and there was an RKO theater somewhere on Prospect Ave. Those three were right next to each other. There was a fourth theater up on Boston Road between 168th and 169th called the Tower Theater. My mother wouldn't let me go to that theater. It had a bad reputation. To this day, I don't know exactly what went on at the movie theater, but my mother would not let me go there. There was another

theater much further down Boston Road, where Boston Road runs into Westchester Avenue or Southern Blvd. by P.S. 98 middle school, I think it was called The Star.

MN: Now, when you were growing up, were there like areas you were sort of told to avoid, blocks which were particularly tough?

JO: Yes, absolutely.

MN: Now, which were some of those?

JO: Okay, I lived on Prospect Avenue. The square block surrounding me, on the corner there was Holmes Street. Holmes Street was an area where I didn't venture. And then there was Union Avenue right behind me where I didn't venture. And so all I knew was 168th was right next to me which I did.

MN: 168th Street is some of the brownstones - -

JO: - - Yes, that was cool

MN: Where Jimmy Owens' lived, but Holmes Street where there were tenements was considered a tougher crowd?

JO: JO: right I did not go around on Holmes Street, and I didn't go on Union Avenue. They weren't good areas. And I knew the people. I didn't know a lot of the people from Union Avenue, but I knew a lot of people from that Holmes Street area and they were tough. Even at a very young age, they were tough.

MN: And those kids went to 99 also?

JO: They went to 99.

MN: But they were in the 7 and 8 classes?

JO: Yes.

MN: Now, this is one of those questions I guess I'll ask you because a disproportionate number of the people I am interviewing were the people in the 1 and 2 classes and these are the people who became executives, teachers, doctors, lawyers. What happened to the people in the 7 and 8 classes, and you know, looking back what were some of the differences then? We had similar situations where I grew up in Crown Heights, certain blocks that were tougher but what is your perception now about what you were told then?

JO: Yes, it's interesting because I don't consciously remember thinking that because I was in the 1 class I was smarter than anybody else, I was just always in the 1 classes, I never even thought about it, but I do know that my friends were those in the 1 classes, so I didn't really socialize a lot, until I went through that bad period as a teenager, with the kids who were in the upper numbered classes and I think there were a lot of factors that made them different. I don't know that they were different, I probably shouldn't say that.

MN: Did Holmes Street look different physically?

JO: Not everyone who lived on Holmes Street, Herbert Coleman, who was a child star and a singer, was in a movie about - it was a - South Africa, called "Lost in the Stars," and he was on Broadway and he was a star. I have a very close friend, one of my closest friends today, is a person by the name of Tim Henderson, he's got a PhD in Physics, he lived on Holmes Street. So, not everyone who lived on Holmes Street was, but I do believe what made the difference was parental involvement. I can remember the kids in my class, I can remember their parents, seeing their parents in school as I think back to some of the kids in the upper numbered classes, I don't remember their parents being that involved. I also remember the kids from my classes were also involved in some of the afterschool activities at the Community Center at 99 in the daytime

particularly, when we were younger. So, I also remember the 6-1 and 6-2 class were quite integrated. We had Italians, Jews.

MN: So, P.S. 99. The school was more integrated than in your building?

JO: Absolutely, yes, as a matter of fact I was actually looking at my graduation picture from Junior High School 40, and I was shocked that probably 50% – 60% of the people in my class were not African American.

MN: Now, so P.S. 99 went through 6th grade and JHS 40 went 7th to 9th?

JO: Yes, 7, 8, and 9.

MN: So your first formal music school introduction came when you went to Junior High School 40?

JO: Yes, while you were in the 6th grade, again I think it was only those kids who were in 1 and 2 classes, we were given a music aptitude test in the 6th grade. And if we passed the musical aptitude test and our academic grades were acceptable, then we were put into what they called special music classes at JHS 40 in 7th grade and we graduated and went to the 7th grade. In 7th grade they had special music classes and they had special art classes for the kids who were talented in art. I remember taking the musical aptitude test in the 6th grade and it was basically, can you recognize a pitch, what notes are higher than this one, lower than this one, really pretty basic stuff. Then when you arrived at JHS 40, you were allowed to select your own instrument, you weren't assigned one, you got to pick the one that you liked and begin your musical training.

MN: What made you pick the trombone?

JO: Well, as I said, my uncle was a famous trombone player and my thinking at that time was that if I played the trombone he would give me my own trombone.

MN: Now, did the school have musical instruments?

JO: The school had musical instruments and you could take them home every day, and music was one of the periods, had, you had, an hour of English, an hour of Math, an hour of Music, and so on.

MN: Now, did they, every day, have performing ensembles, as well as teaching?

JO: Yes, we had a dance band, usually the most advanced students in the school. You usually didn't make it till you were in the 9th grade. We had an orchestra, and we had a concert band. We had a chorus and we had a drama club. Interesting, in the 8th grade they decided to, they mixed the music class and the drama class. They got rid of the drama club and said this one class will do both music and drama. So, in the 8th grade, which was my favorite year of all my education was the 8th grade, because all we did all year was put on plays and play music.

MN: Now, do remember the names?

JO: We did "Carmen Jones," I remember we did "Of Thee I Sing," I don't know if that's the name of the play - -

MN: - - No, there is a play "Of Thee I Sing."

JO: I remember big productions and the Art Department would do the backdrops and the scenes and I've got mixed feelings about that year. As I said, I really had great times, but we were kept out of class a lot. We missed a lot of fundamentals of Algebra, fundamental academics that year. That was the only year that we did that.

MN: Now, were there teachers who believed their students were going to become professional musicians, was there a sense that this program was more than just like, enrichment, that there might be truly talented people coming out of this?

JO: Oh no, they knew there were truly talented people coming out of that program. There were students who went to the High School of Performing Arts and High School of Music and Art.

And there were some kids who came into the program who had already had musical training.

We had one particular kid, who lived on Prospect Avenue, her name was Carol Jefferson, she was playing concerts in kindergarten. She was a child prodigy. By the time she got to JHS 40, she was already pretty well known. Her mother had to take her out of school a lot to play concerts. From the 8th grade to high school she went to the High School of Performing Arts and finally got a degree from Julliard. Today, she has a PhD in Music. She plays concerts all over Europe. But she was playing at the age of four, so they knew that there was some talent, and I think that for the most part they approached it as an enrichment.

MN: Did the Orange reputation precede you into high school?

JO: Absolutely.

MN: And by that time did a number of your siblings become fairly successful as performers?

JO: No, I had a brother, Freddie, who preceded me as a musician. He was a singer. He went to, he left 40 and went to Music and Art and was just beginning his professional career as a singer and dancer. I had another brother who was 6 years older than me who played, who was an athlete, David, was a wonderful athlete. He played every sport, he really excelled at boxing, was a Golden Gloves Champion, and got to the final in the Olympic trials and lost that one fight so he didn't go to the Olympics.

MN: What was his weight class?

JO: 135, and his picture was always in the newspapers, from fighting in the Golden Gloves and everything, so I had a reputation to live up to both in sports and music.

MN: Now, when did you begin to get this private instruction coupled with the school musical experience?

JO: Well, I started late. As I said, I didn't really take music seriously until I was into high school, probably my second year in high school, that I really sat down and said I think I can do this.

MN: So, it didn't happen to you in 40?

JO: No, it did not.

MN: You weren't like the absolute star of the school?

JO: No, not at all, I played in the dance band, I was one of the best, and I acted in the plays. I did all that and I was very involved but I wasn't that outstanding, I was ok, I was good.

MN: What about this little interlude of rebellion? (Laughing). Were there gangs when you were growing up, was this something you were a part of?

JO: There were gangs, I was not in a gang, but at the time, some of them seemed quite dangerous.

MN: What were the names of some of the gangs?

JO: Sportsmen, have you heard that name?

MN: Yes,

JO: Sportsmen, Seven Crowns.

MN: Yes, the Crowns.

JO: The Seven Crowns.

MN: Were these African American gangs?

JO: There was a Spanish gang too, what was the Puerto Rican gang called, The Scorpions?

MN: Yes, Howie claimed he was in a mostly Puerto Rican gang.

JO: Yes, there was a Puerto Rican gang during my time also. I can't remember their name and I don't remember if there were any killings, any real murders, but I wouldn't be surprised if there were and I just don't remember.

MN: Do you remember rumbles or big fights?

JO: Yes, I remember, I guess I was in the 8th grade or 9th, and Fourth of July I went off with my bad friends to Pelham Bay Park for the day. And Pelham Bay Park, I didn't know this at the time, but Pelham Bay Park had been taken over by the Sportsmen and the Seven Crowns. They were supposed to be meeting at Pelham Bay Park to have this big rumble to determine who was the premier gang of the Bronx.

MN: This is what, like 1953 or something?

JO: Yes, 1953 or 1954, and I remember I was wearing a red shirt and the uniform for the Sportsmen was black pants and a red shirt and I was afraid one of these Seven Crowns would see me and think I was a Sportsmen. I know I was very frightened. I was really scared and I wanted to get out of there. I didn't know how to tell my friends that I wanted to go home.

MN: Now, had you heard of gangs such as the Slicksters and the Fordham Baldies?

JO: As a kid I remember, I think the Fordham Baldies, were like during my time. They had a notorious reputation.

MN: Now, what about the Slicksters?

JO: The Slicksters also had a really bad reputation. But they were before my time, they were with my older brothers. I can remember things because I had older brothers that preceded me.

MN: Now, what was going on with you in the 8th grade? What did it mean to be a bad kid in 8th grade in your neighborhood?

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JO: It meant that we left the neighborhood and we'd ride our bicycles up to the Bronx Zoo or the Bronx Park and go swimming in the polluted lake and I do recall, now this is probably the worst incident that actually occurred, and I don't know if I want to put this on tape but I will. I remember riding our bicycles up to the Bronx Park and then leaving the area where that little lake ran and there was some dirt paths that took you down into these kind of wooded dirt paths and we rode our bicycles riding and we ran into a couple of white boys. And I was kind of trailing behind the pack and by the time I got up to the pack they were assaulting these two boys, and I remember this one boy, Leon Gray, talking about remember Emmitt Till, because that Emmitt Till thing had just happened at this time, and these boys were assaulted. I don't think anyone thought much of it; it was just something to do, and we got on our bicycles and started riding and we ended up on one of the streets on the other side of the Bronx park which was an all-white area and all of the sudden we were kind of surrounded by police cars. We were all arrested and they took all of us to a police station. I don't remember where it was and we had to sit and wait and wait and wait until our parents came, that type of thing. So, finally my mother comes in and my uncle had happened to be by the house that day. J.C. Higgenbotham, and he came in and introduced himself to one of the policemen and told him, "I'm J.C. Higgenbotham," and the policeman was a jazz fan, and he said, "J.C. Higgenbotham, what are you doing here?" and he said, "My nephew is here," and that immediately, again, somehow they all had to go to court, I don't think any of them were sent away to juvenile hall or anything but they all did have to go to court and somehow I escaped that. Once again, I just happened to have a family that carried a little weight.

MN: Do you recall a lot of racial tension at that time in the Bronx?

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JO: I don't think so. I don't remember any. Quite honestly, in my classes I will proudly say that it was about 50/50 and I don't ever remember a racial incident. A lot of my friends were not African American. My best friend, through middle school and junior high school, was a kid by the name of Fred Sadona, and he was Italian. Fred Sadona, actually was the commissioner of the school. Commissioner was the top position that any student could hold at the school. The student body actually voted and he ran against an African American kid and he won. But one interesting thing that I seem to recall is that after we left about the 6th or 7th grade, even though we were in school together, I don't remember seeing any of the white kids after school.

MN: It wasn't like people went to each other's houses after school?

JO: No, even in elementary school, I had a couple of friends, I remember in elementary school, my best friend was a kid from Venezuela and I was always by his house or he was by my house. But even my best friend Fred Sadona, that I just spoke about, I don't remember him coming to my house or me going to his house.

MN: Now at what age did you start having parties where boys and girls were together?

JO: Actually, I probably started a little young because I was in the 7th grade, but most of my friends were in the 9th grade, and I remember very distinctly that year starting to have parties and listening to doo wop and learning how to do different dances.

MN: So your household was mostly a jazz household, but when the rhythm and blues and doo wop hit, you became involved, you became a part of that?

JO: Yes, I very much was in love with all of that.

MN: Now, did that create any tension in your family? Was there any people there who think this is lowering the musical standard?

JO: No, not at all.

MN: Now, what about, people talk about the talent shows at 99, do you have any recollections of those, in the evenings? What were they like?

JO: Yes, I remember sort of two eras of talent shows. Now, when I was younger I would go with my older sisters and brothers, my older brother always performed, because as I said he was a singer.

MN: Now what was his style as a singer?

JO: He was like a pop singer, like Billy Eckstine at that time, that type of style, and later he actually joined a group. They made a couple of records but nothing much came of it. He was the lead singer of those groups. The talent shows as I can remember them, were mostly groups, I can remember three eras, I remember the pre-doo wop era, which was my older brothers and sisters and individual performers. The mc was a guy named Satchmo, Leroy Gordon, who sounded just like Satchmo. I can remember a tap dancer Gene Paige, I can remember a guy who played the bongos, now that was probably in the early '50s. Then in my era came the doo wop groups and it would just be one doo wop group after another.

MN: Did you ever try singing doo wop?

JO: Yes informally, but I was never part of a group, just in the hallways with my buddies. But then later, when I was studying and playing music, they weren't called talent shows, but they were like jazz concerts, and I would play seriously at jazz concerts at PS 99.

MN: So, they had a pretty vital program in the evenings. Now, would a lot of people from the community go to these?

JO: Yes, to the center or the talent shows?

MN: To the talent shows.

JO: Yes.

MN: Now, you went to Morris High School, were there any other schools you were looking at?

Were you seriously looking at Music and Art?

JO: No, because as I said, when I was at the age where I should have been thinking about Music and Art I really wasn't thinking of music, but I have no regrets about going to Morris High School. Morris High School was a wonderful school.

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

MN: Now, tell us a little bit about Morris High School, coming from junior high school to Morris High School.

JO: Coming into Morris High School, the teachers at Morris High School, in my opinion, recognized those of us who were talented or serious about wanting to do something and they would just extend themselves to no limit to support you and it was at Morris High School where I was really encouraged to take my music seriously and to start studying and I had a couple of music teachers up there, Mr. Ingraman and another guy whose name doesn't come to mind right now, Mr. Bingham, I think his name was, who I think would let me cut my other classes to play music. My other teachers cooperated. I mean it was just amazing. A lot of my friends went to Music and Art, and jazz was discouraged at Music and Art, they got a good education but they were not encouraged to play jazz at Music and Art. It was all classical. That was not the case at Morris. If you wanted to play jazz it was fine. I had my first ventures in trying to do some arranging and I showed it to one of my teachers. He took his lunch break one day and showed me how to score things and how to rearrange.

MN: So you had some teachers who had real musical talent?

JO: Oh, yes. We had one teacher who was actually writing hit songs in the doo wop vein. He used to go down to 52nd Street every day after school, and he'd try to peddle songs he would

write. And it was funny because every day he'd say, "Joe, what do you think of this?" And every day he'd have a new rock and roll song.

MN: Do you remember his name?

JO: Mr. Fields, I believe it was.

MN: Was there a lot of music around the school? Was this like - -

JO: - - That point in my life I was so engrossed that it just seemed that there was music everywhere. I was not aware of anything other than music.

MN: Now, this hit you in 9th grade, would you say?

JO: 10th and 11th, I would say.

MN: 10th and 11th. Is that when you began getting instruction outside of school?

JO: Yes, in the 11th grade, I met a friend who went to Morris High School and he was older than me, only a year older than me, but he was a lot more mature than me. And he wanted to be a trumpet player. Surprisingly, he wasn't that talented as a trumpet player but he knew a lot of people and he was a lot wiser than me and he's the one that said, "Joe, if you are serious about being a musician you really have to practice." You know, these things kind of came to you somehow, you know, but he introduced me to a trombone player who was about six years older than me and he agreed to start to teach me. And I would go by his house like two or three days a week and we would just play duets together and he would show me different things.

MN: And this was free?

JO: This was free, no charge.

MN: Now, one interesting question, what about the neighbors while you guys were playing trombone?

JO: Oh, that's kind of interesting, yes, you know, I don't know. I never remember the neighbors complaining too much.

MN: Now, did you practice at home?

JO: I practiced at home 4, 5, 6 hours a day.

MN: What!?! Practicing trombone at home?

JO: Absolutely, at home, in a tenement, with the windows open. I never remember complaints.

MN: Now, was this because you know in a certain way there was noise and music everywhere, people are playing their records?

JO: Yes, there was a record store on the corner, I remember it later, that played their music outside and that was going on. I just never remember it as being an issue. And I know that Jimmy Owens lived up the block and he was a trumpet player and there was another trumpet player who lived across the street.

MN: And everybody practices in their house?

JO: Yes, Freddy Patterson lived in the building next door to me and I could hear him and he could hear me, I don't even remember any complaints, as long as we didn't play too late at night.

MN: Now, did you feel like you were in an environment where music was everywhere?

Walking down the street you'd hear music?

JO: Yes.

MN: And from different types of music?

JO: Yes, we were exposed to all kinds of music because in those days I don't know if they still do it, but they even had record ships and they would be playing music out onto the street - -

MN: - - Out the window

JO: Yes, so you could hear it everywhere you went.

MN: And because people didn't have air conditioning in the summer?

JO: All the windows were open, yes.

MN: Now what were the kinds of music you heard in the street, in the apartments? What different styles? Did you listen to Latin music at all?

JO: Oh yes, a lot in fact, when I was in high school, I really first became aware of Latin music because a lot of my friends and people I would be around had started venturing out to Latin venues and go dancing and they would come to school and say we heard Tito Puente and we heard Tito Rodriguez, and they would be talking about all this Latin music and I started to pay attention to it.

MN: Now, where were the venues, they were going to dance?

JO: The Palladium was the big thing, 53rd Street and Broadway.

MN: Now, were there any places in the neighborhood?

JO: there were a lot of places in the neighborhood but I didn't go to them but there were a lot of places. The Puerto Ricans had a lot of dance clubs.

MN: Now, did you learn how to dance in high school, dance Latin?

JO: I never really learned how to dance much, I didn't do much dancing in High School.

Actually I did more dancing in junior high than I did in high school. In high school, I was busy playing.

MN: Now was there much West Indian music around or not that much?

JO: Yes, there was West Indian. I had a friend, Richie Powell, who played drums. And he always had a band. Again, he wasn't always the best musician but he was the most entrepreneurial. He was the guy that would get the jobs. I remember going by his house and he had steel drums in his house and that was the first time I'd ever seen steel drums and again, my

sister married a West Indian so I was aware of Mighty Sparrow and all the West Indian music but again I didn't consider this to be the hip music. I wouldn't buy a West Indian album, actually.

MN: So the hit music would be R & B and jazz for you?

JO: For me at that point by high school it was jazz.

MN: So, you in a sense outgrew the rock and roll and rhythm and blues and then became a jazz person?

JO: Yes.

MN: Were there other people who followed that route who became jazz musicians?

JO: Oh, yes for sure, most of my friends were into jazz, and didn't listen to doo wop at that point.

MN: Now was this also the first and second class phenomenon?

JO: No, this is high school.

MN: No, I mean, but in high school was this more among those in the elite academic tracks were more likely to be jazz people?

JO: I don't know. I think in high school a lot of things started to happen in high school. I became very serious about my music. I began to move out of the community and I was playing my music outside of the community. I was playing in groups downtown. I was playing with a lot of kids that went to Performing Arts and Music and Art.

MN: Now who connected you with those people? Were they neighborhood people?

JO: Neighborhood people like Jimmy Owens who went to Music and Art.

MN: Now, did you know Jimmy from before?

JO: I knew Jimmy from kindergarten, yes.

MN: Was he serious earlier than you?

JO: Yes.

MN: So when he was in 40 he was - -

JO: - - Jimmy, he was one of those rare individuals who the first time he picked up his instrument he knew he wanted to be a musician. He just loved it and he knew it. I was not like that at all. So, Jimmy and I were venturing out of the neighborhood, playing a lot of music around, all over the city, anywhere we could play and I became focused exclusively on music. So, in high school I didn't have a wide social circle. I didn't have a group of people there I ran with, I just had like the one or two people who were serious about music. In some respects I missed a lot of the traditional high school experience. In fact, my senior year of high school I played at the Newport Jazz Festival and I missed my graduation because I had to go to rehearsal.

MN: Now, who connected you with this Newport ensemble?

JO: The Newport Youth Band, it was called. A notice went out to every high school in the city that George Wein had engaged a band director by the name of Marshall Brown to form a band that would appear at the Newport Jazz Festival every year and practice and play around the United States. And I went out for auditions and they ended up with 800 students trying out for the 18 positions. I didn't try out but knew a lot of people that did try out and made it into that band. Okay, so I knew about four or five people in the band and a year later there was an opening by then they had called me and I went to play.

MN: Now, was Jimmy Owens one of those people?

JO: Jimmy didn't try out initially, but Jimmy was taking trumpet lessons with Donald Byrd, who lived on Teasdale Place in the Bronx.

MN: What, Donald Byrd? Now, Teasdale is between where and where?

JO: It's off Third Avenue, around 162nd or 161st.

MN: Really, and he was living in the Bronx at that time?

JO: Yes, Donald Byrd was living in the Bronx and he was giving trumpet lessons to Jimmy. And Herbie Hancock by the way, was living with Donald Byrd.

MN: So, they were both living in the Bronx on Teasdale Place, because when I moved out to Brooklyn, Donald Byrd owned a brownstone on my block.

JO: Right, this was in the '50s.

MN: In the '50s, Donald Byrd and Herbie Hancock were living on Teasdale Place.

JO: Absolutely, and I'm positive of that because I used to be there all the time. So, Jimmy was taking lessons with Donald Byrd and Donald Byrd called up Marshall Brown and said, "I've got a student I want you to listen to for the band." So, Jimmy had sort of a connection to get into the band and he got into the band before me and then Jimmy and a couple of other guys in the band started to talk about me a lot to Marshall Brown.

MN: Now, were any of these kids Bronx people in the band?

JO: Oh, yes, yes.

MN: Do you remember any of the names?

JO: I remember all of the names, all of them became professional musicians. Al Abreu, who lived across the street from St. Augustine's Church on 161st or 163rd Street. Al was Cuban. He was either Cuban or Puerto Rican. I'm not sure which, but Al Abreu went on to play with Mongo Santamaria, he played with, what's the South African trumpet player's name, Eumascalala, the grazing of the grass? Do you ever hear that, that's Al Abreu playing saxophone.

MN: So he was a sax guy?

JO: Yes, he played with Tito Puente, and then Al was in Puerto Rico with Tito Puente's band and was in a motorcycle accident and was killed, died very young.

MN: So, he was from the neighborhood?

JO: Yes, he was in the youth band. Harry Hall, who lived on 167th Street and had gone to Junior High 40 and P.S. 99, he lived on 167th Street between Prospect and Union. He was the lead trumpet player a solo jazz trumpet player. There was another kid, a white kid, who lived on Allerton Avenue, near the Bronx Zoo. His name was Larry Morton. He was a saxophone player. Harry Hall, by the way also became a professional trumpet player. He and I played later after the youth band. We played with Lionel Hampton's band together and played with Lloyd Price's band together and Harry too, died young. Larry Morton was from Allerton Avenue up near Bronx Park, he went on to become a professional musician but I understand he's now living out in California and he's a producer, a music producer, and then there was me and there was Jimmy. So, out of 18 kids there were five of us from a relatively small area in the Bronx. The rest, you know there was one from Brooklyn, two from Staten Island.

MN: So, this community was definitely a musical hotbed?

JO: Absolutely, I often marvel at the number of musicians that came out of a very small area of the Bronx who are professional musicians and many nationally renowned.

MN: Now, to take a brief segue, what is the role of St. Augustine's Church in your childhood and youth?

JO: First, was my older brothers, tagging along behind them, they would always be at this place called The Fellowship House. That was a building owned by St. Augustine's Church. Their after school was right next door and it was like a community center as I remember it. And that was an after school place to go. Now this might have preceded P.S. 99 Community Center even,

and they used to have an inter-church basketball league where one church would play another church and I remember going along with my brothers and watching them play basketball. Later, when I came along with my brothers and watching them play basketball. Later, when I came along St. Augustine's was not as significant. I did not go to the fellowship house that often. I went to P.S. 99 Community Center but St. Augustine's Church had a jazz concert every year and I remember playing in that every year.

MN: This is for the young people?

JO: This is for the young people in the community that played music and all the musicians from all over the Bronx could come and play in that jazz concert they would have every year. I remember playing, even when I was in the Newport Youth Band. At that point, by the time I was in the Newport Youth Band, I was living in the community, in the Bronx, but I was out. I was traveling around playing. To be in that band, we rehearsed Monday, Wednesday, Friday, all day Saturday and Sunday. So, that sort of took over our lives, you know. I need to let you listen to the CDs we made, really good.

MN: You have some of those?

JO: Oh yes, and you'd be amazed.

MN: Do you have the equipment to put them on-line?

JO: No, but I could make you a dupe.

MN: Well, that would be great.

JO: On a CD burner.

MN: I'd love to have some of those. So, by the time you're 18, you know your life is going to be traveling all over the place.

JO: Yes, yes.

MN: Now, from Newport, what was your next step into being a professional musician?

JO: Well, after the Newport Youth Band dissolved, because we could only stay in that band until like our 19th birthday. So, I think for a lot of reasons Marshall Brown decides to dissolve it. At the age of 19 I moved downtown with a friend of mine, a bass player and he and I got an apartment on 78th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus Ave. and I started my musical career.

MN: Now, this is in the late '50s?

JO: This is now early '60s,

MN: Early s'60s.

JO: Early '60s, and I spent about two years, had my own group, played a lot of little things, struggling, being a struggling jazz artist and the bass player that I lived with was friends with another trombone player who was also from the Bronx, who actually went on to become one of the greatest Latin trombone players in the history of Latin music even though he's not Latin. His name is Barry Rogers.

MN: Barry Rogers is a legend!

JO: So, my friend Paul Rosby was friends with Barry Rogers and he said, "Joe, I want you to hear this guy Barry Rogers play. I had never heard Barry or heard of him, and we went up to a club in the Bronx, called the Tritons club, which is a Latin club.

MN: Now, what street was that on, do you remember?

JO: It was right near Hunts Point Palace and it was actually an after hours place, but they would get major people coming through there. It was the place to be. I remember seeing Celia Cruz, Arsenio Hall, some major Latin artists. So I had just gone up this one evening to hear this guy Barry Rogers and Eddie Palmieri play, and I met Barry and Barry said, you know they had two

trombones, and Barry said the other trombone player, who I knew very well, Mark Weinstein, was leaving and he was going to Europe, live in Europe for a year, and he said, "If you want to come and try out for the band I'll give you a call when Mark leaves in a couple of months." So, about a month later, I got a call from Barry Rogers and Barry says, "Joe, do you want to come and try out for the band we're playing at." I think we were playing at, yes, playing at a place in Harlem. I can't remember the name of it on 125th Street. So Eddie Palmieri's band was playing there and I went and I tried out and I got the job and ended up playing with Barry and Eddie Palmieri for the next year and a half.

MN: and did you do a lot of traveling with them?

JO: We never traveled outside of the state.

MN: So, at that time, Latin music had a pretty confined - -

JO: - - Latin music, yes, it was all New York. We'd play 3 or 4 nights a week. We played definitely Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, usually on Friday nights, Saturday nights and Sunday nights, we played 2 jobs, sometimes 2 night jobs, on Sunday we played a matinee.

MN: Now, where were most of those venues?

JO: Oh, we would play, lets say a typical Friday night, is we would play a set in the Bronx, pack up, jump in our cars, and I would drive, I was driving with Barry [Laughter] and drive out to Brooklyn and play at another place in Brooklyn. Or we'd play the Palladium, and then pack up and then come up to the Bronx and play the Broadway Casino.

MN: Damn, [Crosstalk] now do you any CD's from that time?

JO: Oh yeah, I have all of those CD's. All of them are recorded with Eddie Palmieri.

MN: Now how old was Eddie Palmieri at that time?

JO: Eddie was, I think Eddie was like 4 years older than me.

MN: So he was a young guy at that time?

JO: Oh yeah.

MN: So he's a little younger than Tito Puente.

JO: And his youngest brother, Charlie.

MN: And was Barry Rogers also a young guy?

JO: He was about Eddie's age, he was about 4 years older than me also.

MN: So they were in their like mid to late 20's and you were early 20's?

JO: Yes, and Barry went to school, Bronx Vocational High School. Vocational, you know, Barry was an auto mechanic, [Laughter] a good one, as well as being a great trombone player. He and Johnny Pacheco went to Bronx High School of the Science and Eddie went to Monroe High School, James Monroe. Yeah, you know in the Bronx.

MN: So Eddie Palmieri is from the Bronx?

JO: Kelly Street in the Bronx.

MN: So you have, it also sounds this incredibly multi racial, multi ethnic mix.

JO: Yes, yes.

MN: You know, the cross fertilization of different cultures.

JO: And as I said, even when I was younger before I started playing with Eddie Palmieri and met so many people, I mean I'd be playing on a job and I'd look over and see a [inaudible] player with another band and remember he went to junior high school 40 with me. You know, so there were, at an earlier page, I think that Latin musicians were doing their thing and we were doing our thing, but it wasn't until a little later that it all started—it seems to me at least, to come together.

MN: Now after you left Eddie Palmieri, is that when you decided to do Rhythm and Blues Soul thing?

JO: Yes, I wanted to travel. I can't believe I wanted to travel [Laughter] I wanted to travel and a friend of mine was playing trombone with the—live with Lloyd Price. And he played with me in the Newport Youth Band, and he called me and asked me if I wanted to play with Lloyd Price. So I said, Ok, you know, I thought of traveling at that time as glamorous and fun. I learned very quickly that I'd made a huge mistake [Laughter] but I did join Lloyd Price. It was after most of his big hits. The only hit that he recorded while I was there was "Misty." I was on the "Misty" CD, or the "Misty" Album.

MN: Now did he do like chitlin circuit stuff or he just –

JO: Yes, he was doing the chitlin circuit stuff. You know, we played the Apollo, we played the Howard Theater in D.C., the one in Philadelphia and a lot of venues throughout the South. And that was also my first venture South, I had never been further South than New Jersey, and so we did you know a lot of traveling throughout the South and it was an experience, you know, it was an experience that I needed as a musician. One of the things you have to learn as a musician is you have to learn how to perform and perform well under the most adverse conditions. You just have to be able to play all the time. People are playing, they don't really know that you're not feeling well, or you've been up all night. You know they paid their money and they want a good performance, and I really, so the experience was invaluable even though you know traveling in February and January on a bus with no heating and you're in Chicago [Laughs] is not fun.

MN: Now were the other musicians talented?

JO: Oh yeah, for sure. [Crosstalk] At this stage of your career you're playing with you know, you're playing with top musicians.

MN: And so you had really top people with him.

JO: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, the leader of the band, the musical director was Sly Hampton, and prior to Sly Hampton you had Al Gray. Al Gray was the leading trombone player with Cal Basey for many many years; very prominent you know, jazz trombone player. Now again, another reason I joined Lloyd Price in particular was because he had Sly Hampton and he had Al Gray, and these were monster trombone players, much more advanced than me, and I learned a tremendous amount you know playing with them.

MN: Now after that, what was your next step?

JO: I think I left Eddie, I mean—I think I went to Lionel Hampton's band. Yeah I think I joined Lionel Hampton and you know in the music business even though you're with a band you're still doing a lot of free lancing so I played with a lot of different people; even doing some Latin stuff you know when I was in town. But when I jived in with Lionel Hampton's band, Jimmy Owens was playing with Lionel Hampton, he got me on that band, and again a little of the same.

MN: So you and Jimmy were staying in touch all throughout this?

JO: Oh yeah.

MN: And what is your home base and apartment? You're still 79th to 80th Street?

JO: When I was with Lionel Hampton, where was I living? I think, you know I think I had moved back home. I think I was living with my mother [Crosstalk]

MN: On Prospect Avenue?

JO: Yes, I was, that's right, yeah. I had moved back home. I was living with my mother on Prospect Avenue when I was playing with Lionel Hampton.

MN: Now were you starting to notice then, like I guess this must have been what mid 60's? That things were starting to really decay in the neighborhood or it wasn't that visible?

JO: What was noticeable to me was that a lot of people that I grew up with were beginning to use drugs.

MN: So this is Heroin?

JO: Heroin.

MN: And it hit your circle when, in the late 50's or the 60's?

JO: 60's.

MN: And these were people you knew and went to school with?

JO: People, the bad guys were my 8th grade group. All of those guys started to fool around with Heroin, and so when I would come off the road—again, I had been sort of out of that community, out of the community for many years by now. My mother lived there, you know even I was living there, but just for sleeping there. But consciously, my consciousness was not there, but I became aware of, you know I would ask about somebody, “Oh he's strung out, he's strung out.” So a lot of people I grew up with started to use drugs mid 60's.

MN: Right, now on the other side, were any you know of the girls getting pregnant? You know was that something you were aware of?

JO: I don't remember a lot of the girls getting pregnant, and matter of fact I was talking to a friend recently that I grew up with and we thought—we both found it quite unusual that most of the girls who grew up with our, with us, didn't marry boys who grew up with us. They found outside of the community. I don't remember any of the girls getting pregnant though.

MN: Now at this point did the Heroin translate into break in's? You know was your mother afraid of getting robbed? Or broken in to?

JO: Oh yeah.

MN: It was more fearful than –

JO: Yes, you know ten years prior you could leave your door open in the summer to get a cross ventilation from the window in the front and the door in the back, and that was no longer.

MN: So by the mid 60's it was more dangerous?

JO: It was more dangerous.

MN: At least for older people.

JO: And I would come home at night and get off at Prospect Station and walk the 6 or 7 blocks, but I had my trombone, and I had to keep my eyes open, you know because I'd be coming home at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, you know finishing jobs and stuff like that. So I would have to really—

MN: So by the mid 60's the Heroin is the big thing that you—

JO: It's starting.

MN: It's starting and that's bringing more of a sense of fear?

JO: I would say early 60's, '63ish. Yes because then after—when I really noticed it—now I was, after Lionel Hampton I stayed around New York and free lanced for a while. I played with Charlie Palmieri, Martin Rivera, a lot of Latin bands, just free lance, and did that, and around '64 I got with Herbie Mann's band, and I stayed with Herbie until '66, and with Herbie we traveled all over the world. Herbie had a band that you know just, we went to Japan, Europe, South America. We did a lot of college dates and everything. That was the best gig I had because Herbie treated us musicians well, you know we traveled well. It was just a fun band. I got on that band and then I got Jimmy hired on that band.

MN: Oh so Jimmy came on—[Laughter]

JO: I pulled Jimmy on to that one. [Crosstalk]

MN: Do you have CD's from that period also?

JO: Yes, I have—

MN: Actually I might even have it. I used to listen to him in college.

JO: We played a lot of college, he was very popular.

MN: Yeah I know, that was, he was somebody he was very much on the college radar screen.

JO: Right, so then I left Herbie and decided that I was going to move to California and go to school, and I did. I went out to California; stayed out there for a year and a half.

MN: This is what '66—

JO: '66-'67, yeah, and stayed out there for a year and a half and came back and stayed with my mother until I could find a place to live in New York. That's when I really noticed, maybe because I had been away for a year and a half, but when I came back to the Bronx it was depressing. I mean I would see kids that I knew from Elementary school nodding on the street corners, people robbing each other; I mean, people who were friends you know robbing each other for drugs. I mean it was really, people like my mother, you know my friend's parents and stuff, you know afraid to leave their houses. It was really bad.

MN: And this was '68?

JO: This was '67-'68.

MN: And you really felt this, this was really, what did it make you feel like when you had grown up and it was—

JO: It was very depressing not only to see it, but you know I would ask about people, and this one had died from an overdose, this one was in jail, this you know, it was nothing good, you know it was just—it was like a, you know, some kind of a horrible plague that killed the neighborhood, I don't if the community center was still even open at that point, but we were all in our 20's now so we certainly would not have been going anyway.

MN: But you know again, going back to this thing, were most of the people who were really in these distressing circumstances, not your immediate close friends from the sop classes or—

JO: No, they were not my friends from the sop classes, no, they were my other friends.

MN: Because this is again a certain percentage of the people were moving up and out, and the one's left behind were being devastated.

JO: That's right.

MN: Would that be a fair assessment?

JO: Absolutely, and my friends from the sop classes were not part of this group. You know I always had sort of a dual existence because I had a lot of friends who were not in my class and it was those other people, the guys who were not in the sop class, they were not musicians, they didn't show any particular or develop any particular talents or skills. I think a lot of them probably didn't even finish high school. I wasn't associating with them, but I knew them. You know, in fact, I can recall one of my very close friends, a kid named Gordon Vinyl, one of the most brilliant people I had ever met, but his whole family were into drugs. All of his sisters and brothers, and he had a lot of them.

MN: And what street was he on?

JO: He lived on Stebens Avenue, near Fort Street.

MN: He lived right near 99?

JO: He lived right across the street from 99, yes, and he was brilliant, this kid was reading Plato in elementary school [Laughs], but he got involved in drugs, and all of his sisters and brothers were involved in drugs. I remember when I came back from California I was at my mother's house looking out, sitting looking out of her window on Prospect Avenue. He walked by and I called him and I go down and we started chatting and he says, "Why don't you come up to my

mother's house, you know that's where we all hang out over there, all the old guys from, you know—" and they were now living up on Crotona Avenue. They had already moved up to Crotona Avenue, and I went up there and that's when I saw a lot of my old friends from elementary school, neighbors I should say rather than friends perhaps, and they were all like using Heroin.

MN: They were nodding out—

JO: Yeah, and it was the most depressing thing, and I mean drugs weren't completely foreign to me being a musician you know because there were some musicians using drugs too [Laughs], but it was very sad. Almost without exception all of those people are dead now.

MN: Now what about apartments in the building. Were there, like in your mother's building, were there people who were—

JO: No, I don't think they started moving out until a little later.

MN: But were people in the building getting involved in drugs? Did your mother have to worry about like the person in 2C because those kids were in drugs and I have to watch when I walk up the stairs?

JO: No, I don't remember that. My mother was very respected; even the drug addicts kind of respected my mom a little bit, but that's a sign of a still moniker of respect, and I never felt that any of those kids I knew would harm my mother, [Crosstalk] as desperate as they were.

MN: There was still a level of civility that was still there?

JO: Yes, and I never felt threatened by them.

MN: Now, when did you end up moving to—you're living in your mother's place, was the next step Staten Island or--?

Interviewee: Joe Orange
Interviewer: Mark Naison
Date: n.d.

JO: Yeah, close, I found an apartment over in the Soundview area, I didn't stay with my mother very long. A couple of months and I found an apartment over in the Staten Island area. By now I had one foot out of music and one foot in music. I was playing, just doing weekends with different Latin bands, I wasn't practicing much. I was really thinking about getting out of the business. Met a woman, fell in love, got married, moved to Staten Island. [Laughter] That kind of stuff, you know what you do when you get married? Move to Staten Island. [Laughter]

MN: Not me. [Laughter]

JO: The minute I got down to Staten Island, again Jimmy Owens steps into the picture, and he knew a person who lived on Staten Island who had a son that played drums. The son is now a major drummer, he's got his own radio show here in New York, his name is—Washington, I think it was, part of it was Charles Washington, I can't think of it, but he's got a very popular Jazz radio show.

MN: Is this on CD 101?

JO: Comes out of New Jersey.

MN: Oh Newark. Oh yes, ok.

JO: Yes, but any case, he was a kid then and he played drums and Charles Washington had started a band just so that the son would have someone to play with because the son was a prodigy, and Jimmy went out to help the kids get this little band started, and called me up, and I met Jimmy out there and Jimmy introduced me to them and said you know, "Joe is a wonderful musician," and, "you should get Joe to start this band for you," and the next thing I knew I had started a like a youth band. We had like 20 kids in the band. We started traveling all over the state. [Laughs] And I'm back in music and now I'm teaching a band, teaching these kids. So I did that for a few years living on Staten Island.

MN: Now, it was when you were living on Staten Island when the building burned?

JO: Yes, yes, early 70's.

MN: And describe what that was like to get that call and then come back.

JO: Yes, I got a call from a kid named Freddie, a guy named Freddie Pedis, who also trained to be a musician but never became a professional musician, and he and Jimmy Owens and myself were best friends. Freddie lived on 168th Street right around the corner from my mother's building.

MN: So he was past the same block as Jimmy and the Pruitt's.

JO: Yes, his building was actually attached to my building, right around the corner. And he called me one evening and told me that my mother's building was on fire and that she had abandoned the house, and my mother had me later in life so my mother was elderly. So he said he had brought a chair and a blanket for her to sit in, you know, and—

MN: She was sitting in the street in a chair and a blanket.

JO: Yeah, so I went over you know to the building, the building wasn't demolished but it was damaged beyond repair. Our apartment was mostly smoke damaged, you know, it was mostly, it was just a lot of smoke, not a lot of direct fire, but certainly not livable. We made arrangements for my mother; she went to stay with one of my sisters and tried to see what we could salvage. We went back with myself and one of my older brothers, went back the next day and you know we knew certain things should be have been there, but things were missing.

MN: So people would come in—

JO: People would come in and starting to take things out of the house, so my brother, one of my older brothers who was a little more street wise than me decided he would stay. And he stayed there, I don't know how he managed to stay there I mean it was horrible, it was really horrible;

no lights, nothing you know, just to keep people out while we could make other arrangements and get the stuff out you know. So we managed to salvage some things. I lost my electric train. My mother, when I was about 8 years old, gave me this wonderful Lionel Electric Train.

MN: Oh I remember those.

JO: Remember how they would construct—[Crosstalk]

MN: Little Bridges.

JO: Yes, yes, she had saved it. She had it in this big wooden box. I didn't even know she had it, I had forgotten about it quite honestly. And years later, 5 or 6 years later, I was talking to my mother and we were talking about Prospect Avenue, and she says, "Well, I'll never forget those people who were taking your electric train." And I said, "What do you mean, I hadn't seen an electric train in 20 years." And she said, "I saved that electric train because I wanted to give it to your children, and somebody took it and disappeared."

MN: Now, was that fire arson?

JO: I believe it was.

MN: Was that what people thought at the time?

JO: My mother was warned. Someone during the day knocked on my mother's door and said, "Ms. Orange, I think there's going to be a fire here today. I smell smoke. Something is going on in this building. I don't know if its electrical," but I think that he was wanting her to get out.

[Crosstalk]

MN: Right, that makes sense. Now, was this the first building in that immediate area that burned or —

JO: I don't know if any others burned.

MN: What about the ones across the street?

JO: They didn't burn. Did they burn? I don't think they burned.

MN: Were they abandoned?

JO: They were abandoned.

MN: So somebody, the landlords abandoned them not burned them. Some of the buildings, were any, at that time had any buildings been abandoned? Or was this the first to go in this immediate area?

JO: I think that may have been the first.

MN: You don't remember any of the others being boarded up or—no? So this was the first one?

JO: Yeah.

MN: If it's late 60's, or even early 70's that makes sense.

JO: Yeah, yeah, I don't remember any of them being burned. I think that's the only fire I remember.

MN: Now later when you—now you stayed in New York for the rest of the time?

JO: I stayed in New York, yes.

MN: And then did you ever come back into the old neighborhood after your mother left?

JO: No, no, I stayed away from the Bronx. The Bronx to me was very depressing. I just, I couldn't even, I had made an effort to drive through the Bronx, by then I had moved up to Westchester.

MN: Where were you living in Westchester?

JO: Elmsford.

MN: So this is in the 70's you were in Elmsford, and it was painful to even go back?

JO: I didn't go back, and I could have. I had plenty of opportunities, as a matter of fact, I was living in Elmsford, I was working in Manhattan so I took the commuter train.

Interviewee: Joe Orange

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: n.d.

MN: I guess one of the things is its hard you know to people who don't know this to explain how traumatic it is to see a place that you have, not only lived in, but loved, have that happen to.

JO: And its also very, I find it, almost painful to go back to the place where you spent so many years of your life, you have so many pleasant memories, you don't see anyone that you know, and people are looking at you as if you're an outsider. You don't belong there, and everything familiar and positive about the area is just not there anymore. P.S. 99 is not open, you know, we had stores, you know vegetable store, a beach store, a grocery store, two pharmacies, a candy store, a barber shop. All of this stuff—

MN: All within walking distance.

JO: All within a block. You know, yeah, within a block, and all of it is just gone, they're all sitting empty. You know and you know back in the 70's, the one occasion I drove through, there were still a few building that were occupied, and see a couple of people sitting on the stoop, and I'd love to see if there was anyone that I would recognize, but everyone that I knew had long gone. So it was not a pleasant experience. I don't know if it would be a pleasant experience today. I know they have a Bronx reunion every year.

MN: Yeah, thousands of people come to Crotona Park.

JO: Thousands of people come to Crotona Park. I have not been yet. My brother goes every year. Every year he calls me and says, "Joe I saw this one and I saw that one," and he tells me all the people that he saw and I'm still wrestling with whether I want to go. So last year, Jimmy Owens says, "Joe let's go, you know, everybody go together."

MN: Where's Jimmy living?

JO: Jimmy lives on Park Avenue South, 19th Street.

MN: Now there's a 100th Anniversary of Morris High School this year.

JO: There is?

MN: And we're actually having a Bronx African American History Society Table.

JO: Really?

MN: Yeah, I mean, its going to be, in fact I even know the date. I think its June 16th. So I'll get you that information, and I'll but you in touch with the guy who's running it.

JO: I may see someone that I know [Laughter] I didn't know a lot of people in high school, yes I did, I didn't socialize with a lot. [Crosstalk] I would love to see some of my old teachers because they must be old.

MN: Now, before we wind up, are there any things that we didn't cover you'd want to say? You know that we didn't touch on?

JO: I don't know exactly how to summarize it. You know I think that being born and raised in the Bronx, is whatever I am, whoever I am, being a Bronxite is part of it. I even have a baseball cap that I wear when I travel around, whenever we go on our cruises, or travel around the world, I wear this had that says "Bronx." [Laughter] And it's amazing the people I meet. But that's another whole story. You know, hundreds of people, no exaggeration, "Bronx!" you know they all have their stories. I think the Bronx is a unique place, I think it's a unique place, also like some other historical places, that you've read about where African Americans achieved a great deal that are written out of history. I think the Bronx is in danger of being like that, if a project like yours doesn't turn it around, really, because you know there was a great deal of achievement, and I didn't even touch the surface of the people that I know who came up during my era that I am personally aware of. You know their personal successes, and that doesn't happen in a vacuum. That happens because of family, it happens because of community, it happens because of school, it happens because of churches, it happens for a multitude of reasons,

and all of those reasons existed in that community at that time. And you know, its troubling to me, and there's some guilt associated with it too that all that disappeared. I believe there are a lot of efforts to bring it back.

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

MN: So are you saying you used to see Thelonius Monk walk down Prospect Avenue?

JO: Yes, I used to see Thelonius Monk walk down Prospect Avenue, and I had a friend, his name was Caesar. I don't know his real name, but his name was Caesar, and he was Thelonius Monk's nephew. And he lived on Lyman Place.

MN: Right, yes that's - -

JO: - - Yes, so I was wondering if the person that you interviewed

MN: Jackie Smith. That must have been - -

JO: - - His sister.

MN: Yes, his sister.

JO: Yes, yes, but thinking of Thelonius Monk and other famous people. Funny story. When Jimmy and I, Jimmy Owens and I were kids, we used to play on 168th Street. 168th Street was a side street. Prospect Avenue was a major thoroughfare. We used to regularly play marbles and Yo-Yo's. I distinctly remember on one occasion, not one occasion, but on several occasions, that this guy would come by, and he would visit somebody who lived in the tall building on the same side of the street as the Pruitts. Because that side of the street were all brownstones except for one building, and in that building lived a family called the Clark family. I was friends with the son and daughter, Carol Clark and Gwendolyn Clark, and this guy would always come and visit the family. Later, as we were in high school, and we're starting to read and explore music and

expand, we got on this Langston Hughes kick. We started reading all of Langston Hughes' books.

MN: Right.

JO: We heard, I heard actually, someone told me, that Langston Hughes was giving a poetry reading and a book signing at St. Augustine Church. So, I told Jimmy and my other friend Freddy Padders and the three of us went down to St. Augustine Church to see Langston Hughes, and was very much to surprise to see that Langston Hughes was the guy who we had been seeing since we were kids, visiting this family on 168th Street. He would always stop and play with the kids. You see, he was very good with the Yo-Yo, and he would show us tricks with the Yo-Yo's. We never knew it was Langston Hughes, but Langston Hughes's brother, Mr. Clark, lived on 168th Street and Prospect Avenue.

MN: Wow.

JO: As a matter of fact, when I read Langston Hughes, when I re-read Langston Hughes' autobiography, he talked about his brother, his half-brother under a different last name. So, he was a regular visitor almost like Thelonius Monk was a regular visitor too.

MN: Anything else like that?

JO: Any other notable people who lived very close by? On the corner of Union Avenue and 168th Street was Tyree Glenn, the famous trombone player, and he had a television show at that time. And of course, Erroll Garner lived on Intervale Avenue.

MN: He did?

JO: Yes, he lived right across the street from Ron Nelson.

MN: No one, you're the first one to tell me.

JO: Really? Oh, yes, yes.

MN: Did he have a private house?

JO: He lived in a tenement.

MN: He lived in a tenement.

JO: He lived in a tenement directly across the street from Ron Nelson. I've been told, but I'm not quite sure where he lived, that W.C. Handy, lived somewhere on Union Avenue in the Bronx, but I don't know that for a fact. And some of these people actually participated. I do remember, a famous jazz saxophone player, he's still alive. He came by, at least on one occasion, and played with us over at P.S. 99 Community Center. He played with Miles Davis.

MN: Not Lou Donaldson?

JO: Lou Donaldson.

MN: He still, he lives up in the valley.

JO: What's the valley?

MN: That's up there in Baychester.

JO: Oh, Ok.

MN: It's a neighborhood near Co-Op City.

JO: Right, right.

MN: He is - - he knows one of my collaborators, Nathan Dukes, pretty well.

JO: Right, right. Well, he came by P.S. 99 and played with us once.

MN: And did he live in that area?

JO: He lived somewhere in the Bronx. Maybe where he's still living today, I don't know.

MN: Now what about some of your friends? You talked about all these phenomenally successful people who came out of here, if you can give us, you know, some names and examples.

Interviewee: Joe Orange

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: n.d.

JO: Particularly those who didn't go into music. It's just like everybody became a musician or an athlete, but that really isn't true. Our neighborhood brain growing up, even though he was like five or six years older than me and came along with my older brother. My older brother's best friend was a kid named Tim Henderson, who lived on Union Ave and on Home Street between Prospect and Union Avenue. We used to tease Tim unmercifully growing up because he was so smart, and he wore eye glasses.

MN: Oh, really?

JO: He wanted to be an athlete. He played on all of the teams. But he made it into the Bronx High School of Science, which was rare at that time and went on to earn his Ph.D. in physics and became a physicist. He's retired now, but actually doing, he does inventions and other stuff, I don't know exactly what he does. I see him. He lives out near Ann Harbor, Michigan, and he's got a lab in his house. Good stuff.

MN: Right.

JO: Thinking about, fifteen years ago, I ran into a kid that I grew up with in Manhattan, and he asked me about my older brother, David, and he said, "How's David?" I said, "Well, you know, David passed away," and he was really really saddened to hear that, but he made a comment that was very interesting. He said, "You know, Joe, you ever think about the fact that all the kids that played on David's teams made it, and the ones who didn't, fell to the way-side." My brother started, got all the kids in my age group, and he started a softball team. We were called the All-stars. We played against kids all over the Bronx, and we had the All-Stars as our softball team in the summer, and the Ravens was the basketball team in the winter. We would go around to different places playing, and my brother started that and coached us. So, there were older guys and people in the neighborhood that really cared enough to really give something back.

MN: So, you had some mentoring from the older guys.

JO: Very much so, and in particular, in my case in particular, I was particularly fortunate, quite honestly, to have an older brother who was always keeping me up nights, you know, talking to me and telling me which ones to watch and which ones to watch out for. I'll never forget. He would keep me, he used to like to sit up at night and talk, you know? I can remember summer nights, the two of us just sitting, just chatting, and he would always say, "You have to pick your role models very carefully, because there are a lot of guys around here who are not very good role models, and most of your friends seem to be picking them because those are the guys that are running numbers and selling drugs, and, yes, they have the cars, and, yes, they've had the fancy clothes."

MN: So this was now already there was - -

JO: - - This was in the 50's.

MN: In the 50's, there was already, he was telling you about drugs and numbers?

JO: Yes, absolutely.

MN: Now how big were the numbers in the - -

JO: - - Big, that was big, that was very big. Numbers were big, and the number runners always had a pocketful of change. They dressed nice, and they were looked up to by a lot of people in the neighborhood and especially kids my age because they dressed nice, and they always would seem to have a pocketful of money.

MN: Now, was there violence surrounding the numbers? It was pretty much nonviolent?

JO: Seemed non-violent. I don't remember any violence around.

MN: And there were drugs in the '50's that your brother could mention?

JO: Yes, I could remember one guy, (Laughs) as a matter of fact, my other brother, who is still alive today, calls him the world's oldest drug addict, because he's still alive. He started using drugs, heroin, in the '40's. Now, he was the only one. I don't know where he found it because, in the '40's, the only ones in New York who really knew about heroin were the musicians, but Andrew Mason, who lived on Homes Street between Prospect and Stebbins Avenue, was the first drug addict in the neighborhood. I'm told that he comes to the Bronx reunion every year and that he's still alive. He was notorious. So, I knew about drugs very early, very early, even as early as sixth grade I knew Andrew. Andrew was harmless, I don't remember ever hitting anybody upside the head, an excellent athlete, very intelligent.

MN: Now, was there any sort of, .any prostitution in the neighborhood? Was that something that wasn't visible at all?

JO: I never saw that, never saw that.

MN: Never saw pimps or prostitutes or anything like that?

JO: Yes, actually, a kid that grew up with my brother that lived in Howie Evans' building, Eddie Williams, became a pimp. But, he wasn't pimping in the neighborhood. Wherever he did it, it wasn't in the neighborhood.

MN: Wherever he did it, it wasn't in the neighborhood.

JO: Yes, he became a pimp. Again, there were more than enough, you didn't have to search hard to find the Howie Evans', the Lefty Dario, I can just name one or another, and my brother was always pointing those people out to me and saying, "Those are the guys." He said, "You may not see it now because they're in college and they're struggling, and they're not making a lot of money." He said, "But over time those are the guys."

MN: And this is the kind of thing that kids growing up don't gather.

JO: They don't. They don't hear that I don't think.

MN: The old heads giving them advice.

JO: Right, and I don't know if I lived on Prospect Avenue today, I don't know if anyone could point out ten people and say, "This one is going to school. This one is a doctor. This one is a lawyer." And that's the unfortunate part, I think. One of the unfortunate parts about in some of the Bronx communities and other communities today, where do they find those role models? Who's there to give them the free trombone lessons? Who's there to start a baseball team for them? Who's running a community center or giving them instruments to take home from school? It's like the society has abandoned, and it's even, I don't want to take this into a depressing kind of - -

MN: - - No, no, but it's interesting because having heard this, I think I'm going to have, I'm doing this book called *Before the Fires: An Oral History of African American Life*, which builds on the interviews. The last section will be reflections and what people had and kids need today. Of course, I think you and several other people have been very eloquent about this. I mean, I think that's something important to say. I mean, it shouldn't be that kids growing up in the '40's and '50's had more.

JO: No, it shouldn't be.

MN: And that's what it is.

JO: It shouldn't be.

MN: I don't think there's anybody who would hear this who wouldn't agree with this.

JO: That's right. It definitely shouldn't be, and I agonize a little over it, because I spoke, I was talking to my wife yesterday before I came up. I said, "Well, when I do this interview do I want

to paint this, I don't want to idealize.” It wasn't all pretty. There was some, even in the best days there was some stuff going on.

MN: And you've mentioned that.

JO: It wasn't all a bed of roses. It was mixed, but, again, you know for a lot of us, we got a lot of very positive things out of it. At least, from my perspective, from my experiences, there were other things too that could have taken, at least me, in a completely different direction.

MN: Right, okay.

JO: And I didn't go to Catholic school, maybe that's why. Because there was this thing between Catholic school kids and public school kids. But overall, I wouldn't have it any other way. I love the Bronx.

[END OF INTERVIEW]