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Gumbs, Robert Interview 1

Gumbs, Robert. Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Jacqueline Soboti

Mark Naison (MN): Hello, this is the twenty-eighth interview with the Bronx African American History Project. And we are interviewing Mr. Robert Gumbs, who grew up in Morrisania section of the Bronx on Lyman Place and who is going to be working with us closely over the next few years. Well Rob, what year were you born and where were you born?

Robert Gumbs (RG): I was born in the year 1939 in Harlem.

MN: And, what year did your family move to the Bronx?

RG: The family moved in late 1941.

MN: And did they move to Lyman Place, or did they move somewhere else first?

RG: No, before coming to Lyman Place, they moved to Union Avenue, which is not too far.

MN: Union between where and where?

RG: Union between Holmes Street and 168th.

MN: Now did your family know people in the Bronx when they moved?

RG: No, that's an interesting question. My mother recently told me this, when we were living in Harlem, she visited the health center. And the doctor suggested that she moved to the Bronx because the air was cleaner, sort of interesting story. [Laughs]

MN: Now, did they meet in the United States or did they meet there?

RG: They met there.

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

RG: My father worked for the US government, he worked as an operating engineer, which was primarily taking care of the internal maintenance of buildings.

MN: Was he college educated?

RG: No, he wasn't, but my dad was a very intelligent guy. There were a lot of things; he has a lot of interests. Wanted to be a doctor, but family didn't have the resources.

MN: Right, did your mother work when you were growing up?

RG: Yeah, she did. My mother did, I guess we'd call it domestic type work. Worked for the private industry and cleaning buildings, cleaning offices, that's what she did.

MN: Now what are your first recollections of the Bronx when you were a child?

RG: Very pleasant, very pleasant, very quiet. I think I was fortunate because I grew up on a very small block.

MN: So you grew up on Lyman Place?

RG: Yes, that's pretty much my memories.

MN: Your memories?

RG: Yes, and it was, as I said, it was very small, very intimate. So I got to know a lot of the families and it was very close knit.

MN: Now what type of housing did your family move in to? Was it a walk-up, a private home?

RG: Five-story tenement walk-up, and we lived on the fifth floor. [Laughs]

MN: You lived on the-- [Laughs] Ok, was it facing the street?

RG: No, it was facing the back. And we could look out for, to Prospect Avenue and 169th Street, that was in the back of it.

MN: So your parents couldn't look out the window and see what you were doing in the street?

RG: No, they couldn't. But I was always aware [Laughs] that they would find out.

MN: What was the ethnic makeup of the block when you were growing up?

RG: Lyman Place, on the year that the family moved which was 1943 was ninety-five percent black. I remember no more than two white families.

MN: Really, wow! And it was a mixtures of southern and Afro-Caribbean or predominantly Caribbean?

RG: Just the opposite, pretty much southern.

MN: And what elementary school did you go to?

RG: I went to PS 45, which was on Freeman Street and Intervale Avenue, no longer there.

MN: Right, and was that in walking distance from?

RG: Yes.

MN: And did you walk to school yourself, or did your mother or father take you?

RG: No, no my mother entrusted me to be on my own. So from the time I was in the first grade--

MN: So from the time you were five, six years old you would walk.

RG: Yes.

MN: And did you have to cross streets to get there?

RG: Very few, which was very fortunate because the area was pretty much residential..

MN: Right, now was the school, the racial composition of the school comparable to the block?

RG: No it wasn't. At that time, the elementary, both the elementary and the junior high school was fairly integrated. In terms of the percent I in fact I would probably say that it is probably majority white more than black.

MN: Right, now did you as a child feel racial tension in the neighborhood or school?

RG: No, I you know I was reflecting on that and no memories, no feelings of that.

MN: So, it was, it was a very comfortable childhood.

RG: Very, very comfortable, very, somewhat isolating you know, nothing bad. But, you know it was a very relaxed environment.

MN: Now, one question because we are talking about the 1940's, were there many cars on Lyman Place?

RG: Not that many, not if I can remember. There were families that owned cars but I'd say a great percentage of them did not.

MN: Right, was there much traffic going up and down the street? Automobile traffic?

RG: No, in fact it was a one-way block. So, the traffic came from north to south.

MN: And did that mean that kids very comfortably played in the street?

RG: Oh yeah. I mean those are some of my fondest memories. And it was interesting because at that time there was no such thing as a block being cornered off as a play street. So, pretty much the pedestrians, the motorists respected those kids that were playing.

MN: Now, what were some of the street games you played growing up?

RG: Ooh, the street games. Wow, my favorite was stickball. I played stickball, a game called loadies, which was--

MN: Now when, in stickball did you play with pitching into a box on the wall? Or did you play the sewers?

RG: The sewers.

MN: So, if you were self-hitting..

RG: [Laughs] Yeah. The other form of stickball was pitching in, where someone threw you the ball. But no, on the block it was pretty much--

MN: Now, now what is the maximum distance of sewers that anybody on the block carried?

RG: Oh gosh, I remember one of the top players on the block. He could hit a ball from the first sewer, which was closer to the lower end of the block, to Freeman Street.

MN: Whoa.

RG: Which was way up.

MN: Right.

RG: [Laughs] I mean you consider him the Hank Aaron of this time.

MN: Right, now so did you play with, with what they called a Spaulding?

RG: Spaulding, yes the pink ball. Oh yeah, that was it. [Laughs].

MN: And what were some of the other games you played?

RG: At that time, because where we were, because the school at that time had the after school centers basketball, pretty much. That was it, for me. The two popular sports were uh, stickball, softball was another.

MN: And you played softball in the schoolyards?

RG: Yes. In fact the elementary had a, had a playground that accommodated--

MN: Right. Now when you were playing on the block were there always adults who kept a close eye on what was going on? Or it was pretty much the kids took care of themselves?

RG: It was always that adult presence. There was always you know one or two families or perhaps even more, looking out for the kids. I must say about Lyman Place, was a very interesting because even though it was small block it was somewhat divided. We used to call the lower part of the block down the corner, and the upper part up the corner.

[Laughs]

MN: Wait, was it divided simply, was there any class difference?

RG: No, no, no, it was just based on where you lived. You know what apartment to what building, you know. But it was also because we always that the lower part of the block had the better half, so--

MN: And you lived in the lower part?

RG: And I lived in the lower part.

MN: Now, Hetty lived in the, sort of upper.

RG: She lived in the upper part, yes. The upper part of the block that is, where you found some of your private homes.

MN: Right, yeah exactly. Now, were girls part, did they play stickball, or was this strictly segregated?

RG: No, no! Girls pretty much played their own games, we, --the rope games.

MN: Double-dutch.

RG: Double-dutch, yeah pretty much that.

MN: Now you had mentioned that your family attended Trinity Episcopal Church?

RG: Yes.

MN: Were they active members of this church?

RG: My mother to a certain extent, not my father.

MN: Well now did you have to go every Sunday?

RG: It was required up until a certain age. Yeah.

MN: Now this church was you said across the street from Morris High School.

RG: It was right across the street from Morris.

MN: Now was its membership predominantly black?

RG: Yes, yes it was.

MN: Now, do you ever go, were there any like community center that you went to? You know the Pruitts took me by something called Forest Neighborhood House. Was your main supervised recreation area the after-school centers?

RG: The after-school centers were located in the schools.

MN: Right.

RG: PS 54, and a popular after-school center was PS 99, which was on Stephens Avenue, which was a few blocks.

MN: You know what's interesting, PS 99 has hip-hop fame because that is where Grandmaster Flash used to do some of this outdoor jams when hip-hop started.

RG: It was always a sort of cultural center--

MN: This is Junior High School 99?

RG: No, no it was an elementary school.

MN: It was an elementary school?

RG: Yes, yes one of the unique things about the 99 center was they used to have amateur nights. So, a lot of people used to go there just for the entertainment.

MN: Now, was there a lot of music on your block growing up?

RG: The block was pretty musical, well we all involved or we all know had a taste for Rhythm and Blues, or Latin music at the time. In my case, because my parents came from the Caribbean, I was exposed to Caribbean music.

MN: Right, and that's what they played in the house?

RG: Yes, for the most part.

MN: Now what were your teachers like at PS 54?

RG: Looking back they were very supportive. Perhaps, I could say that maybe I was a little bit more fortunate because I thought of my self as being a fairly good student. And, therefore those that were in the upper classes and I came to understand what that was about.

MN: You mean they rated the classes academically?

RG: They rated the classes, oh yes.

MN: One, two, three.

RG: One, two, three, four, five, yes, yup. And I was fortunate to be in the one, one, two, or three classes. So, but they were very attentive looking back.

MN: So, did you ever, you know, as a good student, did you ever feel peer pressure from other kids that made fun of you for doing well in school?

RG: No, no, no. As far as I remember, that didn't exist. You know you did what you, you know the best of your ability. No you weren't judged by that.

MN: Now, at what age did you attend Junior High School? Did you go through--was your elementary school first through eight grade?

RG: It was K through, kindergarten through sixth grade. Then from there was went to junior high school, which was PS 40. So, yeah, that was the grade seven through nine.

MN: Now how far was the junior high school from you?

RG: Right up the block, it was right on Prospect and Ritter Place, between Ritter and Jennings Street.

MN: So you're going, everything is in walking distance.

RG: Everything it was a unique experience. I really never left the area until I went to high school.

MN: So everything you wanted was there.

RG: Was right there.

MN: [Laughs] What was some of the, you know like landmarks for you in the community in terms of stores, movie theaters? Where you know, where did you go, you know when you weren't playing in the street or going to the after school center in the school yard, where are some of the other places you've--

RG: Ok, in terms of movie theaters there was one called the Freeman. In fact my mother was telling me, here again I think you know I think I was very fortunate because my mother took an active interest in both myself and my sisters. And were talking recently, and she reminded me how she used to take us to Freeman, because the Freeman at that time also had entertainment. So--

MN: It had live entertainment?

RG: Live entertainment, she recalls, taking me to the shows featuring Nat King Cole and perhaps Billy Eckstine.

MN: What? You have Nat King Cole and Billy Eckstine?

RG: Yes, yes at the Freeman.

MN: At the Freeman, and this was this was when you were in elementary school?

RG: Yes, yes.

MN: So in other words the top of the line black entertainers were going to the Bronx? To perform?

RG: Yes, in fact there is a history of that. Um, because of the prominence of clubs like the 845, Sylvia's Blue Morocco, Hunts Point Palace which is another place that was, you know, frequented by the leading jazz musicians of the time.

MN: Yeah, because a lot of people have mentioned that the Hunts Point Palace was a great place for Latin Music. But even before that--

RG: Before that, that's right, that's right. That was a little before me, but you know, you know in reading about this the Hunts Point Palace for example it has the top jazz artists.

MN: Who were some of the, you know, jazz artists that you recall?

RG: Oh, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Dexter Gordon, Thelonius Monk, all the top jazz artists were there at the Hunts Point Palace.

MN: Right, now you had mention that Thelonius Monk had family that lived on Lyman Place?

RG: Yes, yes.

MN: And that you recall seeing him?

RG: Oh yes, oh no that was always an interesting--one of the individuals who lived in fact right across the street was a musician by the name of Elmo Hope. Who was also one of the founders of Bebop, he was a pianist.

MN: And he lived on Lyman Place?

RG: He lived across the street, um, you know from me. And I came to learn later on that he was a very close associate of Thelonius Monk. So--

MN: Elm Hope?

RG: Elmo

MN: Elmo, now did he ever make records on his own?

RG: Yes, Elmo recorded with some of the early Bebop artists, lets see Miles, I don't know if he did anything with Charles Parker. But he was one of the founders.

MN: Now when you're in elementary school, were you aware of jazz?

RG: No I wasn't but here again being very fortunate because of the schools, particularly the junior high schools. Junior High School 40 was known as a music and art school.

MN: Wow

RG: So if you had a particular aptitude or intellectual learning, you were placed in, going back we were talking to these called the ones and the twos. Generally if you were in the one, two, or seven classes you were assigned a musical instrument.

MN: And you could take it home?

RG: Yes!

MN: This is what, that is what people at Patterson who went to Clark Junior High; they were able to take instruments home.

RG: Yea, ooh.

MN: This was in the public--

RG: Yes, oh yes. And they also had an art program. The lower grades, well the lower number grades specialized in art. So it was a very unique junior high school, I think.

And I think it had tremendous influence on me.

MN: Wow now, was, were there, did you hear people singing on your block? Was there much of that?

RG: No, no you didn't hear that but somehow you sensed you know that it was a musical environment. But no, not unlike other blocks, didn't know anyone particularly. In fact, when I talk about Elmo Hope I knew the family but I didn't know him personally, but I knew that he was a prominent jazz musician.

MN: Right. Now what other movie theaters did you go to? What other than the Freeman?

RG: Ok, the Freeman, the other theaters were located on Prospect Ave. There was the Loews Burland and right down Prospect, near the 845 was the-- L Franklin, those pretty much were the--

MN: Right. So that you, there were three movie theaters within walking distance of your house.

RG: Yes, they all were in walking—yes.

MN: Now what, were there candy stores that you went to regularly?

RG: Oh yeah, there were candy stores. In fact that we had a grocery candy store right at the corner of the block, it was also a combination of grocery candy. A number of grocery candy stores, um, the other type of stores we had to walk a distance they were located more in what you would call a shopping area.

MN: Right, now did you go to Manhattan much when you were growing in--

RG: No, I didn't go on my own. I remember my father taking me, and that was also an interesting experience because my father was a very popular guy. And his, one of his famous places was Harlem. So whenever he would take both my sister and I, it was always a very trying experience because I can remember when we were walking in the streets of Harlem we would stop frequently to talk to people. And you know when you

are young, young boy it's like, gee Dad, why are you stopping all the time? [Laughs]. It was like, it wasn't a pleasant experience.

MN: Right, right now did your parents ever like take you to museums?

RG: My mother pretty much was the cultural person, she would take both my sister and I for example down to the Paramount Theater. I remember seeing you know again famous you know, recording artists, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine, that was pretty much my mother.

MN: Right, now where did you go to high school?

RG: I went to a school called, School of Industrial Art. It was again being fortunate to go into a junior high school, when it came time to choose a high school because I also had an interest in art, I applied to two schools that were prominent at their time, School of Industrial Art and Music and Art. Now, Music and Art was more of a musical learning school rather than School of Industrial Art. You had to take a test, and I happened to pass the test for both of them, wound up going to the School of Industrial Art because one of my neighbors was also going to the school, so he encouraged me to--

MN: Now was that in Manhattan or in the Bronx?

RG: It was in Manhattan yeah, midtown Manhattan.

MN: So you got on the subway?

RG: Got on the subway for the first time yes.

MN: Right, Howie Evans who is fairly close in age to you mentioned that there were a great many gangs in Morrisania but were you, was that something you were aware of when you were going to junior high or high school?

RG: I was aware of one gang; a number of the people in the block or the neighborhood belonged to a gang called the Seven Crowns. I don't know whether--

MN: I've heard of the Crowns.

RG: Yes, right. But I also heard that earlier, there was a gang called the Slicksters.

MN: That's the one that Harry mentioned...

RG: Yeah.

MN: As the scariest gang in the area.

RG: Yes, oh no I heard stories about them.

MN: The Slicksters.

RG: The Slicksters, yes, oh no they were pretty mean.

MN: Now, but were there any Slicksters on Lyman Place?

RG: No, no as far as I know there wasn't. But that time the gang itself had pretty much died out.

MN: Did any Puerto Rican families move to Lyman Place when you were, living on the block?

RG: The first Puerto Rican family came to Lyman Place and in fact lived in my building, that was in the early fifties. And that was the first one in there.

MN: Yeah, and did you have sense at that time, that you know that this was a substantial population in the area? Or it was really at that point pretty much a trickle?

RG: I personally noticed that it was beginning to change because the elementary school PS 54, was, began to change. Right across the street there was, you know, housing tenements. And I noticed the population began to change, in fact a few years after I got

out of elementary school. So that was the first time I really noticed you know the influx of new--

MN: And how did the Puerto Rican population get along with everybody else?

RG: Pretty much fine in there, there were not too many. But you know I didn't--in the schools, it was a pretty interesting because from a racial standpoint you know when one talks about how groups interact, I do not remember any overt racial essence or tensions. And it was interesting because that is pretty much where the races came together in schools.

MN: Right.

RG: But no it was no, there was no overt--

MN: Right, did the communication in school extend to close friendships across racial lines? Did you grow up having whites who were pretty close friends?

RG: Yes, yes in terms of classmates certainly in fact it is a very interesting story. In my junior high school, I mentioned that one of my favorite sports was stickball. So I remember talking to one of my classmates and he was also in stickball so we talked about it and we said you know why don't we get teams? You know, gather teams and play each other. So he agreed that he would organize a team you know his area was predominantly white, you know my area on Lyman Place was predominantly black. So we agreed to hold a series of games you know and speaking back on that, the fact that the first game was held in his neighborhood and the second game was held on Lyman Place.

MN: Now where was his neighborhood?

RG: He lived near Simpson Street, which was further, I think, east.

MN: East, that was where you called Hunts Point?

RG: More Hunts Point area, yes.

MN: So Morrisania had a higher percentage of black people than Hunts Point?

RG: Yes, yeah most definitely.

MN: Now, when did you become aware of Latin music?

RG: I became aware of Latin music primarily through radio. They said I was always an avid radio listener, see I remember just because I said my mother worked at night and one of the habits I developed was listening to the radio. So I remember some of the early radio programs, Frank Sinatra Show, the Shadow. You know many of them. So that is really I got my, you know learned a lot about Latin music.

MN: Were your parents politically active in the neighborhood? Or in general did they vote? Were they members of a political club?

RG: No, no I would say, I mean, I--

MN: Was there much of a political consciousness in the neighborhood? Were there soapbox speakers? Was there--

RG: Not on Lyman Place, or, if I can remember, not in the immediate vicinity, no. I remember more the cultural aspects of that area more so than the political.

MN: Right, now when was the first time you went to one of the neighborhood clubs?

You know we mentioned Club 845, Sylvia's blue Morocco, Goodson's, what's the other one? The Ballroom?

RG: Boston Road Ballroom.

MN: Boston Ballroom, How old were you was the first time you were allowed to go to one of these places?

RG: I started going, well there's a story behind that. When I was in high school I met a photographer who happened to live in the Hunts Point Area. And he had formed a club, a jazz club; it was called the Jazz Art Society. And I became a member, and we built this idea about promoting jazz in the Bronx. Here now this was in 1956, '57. So we started going to the clubs downtown, Village. And talking to musicians and, gee, would you like to come up to the 845? First, we got the permission of the owner of the 845, who was very interested because his club was one of the premier jazz clubs in the Bronx. So, you know he wanted to stimulate business, he allowed us to use the club on Sundays. So that was pretty much you know my introduction to clubs.

MN: Now did you, were at that time were you playing instruments?

RG: No, I, when I got out of junior high school I pretty much concentrated on art, I left the music behind.

MN: And what sort of art was your specialty?

RG: at the school that I went to, Industrial Art, they specialized in the training artists for industry. So if one wanted to become an advertising artist, illustrator, fashion designer, that is the school that you went to. So I chose advertising as my field of interest.

MN: Now was there, were there community leaders that you were aware of growing up? You know people who were figures in Morrisania that you know that were known or as again mostly the cultural figures?

RG: For me, it was mostly cultural. I didn't know much about political activity or figures from that area.

MN: Was there a point, well your family moved to the Co-ops in 1963?

RG: Yes

MN: Now, was there any point which before then you felt that the block was deteriorating or that things were happening in the neighborhood that were, you know, disturbing?

RG: Not physically, when I left Lyman Place in 1963 there were families that moved out but that was for a variety of reasons. Um, you know, perhaps the parents bettered themselves economically, or were looking for better housing.

MN: Yeah, so you could, at that time you could have never imagined the devastation that descended upon the area in the seventies?

RG: No, no I could not. There were always abandoned buildings but they were abandoned for various reasons. It wasn't until I lived in Harlem that I began to you know hear reports obviously through mass media about what was taking place up, you know in the Bronx. Particularly the place that I--

MN: So what year did you move to Harlem?

RG: 1968

MN: In 1968, now um, in the early sixties a number of people that grew up in the Patterson Houses remember heroin coming in. Did you see, did you know any people who became you know hooked on heroin?

RG: Unfortunately, there were people on Lyman Place you know who succumbed. Drugs came, if I can remember drugs came to Lyman Place in the middle 50's. And slowly various people began to be seriously involved in it.

MN: How, what ere the signs of you know, of the heroin you know as you noticed in and perceived how people became involved? Did you see people like nodding out in the block?

RG: Yeah, here again it was pretty much the older people. You could see the signs; you know their behavior the way they dressed. Because one thing about Lyman Place, Lyman Place, particularly males, both males and females were pretty conscious of themselves. In fact, Lyman Place was one of the most popular blocks in the neighborhood you know. So people, you know, developed some style about themselves, and you, so you could tell that when someone drifted.

MN: Right so in other words there was, people from Lyman Place were kind of proud how they dressed, how they walked, how they carried themselves.

RG: Yes, oh yes. In fact in, it was commonly known that people from Lyman Place, cause at that time you know you would go and visit different blocks. But people in Lyman Place as generally didn't hang out on other blocks, in fact there was all these kids from other blocks coming to Lyman Place.

MN: So it was a good address?

RG: Good address.

MN: If you were in Morrisania, being from Lyman Place--

RG: Oh without a doubt.

MN: You went to Lyman Place?

RG: That's a right, a lot of-- talked to we had a very positive reputation.

MN: Right, right so overall it sounds like you look back and your childhood is just quite wonderful. Or is that a bit of an exaggeration?

RG: Well wonderful, well certainly growing up I don't think I could have been raised in a better neighborhood.

MN: So, but when I ask the questions there was a hesitation, so that was sort of disturbing in that, you know in the scenario that we just, were there something's going on that were just you know.

RG: No, I wouldn't say going on, when you look back you think perhaps you know how would it have been more ethnically diversified. But no, as I said for a neighborhood in the block at that time even though they, it was insulated; there was always something about the block.

MN: Now, if you are looking back on it, because this is you know the hindsight is twenty-twenty vision. Were there ways in which the races in the larger society sort of weighed on this environment or was that something that people pretty well deflected and didn't let bother them.

RG: I would say outwardly, it really didn't impact the meaning on the people on Lyman Place's lives, as far as I know. Alright, if they had problems you know going outside the community, it might reflected when they came back to Lyman Place.

MN: Right, now did people, where you were growing up. Did you know that there were certain places that you couldn't--it wasn't safe to go? Was there folklore about where you could and couldn't go in the Bronx?

RG: Interesting questions, one of the areas was this area around Fordham. [Laughs]

MN: Right, yeah.

RG: And the first you know, the first signs of that, well the first information were the gangs. We talked about gangs, one of the most notorious gangs at that time was the Fordham Baldies. Now, a bad reputation--

MN: They actually went in to Brooklyn too.

RG: Ok, I didn't know that but from a Bronx perspective there were those who ventured out, you know some went to schools in other parts of the Bronx. And they came back and said well you know, those areas are pretty tough.

MN: Yeah, so Fordham Road was?

RG: Fordham Road, oh yes. For us, you know, it was like another world. Kind of.

MN: Right now what about the Hub? Did you ever go down to 149th?

RG: 149th Street that was the shopping area, that is where you had your department stores. So if you wanted to visit the department stores, you know that is where you went.

MN: What about beaches? Did people go to I guess what the closest beach is Orchard Beach?

RG: Orchard Beach right, eventually there were those who were more, you know had a wider array of friends and they went out to um, Reese Beach that was popular. But for the most part, when you talked about a beach it was Orchard Beach. Now also in the neighborhood there was the pool, Crotona Park.

MN: Right, so you could go the Crotona--

RG: Oh yeah, Crotona Park was within walking distance. You know so from the standpoint of summer activities that's where you know a lot of kids spent their time.

MN: Now when you were growing up were most of the families two parent families?

RG: Yes, yes as far as I can remember. There were certainly in my building most of the families were two family, yes two family houses.

MN: Did you, were there people who were on public assistance on Lyman Place where you were growing up or that wasn't something--

RG: That's something you were not consciously aware of that. I am sure there were but not openly, people wouldn't talk about if they were.

MN: What kind of occupations did a lot of the young men have? A lot of other interviews we've heard other people in like government services, post office or you know construction type stuff like that. Did you see any professionals like in your area? Or was it really just middle-class people?

RG: There was pretty much a working-class neighborhood. I'd say most of the male, the men particularly--

MN: Did they work in factories or?

RG: Yeah, it was a variety, you know laborers I know there was one or two government workers, I guess I should say in my case, my father's case. But, pretty much working class.

MN: Now was your church Trinity Episcopal more a middle-class church than say the Baptist Churches? Would you say?

RG: Well at that time you know I wasn't aware of the differences, it was a church.

[Laughs] You know, what I saw was a variety of people go in there.

MN: Now when you, when you were growing up were there any store front churches on Prospect?

RG: Prospect Avenue, yes, yes, in fact my one of neighbors, in fact the musician Elmo Hope, his mother was very much involved in a storefront church on Prospect. And I think because the family was a pretty large family, and I remember one time, one of the brothers invited me to go. So I spent, at least one time in a storefront church.

MN: Now did people who went to the institutional churches look down on the people who went to the storefront churches?

RG: Not the storefront churches, there was a thing about the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church in the neighborhood was St. Anthony.

MN: Of Padua.

RG: Yes, now that had a reputation, particularly among the young people. If you went to Catholic school you know you were considered different, you know. And it was kind of I guess you would use the term elitism.

MN: Because like the Chantelles came out of St. Anthony of Padua.

RG: I didn't know that.

MN: Yeah, uh but so if you went to Catholic school that was sign your parents--

RG: Yeah, your parents were thinking a little different. You know and we detected a little air, but we always quite honestly we found Catholic students to be not always perhaps as broad minded, you know certainly as open. [Laughs] Because they were not, you know, because well here again you know certainly know about the Catholic Church particularly at that time. Towards the schooling they were certainly more disciplined, so the, you know the students, the people that went to school they were a little more refined you know. But we always laughed about that from time to time because some of the loudest people, [laughs], you know went to those schools.

MN: Now was the Morrisania Library a part of your life when you were growing up?

RG: For me it was definitely an integral part. Early on, and here again I think I was very fortunate because my parents believed in books. So I grew up in a household of books. And I come now know that I was perhaps very fortunate in that regard because I was

surrounded by books. My father loved literature so I was always surrounded by books. I developed an early, you know, interest in books. Then when I found the library, which was right across from Boston Road, Morrisania, it became like a heaven for me, particularly in the summer. Because unlike a number of the people in the block whose parents came from the south, you know after the spring semester many of them went south, to visit you know their relatives. So the question became well what did you do as a young person during the summer months. And there were people, as I said early, they went to pools, played ball, but for me it reached a point where I was tired of that. So I just developed a natural interest in going to the library you know. So I spent a great deal of time in the Morrisania Library.

MN: Now were the librarians very receptive to young people who came, and helpful? Or was it a pretty much a laissez-faire, you know you find everything yourself?

RG: I don't remember the particulars, all I remember is I wanted to you know find a book I found it. Whether I found it on my own--

MN: Was the local library open seven days a week, or it was closed on weekends?

RG: I don't remember that, I just remember it was open when I needed it. [Laughs]

That's pretty much all.

MN: Did a lot of students; did you find children, you know, like you in the library? Or were you one of the few that actually became interested?

RG: In my neighborhood?

MN: Yeah, in your neighborhood, were you one of the only ones?

RG: Yeah, well libraries, you know, they were always habited by different people. From my block I would say I was perhaps one of the few. And you know for various reason, but I don't, the library was always a very competent place for me.

MN: Now were you aware when you were in high school of the Civil Rights Movement in the south?

RG: Yes, yeah, through media. But here again, at that time, also, I was more culturally involved. I really didn't, you know, get into the area of politics or activism until I spent more time in Harlem. That is when really--

MN: When you became politicized.

RG: Yes, yeah.

MN: When you were saying culturally you were very into was it music your primary or?

RG: Music, yeah, because here again this organization that I was telling you about that we formed we were doing promotion jazz concerts, you know, all over the Bronx.

MN: Do you have any of the fliers you did from that time?

RG: I think I could put my hands, well at least some of the other members can.

MN: So they're still around, the people you were--

RG: Oh yes, yes very much.

MN: Now were you also like going to the clubs on 52nd Street at that time?

RG: yes, here again, Lyman Place, the individuals they were very forward thinking. I know some of the older people when they talked about going downtown, and one of the principal destinations was Birdland.

MN: Right.

RG: Or the Café Bohemia, or the Apollo Theater. But there were the people who were slightly older.

MN: So you had these people who were on the cutting edge of what was happening in music. And they were on your block and they were in the neighborhood, and the music was there and also in the neighborhood.

RG: Yes.

MN: So there was this tremendous musical cultural in Morrisania where jazz was?

RG: Yes

MN: Now how much, was it more, was jazz more developed and Rhythm and Blues would you say, as a local cultural form?

RG: Oh the Rhythm and Blues, and interest was there, and in fact one or two groups would form on the block. They never really gained any prominence, but without a doubt with the interest with Rhythm and Blues was there. As I said jazz for whatever the reasons, had a very strong interest in the block. In fact right around the corner on Prospect Avenue another notable was Red Allen, from the early jazz period. He lived on Prospect and 169th Street.

MN: Right, this is Red Allen.

RG: Red Allen.

MN: And he is from swing?

RG: Swing era yes, in fact he was friend of my fathers.

MN: Ok, was there a sense of that jazz was kind of the more intellectual forward-looking persons music?

RG: Yes, it was. Though the people who were, as I said more advanced, more cultural, dressed a certain way, those were the people who were jazz enthusiasts.

MN: Right, now when you are saying, what would be the, how would the dress of a jazz enthusiast differ from the normal person? I am trying to you know visualize.

RG: Yeah, at that time it was the type of clothing you wore, the suits for example. You know, more the college style. So it was a combination of casual and because that is how musicians dressed. SO it was unlike today you know there was a certain pride in what you wore. So you had to emit a certain presentation as a musician.

MN: Now at this point did you ever go to like the Palladium or the Embassy Ballroom to some of the Latin music?

RG: Oh yes, those are good memories, Hunts Points Palace in the Bronx, the Palladium.

MN: Who were some of your favorite Latin Artists?

RG: Oh god, Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, Arsenio Rodriguez, Celia Cruz, Machito.

MN: Do you have any of those CD's or record from back in the day?

RG: I have a few of them, I have a few yes. But here again those are the artists that came to the community, you know. Particularly, when you talk about Hunts Point Palace, and then the Palladium obviously its reputation?

MN: So you had this incredibly musically rich background.

RG: Oh yes, environment right. I mean to the extent, here again we were talking about Monk, the fact that Monk would come to Lyman Place. Not only did he come to visit Elmo Hope, but Monk's wife's family lived, was relative to one of the families on Lyman Place. So when Monk came around, he came around more than once, or more than one

occasion to visit not only you know Elmo, who was at that time traveling a lot. But he would come to visit his in-laws.

MN: Right, now was this an event?

RG: Oh, it was amazing. Monk had a certain style as everyone knew. One of the interesting things about Monk, we would see him, first of all he would come into the block in a Rolls-Royce.

MN: In a Rolls-Royce?

RG: Yes, because one of his close associates was the Baroness. She was a very wealthy I think German-Jewish family, who took an interest in jazz. So she was the kind of provider for all the jazz musicians. So she and Monk developed a very close relationship. So whenever Monk wanted to go somewhere, and I don't think he was a driver. You know that Baroness, as she was called, he would take her, she would take him anywhere he wanted to go.

MN: So she drove him, or she had a chauffeur?

RG: Someone-- no, no, the Baroness drove [Laughs]. So she would come to Lyman Place and it was like an event. You know, so that was one thing. And I remember reading about Monk because of his personality. We, I remember distinctly Monk coming several times to the Bronx, to the block in the summer. And one of the things that stood out was, the fact as regardless of the weather the fact that when you talk about August, Monk was always dressed in a long overcoat. [Laughs] And that you know, the topic of discussion. You know, the word got around very quickly, Monks on the block. Then when we finally saw him we would see him in this long overcoat in August. Somebody was, it was definitely a little weird.

MN: Now would people go up and ask for his autograph? Or is that a contemporary phenomenon autographs?

RG: No, no I first...

[END OF SIDE A, BEGINNING SIDE B]

RG: Monk oh yes in terms of autographs. For me personally the first time I went to a concert by Thelonius Monk was at a school. In fact it was a school in the Hunts Point area. And I remember distinctly well knowing a little about him, but I remember after the performance walking up to him and saying you know, gee, I'd like to have your autograph, it was very pleasant. But on the block, no, that was pretty much because we realized that he was not performing it was more of a family you know, people pretty much stayed away.

MN: Was there any other celebrities who visited the block? Who had comparable charisma that you could remember?

RG: Not that I can remember, you know Elmo Hope was certainly one of the notables. But other than Monk and Elmo, no other particular personalities stick out.

MN: Now, when you went into the Army what was that experience, how did you end up? Were you drafted or you volunteered?

RG: I was drafted, and uh I was drafted in '63 and spent two years stateside. I was very fortunate because I went in to the Army at the onset of, well actually before the Vietnam War. And because my background, I was very fortunate, also the fact that when they through my records and they saw the fact that I had an art background I was assigned to be a photographer. And then there was no more room at one military posting, they made me an illustrator. So for me, the military experience wasn't a bad experience necessarily.

MN: Now when you came back, did you plan to go to college at that point or plan to go to work?

RG: Well prior to going to the Army, I had attended at that time Brooklyn Community College. I elected not to go further I went right at the art field at that time. So I'm you know, I had a couple years of college before I went in to the military.

MN: Now when your family moved to the Co-ops did you continue to spend a lot of time in Lyman Place visiting your friends?

RG: Oh I'd go back and forth. At that time also a number of them began to move away, for various of reasons. So my time spent on Lyman Place was you know really not that many.

MN: Now do you have any memories of the construction of the Forest Houses, you know as--you know cause that was a pretty big development.

RG: Yes, no I do not. Because that area, since I didn't go to Morris High School which was, uh, the route that number of the students, people from Lyman Place or the neighborhood went to. Since I didn't go to Morrisania. I didn't know that much about the Forest Houses which was obviously near Morrisania.

MN: Right, now when you were a teenager or in the Army were you aware of the military. I remember I spent a number of years in Harlem, because what happened with this organization that was forming in the Bronx--what was the name of the organization?

RG: The name of the organization was the Jazz Art Society.

MN: The Jazz Art Society?

RG: Yes, in 1959 we decided to move to Harlem, we took the organization down there.

And then because we were also becoming more politically aware, our influences was

more along the lines of African nationalism. So in fact, we actually changed the name of the organization from the Jazz Arts Society to the African Jazz Arts Society. And we kind of varied our interests, because now we started promoting African culture.

MN: Now who was some of the influences from the African nationalist movement in Harlem? Were these figures like Carlos Cooks?

RG: Carlos Cooks, yes, in fact he was a very strong influences on a number of the people.

MN: Now did you meet him?

RG: Oh yes, yes, yes. In fact I used to go to a number of his rallies, a number of his--

MN: What was the name of his organization in the fifties?

RG: Uh, the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement.

MN: It was called the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement, and so you went to some of the meetings?

RG: Oh yes, in fact it was at one of his events, because he used to promote a annual beauty contest called Ms. Natural Standard of Beauty.

MN: Wow!

RG: Yes, very interesting. Here again since you know Carlos Cooks was a direct descendant of the Garvey movement. And the Garvey movement you know had all, emphasized African Nationalism, you know Black Pride. So one of the elements was a fashion show. So we were so influence by this show that we decided to produce a series of fashion shows with that same theme.

MN: Wow.

RG: Yeah and it became known as the Naturally Series.

MN: Do you have any of the materials from this?

RG: Oh yes, I have the material for that yes.

MN: Because this all should go in the library.

RG: Oh yes I agree. And the very fact that it started by a number of, well in terms of this organization, you know people out of the Bronx.

MN: Now, now one thing that was also interesting here especially in relation to standards of beauty. When I interviewed the people in Fish Avenue you know who were also intellectual, music, but a lot of them were very light skinned. Did you encounter any color prejudice when you were an adolescent as, as a sort of hip intellectually?

GR: No I wasn't that aware of the color differences, although I later learned that in my own family there was some issues. But you know not, certainly not in the neighborhood.

MN: So and it wasn't when you were going to Manhattan or in--

RG: No, no but in terms of the fashion shows, we decided here again based on the influence Carlos Cooks and African Nationalist Movement to develop a series of these fashion shows. Now one of the interesting things about this group was, we were made up of a number of artists, graphic artists, photographers. So we were able to put together very creative promotion materials, that to this day people still talk about some of the posters. I think we were one of the first groups to use direct mail to promote. You know here again we designed our materials, and somehow we were able to hook up with people who worked in mailrooms. [Laughs] In corporate America, so I remember we would get them to help us out by doing mailings.

MN: Now was this an all male group or you had some women in it?

RG: We had one woman [Laughs]. Except for the models that came you know later on. The initial group of Jazz Arts Society that was started in the Bronx we had one woman, it

wasn't that we were certainly had anything against women joining. It so happens that she was the only female.

MN: Now was there a Nation of Islam in Morrisania? Were they selling Muhammad Speaks on Prospect Ave and Boston Road?

RG: Oh yes. One of the things that I later became aware of is that when I was still on Lyman Place, still in the area in the middle, late fifties that is when the Nation really began to gain its prominence. One of the individuals that I used to go to school with was one of the early members you know of the nation. There I think the influence began to spread. But I really became more exposed to the Nation was when I was in Harlem. I used to go to the rallies I used to go to the Mosque, I used to see Malcolm on the corner. You know, oh, it was very familiar to me.

MN: Did Malcom X ever come to the Bronx to your recollection?

RG: Not that I can remember, not that I can remember

MN: Now so you're in this period of sort of cultural-intellectual ferment in the late fifties and early sixties and that was you know before you went in to the Army. Now, when you came back did that escalate? So that when you returned to NY in what was it 1965? Did you become a political activist in that period?

RG: Not really, here again I guess because of my background and my exposure to culture. I always lean more toward the cultural scene.

MN: Yeah, and what sort of work did you do when you returned?

RG: I came back I worked in the advertising field for a while. Then I was fortunate enough to get into publishing. I worked in a number of publishing houses, educational publishing houses. So I spent thirteen years in educational publishing.

MN: Now when did you start hearing that terrible things were starting to happen in the Bronx and in Morrisania in particular? When did you become aware of dramatic deterioration?

RG: Going back and visiting some of the people who were still living there. And just walking around, and just seeing you know this devastation or this decay. And started asking questions, and here again getting information from the media as to some of the reasons why. But I know it had changed, in fact a number of the people that I grew up with eventually left Morrisania and moved further uptown because of the changing, the changes, and blight that they saw. And the old neighborhood, it wasn't the same.

MN: And you know what did it feel like to see like, the place that you had grown up with that was this secure and nurturing and cohesive place turn into you know a frightening place.

RG: Yeah, it was sombering you know to say the least. Because well first of all you know for very good social political reasons began to you know understand why things were happening. But, your memories were before, you know like, the building that I grew up in on Lyman Place eventually was closed.

MN: And what happened to it. Was there rehab?

RG: It was eventually rehab.

MN: So it was abandoned.

RG: It was abandoned for a number of years, and if it wasn't for the efforts of you know like community activists like Professor Fox, Hetty Fox it might have still been to this day.

MN: Yeah and what did it, did you go back and walk in front of the building when it was abandoned?

RG: Oh yes, and it was very sad, as I said the neighborhood the block, because it was such a small block, it changed I mean the whole character changed. There were fewer families; it was you know somewhat painful, quite honestly. So I stopped going around and didn't really want to deal with that. You know I chose to remember good times, good times that were pleasant.

MN: Are there other things that you know I didn't ask you that you think are important to talk about?

RG: I am sure there are but I can't think of them. [Laughs]

MN: You know we certainly go back, Rachel do you have any questions that leap into your mind that I didn't ask?

Rachel Donaldson (RD): No, that was everything; pretty much you answered a lot. I am just curious about the Fordham area. And what years that you were talking about the Fordham Gangs?

RG: Yes, this was here again having pretty much our basic needs met in our, you know in this area. There wasn't any real need to come up this far, but what we heard didn't necessarily seem as inviting anyway you know. And basic information we heard was about Fordham Baldies, that they were tough. Now to say they were against blacks, you know that didn't necessarily come out. But they were a gang [Laughs]. They were very territorial.

MN: If their territory, so if you were on their territory and weren't from there then you were in danger. So it wasn't primarily they were white?

RG: No, no. And they also had a reputation to be older. And you know that came a cross too. So, you know for various reasons you know unless you had to come up this area you never came.

RD: What years were they?

MN: Nnow were you very aware of like distinctions between different kinds of whites.

Between lets say Jews and Italians and Irish? Is this something that you kind of, you made distinctions in dealing with whites when you were...

RG: No, no um, one of the things that I did observe that when it came to different ethnic groups such as Jewish Community-- I mean the Italian community, noticed that the Italians when the neighborhoods began to change, they were all apt to stay in the community. You know they raise their children, then they grow old and some of them pass on. Whereas the Jewish community would tend to move, in fact and many people you know I've heard say that one of the reasons that the Bronx began to change was the opening of Co-op city.

MN: Yeah and those massive depopulations.

RG: Yes, yeah and then at that time the building owners and landlords were reaching a point where the building were no longer profitable. So here again this devastation, in fact I had an opportunity to talk to one of the guys um, that I grew up with and they told me a very interesting story. That he eventually you know became addicted to drugs, he and a number of other people. And one of the things that he would say that they would do, is they actually would raise money for their habit by setting fired to buildings.

MN: Get out.

RG They knew the connections.

MN: [Laughs]. So in other words people would pay them to set the fires so they could collect the insurance money.

RG: Yes, that's right.

MN: They would get their drugs and landlords would get the insurance money.

RG: Exactly, yes. Yeah it was a very sad story, had to do what they had to do but it wasn't you know, it wasn't pleasant hearing that. But so you began to understand that there was a pattern to what was happening it wasn't just isolated. You know then you start looking around you know buildings that were there one day were gone, you know blocks.

MN: And all these clubs that were talking about they all eventually closed down?

RG: Eventually, yeah. I'd say because of the decline in population. Then you also have to remember that the cultural scene changed. Now the midtown Manhattan era is opened up. You know people began to learn that they were welcomed, you know in particularly clubs in Greenwich Village or?

MN: So this is interesting, so in you know when you were growing up, other than 52nd Street you know people from the Bronx were not, had the sense that Times Square and the Village was not exactly their--

RG: A welcoming place.

MN: A welcoming place.

RG: No, no. Well, here again because of the music, people always felt that because of the, you know, jazz...

MN: Well that is interesting because when I was going to college in the early '60's, places like the Village Gate and Village Vanguard would you know start to be a major jazz scenes.

RG: Yes, yeah the Five Spot further east.

MN: Now, did people ever you know, two things about in terms of like sort of informal color lines. Did people ever talk about being harassed by police when they were in certain areas? Like if you were black and walking in certain places the police might come up to you and say what are you doing here? Was that something that you and your friends talked about or not really?

RG: No, no, no.

MN: OK.

RG: Particularly, if you're talking about in the area, in the time period of the fifties no. One thing I can say, the police in the community, and it was interesting because many of the police officers were black. You know and they were tough, so they developed a reputation but unless you got out of line you know there was no problems.

MN: So you didn't grow up with this like antagonism to the police as part of your growth.

RG: No, no certainly you know that many of my friends did, you know we didn't have those encounters.

MN: Any other questions you Rachel or Mark that you have?

Mark Smith (MS): I just had a question about what people did, I mean in your age after high school? Did a lot of them you know go on to college or did they go on trades or what?

RG: Now that's a good question. Those who were not exposed to a college experience there were two options. The military was a very strong option; you know that was kind of like the rites of passage. You became eighteen and rather than wait to be drafted you would volunteer. Now on Lyman Place in particular, there were members of the neighborhood who went to different branches of the service. The Marine Core was very popular, the Navy, the Air Force. Because there was always something about the "Army". You didn't necessarily want to wake up, or to join the Army because you didn't have the choices. So many people rather than just sit around they decided to well let me join; let me take the initiative, so that was very popular. Those who you know were not military inclined; they went to work whatever you know whatever jobs they could find. Some went to college.

MN: Now did you know people who went to the military during Vietnam era? Or that was mostly people a little younger than your particular cohort?

RG: Ok, that was, people affiliation, now I must say that, you have to remember that when I was in the military I came out in 1965. At that time, Vietnam was beginning to heat up. So a number of the people that I was stationed with eventually went over. Uh, I was very fortunate because I was drafted in 1963. And it seems that if you were, came in to the Military, in to Army particularly in 1964 or later you were sent to Vietnam. But because I came in '63 and was scheduled to get out in '65 you know I, they just let me go out. Although you know they began to changed that policy. Uh, because of the development of the war, they began to hold people over. And that was one of the fears that I had, you know I came so close, I said I didn't necessarily want that experience. So

the people that I knew that went to Vietnam were I think a number of them was people that I was stationed with.

MN: Now in the mid and late '70's were you know, you are somebody who is obviously very you know tuned in to the music scene. Were you aware of hip-hop when it was starting, or conscious that this was something that had any kind of promise or originality?

RG: I was introduced to hip-hop through my son. My son was born in 1972 and it was about six, seven, eight, you know then again I think that is when hip-hop began. Because here again being a young person he became attracted to it, so he was really my introduction.

MN: By the time he was seven or eight?

RG: Eight, yeah eight, nine.

MN: Yeah, like in the, that's the early eighties.

RG: yes, yeah.

MN: And he was listening to the radio and--

RG: Yes, and you know here again going to school and being exposed to it.

MN: And were you living in Harlem at that time?

RG: Yes.

MN: What are your views on hip-hop.

RG: As a musical form it has merits, certainly. I am disturbed by the content of it. Because while I'm certainly not one that believes in censorship, I believe in self-censorship. You know I believe that there are certain things that you must take upon yourself. And give the impact particularly of music you have to be very. Those in the industry I think have to pay a little more attention to what it means. In terms of what the

content is. Unfortunately I think a lot of that is missing, I know there are various reasons you know that it happens. But well, it is, to me, it is just another you know cultural expression. But in terms of those who are involved in it, in terms of those who have influence I think there are some questions that need to be asked of them. In terms of what are their responsibilities you know to the greater society. You know I understand the whole concept of being real and you know telling it like it is. But I think, you know, given the power of music and words I think it is incumbent upon those of us, those people that create the music to be a little bit more aware of what the impact of music is. You know, and I am not sure that any of them-- but I can't just blame them you know. I think a lot of the fault you know, has to be placed on the producers, the people who market the people who are in charge of certainly financing the music. And I know there is you know, the other side of it in terms of economics. But you know, I think you know ultimately it is the artists there has to be more aware of the importance or the impact of the music.

MN: Now I want to go back to something which I didn't really you know, ask you when you--how important was the numbers on your block? Was that a big part of the culture when you were growing up? You know people playing numbers?

RG: Oh, yes. That was there, you know certainly my parents you know were involved. You know it was another means of economic means.

MN: And were these families who you know a number of people said that there were some families who you know got their down payments for their house from the numbers.

RG: [Laughs] I've heard those stories. I don't know anyone directly. But I do know that you know the numbers the numbers game was very popular. Oh yeah, and I mean it was

serious, it was taken very seriously. You know because you know, here again you have to understand that during those times you know most, many of the people were in low-income positions. So any additional revenue, means you know was helpful. And I'm sure a number that was the difference between you know putting food on the table or not.

MN: Right, and was, did the local police kind of leave it alone? Or occasionally they'd crack down?

RG: I wasn't that ware of the police policies. I know it was fairly open.

MN: Now was there like a particular store? Or did they just have, people would walk around and stand in particular spots?

RG: In, if you're talk about Lyman Place, for example, there were people who would know to be the people that you went to play numbers.

MN: Right.

RG: I am sure there were one or two sports, but there were individuals.

MN: Ok, one musical question: in the early '70's were you aware of like the Last Poets and Gil Scott Heron and that? Was that something that you were, you know into?

RG: Yes, oh yes. Yeah because they were very political in terms of their thinking. And they chose you know the vehicle of their music you know, to express themselves. Oh yes sure, the Last Poets they came out of Harlem. Gil Scott Heron certainly his music, oh yes I was definitely aware of that.

MN: Ok, so we'll wind this up. Thank you very much.

RG: Really? Ok.

[END OF INTERVIEW]