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## McKay, Stephanie

Bronx African American History Project  
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Interviewee: Stephanie McKay  
Interviewer: Dr. Oneka LaBennett  
Date: December 10, 2008

Transcriber: Will Beller

Dr. Oneka LaBennett: It is December 10, 2008, and we are at the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University. We're conducting an oral history interview with Stephanie McKay. The interviewer is Oneka LaBennett, and our videographer John Russell is present. Stephanie, I'd like to start by asking you to spell your first and last name.

Stephanie McKay: My first name is spelled S-t-e-p-h-a-n-i-e, my last name M-c-k-a-y.

OL: And when were you born and where?

SM: I was born June 2, 1967. I was born in East Harlem, and at two years old my parents moved up to the Bronx.

OL: Okay, we'll talk more about the Bronx, but why don't we just find out where you lived East Harlem for those first two years of your life.

SM: 116<sup>th</sup> Street in the heart of El Barrio between Lexington and Park.

OL: Okay.

SM: 123 East 116<sup>th</sup> Street [Laughs].

OL: And what influenced your parents to move to the Bronx?

SM: I think at that time the Bronx represented a better life, and it represented more of a middle class, better educational system –

OL: Yes.

SM: – and it represented some type of security where you could raise kids in a community.

OL: Yes.

SM: And so my parents moved up to Co-op City.

OL: Okay. Where were your parents from?

SM: Both of my parents were from Norfolk, Virginia, and my mom was born in 1936, and my dad 1934.

OL: Yes. When did they move to Harlem? Do you know?

SM: I think they moved to Harlem around 18 – after college. My dad got drafted for the war so he went to the service, and my mom – she came up pretty much – she went to Atlantic City first for work, and then she came up to East Harlem to join her other sister, her husband at 116<sup>th</sup> street, and she came at around 20 – 21.

OL: Okay. What did your parents do for a living?

SM: My mom was a legal secretary, and my dad, after holding several jobs – he worked as a taxi driver in the Bronx. He ended up being a labor organizer. He was working for the teamsters union – the teamsters.

OL: Oh, that's really interesting.

SM: Yes [Laughs].

OL: And so, he did that after he worked for the Bronx?

SM: Yes, that was his steady job I guess after he got settled into a career. That was – he spent at least 18 years doing that.

OL: Wow. So tell me a little bit about what it was like living in Co-op City in your early childhood.

SM: Well, in the beginning years I would still go down to Harlem for kindergarten –

OL: Oh.

SM: – and then I came up to the Bronx, and I went to all the schools – IS PS 178, and it was a very good school. They had music and arts and reading, and it was a strong program – a multicultural school. Very mixed, diverse – mostly Jewish, blacks, and Puerto Ricans, and it was a very happy time for me, and then my parents got divorced, and then I moved to the Bronx – South Bronx part –

OL: Yes.

SM: – and I lived on 187<sup>th</sup> and Grand Concourse.

OL: Oh, okay.

SM: And that's where a lot of my references in my teenage years come from, and doing some modern – mainly hip hop music.

OL: Okay, we'll definitely talk more about that. Where was PS 178?

SM: That was in Co-op City.

OL: Okay, I see, and what were the other families who lived in Co-op city at the time like? What was the ethnic make-up?

SM: It was mostly Jewish.

OL: Yes.

SM: Jewish American, Italian, Polish – mostly blacks and Puerto Ricans came from the other side of the highway – Boston Secor and the valley, and some were using public transportation from Fordham Road and that area.

OL: Yes.

SM: So, we had a broad, diverse community going to the school.

OL: Yes, what was it like growing up with those kids? Did you feel divided, or did it seem like it didn't matter that you were from different backgrounds? What was that like?

SM: No, I seem to remember like in school different cultures were celebrated.

OL: Yes.

SM: You know, we had – it was integrated very nicely into the education with certain days appreciating certain cultures, and I didn't really sense any kind of separatism between groups. Everybody just lived together. Their parents knew each other, spoke to each other, it was friendly, very friendly.

OL: So this was like the very early 1970's after you moved to Co-op City?

SM: Yes, exactly.

OL: And then what was it like, that transition from moving from Co-op City to Grand Concourse and 181 you said?

SM: Yes, 187<sup>th</sup> –

OL: 187<sup>th</sup>.

SM: – 188<sup>th</sup>, Webster Avenue –

OL: Yes.

SM: – it was, it was a bit of a – it was a little culture shock because my mom – we went from having a three bedroom to a one bedroom with me and my mom, and I had a whole separate experience – a whole different group of friends. This time I was in a neighborhood with mostly Latinos and blacks, and it was very tight knit. Everyone

looked out for each other, and it was a smaller building. Where I came from a building that had 33 floors in Co-op City –

OL: Yes.

SM: – this was a building – a smaller tenement with fire escapes that had 6 floors, and so it was – and I had to take public transportation back and forth. I still went to school in Co-op City.

OL: Oh, okay.

SM: So, you know I had to go up tracks, and my mom was divorced, so I was [Incomprehensible] kid, so I come home, cook my own dinner, and have my own key. So it was kind – I was kind of naïve, call me, in that neighborhood, and I had some bad experiences, but then I got used to the [Laughs] making new friends, and I – it was some of the best times that I can remember.

OL: Yes. It must have been hard for you making friends quickly because you were going to school in a different neighborhood.

SM: Right.

OL: So you didn't have that daily routine of seeing people at school.

SM: No, and then my mom befriended a woman in the laundry mat, and it just so happened she had just moved into the building and had two daughters around my age, and that was the beginning and the end of – end of my loneliness [Laughter]. So I – those two girls, Tilisa and Yvonjia, ended up being my friends still to this day, and they became a part of our family, and so that was the beginning of my friendship, and then from there, we started meeting other young people in the building who our mothers basically –

OL: Oh, that's wonderful. Would you mind saying and spelling the second girl's name again. I know the transcriber's not going to catch that.

SM: Oh yes. It was Tilisa – t-i-l-i-s-a and Yvonjia – y-v-o-n-j-i-a.

OL: Thank you. Those are great names.

SM: Yes.

OL: So you made those two friends, and you started feeling more settled in the neighborhood. You mentioned at lunch that you had an older brother. Was he living with you at the time?

SM: No, he, he stayed living with my dad because there was more room in the apartment. And he – yes, he lived in Co-op City still.

OL: Yes. What was it like financially for you after the divorce?

SM: I would say it, it was a step down for us because, you know, we went from two incomes to one.

OL: Yes.

SM: And my mom, you know, she worked as a secretary, but, you know, we didn't make a lot of money, but it was, you know, we did the best we could, and I had everything I needed. And at the time, she engaged me in a lot of activities, so I was going to dance school at the Alvin Ailey Children's Program. And so everyday after school in junior high I went to the train from the Bronx after school and go down to study dance, and it was just a difference security wise. Our house would get robbed [Laughs], robbed every year that we lived there. We lived on the back of the building. That's where I learned not, not to live on the back of a building, I mean ever again –

OL: Right.

SM: – because they come into your house through the fire escape. So that was different, and, you know, we had mice [Laughs], we had roaches. It was – it wasn't the same quality of lifestyle.

OL: Yes.

SM: But it was very happy.

OL: Yes.

SM: And, I had everything I needed as far as love, yes.

OL: Right. You mentioned going – taking the train down to Alvin Ailey. One of the things that people who talk about growing up in the Bronx mention is the separation between the Bronx and, and Lower Manhattan.

SM: Right.

OL: What was that like for you being connected to that world in Lower Manhattan, I mean, Alvin Ailey wasn't that low –

SM: No.

OL: – but compared to the Bronx –

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SM: But it made a tremendous difference because I think before then I, I, I hadn't been educated culturally in the way that I was when I went to a big city and also studied in a school – an institution that not only promoted physical education, but they promoted history, African American history. To be a dancer, you couldn't just dance. You had to educate yourself –

OL: Right.

SM: – as well. So the discipline and the exposure to the fast paced life in Manhattan was – oh, it just opened up my imagination – opened up my consciousness that, you know, it wasn't just about this little street [Laughs] in the Bronx that I came to every day. You know, there was a whole other world out there of possibilities.

OL: Yes, yes.

SM: Jackson Avenue was the last train stop before Manhattan, so that represented the bridge from, okay, are you going to step into your dreams right now, you know? That's it.

OL: Wow. That's interesting.

SM: I would kind of be expecting a train – that your whole life centered around the subway [Laughs]. That's the way if you lived back then and were trying to make something better for your life. My mom caught the subway everyday for work for 16 years – 20-something years.

OL: Well I want to come back to that Jackson Avenue and, and talk about your song a little bit, but before we get there could you talk a little bit about what it was like growing up in the Bronx – what you saw surrounding your building in the 70's? We've interviewed people for this project who grew up in the Bronx in the 50's, 60's, 70's, and 80's, and we've noticed transitions in terms of how the Bronx was seen by outsiders – especially in the 70's, and the influx of different kinds of drugs and how that changed neighborhoods. So if you could reflect on that a little bit.

SM: Well at the time that I moved to the Bronx with my mom, there was a lot of different scenes going on. The beginnings of hip hop, and then we also had a punk movement going on downtown in Manhattan, and as far as drugs – more when I got to high school – I mean, crack had just overrun our neighborhood.

OL: Yes.

SM: And it – and you saw the effects of crack's [Incomprehensible] – at least every family member – or every friend that you had had a family member who was hit by the drug epidemic, and, you know, of course that was reflected in the graffiti and the art, artwork of Keith Haring and all the great artists that were around that time. And so I think from my perspective I saw my neighborhood change the most dramatically when crack started coming into the neighborhood.

OL: Yes.

SM: But before that, my perception of the Bronx was a very happy – groups, cliques of people who kind of looked out for one another. Everyone didn't have a lot, but you know, we would hang out in front of the building, it was, you know, in the summer time, every, everyone would look out for another, and there was this social interaction with, with games. You know, we didn't have video games back then.

OL: Yes.

SM: We didn't have xbox, so we would always be out in the streets, either playing, you know, stickball, handball, ring the livio, round up, you know, it was always some hide and seek game, it was always interaction – a healthy, physical interaction. Jumping on each others' backs against the building. I mean, there was so many happy memories. I'm like, wow, that kind of social interaction has totally disappeared. We're all behind, you know, a laptop now, and that has really – I'm, I feel grateful I have that kind of quality of life where you have that imagination where you can be free to, you know, interact with your fellow members. Everybody wanted to be around each other.

OL: Yes, definitely, it's not unusual that you're saying that. We've had so many people talk about those street games and how important they were.

SM: Yes.

OL: Definitely. It sounds like your mom kept you pretty busy.

SM: Yes.

OL: Was she concerned about you being a girl sort of on your own? Did she try to keep you involved in projects to know where you were, or what was her motivation?

SM: I think my mom just – she was definitely very protective. Kind of a little, a little scary about, you know, but she wasn't over protective where she didn't want me to pursue things outside the neighborhood. I think she, you know, she sacrificed herself for her kids because she had kids, and she didn't maybe pursue the dreams that she had because of money or whatever, so she really pushed us into different interests that we might have shown. She knew that I was kind of fresh and sassy, and you know, like the play around and dress up, and she's like, "Oh, maybe the arts is good for her." And, you know, and she used to just take me to a school in Harlem – Ruth Williams dance school in Harlem on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. And then when she saw that I had enjoyed that, then she put me into the Alvin Ailey School, and then from there I just delved into dance pretty dramatically. So I think – her interests were in the arts as well. She sang –

OL: Oh really?

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SM: – and all her aunts sang, and they played piano. They learned how to sing in church, in Baptist church down in Virginia. Nobody studied it professionally except for one of my aunts. They pursued acting and modeling, but – so I think my mom had it in her. It was a little bit of her, you know, passion, but she never pursued it.

OL: How old were you when she enrolled you in that first school, Ruth Williams?

SM: Yes, I was six.

OL: Six years old?

SM: Yes.

OL: Wow, so you had this, sort of affinity for dressing up and –

SM: Yes.

OL: – theatricals?

SM: Yes, when I watch home movies, I'm very hyperactive [Laughs]. I'm rolling on the grass, tumbling, I'm like, "What is wrong with me?" [Laughs] So I think my mom – she knew that I needed to direct all that energy some place. And actually, Ruth Williams is a legendary, a legend in the Co-op City community. She lived right across the street from us in Co-op City, and that school had – so many people attended that school. I think it's been existence for like 20 something years.

OL: Wow.

SM: And it was at the famous Theresa Hotel on 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan.

OL: And when did you start singing? Were you always singing also?

SM: Yes I was always singing, but I never took it seriously.

OL: Yes.

SM: It was just a natural gift. I didn't think it was something – my passion was dance, and that's what I wanted, but I didn't realize that my natural gift for singing would eventually help me to make a living as an artist and provide, you know, years of fulfillment as a creative expression more than dance, but I originally studied dance.

OL: And where did you go to high school?

SM: Truman, Harry S. Truman High School in the Bronx, so I stayed in all the schools that were in Co-op City.

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OL: Yes, yes, and did you have access to the arts in your high school?

SM: Yes. Not dance so much, but music. We definitely had music and choir. We had the citywide choir, the Bronx-wide choir, and we would – the Bronx Borough Choir I think it was called – and we, we, you could join that, or you could just take band – pick and instrument and take band, and I chose clarinet, but then I ended up just singing choir in junior high school.

OL: Okay.

SM: Yes, so that's where I learned harmony and singing in a choral group. It trained my ears for harmony.

OL: Right, and how would your teachers and classmates have described you in high school?

SM: Well, I would imagine quiet at times, but then really silly and funny. You know, coming out with something shocking that they wouldn't expect because they thought I was only quiet and naïve, and then – so I would say funny and a little bit different because I had the exposure to that downtown scene, so maybe dressed a little bit different.

OL: Yes, yes. What was it like taking classes in Alvin Ailey?

SM: It was, it was wonderful. First of all, when I went to the school, Mr. Ailey was still alive, and, [Crosstalk] and being around all of these African Americans, Afro-Caribbean dancers who – first of all they were so physically stunning. They were so beautiful, and you know they peak in your class, and you would be so – it was like you hadn't been exposed to seeing your own people in such a cultured way, and, and so distinguished, you know?

OL: Yes.

SM: You know, every, all the images – you were raised on the Brady Bunch, you know?

OL: Right.

SM: You didn't really have those positive images in the media, so to go down to Alvin Ailey and see, you know, tall, short, Asian, thick, you know, lean, and everyone was so – I can't describe it. It's just that they were so distinguished.

OL: Yes.

SM: Everyone just had a presence about them, and, and so I think it really was an affirmation of what I could be – the potential of what I could be, and the discipline of that

environment, you know, and – helped me to, I guess, stay focused on my dreams and aspirations because I saw examples of it all around me, you know?

OL: And at the time it was to be a dancer, that was –

SM: Yes, to be a dancer.

OL: – that was your dream? So how did you do academically in school, and did your mom try to steer you away from the arts in terms of a profession? Did she want you to have like a paying job or did she support your dream to be a dancer?

SM: I had a really unique situation where my parents supported me in the arts.

OL: Wow.

SM: And they never talked about having a real job. It was just what do you love doing? Then, if you love doing that, then work your hardest at it and become the best at it – try to become the best at it. So they just encouraged me where my interests were. I never got the pressure of having to make money, you know, because I always worked hard anyway. The discipline to taking class every day, it made me want to work hard in other areas of my life, so that was never a problem with me [Laughs].

OL: Wow.

SM: Yes, I was lucky.

OL: And you said that your brother stayed with your dad. That was in Co-op city that they stayed.

SM: Yes.

OL: So what was your relationship like with your brother, and how was his upbringing different from yours in these two different neighborhoods?

SM: That's an interesting question. I think – I think his – well I didn't see him much because he was teenager and he was getting into girls, so he was pretty much [Laughs] gone all the time. I didn't see him much. He would stop by, but then there was a point where he would take me out on his dates with him because I was like the chick magnet [Laughter]. So, so that got him good points, and that was when he was a little older – in his later teens, and he would bring me out, and – I can't really say. I would say he was involved in a lot of activities as well because he ran track, and he did gymnastics, but I don't really know how his life was that different.

OL: Yes.

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SM: He was just into a lot of activities. I remember he did music, and he, he danced as well – like break dancing.

OL: So around the time that you were in high school and starting to sing in the choir – this is about the mid 70's maybe a little later – when did you start noticing hip hop as sort of a musical and a cultural force in your neighborhood?

SM: I think it was like 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I think – I think whenever the Sugar Hill record, that Sugar Hill record first came out, and then it was I remember Treacherous Three, and I remember actually Mr. Ailey or one of the choreographers had used a Treacherous Three song in, in one of their pieces called “Stock Up.” I think it was Tally Beatty, and, so – and then it was you saw elements of it in Flashdance.

OL: Yes.

SM: And then you saw – but it really was Sugar Hill Gang and Grandmaster Flash – those two, and then when I got to high school it was more Kool Moe Dee and KRS One, but when I first got into hip hop I think that was like 4<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

OL: Yes, so much earlier than high school?

SM: Yes.

OL: And it's interesting that it was incorporated in to dance for you.

SM: Yes.

OL: Did you – were you aware of beat girls and beat boys? Were you interested in break dancing? Did that influence you in dance?

SM: I was more interested in modern dance, but I was totally aware of break dancing because in my neighborhood it was always, it was always something that was around. It was just integrated in daily life, you know? You kind of just took it for granted. You didn't really think this would be the cultural phenomenon that it is.

OL: Yes.

SM: It was just something we all did, and we just enjoyed – that was how we socialized.

OL: Right.

SM: We didn't think that it would be something that would affect the whole world.

OL: Yes.

SM: Yes.

OL: Did you ever take part in like break dancing on the street on the cardboard boxes or anything like that?

SM: No. As is I was going to dance school [Laughs], so I was more in that type of dance, and sometimes we would have choreographers or classes come in, but it was more of – it was more of modern dance.

OL: Yes. So when did you start thinking of yourself as a singer as opposed to a dancer.

SM: Oh, it was at the end of high school I got a knee injury.

OL: Oh.

SM: And so I had to have an operation, so at the end of high school, no it was maybe the beginning of high school. I was 15, and I had to get a cast on my leg and stop training for a while, and it was devastating to me because I was just on my way to the company. Like, I was getting so much stronger, and so when I got that operation, that delayed me a little bit, and so when I went to college I had to start over, and I started my training over again, and then I left to come to New York to audition for dance companies, and then I was not getting hired [Laughter]. And so I was like, “Hmm, what can I do?” You know, I was like – I saw a singing audition, and I went down, and it was the first singing audition I did, and I got it, and I was able to, you know – [Crosstalk]

OL: Wow, what was it for?

SM: It was for a girl group actually, and the girl group was produced by a famous producer at the time called Kasheef, and we were signed to Arista Records, and it was, it was an open contest.

OL: Wow.

SM: Like, it was something that was in *Essence* magazine. They were announcing it WBLS, and I was like, “Oh, I’ll go down there and try it.” You know, not having any luck with dancing, let me just try. I know I can sing, and I had no idea I was going to get it, and so that was my first introduction to the music business.

OL: Right, when was that?

SM: I was straight out of high school. I was like, I guess I was 18 – 17. 17, yes.

OL: And what was the name of the group?

SM: The group was called The Promise, but then we – then the album didn’t end up coming out because it was signed by Clyde Davis.

OL: Wow.

SM: It was going to be a big thing, a huge thing, and then he ended up falling out with Kasheef, and then they didn't end up putting the record out, but the experience of working with that high caliber of song writers and producers set me – it changed my whole course and direction.

OL: Wow.

SM: And after the group didn't come out I went back to school to finish, and I studied dance again to get my degree at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

OL: Okay.

SM: And then, and then I came back to the city to start working again, and then I would get work as a dancer because I could sing. It was a kind of integrated booth to help me make a living for myself, yes.

OL: Wow, what was it like leaving New York and going to school in Philadelphia.

SM: Oh, I enjoyed it even though everybody thought I was crazy. It was like living – you're leaving the capital of the arts [Laughs] to go to small town Philly, what's wrong with you? But, it was great for me because starting over after an injury, to have that small, less competitive environment to prepare me to come back into a larger shark environment [Laughs] it was great, and I went to Philadanco after school – Philadelphia Dance Company – to train, and then I went – during the day we studied dance and humanities at the University of the Arts, and it was a great program.

OL: Wow.

SM: I loved it, yes.

OL: So when you came back and you were kind of getting back into auditioning and singing and dancing, where did you live then?

SM: Oh, I, I lived back with my mom.

OL: Oh, okay.

SM: Yes.

OL: Yes.

SM: And at that time my mom had moved from the Bronx up to Mount Vernon –

OL: Okay. Yes.

SM: – in Westchester, and so I moved with her to be with her.

OL: Yes, okay. I know that you began playing the guitar when you were in a band. When did you take an interest in the guitar, and when did you learn to play?

SM: I think when I was in the girl group with Kasheef.

OL: Okay.

SM: Because we were around so many multi-talented people, and we were encouraged to really learn the craft of music. All of us studied an instrument in the group, so I had an interest in drums –

OL: Yes.

SM: – and guitar. So I studied drums for a year, you know, with a private teacher – Kenwood Dennard.

OL: Wow.

SM: And he – his mother actually runs a music school in East Harlem on 106<sup>th</sup> Street that's still in existence called the Manna House, and she's kind of like Will Calhoun's mother. She's a staple in the community.

OL: Yes.

SM: For teaching people music.

OL: Right.

SM: And she – he taught me how to play the drums, and then after that, I didn't start studying the guitar until several years later when I just formed my old band, and that was like 1995. I had a band.

OL: Okay.

SM: I started studying guitar. I went to the New School, and I took private lessons.

OL: Yes. What was your band called?

SM: Bako Babies [Laughs].

OL: Okay, and who were the members of the band?

SM: It was a duo between myself and a gentleman named Vincent Henry.

OL: Okay, and what kind of music did you perform?

SM: It was acoustic soul. You know, a little bit of jazz, but more like acoustic soul.

OL: Yes, yes, and where did you, where did you get gigs? Where were you playing?

SM: We were playing down at the Fez –

OL: Yes.

SM: – Time Café. We were playing at the Canal Room, CBGB's.

OL: Okay.

SM: The Canal Room wasn't in existence then it was named something else. We were playing – yes, we were playing at CBGB's though. It was a café next to the rock club, and they had a smaller acoustic place where you could play.

OL: Yes.

SM: We played at – we started at a place called Wilson's up on 72<sup>nd</sup> Street. I think it was owned by a basketball player, and we would do 14 consecutive weeks there to build up a following, and then we started getting gigs around the city, and we put out an album that came out in Germany, and then the band disbanded from there, and then that's when I joined the Brooklyn Funk Essentials.

OL: Okay, so tell me a little bit about your experience working with the Brooklyn Funk Essentials. How did you join up with them? What was it like working with them?

SM: Well, it was funny, the girl group that I auditioned for a couple years earlier – one of the members was Joi Cardwell, and she was the lead singer of the Brooklyn Funk Essentials, but she also had a dance-singing career in dance music – like club music.

OL: Yes.

SM: And, her career was taking off, and she couldn't do the tour, so she called me up and said, "Stephanie, will you – are you interested in doing this tour with a band I've been working with?" And I was like, "Sure." You know, so I subbed for her, and then I ended up being a member because she never came back [Laughter]. And then I really – it was to her that I got involved with the Brooklyn Funk Essentials, and so – since I stayed with them for six years, and that was the beginning of really my cultivation as a live performer because they were a 12 piece band that played everything from soul, Latin, jazz, salsa music, they mixed everything up with reggae, and it was such a good training ground for me to work with an ensemble that had such a wide variety of musical background and, and backgrounds. And so, working with them for six years is what really got me to

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integrate my dance background, my singing background, and also we started song writing.

OL: Yes.

SM: Writing my own songs.

OL: Wow, well I definitely want to talk more about the song writing, but you mentioned all of those different musical influences that Brooklyn Funk Essentials were playing. Had you been exposed to all of those different kinds of music growing up in the Bronx? We talked about hip hop before, but what other early musical influences were you getting?

SM: Oh gosh, the Bronx was just such a great place to grow up because of the history. Well, this is where salsa was started, right?

OL: Yes.

SM: We had – so salsa was a big part, especially coming from East Harlem –

OL: Yes.

SM: – and then moving up to the Bronx. Let's see – Jamaican music.

OL: Yes.

SM: I mean, we have a large Jamaican community.

OL: Yes.

SM: Of course classic soul, which is what my mom played in her – growing up in the house.

OL: Right.

SM: All of the Motown great artists – Stevie Wonder, Curtis Mayfield, Al Green.

OL: Yes.

SM: And so it was a culmination of that and like 70's AM radio, which was everything from Jim Croce to Three Dog Night –

OL: Wow.

SM: – to Michael – young Michael Jackson.

OL: Right.

SM: So you had this kind of rock and soul, you know, coming together on the radio. You had like salsa and reggae and hip hop in the street, so it was – it was an exciting time to be growing up where we had all those different scenes.

OL: Yes.

SM: Yes.

OL: You know, I was thinking you must have just fit right in with Brooklyn Funk Essentials because –

SM: Yes.

OL: –those same musical traditions were so alive in the Bronx.

SM: Yes, absolutely.

OL: That's wonderful. So, how did you transition from being – working in this group to then becoming a solo artist? What was that like? Was it difficult to leave them? I mean you were with them for a long time.

SM: Yes, I think it was natural progression because I remember after recording those two albums the band was kind of figuring out what they wanted to do, and at that time, that's when I was starting to right with Vincent Henry – with Bako Babies. And so, I just went – I just started doing gigs with that band, and, and it was just kind of a natural progression. It was just like, okay, everyone was doing their own side projects as it were while they were doing Brooklyn Funk Essentials, so when, you know, creatively the band was just trying to decide where they wanted to go, I think everybody just took a break because they were a little bit burnt out [Laughter]. You know, they wanted to figure out what they wanted to do, so yes, it was just a natural progression.

OL: Natural, yes. What role did the Bronx play in finding your voice as a songwriter and a solo artist?

SM: I think the social interaction with people in the community – having real relationships, you know, you know, day to day contact with the same people that you saw everyday, and being exposed to the poetry of hip hop in the beginning. I mean, Grandmaster Flash and, and, and the issues that they would talk about in hip hop was a humongous influence on me because, you know, I had – I mean when I remember listening to white lines and the bass line and the story telling of you know, of Grandmaster Flash's songs were similar to what I heard in my house when I listened to Curtis Mayfield.

OL: Yes.

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SM: So – or Stevie Wonder, you know, those kind of songs that deal with real life. I wouldn't say it's necessarily – it's – it influenced me necessarily from the Bronx, but the Bronx was a big part of that because there was so much going around. You know, it was really bad neighborhoods, and then there was so much to see with how crack was influencing our friends and family, but then there were lots of good community organizations that were starting that were, you know, kids. There were gangs – positive gangs, and there were negative gangs. There was just a lot of change, and a lot going on at one time, you know?

OL: Yes, yes.

SM: So I would say that gives you a – whether you realize it or not – you know, riding the train or riding the bus to where you're going. All of that is coming into your consciousness whether you realize it or not. So, I think all of those things affected my style musically, and writing – just having a connection with everyday people and witnessing and observing certain transitions in your neighborhood.

OL: Yes, yes. We talked about sort of your friendships and going to school, but at, you know, going from high school to college and then working with Brooklyn Funk Essentials, you were always focused on the arts and always focused on performing and signing and dancing. Were you – were you having relationships with other artists? Were you dating people who were doing the same thing, or did you feel like that was a conflict? Did you ever have to choose between, you know, spending time with your boyfriend, and, and doing your art?

SM: No. I think my first boyfriend in high school, he – he wasn't in the arts, but he loved the arts, you know?

OL: Yes.

SM: I always had support, and then later on I dating people who were doing the same thing as me.

OL: Yes.

SM: Musicians, [Incomprehensible] – when you're in that world all the time, that's where your – that's where you meet people, and I can remember my mom always telling me, "Get out of the same circle of people. [Laughter] You know, try to meet some other people." And I'm like, "But, Mom, this the only people I'm around."

OL: Right.

SM: You know, and so, yes, I dated other artists. I collaborated with other artists.

OL: Yes.

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SM: You know, I was in a band with a boyfriend at one time. Yes, so – yes, those type of crossovers would happen.

OL: Yes.

SM: But it was all positive, and it was all things that added to the cultivation of my progression – evolution as an artist.

OL: Yes. Could you talk a little bit about your solo albums? How you sort of conceptualized yourself as an artist? You have – there are three solo albums or two?

SM: There's two full albums and one EP.

OL: Okay, okay.

SM: Okay.

OL: So, could you talk a little bit about the first album and how you saw yourself as an artist then, and maybe how you kind of evolved or developed into the kind of artist who made the second album?

SM: Okay. Well the first album was recorded in Bristol, England, and how I got to Bristol, England was I was working in the city singing background for different artists, you know, to help myself make a living, to take dance class, to take guitar lessons, whatever I needed to do. And I was working with a gentleman named Carl Hancock Rux who was a poet, and he went over to England and brought back some music, and we went into the studio to write to the music, and one of those songs was heard by a gentleman in a very prominent rock group at the time called Portishead. And then – so they heard the song that we wrote, and when I went to London to work with another artist named Kelis, I met with him –

OL: Geoff Barrow?

SM: Geoff Barrow, right, and we decided to do a project together because I was just stepping out of my own as a solo artist – trying to get my thing going, and he wanted to do a similar project.

OL: Yes.

SM: And so, I ended up spending a year and a half living in London and recording this record with him. And so, the record was stylized I think more to Geoff Barrow's style of music because he has a specific way of production, which deals with like sonic landscapes. Not necessarily live music per se or organic, but, you know, he, he's very visionary when it comes to programming sounds and getting authentic sounds mixed with modern sounds.

OL: Yes, I listened to Portishead in college a lot.

SM: Yes.

OL: I know what you mean.

SM: Yes.

OL: It's a very unique sound.

SM: It's very stylized.

OL: Yes.

SM: So I think that was – in that collaboration that was a strong factor in how the whole artistic vision of the project came out. It was an honest record. It definitely was from stories that happened to me, but I think the progression from that album to this album was definitely a reflection of my own voice coming forth and my own involvement beyond any superstar producer or any kind of stylized sound. I had more creative control. I picked the people that I wanted to collaborate with, and the stories reflected my life living in New York post 9/11 as an artist and as a woman – just becoming more of a humanist, observing things around me and caring more about the world around me, so it has more of a political, social, conscious bent to it. But, you know, I think that was just a reflection of just being a New Yorker and experiencing some of the things that happened.

OL: Yes, yes. I noticed on songs like “Tell It Like It Is” and “I’m Sending You This Letter” there is a social, social consciousness that you’re, that you’re articulating in the music, and I wanted to read some of the names of the people you’ve either collaborated with, or who you’ve worked with, or who recommended you, and you mentioned Geoff Barrow from Portishead, but also D’Angelo, Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Kelis, who you mentioned, DJ Catalyst. Have you encountered the same kind of social consciousness with these other artists who you’ve worked with? Do you feel like they share your vision of what music should do?

SM: You know, looking back, I realize that a lot of the groups that I was involved in, including the Brooklyn Funk Essentials, including my own partner in Bako Babies – everyone had a certain set of values, and they were interested in reflecting what was going on around them in a humorous way, in a, in a, you know – for instance the poet in Brooklyn Funk Essentials – Everton Sylvester – I remember him writing a song about how the media portrayed certain music. And, there was always this kind of satire to his lyrics. So I think I’ve always been involved or collaborated with artists who had a kind of awareness – a reality to their music, a realness and a set of values that they, they wanted to talk about things that would make a difference or affect people in a personal way. Including Talib Kweli, who I think is one of the brightest stars in hip hop, and his stories to Geoff Barrow, even Portishead, you know. I think there’s a certain artistic aesthetic –

OL: Yes.

SM: – where they try to be unique, and they try to find their own voice. Carl Hancock Rux being another one.

OL: Yes.

SM: So yes, I think looking back those people have influenced me and shared the same set of values or artistic integrity that I admired or wanted to be like.

OL: Yes, I hear also a sort of realism about sort of the daily experiences of city life. You know, those themes that you hear in Stevie Wonder telling a story of a scene, a city scene, you know?

SM: Yes.

OL: It seems like that's a central component of your music.

SM: Yes, I mean the narrative and trying to put into words, you know, what your daily experience is.

OL: Yes, yes.

SM: And, maybe describing, you know, from another person's point of view what the emotion is behind a certain experience like in "The Letter." You know, what those people – families are going through having their family members fight in a war, and they don't know if they're ever coming home again. I mean that was inspired by a set of letters that appeared in a "Dear Abby" column in the Daily News, you know? Real things that you just – cross your path as you just observe in the city, you know?

OL: Yes.

SM: Living here.

OL: Yes. Your, your music bridges a number of genres – soul, R & B, hip hop – I've talked to a number of female artists, particularly about the difficulties for women trying to navigate the industry within the genre of hip hop. What's your experience been like, and do you think it's different for women in hip hop as opposed to other genres?

SM: I think so because the mainstream hip hop media is so masochistic [Laughs]. Kind of like, they objectify women –

OL: Yes.

SM: – in such a way that it makes it hard for women to be supported stepped out because companies see oh, the commercialization, the sexuality of women – it sells –

OL: Yes.

SM: – quicker than a woman, you know, being like Queen Latifah who was such a great role model for us coming up to see, you know, a black woman clearing a table, playing a chess game [Laughs], running her own – and she still is today – running her own career on her own terms, and I think it's sad that we don't have a support for artists like that. The artists that exist out there, there's no monetary support, or people are used to the easy money, so they just want to do something that's easy. That artistic integrity has just gone down, so – can you tell me your question what you were saying again?

OL: I was just wondering if, if you think that it's different in hip hop, and it sounds like you're saying you think it is.

SM: Yes, yes.

OL: Did you specifically encounter any difficulties in terms of being a female artist trying to make it in the industry? Did you feel like you were taken seriously by men? Did you feel like you were, you could be, you know, one of the boys, or did you feel like because of your gender there was any kind of distancing?

SM: I think there's always that underlying element, but it's up to the artist and the woman themselves to define who they are in whatever environment they are and just not accept anything less, and I think my experience in the Brooklyn Funk Essentials where I was the only girl among 13 men, I did witness a lot of things that made me like – you know I didn't agree with, but because I held myself in a certain way, or I spoke about my art in a certain way, I was respected in that way. So I think, regardless of what, you know, the industry is doing, if you stay true to your values and who you are, you know, that will eventually be reflected in the people that gravitate to you and that want to do business with you, and the projects that you end up choosing to be involved in.

OL: Yes.

SM: But there definitely is that line where people will try to force their perception of what they think you should be on to who you are, and if you're young and you're trying to make it in the business, it's so tempting to just go over there and take the easy way out because you're like, "Oh, I'm hustling I'm making it happen." But in the long term, you know, who's, who will pay for it? You know, you will. Where does your career go when you're just one of many, and you don't have an individual voice? And, you know, there's always going to be a girl that's prettier.

OL: Yes.

SM: There's always going to be somebody who has bigger boobs, bigger butt, bigger [Laughter] – you know, that's not –

OL: Yes.

SM: – that’s not the criteria that you want to base your whole career on.

OL: Yes, yes. When you were talking about going and sort of singing on, sort of – doing vocals for other artists tracks, it reminded me of how La Bruja built her career. She said that she would go and do a couple of lines – like, you know, just do a few verses back up, you know for a track, and that’s how she got to know all of the men in the industry because she’d go, “Okay, I’ll come and I’ll sing the hook. You want me to sing the hook? Fine, I’ll sing it.”

SM: Right.

OL: And that wasn’t necessarily what she wanted to do.

SM: Right.

OL: But she did that to build up relationships, and then she was able to call on those people to collaborate with her when she wanted to do her own album.

SM: Right.

OL: Was that like paying dues for you – meeting people, doing back up, or doing vocals on other people’s tracks?

SM: Oh, definitely. I think it was, you know, a real world schooling, you know, that was, that was priceless. I mean even though I’m doing those choruses for people, I still have to be – I still have to be able to relate to it in some way, so it wouldn’t be something that was totally so far removed from who I was as a person or an artist or what I believed in. But, yes, definitely, working and doing anything I could was a way of paying dues, and I, and I, I highly suggest that you do that, but in a way that’s not far from what your values are.

OL: Yes, yes. I wanted you to talk a little bit about when you met your husband, how you met him, what’s it like being married to another artist.

SM: I think – oh, I met my, my boyfriend Jacques Schwarz-Bart, my husband Jacques Schwarz-Bart when we were both doing a session for a group called Soul Live [END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE], and it was when Wetlands was open. It was rehearsal for a gig down there, and it was Fred Wesley from James Brown was going to be on the gig, and it was a bunch of musicians from Boston, and I don’t know if you’re familiar with Soul live, but it’s two brothers and a gentleman playing guitar. And they were recording their album, so we went down there to record the album, and he was at the session and so was I, and we just got to talking. We, we hit it off, and we went to the gig, and then we traded numbers, and then after the gig we made a date and went to the Bronx Zoo [Laughter], and, and went to the Bronx, and made him some chicken dinner, and he came up again because I moved back to the Bronx.

OL: Oh, okay.

SM: I lived on Bronx Park East for four years, and then from there I went on the road with Talib Kweli, and he came out and visited me, and he just came from the D'Angelo tour, and we stayed friends, and I kept saying, "This —" you know, Talib would — he would say, "Here's your boyfriend. Your boyfriend's calling." I'm like, "He's not my boyfriend." [Laughs] You know, I would just be kind of play it down. I'd be like, "No, no, no." You know, because I didn't want to get serious with anyone, and now, eight years later, and [Incomprehensible], I'm still with Jacques.

OL: Wow.

SM: My best friend in the whole world.

OL: How long have you been married?

SM: We just got married. [Laughs]

OL: Wow.

SM: That's why I say boyfriend.

OL: It's interesting that you brought him to the Bronx on your first date.

SM: Yes, yes. [Laughter] I can't — you can't take a girl, and we still joke about that to this day because everyone always asks us, "Where -- where are you from Jacques?" And he says, "I'm from Guadalupe." And it's like, "Where are you from Steph?" I'm like, "I'm from the Bronx." [Laughter] You know, I'll always be a Bronx girl, always, yes.

OL: Interesting. So over lunch you were telling us a little bit about some of the big changes that have been going on in your life over the past year. You said that it was a remarkable year for you. It was, you know, sort of good and bad. I wanted you to talk a little bit about the past year and what kind of things going on.

SM: Yes. Well this year is a career high. It was — I played the Blue Note for the first time, and I had a special guest of a great musician I admire: Michelle Indigo Chello, who's a woman who I feel has defined her own artistic vision.

OL: Yes.

SM: You know, on her own terms. So to work with her in a, in a live musical setting and to be mentored by her because she actually helped me put together the evening, and worked with the musicians and helped me on their arrangements. To see another woman who has been touring for so many years, and still doing it, and to see the skill and the talent she had —

OL: Yes.

SM: – as an arranger, and how she was able to pull the music even higher by – one example was before we went on stage, she had all of us sing our parts and perform the show a cappella – verbally – before went on stage, and it made the performance stronger because, you know, once everybody heard each other's voice working against – like people would mouth or sing their instruments before they got on stage.

OL: Interesting.

SM: That made all of us work together more as an ensemble because we visualized what it was going to be before we went on stage. And that was something I had, had never done before – before I worked with her, and it was just great. I didn't realize how that kinship and that relationship between musicians is so important, and there wasn't enough of – there wasn't enough time because everybody's on the road doing their own thing, but having that experience with her, it was – it was just – it was so rewarding. You know, I felt lucky like, like I could get to share some of her knowledge that she had. I didn't realize what a great arranger she was. You know, she just listened to the band playing, and then she would say, "You know, the guitar should answer the bass when he's doing this." You know, and it was very empowering to, to have that kind of input from another woman.

OL: Yes.

SM: Especially a black woman artist. Then I played Central Park Summer Stage with Mavis Staples, and that, what can I say?

OL: Wow.

SM: Mavis Staples is a legend.

OL: Yes.

SM: And we opened up the Summer Stage Series, and to, to be on the same stage with her was just a dream come true.

OL: Yes.

SM: I just was – yes. It was just beyond words, and, and my mom passed away. And she didn't get to see me, but she came to the Blue Note. The last show she came to was the Blue Note. I was like, "Ma how do you like this show?" She's like, "Your dress is too tight." [Laughter] I'm like, "Okay, Ma, but how did you like the music?" "You should have worn something else." [Laughter] But she was fine. She, she loved it. She was such a big supporter. Every show, every Brooklyn Funk Essentials show, every show she could attend, she was there in the front row. And, in fact all the members of Brooklyn

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Funk Essentials called me when they found out. They were like, “Oh my God, your mom,” like, you know, everyone knew she was my biggest fan, biggest supporter, and so she didn’t get to see the Mavis Staples show, but I felt her presence, and it was, it was great. And, from there, I went on to find out that I was going to have a baby [Laughter], and then I got straight on a plane and went and did my first European tour, and then we did another European tour, and then came home, and now I’m preparing for a new life as a mother.

OL: Wow.

SM: And it’s just, and one – oh – and then we have a black president. Obama’s president. [Laughter] I mean, my whole reality as I new it in 2007 has completely changed, and so 2008 was just an incredible year, incredible.

OL: Yes, definitely. Could you talk a little bit about the label Muthas of Invention? It’s m-u-t-h-a-s?

SM: Yes, muthas like they say in London. A mutha is like a heavy – something that will knock you off your feet.

OL: Okay.

SM: So – Muthas of Invention also taking, taking from Frank Zappa’s album. But, I think it’s just so funny that I would be involved with the label that was called Muthas of Invention, and I’m becoming a mother, and I lost my mother, and this label has provided support for me to take my career back into my hands. So it’s so many subliminal messages that come [Laughs] –

OL: Yes.

SM: – when I think of the title of the album. Well that label is an independent label, and it’s the first time I have ever and did a – did my own career without a major label behind me, so it’s a new business model where I’m a partner, and I own my masters. And, I have a private investor who’s funding me to help me go on the road, and, and I learned a lot about accounting and how to balance my expenditures. And I get a statement at the end of every month so I know what I’ve sold. I know how many downloads I’ve had.

OL: Wow.

SM: And the label is distributed through !K7, which was a, German label, but they have offices in New York, and it’s just been so empowering to be independent and not have to rely on a big label whose priority is maybe two acts, and then everybody else gets dropped to the wayside if they don’t sell a certain amount of units in six weeks. You know, it’s – and to be not scared, always holding your hand out waiting for someone to give you something, now you’re, you know, you’re working on a smaller scale, but what you put in is what you get out. I go on the road, I know I’m going to see a return from it

from selling my CD's, selling my t-shirts, and it's just – I can't explain how much more empowering it is.

OL: Wow.

SM: I don't think I would ever want to be on another label in the same way. Well I can't – I wouldn't want to be on the same label in the same way, and would want to come in with my own label on my own creative terms, and that's – that's the only way I could see doing it.

OL: Yes.

SM: Yes.

OL: A number of the artists we've interviewed for this project are people who share your vision, who are socially conscious, who don't, don't necessarily fit into the mainstream mold. For example, a female artist who is going to voluntarily going to be objectified, who is more concerned with the music, and the quality of the music than having her image be co-opted by this like big industry label.

SM: Yes.

OL: And one of the things that I've reflected on is how artists can maintain that sort of originality or that non-mainstream quality. Do you think it's possible for an artist to take control, to have this sound that's not exactly mainstream, or a look that's not going, you know, be exactly what the industry expects and still be with a big label and still be a mainstream artist? Do you think that those two things can go together?

SM: I think it can exist. I think it can exist. I mean, Norah Jones is an example of this. I remember her being on the New York scene, we used to play double bills with her with Brooklyn Funk Essentials, and she was the lead singer of a group called Wax Poetic, and she, you know, to see her make on that scale was, you know, an affirmation to all of us New York people who have been in the scene.

OL: Right.

SM: I think it can exist. It's just rare. It's like one in a million, and it's usually with people who are on the young side, you know, but I think there's so many different definitions of success, and you have to know what your definition is and, and believe in it, and there's other ways to make a living in this music industry other than being signed on a label and have your song rotated on the radio [Laughs] 12, 20 times a day. You can make a good living going on the road, honing your craft, working – collaborating with the musicians you want to, and developing yourself and your songwriting and your voice, and that success to me as an artist, to be able to keep evolving and doing what you want to do, is success. What – who cares if it's on MTV or it's not?

OL: Yes.

SM: As long as you are developing your audience, and there's people out there who are appreciating your music, then, then I feel like that's the success.

OL: Yes.

SM: And that's what I had to come to terms with – that reality of not comparing myself to those, you know, people like Beyonce.

OL: Right.

SM: I'm not that, you know, I'm – I want to be someone who has a – who has something to say, and you could go back and listen to the record ten years later and say, "Oh wow that – I remember that song. It brought back this many memories." The same way that the music that I grew up listening to did to me. I still listen to it for inspiration, even more so than the modern music because it's so rich. It has all the elements of good songwriting, harmony, melody, lyrical content, you know, musicality, counterpoint in music, strong bass line. You know, all those elements that make music timeless and classic.

OL: Yes.

SM: So I think it's possible, but you just have to let go of that fantasy of what success is and define your own terms.

OL: Over lunch you talked a little bit about your concerns about being pregnant and being a new mother and having your career take off now, and those two things happening at the same time. Could you talk a little bit about that?

SM: Yes, it was scary for me. I didn't know how I was going to balance the two. You know, I knew it would be a shift in priorities, and I knew once a kid entered my life I probably – that was going to be the focus. That was going to be the center, you know, and so it was scary for me. I felt like I was letting go one part of my life to begin another instead of thinking of it as one integrated life and how I could, you know, find a way to balance the two, and, you know, that fear slowly subsided when I started talking to mothers who are artists and started seeing people who could do it. And one example I saw was the woman from Zap Mama. I remember a couple years ago she played Central Park Summer Stage, and her sister was helping her, and she basically breast fed, and then she went on stage, did the show –

OL: Wow.

SM: – for two hours, and then she came off, and she breast fed again [Laughter], and then she walked out of the venue, and it was, it was easy. And she did it, and then a couple years later I saw her, and her boy was four, and she was pulling him along to the next festival, and she, you know, she still has a career.

OL: Yes.

SM: She has recorded a new album, and nothing stopped her. Same with Erykah Badu.

OL: Yes.

SM: You know, there's a lot of women out there that are doing it.

OL: Definitely.

SM: And I think the perception of it has changed. It's more modern – modernized now with, you know, so many Hollywood stars coming out and taking pictures.

OL: Yes.

SM: And being more open.

OL: It's been cool to have a baby bump. Right? [Laughter]

SM: Right. It's been coolified, yes, yes.

OL: Yes. I wanted to – I learned that this is a cover of the song Oxygen on your album.

SM: Yes.

OL: I love that song.

SM: Thanks.

OL: And I wanted you to talk about why you selected that – what that song means to you?

SM: Yes. The song was written by Willie Mason, who is from Providence, Rhode Island. He comes from a family of artists – folk singers I think. I'm not sure if they're hippies [Laughter], but his parents were artists. His father I think was a brilliant scientist and a writer, and he recorded the song and wrote the song at 18 years old.

OL: Oh, wow.

SM: And when I first heard it and found out he was 18 when he wrote it, I was like, "Oh, I'll quit the business now. Yes, it's okay." [Laughter] When he – the words of the song were so meaningful and so true. I didn't know. It represented a time like in Dylan in the 60's and Odetta. You know, it had a wisdom of the ages in the lyrics, and when I first heard his version of the song, I was thinking, "Oh I couldn't cover this. How could I do this differently?" But when I sing the words, they were so close to home and what I

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believed in that I decided, I got to find a way to do this song. I love it. And so, now when I perform it, it's one of my most popular songs every time I do it in the show.

OL: Yes, it's a beautiful song, and actually, now that I think about it, knowing that you're having a baby, it also is a little bit like a lullaby.

SM: Yes.

OL: You could sing it to a baby, you know, it has a very sweet quality and it's sort of –

SM: I didn't even think about that, but yes, it does have – it does have a lullaby quality to it. I mean some people, now that Obama's president, it's taken on a whole other meaning of how inspiring it is to, you know, to fight for change or want to believe in things and have hope again when so many people had lost hope before.

OL: Yes. Well one of the questions that we always ask towards the end of interviews is how they think the Bronx has changed from your early childhood experiences in the Bronx to what you know about the Bronx today. How has it changed?

SM: Oh my gosh. [Laughs] The Bronx – first of all it's – it has so – first of all there's buildings [Laughter]. It was all burnt out, and it was – it was complete – it was neglected. And now, you know, there's a thriving community, new houses, and there's community organizations, there's the art school in Hunt's Point. They're building parks along Hunt's Point that I haven't seen with rowboats. I mean it's just, it's just been completely rebuilt and invested in economically, and it shows you what can happen to a neighborhood when – where given – funds are given. The opportunity – I think the Bronx has changed, let's see, it still has some of the basic community values that I have always loved about it, you know, that local – you have your characters in the neighborhood. That will never change. There's the melding of cultures. I don't think that part has changed.

OL: Yes.

SM: But I just think economically it has been rebuilt.

OL: Yes.

SM: And, and it's thriving, and cultural – the Bronx Museum of the Arts has got so many new programs that we didn't have before, and yes, I just think it's changed for the better.

OL: Yes. Is there anything you would like to add? Anything I didn't ask you about that you want to talk about?

SM: We talked about a lot of things [Laughter]. I guess, I guess, yes, just how I feel about Obama being president and what that means.

OL: Yes, I'd love to hear about that.

SM: I just think it just represents, you know, the possibility for so many African Americans about what their full potential can be, and it sets a new example of, you know, our own image out there in the media, and, you know, it represents hope, and it's just completely changed the perception of the world – reflecting ourselves in the world.

OL: Yes.

SM: And what the possibilities are, and I just hope, yes, I just really look forward to the presidency and how, you know, things are going to evolve from here as everyone does.

OL: Definitely. I read an article in Newsweek about Michelle's image, and what that image means to have a black woman in the White House.

SM: Oh my gosh.

OL: What do you think about that?

SM: It's incredible and having a son, when I found out I was having a boy, having a son that fact that he'll grow up in a world and never know that there was ever a time when there wasn't a person of color in the White House is just – it's such a liberating feeling.

OL: Definitely.

SM: It's like that scene at the end of The Wiz when they take off their monkey suits, and they [Laughter] start dancing around in the yellow [Laughter] [Crosstalk including unidentified speaker in background].

OL: Well I think we were winding down and we got that on the audiotape. [END OF INTERVIEW]