



8-31-2005

Fleet, James

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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

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

Recommended Citation

Fleet, James. August 31, 2005. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham University.

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

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt
Interviewee: James Fleet
Session 1 August 31, 2005

Transcriber: Laura Kelly

Mark Naison (MN): Hello, this is the 27th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We're at Fordham University on August 31st, 2005 and we're interviewing James Fleet. Could you spell your first and last names?

James Fleet (JF): Absolutely. James, J-A-M-E-S. Fleet, F-L-E-E-T.

MN: Mr. Fleet is a teacher and a musician who grew up in the Patterson Houses in the south Bronx and whose father is one of the pioneers in the history of American jazz. In this interview we're going to focus on Mr. Fleet's father's musical career but I'm going to begin with a few questions about how your family came to the Bronx. What year did your family move to the Patterson Houses?

JF: That had to have been October of 1956.

MN: And where did they move to the Bronx from--where were they living before?

JF: In Harlem - -

MN: In Harlem.

JF: - - across the bridge.

MN: And on what street?

JF: 116th Street, between Fourth and Third Avenue.

MN: And what led them to make this move?

JF: They had a growing family - - young children - - they needed more space. Public housing back then, thanks to probably Robert Moses and other people seemed like the way to go.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: And what was it like for you in those early years with the family growing up in the Patterson Houses?

JF: Believe it or not, it was beautiful - - it was a nurturing experience - - the parents - - parents were great. The community was excellent - - much different than what it is today in many ways. So I - - you know, I had a great time.

MN: And when your father moved to Patterson, was he primarily supporting himself as a musician or did he do other work?

JF: My father left the business of music full-time somewhere around 1952-1953 - - he had just taken a job at Lord & Taylor on - - in Manhattan - - and that was his way of supporting the family - - that was his means.

MN: And did your mother work or was she a stay at home - -?

JF: No, she stayed at home - - and just raised the children.

MN: And how many of them were there?

JF: Four siblings.

MN: How old were you when you became aware of your father's musical career and his role in the history of jazz?

JF: As long as I can remember me being me I've known about my father in music.

MN: So this was something that was there - -

JF: Age three, age four - - he was the one who taught me how to play guitar - - so that had to have been when I was either in Kindergarten or first grade.

MN: And did musicians visit the house?

JF: All the time - - I didn't know who the musicians were at that time - - it wasn't until years later that I realized, 'Oh, this is this person, this is that person.'

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: So this was very much a part of the whole atmosphere of the family.

JF: Ongoing.

MN: Were there pictures of you father playing on the wall or around?

JF: Very good - - none whatsoever - - he didn't even play - - he didn't play any records in the house. He played, of course, his instrument, the guitar - - he didn't - - those other things he chose not to do. And I asked him about that years later. And what he told me was that there's nothing new to listen to. So, why continue to listen to music - - he was there when this was being produced, so for him there was no necessity to continue to listen to it.

MN: Now what part of the country had your father grown up in?

JF: He's from Bowie, Maryland.

MN: From Bowie, Maryland?

JF: Yeah, by the racetrack, the Bowie racetrack.

MN: And how did he end up coming to New York City?

JF: He came by way of - - as many musicians during that time from Maryland - - he came through Washington D.C. Then he came through Pennsylvania, and made his way, eventually, to New York - - New York was the place they had to be - - they had to come to.

MN: Now where did he learn music - - was he professionally seminary trained?

JF: Not at all, just through experience, hanging around, jamming, picking up - - picking a little bit up from here, from this particular county, moving on, working with someone else - - and eventually that's how he learned.

MN: Now was Bowie a rural area, or did it have towns and cities?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt
Interviewee: James Fleet
Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: It had towns and cities, but of course, small towns.

MN: And so they had little clubs there where people performed live music?

JF: If they did he never spoke much about it. He couldn't wait to get out of there.

MN: So he picked up - - he learned music, then he tried to find a place where he could - -

JF: Washington D.C. was the place at that time. Basically anything that migrated around the Howard theater was the place where musicians during the - - this is I guess after the Prohibition period - -

MN: This isn't the 20's?

JF: No, this is in the mid 30's - -

MN: Mid 30's.

JF: 1935, 36, 37.

MN: Ok, and so he was in Washington in the mid 30's?

JF: Yes.

MN: And when did he meet your mother?

JF: He met my mother in 1946 - - around October of 1946.

MN: And that was in New York City?

JF: That was in Harlem.

MN: In Harlem. And is your mother of Southern or of Caribbean - -

JF: She's from Florida.

MN: She's from Florida.

JF: A little town called Apalachicola, in between Panama City and Tallahassee.

MN: And did she have many family members in New York City or - -

JF: A few.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: And how did she end up coming to New York?

JF: Well there was a great migration around 1910, 1915, throughout the 20's where black families from the South, they wanted better opportunities so they came up North.

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

JF: My mother graduated from high school. My dad - - somewhere after elementary school he sort of left school - - and he knew that he wanted to be a musician.

MN: Were there extended families on either side - - relatives who you grew up visiting?

JF: My father had a sister in Harlem and that's who we came to stay with as he gravitated into the music industry. And my mother had relatives - - her mother was in Harlem at the time.

MN: So you grew up with cousins and aunts - -

JF: Absolutely.

MN: Now, for those people listening to this, tell us a little bit about your father's musical career and significance.

JF: Okay. My father has to be, probably - - and this is completely objective - - he has to be one of the most unrecognized but yet pivotal players in the evolution and revolution of jazz music, particularly as it pertains from going to swing to bebop music. His great claim to fame is that he is noted in the history of jazz because he motivated Charlie Parker. When Charlie Parker had his great epiphany and realized the music - - the musical improvisations that became known as bebop - - and has had an impact for over 60 years - - the person who inspired Charlie Parker was Bidy Fleet.

MN: And where did they first meet?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: My father - - from a historical perspective, my father was born July 17th of 1910.

Charlie Parker - - so he would've been 95 this year - - Charlie Parker was born - - he just had a birthday - - August 29th of 1920. So Charlie would have been 85 years old, he was ten years younger than my father. My father was an established musician in Harlem at the time and throughout the eastern coast - - but the answer to your question is they met in Harlem, New York.

MN: Now, what were some of the kinds of bands your father played with in Maryland and Washington and Harlem - - stylistically.

JF: He worked with the great Jelly Roll Morton and recently, a discography has been discovered of some recordings that they did in 1938. It's called the Baltimore Acid Tapes. So, if you go online you will see that information there. He worked with Cab Calloway's relative, Blanche Calloway. Andy Kirk, Fletcher Henderson, you name the bands - - Chic Webb's group - - okay, of course, that's where Ella Fitzgerald came through - - so, all of the noted bands of the swing era - - late to mid 1930's, early 40's, Bidley Fleet had a part in it.

MN: Now in these swing band and orchestra, how much room did they leave for a soloist to improvise?

JF: My father was a guitarist, and there is little room for a guitarist to improvise. Certain band leaders - - notably, people like Duke Ellington didn't have a guitarist at all. He felt that if there's one chordal instrument, being the piano, there is not the necessity for the other. However, Count Basie had a guitarist who stayed with him for 36 years who was a friend of my father's, a fellow named Freddie Green.

MN: So your father was somewhat restricted in what - -

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: Most guitarists are in that time and that's how you can have the advent of someone like a Charlie Christian who is an improviser and a soloist and a contemporary of my dad's who decided, 'you know what, I want to be out front' - - but most of the big bands there - - the assignment of the guitar was to hold down the rhythm, not to be out front.

MN: So this is interesting because - - again I'm hardly an expert - - but Charlie Parker is known for improvisational music. So your father is influencing that yet he is himself restricted.

JF: You've hit on the key. Because what inspired Charlie Parker, of what my dad was playing, was improvisation. Any of what I've heard Charlie Parker play, and those people that came after him, I've heard, because my father has first played it - - it might have been slower, okay, because Charlie Parker was a genius, but the inspiration came from my father who showed Charlie how to connect the dots musically. So he wasn't improvising. The point that I'm making is that what attracted other musicians who went on to greater things in music - - what attracted them to my father was his improvisational and harmonic skills.

MN: Where would they be exposed to that? Did he perform as a soloist as well?

JF: There were jam session going on - -

MN: Oh Okay.

JF: - - all around Harlem, all the time, and they lasted all evening, and, in many cases, all throughout the morning, and it tied in to where a musician can have maybe three or four hours of a nap and then they would get up to perform because they had a gig somewhere else. So, that's where these things - - Harlem is the place where a lot of this great music occurred.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: So the jam sessions was where you would see the Bidley Fleet - - who was not allowed to show himself in these highly structured ensembles?

JF: Well, he was not allowed to show himself in big bands. The basis of big bands - - and it has a function - - Count Basie had a dance span - - if you wanted to go somewhere to listen to a band back in the late 30's or early 40's, if you wanted to listen, you would go to see Duke Ellington or to hear Duke Ellington. If you wanted to go to listen and dance, you would go to see Count Basie. Because they were two entirely different types of things.

MN: So there were some ensembles your father played with which gave him a lot more space?

JF: Absolutely.

MN: And which were the ones which did that would you say?

JF: With most improvisers and soloists, smaller combos. Band leaders would write on my father's music 'No fancy chords.'

MN: [Laughs] No fancy chords.

JF: 'Bidley Fleet, no fancy chords, just stick to the script.' What a lot of people don't know is when Charlie Parker came from Kansas City to Harlem and met my father in December of 1939, a lot of older musicians, mostly sax players - - this excludes Dexter, because he hadn't come in yet - - but we're talking about Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young Sr., and those people, they didn't like or understand Charlie Parker's playing at the time. Bidley did. And the two of them used to laugh about it. This is not even known in the history of jazz today.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: One of the interesting things - - I guess as historians - - we have this concept of social space, spaces that are important. Tell us about some of the spaces where this creative relationship developed between Biddy Fleet and Charlie Parker.

JF: Okay. Bird - - is it okay if I use the - - when I say Bird everyone should know I'm talking about Charlie Parker, and if I say Biddy everyone should know I'm talking about my father. Well Biddy and Bird used to get together basically at two places. One was a small little Chili house, a place where you could play music and also get something to eat if your money's not plentiful and if you're hungry. And that place was known as Dan Wall's Chili House, off of 138th street and Harlem. And that was just a small place - - it was a chili house that had a band staff. My father had a little combo there. It was just a structured jam session. A lot of the jam sessions would usually start out with a young Charlie Parker seeking out Biddy Fleet, not the other way around. A lot of people need to know that. My father never once sought out Charlie Parker, Charlie Parker sought out my father and whatever is known about my father in the history of jazz is known out of the mouth of Charlie Parker. People need to - - all of the historians need to take note of that. So, they used to get together in Dan Wall's Chili House, that was the first place. The other was a more prominent surrounding and that was called Clark Monroe's Uptown House, which had a rival meeting place of musicians called Minton. It all ties in. So it was Minton's where all of the great and soon to be great musicians, and also lesser musicians would get together. And the other place - - the lesser known place was Clark Monroe's Uptown House. So those were the two meeting places.

MN: Right. And that's where they would jam - -

JF: Could I define something?

MN: Sure

JF: When we say jam people need to know what that means. Jam doesn't simply mean, 'Okay you get together and you start tooting on your horn and then you get together and you do this' - - no, what they were doing was experimenting with music. They were developing an art form. Okay, certain things they experimented with, they threw out the window because this wouldn't help them in the creative process. What they were doing musically - - I wish I had a piano here, I could show you. They would take a chord - - musically, harmony is based on chords - -

MN: One Second.

[Interruption]

MN: Now you were talking about this creative process. Now, were these things - - when people found something that excited them, did they - - they didn't have recording equipment at the time. Did they write it down? Or they kept it in their heads?

JF: Mostly the latter. But we have to understand, this around the time shortly after Tin Pan Alley so we had a lot of show tunes around. Musicians - - even when you create, you have to create from what's given to you, and then you advance from that process. So there were a lot of show tunes that they would play around with - - "embraceable you" - - the song that my father - - "I've got rhythm" - - the song that my father and Charlie Parker collaborated on was a song called "Cherokee," by Ray Nolan. And the reason why "Cherokee" was interesting to Charlie Parker was because the bridge of the song changes keys in half steps. It goes from, let's say, a b major to a b minor, then it progresses half steps to a b flat major to a b minor and chromatically goes down and resolves back to the original key. Now, having said that, that simply means that - - and I'm going to try to

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

simplify it - - let's say we have a b flat chord. Alright, a b flat, d, f - - that sounds right to any musicians here? [Laughter] Okay, well a chord is made from the root, the third, and the fifth. Like barber shop harmony, doo-wop is basically the root, the third, and the fifth. What my father was doing was he was playing the extensions of the chord. There's a root position, a third, a fifth, a seventh, which could be a major seventh, a dominant seventh, there's a ninth, there's elevenths, and fifteenth. And then you can augment all of those extensions. You can augment a fifth position, you can augment a sev - - well, this is what he was playing - - my father - - and this is the thing that amazed Charlie Parker. And what Bird was able to do because there weren't one genius there, there were two - - he was able to process what my father was playing, combine that with his influence from the mid-west, what God had given him, and take it to the next level. That's what happened.

MN: Maxine, do you want to kick in here?

Maxine Gordon (MG): Wasn't Lester Young doing that at the same period?

JF: Lester Young was basically a contemporary of my dad's - - they were only a year apart - - in age - - Lester was born in 1909 - - his approach to music was based on more of a swing approach and being more melodic as opposed to being more experimental with the music. There is an extension, that's why you have these two gentlemen - - this is Lester Young senior and this is Charlie Parker - - and its from swing - - and so they're saying - - Ira Gitler - - a gentleman I met recently - - what he's saying is that, or implying is that the extensions to this music can be traced from this person to this person. So, Lester had a smoother - - his whole approach to the saxophone was completely - - to the tenor saxophone - - was completely different from those of his contemporaries, like a Coleman Hawkins, who had a sharper edge and a sharper approach - - more traditional - -

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

so Lester's approach was completely different. Charlie Parker's - - the forefathers of jazz alto saxophone were two people prior to Charlie Parker, the great Benny Carter and the other one was of course was Johnny Hodges who was the lead and first alto player for Duke Ellington's band. Now, Johnny had a smoother approach, very similar in a sense to Lester Young. Benny Carter was sort of like the glue between the two and Charlie Parker was the extension.

MN: Was your father considered a swing musician in the thirties?

JF: He was both. He was both. But it's best to say, primarily yes, he was a swing musician who had a contemporary mind, and that's why he was sought after by younger musicians.

MG: I just want you to know that the current jazz historians, myself included, we know who Bidy Fleet was, and that I'm so sorry you were not there - - I'm not sure if it was this year or the year before [crosstalk] - - at Columbia University, we have the Center for Jazz Studies, and Stanley Crouch was a visiting professor, Louis Armstrong a visiting professor. And he gave a talk on your father, which is a chapter in his book on Charlie Parker.

JF: Oh really?

MG: And he interviewed your father, did you know that?

JF: That I did know, but Stanley Crouch is also the writer who is noted of saying that Bidy Fleet was an unremarkable guitarist.

MG: No, that's not what he said at all.

JF: Well that's what came back to us.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MG: Well call him up, I'll give you his phone number so you can hear, so you read what he wrote - -

[crosstalk]

JF: Or better yet, I'm going to give you mine, and he can call me.

MG: - - okay, and he can call you up. We were amazed at his talk on your father at the seminar because he explained what you're saying, how you don't have Charlie Parker without Biddy Fleet, and how important he is to the development of bebop. So after I wet to that talk I tried to do some of my own research and then I - - I just love this, what you've done, and I encourage you to write about your father, to do a book - - and to really pursue this and to go further into the connection - - and to interview Billy Taylor.

JF: I recently spoke to Leonard Gaskins - -

MG: Oh, okay, you know he's not well?

JF: - - right. He just had his 85th birthday. Leonard Gaskins was a great bass player during the bebop period on up. He played with everyone, not just those associated with jazz. He played with Elvis Presley. He was on Bob Dylan's first recording. But he was also part of Billy Taylor's first trio of which my father was a member of.

MG: In D.C.?

JF: Right. It's even in the scrapbook, did you see it?

MG: Yes. And Billy Taylor is still - - so, I would encourage you to get interviews with these people who knew your father before - - you know, because their help is fragile - -

JF: Absolutely.

MG: - - and to pursue this, it's very important. One of the things that makes it so interesting is that the reason that we don't hear about him more is because he wasn't

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

recorded extensively. So, what we know in jazz history is from recordings. Recorded history has been jazz history, which we're not trying to break. I'm very interested in writing and talking about people who were not recorded. For my dissertation - - you know, I'm trying to do my Ph.D. at NYU in history - - it's on Minton's Playhouse. So in the early period - - which I start in '38 because Minton's really starts in '38 - - it is that period that you're talking about that I'm particularly interested in, and your father, and this kind of myths that build around the place - - that they say - - the history of bebop is supposed to be this one jam session at Dan Wall's Chili House with Bidley Fleet and Charlie Parker - -

JF: It wasn't one.

MG: - - it wasn't one, but you know how it gets rewritten into this one because somebody wrote about this one night when they heard it.

JF: A couple of years ago Ken Burns did a large documentary on jazz. He spoke a lot about Charlie Parker but decided, that someone on the cutting room floor - - if it was ever done at all, that he would omit the very important part of the meeting between Bidley Fleet and Charlie Parker and what occurred during that time. Now I had the opportunity to meet and speak with - - a little bit - - Ira Gitler - - earlier this year - - and Ira said to me [laughs] 'hey listen, don't feel bad because my stuff ended up on the cutting room floor also - - my interview - -

MG: Yes, a lot of it.

JF: - - and so those who know the history, they would know about my father. Sort of like if you do - - if you're going to interview someone about Martin Luther King, you cannot omit Ralph Abernathy - - you know, people who were right there with Martin.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

And this is sort of like what's happened here. The big picture is that Charlie Parker went on to inspire everyone musically. Biddu Fleet inspired Charlie Parker. What Bird played, I've always heard. And I've heard it in the Patterson Projects in the Bronx. What Charlie Parker plays on his horn - - I could whistle, I don't have my horn with me - - anything Charlie Parker ever played, I can whistle it because I've always heard it, it has been in me all the time.

MN: Wow.

MG: But your father didn't listen to any Charlie Parker records when you were a kid?

JF: Very good question. My introduction to Charlie Parker's music - - I've always known of Charlie Parker - - all of my life - - I used to play - - I started taking saxophone lessons when I was 11 or 12 years old. So I'm in my room practicing 'You're a Grand Old Flag' and my father - - he didn't even open up the door - - he stuck a 78 through the door, a 78 record, and he said 'Here, put this on, this will open up your ears.'

MN: [laughs]

JF: And when I put it on, it was a recording of a very famous Charlie Parker song called 'Onoology.' When I played it, I couldn't even associate what I was hearing with the instrument I was holding, so I took apart my sax and put it away, and that was it for a long time. So what pop - - what dad was trying to say in a nice way is that 'what you're trying to do, this will help you, there's a big gap in between in terms of where you have to go to get to this level, but keep at it.' This was his way of providing inspiration - - keep at it because eventually you can go here.

[crosstalk]

MG: By the time you moved to the Bronx had your father already stopped playing?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: We moved in October of 1956 - - dad got out - - my brother William is 53 years old, so he was born in 1952, by 1952-1953 my father had pretty much had it with the music business and everything that went with it. And there's a lot that went with being a musician, and being a person of color, at that time, and especially at the time that he came through, and in particular, being a black male jazz musician in the United States of America from the 30's on up.

MG: And a man with four children - -

JF: Not only that - -

MG: - - and a wife who was going to stay home and support his children.

JF: - - and how about this, a man who wouldn't yield to all of the pitfalls that are waiting for you in life, and particularly, in the entertainment industry.

MG: So he didn't drink?

JF: He drank very sparingly and when - - when he did drink, it was 100 proof, which he did very well, I never saw any difference. I never once saw him use any type of drugs, however - -

MG: He wouldn't have lived that long, if he had.

JF: - - he never once - - we know of Charlie Parker - - Charlie Parker - - if we can use Charlie Parker as some type of barometer - - Charlie Parker's life is based on a tragic genius. He dies of cirrhosis of the liver, complicated by extended drug use. By age 34, on March 12th of 1955 at the Stanhope Hotel, which a lot of people should note from a historian point of view, is right down the block from the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue, that's where Charlie Parker died. When the coroner came in and examined Charlie Parker who passed away at age 34, they thought that he was 65 years old. So my

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

question to dad, when I got old enough to have the nerve to ask him is, 'why didn't you take Charlie Parker under your wing?' because I know now that this was more than about music, he saw a figure, some type of model in my father that he could probably try to emulate and like - - knowing this now, why didn't you take Bird under your wing and perhaps help to save him? But you know, I never asked him that and so - -[laughter].

MN: This is just an aside, when you were 11, where were you taking music lessons?

JF: Clark Junior High School, 149, on Third Avenue and 144th Street.

MN: And who was your music teacher there?

JF: That's the great question. An unsung hero by the name of Richard Brazowski.

Richard Brazowski taught many - - he taught Allen Jones who we spoke about, Ray Baker, and many more who didn't pursue music but they should have because they had an excellent mentor in this teacher - - who was fluent on at least 5 to 6 instruments, including string instruments which they discontinued in the Board of Education shortly after maybe 1969, 1970.

MN: So you benefited from this amazing music program at Clark Junior High?

JF: And across the street at home.

MN: Wow.

MG: What year are you born - - what's your birth date?

JF: August 15th 1955. I just - -

MG: 55?

JF: - - I just made 50.

MN: Did you have any contact with Eddie Bonnemere at - -

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: Of course, Eddie Bonnemere - - here's what happened with Eddie Bonnemere. Eddie Bonnemere was an old musical friend of my father's. So we simply heard that there were music lesson, piano lessons being given at P.S. 18. So my mother took us around there, not knowing who the teacher was, and when she introduced herself as Mrs. Fleet, Eddie Bonnemere said "Are you any relation to Bidy Fleet?" And she said "Yes that's my husband." He said "Bring these kids on in."

MN: [laughs]

JF: Because they had played together years ago.

MN: Now did your father play in the house for you when you were growing up?

JF: Yes he did.

MN: And that's where you heard all these progressions, all this - -

JF: Right. Yes.

MN: - - and it was part of your - - shaping your understanding?

JF: It is part of who I am.

James Pruitt (JP): Talk about ABC.

JF: Okay. Well the ABC program was being housed, at that time - - this is in 1969, 1970 - - at P.S. 49, which is off of Willis Avenue, I guess 141st, 142nd Street. And what the directors of the ABC program, I think James Wilson might be one of them - - Jim Wilson - - who was an educator in that district at the time - - what they chose to do was get top jazz musicians from the United States and bring them into this particular school and teach the youngsters from the area how to play this music, how to play your instrument, and if you chose to, how to extend and play jazz music. So we had, let's say, a trombonist like Curtis Fuller, who was the trombone teacher. The pianist was McCoy Tyner. The bass

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

instructor was Spike Lee's father, Bill Lee, who I have been in contact with out in

Brooklyn, and that's kind of nice. My father was the guitar teacher, instructor and - -

MG: Wait a minute. Your father was teaching guitar in the ABC program in '69 and '70?

JF: That's correct.

MG: So he was still playing?

JF: He was still playing, but not professionally in terms of working in the clubs.

MG: Right. He wasn't playing in the clubs but he was teaching in this - -

JF: My father never stopped playing guitar - -

MG: Okay.

JF: - - any time, until he came into ill health. And he was in his 80's then.

MN: Now was your family affiliated with any particular church?

JF: My mother was a member of - - a long time member of Mount Olivet Church in Harlem on Lenox Avenue.

MN: Right. And did you attend church with her there?

JF: Here's what happened - - these are great questions. [laughter] My father was a Catholic, and so the local Catholic Church in our neighborhood was St. Rita's. St. Rita's is noted because that is the church where Mother Theresa and Princess Di met at that rectory - - right across the streets at the Patterson projects is where they had that great meeting and shortly after, of course, Princess Di passed away. Anyway, my mother used to take us to St. Rita's Church because my dad was a Catholic and she wanted to honor his particular faith. And so we went to the one hour service, and she would bring us home from church - - this is of course the early 1960's - - and then she would go on to her church for service.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: Now did you go to - - you went to public school?

JF: Yes.

MN: Allen Jones went to St. Rita's for one year then was kicked out.

JF: Okay.

[laughter]

MG: I wanted to go back to the - - in the ABC program - -

JF: Yes.

MG: - - when your father taught. Were there any guitar players he taught that are still around?

JF: None of - - none that I know about.

[crosstalk]

MN: Now what was the location of that school?

JF: This is P.S. 49. It's on Willis Avenue and 141st street.

MN: And how far is that from the Patterson Houses?

JF: Its right next to the Mott Haven Projects, which is a couple of blocks away. The Mott Haven - -

MG: How long did they have that program?

JF: They had the program - - it appears, only one year. Whether or not - - it probably continued but my fathers involvement in it was just one year.

MG: In that '69-'70?

JF: That's right.

JP: What does ABC stand for?

JF: "A Better Chance"

MG: Were you involved with that?

JP: No. I'm familiar with "A Better Chance," it's still around.

MN: But that was the step that ended up sending kids to prep schools.

JP: Right.

MN: Now when you - - you're clearly heading towards a career that in some way or another involves music. Did your father encourage you to become a professional musician, or did he want you to see music as a part of a life with other things?

JF: Dad taught me how to play guitar when I was maybe 6 or 7 years old. Of course the guitar is played this way, right handed. I'm left handed, so immediately you have a problem. All of the, the 6 strings need to be restrung, and you have to sort of think about it in a different way. Dad was a tough task master and I segued away from the guitar, but he always gave us the opportunity to pursue this as a career, he never once tried to push us into it.

MN: When did you begin playing flute?

JF: In 1977.

MN: So when you were in the funk band in the early 70's - -

JF: Sax player.

MN: You were a sax player?

JF: Right.

MN: Wow. That you learned at Clark Junior High School?

JF: I learned how to play saxophone at Clark Junior High. That's correct.

MN: When did you start noticing that the Patterson Houses were changing as a family environment?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: This happened at the tail end of what we know as the modern civil rights movement.

Somewhere around, maybe 1972. We started seeing changes in public housing, or the projects as we call it, all across the area. What a lot of people today don't know about public housing during the 50's and 60's, as that it was a great place to live, it was a mixed environment. We had blacks, we had Jewish, we had Irish, many Italians, very few Latino, and the smallest group, of course was blacks, at that time. But public housing, when I was growing up in the late 50's was largely white.

MN: In New York City?

JF: In the Patterson Projects and the surrounding housing projects.

MN: Did you ever feel - - negative peer pressure about being passionate about music from other kids?

JF: It wasn't negative, but we were seen differently. Those who didn't have an affinity for music could only look at us from afar when we got involved in different ventures like playing in this band, going out for this audition, you know, doing things like that.

MN: You also mentioned to me earlier that you are an illustrator - -

JF: Yes.

MN: - - how did you get involved with graphic arts and drawing?

JF: I have always been drawing. That's something that was just simultaneous to playing music. It's the arts.

MN: Was this something - - were your parents visually artistic?

JF: Not at all? It's just something that I gravitated to. I used to read a lot of comic books back in the good old - - as we all did, as we all did - - and it's unfortunate today that a lot of youngsters - - I have 3 children of my own - - so a lot of youngsters today don't have

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

the opportunity to read comic books because you can learn a lot out of comics. One of the great things that happened was, aside from the stories, there would be segments in some of the comic books that would have historical information in them. So you could learn a lot about history just by reading a comic book.

MN: Well I grew up on the classic comic book as well as the others.

JF: Okay.

MN: Now did you get good art instruction in the local public schools?

JF: Once I got to high school.

MN: Did they have an art program in Clark Junior High School comparable to the music program?

JF: No. Richard Brazowski who was the music teacher for many, many, many years at Clark Junior High was - - he was excellent - - he was the department [laugh]. You know, there might have been several art teachers, but Mr. Brazowski was the only music teacher, he was the only band teacher.

MN: Now what high school did you attend?

JF: The High School of Music and Art.

MN: Now did you audition for music or for drawing?

JF: I auditioned for art.

MN: And what was your art audition like?

JF: You had to have a mixed portfolio and a segment of the interview was oral. Because after you submit your work, the instructors, the proctors want to know if you can communicate with them and tell them a little bit about what you're doing.

MN: So all the things that you were doing, you taught yourself?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: Basically. I went to different schools and I won awards and things like that.

MN: How would you describe your style? Was it like - -

JF: At that time?

MN: At that time.

JF: Mostly a comic book style.

MN: And so you would - -

JF: There were great comic book artists that the people don't know about. There is a gentleman that passed away the same year that my father did, a man named Jack Kirby. And Jack Kirby stopped - - there was two guys, one guy is still living - - there was Jack Kirby and there was a writer named Stan Lee - - and together they created a universe- "Fantastic Four," "Spider Man," it goes on and on and on. Jack Kirby, single handedly changed comic books throughout World War II up until the 1970's - - single handedly - - he was one of the most accurate and creative minds and he was also very fast. He could draw like 10 to 12 pages a day. And it would be all there. And he had a great mind for coming up with concepts.

MN: So where did you enter these contests?

JF: There were local department stores that would have art contests. Sacks department store used to be on 149th Street. They had art contests and things like that.

MN: Now tell us a little - - this is interesting - - a little bit about the shopping in the area and the Hub. There were department stores there.

JF: Yes, this around 3rd avenue, L time?

MN: Yes, 3rd avenue, L.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: Yes. They had department stores. Of course the two main ones were Hearn's and Alexander's.

MN: And did your family do a lot of shopping at those department stores?

JF: Yes, as did most of the families in that neighborhood.

MN: Were there movie theaters in that area?

JF: There were a couple of movie theaters. There was one right around the corner on Westchester Avenue, where the 5 train and the 2 train come out of the tunnel, and it becomes the outdoors - - there was a movie theater right there. Of course, we knew about the one further up here, by the Grand Concourse - - Prospect Avenue I think had one.

MN: Would you say that the Patterson Houses - - that there was good shopping?

JF: Oh absolutely. Very accessible.

JP: There were three or four five & ten stores

JF: Right. I was thinking about H.L. Green, McCrory's Woolworths, of course.

MN: Were there supermarkets?

JF: Supermarkets - - the main chain was A&P, which from the Patterson projects there were 3 accessible ones- one on 138th Street, one all the way up on Melrose avenue, and there was a third one.

MN: Now, was - - I'm just also thinking about sociability and style. When your father, on a weekend, left the house, how did he dress? Did he dress formally or informally?

JF: I never once saw my father wear a pair of dungarees and I never once saw him in a pair of sneakers. And I knew my father up until I was almost 40 years old. His dress was an extension of the man. Always slacks, a pair of shoes - - casual dress for him was put on a pair of loafers.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: Did he ever wear a jacket and tie on the weekend?

JF: When he had a performance, he always had a tuxedo ready.

MN: Did he perform in churches or in places other than clubs - -

JF: Boat rides, clubs, boat rides - -

MN: This is after - - when you were growing up?

JF: Yes, absolutely.

MN: So he still performed - - tell me a little bit about this - - it seems like your saying he stopped playing as - -

[crosstalk]

JF: He stopped playing full time, being a full time musician, that is, his only source of income. But he gigged throughout.

MN: Oh okay, I didn't realize that.

JF: The culmination probably was in 1980 - - are we there yet, are we up to 1980?

MG: No, no - -

MN: No, but say it then we'll go backwards from 1980.

JF: Okay. 1980 marked the 25th anniversary of Charlie Parker's passing. George Wayne, one of the co-developers of the Newport Jazz Festival - - they found my father. He was missing, you know, he's this legendary, mythical - -

MG: [laughs] They loved that.

JF: You're going to love this part because this part is going to even tie into Dexter Gordon. So in 1980, it marked the 25th anniversary of Charlie Parker's passing so the special guest that these promoters found was Bidley Fleet. So he opened the show - - there

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

was a simultaneous concert, on the east side - - it was at Carnegie Hall - - 15 minutes

apart - - it was Avery Fisher - -

[End of tape 1 side A] [Beginning of tape 1 side B]

JF: - - the song that they played was 'Cherokee' because 'Cherokee' is the song by which this whole evolution that we know as bebop, improvisational jazz music came to be known, as based around this song - - so Bidley Fleet came out and he started the performance off. The rhythm section consisted of the modern jazz quartet's rhythm section. The horn section - - the alto players were Lee Konitz, Lou Donaldson, and James Moody, and they went on and had a great show. The beautiful thing that happened - - after that performance there was a little fellow back stage who was sitting behind - - he had his chair turned around and he was watching the whole thing. So when my father came off stage this little guy came up and grabbed him. And - - true story - - and he hugged him. He said 'you know, I know everybody. I know everybody in music. I've played with just about everybody. I've always heard about you but I've never met you. I am so proud to be meeting you.' And that man's name was George Benson.

[laughter]

MN: Wow.

JF: What should be noted is dad was a very laid back, unassuming guy. There's an old adage that the squeaky wheel gets the oil. That wasn't him. But in any industry, you know who your peers are. So the musicians from that time, they knew about Bidley Fleet. But the world at large - - they might have known about Charlie Parker, but they don't know about Bidley, other than what Charlie Parker said about him.

MN: Right.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: Had he been more outspoken he might have gotten more mileage - -

MG: Well I wouldn't put it on him. I don't agree with that. If he had been recording - -

JF: I understand.

MG: - - and if he had stayed full time in the business, then you know down to all the - -

and you all had starved to death [laughs], then he might have been more recorded- -

JF: Believe it or not, well, you know it's all - -

MG: In the 50's - - for him - - that was a very brave move for him to take a full time job and still be a musician because what happened to a lot of people during that period with rock and roll and other things that happened, is that they really fell on hard times or they left New York. You see by him staying here and taking a full time job and support the family he still continued to develop and play. So, you know, it's another kind of musician but because he didn't have a recording contract, and he's not recording, he's not - - don't put it on his personality or his talents.

JF: Point well taken. No, it's absolutely not about his talents - -

MG: It's the circumstance of the recording and the history - -

JF: It's also the circumstances of the times - -

MG: Yes, right.

JF: - - my father turned down - -

MG: had he been born in 1910 instead of 20.

JF: Here's more- my father turned down an opportunity from Louis Armstrong to play with him - - to work with Louis in 1937 because he didn't like the racial stereotypes that were being portrayed by Armstrong for whatever the reasons were at that time. Okay, that's - - the road - - when musicians go out on the road, the road for - - keeping it very

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

real - - the road for white musicians at that time, going out and performing, and the roads for black counterparts, who might even be in the same band - - completely different set of circumstances. My father was close to not Billie Holiday, but to Billie Holiday's dad - -

MG: Oh, he played guitar - -

JF: - - and Billie Holiday used to front the Artie Shaw band. My father used to tell me what Billie had to go through - -

MN: She wrote about that.

JF: - - and she's fronting the band. First of all, you can't go through the front door - - forget about housing when your - - so he saw all of this stuff. He saw it first hand. The way my parents met was that my father jumped ship from Roy Eldridge's big band in 1946, as soon as the band came into the Theresa Hotel, he had a bell hop to take his bag, his luggage over to the Park View Hotel, and he said 'That's it, that's it.' What a lot of people don't know is that Charlie Parker came looking for my father many years later and tried to get him to work with him. And Pop declined. You know - - there are many reasons why that might have been but I definitely - - I know that one of the reasons was that he was just tired of that type of living. Being a working musician, it might sound great - - when it's good, it's great, financially. When it's bad, it's absolutely horrendous.

MG: Did he travel with Roy Eldridge's big band?

JF: In 1946.

MG: So did he go all around the United States?

JF: If not the United States then maybe to the Midwest and back.

MG: Did he ever go to Europe?

JF: Never once.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MG: He never left the country?

JF: No, he never left the country.

MN: Did you ever accompany your father when he was performing, when you were growing up?

JF: Never once.

MN: So if he had a gig - -

JF: Was not invited.

MN: And this was true all the way through? Until 1980? [laughs]

JF: The first time that I saw my father play professionally was when he was 70 years old and at Carnegie Hall and Avery Fisher Hall.

MN: Wow.

MG: I remember that night.

MN: Wow.

MG: Dexter played at Avery Fisher the same night - - is that how that happened?

JF: That was when Dexter - - Yes, yes.

MG: Yes, Yes, Yes. When he had his own group. 'Cause that's after he came back from Europe. Yes, and he met your father - -

JF: Yes - - Long tall Dexter.

MG: I remember this now.

MN: Wow. So he really protected you?

JF: But he didn't discourage us from being in the business. When I had my different bands in the 1970's, like my funk band and all of that, he would see us going out and he would say - - you know, he would see me with my sax case running out - - say 'Hey,

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

where you going, where you going?' I said 'Well, we have a rehearsal.' And he said 'Rehearsal? Rehearsal for what?' I said 'Well, you know, we're rehearsing to get better.' Okay so let's say that maybe happened one week. The next week we're running out the door he says 'Hey, where you going?' I said 'Oh, I have another rehearsal.' He said 'Where's your gig?' He said 'Only rehearse for a performance.' And I would tell this to any musician, young musician coming - - when you rehearse, rehearse - - you'll get great at rehearsing, but you will be absolutely, when it comes to performing - - something happens when you have a deadline and a goal to be reached, called a performance. So what he said to me was 'Who is your man in the front office?' He's trying to tell me 'Who is your agent?' If you have an agent, use your agent, here's the gig, you rehearse for the gig, you go do the gig, then you go on to the next one. You don't continually rehearse, rehearse, rehearse, and there's no gig. It's like being all dressed up with nowhere to go.

MN: Now what was your first band?

JF: What was it? We had a local band in the Patterson Projects, I've forgotten what the name was, but we played right in front of St. Rita's Church.

MN: And how old were you when you were doing this?

JF: Twelve.

MN: Oh so you were - -

JF: Shortly after the Onothology situation with Charlie Parker and the 78 record.

Eventually I put the sax back together.

[laughter]

MN: Okay so what music were you playing in those days?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: The music of that time. 'Tighten Up' by Archie Bell and the Drills, James Brown

'Cold Sweat,' 'I Feel Good,' you know, contemporary - -

MG: How big of a band?

JF: At least 8 pieces.

MG: Yes, you had to have horns.

JF: Big band.

MN: Now tell us a little bit about this band - - the funk band, the Cross Bronx Express it was called?

JF: Yes, the Cross Bronx Expressway was during the early 70's- late 60's, early 70's - - Cross Bronx Expressway had to have been, if not the top, but one of the top cover bands in the Bronx.

MN: Who were the other members and how did you meet them?

JF: I did not know any one of them directly, I just knew of the band. See, bands knew about other bands. You may not necessarily have known the members of the band, but you know the reputation of the group.

MN: Now what were you - - you went to Music and Art - -

JF: Yes.

MN: - - and after that what did you do?

JF: After Music and Art I freelanced. I freelanced as an illustrator. I tried to get into the comic book industry, and that didn't work out for reasons that I know now. But that didn't work out. I took odd jobs, went into the post offices. I always ran away from where I knew I was supposed to be- and that's within the music industry.

MN: How did you end up in the Upward Bound program?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: The Upward Bound program was an opportunity. Basically a representative from the Upward Bound program came into Clark Junior High School. And we were selected a hand - - we were hand selected and that grew into us being in the program.

MN: Now did any other people from Patterson Houses - -

JF: There were one or two others.

JP: Robert Maddox?

JF: No, Robert Maddox was from the Mitchell Projects. Ralph Rivera was from the Patterson Projects.

MN: Now, in sort of looking back on your father's career and how the history was written, are there any things that you haven't said that you want to put on record that we haven't talked about?

JF: Yes. Bidy Fleet was probably represented a handful of the revolutionaries or pioneers in the bebop movement. He was one who was sought after by his peers of that period who would go on to become innovators in that genre. And they refer back to Bidy as one of their sources of inspiration and knowledge. So I just feel that it's important to note his place in the evolution of this music.

MN: Did he ever write about his experiences? Did he ever keep a diary?

JF: Not that I know of.

MN: Did he document his own career with scrapbooks?

JF: I - - yes. The scrapbooks that I have here are ones that he assembled.

MN: What about your mother. Did she ever reflect on, you know - -

JF: All the time. She always encouraged us, the children, to tell the world, if you can, about the involvement of your father in this music.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: Now you mentioned when your mother and father met, but you didn't mention how they met.

JF: Right. When dad left Roy Eldridge's band and came across the street to leave from the Theresa Hotel, he came to a little restaurant called Frenchie's and my mother was in there reading a magazine. And they struck up a conversation and that's how it began.

MN: Was there an age difference?

JF: Yes, my father is 15 years older than my mother.

MN: Oh okay.

MG: Do you feel like your father had regrets about - -

JF: Never once, never once.

MG: - - 'cause I don't get that impression - -

JF: He had - - he, in his words, and this is verbatim, he said he's very happy with the job he's done.

MG: But are you the only child that's interested in this, in this history?

JF: I am the only one who has - - the interest is there by all of the children, but somehow the torch has been passed to me. I'm the only one who is playing music. My sister was a clarinetist, my older brother played bass, plays guitar, and my younger brother plays the bass. None of them are pursuing music, they had stopped playing years ago. I am the only one who has continued to play.

MG: And you're still playing right?

JF: Yes.

MG: And teaching?

JF: I teach autistic children in Brooklyn.

MG: So you went on to college and - - after - -

JF: Right.

MG: Where did you go?

JF: I never completed - - I am an assistant teacher so that gives me the leeway and the latitude to - -

MG: Still play?

JF: - - right.

MN: What do your siblings do professionally?

JF: My sister Evelyn is a teacher in the Bronx. My brother William works for the Bloomberg Company in telecommunications. Is that a good thing to say or a bad thing? I don't know, let's wait until after the elections. [laughter]

MG: We don't care.

JF: And my younger brother works for a moving company somewhere in the Bronx.

MN: Okay, Maxine - -

MG: What you know - - what you have learned about your father's history and his importance, are you learning this after the fact - - have you done this research since he passed, or - -

JF: I've always known this. I have known this for at least 25 or 30 years. I have just never said anything.

MG: Now when did you start putting the time in - -

JF: When my mother dies on February 22nd of last year.

MG: I see. That's when you started.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: And so what I have been doing is, I have been reaching out first to the elder

musicians, those who - -

MG: Yes you want to do your own oral history - -

JF: - - I met with Frank West in January of this year.

MG: You look like Frank West, by the way. Doesn't he?

JF: Yes, absolutely. Frank West is one of the top jazz musicians. He is a saxophonist and flutist. He's the one that brought the flute to prominence in jazz. He was with Count Basie's band in the 1950's. He was part of the replacement when Lester Young and Wardell Gray and those guys left Count Basie's band - - Frank Foster and Frank West took the seat. Frank West is now all of maybe 83 years old, but one of his earliest teachers, and that's why - - it's in last years downbeat magazine - - they were doing a retrospective of his life ad they asked him about his beginning and he said 'Well my first teacher was Bidy Fleet.'

MG: So you have interviewed Frank now?

JF: I met with him in January of this year. When he saw me the whole band had to wait.

MG: Because you look just like your father - - he knew right?

JF: That's exactly - - he said 'Wow.' But there's more to my dad than just playing the guitar. He was also an electrician so - -

MG: Yes I'm interested in this about the amplifier.

JF: - - right. So he built a lot of things. When the family lived in the Patterson Projects he had the whole place rigged.

MN: [laughs]

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: You kidding? It was ready to go. He had - - you press the button and this would come on - - blah, blah, and all - -

MN: [laughs]

JF: Yes. The quote that I made earlier about Les Paul taking notes - - there's a publicist in jazz, a gentleman named - - well, there's a well-known publicist in jazz who has invited me down to the Iridium because Les Paul, who is all of about 90 years old, he plays every Monday night, I believe, at the Aridio. So he's invited me down to talk to Les because Les was taking notes about my father's amplifier in the 1940's. Les Paul is known as the grandfather of electronic music.

MN: Right.

JF: He signed a contract many years ago with Gibson Guitars - - and Les Paul and Gibson Guitars go hand in hand - - so what I am saying to you, indirectly, because I don't have the direct information, is that perhaps some of what Les Paul got may have been through Bidy Fleet as well.

MG: And what about your father's connection to Charlie Christian? What do you know about it?

JF: He only talked about him as being one of many guitarists of that era - - apparently Charlie Christian had a great opportunity when he worked with Benny Goodman. And so that put him more in the public's eye than other guitarists who might have been as good, if not better.

MN: Now, Stanley do you have any questions based on this? Or Andrew?

Andrew Tiedt (AT): - - I'm soaking it all in right now.

MG: Can you identify the people in this?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: The gentleman at the piano is the lesser known pianist from Washington D. C., that's Claude Hopkins.

MG: Oh, yes. Right!

JF: That's the great Claude Hopkins. The bass player and the singer, I do not know. But the fellow right next to my father and above Claude Hopkins is Scoville Brown, the great clarinetist and saxophone player. What people need to know about Scoville Brown is there's a well known photograph called 'A Great Day in Harlem,' well he was the other photographer there.

MG: Oh really?

JF: Oh yes.

MG: - - Was Milt Tinton there?

MN: - - Stanley has a question?

JF: Milt was there, and as far as I know, Scoville Brown was one of the other photographers.

MG: If you scan this and send it to me I might be able to identify them for you.

JF: Okay. I forgot who they were. I met with Bill Shaft and he knew - -

MG: Oh yes, he'll know. Did he know?

JF: - - he knew all of them.

MG: Oh but you wrote it down somewhere. So you have it.

JF: It's somewhere in the house.

MN: Stanley?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

Stanley (S?): You said that your father turned down the opportunity to go to Louis

Armstrong because of the stereotypes and what not. What stereotypes were you referring to?

JF: Those that portrayed African American people in a negative caricature.

S?: As in like...

JF: As being somehow dimwitted, always grinning when situations were not that humorous.

MN: Okay, well, any concluding remarks?

JF: No, I just thank everyone for the opportunity. Because - -

MG: Oh I'm not through.

[laughter]

MG: You mentioned, I think in an e-mail to Mark, the Blue Flame.

JF: The Blue Flame.

MG: How do you know about the Blue Flame?

JF: The Blue Flame on the corner of 138th Street. It was a bar slash - -

MG: Do you know about it first hand? Have you gone in there?

JF: Having gone in there? No, I've never been in there.

MG: Okay, so tell me how you heard about the Blue Flame.

JF: Because my father would play there from time to time.

MG: Well this is what I - -

MN: He played there?

MG: See - - this is - - thank you. And when would he have played in the Blue Flame?

JF: This had to have been in the mid to late 60's.

MN: Really?

MG: So he played with Tina Brooks?

JF: He could have. The name Tina Brooks rings a little bell in my ear - -

MG: Well we know that Tina Brooks played in the Blue Flame often in that period so it's possible, I could see that. Have you ever heard of Oliver Beener?

JF: Oh absolutely, sure.

MG: Oh.

JF: Oliver Beener, yes. But these are not - - these are names that I might have heard from somewhere other than my father speaking about it.

MG: Okay. So you don't know who your father played with at the Blue Flame?

JF: I only know that he played with a pianist names Astor Phipps. I don't know if Astor Phipps rings a bell.

MG: Okay, well - - we'll find out - -

JF: You would - - most people would know about Arthur Phipps who was a bass player but he's Astor's brother.

MG: Oh, no kidding?

MN: Now, they're from the Bronx or are they from Harlem.

MG: No, they're from the Bronx.

JF: No they're from Manhattan and Brooklyn.

MG: But they play in the Bronx. I mean their name comes up in the Bronx.

JF: Okay, I wouldn't know that.

MG: And the bass player is Arthur right?

JF: Arthur Phipps, yes.

MG: Any other clubs you can recall that he played at?

JF: In the Bronx?

MG: Yes.

JF: The Club 845.

MN: Okay.

JF: Did you see the flyer in there?

MN: There's an 845 flyer?

JF: Absolutely.

MN: Oh my god.

MG: Did he play in the 845 often?

JF: That I do not know.

MG: Do you recall?

JF: I don't know.

MG: But the Blue Flame. Because, you know, we were looking for the name of that club and you solved this mystery. Because I was like, Ray Baker said 'Oh yeah, well you know on 138th Street there was - - Ray Barretto remembers there was this club' - -

MN: Well this is very interesting. There is now a hip bar in the same location called 'The Blue Ox' where they have poetry slams.

MG: You saw that right?

MN: Oh can you make a copy of that?

MG: Yes, it's on his.

[crosstalk]

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

MN: The Blue - - I wonder if the Blue Ox owners who are young Latinos knew it's the same place as The Blue Flame and it was a transition.

JF: I don't know.

MN: It's one of the hip new clubs in the South Bronx.

JF: Is it really?

MN: There's poetry slams - -

MG: Same location?

MN: it's on 138th-139th and Third Avenue. It must be the same or very close.

MG: What's the name of it?

MN: The Blue Ox. Any more questions?

MG: Would you be interested if we could have some kind of talk on Bidley Fleet where we could blow up some of the photos and start to build and archive?

JF: Sure, absolutely. I contacted Dan Morgenstern at Rutgers because what was suggested to me was that 'James, you have information that a lot of people don't know about' - -

MG: That you could give a talk over there?

JF: Yes. I could give lectures. I may not have all of the information about jazz music, but in terms of bebop music and its evolution, that I know about.

MN: And also the fact that you could give demonstrations of some of - - in musical terms, of the chord changes - -

JF: I could bring it down to them and show them exactly - -

MN: Because that would be very interesting for somebody like me who's not that sophisticated that I can translate it in my head, to see it done in actual music form.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: Okay, I can't guarantee that that will make it any easier. But at least it will be a description and a demonstration of how it's done.

[Interruption]

MN: Your family stayed in the Patterson Houses - -

JF: My mother did.

MN: - - for 48 years?

JF: For 48 years.

MN: So through all the changes and the deterioration she never - -

JF: Never chose to move.

MN: Wow. So what year did she pass away?

JF: Last year.

MN: So you still came - - everybody came back to visit her?

JF: It was still where the focus of - - that is where the parents were.

MG: What year did you move in?

JF: We moved in October of 1956.

MN: Wow. Now, as you are going back over the years, what are some of the things you have noticed that are different?

JF: The ethnicity of the people - - completely different.

MN: In what way?

JF: Just racially. The racial mix up. It's more Latino-based now and it absolutely was not that way in the 1950's.

MN: Right. It is a predominantly Latino population?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon and James Pruitt

Interviewee: James Fleet

Session 1 August 31, 2005

JF: Right, as is the bulk of the Bronx now. So, that is the first thing. The second is the lack of sense of family. The lack of it. When we were growing up, the housing projects were family based. There were intact families. The second is the lack of caring that people have for their neighborhood, for their community. I grew up with a - - everyone had a sense of community. I mean there were times if you sat on the top of a bench, police would come and give you a fine. If you walked across the grass, that is a ten dollar fine.

MN: And what about things like respect for elders?

JF: That is something that the - - a lot of the youngsters - - you know, I don't want to generalize it too much but many of the youngsters, and even adults, they don't know anything about respect, being a reciprocal thing.

MN: But did people treat your mother with respect as an - -

JF: Revered - - she was revered throughout the community.

MN: So something remained where a person like your mother - -

JF: Well there's a reason why. She was heavily involved in community affairs in the south Bronx. My mother and another lady named Blanche Dixon.

MN: Oh, you told me about Blanche Dixon. Tell us a little on record, a little - -

JF: Blanche Dixon helped to organize many activities throughout the community within the Board of Education. She was one of the founding members that formed paraprofessionals into being - - coming into being. So, she also figured into our family. She is my - - was my sister's mother-in-law.

MN: Right. And where did she live?

JF: She lived in the Melrose - - no, the Jackson Projects.

MN: The Jackson Projects.

JF: Yes.

MN: Now what are some of the activity - - the community activities that your mother was involved in?

JF: Title One programs - - the names of the programs I have forgotten. But it had to do with after school programs - - these are programs that left.

MN: So she worked - - she did a lot of work with youth?

JF: She did a lot of work with different organizations. Jose Serrano Sr., you know who he is right? Jose Serrano Sr. - - my mother was his tutor - -

MN: Wow.

JF: - - helped him to get his GED, which he still remembers. So she was a mentor in many ways to a lot of people who once again went on to other areas of life.

MN: Did she ever go back to college?

JF: She had always wanted to, but never did.

MN: So she was, by virtue of being a figure who is involved - - that, you know, she got this respect from everyone around her.

JF: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

MN: Okay, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]