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## Gumbs, Robert Interview 2

Gumbs, Robert. Bronx African American History Project  
*Fordham University*

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Mark Naison: Interview with The Bronx African American History Project taking place at Fordham University on April 18<sup>th</sup> 2005. This is the second interview with Robert Gumbs and the interviewer is Maxine Gordon, who is working as a jazz researcher for the BAAHP.

Maxine Gordon: I'm doing this second interview with Robert Gumbs particularly on his involvement with jazz. Because in reading his first interview, there are some very interesting things that he mentioned but I think would be very good to go further about. So just to repeat, you were born in Harlem in 1939, 1941, you moved to The Bronx.

Robert Gumbs: Yes

MG: To Lionel Place?

RG: No, my family moved to Union Avenue in The Bronx not to far from Lionel Place.

MG: And then?

RG: Then we moved to Lionel Place in 1943.

MG: Okay. And your father was from St. Thomas and your mother from Tortola?

RG: Tortola, the British Islands.

MG: And you went to P.S. 54 and P.S. 40 for junior high school. And then you went to Manhattan for Art and Design.

RG: Art and Design now, but it was called The School of Industrial Arts.

MG: Right, okay, now, one thing that you mentioned was the Freeman Theater. Was it called Freeman's Beacon then?

RG: It was the Freeman Theater if I can remember, yes.

MG: Okay, where Nat King Cole and Billy Eckstein performed?

RG: Yes, they are the ones I went on tour with.

MG: Okay, can you remember what she said?

GR: She was very interested in getting us involved with culture and one day we were talking about growing up and some of the things she did to expose us. I remember we used to go down to Times Square to see some of the concerts, Nat King Cole, --

MN: --Okay, finish this and then—

RG: Nat King Cole, but she also reminded me that when we were also living in The Bronx that we used to see some of these artists at the Freeman Theater which was located on Westchester and Freeman Street. And that was what was surprising to me because I didn't know; I used to go there to see—

MG: You remember, do you remember the Freeman Theater?

RG: I remember the Freeman Theater for the most part, but I didn't remember it as a venue for the performing artists---

[Tape break]

MN: We were at the end of the Freeman Theater

MG: Okay, if you could just tell me what you recall about the theater, about the size, who went there?

RG: My memory serves me at this moment, it was a small theater, small relative to some of the other theaters in the neighborhood. We had Franklin on Prospect Avenue. I remember going there on Saturdays.

MN: How far away was it from your house?

RG: It was about a ten minute walk. What I remember was the Saturday features, westerns, and of course they had the newsreel in between. So those are pretty much my memories, but in terms of the musical concerts, I don't remember that at all.

MG: Do you suppose that Lionel Hampton Band would have played there?

RG: It's possible since they had Nat King Cole and Billy Eckstein, it's possible.

I suspect that took place in the middle forties, yes because my memories go back to the early fifties.

MG: In those theaters when you used to go on Saturday, your mother would take you to the theater, to the movie?

RG: Yes

MG: So what was the make up of the audience like?

RG: I don't remember that, but I would assume that it was probably mixed because at that time, there was still a large Jewish population, so I would suspect –

MG: Who are the people that go to movies on Saturday?

RG: Oh, that's something that I don't know

MG: Do you know if the Jewish population was quite orthodox?

MN: There? Hell no. No this is a working class Jewish trade union socialist neighborhood. They would go out of their way to go on Saturday.

MG: Oh, okay

RG: But I think I do remember that it was mixed.

MN: Was this town by the subways?

RG: Yes

MN: Okay, it was down the hill

RG: It was a Westchester, the IRT stop was Freeman Street, so it was on the uptown side of Westchester.

MG: You know you show your age by saying the IRT and the BMT and, [laughter] usually they don't call it that, they call it one of those letters or numbers, only people of a certain age like me and you call it the IRT. Another thing you mentioned that I thought was real interesting; you said your father knew Red Allen. Do you recall how he knew him?

RG: Henry Red Allivuse lived on Prospect and 169<sup>th</sup> Street; incidentally it was the same place as my father. He was a very sociable person and he knew a lot of people so it wouldn't be surprising that he knew someone like Henry Red Allen. But I remember, particularly when I got involved in jazz, he would mention, oh, I know Mr. Allen; he lived right across from the Avenue.

MG: Did he ever come to the house?

RG: No, I just heard about him and when I would see him on the Avenue---

MG: You did see him?

RG: Yes, I remember him yes. Well distinguished.

MG: Did he seem to distinguish himself from everybody?

RG: No he didn't.

MG: He looked like everybody---

RG: Yes, I think that was part of the environment, everybody blended in, nobody stood out whether your position or somebody of note.

MG: Okay, one thing I found when we talked to people involved jazz and jazz fans, and I'm one, like you, what we have in common is the first time you ever heard something

that made an impact on you, were the first recordings you heard. Do you recall what you heard?

RG: The first recordings I remember were the records of Dave Womack. Let me back a little up and say that in high school, the school I went to was an art school. And like all art schools, it was pretty liberal. And one of the features they had was a music appreciation day. And before my initiation of exposing the students to jazz, there was pretty much a concentration on classical music. So once I became interested, I decided to share some of my interests with some of the other students. So another student and I, we formed a jazz music appreciation day and where the students during their lunch periods would come in and they would bring their own records and we would listen to some of the artists.

MG: What year was this?

RG: This would be about 1955. So they would bring in their albums and I would bring in mine. But one of the first recordings that I remember making an impact was the music that they brought in. Then I heard some of the music of the middle forties musicians, Charlie Parker, the traditionalists, Big Bob, Miles, Dizzy, some of those others.

MG: Who introduced you actually to jazz?

RG: I think back on that and I think this might have been a case of self discovery.

MG: On the radio did you hear it?

RG: Not so much on the radio, probably through records. But yeah I think it was the early recordings I heard—

MG: Did you have other friends that were —

RG: Eventually, yes.

MG: But not in the beginning. In the beginning it was like you alone?

RG: Yes, well no, I'd be out there with people and friends from the block I remember, but for me personally, it was records. Then I started interacting and then some of the friends would go downtown.

MG: Okay, when did you first go downtown, when was the first time you went to a live club?

RG: The first time I did was 1956. I went to Birdland.

MG: That's the first time you went to a jazz club?

RG: Yes

MG: So could you tell me about that?

RG: I went to Bird land. Interestingly, I went to Birdland on the graduation day of the senior class that was ahead of me, I became friends with them. So one of the things that they would do was go to different clubs. So I went on with them and one of the clubs they went to was Birdland. And I remember seeing Bud Powell.

MG: On stage?

RG: Yes, Bud Powell is the musician that was playing that night. And I became instantly a fan of Bud's.

MG: Do you remember Birdland? Could you describe it?

RG: Oh yes. A small club, you go downstairs, very intimate. And they had a section where people could sit who didn't drink. So I remember that [laughter] but it was small, very intimate. And you would really write up on musicians. And I told you that one of the musicians that I immediately took to was Bud Powell. So I was sitting near the piano and I could really just hear Bud, but oh yeah, I'd go on a regular basis. I'd go to see Art

Blakey and The Messengers, Slow Miles, and a few other groups, Clifford Brown. Yeah, those are the ones that came through.

MG: So would you buy records after you heard somebody you liked?

RG: Yes, oh yes!

MG: Where did you buy your records?

RG: There was a store in The Bronx called Burland Records.

MG: How do you spell that?

RG: B-U-R-L-A-N-D

MG: And where was it?

RG: Burland was on Prospect and Prospect Avenue. That was a major source. And then there was another record store called Mellow Tone, which was on Boston Road and 169<sup>th</sup>.

MN: And they were both in Morrisania?

RG: Yes, they were the record stores.

MG: You bought LP'S or you bought---

RG: Initially 78's then I started buying albums.

MG: Where'd you get the money?

RG: Oh, those were the fortunate times when I had parents, who had a little spending money, and then I was doing little things like delivering groceries and stuff like that.

MG: Did that become something you did regularly, collect records?

RG: Yes! Oh yeah. I had a very large collection. I still have a lot of those records.

MG: Are they cataloged?

RG: No, they're just piled up. [laughter]

MG: A record collection is really important because you can trace a person's taste from their first recordings and especially with LP's. So did you have other hobbies besides buying records and going downtown to listen to jazz?

RG: Since I was studying art, what I would do is practice painting or drawing as preparation for a career in art.

MG: And you visited museums downtown too?

RG: I visited museums, yes, I visited museums. So between museums and jazz clubs, that was pretty much it. Oh, I cannot forget going to the Apollo Theater. That was another venue that featured various musics, Rhythm and Blues, jazz, so, I saw a number of musicians down at the Apollo.

MN: Now this exposure to an appreciation of jazz occurred in the middle of the whole doo-wop and Rhythm and Blues era. Did your gravitation to jazz distinguish you from other people in your neighborhood?

RG: No, we were pretty, when it came to music; we were pretty well rounded in terms of our exposure to music. Whether it was Rhythm and Blues, whether it was Latin music, Caribbean music, or jazz.

MN: So did you buy rock and roll records also?

RG: Yes, in fact, I have a nice collection of Rhythm blues as well.

MG: So did you go downtown to hear Latin music?

RG: No, I did not. I went to places like Hunts Point Palace. Yes, that was the venue for Latin music.

MG: Did you go in a group?

RG: Yes, all of us did, generally, that's how, when we went out. I have to mention this, speaking about groups; I had an opportunity to see The Maxwells and Clifford Brown down at Basin Street, East Side. This was an opportunity that I regret because for some reason, I chose not to go, and as it turned out, that was one of the last public appearances that Clifford Brown did before he was killed. So I think back on it and I say gee, why didn't I go? Well sometimes, you can't answer those questions. But generally we would go in groups.

MG: Do you think that there are some, those of you who were attracted to jazz and who went downtown to Burland and other clubs and started buying records, did you sort of think of yourselves as having some particular abilities, or some particular kind of hip style?

RG: Yes, that's true, we considered ourselves pretty advanced in terms of culture, wanted to be exposed, and just took the time and initiative to go out and find that.

MN: Did you kind of think of yourselves as neighborhood intellectuals and a little more of on guard than the other kids around you?

RG: I would think of ourselves as being progressive. Being exposed, looking for new ideas and things.

MG: Were there girls in this group as well?

RG: Very few young ladies as far as I can remember.

MG: But the guys had girlfriends and brought their girlfriends along?

RG: That's true, yes, yes, but as a whole, it seemed like it was more boys than girls.

MG: Are you in touch with any of those same friends from this period?

RG: Yes, we still make contact. We see each other at funerals unfortunately, and we also see each other at the Annual Reunion up in The Bronx. It's a big reunion. Old timer's day is what it's called. This takes place every August, the first Sunday.

MN: We were there last year in the rain. Did the people who went to jazz dress differently? Was there a particular style?

RG: Yes that was interesting because at that time the dress fashion was what was called Ivory League. So a number of people took on that style and that distinguished them from a lot of the other residents.

MG: And where would you buy the clothes?

RG: There were some neighborhood stores, but we would go down to the village.

MG: Oh you did?

RG: Yes, we had another area that we noticed, go down to Kathy Vochimia, another---

MG: Did you go to The Five Spot?

RG: The Five Spot, yes.

MG: Did you go to the Half Note?

RG: I didn't go to The Half Note, but I remember Five Spot, Going down regularly to see Theloneus Monk, John Coltrane, go to Kathy Vochimia, in fact that's where we first met Miles Davis. Seeing his group. After that it was about building a close relationship with Miles.

MG: Did he know you all came down from The Bronx?

RG: Yes he did, that was interesting, yeah. And as a result of that, he was very helpful when we started forming the Jazz Rock Society. Although he, Miles was also a very

business person, he had rules and, [laughter], but he was instrumental in introducing us to a number of the artists who subsequently played for us at Club 845.

MG: Did you go to the Club 845 in that period?

RG: No I did not. I started going to The 845 when we organized the Jazz arts club.

MG: Not before

RG: Not before, no, even though I heard about it.

MG: Were they still having jazz there in the late fifties?

RG: No, we're talking the middle fifties, 55, 56, at that time, I think they had discontinued their regular events. So when we approached the owner and we told him we had this idea about sponsoring some concerts for Sunday, he welcomed us. He being familiar with a lot of musicians.

MN: So it was just a bar in a restaurant?

MG: Wait, I don't want to go to the Club 845 yet. I want to still hear from these Kids from The Bronx going down to The Village. So what did you think about The Village and the clubs and the people down there. Did you think, were there other black kids?

RG: Yes.

MG: I know that's true because I was there in the same period you were, but sometimes there is an impression given that the audience was white for jazz, which is really, well I don't even want to discuss that, but you have heard that lately?

RG: Yes, but no.

MG: It wasn't true in that period at all. You usually were very comfortable in there.

Oh yes, I'm sure, I've heard a lot about the village, but that was part of the reason I went to The Village, to visit the jazz clubs.

MG: Did you go to The Village Vanguard?

RG: Eventually, yes. That was one of the three or four clubs I attended.

MG: An economic question here about going to clubs has come up, because we went also, since I was fifteen, every weekend had the listening section. Vanguard had one and Burland had one, so we know teenagers were welcome, but they still have to pay. So either we had part time jobs and use all our money to buy records and go to the clubs, or people had parents who subsidized their jazz habit. So you had both?

RG: Yes, I'll certainly share that with you.

MG: Because there is the economic background. It was cheap compared to now, but it's still, people who didn't have the entrance, but of course later there were a lot of free concerts.

RG: Yes, right, but this was before. I remember going to Carnegie Hall that got me into the music, so that was also very interesting, having that bit of concert hall performance.

MG: Did you say you were building a record collection at that time?

RG: Oh yes.

MG: Did you build your collection based on who you heard or did you have another method?

RG: Primarily, those I heard in person or on radio because if I can also say this, at the time there were several popular jazz stations. You had Symphony Sid and I think there was another Louis Conover was in America and he was broadcasting jazz. But it was primarily Symphony Sid, The Symphony Sid Show.

Symphony Sid was on what channel?

MG: WEBD

RG: Yes, the radio program.

MG: And it was at night. This was extremely significant to people of a certain age.

They get their information from them and he was live at Burland, and made everybody want to go to Burland. It was very smart right?

RG: That's right, come on down and you would hear the music in the background

[laughter]

MG: You know because of who played in Burland, a lot of people of a certain age make their entree into the music because of that. So you have to think about who didn't get to play there and why we didn't get there till later, and we'd have to search out people.

RG: No Sid was actually opening up

MG: Radio

RG: Radio, yes

MG: And then other forms of music too, you see how radio influences it. So now we can talk about the [inaudible]. I want to hear about this little jazz society. How did this come about, who's idea?

RG: It was really started by two individuals, Laumbay Graph and Corner Graphwic. The connection was that we all went to the same school the same high school, the School of Industrial Arts.

MN: Now did you know them before you went to that school? I did not know them. I happened to meet them one day on Prospect Avenue.

MG: They're from The Bronx?

RG: They're from The Bronx, yes. And a mutual friend introduced us. And they started talking about what they were doing and forming this group. And since I had gotten into jazz, I said well gee, that sounds interesting. So we would meet at their parents' home, which is on Kelley Street, which is called today the [inaudible] area.

MN: Probably where that park was, where, it's probably the Funk, the houses, that's where Kelley Park is now.

RG: No, in the case of the ref---

MN: Wait, there're houses

RG: Okay, originally, the names were Cecil and Ronnie Graphling. They later, Laumbay changed his name to Alaumbay Graph, and Kwame is now Kwame Graphling, but they---

MN: They lived on the brownstone block?

RG: Yes

MN: That's still preserved.

RG: Yes, still very much, yeah in fact they're land marks.

MG: They're out in Morrisania, so we wouldn't ---

MN: Right

RG: That's where we first met and formed the Jazz Arts Society.

MG: Is it Arts or Art?

RG: Artsss, yes

MG: Okay because I'm figuring. Are they also teenagers at the time?

RG: They were teenagers, yes.

MG: What year is this?

RG: 1956 and the commonality was that most of the founders and cofounders were artists. Eventually we attracted other people that were interested.

MG: For your society?

RG: Yes.

MN: Jazz arts, so everybody was a graphic artist or—

RG: Yes. Then as I say, we attracted other people who were interested in our music, but the nucleus pretty much were people from the school.

MG: Did you have meetings?

RG: Yes, we would meet every Saturday and we would plan—

MG: Where did you meet?

RG: At the Graphwic family house.

MG: Were they from Barbados?

RG: Yes

MG: Do you think they're related to Kamal Bratley?

RG: I don't know

MG: Okay, I just wanted to know.

RG: So we would meet and plan our concerts, which took place on Sunday afternoon and we were very fortunate to attract some of the big name artists at the time. As I said, we met them because when we would go downtown, we would befriend some of the musicians like Miles. An early supporter of ours was Jackie McLean. Jackie was very, it was always available, Lou Dallison was also very supportive. Then once we featured artists like, we began to attract other artists.

MG: So was it from 4-9? What time was the Sunday night—?

RG: Generally it was afternoon; I'd say 4-6.

MN: Nom what was going on in the Club 845 in the 50's when the jazz wasn't there?

RG: I don't know about what was happening. I know before that it was still one of the major jazz venues, but during the early 50's, I don't really know what was taking place, I know there were some shows, but I couldn't tell you.

RG: Did you know the owner? You worked directly under him?

RG: Yes, we met the owner and his name was Joe Tucci. And he was very receptive of our idea of bringing back as we would say jazz to The Bronx. Because at that time, Little Rocco opened after we started doing the concerts at the 845, so around that period, the 845 was really for young people like myself. It was really the place to toast the jazz.

MG: So who did the booking to bring the artists up there?

RG: Well that was something that we collectively did.

MG: You'd call them?

RG: We'd call them, we'd go down to the clubs and tell them what we're doing and they'd say hey, we'd like to play.

MG: And how'd you pay them?

RG: Based on the revenues from the door [laughter]

MG: How much did you charge at the door? Do you remember?

RG: Maybe three dollars, four dollars.

MG: And then you would give all the money to them?

RG: Yes, right, whatever we collected. Now there were some Sundays where we did not attract that many people, but they were very cooperative, very understanding, that we just couldn't pay them, we owe them.

MG: And so they would come to The Bronx and play for the door?

RG: Yes.

MG: On a Sunday afternoon?

RG: On a Sunday afternoon. And we were able to attract like I said, some of the naughty musicians.

MG: And what about the audience?

RG: Audience, how we got them there?

MG: Yes

RG: Well one of the things that we were good at and I think back now we were pioneers in terms of promoting, what we would mention, we had was that we were artists, so we would design fliers.

MG: Do you have any?

RG: There might be a couple, in one bag or a corner, but we were good at that. But also, I would like to say that we took, we were one of the first groups that used direct mail. We would design these fliers and we would talk to people who worked downtown in major businesses and that had mailing lists. So we paid a couple of dollars and they would insert our fliers. [laughter] So in between fliers and posters, we also became noted for the design of our posters.

MN: Do you have any posters?

RG: There might be some of them still existing.

MN: Wow.

MG: That would be good.

MN: That's probably a long day in Kwame's

RG: Yeah, right. But in the beginning like I said, we were one of the first social groups that I know that really got up there and used the ---

MN: What was the demographics of the people who came to the events?

RG: Primarily black.

MN: What were the ages?

RG: Age at that time, it varied. It varied from teenagers to on up because the people who really were looking for opportunities to hear jazz, once they got word of what we were doing, they would turn up.

MG: Was that the only opportunity to hear jazz in The Bronx at that time?

RG: Well at least from our understanding of the Morrisania section. There were a few other places but they didn't feature, Boddleshacks, let me put it that way. There were other clubs, but very few featured the type of jazz musicians that you'd find either on 52nd Street or in The Village. And that was through our efforts of just going out there and exposing ourselves.

MG: You started in 56, how long did you --

RG: The concerts went from 1956 to 60.

MN: That long, wow.

RG: Yeah, we were very successful. What we also did which was a kind of departure, we came with the idea of the concert, a picnic and jazz concert, at a place up in The Bronx called The International Park Inn. And this is where we would meet because what

we had; it was an outdoor barbeque, and jazz. Which I think back was pretty unique at the time.

MN: Where was this located? It was located on 229<sup>th</sup> Street and White Plains Road.

MN: Wow, so up in Wakefield.

RG: Yes. Now how we found the spot, I don't remember.

MN: That was a neighborhood that was becoming more and more Afro-Caribbean at that point, the Wakefield section.

RG: At that time we didn't know. We found the spot and it seemed like a great opportunity. So here again, using our promotion techniques---

MN: Now this was a bar with an outdoor ---

RG: No, no, this was actually like a, it was kind of a small park, it was a park, it was a big area that people of the neighborhood created as an outdoor place for barbequing and just spending time out there.

MG: So you put a stage or they had a stage?

RG: Yes, no they had a stage area which was also used as a dance area, right in the center, so it worked out very well, and we were able to attract, here again at that show, if I could remember some of the artists that appeared, John Coltrane ---

MN: What?!

MG: What?!

RG: Yeah, we were very fortunate. What we realized was that we were very personal [laughter], so we were not intimidated by the artists, so we'd go up to them and, particularly since we had a good friend in Miles, you know, we'd go up there and say we're doing concerts, would you like to come up and play for us? And they would come.

So at this event, I forgot what we called it, it featured John Coltrane, Cannon Ball

Admaly, Billie Joel on the drums, and I can't think of the others.

MG: And how did you pay them? From the revenues from the event. It went very well.

In fact, one of the interesting things about that particular concert was that I told you that we tried to get Miles to come to play for us, but Miles was like no, I'm sorry, talk to my agent. But he made an appearance, which was very interesting.

MN: And what was the name of this place? It was called the International Park Inn.

MG: What did you call the event?

RG: It was something to do with barbeque and jazz, but I don't remember the exact title.

Now this took place on a Saturday afternoon. We had a nice spot.

MG: When did you change the name to the African Jazz Society?

RG: That took place when we decided we needed a space. So we looked around and we found office space right next to the Apollo Theater.

MG: No kidding?

RG: Yes, 243 West 125<sup>th</sup> Street. So we moved down there and ---

MG: I think that's where Catherine O'Donnell was. When you face the Apollo, is it to the right or the left?

RG: It's to the left. Yes, it's to the left. In fact, I later found out that that was in that building, Lomay Babe had a story up.

MG: Yes he did. They have the videos now.

RG: Yes. She was like that was a historical place, but we didn't know it at the time. So the owner of the space were also the owners of the Apollo Theater, the Chiffer family.

So they took the space. Then, Lombay I remember came with this idea because, maybe I

should backtrack. In terms of the political exposure, we started going to Harlem and becoming exposed to the politics of Harlem. We'd go to the Mosque and see Malcolm. We'd stand on the street corner and listen to the street speakers. And at that time, the founder of the African Nationalist Pioneer movement was going on with the speakers of the corner, and his organization was based on the Garvey movement.

MG: Right

RG: And one of the features of the Garvey movement was they had other businesses, but they also did what they called shows. One of the type of shows they had was a fashion show that featured women who did not straighten their hair. And it was called a Miss Standard of Beauty Contest. So after visiting one or two of them, I remember Lombay called and said I have an idea about why don't we take that concept and broaden it. So we came up with this idea of finding girls who didn't straighten their hair and we produced a show called the Naturalists Show. At that time, we decided to change the name from The Jazz Arts Society because we were moving more you know, I wouldn't say away from jazz, but we were more broadening our concepts and ideas, getting involved in politics of African Nationalism. So that's where the African Jazz Arts Society came into play. And under that we produced a number of these shows that later became known as the Nationalists shows.

MG: Where were they located?

RG: Well initially, they are in Harlem. We started one in a small club on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, it's no longer there, I don't remember it. But from there we used different ball rooms throughout the area. And also very interesting, showing the ties, at one of the shows, we were introduced to Abby Lincoln. Abby became so excited that she agreed to work with

us. So Abby was one of the presenters, and she also was a performer. Then Abby got next involved. We had their support; in fact, we did a number of shows, two shows exactly, in Chicago and Detroit.

MG: No kidding?

RG: Yeah, and we came along. And here again, talking about regular people, Abbie was such an --

MG: He's the best—

RG: Oh yes. Yeah, she took me on, she went with us on this long bus ride to Chicago in the dead of winter, but they were very supportive of us. So we still had the connection between the culture, which was culture, you know, fashion shows and jazz, see we were able to bridge the two.

MG: So besides the Grapghlwic brothers and you, were there other, who else was in the—

RG: Yes, there were several artists, I think, let me just wrap it up and say that The Jazz Arts Society originally consisted of not only of, there were four of us primarily, with the Lombay, Kwame, another individual by the name of Chris Hall, who was also an artist.

MG: Was he from The Bronx also?

RG: NO, Chris was from Brooklyn originally, but he knew Lombay because Lombay went to The School of Visual Arts, so that's where they went. But there were other people that came into the organization who were not artists. The interest was the center piece was the music. So we had to attract, they didn't stay very long. They would come in for a while; some were college students and went on to the other big stuff.

MG: Were there any women members?

RG: At the beginning there was one woman and I always think about it. Her name was Shirley Anderson. And we needed a secretary [laughter] so I don't know how we met her but she became our secretary. She was with us for a number of years, but she was the only female.

MG: Did she have anything to do with jazz?

RG: Well sure. She was a jazz fan.

MN: Were all the people of Caribbean ancestry?

RG: No, no. It was the mix. Some were born here in the States, and others [inaudible]

MG: So in the time that you had the place on 125<sup>th</sup> Street and you expanded to this African Jazz Arts Society, you still call it the African Jazz Arts Society when you did the Natural Ways show –

RG: Yes. Yes.

MG: Were you commuting to The Bronx?

RG: Yes, well I still lived in The Bronx at that time. In fact we all did. Then one by one as the individuals went on their own, some moved to Harlem and some stayed in The Bronx. But I was still in The Bronx.

MG: Let me ask you a little bit more about Carlos Cook. So were you involved in his organization?

RG: I never personally became involved. I would attend his affairs, but eventually, Alomay and Kwame actually became members.

MG: But you didn't?

RG: No, I did not. I just wasn't interested.

MG: Almay and Kwame, are they Muslim?

RG: No.

MG: They're just African names?

RG: Right, yeah. So as said, he would go to the mosque and that's where we met Malcolm.

MG: So could you talk about seeing Malcolm a little bit?

RG: Oh that was an interesting experience. I first met Malcolm, I first saw Malcolm at the Muslim mosque on 116<sup>th</sup> street between, it wasn't at the location that the building is at now, it was in another location farther east, a smaller place. But it was very impressive. Then we'd see Malcolm on the street corners, so Malcolm, when I think back, we were very fortunate to experience, not just to meet him but to actually see him work.

MN: Did he ever come up to The Bronx?

RG: Not that I know of.

MG: He may have, if we keep asking that question.

RG: Oh did he?

MG: No what I mean it's possible he did.

RG: Oh yes it's possible, yes certainly.

MG: But I was very interested in your interview I read, a previous interview. You separated the idea of cultural from political. You said we weren't political, we were cultural.

RG: Yes.

MG: You know because of the, but really, there is a very fine line here—

RG: A very fine line—

MG: So the whole idea of you young guys going downtown and forming this community of this socialist group here, or what we could term as equal and attracting artists that would work to support you really, they're coming to support what you're trying to do in The Bronx.

RG: That's true, oh yes.

MG: Right, which today might be a little difficult, and then changing your name to the African Jazz Arts Society and having a place and having the establishment, it's very political—

RG: Yes. I agree

MG: So you might have started by being jazz fans, but you know this is often something said around jazz or anything having to do with Abbie Rankin and Max Rowe of course, it can be political.

RG: Exactly. Yes.

MG: Because of her stand and your stand –

RG: Yes right—

MG: You know Louis Armstrong and everything, it's all political so anything to do with jazz and outsiders –

RG: And here again I should mention, jazz was issues, other artists, I think they welcomed that. They welcomed the opportunity to at least display both sides of their personalities.

MG: And helping to assist young black men trying to something with a business.

RG: Yes, as I said, contributed a lot to our success.

MG: And was a little unusual at that time.

RG: Very unusual.

MG: And at this time. [laughter]

RG: You know, you don't think of yourself as a pioneer, but in many ways, the things that you do when you did them were pioneering efforts as I look back on it now. We were many ways as they would say, ahead of our time.

MG: And do you continue your interest in jazz?

RG: Yes I do. I don't visit as many clubs as I did, but I still try to keep up with the music. I go to the concerts, yeah I'll do concerts, but the club scene, I don't do it as much as I [inaudible].

MG: Do you listen to records or you have CDs?

RG: Well, CDs, certainly stations like GBO, certainly for me fill the void going to, don't go to live concerts, excuse me clubs. I can't remember the last time I've been to a jazz club. But I definitely have my music –

MG: Still consider yourself a jazz fan?

RG: Oh yes.

MG: do you think The Bronx could support a jazz club now?

RG: I think it could, but it would have to broaden its tastes, its interests. I think it would still have to take in the Latin culture, which was always part of jazz. But I think if you were going to be successful, you would have to incorporate more Latin jazz in the mix. As I said, even though it was part of the beginning. Certainly when you think about the history of Dizzy Gillespie, it was always there, but today, because of the, certainly the mixing of the two musical styles, I think you have to, particularly keeping in mind the demographics of The Bronx. You know, you would have to do that to be successful.

MG: Do we have more time?

RG: Oh plenty

MG: I want to ask you about going back to Lionel Place because when we hear about Lionel Place, we always here about Theloneus Monk and Elmo Hope. But is that in hindsight, or is that at the time when you were living there that you were aware of Theloneus Monk and Elmo Hope.

RG: Certainly it was aware of Elmo because of his family living directly across the street. His family would tell us about their older, one of the brothers who was a famous jazz musician. Then we took more of an interest, particularly once we started and getting into jazz. Unfortunately, Elmo was not around.

MG: Right, he came back in 61. You were gone right?

RG: Right, yes because at that time between traveling around and some of the other issues he had, he just wasn't there.

MG: He was in California until 1961.

RG: Yes, but when he would come around, I remember it would be a big occasion because when he would come, often times Theloneus Monk would come around to see him, so that was an opportunity for us to see both of them together.

MG: Did you know that Buck came up there too, Buck Collins?

RG: No.

MG: But you heard about it?

RG: I heard about it. Later yes, but no, I did not know that.

MG: Could you hear a piano playing from that apartment ever?

RG: No, I did not. My apartment was in the back, five stories up.

MG: Were there other musicians on Lionel Place?

RG: There were a few that took a serious interest in it, one became a drummer of note and eventually he went on to play with Chad Baker.

MG: Who's that?

RG: His name was Neil Mitchell. Yeah, so once we started –

MG: He grew up on the block?

RG: He grew up on Lionel place yeah.

MG: Is he living?

RG: No, he passed away in the middle - -

[End of side one]

[Beginning of side two]

RG: - - twist in different forms of culture. There were artists who came out of the block like myself and a few others that studied art. There was a woman that became an editor and a romance novelist. And Also there was a - -

MN: What was her name?

RG: Elsie Washington.

MG: Is she living?

RG: Yes, I think she lives up in, I think she stays out in Brooklyn today.

MN: Elsie Washington. Does she write under that name?

RG: She used a pseudonym, I can find that out. But we began to recognize that Lionel Place was special in certain ways. One because we could say that we had noted positions and have either lived or came, but also, there's also this cultural interest. Just that some went on to pursue their cultural arts and some didn't. So we considered ourselves

fortunate in that regard. Being exposed. Then right around the corner, we had musicians like Red Allen, so the immediate environment was very cultural.

MG: How far away were Maxine Sullivan and her friends?

RG: Maxine, she lived on Witter Place.

MG: Was that far?

MN: Two blocks.

RG: About two blocks, yeah, two blocks north.

MN: Were you aware of Maxine Sullivan in the fifties?

RG: No I wasn't.

MN: See this is interesting.

RG: I was not.

MG: When did they name it The House That Jazz Built? Was that later?

MN: No that isn't her house. She had an actual store front for kids in the neighborhood that she created in the seventies.

MG: Oh and that's where it says The House That Jazz Built.

MN: Yeah, it's not her house on Ritter Place, it was a program called The House That Jazz Built.

MG: Oh, see I didn't, and that's in the seventies?

MN: Yes. And from the seventies through the eighties. And it's right near Caldwell AME Zion Church, which is right up the block. It was fairly close to Lionel Place.

RG: Yes, it was between Chisholm Street and Fayette Street.

MN: On Stevens, which is now called Reverend William Polite or

RG: James Polite.

MN: James Polite. It was on Stevens between Chisholm and yeah. So and if you look at it on Google, it will show some [inaudible] about the program and it's also we interviewed her daughter, Paula Morris, who worked with her at The House That Jazz Built.

MG: I see, I had it, I had it wrong.

MN: Yeah. The house is separate.

MG: When you hear about it, but then you know. Did your parents go to church in that neighborhood, were they members of the church?

RG: The family church was in Morrisania, Trinity Episcopal, which is located on Boston Road and 161<sup>st</sup>.

MN: Right near Morris High School.

RG: Yes, that's it.

MG: So listening to jazz and going to clubs and all wasn't around the time, in that - -

RG: No, no.

MG: Whereas in Elmo Hope's family, they were fundamentalists and the mother frowned on music and jazz - -

RG: Yes - -

MG: and there was a lot of tension there because of that.

MN: Now you also told me something, you were heard Elmo Hope's first wife shouting out the window at her son?

RG: Oh yes. I was saying that Elmo's first wife lived on the same side of the street as our family and they had a son. His name was Elmo Hope Jr. And at that time he was separated from them, but we all remember the son of because some knew who his father

was. But one of the things I remember because I lived in the back and their apartment was, we could certainly see it. And I remember when she was angry at him, she would say something like “you’re gonna be no good like your father”.

MG: And you remember that, later you remember that.

RG: And unfortunately - -

MG: You know this is ironic, could you turn that off?

MN: Turn it off?

MG: Just for a second

[Recording stops]

[Recording begins]

MG: But I am interested in the church, you know the affiliation because we know from an earlier interview with professor Harding also that the ladies he brought there went to Catholic church, and so they went to the clubs, the Latin clubs, they went to The Palladium, they went out and went everywhere, but he was a - -

MN: A Seventh Day Advocate - -

MG: And he said that was frowned upon, so he didn’t go to the clubs and the theaters and everything, but they would have house parties and there was certain kind of music they couldn’t listen to. So you know that has to do with people’s experience, how the family, what they’re open to.

RG: Yes, yes. Certainly, I did experience that in life, we were a young bunch free to listen to what we wanted to listen to.

MG: And what kind of music did they listen to in the house?

RG: My family, being from the Caribbean, it was primarily Caribbean music.

MG: Calypso?

RG: Calypso, yes.

MN: Now who were the calypso artists you remember best from your childhood?

RG: Mighty Sparrow comes to mind. He was and still is one of the biggest - -

MN: Did he ever perform in The Bronx?

RG: Yes, he did, I am not sure where. In fact, he might have performed at Hunts Point Palace.

MG: That's something to pursue, the calypso.

MN: Do you ever remember going to hear live Caribbean music?

RG: Most definitely, oh yeah.

MN: Where would you hear the Caribbean music?

RG: I would hear it at different dances. I would hear it either at Hunts Point Palace, or Lockland Palace, which was another major public venue of entertainment in the Bronx, I mean in Harlem. There were other clubs, The Dawn Casino in Harlem, there were a number of places. Did your parents belong to any Caribbean associations that they, you know - -

RG: My father, there was a Virgin Island Organization that he was a part of.

MG: In The Bronx?

RG: I don't know where they were based.

MN: Did he play cricket?

RG: No he did not. Cricket is more of an English sport.

MG: He's from the American [laughter] he didn't need a passport to come.

RG: That's right [laughter].

MN: But he played baseball?

RG: Yes, we are in the United States.

MG: Yes, there's a real difference.

RG: A big difference yes.

MG: So did he have records also?

RG: He had some, yes. And through his record collection and my being exposed to calypso on the radio, see one of the main sheer influences in terms of music at that time in our era was a particular radio program called Dr. Jive. Tommy Dr. Jive Smalls was the DJ and he was a pioneer in a sense that he exposed his listeners to all forms of music. It was pretty much a rhythm and blues formatted show, but he would devote at least fifteen minutes to different formats. One was Latin music, and he also featured calypso.

MN: Mow was this WWRL1600?

RG: I think it was the call, 1600 yes.

MN: And what time of the day did it come on?

RG: It was during the afternoon, three thirty.

MN: So when you came home from school?

RG: Yes. One of the first things that we would do was turn on the radio.

MN: Dr. Jive, a number of people have mentioned him.

MG: Very influential. Let me ask you, did you go to any of these other clubs in The Bronx later? Did you go to Sylvia's.

RG: Yes, I eventually went to Sylvia's, I went to Freddy's.

MG: Oh, tell me about Freddy's.

RG: Freddy's, I remember Freddy's was a small club.

MG: Was it a bar or was it a club?

RG: It was more of a bar. It had a little stage area. Yeah, it became more popular after the New Morocco. The New Morocco opened in the early sixties, it might have been in the fifties - -

MN: Late fifties - -

RG: Late fifties, early sixties, something like that. Right. Now Freddy's had been there a while, it was a local bar, then you know, they changed and opened up to jazz musicians so [inaudible]. It was a very small place.

MN: Now what about Goodson's?

RG: Goodson's, I had never attended Goodson's. It was one of those places when I was growing up, I'd see the adults going there, but I never went. They changed the music. I don't remember people saying that they featured jazz. I don't think it was a jazz club.

MG: Do you remember who you heard at Freddy's?

RG: I do not. I don't remember.

MG: What about New Morocco?

RG: New Morocco, Nancy Wilson. That's when she made her uh - -

MG: Did she work there often, because every body interviewed say they heard her there.

RG: She was one of the feature artists, oh yeah, she was one of the main features. That's how they built their reputation.

MG: That's how. Can I go back to the owner of the Club 845. He's Italian?

RG: Yes

MG: Is he still living?

RG: I doubt it. His name was Joe Tucci, I knew very little of - -

MG: Wasn't there someone named Valone before that, or Malone?

MN: Ralph Vascone.

MG: Vascone, yeah.

MN: Seemed to be the first foreigner. Now were there rumors about mafia ties surrounding this or anything like that?

RG: Never heard that.

MN: Now what about chorus girls at Bronx Clubs. Because I've seen the advertisements and they talk about the Zanza - -

RG: Zanzibar?

MN: Yeah, about like they had a chorus girls?

RG: No, - -

MG: That must have been earlier.

RG: Yeah, before 47, at least. I knew very little of that.

MG: Did you notice darks coming into the scene?

RG: Certainly I noticed it on our block when I was there. I remember trucks introduced about the early fifties, not by musicians, people coming in. That was the first time. Then experiencing one of our neighbors dying from an overdose.

MG: Did you know he had a habit?

RG: Word got around.

MG: Word got around.

RG: Yes, and this individual in particular, he joined the navy and I don't know what happened, he came out on leave and he passed away.

MG: Was there any activity to keep drugs off the block?

RG: Any organized, no. At that time you just, you know, if you're aware of it, you make decisions. Some succumbed and got involved - -

MN: Did you in the fifties feel the neighborhood was going down, or that sensibility wasn't there that early?

RG: What I began to notice was that people started to leave for different reasons. Either they went away to school or a family decided to move to another neighborhood. There was the change that - -

MG: And who would move in when people moved out?

RG: Other families. But it wasn't the same because you had known these families. And Lionel Place up until the late fifties, early sixties, was a pretty stable block. You didn't have that much transition.

MG: That's what makes a difference. When the people who have been twenty years in on neighborhood either move up or out, the children grow up then you come with the next generation, and the next generation comes with problems.

RG: Right, you don't have the kind of relationship that you had - -

MG: When all the children you grew up with were all grown up so they either went to school, went to the army, or went to work and had their own families.

RG: Right, exactly. If they went into the service and didn't marry, they'd come back, so eventually they would leave. So that was the first transition that I began to notice.

MG: And when you went into the army, you were living on Lionel place?

RG: No, Yes, in fact, it's interesting because I went into the army in July of 1963. I was stationed at Fort Dix. While I was at Fort Dix, I got a letter from my family saying dear Bob, dear Robert, we have moved. [laughter]. And I was shocked.

MN: Where did they move to?

RG: They moved to Trinity Avenue, not too far.

MN: Trinity between where and where?

RG: Trinity between 161 and 163 street.

MN: Now, did they move into public housing? No, they moved into a co-op.

MN: Oh, they moved into Woodstock - -

RG: Woodstock Terrace.

MN: Which was a middle income co-op, which is still there, right near Johnson's Barbeque.

RG: But that was a shock to me because you know, when I went in, I thought I'd be coming back to my place.

MG: Did you have siblings?

RG: I had a sister yes.

MG: You had one sister?

RG: Yes.

MG: Was she also involved with The Jazz Arts Society?

RG: Well she was involved when we were producing the Naturally shows, she became one of the models. Yeah, she was stable with the group for a couple of years then she went to college and became a teacher.

MG: Do you still have a relationship with Kwame?

RG: Yes, it's not as close as it used to be, but we still have a relationship. We see each other at occasional events, but certainly not to the extent that - - -

MG: I think he's, Alombay's certainly continued on the Black Nationalist movement, - -

RG: Yes he has.

MG: And do you feel like you like - -

RG: Well with me, and here again - -

MG: Would you still identify as a Pan-Africanist?

RG: Well I've always had the political interest, but I began to realize that I was more comfortable with the cultural aspect of the scene. Here again, moving more into the art field, but I felt more comfortable dealing with the cultural aspects than the politics, which, you know I have a little experience, I know a thing or two - -

MG: But in terms of like you feel more comfortable with the cultural, also in your career, you worked with white people right?

RG: Well, here again, the direction that I took, now keep in mind, not to say that you can't be a nationalist and be part of a multicultural environment.

MG: You can. You might choose not to.

MN: Right.

RG: And you might choose to. I just chose to go into art and eventually fatherhood, which [inaudible]. But I began to use whatever skills I had my interest in and try to belong to other creative avenues.

MG: Are you working on your memoir?

RG: Thinking about it.

MG: I would encourage you to write a memoir and really look at what you're saying now, and really look at this black nationalism in a positive light of what it did to you and how it conformed to your life and everything.

MN: One issue I want to bring up because is, were you aware of skin color gradations in the black community in The Bronx, or at the time you were growing up, was that a non issue?

Well growing up in the black family, there's always, well I shouldn't always, in most, in many cases, there's the issue of color. Certainly in my family it was no different. But when it comes to The Bronx, the neighborhood, no.

MN: Okay because when the Pruitts mentioned when they moved there in the 30s, most of the families were very light skinned, but the first families who moved into Morrisania which was the thirties, but by the mid forties, that had, you know, is a much more diverse migration.

RG: Yes, right. No, but you know it was not until later as I had started thinking back, and seeing certain - -

MG: But you know what's interesting about that is that when you people were first renting to colored families and we're assuming it was the light skinned people who could move in, in that same family could be dark skinned people, so it really depends who went to rent the apartment. Because as you well know, that we rented many things that weren't for black people it's the same way that people have of getting into it right?

MN: Yes. Okay, is there anything else you want to raise Maxine?

MG: If you could find any memorabilia from The Jazz Arts Society, this is, oh, and I wanted to ask you were you aware of other groups, similar groups in that period in other places, like did you know about the Collective Black Artists in Manhattan?

RG: No I didn't.

MG: It's almost the same as - -

RG: Yes, I learned that.

MN: Yes I told you know, that they were at the same time. And in Brooklyn with the East and everything, I'm sure that they had other groups in Brooklyn, know about Randy and everything that we're doing, other black men trying to do the same thing because remember The East in Brooklyn?

RG: Yes.

MG: You know about The East right?

MN: Extremely.

MG: But you know there are these similar cultural moments around jazz that come out of the civil rights movement, you know, of the black nationalists.

RG: That's true, yes. I have heard people, certainly when people, when I talk about the Jazz Arts Society, one of the things that I learned is that people were looking at us in terms of what we were doing and one of the things that impressed them was how we promoted our events. I think I mentioned this earlier, that because we were artists, when we wanted to publicize, we just didn't go to someone and say print up a flier. We designed our own fliers. We later learned that a lot of people collected the - -

MN: So Elombe and Kwame would have this material if anybody does?

RG: Yes, yes.

MG: I'll call them. Can I use your name?

RG: Sure of course. But I have also heard people say gee, you guys have really set the standard for us.

Interviewer: Mark Naison and Maxine Gordon

Interviewee: Robert Gumbs

Session 2

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MG: That's good. Well you know in the downtown scene, what's the theater on second avenue, The Gilmore, you know, that art work, Peter Max, they used, he did that for free at first and that developed a whole style that - -

RG: Yes, of course