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Hope, Bertha

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Mark Naison (MN): Hello, this is the 104th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. It's taking place at Fordham University and it is February 17th, 2004. The interviewers are Dr. Mark Naison and Maxine Gordon who is a senior interviewer at the Bronx African American History Project and we are interviewing Bertha Hope, a jazz musician and a resident of the Bronx during the 1960s whose husband Elmo Hope was a great keyboard artist in the '50s and '60s. So let us begin.

Bertha Hope (BH): He played piano. Keyboards are electronic.

MN: Oh piano, I'm an old guy, I'm not – ok so he was a pianist. And you consider – you're a pianist

BH: Yes

MN: Ok, I've been hanging around hip hop too much. So Bertha could you tell us a little about your upbringing and how you got involved in music.

BH: Ok, well I grew up in Los Angeles, California and I was born to very artistic parents who were engaged in the music business. My father was a bel canto tenor who had a career that sort of paralleled the same places were Roland Hayes and Paul Robeson played - took lessons from the same vocal instructor. At that time there was a very limited kind of exposure for more than one black artist in a category so my father with the voice and with the – with all the same bookings really did not get the same kind of publicity.

MN: What was his name?

BH: Clinton Rosmund, he spent about fifteen years in Europe – I mean he left here in 1915 and didn't come back until the banks crashed in 1928.

MN: Now where was he – what part of the country was he born in?

BH: He was born in South Carolina, in the plateau part of the state that's in Seneca. Part Indian, part American-Indian, was raised in Little Rock, Arkansas before he became a soldier after putting his age up to serve in the Spanish-American war with Teddy Roosevelt, was part of the 10th cavalry. One of the pictures I have of my earliest recollection of is him sitting his horse when he was 15 he put his age up to 18 to be a part of that. So he was born in 1882 so he was about 25 years older than my mother.

MN: Right, how old was he when you were born?

BH: So he was about – let me think – he was about 54 I guess.

MN: Right

BH: When I was born and I have a sister, older – he was about 45 when she was born. And I have a brother, younger, so he was about 57 when my brother was born.

MN: And where did your parents meet?

BH: They met on either the Queen Elizabeth or the Queen Mary in 1927 or '28. My mother was a teacher who had gone as far as I guess the family money would allow her to go in education. She went to a normal school, what they call a normal school and taught for a while in St. Louis. She was interested in dancing. She had danced, taken lessons, and was a dancer in St. Louis and was inspired by some of the pioneers to go out and have some worldly experience dancing and come back to homestead and start a community school for dancing. But that was the story that we got about what her intentions were and intentions aren't always what happen. She met my father on the boat going over to Europe. She auditioned to be a part of the cast for Showboat, the play Showboat in which Paul Robson was going to be the star. My father was the stage manager and he came back from Europe to pick the cast. And my mother was one of the dancers who was picked so that's how they met.

MN: She was a dancer in Showboat.

BH: She was a dancer in Showboat. She had already appeared in the Cotton Club. She was one of what they call ponies because she weighed under one hundred pounds – she was little – 5 feet. She was café au lait. They all look alike. They were all the same color. Pretty much the same color and height and, you know, body disposition - the Cotton Club dancers. So she was what they call a pony as opposed to the tall light show girl dancers. So she was part of the Cotton Club.

MN: Now how did your parents end up in Los Angeles?

BH: Let me think about that. Ok my father's family had migrated to California and they homesteaded there. And so after my father – after he came back when they decided that Europe was going to be extremely depressed if there was a depression going on in this country, they went to where his mother was located – where most of my father's family had moved. By that time my sister had been born and when he came back from you know these concert tours, there was very little of that going on. He got into some parts of the movie industry but he also was part of what they call "Tough on Black Asses" T.O.B.A. circuit, a show business circuit. So he worked in territories all across the United States with singing groups and my mother and sister traveled with him until she was kindergarten age.

MN: So I guess later they would call that the Chitlin circuit?

BH: I guess that's the same circuit. Is that – are we talking about

MG: Well T.O.B.A and that stands for –

BH: T.O.B.A. is what – tough on black asses - artists

MG: Yes that is the acronym but its Theater something Booking Agency

BH: Right, it really has the name and that was the -

MG: It has the name T.O.B.A and that was the black artist circuit

MN: Now was the community you grew up in multiracial in Los Angeles or was it a fairly segregated world?

BH: Well let me see, there were older Irish people who were and I mean a smattering of Irish who were still left there. The people who were the merchants were Filipino and Japanese. It was a pretty solid I would say working class black community that as I grew up was emptying itself of, you know, most white people. There were two public schools at either end pretty much of the community and they were still black and white but they were fast, I think, becoming black. The high school, the junior high school was becoming black.

MN: Right, now how old were you when you began musical training?

BH: Well I was 3. I mean, no. Not training I would say. Let me think. At 3, I picked out a song on the radio and played it on the piano. There was always a piano in the house. My father's sister was a piano – was a musician. I remember her teaching piano in the community. There was a piano in my grandmother's house and a piano in our house. By the way the piano that we had when I was a baby was played by Nat King Cole and I think Art Tatum - a whole bunch of people used to come by and play at my father's house.

MN: So your father knew many artists.

BH: Oh he knew a lot of people. He knew Jack Johnson. He knew Sidney Bishay, Josephine Baker. He was part of that history

MN: Right, now it's interesting – and so when people came to Los Angeles they would stop at your house?

BH: Well now I'm going to between before we moved to this working class neighborhood that I'm telling you about when we lived on the east side of Los Angeles which is where I was born in the house with a midwife, '36. So I think yeah, he was a very engaging person in that house, probably stopped by a lot and played piano. And he also, you know, stayed very close to the theater district so I remember meeting musicians in the lobby of the bar in the Dunbar hotel as I was really too young to, well at least maybe just old enough to start traveling on a bus by myself. And he would introduce me to people who were staying there and it was segregated so that's where they always, that's where all the black entertainers stayed so I have a feeling that a lot of people were in and out of the house on the east side, not so much when we moved to the west side.

MN: Now did you get musical training in the public schools?

BH: Yes I did. It was – I mean I grew up – it was a really lush experience I think because from the seventh grade to the twelfth grade I had an instrument in my hand, supplied by the city. I had perfect pitch so I went through a lot of instruments taking up the space of graduating students. So the teacher would give me an instrument to take home over the summer and get as far with it as I could and then she would put me in the instruments class the following semester and then I would graduate to the band or the orchestra. So I played violin, viola, clarinet, cello, and then I went to the percussion section. By the time I was in high school I was playing classical percussion – the timpani, from the timpani to the triangle basically. So I played – I was in the – in the seventh grade I was the pianist for the music teacher's son who was in the concert, you know, studying the concert repertoire on viola. So you know we did all-city and all-state festivals and, you know, interband competitions. So I played piano all through junior high school while I was learning these other instruments. None of them – I never played any of them to any great, you know, degree of – what?

MG: Expertise?

BH: Thank you. But there was a wonderful – it was a great experience to learn how to read in a different cleft and to be involved with – for no cost – I don't remember any rental fee or anything. There was a closet full of well-kept instruments

MN: Yeah, this is the same experience people talk about in the Bronx at the same time

BH: Is that right? Is that right?

MN: At junior high school 40

MG: What school was this?

BH: This was Foshay, James A Foshay

MN: Was this a high school?

BH: No this was a junior high.

MN: James A Foshay Junior High –

BH: James A Foshay Junior High School

MN: And how do you spell –

BH: F-O-S-H-A-Y

MN: Ok. Were there any teachers who stand out in your memory as being particularly influential?

BH: Oh absolutely. That teacher in that particular school -Helen Bicknell was her name. She was one of those people who loved music and was very good at picking out and encouraging the kids who really wanted it and laying it open to any other kids who also wanted to be involved. But she would say – I'm losing my violin player next year. I won't have any viola section at all. I need you to take the viola home. You interested?

MN: Now was she white or black?

BH: She was white. She was also, I think, probably the first – she and the math teacher had a very, very close – I'll just say that – relationship – who was also a woman. And now that I think about it, I think that it was a very, very, very close relationship. But a wonderful dedicated teacher who just found practical ways, you know, to make the instruments available.

MN: Now this was a time when there were powerful gender barriers to women becoming instrumentalists. Were you encouraged to pursue a career as a professional musician or was it assumed that you were going to get married and that would take precedence?

BH: Well that was never out in the open but I'm sure it was lurking in the background. The one thing I resent more than anything when I think about is that women played the – girls were introduced to the clarinet, up the hierarchy of woodwind instruments that's as far as they got. Nobody ever suggested that you could go from the clarinet to any of the saxophones with basically the same fingering. So there were –

MN: Wow, that's fascinating. Is that across the board in the country?

MG: Oh yes

BH: Oh absolutely

MG: A woman saxophone player, that's unheard of

BH: Oh no. That's why people like Vi Red were like an anomaly almost. I mean she was -

MG: And what about trombone?

BH: And trombone too. But I mean –

MG: Forget trumpet

BH: Inside the system where you were offered violins, viola, cello – even cellos, no bass, I don't remember any bass, anyone suggesting the bass. But clarinets were ok. What's that about? Clarinets were ok. You could play first, second, third clarinet

MG: Flute

BH: And flute, right. And flute. No oboe. No bassoon. No other – but the fascinating part is one of the clarinet fingering systems you could transfer to the saxophone – any saxophone. And in the fifties it was unheard of. Well this is, I was in junior high school in the forties – in the end of the forties. I graduated high school in fifty four.

MN: So were you thinking that, you know – clearly you were tremendously talented – that you were going to be in an orchestra – that you were going to be in a symphony orchestra? Was that the dream or were you – you didn't have a career dream relating to this.

BH: No, I never thought about a symphony orchestra in terms of the violin, viola, cello, or clarinet. I always thought about – I was always a pianist first I think. And I really enjoyed the expansion into these other instruments -

MN: But the piano was your –

BH: The piano, I think was my first dream. And I think at some point I may have, since I started when I did start studying it was – I was studying classical music, and I never spent a lot of time dwelling on it but I think somewhere in the back of my head I may have thought that playing classical piano might be something that I would do. But I never had any career push –

MN: Did you have any role models as women pianists when you were coming up that, you know, as you said, this person who's done this and been tremendously successful so maybe I can do this.

BH: Well you know I remember Philippa Skylar. I remember her. And I remember being fascinated by her whole story. And I remember some women in the community but I don't think they served as really classical – I don't think I ever really dwelt on the idea of being a classical musician. And part of the detriment – I mean part of the deterrent to that I think was knowing somewhere in the back of my head that it would be almost impossible to accomplish and so if the dream were there, it didn't get very far. And then there were people like – as I was a little older – I watched people like Eric Dolphy. I don't know if you know that name -

MN: Yeah, even I know that.

BH: Oh ok, who could play circles around half the classical clarinetists in Los Angeles and was turned down for –

MN: Right

BH: Very early on. I mean in what we thought was a blindfold test – that you play behind a screen or something but it was just very obvious. And he was very heartbroken over the idea, too that he was not going to have a career as a classical clarinetist. So if you're asking me did I think I was going to be a classical musician or had any role models to that affect, I think I'd have to say no.

MN: Now what about, you know, jazz? Was that something that you were very aware of?

BH: Very aware. But that didn't – I didn't have any female role models at that either. Not really. There were women that I encountered as I started to play that really went out of their way to be very helpful to me. One of them was Vivian Slater. She was married to - Do you remember Vernon Slater?

MG: Yeah

BH: His wife kind of put my hands on the keyboard and said this is a blue chord here – these are the blues chords. Vi Red was really always fascinating cause she was playing the saxophone you know!

MN: Right, now did your parents encourage you to pursue a career in show business or become a professional artist, a professional musician?

BH: Well I think my father was my biggest supporter. And I think – I mean my mother never stood in the way but she wasn't nearly as vocal or as forward around the career aspect of it. But I mean she paid for piano lessons for a long time because she knew my interest was there.

MN: Now what about traditional academics? Was that emphasized in your household?

BH: Yeah very much.

MN: And were you expected to go to college?

BH: Absolutely. And when I didn't – I mean I didn't hear the end of it until I got my B.A. degree in 1976 when I was 40. And I was the last of 9 grandchildren. It was like my name was mud.

MN: How was it that – what circumstances led to you not going to college?

BH: Not going to college – well let me see, I went to college in L.A. I went to city college for – from '54 to '56 basically and did some, you know, music lessons there. Then I got married and I actually kind of dropped out of school and went into a very bad marriage –

MN: OK and this was not – this was married to somebody else before –

BH: Yeah before Elmo

MN: And was this someone who you met in college?

BH: This was someone who I met who was also aspiring to be a – who wanted to play bass – who wanted to be a musician.

MN: Ok and how long did that –

BH: About a minute

[laughter]

MN: So that was a short –

BH: Very bad. Just wrong, yeah

MN: And after that how did you support yourself after the marriage fell apart.

BH: I worked at the telephone company. Yeah, Bell it was called Bell then. I worked at the telephone – I went and – let's see before that I worked at Kaiser Permanente.

MN: Kaiser Permanente?

BH: Was the first managed care

MN: Oh the health provider, right.

BH: Right, the first one in the country which was only I think on the west coast.

MN: Now while all this was going on were you performing on the side?

BH: Let me see when I was working at that – ok let me get my – I don't – let me think of it by the years now [laughs] whether I was working or not – I think no I wasn't no

MN: Now how did you meet, you know, Elmo Hope?

BH: Ok, I met him when he came to L.A. I met him at the – what was it the celebrity club? He came to play for – no he was there already and Sonny Rollins came to Los Angeles to work and he was, at that time, one of the people who was part of the rhythm section – part of the preferred rhythm section that the clubs would hire to support somebody coming from the east coast as a solo performer.

MN: So he was living full time in Los Angeles

BH: So he had – yeah he had come to Los Angeles with Chet Baker's group. In around '57, and somehow he left Chet's group in Los Angeles. When they moved on – I think it was a tour and he decided to stay there. And I met him around '59 I think.

MN: And you met him at a club

BH: I met him at a club. At that time I was listening to Thelonius Monk. I was listening to Bud Powell. And somebody had just introduced me to Elmo Hope. So I was listening to these three pianists and I was trying to work out some of the things that I heard them doing and I was working on one of what I thought was a simpler song that Elmo wrote and then I met him at this club. And I thought Oh my God, you know, here's my chance to just say how much I enjoy – I was really awkward, socially awkward about asking about introducing myself or saying

anything, you know. But I got up the nerve to tell him that I found his music fascinating and that I was working on this song. And he went – are you playing my music? Sort of like oh really. And then he introduced me to Sonny and to somebody –she’s playing my music. And it was sort of like, you know, she says she’s playing my music. You know, but they didn’t, that was oh yeah, ok, like right.

MN: So there was a little skepticism.

BH: Yeah but he was nice. That’s what she says. So now I got a little annoyed by this so I asked him – I got really bold and I said well, you know – I had a car also, none of the musicians they had cars cause I was working at the telephone company I had a car. And I said – this is not, I’m not trying to be funny or anything but I would – you know clubs close at two – I’ll take you home if you like but I would really like for you to hear me play this song. So he came by to hear me play it and he went [pause] oh wow sort of like - because I did have a lot of it right so he was really taken back. And then we became friends. We were friends for a really long time – about a year, a year and a half. And now he really believed that I had a good ear and that I really genuinely liked him.

MG: Was it ’59?

BH: Yeah ’59, ’60.

MN: And what year did you get married?

BH: We got married in like ’60, the beginning of ’60 – January

MN: And what led the two of you to move back to New York City?

BH: Well Elmo was bored with the music scene. And actually leaving here this was all very emotional because I think when he left here he didn’t have a cabaret card. He had lost the cabaret card under some – whatever circumstance you could lose a cabaret card under – I don’t think it was that you could get it back so easily. So, you know, the idea of him working in a place that served alcohol – it had some really slim chances too. But he got offered a record contract if he were in New York. And by this time I had been offered a tour with a dance troupe leaving L.A. and ending in New York and I took it. Well by this time Monica – I had a daughter. She was born in November of ’60. And she was three months old when this opportunity for this trip came up and he wasn’t working and I wasn’t working and I thought well this will at least be able to finance whatever the next move might be. So he was really very much against my taking the trip but we didn’t have any other offers and it was a pretty good trip to go straight across route 66.

MN: Ok and so you would be the pianist for a dance troupe?

BH: Right, right. So that’s what I did.

MN: And he took care of the baby?

BH: He took care of the baby

MN: Ok so this is a very modern relationship.

BH: Well I mean after I talked him into it. Too say nothing of the fact that my mother lived about six blocks away and, you know, he was going to be – so I took that trip and the trip was supposed to end in New York and that trip got canceled so we ended in Florida which was our last trip with our last gig so I called him and said well you know I didn't make it all the way to New York, are you still thinking about coming to New York? And so now I'll just go from Florida to New York and you can fly from L.A. to New York with the baby.

MN: And you moved in to Limon Place and who was living in the apartment at Limon Place when you got there?

BH: His mother, his father, and I think a grandchild that the grandmother was taking care of –

MN: Right, now how big an apartment was this?

BH: Oh it was pretty big. It was one of those tenement. It was – oh let me see

MN: You remember the exact address?

BH: 1358

MN: 1358 Limon Place. And what floor did you live on?

BH: I think it was the third floor

MN: Right, and there was a piano in the house?

BH: No, there was no piano in the house. There had been a piano in the house before –

MN: Right, cause Jackie talked about playing on it when he and Thelonius

BH: In the house – in 1358?

MN: Yeah

BH: That's a possibility – there wasn't a piano there then. Though now we're into '61 and yeah there was a piano in that house because that's when they told me all those stories about someone leaning out the window to make sure that Mrs. Hope was out of earshot because when she left they would be playing Bach and she would say – Oh these children, they are sure accomplished. Oh they going to be fine music professors. Listen to them playing! And as soon as she left down the steps they were into –

MN: Right, so Elmo's family was from the West Indies

BH: Elmo's mother was from Antigua.

MN: Antigua.

BH: And she grew up – I think spent a lot of time in St. Croix. The father was from Barbados. So he was like the first generation with the Caribbean descent.

MN: So here you are. You grew up in Los Angeles and you're in the Bronx. What was that like?

BH: Well the cab ride to Limon Place where - it was May and really nice weather – when we pulled up to the apartment I was like what is going on? Why are all these people in the street and why are they all hanging out of windows and it was just –

MN: It was just a lot more people than you were used to?

BH: It was just so dense

MN: Oh more densely populated.

BH: Yeah very dense and just kind of foreign. Just unreal. I mean my whole existence was I better not catch you on the street corner. You go straight to where you going. And all these people were all over the street. It was really –

MN: And you were there over the summer, you know, New York –

BH: I had no concept of that many people being in that space on top of each other.

MN: Now did people have fire escapes? And they sat out in the fire escape?

BH: Oh yeah, yeah and they threw the money down to the kid. Junior, go down to the store and get – in either a handkerchief or a paper bag. A long time before I got that together that there were keys and money going –It was interesting -

MN: Were people friendly on the block?

BH: Oh yeah

MN: People go out of their way to say ohh look at the –

BH: Yeah they all knew Mrs. Hope and I wasn't her every long before I got a job at the telephone company too and that was really something because then it was like congratulations Bertha, congratulations on getting a job at the telephone company, good for you! I didn't get that together for a minute. That was '61

MN: Was Elmo able to get his cabaret license?

BH: No, what we did was the company – Riverside was the company that offered him the contract and he and I did a duet part which was called Hopeful. That was part of that record tape for us to do a couple – but he never got his -

MN: Now is this record still available?

BH: Yeah it's on a collector's item list so it's – I don't know – about 400, 500 dollars.

MN: Ok

BH: I have one copy of it and somebody took the other copy because I went to Japan and a Japanese label did a limited edition of it and the owner gave me one of those

MN: Now was Elmo able to get work other than this recording in New York?

BH: He did – I mean as far as I remember he did some side – you know he went out on some short trips. But he wasn't able to get back into the, you know, night club situation.

MN: Now what about the clubs in the Bronx? Was he able to play there where there may have been less supervision or – did you remember him playing at like 845 or something or Blue Morocco or places like that?

BH: I played at the Blue Morocco. I don't remember the 845 or that being a part of his – of what he was doing when we came back. I know he worked there earlier and he worked there with Grant Green but I don't know how many other people but that part of his history I don't know anything about. I worked at the club so Mickey and Silvia's Blue Morocco with Jimmy Castor. Right before he went, you know, like really – he got huge with

MN: Jimmy Castor is really critical in terms of the origins of hip hop because his song Only Just Begun was one of the most sampled songs for break beats. So Jimmy Castor is a legend in a later phase of music history.

BH: Is that right? Only Just Begun? Oh that's amazing.

MN: Right and I'll play it for you when we come back to the office. It's one of my favorite things to play to show how hip hop emerged. So you were part of like a house band – and what instrument were you playing?

BH: Piano

MN: So you played piano and what was his instrument?

BH: He was singing and playing vibes. Did he play vibes? I just remember him – what did he - he sang.

MN: Ok and what years was this?

BH: That was like '62, '63.

MN: That early? So he must have been a kid.

BH: Yeah he was a kid. He was a kid. He was pretty young.

MN: So who made the introduction, did you walk in there yourself?

BH: I don't remember how I met him

MN: But how did you get into the house band at Silvia's?

BH: Well I don't know if it was the house band. It was his band. But we were there every week for I don't know how long. It was right before he went to – right before that troglodyte period.

MN: Troglodyte, right. And do you remember Hey Leroy, Your Mama, She Calling You Man – that song? Because that was another of his [sings]

BH: I don't know –

MN: Yeah that's another one of his hits. So how did you - who introduced you to Jimmy Castor?

BH: I don't remember. Did he have a song called – who was it that did this

MN: He did Troglodyte songs. He also had a song called Bertha Butt Boogie. Now that isn't about you?

BH: No

MN: Uh oh. We got problems so let me stop this here

End Transcript