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Diaz, Rebel

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcribed by Dominique Jean-Louis

Oneka LaBennett (OL): 11th, 2007, and this interview is taking place at Fordham University, in the Department of African and African-American studies. The interviewers are Dr. Mark Naison and Dr. Oneka LaBennett, and the Videographer is Dawn Russell. And I'm going to have our interviewees each say their names, but this group is called Rebel Diaz, and I'm going to have each individual say their name and date of birth. So why don't we start over here.

Rodrigo Venegas (RV): My name is Rodrigo "RodStarz" Venegas. I'm part of Rebel Diaz. And I was born November 19th, 1979.

Mark Naison (MN): Were you born in the United States or outside?

RV: I was born in a small town outside of London called Churchsea England.

Gonzalo Venegas (GV): My name is Gonzalo "G1" Venegas, from the group Rebel Diaz. I was born on February 14th, 1985. Chicago.

Teresita Ayala (TA): My name is Teresita "Lah Tere" Ayala, and I was born in Chicago, and my birthday is September 24th, 1979.

OL: Why don't you start, Mark?

MN: What we always do in these interviews is have people talk a little bit about their families, and how their family background influenced what they do, so start with you, Rod, then G-Unit, then Teresita. So tell us a little bit about your family, in terms of where they're from, their political background, and how they influenced you.

RV: Well, me and my brother G, our parents are from Chile, I think that for us, that part of our history and our drive comes from the history of our parents, and the struggle they

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went through. They were members of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, which is the MIR, the revolutionary Leftist movement in Chile. They were activists, student activists, during the Popular Unity movement of Salvador Allende. On September 11, 1973 the Allende, the democratically elected Allende government was overthrown by a CIA-aided military dictatorship, and a dictatorship ensued for seventeen years, under Augusto Pinochet. So for us, I think, that's a very momentous occasion, even though it was before we were born because it pretty much shapes our lives as to where we are today. So basically I'm the second-born of three brothers. I have an older brother, who is a doctor now- but basically my parents were political prisoners in Chile after the dictatorship fell. The MIR, was one of the first, because it was one of the most militant groups, was one of the first groups of people on the list of people to be apprehended for being potential threats to the military dictatorships. So, my father fell first, and then my mother went into clandestine underground hiding, and she left the country. She took a journey from Chile to Colombia, Sweden, and eventually was met by her parents, who were taking care of my older brother Marcelo. And my father was in jail for four years, in different concentration camps, was a victim of torture, of vicious torture. I'm, I guess, a result of their reunion. After pressure for different international groups because of the stuff that was going on, my father ended up coming out of being a political prisoner from the concentration camps, and they sent him to England. Many

European countries received people in exile, Sweden, and England, and Germany. So from that, we ended up, basically I was born in '79, a couple of years after that, and then

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we ended up coming to the United States. I think the exile lifestyle, from a lot of people that we've met, ends up being pretty nomadic, in a sense that, looking back on it, it's like a strong change that hits you, and from then on, you pretty much lose your home, so from then on it's pretty nomadic. So from England, we ended up going to- my father was a chemist, he got a Ph.D in chemistry, and he ended up coming to Houston. From England we went to Houston, we lived in Houston for a year, and then came to Chicago, which is where we grew up at, in Chicago. And then my brother was born in '85, a couple of years after that. So for us, that's our main thing, we grew up in Chicago in a very politically charged environment in the sense that, in the eighties, Harold Washington was the first African-American mayor elected in Chicago. So there's a big solidarity-type atmosphere, right, between the Latinos, who were led by Rudy Lazano, who was assassinated, who was one of our leaders in the sense of what he did for Chicago and black and brown unity. And he was also an organizer for tortilla workers. So from there we grew up in an atmosphere of solidarity as far as Chicago goes. Then, in Chinasta solidarity, in a sense that the eighties were civil wars all over Central America. All the exiles came from Nicaragua, El Salvador, so we grew up in a very internationalist-type feel. So for us, we say it's like church, on Sundays instead of going to church, we went to political meetings. A lot of times, we feel we grew up under the table of political meetings. We talk about that. And then at the same time, the eighties is also the

beginning of hip-hop. So not only have we had this historical context, but we're growing up in Chicago in the inner city, and our sidekicks we breakdancing, kids were doing

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graffiti. And that came a little bit later in Chicago, because pretty much there was a migration of hip-hop. I remember my first hip-hop tape was KRS-1, Jack of Spades, I remember was the name. And my mom, when she picked it up- she came to visit me going for a conference, and she came back with all these tapes. So my first exposure to this- and a mixtape at that, because it wasn't even a real tape, it was just written. I remember reading it all and trying to memorize what it was talking about. Which was crazy, because KRS-1, we hadn't heard of them. The only reason we had heard of them was because in Chicago there was house music, and there was this rapper called Kool Rock Steady, who used to battle KRS because they had the same initials. So when I got this thing, I was all into house music, because that's what was in the music scene. And it was actually called hi p house, which is like a fusion of house music with hip-hop. And so for us, we grew up on house music, and also hip-hop, but for us it came a little later. My initiation with hip-hop came from break dancing and all that. So that's pretty much a look back on, and then his would have been.

GV: I would just add that I was the last of three brothers, the only one born in the United States, which made me the most at risk of assimilating, and losing touch with our history. But like Rod mentioned, I think that what has shaped us was really prevalent in our lives during those early years. And Chicago, in terms of the hip-hop scene, well, in terms of the youth scene it was even like, gangbanging or hip-hop. And so for us, and me growing

up and being the youngest, looking up to my two oldest brothers, there was this following in the footsteps. Like, you breakdancing? Okay, that's where I'm going, and engaging in

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that. And I mean, we were little. We would perform for the political meetings that would happen. [Laughter]

MN: You would be the break?

GV: We had a crew! We would dress the same, we have pictures of it. And just seeing how that comes together.

MN: I have a question, because you're, in effect, movement cultural workers. What was music an important part of your parents' political world. And what sort of music, and what form.

GV: In Latin America, during the sixties and the seventies there was La Nueva Cancion, which translates into "the new song." Which was really a movement of folk singers. We have Senor Rodriguez, Paulo Milanes in Cuba. In Chile you have Victor Cada, who was actually a folk singer who was murdered, killed by the Pinochet regime, because of his music being so revolutionary, they actually had him in a concentration camp and cut off his hands, as a symbol of, you know, because he was a guitar player. So we definitely, you know, we grew up, there's music from our childhood, and also a lot of just Chilean folk music Andino music. So we grow in that, in that music of- it's like music that is political music. Real poetic, too. La Nueva Cancion movement was very poetic, it wasn't so much very direct and revolutionary, it was very poetic. So it was just like we grew up in that. And me, it's like the maroles, in terms of our group today. That's the

music that I ended up sampling. The music I grew up with, well I was like, ‘Whoa, I’m going to turn this into what I’m hearing on the streets.’ That’s a huge influence for us.

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MN: Okay, Teresita, your family-

TA: Let’s hear it. Let’s see. I’m first generation. I say that because I come from Puerto Rico, which was colonized. So I am first-generation American, right? I do consider my parents immigrants, because they came and even if they say that they had, or have rights as Americans, they still were of color. So, right. Let’s see, my parents, my father came in ’75 with a group of 75 teachers to teach bilingual education in Humboldt Park, which is a community in Chicago.

MN: So he went directly from Puerto Rico to Chicago.

TA: Directly. They went to the Catholic university that my father went to, and they picked 75 teachers to come and teach bilingual education. And he was like, “I’m going.” So there was 75 of them- which, the community is still very, very strong, of those teachers. Most of them are just now retiring. And then my mom came- so my father came in ’75, my mom was here, actually, in ’67. She came from Puerto Rico in ’67 as a seamstress, and regular factory working. She married a Norwegian man, I have two older sisters that are Norwegian.

MN: Really Norwegian, they live in Norway?

TA: No, no, no. He was born in Norway, but in the United States. The whole family had come from Norway to the United States. So my mom married a Norwegian man, so I have two older sisters that are Norwegian, so that mix is very, very interesting, he was

blonde hair, blue eyes. Then she married my father, who is Afro-Boricua, as dark as this jacket that I have on here. And so, boom. They get together, and they have my brother

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and I. My mother started teaching after she met my father. So they worked at the same school in, like I said, Humboldt Park, which has been a resistant community, since the beginning of the Puerto Rican community being there. So my father, most of his work was gang truces, between the Folks and the People. There's a park that divides the gangs, so his school was right on the border, so he did a lot of gang truces. And then it ended up being that the community- the gangs that were on the same side ended up fighting each other for drug money and stuff like that. So my father was pretty much known in the community for that kind of work, of just having that power to, 'Stop! You guys cannot shoot until six o'clock. If you're going to start shooting, you have to shoot after 6 p.m.'

MN: No, I know exactly what you're-

TA: And then my mom, they worked at the same school, so we were always in after school programs. My high school and grammar school were right around the corner. So that community is pretty much- I grew up in Afeda, which is a Puerto Rican organization which was to empower the youth through cultural expression. So, grew up doing- my parents had me really into anything that was after-school activities, just to keep us out of the streets. And in that is where I developed this strong love for being Puerto Rican. They educated me on the truth about Puerto Rico. Now, we're in a community where everybody's aware that we're really not supposed to be here! This is not- we were

brought over here, we were kind of lured over here into the United States from Puerto Rico, and now we have to make it with nothing. So the community is a very resistant,

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pretty revolutionary community. One of the strongest, I would say the strongest Puerto Rican communities in the nation, in regards to what's happening with gentrification. So my parents weren't necessarily at the table, but they were the- my mom was the PTA president, that type of, more on the educational tip. And I ended up going to Jose Riego, which was a very active grammar school. Active in the sense that it was okay for the community to come in-

MN: This is a public school?

TA: Yes.

MN: With a political tradition.

TA: Sure. Well, yeah, it was okay for-it was all Puerto Rican teachers in the school, so it was okay for the teachers to teach us, you know, which is where the Aspida comes in, that organization. And then from there, I went to Roberto Clemente High School, which is- the revolutionaries were actually the teachers there. So there were trips to Puerto Rico so that we can- you know, we were a poor community- but so that we could make sure that we could at least taste our roots. And that school ended up going through really big, big issues in regard to the government saying that the school was embezzling money and sending money for the Puerto Rican political prisoners campaign. So that whole- and I was in a salsa band at that time, when all of this was going on with the political piece at the high school, which was a resistant salsa band.

OL: Did you sing in the band?

TA: Yes, I was lead vocalist.

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MN: Were you also an instrumentalist, or just a singer?

TA: Just a singer. Which I pretty much picked up from being in Aspida and doing the plenas and the bombas, and singing like the whole crispness barranda music. So I transferred that into the salsa band. And then went on to college and did the same thing.

OL: Did you back to Puerto Rico when you were a kid, did you go to Puerto Rico at all to-

TA: Yes. Well, we were pretty lucky since my father was a teacher, we had a little bit more money. So we were able to go every summer, and stay for the two months. But my parents would go with us.

OL: Where in Puerto Rico did you stay?

TA: In Carolina. Up in the east.

OL: I was reading that up in Puerto Rico the places where bomba y plena is usually played is predominantly black villages and areas, and those are somewhat marginalized.

Was that like one of the places where you were going back to?

TA: Absolutely. So, I'm from Carolina, and the neighboring town is Loiza Aldea, which is where bomba originated.

MN: I was there last summer.

TA: So right next to San Juan, they call it El Metropolis, which is like, I guess, the Metropolitan Area? And so, it's all black.

MN: How did you, in Chicago, navigate blackness and Puerto Rican-ness, in- Chicago is a very powerful black city. How did you work through identity with a strong Puerto Rican identity and a strong black consciousness.

TA: I didn't have a choice. It was from inception. My parents, my mom has always been a very proud Puerto Rican woman, that's just a part of who she is. Very sassy, very strong. And my father is black, so he made us conscious of when he would walk around with my two Norwegian sisters, and they would tell him, 'Those are not your children!' 'Who is this man who is holding your hand, picking you up from school?' Because he was black, and my two sisters are white. So they always mentioned that you have to know where you're from. Otherwise you're not going to get anywhere. So it's a natural thing. And the community is really, really a strong Puerto Rican community. You go now, and everything is Puerto Rican. So it's a huge sea of flags that are like the bookends to the neighborhood. The streets, the names of the high school, the public schools in that surrounding area, all of the community, all of the stores on the boulevard are named after- yes, and as far as the black, it's a poor community so it was black and Puerto Rican kids growing up. So it wasn't really-

MN: It was never an issue where you had to choose.

TA: No, no, never. Thank goodness.

OL: I wanted to ask about your family now, but if you have-

MN: No, no, no.

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OL: I wanted to go back, because you mentioned that your dad got his Ph.D in chemistry, I wanted to know what your parents are doing now, what jobs they held while you were growing up, and what they are doing now.

RV: My dad's a chemist, he works for Abbott laboratories, doing research. And my money works for DCFS, which is, I think, ACS over here, the Department of Children and Family Services. What's crazy, I think, more than anything is that with us is that part of the movement of the sixties and seventies followed in the line of what Che Guevara's idea was of the Hombre Nueve, like the "new man." And a big part of that was really instilling a value system of being the best at everything you do, starting a revolution from the beginning. But for us, it was always a big deal for education, I think that's one of the biggest values that we got. When you look back in history, Fidel Castro was a lawyer, and a lot of the members of the M.I.R. were very educated. Very educated. And so for us, I think that, you know, my older brother's a doctor, my brother went to NYU, I went to the University of Illinois. I think for us, it's always been a very big deal, our education. And the idea that you have to be the best at what you do, because if you want to be taken seriously, to other people, just having that discipline. I think we've been very rebellious against that discipline at times, realistically.

MN: You played your own tour.

RV: That's a big value I think we have for trying, and that's the way we try to ply that with our own experiences, which is through hip-hop. Because at first it was like, my son,

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went to college, so what are you doing, 'Well, he's rapping'. [Laughing] It was not the easiest thing! But I think that they see the results of that, you know what I mean?

MN: Now, this raises a question about- you're in a family that prizes education, and you're living in an immigrant working-class community. How did you navigate between the different worlds? And how did you maintain the connection with the other kids in the neighborhood, while you have parents who have ideas that are a little different?

RV: I think it was the politics that made the connection. My parents were educated [unintelligible] [Laughter] But from that, I think the fact that we were always taught about the history of struggle, and seeing that, you're not attracted to- like, I was always attracted to hang out. I went to a magnet school, we were bused in, and half our school was from the Cabrini Green Projects, and half the kids were rich kids from the Lincoln Park part of Chicago. So for us, it was like, you go hang out over here, you go hang out over here, and because of our politics and the idea of resistance, we always hung out-

GV: Even at a young age, there's something that comes, I don't even think you have to look at it like a political thing, but it's just like an instinctive, 'It makes more sense, I'm going with the kids over there, we're sharing their hot lunch.' [Laughter] Or, 'I got reduced-lunch bacon, too.'

RV: We still had, it wasn't bad enough, U guess our parents didn't qualify for free lunch, but we still qualified for reduced lunch. [Laughter] I'm still the same-

TA: We got the same credit ticket. [Laughter]

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GV: The credit ticket, that's true! Because the credit ticket determines how much you pay.

MN: So that's a Chicago thing.

GV: All the schools, yes.

MN: Chicago public schools do this.

GV: We would go to school and eat breakfast at school. All the kids that ate breakfast were black and brown children. And our school was like- so that's what I think counted. It's crazy because hip hop had a big part to do with that too. I think hip-hop is definitely a culture.

RV: Hip-hop's a blessing, to be able to navigate the different codes, you know. The codes of conduct, different reality systems, and for us, to be able to- I think I can speak for all of us to say that because of the fact that we were in the hood, but also had parents that were educated, we had the access to both worlds.

TA: My father always said, 'Okay, well, honey, you're going to be book-smart, and you're going to be hood-smart.

MN: He said that, it was explicit.

TA: Just like that. It's like, you have to know how to be in the street and know when you see this dude, that's wearing this color, and this dude that's wearing this other color across the street, that you need to get out. You need to find refuge. The same way you need to read this book, you know? But that's really- We're hood-smart because we had

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to learn to navigate them again. And it doesn't matter if you're a woman, or a man. It's as intense in both genders.

MN: Now how did you manage to stay out, did you get a free pass from the gangs?

RV: I was always a kid, my cousins gang-banged, my friends gang-banged. I think for me, it's because I was cool, I was break dancing, I wasn't about that. I remembered I would go and hang out with my cousins, and they were Maniac Latin Disciples.

MN: Spell that?

RV: Maniac Latin Disciples.

MN: Maniac.

RV: The thing is, in Chicago, there's two nations, there's the People, and the Folks. The People were like the Latin Kings, the Vice Lords, and they ran under the five point star. The other side, that was the folks, and that was a six-point star and that was the G.D.'s, the Gangster Disciples, the Black Gangster Disciples, the Spanish Cobras, the Maniac Latin Disciples. So you knew, by neighborhood, that sometimes on my block, you couldn't go to that block because you were [unintelligible]. As you grew up, to me break dancing was like, everybody, the dudes, would get a kick out it, like, 'What's up little

shorty, why don't you do a little pop-lock?' And you know, it's not a problem if you're not a threat. But as I grew up, more to high school age, even what I'm doing with my hat, I couldn't do this in Chicago. In Chicago, it's more like, this is how you wear your hat. I couldn't- to the right, it was the six-point nation, and to the left, is the five-point nation.

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MN: If you do it to the back?

RV: It would have to be a hundred percent.

[Crosstalk]

RV: -And when you're in the car, put your hat straight. And look straight, don't look- Over here, I'm blown away by how, in New York, because of the fashion and all that, people would have to- or people stare at you. Like when I first got over here, I was always like, 'Maybe he wants to fight me.' Because in Chicago, you don't look at nobody in their eyes. You're looking for trouble, unless you know them.

TA: I think the energy is so intense, because we were raised in an environment that was that intense, all the time.

MN: Unbelievable, because it sounds like you had to be on point all the time.

TA: True organizing. You have to organize yourself before you head out there, because you don't know.

MN: At what age do you start getting the free pass, like when you're fifty or something, or not even then, are there old guys still gang-banging.

RV: At the level of our street soldiers. They got out the joint, didn't get no job, just went right back to the the-

TA: To the rest of them.

RV: And at first, you don't realize, because as you get older, you start realizing, 'Wait a minute, you still gang-banging!

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TA: Hard! You're wearing the colors, like you're wearing a black jacket with a green hoodie, and you're representing Spanish Cobras all the way. But for me, as a female, I went to one of the most-

RV: Gang-banging high schools.

TA: Clemente High School is-

RV: Everyone in Chicago is-

TA: They are like, "Oh, my god, you went to Clemente"? But my whole piece was, because I was always in the after-school programs, and my parents were down the block, and my father was so into the community that people knew him by first name, and it was kind of like- that was my free pass, is that my dad was an activist, and that's Mr. Ayala's daughter. And my father was like- the streets that I took to walk from school to my father's, to my parents' school, every day, there was somebody that was watching me, one of the gang members that was watching me, to make sure that nothing happened. I knew houses that I could go to in case something happened. But that was because my

father had organized it so that nothing was going to happen to me. And I'm telling you guys this, and my hairs are sticking up, because I've never had to think about this.

OL: There's so much that goes into daily survival. So much.

TA: My high school was known- that was my free pass.

MN: Now, that was a safe zone, your high school, or the gangs were there, too.

TA: No, that's where the fights would happen. The younger kids' fights would happen in the school. So this is an eight-four school, it has escalators, elevators. Great baseball

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team, don't get me wrong, one of the best baseball teams, Roberto Clemente High School. But the gangs really, have killed-

MN: And even the revolutionary teachers couldn't do anything about it in the school.

TA: Well, the thing is, is that with the revolutionary teachers. Some of them, they talked to us and they gave us things to do, and things to read, but once you step outside, it's a whole different. They don't have nothing to do with it. If they are not involved literally in the gang talk, they don't have nothing. There's no pool.

OL: What about when you were in school, in class. Did you see it was not cool to be the kid who was smart, and obviously doing the reading, and doing work, did you feel pressure not to perform well in school?

TA: Again, I didn't have a choice, because my parents are educated. They were not trying to hear it. You could not tell my parents that 'After high school, I'm going to go get a job.' College was always talked about, from the beginning. And that's one of the privileges. I was privileged in that sense.

OL: So did you go to college after high school?

TA: Yeah, I went to the University of Illinois, which is where I met Rodrigo. Ten years ago.

OL: Should we talk about after they met, or do you want to-

MN: I just have a couple of more questions about culture. Was Latin music part of a culture of your neighborhoods in the streets among young people, or did young people choose hip hop and block out the Latin music.

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TA: In Humboldt Park, I would say it was half and half. Because the culture, the bomba y plena, salsa, meringue, is really, really important. Because we're a resistant community, they are the workshops of everything that you can think of, house parties. Hip-hop was more when you hung out with your black friends, in the neighborhood.

MN: And was that true in your neighborhood, too?

RV: No, no. It wasn't for me, I think because I got into hip hop through break dancing. I got into hip hop through the dance. And even a lot of the dope beats we would dance to were, the elders gave it to us, so a lot of it was break beats, and people were often break dancing to the Latin genre that was huge in Chicago, which was freestyle. That was huge in Chicago amongst the Latino community. But I think for me, I got into rap through break dancing and also, I would say, through some of my friends that I hung out with from Cabrini Green, at my grandma's. But they would give me more of the gangster rap, like they gave me Ice Cube, and N.W.A., and I would go home, and my older brother was listening to more like Rakim, and Tribe Called Quest, and the more East Coast rap. So,

Chicago, since we were in the middle, we were getting the better of both worlds. We were getting the East Coast music and the West Coast music. Because of the gang culture, you have to listen to the gangs' gangster rap too, you know. Yeah, I think we had a balance of both.

TA: I think because I was in a- they were more in a multicultural community, my community was straight up Puerto Rican, and black. So it was more like, the folkloric music, the modern Spanish music, and then, the waves we would listen to. And the

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freestyle, the freestyle was more of a Latina thing, the Latin freestyle. So that was the English kind of music that we listened to.

GV: That was our reggaeton, I feel like.

TA: Exactly.

[Crosstalk]

TA: I didn't listen to hip-hop until I was probably thirteen years old. So that's 1993.

MN: Rod, either you or Lah Tere get involved in high school in ciphers, standing in corners, rhyming?

RV: Yeah, there was this Taco Bell [Laughter], and there was a bus stop right on the corner, and it was crazy. I remember my junior year of high school, MC's would come from Shurz High School, which is right back up Addison Street, and Technical High School, and it was crazy, because at first it was more like the break dancing was the big thing. A lot of people give credit to Chicago for being the city that brought break

dancing back. Because break dancing had to bow out. I remember we came out in Rap Pages, I was twelve years old, my crew, Chicago champions-

MN: Your crew was called Chicago champions?

RV: Chicago champions, yes. And we were the only crew that could use Chicago. There was another crew called Chicago Tribe, and we battled them for the name. And it was crazy, because we had older members, we had older dudes that- even like 1993, there's this huge thing called Hip-Hop Props Award. And it was held at the Blackstone Hotel, in Chicago. Even before Common was a movie star, rap star, he won for best rapper, this

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other dude named Upski, who's written books. Billy Upski Wimsatt, he won for most influential hip-hop, whatever, and our crew won. I remember it was a big battle we won for best crew, everybody voted, we were the only crew that could use 'Chicago' after that [Laughter]. But for us, the rap battles were big, I remember for me, the battling was the first, that was the first memory of hip-hop, was the competition. The b-boy, if you knew any b-boy, some of the most competitive people you meet. I'm talking about, I would walk down the street, like, 'You want to battle me? I'll battle you right here!' I'll put my bookbag down, and let's get it on. And for rap, it was the same thing, I think a lot of the best freestyle MC's came from Chicago. A lot of people know Eminem blew up, but a lot of people don't know this but Juice, an MC out of Chicago, there's no argument, Juice was the battle champion. MC Juice, he beat Eminem in 1996 at the Scribble Jam Awards in Cincinnati, Rhymefest, a lot of cats, Common. Common has this important against Ice Cube, so basically with us, the battle thing was always huge.

GV: For me it was like, every day, that's what you did. I went to a different high school, I went to Lincoln Park High School in Chicago, and it was a art school, and they had a stage outside, like an amphitheater, and everybody would just kick it there, and then we would just chill, like, nobody would go to school, people would be outside all day, that's what we did.

TA: As far as ciphers, there was a hip-hop crew in the school, they did their thing, and I would just [beatboxes], just add, or do a little singing in it, but I never was a rapper.

OL: What year in high school were you in?

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TA: Probably my freshman year. I mean, I liked music, wherever there's a beat, it sounded to me like bomba or salsa, it's the same thing, the sounds are the same, the beats are the same. So I was used to singing in it. I would put the freestyling, the freestyle singing into the freestyle cipher. That's pretty much where I fit into the whole category.

MN: Brenda K. Starr.

TA: So, I really into ciphers until I met this nut over here, in college.

OL: How did you- talk a little bit about how you kind of transitioned from breaking to rapping. How did that happen for you.

RV: Well, the thing is, for me, breaking was like a sport, and it got to the point where I really started hanging out, and in your high school, you want to hang out with girls.

Break dancing, literally, when I was into it, I would wear jogging suits to school every day, because after school we would take over the fourth floor, or take over the bowling alley, and break dance. And when you get to junior year, it turns into I'm ready any time

you want to be ready. As you get older, the ciphers become more of you're socially at parties, maybe there's a little liquor involved, for your rap, whatever. So for us, as I got older, I kind of felt like leaving the b-boy behind, because I couldn't keep up the pace because I wasn't practicing as much. That's the real reason for the sport. I never stopped break dancing, and I have friends who are still part of my crew that are my age that could still head spin with no hands at the top of a dime. So for us, my love really- I realized that I loved- and I used to always write, on the low, or whatever, poetry, or rapping to

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myself. Then I started freestyling, I started enjoying the feel of it, so I got into that, like full, full-fledged. So I think it's more that I just stopped practicing whatever sport.

OL: So it was like mid-high school, you said.

RV: Yes, like my junior year I started focusing a little more on rap.

TA: And I think that he's best at writing the freestyle.

MN: When you started freestyling, did you do it in English and Spanish together?

RV: You know what's crazy? I didn't. I only did it in English at first. And I remember that I would- because there wasn't Spanish hip-hop that much. So my influences really weren't Kid Fox, and Mellow Man Ace, it wasn't. My influences were Juice, and Rhymefest and Common, and All Natural, like Chicago hip-hop. KRS-1, got to get some of the New York rap, Mobb Deep, Nas. So for me it was English, and it was really battle-oriented. If you listen to me when I first rapped, I'm not really so innocent, like there's not much social conscious, it's just I'm going to destroy the other MC, because

that was what it was, it was like [pounds table]. And that's really from Chicago, I feel like.

MN: Now, can I put you on the spot and have you do a little freestyle in English and Spanish?

RV: Of course, of course.

MN: Okay.

[beat pounds]

[RV raps freestyle, TA sings in the background for 1-2 minutes]

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[Applause]

MN: Now, did you also navigate two languages when you were singing in the salsa group?

TA: Yes. Because that was the easiest way to get to the kids, to get our message out. It's a bilingual community, which is why my father had to come in '75, to start teaching, right? So it's always been a part of- the Spanish, the switching over, it doesn't matter where you go, everybody speaks in the middle. It's kind of lost in translation, you're in the middle there. People from other communities would come in and- because if you go into a Mexican community, it's Spanish. And Chicago is one of the most segregated cities. It is straight up Spanish. You go into the black community, it's English and slang. I mean, I guess that's everywhere. Here, I've noticed that it's a little different, because it's-

MN: It's less segregated.

TA: Yes, it's such a mix-

MN: The Bronx is even more than anywhere.

TA: Jamaican, just everything.

MN: Africans.

TA: Yes, it's such a mix, so you can never really keep up.

MN: In your neighborhood, you go into a store and people will be going back and forth all the time.

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TA: They hang out in my neighborhood a lot, some of our best friends are there, so I know that growing up, they got to see the switch.

RV: We migrated to her neighborhood, we kicked it in her neighborhood. [Laughter] We were always there.

MN: Someone should do a documentary film just on your neighborhood, and the language, and the culture of it. Because it sounds like a unique social space.

RV: It's an intense space, especially because it's so organized.

OL: So, I wanted to transition to when you were in high school, and you weren't quite in high school yet. But you decided to go to go to college, and you meet up with Tere, where were you in high school then, when they were in college?

GV: When my brother was in college, I was-

TA: '93? '97?

[Crosstalk]

OL: So you two met in college, and what was your college experience like? When you guys met, were you both into music, and knew you were going to-

RV: My crazy thing is, when I met Tere, I had already met her, but not officially. Tere was on television. I was doing activism in school, and had a walkout, because of Prop. 187, which was a contract of Newt Gingrich's, I remember Contract with America, it was a big thing. And we were like, 'Yo, we're going to have a walkout.' And I remember it was a huge thing. We walked out mad students.

TA: Because it was the biggest high school.

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RV: I went to Lanston High School, which was the biggest- we had like 2,500 students come out. It was all over the news, it was a big deal. So then, I'm all into activism, from then on in high school, I got into activism. And then Tere, I remember I saw Tere on television, because her school had been accused of funneling money to the Puerto Rican independence movement, like that was what it was. And it was really because they were in school, but they were accusing them at the same time. They interviewed her on television, and I remembered being like, it's dope that there are other young leaders, so I go to college a year later, and I was like, 'I've seen you before.' And that's what it was.

TA: Because we went to the same college.

OL: How was it that when they interviewed you- you were heading that group at the time, or-

TA: I was the local school council's student advocate, class president, I was in it all. I've been active. They were interviewing me- really they were just trying to scare me, you

know, the media was trying to scare me, and make me say some stuff on the- they didn't know what was coming, though. [Laughter] They thought I was going to be a little stupid student, that was just on local school council that was just sitting there, and I was like, 'You guys are crazy, we're going to a school that's awesome, we're doing positive things, we're doing gang work, we have music groups, salsa bands that go across the country, we have to learn about being Puerto Rican,' and then I went on talking about, we're colonized, and we're colonized in this community. [Laughter] [Crosstalk] This

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interview comes after the FBI coming to my home with big guns, like huge guns, and basically telling my father to shut up, that they are going to ask me questions.

MN: With guns?

TA: With guns.

MN: That's crazy!

TA: The hate on the Puerto Rican community in Chicago is serious.

MN: With guns!

RV: The political prisoners that were freed by Clinton, like eight of them are from Chicago, from that strip.

OL: So you go to college, you meet up with Tere, you recognize her from the interview.

RV: More than anything, we went to college, and we realized that we were the last year of inner city recruitment by the University of Illinois. No other kids came from Roberto Clemente High School afterward.

TA: Nope.

RV: That was the last year. So we get there, and it's like 65,000 students and 1.9 percent of the students were Latino. It was a ridiculously low number. And then also on campus you had mad racism, because I was raised in Chicago. It's all cornfields around you.

[Crosstalk]

RV: It changes in the sense that all that gang culture, you walk out on campus and you see kids that are Latin Kings, and Cobras, mean-mugging each other, then after a week, you're like-

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TA: We look the same.

RV: 'We look the same, so what are you doing later on today?' The inner-city kids- that was our crew! Our whole crew was Spanish Cobras, Latin Kings, different gangs, different groups, we just all came together, and it was cool because we had hangouts. 51 was Bruno's address, and everyone would call it Area 51.

TA: Well, my high school best friend ends up being his roommate, in college, and then it was just like, from there, we're family.

MN: Now, when did you connect musically, as opposed to politically?

RV: Well, that's the thing, because it was an inner-city type, at that house, talk about culture, that house was a huge thing.

TA: That was the cultural center.

RV: That was the cultural center, the unofficial cultural center, in the sense that I learned how to dance salsa in that house, from Tere and other girls. You would take time to hang

out, and you would dance, I remember I started playing the congas for the first time in my life in that house with David, and other brothers from Clemente High School who were older than us. And my break dancing crew would come down from Chicago and perform inside the house, remember? And then we started learning the-

TA: We had Vipers in the house, too.

RV: All the time, yes.

[Crosstalk]

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RV: For the first time ever, we did barranda. Which for me was new. Barranda is caroling, Christmas caroling that they do in Puerto Rico from house to house. And the whole thing is you stop at one house, and you had drinks, and then you go to the next house, and then by the end of the night, you have this huge moving party. For me, that was all new, in terms of culture, and it was music, too. And because- Tere would be the leader of the singing, and I would always tell her, 'Yo, get in there,' she would rap every now and then when it was just hanging out, but it was all very organic. A lot of wasn't- Tere was playing aliente, I was rapping, pretty much with dudes on campus, different crews that were performing. I had a radio show.

TA: So then he started- I don't know, we ran into some little guy that thought he was a producer, and that he was like, 'You're going to have to sing. I'm going to rap, and you're going to sing,' and then we went to this random house in the cornfields, and made a song. Which- we're not going to talk about what the song was about.

RV: We did a really raunchy song, because-

TA: It was horrible! [Laughter]

RV: It was really funny, because we heard the lyrics, because they wanted us to jump on a song- they wanted a Latino feel to the rap. So they get there, and we hear the lyrics, and we were like, 'I guess I'm supposed to rap about something here.'" It was a pretty bad song.

OL: And so after that meeting, you guys kind of, you kept talking to each other

RV: Me and Tere are friends. That's the first thing. We roll together. Even when we

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weren't doing music, we were still like, 'What's up, what are you doing?' Our main thing with Tere, to me, like I said, just hanging out. Our main connection was we rolled with the student programmers at the cultural center.

TA: The Latino cultural center.

RV: And when events closed, we took the whole event over to my house, which is at Area 51. So our main connection was through organizing. We did the main thing in terms of believing in ourselves, we put on dope events. Like we had this Latino poetry site called the blue room, and then we got together with the African-American culture center, called Peppers and we brought them together. And at first it was small, but by senior year, they were-

[End of Side One, Tape One

[Crosstalk]

MN: It becomes New York- we'll trade stories.

TA: He ended going from bilingual teacher to the disciplinarian of the school.

MN: Even though I'm a college professor, I have this whole other side.

OL: Maybe we should talk about how- did you guys move to the Bronx first, and then form Rebel Diaz, or did you form Rebel Diaz when you were still in college?

RV: You should just pass it to him, because he's the reason we're even here.

OL: Because of G1.

RV: Yes.

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GV: This is going back to some of the stuff I was talking about before. Like, my experience was, in the schools that I was going to in Chicago, it was mostly- my circle of friends was mostly black, mostly the black students. That's who I identify with, that's who- I think out of all of us, I had the least Latino influence. And that changed in high school, I was getting into trouble, and being a knucklehead, so my mom just sent me off to Chile, and I was in Chile for almost a year, on two different occasions during my high school. [Laughter]

MN: There are no knuckleheads in Chile?

GV: There are knuckleheads around the world. That's what my mom didn't know, she would send me out, leave, come back worse.

TA: But that's really a Latino thing, 'send him back to the country!'

OL: West Indians do that, too.

TA: Send them back to Puerto Rico, and then in Puerto they are causing this ruckus out there, too.

GV: But when I was out there, the first time I went, I was staying with my grandparents' neighborhood. They lived in the middle of three different neighborhoods, Peñalolén, Ñuñoa, and La Reina.

OL: Say those again slowly for the transcriber.

GV: Peñalolén, Ñuñoa, and La Reina, like 'the queen.' And the neighborhood, first of all, I had never experienced or seen that type of poverty like houses over there. It's stray dogs, and the tin roofs, and everything. Over there, I actually learned how to make

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music, the neighborhood youth would put on shows. So that's the basis of the music production thing. It was probably like the Bronx in the seventies. They would all get together, put shows together, and that's where I learned, from all that stuff. In terms of putting shows on, in terms of producing music. So, that gets transferred back when I get back to the states. Rod is engaging more in the rapping thing, and that's where we come together, and I'm doing the music, we're both rapping. And that's where the transition of just rapping in English to starting to rap in Spanish. I remember, you went to Chile, too, which was in the middle of college, you were there for a year.

RV: Yes.

GV: And so that's when the transition, the big transition in terms of incorporating a lot more Spanish, doing only Spanish songs. I don't think we ever did that before. And then, I ended up finishing high school in Chile, and I got accepted to, I got a scholarship

to the Clive Davis Department of Recorded Music at NYU. So I ended up coming here, and a year later, Rod joined me here, and then, a year later- Tere came to visit us, actually we were living in Brooklyn [Laughter] What was it for?

TA: It was Brooklyn, I came for-

RV: We spent the holidays together, you came to chill with us in Brooklyn.

GV: Because you were living in Jersey.

TA: Yes, yes. And then she came to visit us when we were living in Bushwick, in Brooklyn. And we were just, wintertime, it was cold, we had a studio.

TA: A nice studio.

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RV: But we had recorded two songs with Tere before in Chicago.

GV: In the summertime, yes.

TA: Which were real hits in Chicago.

RV: They were Chicago hits.

MN: Really! What were the songs?

GV: Feed 51.

RV: Feed 51, which was about us shoplifting food, from a big store. The whole story was [Laughing] The whole hook was like, 'we're gonna walk into that big food store, gonna feed 51 friends and more.' And the whole thing was like-

MN: It's Feed 51.

TA: 51 is the group of our friends.

[Crosstalk]

GV: “Gonna walk up to that big food store, gonna load up the car, for a hundred friends and more.’

RV: So the idea was of a massive shoplifting of a grocery store to feed the whole neighborhood. That was the theme of the song. This, to me, was my first political song. I used to do performances at school- Tere came, and I remember we recorded two songs in one day.

GV: And I just have to make a comment before they start on the record. This was the first time we all recorded together, and we didn’t give any words or anything to that song, we just went in there, with the whole song.

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TA: And this was in Bushwick, in Brooklyn.

RV: No, this is in Chicago.

MN: In Chicago, or at the university?

RV: This is in Chicago.

TA: At somebody’s house.

RV: This is post-college for me and Tere, and G, the summer before he goes away to college. That’s what it was.

MN: Right. Got it. And somebody had a studio in his house?

RV: One of his friends, J. Free.

OL: So Tere just comes in and.

MN: And when you say freestyle, freestyle singing, or-

GV: Freestyle singing.

RV: Not freestyle the genre, but singing without written word.

TA: We had no lyric sheet.

GV: Right. But that day, I remember it was only two tapes. And I was recording, it was one of those days, the mood was just bam. I was taken aback emotionally, like I was crying. That's some real shit, for real for real. Just because I had never had that type of feeling on a track. Literally, I was just wow. I don't think I ever said that. [Laughs]

OL: Did you surprise yourself, or did you just have that mood.

TA: I was just doing what I do. I mean, it was cool.

MN: Is there a tradition in salsa, like in jazz singing, of improvisation?

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TA: Sonarre, which is like freestyle. It's like improvisation. That's what I did in the booth.

MN: Was this English and Spanish, or just English?

TA: I did it in English. Just English. I'm way stronger in Spanish. Way stronger in Spanish.

OL: So you record that song in Chicago, and then the next year, G1 starts school at NYU.

RV: And then I am running around aimless in Chicago, not knowing what I'm doing with my life, after college. I did a public allies program, saved money. And then the next summer he came back. The biggest for us, because he's my younger brother, I was always- as far as a big foundation of what my mind state is, it's always been tough love. My brother would be like, 'Hey, listen to my beat,' and I'd be like, 'That shit sucks. Go home and do a better one.' We're honest. And he started coming with some- I couldn't

even deny it anymore! I was like, ‘My brother has better beats than anyone I’ve ever heard.’ I was listening to other producers, because I was doing my thing rapping. I was like, ‘We’re better than to be, you know?’ But I think, Tere can attest to this, we’ve worked with other producers here on other products, I think by your school, I think he was practicing his craft at a professional level in the sense that he got an NYU education on music recording. Even now, anywhere we go, we have a professional producer on our team.

TA: A professional producer, sound man, engineer, just in one.

MN: He’s a Doctor Dre. [Laughter]

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RV: I think that neither of us had experience being in a booth before. When I first got into the booth, I’m five years older than him, and I’m being told, coached how to record. Because you have me, whose raw energy was just what you guys saw earlier, that’s hard to put that energy at times. That’s a very hard transition to put that into the booth. When you’re having to read something, when your whole life, you’ve only rapped. I never wrote raps. I used to go into the booths and just record. I didn’t know measures, like sixteen bars. He’d be like, ‘Give me sixteen,’ and I would rap like forty. He’d be like, ‘Can you cut that in three?’ [Laughter] ‘So it can fit this beat.’ I didn’t have that education musically. But I had, and Tere, too. So I think for us, a big part has been that coaching of learning how to be in the booth and feeling comfortable because we have a producer. I think music-wise.

OL: So when did you guys all come together, in New York, and then were Rebel Diaz.

MN: Well, why don't you do Rodstarz first, because that's how I met them as Rodstarz. I met them as Rodstarz, before- [Laughter]

RV: The Rodstarz. The funny thing behind that is G had a crew, called Ill Descript, which is him, J. Free, and Donny D, which are his high school buddies, which are all linked together now still.

MN: In New York?

RV: Yes.

MN: In Brooklyn?

RV: Yes. Ill Descript is now on the map. So from that, they are all producers. It's funny

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because we fought about this all the time. I wanted the album- my name is Rodstarz, me, by myself. Because that was my b-boy name. In Chicago Champion's Crew, the Northsiders were called Northstarz, and everybody took the last name Starz. So that was the history behind the name. I wanted to be another rap name, but nobody really would have accepted it, your name was Rodstarz. Whatever, so. From that, okay I lost track. So, me and G worked on a mixtape a whole year. I was here a whole year before Tere came. On that mixtape, Tere, when she visited, recorded "Oh Why" which is the first time she had ever rapped on a record, which was a bonding session we had until five in the morning, and I was like, 'Yo, you're going to rap, and I told her I was going to sing. If she rapped, I would sing.' So on that song, you hear my one and only-

MN: And that's on the RodStarz. I remember,

RV: -singing. [Laughter] That's the last time. And it was just dope energy because we're friends, and then when I would go back to Chicago, Tere would come and perform that song with us. And it was great because out there friends would come, and it was her friends and my friends from college, so it was just a good vibe. So when Tere came to New York- I'm sorry, so me and G put out a mixtape called Desde El Lago Hasta El Mar. Everyone called it the Rodstarz mixtape. But he didn't want his name on it, because he wanted to be this superproducer- he had his whole thing, he didn't want to be recognized, he wanted it to just be Rodstarz. So then, we put this mixtape out, we took it to Chile- we pushed probably two thousand units, which is pretty good, independently. We started

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doing shows out here, just me and him, everywhere. So-

OL: As Ill Descript?

RV: We had an indentity crisis.

TA: It was a really big mix-up because people still called them Ill Descript, then the Rodstarz.

GV: The Rodstarz [Laughter]

RV: So Rodstarz was the name, I think, that first got recognition here in New York, and Ill Descript. And it was dope because we hooked up with the Nuyorican Poets' Café tour, so we started going to different colleges. So then Tere, we were like, 'Man, we need to get Tere. We're missing something.' We started seeing, we were doing our shows, it was great, like we were getting props, whatever, but it was like, all dudes, and I tell Tere. Tere was visiting-

TA: I think for a Rakim concert. [Laughing] Of course. What, I came to New York for a Rakim concert, what? And I was staying-

RV: I had a girlfriend at the time, I was living with my girlfriend. I was telling Tere, 'Yo, you need to be up here.' My girlfriend at the time was like, 'Yo, they are looking for an education organizer at Mothers on the Move.' She used to work there, at Mothers on the Move. So I told Tere, 'If I get you a job, will you move to New York?' And she said, 'Get me a job, I'll move here right away.' So I said, 'You have an interview tomorrow, ten in the morning.'

TA: I was there. I went to the interview, I got the job, and I was like, 'I'll be here in a

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month.' That next month was when the immigration protests-

RV: She came in April. So our first show, we did a song called [unintelligible, in Spanish] And our first show, as a group, which wasn't even Rebel Diaz then, it was just Rodstarz and La Tere and G1. I didn't even know he existed. He was just like 'I'm a super dope producer who writes songs and whatever.' He wrote the whole chorus for [Unintelligible, in Spanish] anyways. He writes a lot of songs, the hooks, and the lyrics. We do a show, and it's like five hundred thousand people. [Laughter] You know the jumbo football thing? They had one every three blocks.

MN: And this is in New York?

RV: April 10, 2006.

OL: In the Bronx?

RV: No, by Union Square.

MN: By Union Square. They was the day of absence, right.

RV: Yes, it was the big.

TA: But that was May 1, that was May 1.

[Crosstalk]

GV: That was the big one because it was supported by the unions and by the Democrats.

Even like Hilary Clinton spoke, I think.

MN: You were on the same stage as Hilary Clinton.

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TA: Actually, they only gave us one song because she decided to come late and she had to speak.

RV: It was hilarious, too, because-

[cell phone rings]

RV: Sorry. It was hilarious, too, because Anthony Weiner, you guys remember that?

[Crosstalk]

RV: We had these shirts, we made shirts for the show, [unintelligible] and I remember Anthony Weiner's staff secretary was like, 'Will you give us one of your shirts so Anthony Weiner can wear it?' And we were like Anthony Weiner to come ask us himself? [Laughing] So he didn't want to come, so when she came back, she was really aggressive, like, 'You need to give him one of your shirts.' We were like, 'Hell, no!'

[Crosstalk]

RV: So that was our first show, and from that, I think that they made a music video for us.

TA: From that show.

RV: And from that, I think that that's really the birth of Rebel Diaz.

TA: And the velocity of the people. After the people saw us perform, it just- they were like, 'We've been waiting for this forever.'

RV: And I was also just living and working in the Bronx at the time, too. With the Youth Ministries of Peace and Justice, I was also consultant, working at the Youth Ministries of Peace and Justice.

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MN: Where are Youth Ministries of Peace and Justice located?

RV: 1384 Stratford, right across the street from the Bronx River Project. So for us, we were there all the time. And we did something like this called Bronx River, and we did a documentary, they interviewed different people in the neighborhood. Jermaine Showtime, he organized a mad basketball tournament so we worked for him a lot.

MN: That's a guy who I was supposed to interview. His girlfriend is a teacher in a Bronx High School. And what is the name of the park they play in? It's- Sammy Park.

OL: This is in 2005, you're working for Youth Ministries?

RV: Yes, and that was when the Rodstarz mixtape came out, and then the birth of us as an official group, but Rebel Diaz was born April 10, 2006.

OL: And so then where in the Bronx were you guys living? When you moved to New York, you moved to-

[Crosstalk]

MN: What street was that on?

RV: Baretto. Literally across the street from the spot-

MN: Oh, so literally from-

OL: And what was the transition like for you from Chicago to the Bronx.

RV: You know what it was, I'll be honest, it's crazy. I felt like I was in Humboldt Park.

I think there's a certain value system that you have in the 'hood, that is universal. You go to a 'hood in Chile and it's the same thing, it's that understood respect and sharing, and-

TA: A different kind of love.

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RV: Yes, like a loyalty. So for me, even if Hunt's Point, I have a crew already, that I roll with, and-

TA: Waco Division.

RV: And they have a recording studio, we work with them. And it's crazy, because from an organizing perspective, I never really took into account the power of what social organizing can be, as compared to the regular. I have no idea who you are, you don't know who I am, but I'm going to endure them giving you a petition to sign. This is like, I have a crew of thirty dudes that at any time, if I need them to roll up to an event to an event, or a protest-

MN: Amazing. All in the same neighborhood?

RV: All on the same block.

MN: We have to get down there, we have to make this part of your division, this little

RV: All Puerto Rican and Dominican. I think for me, I feel like it's the music that led to that relationship. I started doing shows through the Point Community Center. The Fish Parade, they have an event right there on Hunt's Point called the Fish Parade, went out to perform there, and I met some of them through that. Citgo, the Venezuelan Oil Company, was giving money to low-cost oil, to the building across the street from mine, to my building to the other buildings, so from that, we got to perform, and right away people in my community know me. Bodega owners have our newspaper clippings on their wall. You kind of become a neighborhood celebrity in a sense.

TA: But it's perfect, because we do organizing.

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GV: It's honor more than-

TA: It is.

OL: So, I want to hear more about your transition to the Bronx, then I want you to talk a little bit about what it was like to go to NYU.

GV: Sure

OL: SO what was it like for you coming from your neighborhood in Chicago? You get this job in New York, you come here, what was that transition like?

TA: I guess my answer to that would be I've been traveling- I did union organizing for three years with SCIU, so I was an international organizer, which meant that every three months, I was in a new city, organizing. And I was coming, and my brothers were here, so-. And then when I went to Mothers on the Move, the boss, the executive director, she was from my home town in Carolina, she was like one of my aunts. Everything just kind

of fell into place. And it is Humboldt Park, it's the same thing. The only thing that scared me was the prostitution in that area, like around Rodrigo's-

RV: My building.

TA: The prostitution, and my being by myself at times, coming from organizing at night, especially when the winter came. I was like, I can't do this, I'm scared. And in Chicago, I'm used to driving, this is all, you've got to jump on a train, or walk up your block to get to the bus, to get to the train.

MN: Are guys from the market patrolling. Is that why you have that in Hunt's Point?

TA: Yes. The truckers for the market.

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MN: So any woman is fair game?

TA: It is so scary!

RV: They think every woman that walks down the street is a prostitute. They have cars, johns from different areas of the city driving up. It's crazy, you see all kinds, Mercedes, strip bars.

TA: There's a lot of strip bars inside of that whole part. So that was the only thing that I couldn't get with. But I really did love the whole- I wasn't scared, the gang part was eliminated. I was like, 'Oh my goodness! I can throw on whatever outfit I want to? What? I'm wearing green and black today! I'm wearing purple and black tomorrow!'

MN: So Chicago is just really that tense. Like that way, you have to watch your-

RV: New York, my heart is like, 'I'm relaxed.' I walk down the street every time, I walk home. I feel like all I really have to look out for is individuals. It's more random. The violence out here is more random. But over there, it's like-

TA: Drive-by.

RV: You know? So for me, that's crazy to say that, because that was a big thing. I was relaxed, walking through any neighborhood out here in the Bronx. And I would see our streets marked- but the gang thing is not present. You see whatever, but people don't bang, in the sense of- out there, you walk through a neighborhood, they will stop you.

TA: They tell you to throw the opposite gang sign down

RV: And a lot of times, bait, they call it false flagging. They tell you, I'm a disciple, throw the Latin Kings sign down. And you learn not to do it, because if you do, they

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might get all, 'We're Latin Kings.' So you have to do- so that wasn't missed at all, at all, at all.

TA: We're still here.

OL: Say a little bit about what it was like for you when you started NYU.

GV: Man, it's tough. It was a blessing to be there, in regards to the program I was in. It was just a whole new world. I was doing what I liked to do, and I was doing it in school, and then getting a degree. It was tough, though. I lived on campus for the first year I was there. And I think that coming from the school I came from in Chicago, what I tried to do at NYU didn't really work out because the conditions weren't the same. You have, first of all, very few blacks and Latinos. Like what you said before about colleges not

recruiting inner-city blacks and Latinos, by my era, that had been solidified. Most of the people of color on campus are upper-middle class, or international students. You had a lot of inner-city kids that didn't live on campus, or they just lived at home, like in the Bronx. In terms of socializing, in terms of organizing, very difficult. Just because everybody was on their own thing. So here I am, I'm from Chicago, I don't really know. So I felt like I never really became engaged in the cultural and social life at NYU. And part of it had to do with you feel like an outcast, but you have pride in who you are, too, you're like, 'Fuck it, I'm not one of you guys!' So it's kind of a double thing, where people look at you differently, and I would be like, "I am different, and what?" So the first year I was on campus, and from there, from that year followed a year in Brooklyn,

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and then in the Bronx. But the challenge to me was tough. I didn't finish, I will finish, hopefully soon, someday.

OL: Are you in school now or are you taking classes?

GV: No, I'm taking time off. I'm actually enrolled, still, but I'm just going to leave. I actually have just a few more credits to do. So I think the biggest thing for me was the shock of being seventeen, eighteen years old, definitely not like the University of Illinois, when you're in a city where the city is the university. That's not the case, obviously with NYU, you're just in New York City and that's that. But at the same time, it's a blessing, not everybody gets the privilege to do what I got to do. And I learned, when I was in the school, I learned a lot in terms of technical aspects and it's in the School of the Arts, so

all the background of the arts education. A lot of it is kind of like a lot of hot air, but I think a lot of it is also good, like it gives you some kind of academic backing, as opposed to what we do. But I think the biggest thing for that was just the adjustment of being in a place where I wasn't really empowered to organize or just socialize on a personal level, because I didn't identify.

MN: Wow. Well, one of the things that is amazing to me is that you, like the neighborhood you're living in, now. You managed to create a context for political organizing in a neighborhood with all these problems and issues, but you still found this incredible upside. And I think that's an unbelievably inspiring thing, because- how do you keep your optimism in this time as cultural workers and organizers? And how do you see this movement you're building growing in the next few years?

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GV: I just think it goes back to what Rod was saying in terms of the organizing being done not like, 'I work for a nonprofit, I'm going to go knock on your door and give you a flyer. I think that a lot of the hope just comes from building with people personally and you see that there's a value system there that exists that is a good one. People break bread, there's a will, there's humanity! It's not all- poverty has not destroyed everything. Our humanity, if that makes sense, I don't know any other way to put it.

RV: I think that this space that we're having in Hunts Point and now that community already had a little bit of a foundation, like the Point Community Center, Mothers on the Move, Sisters on the Rise. So for a lot of youth there, the stuff I'm talking about-. I'll give you an example, there's a kid named Y.C., 'Young Cannon,' that's sixteen, and he's

come up through some of the hip-hop workshops that were done at the point, open-mics here and there, so when you have a little stuff like that around you, and then you have people that come from the outside, which is a real thing. Like I've talked to some of the dudes from the hood, and they are like, 'Man, Rod, you give us inspiration, because I see you traveling.' It's crazy, the feeling I feel when I come back from the airport, after having been on the road for a month, I'm still on the train, I'm still living at the same level that they are. But I'm doing music. So I'm walking up with my luggage, rolling up the hill. And it's like an automatic hood reception, like, 'What up, Rod? Where you coming from now?' Man, I just came from over here, I'm telling them what I did, and then at the same time, I'm also recording music with them, so it's like- they are like, 'We're going to get our crew together, and we're going to put out a mixtape, too.' They

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haven't put out music, but when they see that we can do it, and we're just like them.

We're not trying to talk down to them, we're humble people. So I come, and I get down-

TA: -how to do it.

RV: It's like, 'Yo, if you need something, my brother can help you master the music,' like little things. And so from there, we put them on the shows and stuff. We do big shows, and had them open for us, so you show them you want to share, they want to start doing more themselves.

TA: The 'how do we stay excited about this, how do we stay positive about this' whole piece, for me it's a spiritual movement. This is all about what I was sent to do, this is my purpose, this is my work. This is not- I don't have a choice whether I want to do this

kind of work or not. I've been put in this place, and I will be held accountable at the end for not doing the work that I was supposed to be doing. So then it's like, 'Oh my goodness, I have to put in all of this planning!' But the rewards are so plentiful. The rewards are, for example, because of the work that we've done locally in the South Bronx, my old boss calls somebody in Miami, Florida. They give us their MTV Cribs for a week to hang out, [Laughter] while we're still doing community work out there in Miami. We go back to a Jacuzzi! [Laughter] I mean, but we're still broke! [Laughter] We're like, 'What!' [Laughing] But those are the beautiful rewards of the work that we are doing. So there is no way for us to not feel empowered, or feel great. Then I have these awesome brothers, like as a woman, as a queen, I feel like a queen every day, all day, even if we're fighting, there's still a level of respect where I feel safe, I feel

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protected. It's real community, it's a real unit. It's a solid unit that was put together by God, that's how I feel. To do this kind of work for now, regardless of what the outcomes are going to be. The work that we do is front-line work, this is not- we're not just rapping, you know? And so how many times have I now been in a position where I'm like, 'What's going to happen if we're standing in a corner, and my brother gets shot by a police officer and killed, because of the music that we're doing?' When do we start getting paranoid about who's standing around us, because of the work that we're doing? And so for me-

[interruption] Excuse me, I have to change-

TA: Go ahead. (Laughs)

MN: It's funny, at the end of my Worker in American Life class, I decided to play the Bob Dylan song, "You've Got to Serve Somebody." Which speaks to what you're talking about. Have you heard that? Oh, when we get back to the office, if you have a minute, it's also that people in power are going to be held accountable for what they do to people-

TA: Absolutely.

MN: Even if it's invisible. Just as much as the person on the corner who is soliciting prostitution, so is the banker, a man who is making sure that that factory closes.

TA: Sure. So for me this is more of a spiritual movement. This is something that I'm going to be held accountable for, and it's a beautiful thing. Like I said, the rewards are plentiful, and when you're able to be in front of someone, and know that you can just say,

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'Whatever comes out of me, I know it's going to be pure and it's going to be of good. It's a medicine. It can't get any better than that, it can't.

OL: It seems like you have such a good situation because of the guys you're with, these two guys who really are like your brothers, and your supporters. But do you ever feel, a woman in hip-hop, that your role is different from theirs, or you're somehow marginalized because of how women are perceived within the hip-hop industry and within the pop culture surrounding hip-hop?

TA: (Laughing) They're smiling because I just went through- we had a workshop, and I just pretty much-. I get upset when I hear that, because I feel like it is up to you to do what you feel like you have to do in this culture. Who cares if this girl is popping her ass

over there, doing her thing. You know what, I am a completely different person, and I have a whole other purpose, and I can't sit here and worry about everything that's happened in the hip-hop culture in regards to women and use that as a way to help me mold my thoughts in this movement. I don't have time for that! I really don't have time for that. That's great, and I'm sorry that that is what has happened in hip-hop, and it is misogynistic, and it's- I don't have time to deal with that whole part of hip-hop. I don't. And we can talk about it, but right now I have this work that I have to do, I have to speak for the immigrants, I have to speak for the women with color with AIDS/HIV, I have to talk about reproductive rights- if I focus on the negative, there's no way I'll be able to move.

OL: That's incredible

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(Unidentified voice): the thing is though, we're not seeing you on TV, we're seeing those other people on TV. The young people who are being publicized are not people like you. So what you think?

TA: It's more of the one-on-one impact that you have, I really think it's the one-on-one. I'm more worried about being able to talk to the young girl that's pregnant, and that's still being promiscuous as she's pregnant, and talking some good sense into her, and trying to move that than worrying about- I have to do it one by one. And sometimes we have these shows, and there are so many young women that look up to me, and- but at the same time, I want to tell them 'Look, I live in this world, too. This is not- I've probably been through most of the things that you're talking about right now.' So it's just a whole

different aspect, and I feel like if I focus on everything, all of the negative things that they say about women, and how they use the women in hip-hop, and what they are going through. Also, I'm glad that there are girls doing boasting jams. That's what is making a difference, is CD's, is music, is the people actually focusing on the positive parts of women, it will fall off. It will start falling off the face of this earth if enough people are moving.

GV: I also feel like you created your own space, as opposed to being reactive to- 'Okay, well you have to do this.' In that way, you almost have no agency because you're expected to- 'Because I'm presenting an alternative, let me go against what this other reality is.' Well, no, part of it is just making your own space and creating that alternative on your own.

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OL: It's also interesting because what you guys have been talking about shows how much your orientation, music has been a part of education and activism for you for so long that that's not even how you think about hip-hop. That commercialized, mainstream hip-hop-

MN: You're organizers.

OL: -off the radar, for you guys, and even what you were saying about your community that you lived in, you think of, you go up to college and you see these people who are also like you from poor parts of Chicago, and you have this code of respect, and way of dealing with each other. That is so against the mainstream ideas of how poor people live. It's like- they have no code. They have no respect.

GV: As Rebel Diaz as a crew, and obviously it's really piggybacking of what Tere said, us, we're not trying to pigeonhole ourselves as 'Oh, we're conscious rappers.' I'm not trying to point fingers at anybody. This is the lane that I'm in. Hopefully, you want to get down with this lane. And we're doing a job well enough organizing-wise and music- and message-wise, that their lanes don't seem appealing to you. Because I think a lot of times, people get caught up in- I'm not trying to knock music that comes, hip-hop, this whole argument like 'hip-hop is dead,' and Nas came out with the album, or people saying New York hip-hop is dead- I'm not going to knock the South. Because really, the reason that the South is making dope music is because the South is making celebration music. Maybe- a lot of times for us, musically, I'm not going to sit here knocking another group of people that are trying to do music, but at the same time, I'm not going to participate in it. I'm just going to do something-

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MN: One thing, many years ago, when I was doing my interviews with union organizers and radicals, a great organizer called Claude Williams told me, 'We don't need leaders of the people, we need leaders among the people. And it strikes me that that's what you've been doing. That you never separate yourself from the working-class and immigrant communities you grew up in. And that, to me, is what this is all about. And you're setting an example, which I think a lot of people have to follow.'

OL: So maybe we can end with you guys telling us- you know, you came back from touring, what's up next for you guys? What is the next thing.

RV: Every city we went to, the stories were following us. Young people of color getting shot in the back by the police. In Oakland, Gary King, Jr., in Miami, four young men, in a matter of nineteen days.

TA: And right before we left was Jason Serrato.

MN: On the corner of her house.

RV: So I think a big thing for us now, moving forward, is we want to take it beyond just the music, we want to take it- media, just media arts. Last year, through some money coming from Citgo, from the Venezuelan government, trying to get some equipment, since we have the privilege of traveling, be able to- different community organizations that we're building with in different cities, like using operatives to amplify that struggle for whatever campaign they are doing at the moment. And doing it through the media arts, so-

TA: Connecting the dots.

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RV: -through video, through photography. And then bringing it together, with hip-hop, on the music tip. And then being able to present that on a platform on the Internet that's accessible to the world. So that's our next months is kind of getting that together, getting the stories that we've gathered throughout the country in the last month, and being able to put that on a national scale, and also link them. It's not a coincidence that people of color are getting marked by the police all across the country.

TA: In the same way.

RV: In the same way, open a bag of chips, open a hairbrush, open a wallet- all of the sudden, these things become arms.

RV: I think also that the reaction we got from the “Which Side on You On?” video- doing more visual stuff. I feel like we have a lot to say, and at times, if it’s just the music-

MN: That video just transformed the presentation I was making in Berlin, and all of the sudden, it reached across the generational divide to people who found it hard to deal with what I was saying, what I was talking about. Their view of hip-hop is so narrow, and to visually see it connected to all these images and sounds, which they can identify with. They said, the seventy-eight year old professor said, ‘Now I understand what you mean by politics and culture.’

GV: It’s funny you say the generational gap thing, because I think even amongst us, Rod and Tere are 28, and I’m 22, so I’m in the middle between their generation and the generation that’s grown up in the 2000’s. You have kids in high school that their first

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memory of hip-hop is Puff Daddy in the nineties, which is already the transition from culture to industry. So I think right now, you said even for us, we’re also engaged in the generational gap, but we’re trying to- for the younger kids, the kids that are in high school, is try to present things in a fashion that’s number one conscious of the fact that people have short attention spans, and number two that it’s more content, more often. Everything is- ideally, it would be putting out a “Which Side Are You On?” video-type thing every week, once we have the resources to do that.

MN: They used to call them broadsides, in the days of

TA: Broadsides?

MN: Yes, in the thirties. They put out these bulletins, and spread them around the country through wiring services. And they get all the struggles, like, 'Worker shot down outside Ford Company.'

TA: What did you call them, broad-?

MN: Broadsides, B-R-O-A-D-S-I-D-E-S. And they would be sent out, 'Twenty thousand farm workers march in Fresno,' 'Eight steel workers, killer in alley.' Broadsides, yes. Every week, because the labor news would send it around the country. And sometimes did graphic designs, pictures of people in struggle. Because there was a struggle going on every place.

TA: So our whole theme is like the hood reporting. And so, bringing all of this together, and actually having to report back for the world. And be with the (whispering) scholarly

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world. (Resumes speaking normally) The academic part, we've all gone to school, we're pretty smart kids, being able to put that into a nice piece. And just getting it out there.

MN: I have a friend, well, I don't know if he's a friend, he's a tennis rival [Laughter] who has this website that can instantly translate any video into a hundred languages around the world, and so I'm going to connect you with him. He's an asshole, but he's brilliant. And he may decide to adopt you, because he has good politics, but he's just a jerk. I'll give you his name.

[Crosstalk]

TA: Mama's Hip Hop Kitchen is an event that is February 16, 2008. it is hip-hop for the soul, right. And it's specifically for women of color who are going to be reporting back about their organizing in HIV/AIDS and their organizing in reproductive rights. So it's a space where women are free to express themselves with whatever art form that they feel, whether it be graffiti, just regular painting, MC'ing, there are going to be female DJ's. Every element that you can think of in hip-hop is going to be there, and it's going to be women doing it. So it's not only for women, but it's a women's event.

OL: Are you performing?

TA: I'm just performing one song, but yes, Patty Duke's, we're going to have DJs. Some are from the South Bronx. Actually most of the participants are from the South Bronx. Which is pretty cool, which are people that we've built with in this community that have similar ideas, and can come in and do something positive for the young women. These

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are women that are organizing are from fourteen to twenty-two. It should be nice, it should be fun.

OL: Patty Dukes is supposed to be coming up Friday for her interview.

TA: Oh, okay, cool. That's going to be fun.

RV: I just want to say really quickly, we campaign- we just came back from Miami, organizing with the Coalition of the Market Workers, and Burger King, we're going to go at Burger King hard. Because the idea is, Burger King doesn't want to be lenient and pay

a penny more, per pound, to the tomato farmers that pick tomatoes that go on the burgers.

McDonald's gave in, Young Brand, which owns KFC, Taco Bell have given in, but

Burger King has taken a hard stance, basically saying that, 'Well,

[End of Tape One, Side Two]

RV: 150, 000 thousand dollars a year for the company. And they can't afford, but they can afford billions of dollars a year in bonuses.

TA: For their employees.

MN: Spread the word.

(unidentified voice): This is an act of principle, or-

RV: For one, it's a matter of principle, but the say the main thing is they're not going to let themselves by workers. So the thing is, what we're doing as hip-hop artists, is saying, 'Bruger King tried to use their advertisement to promote in the hip-hop community, to try to use hip-hop. Which is crazy that you guys have this because they've been doing it from the beginning. They've been in hip-hop from the beginning.

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TA: That's the thing, it's Burger King.

RV: So if you look at any advertisement in the Source Magazine, or XXL, Burger King is usually- they even had a hip-hop contest. So the thing is, as hip-hop, we're going to call Burger King out as a corporation. And what we feel is, we believe in small victories. Like when we defeat a corporation like Burger King and have them give the workers their money, and use hip-hop to do that, we're doing that. So as far as visuals go, we come in.

TA: Have it our way, we're having it our way.

MN: Have it our way, all right!

OL: Thank you guys.

MN: Thank you so much.

TA: Thank you guys, this was great. Thanks for taking us to heart.