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Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon, Brian Purnell
Interviewee: Arthur Jenkins
Session 1 December 14, 2005

Transcriber: Laura Kelly

Mark Naison (MN): This is the 136th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. It's December 14th, 2005 at Fordham University and we're interviewing Arthur Jenkins, a musician who grew up in the Morrisania community whose musical career touched on both jazz and Latin music. And what we're going to do, Arthur, if it's okay, is move backwards from you know, when you became a teenager and, when did you first start playing in bands and combos in the community?

Arthur Jenkins (AJ): Let's see, when I was in junior high school.

MN: What junior high school did you attend?

AJ: At that time it was junior high school 40 on Prospect Avenue between Jennings and Ritter place and the school had a dance band and it was the only dance band in the city that we knew of on the junior high school level. And that's where it started. There were quite a few good musicians that turned professional that came out of the band of the class that I was in. I was in a special music class. From there I met other young musicians, mostly black in the neighborhood that was interested in Latin music. I was playing alto saxophone at the time. Actually, the alto saxophone was playing me.

[laughter]

MN: Now when did you first pick up an alto saxophone?

AJ: I was in junior high school.

MN: So that's where you learned, in the school?

AJ: Yeah.

MN: Who - -

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AJ: I had an outside teacher but I really learned from hit and missing and some teachers would show me certain things.

MN: Now were you allowed to take home - - was the instrument the school's instrument?

AJ: Uh huh. As a matter of fact, the second year they got a slew of new instruments and so I wound up with a tenor sax. When I graduated and went on to performing arts, then I got an alto saxophone [inaudible]. And I wrestled with that until I dropped out of college. And when I dropped out of college, I dropped the saxophone because in the mean time I was getting - - my piano was coming back and I was learning the disciplines of Latin music and I was more comfortable with that. And plus the fact, like I said, there were a bunch of black musicians that lived in the area and that's what we played, Latin music. None of us played jazz, blues, or anything like that.

MN: How did you first become exposed to Latin music, was this in your family or was -
-

AJ: No, it was just that my mother would play the radio and whenever I heard something Latin my ear went like that. It's that simple [laughs].

MN: And where did your family live at the time, where was your family's apartment?

AJ: We lived on Union Avenue, the last block of Union Avenue, which is between 169th and Boston Road. And the other musicians, they lived like further South Union Avenue, some lived on Prospect around Holmes street and - -

Maxine Gordon (MG): Can you name some of the others?

AJ: Pardon me?

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MG: Can you name some of the others that were with you?

AJ: Well there was a drummer named Jimmy Williams, and he got a lot of jobs. He wasn't the greatest drummer, but he was adequate, more than adequate for where we all were at that time. I was probably the youngest in the band at 14 and 15, something like that. Then there was an excellent trumpet player named Oliver Beener.

MG: Oh, I heard of Oliver.

AJ: You know him? Or did you know him?

MG: I know about him and Tina Brooks.

AJ: Well I knew who Tina Brooks was. [laughs] There were certain musicians I stayed away from. Tina Brooks was one of them. Because they were into drugs and I wasn't and that's what killed Oliver Beener. Plus the fact that he didn't like Latin music [laughter]. And that's - - all he wanted to play was bebop and so eventually we parted ways.

MN: Now was your family musical?

AJ: Well, the inspiration - - my father sang in church and my mother played.

MN: Right. She played keyboard piano?

AJ: Yeah, piano. She didn't play a whole lot. But she read enough. And my father sang and he went into the second World War and when he came out, he sang a lot less.

MN: What church did your family belong to?

AJ: We went to, what was it - - it was called Metropolitan Methodist Church. I think they now call it United, I don't know - -

MN: Was this in the Bronx or in Manhattan?

AJ: No, it was in Manhattan on 126th street.

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MN: Now when did your family move - - did your family live in Harlem before they moved to the Bronx?

AJ: My mother's side of the family is originally from Houston. And my grandmother bought - - she had like 9 kids by 2 husbands. My mother was the eldest of the second husband. They were Crawfords. And there were three of them- my mother and an aunt that still lives - - she lives in Englewood. And then they had a brother who was mentally challenged, I'm not quite sure how. But he passed away within the last ten years to fifteen years, something like that. So when I was born, my mother and father were living in Harlem, something like maybe 114th street. And then we moved to 147th between St. Nicholas and Convent. And during the summer time, you know that was before air conditioning and all that kind of stuff, so windows were open, and I think now there's like a supermarket and a laundry, I believe. And it was on St. Nicholas Avenue, now. But then it was a big open, you know, a piece of land that they put up a church tent. So I used to hear that. So when we were five years old, we moved to Union Avenue in the Bronx. And we lived around the corner from what was known as the Royal Mansion Ballroom. And again, during the summer time the windows were open, we would hear this music coming [laughs] out of the road. As a matter of fact, that's where I played my first gig.

MN: Really? At the Royal Mansion?

AJ: At the Royal Mansion. And what we did was, we allowed - - they allowed us to practice there under certain circumstances at certain times. So we begged them to let us play the intermissions. Machito was one of the main bands that played. I think there was

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a band named El Boi. And there was another band that was really instrumental but I don't remember the leader's name.

MN: So growing up on Union Avenue, you heard the sounds of Latin music coming from right across the street?

AJ: No, around the corner.

MN: Around the corner. And did that make an impression on you?

AJ: Oh, absolutely.

MN: Wow.

Brian Purnell (BP): What happened - - what occurred in the church tent when you lived on St. Nicholas? You said - -

AJ: Yeah, we would - - I would hear - - they would just be singing, you know, whatever music that church people sing. And because it was a tent, you know, the music permeated throughout the neighborhood. We lived half a block from, or less than half a block from where this tent was set up.

MG: What year would that be?

AJ: It would be before '41. I would say - - I was born in '36 so, '36, '37, '38 - - it would be '38, '39, '40, you know, somewhere in there.

MN: Now how old were you when you first became aware of the Royal Mansion and what was going on there?

AJ: I was probably five or six years old.

MN: So this club was playing Latin music even in the early 40's?

AJ: I would think so.

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MN: Wow.

AJ: I would think so. And I'll tell you another thing that was interesting, on the corner - - see you had Boston Road and then Union Avenue kind of curved - - that was the last block. You had Jennings Street that ended there. And you had Ritter Place that ran from Prospect and so forth. So now on the corner of Boston Road and Union Avenue on the side where I lived, there were like 2 big spaces. And the space that was on the corner usually had a Fundamentalist type church where a lot of music came out of that. I used to stop and listen to it. They had trombone players. You know, it was sort of like church music but with a New Orleans type flavor, you know. So - - I mean there was a lot of [sips beverage] excuse me, a lot of music going on in that area.

MN: Now when you were going to elementary school in the Bronx, were there like Puerto Rican kids in your classes?

AJ: No, there were no Puerto Ricans in the Bronx. We were replacing Jews, c'mon. You know, I never met any Puerto Ricans until I probably got to high school.

MN: So you started playing Latin music without meeting Latin people?

AJ: Yeah.

MG: [laughs]

AJ: But I wasn't alone, you see. And that was the name of the tune. The first Latino that I met, that I can recall was Benny Bonilla. Who at that time, I didn't even know his name was Bonilla because he used the name Benny Perez. And that's how I knew him for a long time. I don't know how we met. But we did meet. Benny played congas and he had a friend, excuse me, named Frankie Rodriguez, who he has not been able to find, excuse

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me, currently, let's say. But Benny came up with some jobs. We rehearsed sometimes at my house, sometimes at somebody else's house.

MN: Because David Carp has this picture of you with Benny Bonilla and Barry Rogers all jamming at your apartment.

AJ: Right, right. Well that's the apartment that I'm talking about.

MN: Right. Now did you have a piano in that house?

AJ: Well, yeah. Well, I'm playing it. I'm sitting - -

MN: [laughs] Right, but it was - - your mother played the pi - -

AJ: There was always gonna be a piano in the house because my mother played and she wanted me to be a musician. She was adamant about that. And a lot of times I had to practice while my friends were downstairs playing. So you know, that was a social conflict for me. But eventually, I got into it through Latin music. And it's funny [laughs], if there were friends of mine that lived around the corner that were having say, a birthday party or something of that nature, my mother knew the parents. She would al - - I would tell her, 'Listen so and so is having a birthday party and I want to go.' She'd say, 'Fine, be home by ten o'clock.' I says, 'It's not gonna start until 10.' So I wound up not going. So I discovered something that as I played saxophone. As long as I had that saxophone on me I could come home a week later.

[laughter]

AJ: So I always had that saxophone on me [laughs].

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

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AJ: My father was a presser. He made clothes. He could design by it - - if I said to him, 'I like your jacket,' he'd look at it and make a pattern.

MN: Did he work at a large company?

AJ: No, he worked for a small tailor shop people as a presser. And that basically is what he did. You could say generally - - I should say that the other side of the family were the Smiths. That was the first husband and that was the neat and potatoes of my mothers half siblings, lets say. And they were all in the tailoring business. And my father was friendly with one of the Smiths. That's how he met my mother.

MN: Right.

AJ: So, you know, that was it. I learned how to press pants, jackets, and - -

MN: Was your father a member of a union, was she a member of the - -

AJ: Not that I'm aware of.

MN: Now, when your - - what was the name of the first band you played in that started actually playing - - like, doing performances?

AJ: I don't remember what the first band's name was. You know, it could have been whoever was the leader at that time. But Jimmy Williams' band comes to mind. Then it became - - I don't think Benny called the band - - I would have to ask Benny if he could remember what the name of the band was. But those were the two major bands that I played with. Sometimes Bonilla would schmooze people on 121st street. And he would call me up, he says, 'Hey man, I got a gig for you.' 'Cuz he's schmoozing somebody and then he'd talk them into hiring me to play piano [laughs].

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MN: Now when you were growing up, where did you go to hear live music? Did you go to any of the places in the Bronx?

AJ: No, but I could tell you this, there were no buses, at least not in the area that I lived. There were all trolley cars. And so my grandmother lived on 145th street, which we also came out of that neighborhood. So we'd take the bus to 3rd avenue and come up 3rd avenue and hit Boston road. When we got to 168th street, there was Freddy's bar. And they had live music. So it depended upon what time we were heading home, then I would hear music coming out of that kind of a situation. But I always heard music coming out of a situation. It wasn't like Jimmy Owens coming to me at 8 or 9 years old wanting me to take him into the Blue Morocco - - you go home [laughs] and I'll tell your mother, you know [laughs].

[laughter]

AJ: And then I'd turn around, seems like I blew my nose or ate a meal, and now he's playing with Lionel Hampton [laughs].

[laughter]

AJ: And how I met Jimmy, I was friendly with his sisters. He has two sisters - - there were two other girls - - there was about 7 or 8 of us and we were like that, especially through junior high school, so.

MN: Now tell us a little bit about your first exposure to the Blue Morocco and then how you came to play in their house band.

AJ: One of the guys in that picture you were referring to is sitting down. His name was Herbie Coleman. And Herbie and I were buddies and for a while, especially when we

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were in high school, and after high school actually, we ran the streets together. And Herbie went to performing arts as I did. And that's where I met him. Herbie Coleman's family was a vaudeville family. It was his mother and his father, and he had a sister name Yvonne, and it's my understanding that the Coleman's was the last vaudeville act on Broadway when that situation was being phased out, and I think they were at the Archaean Palace if I'm correct; there's something else there now. And so Herbie and I ran the shoots and we used to go into the Blue Morocco. So - -

MN: And what did the Blue Morocco look like, you know? Give us a physical description.

AJ: You would walk in the door and it was - - is this a rectangle?

MN: Yeah.

AJ: Okay, it was rectangular. And so you would walk in the door, and say you would be on the left side of the rectangle, and that's where the bar would be. Now, as you walked in the door, to your right was an opening where there was another area that had chairs and tables and an area for dancing. Now the divider was a wall that came up to your waist or chest and they had a curtain that they could draw. And so when they had - - when the house band was playing they would pull the curtains back, you know, so the people at the bar could hear. If there was a wedding reception or some kind of private party then they would pull the curtains to separate the situation.

MN: Right. How many people could they fit in the - -

AJ: I have no idea. But - -

MN: But you could dance there?

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AJ: You could. You could. People danced to our music depending upon what was going - - they usually - - they didn't dance, say, if Nancy or Irene was singing. But we always played you know about 4 or 5 tunes before they were called up.

MN: Now what year did you first remember going in there? You know, when you and Herbie first - - was this in the late 50's or early 60's?

AJ: Both. It was in the late 50's and early 60's. And so, I should give you a little background. I'm gonna start with Freddie's because I'm aware of what's going on in Freddie's and I don't have a clue what's going on in the Blue Morocco.

MN: Okay.

AJ: The Blue Morocco might have had another name before it became the Blue Morocco. But Freddie's had a band - - a group called Sir Harvel. And Sir Harvel was a Nat King Cole imitator. He sounded like Nat Cole, he played piano, and he has guitar, bass, and drums. Sir Harvel got drunk all the time. And so the people at Freddie's was up to their nostrils in his drinking and so Harvel wound up going to the Blue Morocco. By that time it was the Blue Morocco, it had be refurbished, repainted, and all that kind of stuff. And the same thing happened. Harvel got drunk, and got drunk, and got drunk, and got drunk, and so now the owners of the Blue Morocco were up to their nostrils in Harvel and they wanted to fire the band. So the drummer whose name was Charlie Hawkins asked them not to fire the band, just fire Harvel [laughs].

MG: [laughs]

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AJ: And so they did. And Burt Decateau became the pianist. Now in the meantime, while that was - - while Harvel was there, Herbie and I would come in the door and Charlie would ask us to sit in and sing, and so we sang a couple of numbers.

MN: You sang also?

AJ: No, no. Herbie sang.

MN: Herbie - - oh Herbie - -

AJ: Coleman sang. And then - -

MN: Was he a child prodigy? Somebody said that he sang - -

AJ: Yeah - -

MG: [inaudible] how we did hear about him.

AJ: Like I said, the family was into vaudeville, so they grew up under that circumstance and they knew all of the performers on their mother's level that lived in the neighborhood. I wish I could remember names. Maxine Sullivan, she lived around the corner on Ritter Place. And next door to her was a man named Winston Colliemoore? who was a violinist, and he was doing Broadway shows and things of that nature. And he - - his eldest child was a daughter whom I was schmoozing.

MN: [laughs]

AJ: He would allow me to approach the stoop and talk to his daughter because he heard that I was studying to become a musician. So that separated me from the rest of the riff raff [laughs].

[laughter]

AJ: So anyway, that happened for quite a while.

MN: Right.

AJ: Now Burt Decateau got involved with Silvia Robinson.

MN: Right.

AJ: I became aware that there was an act called Mickey and Silvia. And they went to Europe. I think his name was Mickey "Guitar" Baker. And he stayed in Europe. I don't think I ever saw him again. But Silvia came back and when Burt went out to do a gig with Silvia, then Charlie would ask me to play. And that's where I began to you know. And so I was subbing for Burt until Burt decided that he was going off with Silvia permanently and then I got the job. I believe Irene Reed was there at the time.

MN: Right. Now Irene Reed was what you would call a blues singer?

AJ: Yes, I would loosely call her a blues singer.

MG: She's a jazz singer.

AJ: Yeah, in the jazz - - she's not a blues singer per se.

MG: No, she sings the blues, but we would - - jazz singer I would say, would you?

AJ: Pardon?

MG: A jazz singer?

AJ: Yeah, I would probably describe her more than a blues singer.

MN: Now at this time were you playing Latin music in other places?

AJ: Yeah, I was, you know, playing with different bands. I was connecting at the Union when it was on 52nd street.

MN: Right. So in the Blue Morrocco you were playing - - you would call it more jazz?

AJ: Well when me and Herbie was going in, Charlie asked me to play a Latin tune.

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MN: Really? Okay. So you were play - -

AJ: Because there was really nobody else who could do that.

MN: So you would play Latin in the Blue Morocco?

AJ: Yea, I would - - when I'm sitting in. Except if Herbie is singing and I'm playing behind him, I'm not playing Latin.

MN: Right. Now what if Irene Reed is singing?

AJ: Then I'm playing whatever it is that she's singing. And it could be a tune where I could play Latin or have Latin flavor, but, you know, whatever she's singing. You know, I didn't care [laughs].

MN: Right.

MG: Did you play her arrangements? She had sheet music?

AJ: Yeah we would rehearse. There was no sheet music per se, except at rehearsals. Then after a while, you know, there was just no music at all.

MG: She was great.

AJ: Yeah, she still is, by the way. She has some physical problems. I saw her maybe last year, or the year before last. She was singing for the jazz mobile in I think it's Morris Park, Mount Morris Park - -

MG: Marcus Garvey?

BP: That used to be called Mount Morris Park.

AJ: Oh, okay. Now it's called Marcus Garvey.

MG: Yeah, it's called Marcus Garvey.

MN: Now was she living in the Bronx at that time.

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AJ: No, she was living in Manhattan.

MN: She was living in Manhattan?

AJ: Yes, probably living in the same place.

BP: May I ask you a question?

AJ: Sure.

BP: What, um - - when you say that you played Latin or that it had Latin flavor, what does that mean? How would you kind of characterize that musical style - -

AJ: Yeah, that's it, it's - -

BP: - - was it salsa, mambo, or - -

AJ: There was no such thing as salsa.

BP: Right.

MN: [laughs]

AJ: [laughs] Okay, it was either guaguanco, or you say mambo. Or it was the Dominican music, what do they call it - -

MN: Meringue?

AJ: Meringue. Or it could be Descarga, bolero, you know. So, say for instance, if there was a ballad, and I thought, stylistically, if I played it, you know, Latin flavor, which I like to do, and that separated me from the riff raff. [laughs]

[laughter]

MN: Is the - - does the Latin music, I mean, come on a different beat? Is it different rhythmically? Is it - - if you could, to a lay person, explain what, you know, about - -

AJ: What's the difference?

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MN: Yeah.

AJ: [clears throat] Well, I would say the biggest difference in Latin music from say, jazz or blues, is the conga drum. And Latin music would be based upon the disciplines of the African music that developed in the Caribbean along with whatever European harmonies and techniques, alright? But the differences in the music is style. Jazz is a certain kind of style. Blues is a certain kind of style. Country is a different style. Western music is a different style.

MN: Now, did you have a conga player with you in the Blue Morocco?

AJ: No.

MN: So - - but you were able to do it on the piano - -

AJ: Yeah, and the drummer did the best he could. Charlie was older than us. See when I started playing in the Blue Morocco, the band was really what was left after they threw Sir Harvel out. Now I'm dealing with a different culture. These were older guys. So the way they approach music wasn't quite the same as what was happening now. That was one of the reasons of my success because I could play Latin music and nobody else did. And - - on their level. Unless they were Latinos playing with say Perez Prado or Machito or somebody like that. Before this kind of situation, you could hardly find anybody that did that kind of thing. And my knowledge [clears throat] of Latin music is really fundamental to my success as a musician. Because I could bring to the table something that somebody else couldn't do.

MN: Right. Now what was the crowd like at the Blue Morocco?

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AJ: Mostly neighborhood people that I grew up with that were now adults. And then one time I found that there were some people that had come in from Long Island that had heard about the Blue Morocco. And there was never any advertising, just - -

MG: [laughs] That's why we can't find any - -

AJ: Yeah. No, it was word of mouth.

MN: How many nights a week was it open for the music?

AJ: Fridays and Saturdays for sure, and sometimes Sundays. It all depended on if management felt that Sundays was gonna make them a profit.

MN: Right.

MG: Who owned the Blue Morocco?

AJ: I don't recall. It might have been two Italians or one Italian, one Jew.

MG: Italian, oh, and Jewish - -

MN: So it wasn't owned by Silvia Robinson?

MG: No.

AJ: Not then. Not then. And they were fairly young. Older than me, but still fairly young. I guess they looked like to me they were in their early 30's, something like that.

MN: So this was - - it started out as the Blue Morocco and then she bought it eventually?

AJ: Joe Robinson bought it. Yeah, her husband. [clears throat] And their music - - their musical flavors is different from mine. Mine was jazz and Latin, and whatever was popular. You know, like Amad Jamal? would have something popular, I'd play that.

Maybe there was something popular that George Shearing? had, I'd play that. And then

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I'd play some Latin music. So it made everything go nice and smooth. But they were more into rhythm and blues or what we called rock and roll.

MN: So they changed - - when they bought the club, they changed the musical format?

AJ: They said they wanted to try out somebody else and I saw the handwriting on the wall.

MN: Right. So this was in the early 60's when they bought it, would you say?

AJ: Yeah.

MN: Tell us a little bit - - would you say that the neighborhood crowd in the Blue Morocco was a pretty classy crowd, was it more a rowdy crowd, or was it a little of both?

AJ: Well, I would say it was more classy because when you walked into the Blue Morocco you had a sense of how to act. But everybody knew everybody and so most people got dressed to go into the Blue Morocco. It would be the same for Freddie's but maybe they would have more of a rowdy crowd let's say. The 845 club was even rowdier than that - -

MN: [laughs]

AJ: - - okay? But the Blue Morocco was basically a kind of a sophisticated club because of the way it looked.

BP: Did it serve food?

AJ: No. There was, on the corner next door to Freddie's, a luncheonette - -

MG: Yeah, there was.

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AJ: - - that everybody went to when the clubs closed. So there was no real need for them to decide on a cook and that kind of expansion. I don't recall what the 845 was in terms of food.

MG: [inaudible]

AJ: Pardon?

MG: They had food in the 845. They had a kitchen.

AJ: They did?

MG: Uh, huh, that's what they told us.

AJ: Oh, okay.

MN: Now someone that we interviewed told us that, occasionally, people would come to 845, I mean, Blue Morocco after the show at the Apollo. Do you remember musicians coming from Harlem?

AJ: Well there quite a few musicians that came, especially when Nancy Wilson was around. Because she comes out of Columbus, Ohio, and she was very popular as a local act. And so all of these musicians went through Columbus. So she got to know the Adderly's very well. And then, if you can recall, Levy, is it - -

MG: John.

AJ: John Levy, thank you.

MG: He's still alive. He's 93.

AJ: That's amazing. Well he was playing with George Shearing.

MG: Yeah, right.

AJ: And he - -

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MG: He was a bass player.

AJ: Yeah, he was a bass player. And he quit that to go into managing.

MG: Right.

AJ: So then he wound up managing - -

MG: Cannonball.

AJ: Cannonball. Probably Nat too, and some other acts he had on the side. And they bought John Levy up to the Blue Morocco that he and Nancy - -

MG: That's a black man named John Levy, by the way.

MN: Oh, really?

MG: In case you're wondering. You have to say that because people think, 'John Levy...' - -

AJ: So they think he's a Jew, right?

MG: Yeah, exactly.

[laughter]

AJ: Yeah, I know when I hear John Levy I - -

MG: That's why - - that worked for him, you know. That worked for him [laughs].

AJ: [laughs] Probably did.

MN: Okay, now do you recall - - were you there the first time Nancy Wilson actually sang at the Blue Morocco?

AJ: No, I was someplace else playing. And somebody said that Nancy had - - there was this singer that knocked everybody out and it turned out to be her. And I'm not sure - - I was playing in one of those rooms at, I believe, Smalls' Paradise. It wasn't in the main

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room because they had a downstairs, I believe, and was there an upstairs or next door to the main - -

MG: In Small's?

AJ: Yeah, because Small's had the bar in the front and then a back room.

MG: Right, with the roller skates.

AJ: Okay.

MG: The waiter's [inaudible].

[laughter]

MN: Really?

MG: Uh, huh.

AJ: So, to answer your question, again, no. But since I had the gig there, then we met right away. And when they hired her, then we rehearsed and she came up with this tune which I don't even remember, I tried to - - 'Guess who I saw today.' And when she came up with that, the word when out like wildfire.

MN: So this was - -

MG: It was a big hit?

AJ: Yeah.

MN: Now, could you tell that she had something special when you were working with her?

AJ: Hell yeah. You can always smell something.

[laughter]

AJ: Where there's smoke there's gonna be fire [laughs]. Absolutely.

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MG: She's still around you know. She's fabulous, still.

MN: Uh, huh.

AJ: Yeah, she lives somewhere out in Arizona, is that where? In California or something?

MG: [inaudible]

MN: Now when you were playing Latin music gigs did you usually play it in all - - in venues where most of the dancers and people were Latino? Or did you play - -

AJ: Yes. Yes. When I'm playing with a Latin band, yes. And there was a guy named Anhell Natell? And he had a big band. And, you know, I was doing my networking at the Union. Because the Union used to have these days where it was sort of like an exchange and the way the Union was situated on 52nd street, it was connected to Roseland Ballroom. And you could walk across the balcony and hit different rooms for the Union. One of them was where you got your checks.

MN: [laughs]

AJ: And then you could look out over the floor Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. And on Wednesdays and Fridays was when you would go down and look for work. The Spanish musicians was here. The bebop musicians was over there. And the rest of the proletariat was out there, you know what I mean?

[laughter]

MG: The club [inaudible].

AJ: Right. So I got to know these people and then the word went out so the phone started to ring. So now, I'm playing with Anhell Natell, big band. And it was at the Taft hotel

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that no longer is there. It's one of those big buildings. Now I think was like 51st and 7th avenue or something like that.

MG: Uh, huh, that's right.

AJ: And on Saturday nights I believe they were Cubans.

MN: At the Taft hotel?

AJ: Right. And Cubans had the big dance room and stuff and Anhell was the band leader. I discovered Zombie's there.

MG: [laughs]

MN: That's a drink?

AJ: [laughs]

MG: [inaudible]

AJ: And that's also when I was so comfortable with what I was doing, I started doing something that they had never heard before. And I started playing bebop licks because I knew where to drop them in to good effect, you know. And they'd look around, 'What was that?' [laughs] You know? And so I'm now able to judiciously incorporate some bebop licks within the confines of the Latin discipline and that made my stock go up even higher.

MN: Right. Now, did the Cubans shake it pretty good on the dance floor?

AJ: Yeah - -

MN: Or were they more you know, like genteel than let's say, Bronx people?

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AJ: Oh, no they came to impress and to dress, you know, downtown, Times Square, Midtown, big hotel, you know. So they came to - - I never learned how to speak Spanish, I learned how to speak the music. My finger speaks Spanish but my tongue doesn't.

MN: [laughs]

MG: Oh that's a good line [laughs].

MN: That's gonna be in your speech, right? Now - -

MG: Did you know Mario _____?

AJ: Yes. I got a lot of help from the Machito musicians because that comes out of the Royal Mansion situation when we were young. What was the bongos player name? I'll think of his name in a minute. And one time I asked him if I could play cow bell. And so I started and he took it out of my hands and said, 'No it's like this.'

MN: [laughs]

AJ: You know? And I said, 'Okay.' Louis Meranda I believe was the conga drummer at that time, he was very helpful in terms of giving out information. Then I got to know Rodriguez, the bass player, and I understand he passed away. I can't think of his first name. But he played with Machito and then he went on after Machito died, or somewhere in there, he wound up with Tito Puente's band. And the first session, recording session that I ever did, this man was on bass. Here we go again. It was a vibe player and he called me up, he wanted to rehearse. He had session - - and album to do. And is it Bobby Rodriguez? Maybe that's his name.

MG: The bass player?

AJ: Yeah.

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MG: I think so.

AJ: Bobby - -

MG: I can look it up.

AJ: Okay. I think its Bobby Rodriguez. I forget who the band members were. Small group. A conjunto they used to call them.

MN: Conjunto?

AJ: And we were rehearsing and rehearsing and we were going nowhere. And one by one the musicians were dropping out of the project. Then it came to me to drop out of the project and the producer asked me not to leave the project. He asked me to take the project over in terms of arranging and then I could pick the musicians that I wanted. So at that time Eric Dolphy was taking the - -

MG: Get out of here.

AJ: - - hello?

MN: [laughs]

MG: Eric Dolphy?

AJ: He was coming on strong.

MG: Yeah, he was. He's from Los Angeles, Eric Dolphy.

AJ: Was he?

MG: He was - - he's from California, that's from California, that's why I'm telling you. He was from the east side on Central Avenue. Okay.

AJ: I wish I could remember this vibe player's name I've been working on. But anyway, so I didn't - -

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MG: It's a Latin vibe player, or - -

AJ: Yeah, he was - - well, I started to say he was the only Latino, but no, he wasn't. Phil
Diaz - -

MG: [inaudible]

AJ: Well, no, nobody knew him.

MG: Okay.

AJ: And I don't think anybody might have known him after.

MG: Uh, huh, okay [laughs].

AJ: I mean I don't want to - - he just wasn't up to the level. But he had the gig.

MG: Right well that's half of it [laughs].

AJ: Sometimes it works out that way. So anyway, I decided - - I told [inaudible] I
wanted Eric Dolfy on the [inaudible], Bobby Rodriguez, Louie Ramirez, what did Louie
play? Louie must have played timbales. Maybe Phil knew somebody that's been on the
gig, and myself. And I think the name of the album is 'Latin Jazz' or something like that.
I don't know - -

MN: Do you still have the album?

AJ: No.

MG: David might have it right?

AJ: Quite possible. But that was my first recording.

MG: Do you remember the label?

AJ: No.

MN: Do you have any records of you know, the music you created in that time?

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AJ: No. And if I have anything it would be stored - -

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A]

[BEGINNING OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

AJ: - - Americans on the music.

MG: Exactly, that's what I want to talk about.

MN: Nobody mentions the input of African Americans in Latin Music.

AJ: That's right.

MN: Which was - -

MG: Because nobody talks to anybody about that.

AJ: No they don't. And I hear that and I get pissed.

MG: Right, right.

MN: Well give me, you know, because this is something that we're definitely interested in documenting. Did mo - - were there African Americans in most of the conjuntos and bands that were playing in the city at that time?

AJ: Um, okay. I'm not sure how to answer your question, but I'll answer it this way. You had African Americans playing Latin music.

MN: Right.

AJ: And there were nothing but Latin, I mean, African Americans in the band.

MN: Right. Oh, so these are African American bands - -

AJ: Like Poocho was one. I played with Hugo Dickens, whom we can't find. The exception with Hugo's band was that there was a Latino conga drummer, Papito Allende, he played congas. And then the other exception was Barry Rogers, who was Jewish.

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Everybody else in the band was black. Now when I first joined - - and Barry Rogers introduced me to these people, because I had gone to school and dropped out and when I met Barry - - am I getting ahead of myself?

MG: No.

MN: Well maybe start and tell us how you met Barry and then move back to that.

AJ: Okay. There was a pianist named Rupert Branca. And Rupert Branca played with The Chords that lived in the neighborhood.

MN: On Jennings Place.

AJ: Jennings street. And they were the ones that had the song, 'Sha boom.' But at that time, prejudice and racism prevailed, so they would always take a song that was popular in the black neighborhoods and they would cover it with a white act.

MN: Right.

AJ: Okay. Now, Rupert wound up with The Platters. And he was playing someplace in the Bronx with some group or some musicians, pick-up. And Barry Rogers was in the other group playing Dixie Land.

MN: Dixie Land?

AJ: Yeah. Dixie Land music.

MN: In the Bronx?

AJ: In the Bronx. And Barry liked the Latin music so much that he made friends with Rupert on the gig. And Rupert said, 'Well man you outta come and you know, meet the musicians that I know.'

MG: Cross over, yeah [laughs].

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AJ: That's how I met Barry Rogers. So when I - - that picture that you were referring to in my living room - -

MN: Right. Which is 1956 I believe. Or is it - -

AJ: Probably.

MN: That's what it said on the picture.

AJ: Okay. I was - - that was a party that I had - - my mother never - - I never had a party at the house, except for that one time. And I was on my way to college the next day.

While that music and stuff was going on, there was a blizzard happening outside, okay?

So when I dropped out of - - okay, wait a minute, I'm going a little - -

MN: Okay, where did you end up going to college?

AJ: Baldwin Wallace in Ohio.

MN: In Ohio?

AJ: Yeah, outside of Cleveland. Hillbillies and all that kind of stuff. And know Latin music.

[laughter]

AJ: But I played jazz and there was a guy that lived in a town near by, I think he was a bass player, and he used to come out to the campus and we would have jam sessions in the rec halls. They would always say, ' There's a guy from New York City that plays piano.'

MG: [laughs] Right.

AJ: And so I wound up playing polka weddings through this guy.

MG: Wow.

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MN: [laughs]

AJ: The next thing I know, I'm working. Now the professors would counsel me that they didn't like the people I was running with. And I'd say to myself, 'But ain't nobody any ya'll to play a gig, but they callin' me.'

MG: Yeah, right.

MN: Now was Baldwin Wallace a music oriented school?

AJ: It had a conservatory on the campus. The main thing about Baldwin Wallace was it was a method of school. And my minister - - when I came out of high school, that was what I had to do. As a matter of fact, it was through my minister that I met my girlfriend when we were teenagers. And we hooked up again after 51 years.

MG: How nice.

AJ: That's why I went to California.

MG: No kidding?

AJ: Well there was no reason to leave New York - -

[laughter]

AJ: - - you don't go nowhere when you're in New York [laughs]. But that's the reason why.

MG: That's nice.

AJ: It was decided that we would move to North Carolina because there was no reason for us to be out there. I didn't go to California looking for work or nothing. I went out there to be with this woman. So I'm cool. But anyway, when I came - - dropped out of college, Barry said to me that I should get a day job because those musicians that I was

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playing with that he had met, he said, 'They're totally irrelevant.' And he was right because I hardly - - I might have played one job with these guys somewhere after that. And they were playing the same tunes the same way and I said, 'Okay,' [laughs]. And that was the last time I ever saw them. Pete LaRocca was with Hugo Dickens.

MG: So he was in the band with you?

AJ: For a hot minute. Pete was playing timbales. And Pete was the first person I ever met that bought a bass drum with the timbales.

MG: Oh.

AJ: Yea. See that's one of the things that nobody will tell you. He wasn't there long because Pete was extremely talented.

MG: Oh yeah.

AJ: And he wound up with Slide Hampton - -

MG: And then [inaudible].

AJ: - - and he played with Sonny Rollins. And all of us was thrilled playing with Hugo [laughs] when Pete was off to the races.

MG: So he had the bass drum with the timbales. He played with the foot and the hand at the same time?

AJ: Mmm, hmm.

MN: Foot and the hand at the same time?

AJ: Mmm, hmm. And some of Latin musicians now do that.

MG: They do that. And he was the first?

AJ: He was the first one I ever saw.

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MN: I think Bobby Sanabria does that.

AJ: Yeah, okay. And I'll tell you another thing. I didn't know any Latin pianists that could play jazz at that time. The only people that could do that was myself and a guy named Rogers Grant. And I replaced Rogers Grant in Hugo's band. Thank the Lord, whatever. But he got drafted [laughs]. And then of course he wound up with Mango Santamaria and so forth. But anyway, that's how I met Barry. And so Barry played with Hugo all the time and then it got down to where there was a fellow named McClay who sang. And he came up with - -

MG: Was he Spanish?

AJ: Spanish, yeah.

MG: But he wasn't Spanish speaking?

AJ: Yeah. He was.

MG: Oh, okay.

MN: [laughs]

AJ: And you know, it's like the word goes out and guys come and sniff around. That's how we met Marty Shello? Marty Shello was going to Colombia and somehow he heard -

-

MG: He went to Colombia? I didn't know that.

AJ: Yeah, he was - -

MG: He's from Newark right? Marty?

AJ: Uh, I'm not prepared to lie.

MN: [laughs]

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MG: Okay, he might be from Newark.

AJ: But all I knew about Marty was he wound up coming to one of our rehearsals and the next thing I knew, he was calling us to play gigs with him.

MG: Do you know about Marty Shallo? Okay.

AJ: And so Marty wound up, of course, with Mongo along with Rogers Grant. [belches] Excuse me. And so it got down to Poppy Allende - - I should start with McClay because McClay was coming up with the gigs.

MG: Okay.

AJ: So McClay would sing. If would be Phil Newsome, Poppy Allende, Joe Gorgas, who was probably the first Latin Timbali player that was crossing over to playing drums and bebop, Barry and myself. And we would play like opposite the Greats band, maybe once Machito's band. But by that time we were kind of seasoned at what we were doing. So we would hold our own, and with this small group against these seasoned - -

MN: What were some of the spots you were playing with Hugo Dickens?

AJ: The dance hall that was on 34th street, I forget what they're called. We would play - - where was Malcolm X assassinated?

MN: Audobon Ballroom.

AJ: Audobon Ballroom. We played there a lot.

MG: You play any places on like - -

MN: Did you play the Embassy Ballroom on 161st? Does that ring a bell?

AJ: In the Bronx?

MN: Yeah.

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AJ: Yes, yes, yes. And it might have been with Hugo, but it was with other bands too, or other musicians I should say - -

MN: Now at the places where you played, did African Americans come to dance Latin as well or was it mostly Latinos?

AJ: No, it was mostly African American.

MN: Ah.

AJ: Because the music was getting to African Americans.

MN: So you would - - this would be Hugo Dickens playing Latin music to a largely African American crowd?

AJ: Yeah, we didn't play anything else.

MN: Wow.

AJ: you know, it was a Latin band. But some of us knew how to play jazz but that wasn't the reason why we were gathered and the reason why we were gonna get paid [laughs].

BP: There's so much cross-fertilization - - I mean, there's so much - - what you're describing, I'm wondering how it played out in social relations between blacks and Latinos in the Bronx. So African Americans were innovators in Latino music. Did people, Puerto Ricans and black people in the Bronx, did they hang out, did they get along, was there tension?

AJ: Well, I don't know about tension. I happened to meet Latinos as time went on and we became friends and then I got to know a lot of Latin musicians. And we admirers of each other and so forth and there were occasions that we would play together, either on a record date or something like that. As a matter of fact, as time goes on the melting of the

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music was happening. I'd like to think that it started with the guys that I was with. I mean, it was like a mutual respect. Once your reputation went out, it didn't really matter if you were Latino or not. And so then the bands became mixed because a lot of times the African American musicians, as would some Latinos - - you know everybody else is rising to the top and others are going straight ahead, and others are going down. You know, so, one day I just looked around the room of musicians I was with, there were some people from Count Bassie's band, there were a couple of people from Duke Ellington's band, and then you had all of these Latinos, you know. I'll tell you something funny. I went to high school with a guy named Bill Salter? And Bill Salter was one of the writers of where is the love, just the two of us, and mister magic and so forth. Now, he played with Miriam McCable for a long time. When I got the job at the Blue Morocco, I was trying to phase these other people out. I couldn't get rid of Charlie Hawkins because he was the leader, but the guitar player was the first to go. So it got down instead of four musicians, it was just the three of us. And I don't know why the guitar player left. I had nothing to do with it. And then I needed to get rid of the bass player. I hate to say it that way, but that was really the fact on my mind because they couldn't play Latin music. I was looking for Bill Salter. Now before I could get to Bill Salter, a guy names Chris White - -

MG: Oh, I remember Chris White.

AJ: - - played bass.

MG: He played with Dizzy.

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AJ: That's right, for a number of years. See, I've know Chris White since we were teenagers.

MG: He's not from the Bronx is he?

AJ: No, he's from Brooklyn.

MG: He's from Brooklyn, yeah.

AJ: Listen, when the word goes out, the word goes out.

MN: [laughs]

MG: Okay. I know he's from Brooklyn [laughs].

AJ: A lot of gigs I played at the Elks Hall in Brooklyn.

MN: And was that in Bed-Sty?

AJ: Yeah.

MG: They had Latin dances in the Elks Hall?

AJ: Yeah.

MG: Exactly for African American dancers of Latin music in Elks Hall?

AJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MG: Oh my god. Where else in Brooklyn? Sorry, professor.

AJ: There was a place on Eastern parkway that was kind of a classy place.

MN: I think I know, I'll tell you what it is. We've been trying to track it down.

AJ: Is it something manner? No. There was like an Elks home on 112th and Lenox that we played a lot of Latin. And Latinos came to those gigs.

MG: On 112th?

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AJ: Yeah and Lenox. I think that's where it was. It's some kind of fraternal home, a club spot, you know, and we played there.

MG: Any of the musicians - -

MN: Can I turn this off - -

[interruption]

MN: Okay. We're back to the interview with Arthur Jenkins. Now one of the most interesting things you mentioned is playing the gig at - -

MG: Excuse me, he doesn't have a microphone.

MN: Oh.

MG: Okay.

MN: - - is the date you played at this upscale club on Eastern Parkway, the Town Hill restaurant. Could you tell us a little bit about your memory of that place because it's something we want to put on record because we kind of lost all memory of it.

AJ: Okay, I'm trying to think who I might have played the Town Hill with and I don't recall. But I did play there at least a half a dozen times.

MN: Uh, huh. And you're playing Latin music?

AJ: It might have been a mixed batch of stuff. And I might have been with a singer named Naomi Johnson. And maybe Bill Salter might have played bass. And Naomi's husband at that time played drums, he might have been there. I think Danny Holgate also had a steady gig there and I used to bump into him.

MN: Do you remember what the place looked like?

AJ: No.

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MN: Okay.

AJ: All I can recall is that it was on Eastern Parkway.

MG: Was it upstairs?

AJ: Yes, and I think we were in a front room as opposed to a back room. Like it seemed like maybe they had a lounge setting and that's where I played.

MN: Right. Now, what was the name of the - - Mr. Vick, who was playing at the Blue Morocco before you?

AJ: Harold. Harold Vick, yeah.

MN: And tell us a little bit about him at that time and then some of your later contact with him.

AJ: Well, I didn't really know him except I knew who he was just by word of mouth, you know. And I would go in and I would hear him play. I didn't really get to know him until further down the road and probably after the Blue Morocco.

AJ: This period where Mr. Jenkins did commercials and jungles and all this with Bill Salter's company, this is a very important element in African American musical history.

MN: Is this in the late 60's when you were doing this or later than that?

AJ: It was later than that, more like the 70's and the 80's.

MG: Early 70's - -

AJ: That scene for me went for about 16 years, from the early 70's. Because I lived in Hollywood, my daughter was born in Hollywood. Frankly, I starved to death and I had to get back to New York. And within six months I was conducting Melvin van Peebles, 'Ain't supposed to die a natural death.'

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MG: No kidding!

AJ: Uh huh. And it was funny, the play did die a natural death [laughs].

MG: It was good though, it was good.

MN: So you were in charge of the orchestral band for that play?

AJ: No, I wasn't the director.

[crosstalk]

AJ: But anyway, this play had opened and then I was to take the musical directors place. So I was with the play for about 9 months. It was a unique situation insofar - - it was a small group, but the group was set up over the stage. So we were part of the stage which meant that we - - because we were not in a pit, we got paid more. So - -

MG: Was Harold in that band?

AJ: No. I think it - - I forgot - -

MG: At the same time as that was the Negro Ensemble Company, they had small ensembles also and they would be on the stage. This was a new way for black musicians in New York to make money. You know in this period.

AJ: Melvin also - - while 'Ain't supposed to die' was happening, Melvin also opened up another play at the same time called, 'Don't play us cheap.' And then he wound up with, 'Sweet - -

MN: 'Sweet Badass Song.'

AJ: 'Sweet Badass Song.' So it was unique insofar, he had that movie and two plays at the same time.

MG: And two plays. That was his big moment [laughs].

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MN: Now when was this - - you know, you were on this main [inaudible] song and
'Everybody plays the fool' and what - - was that in the 70's or the late 60's?

AJ: No. That was in the 70's because - - see in the middle 60's I went off with Johnny
Nash and stayed with Nash for about 9 years.

MN: So were you with Johnny Nash when he did, 'I can see clearly now'?

AJ: No, that was the last song that he did. And he did that in England. I had left him
probably a year to a year and a half prior to that.

MN: Now where did you meet Johnny Nash?

AJ: [laughs] [inaudible] Does anybody remember [inaudible], trombone player? That
was another band that was floating around.

MG: The Bronx?

AJ: The Bronx and then Harlem - -

MG: Latin band?

AJ: No.

MG: Oh, jazz?

AJ: Uh, huh. And he also had an office in 1650.

MG: Oh, he was a black man?

AJ: Yeah he was.

MG: And now he's a white man?

AJ: No he's a dead man.

MG: He's a dead man.

[laughter]

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MG: He had an office huh?

AJ: Yeah, in 1650. Oh, you know what, he used to run the jams sessions all over town.

You remember Count Bassie's was on Monday night?

MG: Yes, oh then I know him.

AJ: And there was someplace else. The club that's at 155th street - -

MG: Wells?

AJ: No, not Wells. Wells is next door to Count Bassie. But there's a club like 155th street and St. Nicholas Avenue at that time, I don't remember the place. And then they used to have jam sessions on another night even at Freddie's. I think that's how he and his band got to Freddie's. Anyway, he had a pianist whose name I've forgotten, I think he might have passed away. He used to go on tour with Nash. And he called me up and asked me if I'd like to go on tour with Nash. So I knew who John was. And I said, 'Yeah that's cool.' He said 'Well here's his number, let me give it to you. And you call him up and tell him that you'll do the gig.' So I did.

MG: For nine years?

AJ: Nash didn't know who I was or where this phone call was coming from. So he said he would get back to me. And I said to myself, 'You know what? You better prepare to make this trip because it was leaving tomorrow.' [laughs] So I started packing some things, washing some things, and ironing some things. And Nash called and said, 'Okay, you meet us, da da, da da, da da.' And so we went on this tour of the Caribbean and certain countries in South America.

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MN: Now what sort of - - what were the musical styles that Johnny Nash played at that time?

AJ: Popular stuff, you know. A couple of things he wrote himself, but pretty much of what he might have done with Arthur Godfrey. He was the first black artist on Arthur Godfrey when Godfrey was broadcasting simultaneously on radio and television. And so it was pretty much the same thing. But what is more significant in my relationship with John is he and his manager discovered Kingston, Jamaica. And so they had gone to Kingston and recorded a couple of rock steady's.

MN: Yeah, right. Rock steady's in mid 60's, yeah.

AJ: And this was like December, Christmas. By this time of the year I went to Florida with Harry Belafonte and they went off to Jamaica. So I said, 'Well, we'll hook up in New York.'

MN: So you were playing with Harry Belafonte also?

AJ: I did, but mostly I did arrangements for him. So when they came back they had this strange music called rock steady. So they wanted to go back to Jamaica and record some more rock steady. And when we went back, it was no longer rock steady, it was called reggae. And then we came back and took our own engineers and sound stuff down to record some more. And the object was that we were recording tracks for Nash, for Bob Marley, and Lloyd Price. And there was a local act, he was more like the radio-television personality, Neville Willoughby was his name.

MG: In Jamaica?

AJ: In Jamaica. So I wound up spending a year in Jamaica.

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MG: Okay, wow.

AJ: I learned how to drive on the right side and refused to drive a car that was left because that's how you move in Jamaica, on the left. So I needed stuff on the right [laughs].

MG: Did you meet Larry McDonald?

AJ: The name is not familiar.

MG: What year is this?

AJ: This is like 64, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

MG: You know [inaudible]. She taught at the Jamaica school of music.

AJ: No kidding? I wish she was there when I was there.

MG: No, she was there '73-'79.

AJ: Okay. John and his manager decided to do something - -

MG: See this - - I want you to know why this is particularly important. Because if he - - if Mr. Jenkins spends a year in Jamaica, he also now adds a Latin and jazz influence to Jamaican music because of his presence there. Because it's not how many black musicians are there, but the impact of the one who are there. So you know, this is a whole other element to what happens.

AJ: You're absolutely right. Mr. Jenkins did throw in some bebop [laughs].

MN: [laughs]

MG: Of course, because that's how you play. And you know, you hear it in there, in reggae and in rock steady, and you hear it in the horn arrangements in The Wailers. And

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I'm always like, 'Well, who is it?' And they say 'Well Count Ossie is a jazz musician but you know its still...' See now I get it.

AJ: See because all music has discipline to it. I mean you just can't willy nilly anything, you know. But once you understand the discipline you can figure out where you can drop these bombs that come from other disciplines.

MG: Right.

AJ: I recently heard some tracks and I said to myself, 'Oh that had to be me, because I don't think any Jamaican would have played that way.' [laughs]

MG: Right. Exactly right. And that's what I heard when they played it for me.

AJ: Of course now probably you can hear those licks.

MG: After Melba then they learned how to do that, but when you were there no.

MN: So you were working in various studios there?

AJ: We recorded in about 2 or 3 but mostly in - - what's this man's name, he's sort of half Asian half Jamaican - -

MN: Lesley Cong?

AJ: No, it wasn't Lesley Cong's studio. I can tell you another name, Duke Reed.

MN: Duke Reed, oh of course. Duke Reed is one of the three great - -

AJ: Well we recorded in his studio once or twice. And Duke Reed sold Red Stripe and probably Coca Cola or Pepsi Cola. But the way he had it set up is that all his cases were in the open. So he was the only one I saw in the whole time that I spent in Jamaica that carried a gun. The police didn't even carry a gun.

MG: That's right. In the 60's they didn't carry a gun.

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AJ: Because we were stopped by the police, Nash, his wife, his manager, myself, and the guy that wound up engineering a lot of stuff who was driving. And the policeman, he just stepped out into the road and he put his hand up. I said, 'This is gonna be interesting.' So Danny Simms was Nash's manager at the time. So Danny and John got out of the car. Now, if the police stopped you here and they wanted to search you, there is no doubt - - first up they have their weapons out you, and they're telling you what to do. This man didn't have a weapon. So he wanted to search them but he did it in such a way that you knew he was hoping he wouldn't feel anything [laughs]. Because if he felt something, and he had nothing to retaliate with, there would be a problem. So everything got smoothed over and he gave the driver a ticket because his headlight went left and right or whatever. But I thought that was funny. At the same time when Bob Marley got shot, I thought that was strange and that put a little distance between me and the thought of going back to Kingston.

MG: Uh, huh, that was the beginning?

AJ: Yeah, and then when Peter Tosh got murdered with those other people I said, 'Well, what's to go to Jamaica for?' Because again, when I was there nobody had a gun, except for Duke Reed - -

MG: But they also didn't have all that money.

AJ: Well, you know, he had a gun to keep people from stealing his product.

MN: Now some of the other guys were Coxone Dodd. Did you have any contact - -

AJ: Yeah, Coxone.

MN: Coxone.

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AJ: The engineer, who turned out to be a friend of mine, he moved to the city and he wound up working for ITT Deka and then he moved over to NBC. Now, at the time that I met him, Buster - -

MN: Prince Buster.

AJ: Prince Buster put out a record in England. And a friend of Garnet sent him the record from England. On the b side of the record was a production of Garnet's [laughs]. And they used to do stuff like that. So Garnet would walk to Prince Buster and say, 'This is your record, what's that.' [laughs] And I'd die laughing. Because you know, ain't nobody could do that here you know. There'd be dead bodies all over the place. So I wish I could remember, I hate growing old. But most of the recordings we did was at this one studio. A lot of them had studios and another kind of business below the studio. And this man had a - -

MN: This isn't Chris Bockwell or anything now?

AJ: No, we never met Chris, he's English-type. And he could have been in and out of Jamaica. What I wanted to say was it was decided that we were gonna do a show that they do around this time of the year called 'Nuggets for the Needy.' So we're gonna do this big production. I'm gonna do arrangements. We pick the songs, me and Nash. Nash is the focal point. So we wanted some singers. So we had to go to the school for girls. You know, they were like high school types. And so that's where our singers came from. Then we needed brass and reed players. So we had to go to the army to get those type of musicians. Then we needed string players. And then we went to the Jamaican school of music and therein lies the ruff. Because the people that were in charge were English. And

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they gave me some grief. And all I wanted was them to play the music. And this is how it goes.

MG: They only played European music.

AJ: And so therefore I had a feeling that these men were over in Jamaica because they were losers in England and they were gonna come over and act big and large in Jamaica. So we didn't use them. We used local musicians. It was like a string quartet or something, or just 4 string players you know. And they were more than happy to get involved in this kind of thing. And so we did. They broadcasted and televised the show. And that got us an invitation to the - - he was the minister of finance at the time and he wound up being - -

MG: Is he the prime minister now?

MN: Edward Seaga?

AJ: Thank you. See [laughs]. Seaga was the minister of finance at that time and this was probably you know somewhere between '65 and '70. Because by the time we got to '68 and '69, I came back to New York. Especially - - there was somebody that had come down - - Denny was trying to get a lot of people to come down and see what we were doing. And so this time I had to take somebody to the airport who was leaving. And while I was there I decided to go check out a newspaper, because while we were there, there were no newspapers, they were on strike for some reason. So I see a New York Times, it's about a month old, but it tells me that the Jets had won the superbowl. Well, I got upset.

[laughter]

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AJ: I said, I gotta get out of here and go back to New York. And it wasn't long after that that I said hey ya'll got it.

[laughter]

MN: Now I wanna go back, you said you had played with Poocho and his Latin soul brothers?

AJ: Yeah at a place called the Purple Manor on 125th street. And that was a lot of fun.

MG: How's the level of the musicians in Poocho's band?

AJ: With Poocho? I always looked down on Poocho's band. I thought the level of musicians in Hugo Dicken's band was better.

MG: Oh, see! But there are people that have a bad attitude about Poocho's band.

[laughter]

AJ: Well I had a bad attitude too [laughs].

MG: Okay, see.

AJ: The thing about Poocho's band, whatever it is you think about them, they always stuck together. Where Hugo Dicken's band itinerates. Because the musicianship in Hugo's band was of such nature that the musicians couldn't stay there - -

MN: Right. They always had other gigs.

AJ: - - Sonny Rollins called Peter Aroco, why would he want to stay with Hugo? If Miles Davis called me, goodbye Poocho - -

MG: [laughs] You had to go, yeah.

AJ: But something went down, and I wound up with Poocho's band for about a year at this place called the Purple Lounge.

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MG: Oh, good. A steady gig for one year?

AJ: Yeah.

MN: Did they ever play the Bronx - -

AJ: He might have been there longer than that. I'm sure Poocho did.

MN: Were they Manhattan guys or - -

AJ: Yeah. There's another group that comes out of Harlem, Joe Panama.

MN: Right.

MG: Oh yeah, right!

MN: So that's another group of African Americans who'd play Latin music. In fact, they're in the flyer I handed out and they played the Blue Morocco.

MG: Yeah.

AJ: They might have. I don't know.

MN: Yeah, I have the flyer so, I'll show it to you.

MG: What's Joe Panama's name? Other name, I mean, his given name.

AJ: I don't know. Poocho's name is Henry Brown.

MN: So you have - - there's three major groups of African Americans who play. There's Hugo Dicken's band, Poocho, and Joe Panama.

AJ: Right.

MN: And that's in addition to the individual musicians that are playing with Latin ensembles all over the place?

AJ: Right.

MN: Now did you have any contact with Eddie Palmieri when he got started?

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[crosstalk]

[laughter]

AJ: I met Eddie and Charlie either at the Paladium, the [inaudible], or I might have met them at - - what's the place that Malcolm X?

MN: Audobon.

MG: Audobon.

AJ: Or the Audobon Ballroom. And Eddie Palmieri was - - by this time, Charlie had died and I didn't know that except for reading it in the paper. Eddie was a John Levy artist who had among other labels, Tiko records. And they had offices on 50th street between Broadway and 8th avenue. And Danny and Johnny, their operation was running some rooms in the same area of offices that Levy had. So one day I ran into Eddie and Eddie said he had a credibility problem - -

MG: [laughs]

AJ: - - and he asked me if I could solve it for him. And I said, 'Sure, fine.' I think the music was boogaloo then or something - -

MN: Latin boogaloo.

AJ: Yeah, something like that you know. And Eddie - - there were other bands coming up off of this new music and Eddie was just floundering. So, I was married at the time and my children's mother, that's how I like to refer to her - -

[laughter]

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AJ: - - she wrote lyrics. I can see music coming around the corner but a lyric will lose me, you know. So I went home and she came up with these lyrics and I came up with the music and we made a demo and it was called the African Twist.

MG: No kidding!

AJ: So that's how well I know Eddie.

MN: The African Twist - -

MG: Do you have the writer's credit on it, the publishing?

AJ: My wife does. I don't know what happened to the rest of the situation. It could be buried with John Levy or whatever. I didn't take care of that kind of business.

MG: Too bad. Too bad.

AJ: Yeah, it is too bad, and I didn't realize - - see, I don't like to make lead sheets. That's the hardest thing I have to do [inaudible]. Everything else I find relatively easy. And every time I turn around John needs a lead sheet for this, that and the other.

MG: Yeah, for the copyright.

AJ: For the copyright. And I said 'Oh man. This is worse than Japanese.' You know? So that's what kind of happened with that. I'm not even sure - - see I - - because I'm in love with my wife whom I was married to at that time, I put her name down for everything.

MG: Okay.

AJ: Because I thought that that would do good for her because I got all the rest of this happening, I don't need to have everything. So I was trying to spread the wealth around.

MG: That was nice.

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AJ: If I had other opportunities, I would have put my children down as writers or something like that, so. Anyway, yes [laughs].

MN: [laughs]

AJ: Eddie came out to the - - and played at the Catalina Bar and Grille about 2 to 3 years ago. And I took my girlfriend and we went to see Eddie. And Eddie introduced me to the audience and introduced Francisco Aguabeda.

MG: Oh, yeah because he's living out there. Do you know who Francisco Aguabeda is? He's the first person to bring bata drums from Cuba to the United states.

AJ: Okay, I didn't know that.

MG: Yeah, traditional bata. I mean, among other things. But I mean in the religion he's extremely important. He went to California and he's like THE Cuban percussionist in California.

AJ: I got to know him in around '68 and '70 because I was on tour with Belafonte and Belafonte's last gig was at the Greek Theatre. And this was like October or September. And by that time, my children's mother and I, we were all together. She was pregnant with my daughter - - our daughter. And I met Francisco somehow or another and I started to work with him.

MG: Oh great.

AJ: I wish I had gotten more interested but I was really frustrated in Los Angeles. And I was just trying to figure out how to get back to New York. Because the problems I was having out there with work and cash flow did not exist for me here in New York, you know. So I worked with him as far as I could. And the other thing was I went as far as I

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could in Latin music and then money became a problem and I couldn't see myself making any money beyond what it was at that time.

MG: California - - Los Angeles, it was a big problem.

AJ: Yeah. And so I figure - -

MG: Musicians have a big problem.

MN: So when did you get into the jingles, that's when you moved back to New York?

AJ: Right.

MN: And that was a steady source of income?

AJ: That and record dates.

MN: And record - - okay so you - -

AJ: And - -

MN: That's when you did that thing with the main ingredient, when you moved back to New York?

AJ: Right. And then I developed a reputation, if you couldn't get Ralph McDonald, call his sub - -

MG: [laughs] For congas, which he doesn't play.

AJ: - - and that's me, okay? So that I have clients that have no clue that I'm a pianist. They think I'm Ralph McDonald's sub.

MN: For conga?

AJ: For congas, yeah. And not percussion, you know, whatever it is.

MG: Right, right, exactly. There are musicians, on a very high level, who have built careers and homes and sent their children to college by being subs. There was a bass

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player, Joe Benjamin's sub, you know, Jack Greg. Nobody knows Jack Greg, they don't nothing about him, but the man had a fabulous career because Joe Benjamin was first called and he couldn't make all the gigs, just like Ralph couldn't make all the gigs. So this is another - - that's very good.

MN: Wow.

AJ: And that led me to Yoko Ono.

MG: Oh, no kidding?

AJ: I went to visit a friend, some reason, I still don't know. When I see him I'll ask him. And I went to the studio where he was. And we concluded our business and the reason I was in. I looked around and I didn't see any Latin percussion. I said, 'Hey man, ain't no Latin percussion [inaudible]'. So the next thing I knew I got a call to come in and do Yoko's date.

MG: She used Latin percussion on her date?

AJ: Mmm, hmm. Of course, you would never know that because they were - -

MG: That's right. The way they mix that album [laughs].

AJ: [laughs] I did two albums with her. Unless you could tell me what country they were sold. I know they ain't selling. They never hear it on the radio. It didn't do anything for my career except it led me to John.

MG: Oh really?

AJ: I did 2 albums with him. One called - -

MN: This is John Lennon, we're talking about right?

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AJ: Yes. One called 'Walls of Bridges' album. And the last album that he did before he was assassinated was the 'Double Fantasy' album. I'm on that playing Latin percussion.

MG: No kidding? That's your second career. So was he a nice guy.

AJ: As far as I knew.

MG: Was he at there or he overdubbed?

AJ: No, he was there. I'll tell you, when we were doing the 'Walls and Bridges' album, he had imported these musicians - -

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B] [BEGINNING OF TAPE 2 SIDE A]

MN: - - with John Lennon on an album called - -

AJ: Walls and Bridges.

MN: - - Walls and Bridges.

AJ: So, when the session started the musicians would break out the brandy and whatever amenities that they had which I don't need to mention. Didn't have anything to do with needles and heroin however, I could mention that [laughs]. So the session really didn't start for about 45 minutes. So one day he was annoyed because we were doing one tune in two sessions that's why I tell you I don't know why he imported these guys, because he had to pay for their expenses and all of that and then pay them a good fee for doing the session. So one day he said, 'Listen, let's not start the carnival yet, until we at least get one tune done. I'd like to do more than one tune today.' He said, 'Now Jenkins is cool but the rest of you - -

[laughter]

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AJ: - - you know, and Jenkins was cool, because what was he gonna say? You know it got to the point where my reputation went out to certain people where it wasn't an original session for me, it was an overdub. So one of the best things that I like to - - they'd say, 'Listen, I don't know what to tell you, listen to it.'

MG: Uh, huh, do what you think.

AJ: Yeah, see what I think. So I'd listen and I'd say, 'Well, how many tracks do you have open because I'd like to do this and I'd like to do that.' They said 'Oh fine, we got plenty of tracks.' And so I would do something and then overdub something else until well - - and I always loved to hear the producer say, 'Boy it was just like he was reading my mind.'

MG: Oh, yeah, right. They wish [laughs].

AJ: [laughs] So yeah, we were looking to go on tour. And my birthday is December 7th and the next day I get a phone call from a relative of mine. And at that time I was living around the corner, down the street from him. I was living on 73rd, but very close to Columbus as opposed to where he lived on Central Park West and 72nd.

MG: That's a shame.

AJ: It was a shame and so I saw not only possibilities fly out of the window but also a trip around the world. I've never been to Europe.

MG: No kidding!

AJ: Never. I have not crossed the Atlantic.

MG: [sniffles] I'm allergic to something in here.

AJ: Uhh, it could be me.

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MG: No, I think it's the heat.

[laughter]

AJ: I've been to Canada as far south as Buenos Aires. But I have not been East or West.

MG: It's not too late.

[END OF SESSION 1] [BEGINNING OF SESSION 2]

MN: Okay, we're returning to Jamaica and we've tracked down the name of the person you were working with, Vincent Chin.

AJ: Yes, absolutely.

MN: And tell us a little bit about your work with Vincent.

AJ: Well I don't know how we met Vincent or who met Vincent but a deal was broken. Probably Bill Garnet was instrumental in doing that. Bill wanted to be a sound engineer but he worked for another company. And what he was doing was building studios. He might have built the studio for Coxone or a couple of other people.

MN: This is Bill Garnet?

AJ: Bill Garnet.

MN: Now what was his background? He was from - - was he a New York guy?

AJ: No he's a Kingston.

MN: He was a Kingston person. And how did you meet Bill Garnet?

AJ: We met him because he came to the studio - - you know they only had - - Vincent was one of the few studios that had three tracks. Everybody else had two. So we met Garnet. We wanted to record from midnight to six o'clock in the morning. And we might have been recording at Federal Records studios, and the engineers didn't want to do that.

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MN: Federal Records is who's - - who was that?

AJ: I forget the man's name that owns Federal Records.

MN: Okay.

AJ: But Garnet said that he would do it. And so that's how we met Garnet. And then after, when I left the island about a year or so after that Garnet and his wife moved to New York. Garnet is passed away. But his wife is still working for what is Sony now. She's been in - -

MN: Now, Vincent Chin's son, Clive Chin, came to the New York and is a pretty big time producer.

AJ: Yeah and at the same time, Vincent has a sister that's married to I believe a Latino, and they have a record store. Might be called Randy's Records in Brooklyn.

MN: Wow. Which is the same as the name of that store in Kingston.

AJ: In Kingston, yeah. So, and as far as I know, the store is still there. I never got to know the sister or husband but I've been out to the store at least once or twice a number of years ago.

MN: Right. Now, what I'd like to do to wind up today because I'm sure we're gonna come back for other interviews is - - you've had an amazing career as a musician in terms of the variety of artists you've played with, the kinds of work you've done. How did your growing up in the Bronx shape that experience as a musician? You know, growing up in the Morrisania section of the Bronx, what kind of legacy and background did that give you as a musician and as a person?

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AJ: Well, as a musician - - as a person, fundamentals came from home and I went to church all the time. It began because I was gonna be thrown out of school. And it took me an extra year to get out of high school. So part of that was I would go to church after school and go work in the church's office. I learned my secretarial skills, how to type, and things of that nature. But the Bronx, at least that part of the Bronx I was in, was rich in music. And it was as I grew up and it became probably a little more so as my knowledge of musicians and culture expanded, it was all there in the Bronx. In my neighborhood within say a span of three blocks walking East, West, South, or North, were at least four clubs that had live music. That was just in my neighborhood. The 845 club was not in my neighborhood. But that was another one. And I played in every venue at one time or another but mostly I played at the Blue Morocco as I got older.

MN: Right. But you grew up, from the time you were five, hearing sounds coming from The Royal Mansion, from the Church in the corner, from Freddie's - -

AJ: That's right.

MN: - - you know, so it was like the music was coming out you know, in the street - - live music. And then you were taught to play in a public junior high school.

AJ: Right. And not only that [laughs]. You know, there were a lot of criminals in our neighborhood [laughs].

MN: That's okay [laughs].

AJ: And I'm talking about young criminals, I'm not talking about older. So, when you went out for lunch, and this is junior high school, then they would have these guys that

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you'd have to pay them a dime or a nickel to get back into school. But when they saw the likes of me with my instrument they said, 'No, let him go because he's doing something.'

MN: Now these were young guys?

AJ: Yeah.

MN: These were like gang guys?

AJ: Yeah, they were old enough like guys going back to school but they were like - -

MN: But they were 15 or 16?

AJ: Yeah, you know [laughs].

MN: [laughs] So you had to pay a tax to get back into school? You had to pay a little tax.

[laughter]

AJ: There you go.

MN: Okay, but if you were a musician, you didn't have to pay the tax?

AJ: Because they always saw me doing something. And I played - - I was involved in most of the assemblies. Some kind of program or some kind of reason. Plus the fact that they had a lot of after school activities. And it didn't necessarily stop with the junior high school I went to. There was an elementary school, P.S. 99 - -

MN: Oh right, which had talent shows and - -

AJ: Yeah.

MN: Did you ever play in the talent show?

AJ: Absolutely.

MN: So you were in those talent shows?

AJ: Yeah.

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MN: Now what were you - - and what were you playing? What kind of music in that time?

AJ: Uhhh, I don't know.

MN: Would it have been Latin music or - -

AJ: I don't think so. I don't think so. That came a little later. Thought I was working on it, but I wasn't playing with musicians that would play Latin music at that time.

Especially for those kind of shows.

MN: Did you go to any of the dances at P.S. 99?

AJ: No.

MN: Okay, but you played in the talent shows.

AJ: I'll tell you, as long as I had my saxophone, the world was my oyster. If I went to a dance that means that I didn't have an instrument and chances are, I'd have to be home by 9 or 10 o'clock.

MN: Ahh! So that was your way of staying late, carrying around that saxophone?

[laughter]

AJ: That's right. And in those days, chances are that you could be out and 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and not get ripped off for your instrument. Do you understand what I'm saying?

MN: So you - - it was safe.

AJ: It was safe.

MN: So - - and people - - you felt, despite the tough guys and the numbers guys that this was basically a safe neighborhood?

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AJ: For me. I mean, it may not have been safe for anybody else. We used to have - - in those days, you know, nobody had the money to buy guns. So they made what they called zip guns out of a piece of pipe and it would be somehow calibrated, hopefully, to hold a bullet. It would be made out of wood and the trigger would be a strong series of rubber bands and that was the instrument of choice in those days. So that there were people that had gotten shot in front of my house with these zip guns you know. But when my mother saw that going down, she would holler, 'Get upstairs now.' And you know, we'd stay away from the window because a lot of times the police were involved you know. But if you hung out with that kind of element that's what you got into. But the element that I hung out with didn't have anything to do with that. We were like the entertainers of the neighborhood and so therefore, we were not harmed.

MN: You got a free pass.

AJ: Yeah, you know. Free pass, whatever you wanna call it. And then, you see some of those same people grew up and then they would come to the Blue Morocco and see they would know who I was.

MN: Okay, so the young gangsters at 15 or 16 who were collecting a tax outside of junior high school 40 would then become the grown up gangsters that would go out to the Blue Morocco.

AJ: Well, some of them weren't gangsters anymore that would come to the Blue Morocco. Those who had grew up that maintained their gangster hood were either shot and killed or they were in jail. You know, there was a family, I forget what their name was, but there must have been about a half a dozen boys. And I went to a memorial

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service at Riverside church not - - let me see, maybe about six years or so ago. And there was a guy that came out of this family. And he talked about how he was the only one left. All the other guys got shot and killed, all his brothers. And they all spent time in jail except for this one, you know, so. I mean the neighborhood was a mixed bag, but the thing about it in terms of culture, there was plenty of music. And I haven't even mentioned like Lonnie Gales, that played for Thelonious Monk - -

MG: Larry Gale.

AJ: Larry Gale, well we knew him as Lonnie.

MG: Oh, no kidding.

AJ: And there's Valerie - -

MN: Capers.

AJ: - - Capers. And then there was her brother Bobby, who, I mean if you closed your eyes you would have thought of Charlie Parker when he was 16 or 17 years old. And the Capers' mother and father, around this time of the year, they'd have a party at their house and we'd all bring our instruments.

MN: And where was this - - where was their house located?

AJ: Down the street from where I lived.

MN: Oh on Union - - they were on Union Avenue folks?

AJ: Uh huh. They were closer to Freeman street than I was but these were the kind of people now that I'm meeting. The ones that were a little further away that I used to play with are no longer relevant to what it is that I'm doing, you see? And then when I got to do record dates and jingles you can count on probably less than one hand the people that

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had survived that. That would include Barry Rogers and I think that I had mentioned Oliver Beener who would have been in the middle of all that except for his other proclivities. And then of course Jimmy Owens came out of the blue and we saw him do the last jazz mobile last year. Man, I had to tell him, I mean he played so well, you know?

MG: He played up here.

MN: At our benefit concert. Well thank you very much for a breath taking experience which - -

[laughter]

MN: - - and we may have to name this the Arthur Jenkins seminar room because you know. But thanks and we've gotta have you back.

MG: We want to continue, yeah.

MN: Right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]