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## Gregg, Earnest

Gregg, Earnest. Bronx African American History Project  
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Interviewee: Ernest Gregg  
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison  
Date: July 12<sup>th</sup> 2005

Mark Naison (MN): 19<sup>th</sup> interview of the Bronx African American history project were here with Ernest Gregg, who is a principle in Mt Vernon, who was born in the Bronx and worked for many years in the New York City school system. Today is July 12<sup>th</sup> 2005 and were at Fordham University. So Mr. Gregg tell us a little about your family background is your family southern or Caribbean?

Ernest Gregg (EG): My family is southern, my father was born in Orangeburg, South Carolina and my mother was born in draus, South Carolina. My father came from a very prominent family of 11 brothers and sisters and all of them went to college, my father would be in his 90's right now, if he was still living, In his late 90's. One of my uncles was a medical doctor and my grandfather was a very prominent minister in Orangeburg and he supervised other ministers and my mother on the other hand, coming from {Draroir}, did not grow up in a very prominent family but she had, my mothers maiden name and she was {Galeski} and she was a cousin to dizzy Galeski, better know as John burkes Galeski and I thought very early on that when I became a teenager I started taking trumpet thinking that, that this talent was hereditary and I found out it wasn't.

MN: Right. Now did your family live in Harlem Before they came to the Bronx?

EG: No they did not, they moved from the south to the Bronx they never lived in Harlem.

MN: ok, what year did they come to the Bronx?

EG: Wow, that's a good question

MN: Now you were born in the Bronx.

EG: I was obviously, my mother did, I guess my mother and father did spend some time they lived in Atlantic City for a while but I don't know. I would say 30's 40's probably 30's

MN: Now, do you know how they found the Bronx? Did they have relatives who lived there, you know, most of the people we've interview didn't come directly from the south to the Bronx, they went to Harlem first. What sort of work did your father do?

EG: My father was a Pullmans porter??

MN: ok, because that, its seems like the first settlers of Morrisania were Pullman Porters and Postal workers

EG: yes

MN: So he was a Pullman porter, were there other, Did you know of other families were the father were Pullman porters when you were growing up?

EG: Not in the same area, no.

MN: ok, where was the house your family was living on, or the apartment, when you were born?

EG: 154<sup>th</sup> E. 169<sup>th</sup>

MN: Ok and how long did you live at that address?

EG: Until I was 12 and they condemned the neighborhood and tore down the buildings and built the projects up there.

MN: Right, What was it like? What was the design of the building? What it a 5 story walk up?

EG: It was a 5 story walk up.

MN: ok, and what floor did you family live on?

EG: the 2<sup>nd</sup>

MN: 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Front or back? Or it went all the way through?

EG: I was a railroad apartment, its was the whole, -- coming up the stairs on the right side.

MN: ok

EG: There were 2 apartments on the floor

MN: right, and did you have a fire escape?

EG: yes we did.

MN: Front and back or just front?

EG: Front

MN: Did your family use the fire escape at all?

EG: I used it occasionally

MN: right, how many children were there in the family?

EG: 2 brothers 1 sister

MN: right, what was the age order? Were you the youngest?

EG: I was the youngest; I was the youngest of all children

MN: right, now when you were growing up was the block you lived on multi-racial or was it predominantly black?

EG: It was predominately black except that Park Avenue, which is right around the corner from where we used to live, was interracial. There was a lot of whites living on Park Avenue.

MN: do you recall what their ethnic background was?

EG: They may have been Jewish,-partially polish;-we also had gypsies periodically living in the neighborhood.

MN: Gypsies!

EG: Gypsies. I remember them

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MN: Now what about Church? Was your family regular church goers and what church were they a member of?

EG: Morrisania Presbyterian

MN: Morrisania Presbyterian which was located on what? So was it walking distance?

EG: yes, walking distance of the house I can't remember the street.

MN: Ok, We could track that down. Now was there a active street life on your block when you were growing up?

EG: Oh yes

MN: What sort of games did you play in the street?

EG: Baseball, spinning tops, skully, just all sorts of things we made our own carts out of milk cartons and old roller skates. It seems like there were seasons of sports, I mean they had certain things you did in certain seasons and it was always, we were always very competitive and it was all kinds of sports and games going on in the block.

MN: Was the block monitor by adults? Did you feel safe playing when there is a very strong adult presence?

EG: Yes, the block was extremely safe, all the parents knew each other, all the children knew the parents and grew with a lot of respect for the parents it was very safe.

MN: Now you said you attended P.S. 2, How far was that from where you lived?

EG: I was walking distance about 4 blocks; I believe it was on Washington Avenue I'm not to sure.

MN: Was the classes you in; was the school multi-racial when you were going there?

EG: There were, it was predominantly black but there were whites who attended

MN: Were there Puerto Ricans on your block? Or was it mostly black and then whites on Park Avenue?

EG: It was mostly black around my block and there were whites on Park Avenue.

MN: right, how did you regard your elementary school experience? Was it a positive one? You think the school, you're a principle now so looking back on the {pedagogy}, the style, what do you make of P.S. 2.

EG: It's a very interesting question because at the time I didn't have anything to compare P.S. 2 to, except that when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> I moved from there to the Castle hill projects. The castle hill projects had just opened

MN: right

EG: it was 1960, and I remember feeling very inferior to the students because the work in the north Bronx in P.s. 138 which I, was my new school which was predominantly white which was far superior then the class work I was getting at P.s. 2 so I guess they didn't do such a great job in preparing me because it was still the 6<sup>th</sup> grade but a superior school system.

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MN: right, now did you feel like when you were at the school that the teachers were underestimating or disrespectful of the students?

EG: No, I think basically it was a time, I didn't think that at all. I thought that I grew up during a time period where adults were the authority you respected the adults and that was that. There was no question about it but I never felt like they treated us differently or anything like that.

MN: right, now was the school tracked? Like class or ability level?

EG: Yes I was tracked by ability level

MN: Ok, Now were you in one of the upper track classes?

EG: No I wasn't I was always an average student

MN: Really

EG: I was always average student.

MN: So you were in like a 3 or a 4 class?

EG: Yes

MN: Now what about your family, did your family emphasize academics or was there a lot of pressure on you to perform?

EG: yes I was the last child and my father wanted one of his children to become college educated my other brothers and sisters graduated from High School did not explore going to college and so I felt a little pressure in that regard and he attended south Carolina state university. - My mother went to college for 2 years so I did feel pressure about going to college but I also wanted to go to college.

MN: Right, Now why is it that your older brothers and sisters didn't? Did things happen in the neighborhood that affected them?

EG: I suppose that during that time because you could get a job coming out of High school and my oldest brother decided to go into the air force and my sister worked for the telephone company and my other brother just got a job in an office so during the times I graduated and during the time I grew up it wasn't necessary really to go to college. You went to college if you wanted to.

MN: Right. Now was music an important part of your household? Given that your uncle was one of the greatest jazz musicians of a modern era.

EG: Yes, It's a good question, No, strangely enough the answer is no, It was not. I knew of Dizzy Galespi because of my mother's discussion of him but I have an uncle who was a jazz enthusiast and who shared many jazz records with me 78's ---- through his efforts I became very familiar with the music and the music of Dizzy Galespi but it wasn't really something really, Music wasn't a big part of the experience in my home and my brother and sisters their always, they had 78's of contemporary music.

MN: right

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EG: I do remember one specific album that really caught my attention. a jazz album my brother had by Miles Davis "someday my prince will come" and I remember listening to it on a regular basis when I was about 14 I used to listen to it and it used to put me to sleep.

MN: Right, now what about the do-op rock and roll music that was in the community at the time was this something you were aware of? Was there street corners singing and was this something you got drawn into in any way?

EG: Yes, it was (crosstalk)

MN: One second I'll just-

(Tape Break)

MN: So, was there street corners singing on your block?

EG: Yes. Yes there were. All kinds of a – do- op groups - - Prunners and singers my brother belong to one of those groups. I was very much influenced by Frankie Limon; I knew all his songs (crosstalk) some people say I had a voice like his.

MN: So you could sing high pitched like that?

EG: Until my voice changed (Laughter) (Crosstalk) Very much influenced by the music of the time and I remember clearly friends of mind and I going to the Apollo Theater to see James Brown and Pattie label and The Temptations (Crosstalk)

MN: and this is after you had moved to castle hill when you were a little older.

EG: This is when I was a little older (Crosstalk)

MN: So this whole experience, musical experience really was part of your –

EG: Yea musical experience was a part of growing up but it wasn't really emphasized in my home (crosstalk) my brother and sister really, I got that from my brother and sisters.

MN: Right, now what about Latin music, was that part of, you now your co hoard - and growing up also.

EG: Latin music was a huge part of my growing up. In particular, I guess as I got older. The music of Eddie Parmer, Tito Puente - - really became a great part of, and dancing was specifically really one of the greatest equalizers in terms of meeting young ladies (Crosstalk) so if you didn't know how to dance as a teenager you really couldn't court our self. I had a friend who taught me how to dance to Latin music and salsa (Crosstalk) that was pretty good. Yea it was pretty good.

MN: - -Now, Was – You mentioned that your family moved when – when they began construction on the Claremont Houses.

EG: That is correct

MN: was your sense that the neighborhood that was demolished for those houses was a deteriorating neighborhood or was it a very stable – neighborhood when the so called slum clearance took place?

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EG: I often times I ask myself that question although the building that I lived in really was not a building that, I remember not having key often and I remember not having hot water, but in terms of everything else the neighborhood was thriving. It had very, - - two parent families, working – I don't remember to many people on welfare. (Crosstalk) so I thought it was a thriving neighborhood.

MN: and it was, you felt safe.

EG: I felt extremely safe.

MN: And your sisters and brother can come home late at night (Crosstalk) they could walk from the subway, so the concept that this was a slum.

EG: There was no concept it was a slum, it was my home (crosstalk)

MN: And in retrospect - - - You would more agree with Jane Jacobs that you would destroy a thriving neighborhood to put up something that could not be that kind of community. (Crosstalk)

EG: That is correct. I feel that it was, personally - - it was very disheartening for me to move anyway cause all my friends lived there(crosstalk) and secondly - - In retrospect because we knew everybody everyone felt like they were a community building the projects was one of the worst experiments, urban experiments ever (crosstalk)

MN: - What were the castle, your family moved into a new -?

EG: Development

MN: Development now was this low income or moderate income.

EG: It was moderate (Crosstalk)

MN: It was Moderate income.

EG: It was middle, Castle hill when I moved into it was really a step up from us from us. It was – middle class neighborhood, we thought it was a moderate – They did income checks, and I remember distinctly moving into this neighborhood it was, had – There was sidewalks were even constructed in many of the places – you had to walk about a half a mile or so to the stores cause they hadn't even built (crosstalk)

MN: So this was not even a place were they cleared other houses (crosstalk) to build it. It was vacant land.

EG: Right, it was vacant land

MN: and was the development multi racial in the beginning??

EG: yes it was. A matter of fact in the beginning it was mostly white and we were one of the few black families to move in.

MN: Now was your mother working at the time?

EG: yes she was

MN: and what sort of work was she doing?

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EG: She was a Home aid - - yea she was a home aid, and she retired as such.

MN: - - Was it a big adjustment for you to make this move? – Or was it a pretty quick adaptation?

EG: In terms of moving to castle hill?

MN: Yea

EG: - - Knowing that I had no choice in the matter and - when I moved up to castle hill of course the first thing you want to do is meet friends and so I looked in the park and saw a lot of people in there in the park and meeting a lot of friends – so the adjustment was, I thought the adjustment went very quickly.

MN: Now when you say go to the park is this - - the way you meet people is playing ball for you?

EG: That is correct.

MN: And which ball, which games did you play mostly?

EG: Well when I first moved up to Castle hill I didn't know much about basketball and now it's the sport of the day, so ended up learning how to play basketball - - ended up being pretty good at it.

MN: Now did you learned it out of eye or you just got a ball and practiced yourself, got up early and just worked on your moves?

EG: Yea, just basically by playing it – by playing with other guys and practicing I learned how to play basketball.

MN: Now in terms of, like, - going back to - that morrisania neighborhood, - other than playing in the street, what was some of the things you did for recreation? Did you go to the movies at all?

EG: Yes we did. (Crosstalk)

MN: What were the theaters you went to?

EG: - The Fen way, its funny I had - - that really strange case I really haven't talk about this in years. – It was a movie theater called the Fen way near Bathgate Avenue and there was a movie theater on, I think it was third.

MN: Bathgate between where and where?

EG: Oh (laughter) I don know, and there was another theater, it was called the tower, and I distinctly remember going, it was 25 cents or so and I remember going to the movie seeing – 3 - movies and all the cartoons you can watch.

MN: Now did you ever go up the hill to Boston road or most of your stuff was down in your particular area?

EG: yea, most of my – social - interactions were in my neighborhood.

MN: And the shopping also, (crosstalk) and the theater and the school. Down the hill was –



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EG: Down the hill was off limits and up the hills was off limits in many cases although I did go to Boston – Boston road occasionally and I think – the tower, Now that I'm thinking about it, I think the tower was on Boston Road.

MN: Now were there any gangs back in the day and how did that play itself out? - What were some of the gangs you remember?

EG: I remember the Fordham Baldy, The Disciples. And I remember being warned not to go to Brook Avenue or - Webster Avenue I remember that - .

MN: - And that not that far from you, - and there were certain streets that were said that you got to be careful (Crosstalk)

EG: That's right, that's exactly right

MN: And (laughter) what would they allegedly do to you?

EG: well they would beat you up.

MN: You weren't going to get stabbed?

EG: no – no you would get – nothing that serious but I just – They knew everyone who lived in the neighborhood and they saw this as a invasion of the neighborhood someone coming into the neighborhood who shouldn't be. You didn't have girlfriends in that area or didn't have friends in that area so I just stayed basically in my own block in my own neighborhood.

MN: Now when you went, did you go to any recreation centers when you were living in that area you know any after school programs wise.

EG: I went to camp; I went to summer camp in those areas. I don't remember which summer camp I went to.

MN: Ok, Now you moved to Castle Hill, did you go to elementary school or junior high there?

EG: I went to – That was my last four month of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade - . I was in P.S. 138 in district 8 at the time for about 3 or 4 months.

MN: and then you went to junior high?

EG: then I went to junior high school 101, Throgsneck.

MN: In Throgsneck?

EG: yes, in Throgsneck

MN: Now what was that like?

EG: that was different, that was very different because I remember being intimidated – in junior high school. There were guys and there were drugs - they were very tough and rough.

MN: Were these like Italian, mostly Italian (crosstalk)

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EG: No, Mostly black guys.

MN: - - Now Throgsneck, - were they Kids from the Throgsneck houses or, because Throgsneck was – a pretty seGreggated area.

EG: --- I may be getting It confused, - I remember 101 being, It was very mix, 101 was very mixed as well as saffron rd. I guess – it was intimidating for me because the number of people that were there and High school was really the time, place were I was really intimidated because I – some of the big tough guys— who were black.

MN: wow, when you say intimidating would they go out of their way to find people who they looked at as a little soft or (Crosstalk) and use all the theatrical techniques?

EG: Oh yes, oh yea – and then they would come – they would always walk, they traveled in groups (crosstalk) and there's always an instigator who said something that you said something you didn't say to see if I - -

MN: This is very interesting cause I had a similar experience at a High school and had a transfer with 6 guys in a locker room, one guy said I stole his sweat socks in front of his friends to provoke a fight, so it was that kind of stuff (crosstalk)

EG: It was that kind of stuff

MN: They found – cause you came from a little more secure family and so --- did you have to fight a lot or was it more like being chased or it was being made fun of or all the above?

EG: I tried to avoid fights, I didn't fight a lot, but I was in situations that I had to figure a way of getting out and , -- Sometimes my – one of my friends at the time told someone else I had a - - my name was Ernest and there was another guy named Ernie, and they had a conversation that Ernest could beat up Ernie and there was this big debate as to who would - - - win the fight If we fought, and fortunately Ernie wasn't a big fighter neither was I we really didn't make a difference our name was similar we really didn't want to fight so we didn't have a fight, but I tried to figure out ways to get out of fights, sometimes I had to run home (laughter) to get out of fights/

MN: Did you ever use humor to get out of fights?

EG: - I wasn't that true at that point.

MN: - - This is the genesis of some comedians.

EG: Yes it was, Yes, I generally tried to avoid fight by trying to reason with people, sometimes I did know a few jokes but I didn't necessarily use it to get out of it.

MN: Now what about friends, did you have a lot of friends in school? And that helped.

EG: Yes, It helped that I had a group of people that I was always with and they knew me and we knew each other and kind of hooked up with each other.

MN: Now what did kids do after school in Castle Hill, were there organized programs or you did things yourselves?

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EG: Well, there was after school, -- It was actually a center that opened up in the evening and I could go there after I finish my homework and ate my dinner on certain night, my mother would allow me to go and it had recreational equipment, we used to play basketball, so there was a center for children to go to.

MN: Now at your Junior High were there like teens, were there cultural activities, were there things you can get involved in or it was pretty much you went to school or you went home?

EG: Well I know there a lot of different after school programs at the time I wasn't involved in any, we had a bus called the special and the special it transported us from Castle Hill to Throgsneck without any stop and it was just a straight ride so I would always get on the special and go home and that's what I did.

MN: So you felt much more at home in Castle Hill then in Throgsneck. (Laughter)

EG: That's correct.

MN: Now what about Monroe High School was that a -- were you more involved in activities in Monroe?

EG: Interestingly no I wasn't I was -- I thought I had a future as a athlete and I would have had I really pursued track cause I had excellent, I had outstanding, I had very good talents in track but track wasn't Flamboyant enough for me nor was I encouraged -- whenever I ran or raced - I always came first and even in physical education when we were running around the track Id always come in first and I remember one wintery day we were in shorts, they took us outside in shorts (laughter) and I was glad to run but I should of pursued a, - probably I should of really pursued track more aggressively but I didn't have to encourage me to do something.

MN: Right, - Because Grober Johnson ran track when he was at Monroe.

EG: Yes

MN: was your bestest in sprints or middle distance?

EG: Sprints, 50 yard dash, 100 yard dash and I guess also a lot of the guys on the track team use to run, use to encourage you to run long distance and I wasn't up to it to run long distance at all.

MN: -- Was it exciting being at Monroe, was there a lot going on that made it interesting to be there or is it more like something you try to survive?

EG: It was, I enjoyed being in High School I mean -- I enjoyed being in high school for many reason I enjoyed being with my friends and also -- I got very interested in young lady so that was a good thing, to go to school and this young lady liked you and wanted to meet you and there were parties on the weekends so as I became older school took on a different meaning for me, it wasn't just about books it was also about socializing and meeting people.

MN: Now, -- was these apartment parties that were or house parties?

EG: House Parties, they were house parties.

MN: and were they all over the Bronx or they were cons --

EG: yea they were all over the place, I remember distinctly not going to a few of the place that I was, -- Parties I didn't go to and I was glad I didn't cause they were all kinds of problems in certain neighborhoods.

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MN: Were the parties tended to be divided by race or did they cross racial and ethnic boundaries?

EG: - - They were divided by race.

MN: Now what about the Latin kids, did they go to the black parties and visversa or did they have their own sort of scene?

EG: No, there were some Hispanic - - who went to black parties and there were at first the Hispanics in Castle Hill there were just so few of them when I was growing up, so they hung out with us - - so we ever we socialized they socialized, basically.

MN: Now at these house parties were there usually parents or not always?

EG: Yea, always parents there, unless you cut from school (Laughter) and went to someone's home.

MN: Now did people feel pretty safe at these or was there crashes that went around?

EG: Well I guess, you know there are always trying to get in parties they weren't supposed to, but usually they respected the adults of the house hold so someone father would get involved or someone's uncle would get involved and it usually discouraged people from breaking in at night.

MN: now when you were in Monroe were you encouraged to go to college by any of the teachers there?

EG: Absolutely not, a matter of fact the guidance counselor told me that I wasn't college material because at the time I was - - basically getting a general diploma. I wasn't even on the academic track but I hadn't been challenged and basically I didn't discover that I was - that I had the academic ability until I attended Sarah loins I guess - - I know I'm moving - (crosstalk)

MN: Ok so this is an interesting thing it sounds like you weren't - - particularly challenged in elementary school, Junior high school was more difficult than you remember, you were in the general track in high school. How did you become intellectually awakened and what was that process like?

EG: - - That's a very good question. I think in 1966 when I graduated from high school my brother had a friend who worked in Bed-Stuy in a project, what's the name of the project? I cant remember, It will come to me, anyway it was a project for youth to - - youth in action, its called youth in action it's a project were blacks in particular were, - - they were training youth for leadership and I remember going into the project and hearing some very profound things and things about black history I had never heard about, people I never heard about, great people I never heard about. I heard about the great history about the Egyptians and that inspired me and finally on my way to class Ursey, which is in South Carolina I started reading the autobiography of Malcolm X.

MN: Now how did you end up acquiring the class from University? Was that the year right after college?

EG: That was the year right after college (Crosstalk) right after high school, excuse me, my father attended south Carolina state and Kafline and I had my fathers family owed property actually on {Klafline} University, and my uncle and aunt taught at Klafline.

MN: Ok so your father really wanted this to happen so he made sure you got admitted to Klaphline, and this was more his initiative than yours or you?

EG: well I wanted to go to college I - - and I had heard so many things about the south actually to ell you the truth my grades weren't, my grades (laughter) were so poor, that's the only school I could get into at the

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time cause you had to have a B average to get into a city university and you had to be on the academic track. So the only place I could really get into was a southern school.

MN: Right, so you were there, what was that experience like after being in Monroe?

EG: oh, I remember going down the first day, it was a Sunday, and I was in the middle of campus, cause the campus is so small, I said where is the campus? And I was standing In the middle of it, but I remember the first thing that I encountered after having gone off, traveled off campus was a white only bowling alley. In Orangeburg South Carolina it became a huge issue later on.

MN: And this was 1966? They still had a white only bowling alley even after the civil rights act of 1964.

EG: That's correct, and of course a friend of mine and I, who was from New York City, we were inspired to bowl (Laughter)

MN: So what was that like, you walked in?

EG: And everyone stopped bowling and we were asked to leave, which we did, but interestingly enough a year later snick organized in, - Orangeburg, South Carolina around that bowling alley and it was later called Orangeburg Massa (Crosstalk)

MN: Yea we all knew about that, and was that somebody Sammy Young Junior or something?

EG: Yes

MN: So it was the bowling alley that triggered that demonstration that lead to the violent encounter? (Crosstalk) Now were you there when this was going on?

EG: I - - Had just left, I told my father the year - - The semester I didn't go back I told my father I could endure another year of Clapton University, the south was not progressive enough, my family thought I was a revolutionary, I just couldn't - (Crosstalk)

MN: - - How long were you there all together?

EG: I was there one year.

MN: You were there one year and when they said, they called you a revolutionary what did that mean?

EG: I joined stick, I was part - - Cleveland Sellers and Sandy Duncan I remember both of them organized some students in the area and I was one of the that work with Cleveland Sellers at the time, and I remember speaking to the president of Clapton University and about our concerns about not being able - - but one of the things that disturbed me also was that we really couldn't work in the town, in Orangeburg. There were certain places you couldn't go, there were certain places you couldn't work and those types of things.

MN: So your family who lived there for generations they saw you as -

EG: Yea they saw me as a rebel rouser, supporting me very lovingly. I think they just didn't want me to end up in jail or in trouble nor did they want me to disgrace the Gregg name. Which was a big thing.

MN: Now ok you left Clapton after a year and what next?

EG: I left Clapton went through night for a while (Crosstalk)

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MN: In New York?

EG: In New York, I went to Hunter for a while and then I just, - - I don't even remember how I tell you the truth but someone mentioned to Sarah Lawrence. - - And I had never heard of Sarah Lawrence, - I ended up going to Sarah Lawrence at the time - - there was a black organization having a barbeque or some type of - - and I remember going there and really falling in love with Sarah Lawrence.

MN: Now what year was this?

EG: - - This is - - 70, 69.

MN: Ok 69 or 70.

EG: Falling in love with Sarah Lawrence and meeting a wonderful women by the name of Dean Mattfald, now dean Mattfald was of course the dean at Sarah Lawrence, - a white women who took interest in me, and she saw something in me and she was the one who single handedly - got me into - Sarah Lawrence College and found money to pay my tuition.

MN: Now how many credits did you have that were transferable when you went to Sarah Lawrence from - Clapton and Hunter and all that?

EG: I guess about 30

MN: OK so you had to really go for three years (Crosstalk)

EG: Yes

MN: So this was like almost starting over again, now in those years you were in New York and going to night school did you remain politically active?

EG: No I did not, - I did not remain politically active I simply, well I - yes I did, I'm sorry I'm very sorry there is a piece I'm missing to. I also found that I could write, In 1970 - I was doing a lot of writing and was very inspired by the environment I wrote a book, it was published by Harper and Rowe titled "And the Sun God said That's Hip"

MN: Really, and this was while you were still in college.

EG: This was while I was still in college and I can recite part of it.

MN: and was it a book of poetry?

EG: It was a book of - It was really a children's book but it was - - really inspired by a lot of the work I had read, I was very influence by Langston Hughes and a lot of he urban stories I had heard, but I became very interested in writing during this (Crosstalk)

MN: - - and can you still get this book on Amazon?

EG: It's out of print, its out of print (Crosstalk)

MN: And the Sun God says that hip and it was Harper and Rowe.

EG: Right

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MN: Damn, now where were you living when you were going to Sarah Lawrence were you still –

EG: I was living on campus

MN: And was your family still in Castle hill?

EG: Yes they were.

MN: And how long did they remain there?

EG: Until my father and mother passed on.

MN: Because (Crosstalk

(Tape Break)

MN: Yea that what I wanted, how the black conscience movement effected you because you had that Bedford-Stuyvesant youth and action experience, you were involved in stick at Orangeburg, you leave south Carolina come back to New York, were there other events you went to that a big impression in 68' 69' ?

EG: Yes, there were. I attended a lot of conferences about the black condition, situation in America, but I also took and interest into writing so I went to a lot of black writing conferences.

MN: Could you have any contact with Amery Baraka's groups in Harlem?

EG: - - I attended a number of conferences and or meetings conferences with Amery Baraka was speaking. I used to, my second home was the Schoenberg, I did a lot of research in the Schoenberg Library, and –

MN: And this was even before you were at Sarah Lawrence or?

EG: No, no this wasn't (crosstalk) Yes, yes; I was around the same time.

MN: In 68' or 69' - - 69', 70'

EG: Around that, around the same time that I was beginning to discover, find out the truth about black people and history of the world of African people I started really attending several different lectures.

MN: Who were some lecturer who made a big impression on you?

EG: Dr. Ben, Dr. Benyacom, and Dr. Henry Clark.

MN: Where would they be speaking?

EG: There was several different places. Churches, there was a lecture series on Convent avenue that I use to go to all the time. There were a series of black professors and black lecturers, who attended, - It was called first world or something like that lecturers, and they had a big impression on me. I also attended a writing work – John O Killins had a writing workshop had a writing workshop I, at Bronx Community College (Crosstalk) I used to attend his writing work shops. The poets Vicky Giovanni, I used to attend Schaumberg used to have a lot of Cultural events, Vicky Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez and a lot of other poets, I attended those - - workshops and conferences and I began to explore my own sense of who I was

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through writing. - - While I was at Sarah Lawrence I had a professor, South African guy, Named Willie Kghostile who was a poet.

MN: How do you spell his last name?

EG; I think its KGOSTILE something to that effect, and its - - I'm not pronouncing it correctly cause there is a click in there somewhere its (Click) Kghostile and in any case he was poet and a very well informed writer and historian and he was talking about African mythology one day and he talked about the Sun God - - and it resonated in me so much and I thought about it and I did a lot of research and found out that there was, there wasn't really any mythology dealing with black people, urban mythology dealing with black people in this country so I ended up writing about the Sun God created people of color, which didn't go very (Laughter) in the face of many people because it became a book - - excuse me it was boycotted at the time anyway - - The sun God was written in 1970, it was, I showed it to a friend of mine who attended whose name was lanthy Thomas, she was a student but had already published a book with Harper and Rowe, and editor at that point, her name - - what was the editors name? Ursula Nostra was her name, she was thee, she was the, thee children's publisher of Sarah Lawrence. It just so happen that she loved the story and - - It was just amazing she - within a weeks time I signed a contract. Also, I also share the story with Alice Walkers, Alice Walker also a graduate from Sarah Lawrence; she visited Sarah Lawrence I think in 1970.

MN: So it was a very exciting place to be?

EG: I loved Sarah Lawrence, it was really the place for me to be, cause Sarah Lawrence had, it's a small college and the classes wee very small each class was, - was 6 credits interestingly cause you had to do an independent study and I was a older student and I really loved Sarah Lawrence very much I thought it was one of the most inspiring places That I could, I had ever been.

MN: Now was anyone in your family going through a Parallel evolution or was this you know -

EG: No I guess,, -- now one in my family was going through what I was going through I think it was the timing an the influence of learning from my brothers and sisters mistakes of becoming a really avid reader, listening to, I think one of the greatest things that happen to me was -

(Turn Over Tape)

MN: Began before you went to South Carolina (crosstalk)

EG: I really started listening to jazz since the age of 13, and so yes I would listen to Jazz often and of course I was always familiar with popular music (crosstalk)

MN: Is jazz something that - - helped shaped a different course for you then people who were more into rhythm and blues?

EG: Yes, most definitely cause I would go to jazz clubs by myself at 18-19.

MN: Ok and what were some of the clubs you were going to?

EG: Slugs, Slugs was one of the main (crosstalk) slugs was really like the burden land of the 30's and 40's and Slugs was like the burden land of the (crosstalk)

MN: What street was that on?



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EG: East 3<sup>rd</sup> between B and C

MN: And who were some of the people you saw there?

EG: Jimmy Owen, Jackie McKlein, Sun rah, Woody Shaw, Kenny Hubbid, Lee Morgan. I mean - all the greats, many other people/

MN: No do you ever recall hearing a lot of Jazz in the Bronx?

EG: No, then of course I discovered jazz mobile. Cause I lived in Harlem for a while.

MN: when did you move to Harlem?

EG: I moved to Harlem - - I guess in about - - late 70's early 80's.

MN: ok, so this was after Sarah Lawrence.

EG: This was after Sarah Lawrence.

MN: Now, your getting into the black arts movement and black history and jazz – so that's were this whole list of cultural philosophy. Now how did that, if at all, shape your desire to go into education?

EG: I saw it as one in the same, I saw that the minds of the people had – I just felt that - the system had brain washed a lot of people into believe some misconceptions and I thought that I could help by sharing the truth as I knew it and providing them with a strong academic foundation.

MN: Now did you sort of look back at your own education as an example of how to be.

EG: Yes I did, u know one of the major things – well personally there were so many misconceptions, one Columbus discovered America, number two I was told that Egypt was part of the middle east, wasn't part of Africa. It was so many misconceptions that I felt those things needed to be corrected and my interest in welfare education working with children, and everything I knew just seemed to come together. But I was also at the same time very torn between education and writing and I didn't know which way to go, I'm still – although I have chosen education as my profession writing is still a very – I have a very strong drive to write and I haven't resolve that, reconciled that yet.

MN: Now when you graduated from Sarah Lawrence did you go directly into the New York City public school system?

EG: No I didn't it was the last place I wanted to go cause I thought the New York City Public Schools were part of a conspiracy to really – deceive people and miseducate them.

MN: So what did you do?

EG: I went into day care.

MN: and which organization did you go into?

EG: I became the executive director of Harriet Tubman daycare center in Bed-Stuy.

MN: and how long did you stay there?

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EG: A couple of years

MN: and what made you leave – and did you go from there into the school system?

EG: I went – no I still didn't go into the school system, I went into the school system very late I went into alternative programs, after trying various alternative programs and finding out that these programs are funded and not funded and you have a job you don't have a job. after going through that for several years I decided well maybe I'll try the public school since this is a secure institution which I ended up.

MN: now I want to sort of phase this out because you know – In looking back at sort of your experience in the Bronx certainly there is a lot of good memories, what is some of the things that - stand out for you positive and negative?

EG: The great thing that stands out for me in my experience in the Bronx was that I - the whole concept of African Communalism and community really existed when I was a child and people – people really were

decent, everyone – children respected their parents, we all respected adults, everyone looked out for each other, and so that stands out more than anything else.

MN: You think that's stand out because it's missing now?

EG: Yes, it's so missing

MN: Yea, you lived in a working class black neighborhood were there was caring, respect, mutual aid.

EG: That's correct. That's important.

MN: And us comparable neighborhoods don't have that atmosphere today.

EG: It doesn't exist in most areas.

MN: It doesn't exist in Mt Vernon

EG: No

MN: It doesn't exist in the Bronx.

EG: No. it doesn't

MN: Next interview we'll talk about why you think that happened. So that's something – that block on 169th between where and where?

EG: between Washington and Park

MN: have you ever written about that?

EG: A little bit, when I wrote about – I did a autobiographical sketch and I wrote about it somewhere.

MN: and anything else that you know leaks out, don't you think – this is one of the issues because people a lot – do you think the teachers of that time short changed the children?

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EG: I think the teachers at that time were products of society, they were you know – they went to a school system, they worked through a school system, they didn't – there was only one outstanding teacher that I remember cause I didn't see teacher even as human beings I just saw them as people who simply choose this professional and there is only one teacher who really – that I really thought of as a person in my elementary school and his name was Mr. Wolf and I still remember him.

MN: Now did he reach out to you and see something in you or it was more like just the way he conducted himself with everybody.

EG: I think it was a combination of both, I think he saw something in me too but I saw him as a human being I didn't see him as a teacher and I think that, again I think they were product of society in general and.

MN: was it that they were mean, I wasn't that they were particularly mean I was just that they were - their imaginations and intellect were not directed towards.

EG: Yea, they did what they were told. It was a certain historical tude were adults basically were adults and they were the authority figures and that was that, and you found – you very seldomly found an adult who really - - who really became – you know was really sensitive and humane and was interested in you as a person not just as a student.

MN: Right, anything else you know - when looking back at those times.

EG: I think that was the most important part of looking back at the time and realizing that you didn't live in a community of people later described as the ghetto or a low income neighborhood but to me it was home - - I think that a lot of the children now that attend school they don't have that in their home's they don't have that in their communities, I really give you a sense of who you are as a person - it helps define you I think that's what's missing.

(Tape Break)

MN: Ok you wanted to make some comments about - - things that influenced you in writing *The Sun God Says*\_\_\_\_\_

EG: Yes as I indicated I have a professor name Willie Costasili he taught African American literature but also I had read a lot of works of black writers and poets like Langston Hughes, Coy McKay and the like, and I developed my own sets to what I wanted to write so I also very influenced by urban stories of shine and of Stag alee and signifying monkey.

MN: Now was those things that you were aware of as part of your culture growing up or there things u read about it folk lore and then went back and said huh those were there?

EG: No, I herd those in the street and then went back and found them in literature.

MN: Really? So that - - that kind of, you know, the dozens and all that was a part of growing up in the Bronx?

EG: Yes most definitely.

MN: - - Did you and your friends do that kind of thing.

EG: No, we engaged in the dozens or sounding on people, what it was called at that time, fairly. Fairly.

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MN: and that was something that was going on at elementary school.

EG: A lot of it in Elementary school and mostly – Mostly in junior high school though a lot in junior high school.

MN: so there was a lot of sounding going on.

EG: A lot of mother jokes.

MN: right, now would this be like you know going on at the school yard as well as...?

EG: Yes, the school yard basically was – the school yard for the most part was really sports. - - we used to play the dozens and sound on people during down time. Yea we weren't really involved in sports.

MN: so this was - - you began putting things together that there were these grass roots poetic traditions.

EG: and that's were the Sun Guard came from and having research this whole African mythology as well as urban oral tradition and I d like to share that at least a part of it with you. The Sun God was lonely, it smile at the trees, blinked to the breeze, whistled for the tides and made the rain close its eyes. It laughed at the moon, turned darkness into noon, gave a party on mars and invited all the stars. he made the animals {take sheed} with its raised and boiled the ocean for decades but he was still lonely as loneliness could be cause he was missing you and me so he decided to have some suns, I said suns and daughters and he called for the water and told the soil to toil saying make them like me let them reflect my rays but the jobs wasn't easy cause it took 107 days.

MN: Wow. Now do you still perform this?

EG: no I haven't performed it in a while but I used to do lot of poetry readings so that was one of my key things that I would perform, and it stands in my mind as part of this oral tradition that I now see continuing Russell Simmons def poetry. I see it continuing but this was written in 1970.

MN: now was this at the time the last poets are coming out (crosstalk) and Gill Scott Harran and they were people you were very.

EG: well actually yes, I discovered the last poets in - - I ended up discovering the last poets after this, after I had written this and I had became a friend of one of the last poets Abil Odon who was one of the original last poets. After I worked at a place called futures incorporated, which was a satellite of Antioch College and an urban satellite I was one of the college advisors so.

MN: and was Gill Scott Harran... (Crosstalk)

EG: Gill Scott Harran was – Gill Scott Harran came on the scene after the last poets but – I love Gill Scotts work.

MN: now where you one of the people who saw hip hop as having potential or?

EG: No I didn't, I never saw hip hop as having potential, I still don't see (Laughter). I see - - hip hop having a tradition, I see hip hop coming out of something and going another direction. and I see some of the – like Kanye west and common and a couple of others they even – Common - - him and Kanye West even hook up with the last poets there trying to get back on track, but hip hp is taking another direction that I really disdain and dislike.

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MN: and that's something we can talk about in the next one. Anything else (Crosstalk) Ok Great