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Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewee: Philip Newsum

Date of the Interview: 1/10/06

Transcriber: Michael Ross

Mark Naison: This is the 138 interview of the Bronx African American History Project.

We are at Fordham University on January 10, 2006 with Phil Newsum who played in very important Latin ensembles in the 50's and 60's and our lead interviewer is our senior interviewer and jazz scholar Maxine Gordon.

Maxine Gordon: Thank you so much and thank you Phil Newsum. I know you are not born in the Bronx. I know you are not from the Bronx. But there is a reason that we want to talk to you about the Bronx and to talk to you about Manhattan also because as we have learned from the beginning to do this research on jazz and Latin music in the Bronx - - the boundary between Harlem and the Bronx is only one subway stop. So you know we can't only look in the Bronx when we are looking at the music. And you are key to this- - to understanding the bigger picture. I don't want you to feel like being from outside the Bronx puts you outside this project. So I want to start with your full name and spell it.

Philip Newsum: Ernest Philip Newsum.

MG: When were you born?

PN: May, 22 1937.

MG: And where?

PN: In Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan.

MG: And you grew up in Harlem?

PN: In Harlem.

MG: What street?

PN: 141st Street in and Convent Ave. Right above City College.

MG: And you went to school where?

PN: Well grammar school, Our Lady of (inaudible), catholic grammar school. Then I went to George Washington High school and there many years went by and I wound up in Fordham Lincoln center. I have some relationship with the university. I have a ram pass.

(Laughing)

MG: I wanted to ask you about your music background. When you began playing and what you began playing.

PN: I always had a love for music. It started off with Jazz in the swing era. That's when I was first exposed to it. As the years went by, my cousin gave me some Latin American records by Tito Puente. And I fell in love with the rhythm.

MG: When would that be?

PN: That would be around 1953. I didn't play anything but I really enjoyed the music. When I went to high school, George Washington High School, I was a trumpet player - enjoyed watching the high school band. Started with John Costello along with many other relatively well-known trumpet players that came along with me into this aspect of the business. Early in 1955 one of my band mates enjoyed watching the high school band suggested he wanted to start a band, a street band, a local band. I thought that was a great idea. His name was Hugo Dickens. Hugo Dickens, Milton Summers, who was an altoist in that band and myself started playing together - - rather large band composed of three

trumpets and three saxophones and complete rhythm section - - Pete LaRoca, Pete Sims, he was one of the founding members of that band.

MG: Was he also from the neighborhood?

PN: Peter lived on 130th street off of Seventh Avenue. The whole Harlem area to us was very small; to some people it might have seemed large. But it was very small to us. We used to rehearse in Hugos mother's living room with the large band.

MG: Where did she live?

PN: On Convent Ave about 148th street. It was a private house tucked away in the middle of apartment houses. It is still there - - she is no longer with us but everybody in the neighborhood would hear that band - - they all seemed to like it. In that band was George Brife, he's from the Bronx. Vincent McKewen played with that band, Another Bronxite. And Larry Spencer who was a trumpet player from Manhattan who I studied John Costello with - - he was also in that band. Tito Figurola- - Im not sure where Tito lived but he was a graduate of Mt. Lorreto in Staten Island. You know he was also a very good trumpet player. But we rehearsed weekly, consistently until we had some measure of competency. The Congo player was a fellow named Arthur Cross who was six feet and some odd inches tall and known to everyone as Pee Wee. He lived around the corner on St. Nicholas. (Laughter) The first piano player was a George Washington high school student female. He name escapes me. It has been too many years. She was competent, however eventually Rogers Grant replaced her. Most people know him as (Inaudible) piano player.

MG: Was he from the Bronx?

PN: No he lived in Harlem. I remember where his grandmother lived but I don't remember exactly where he grew up. Barry Rogers was with that band, trombone player, he is a Bronx guy. The number of musicians with the band rather than go through a very lengthy explanation of all of them. We used to rehearse in a church which, Convent Avenue in the basement and there was a fire there. We rehearsed in Hugo's mother's house for years and then we started rehearsing in a club on Amsterdam Ave about 159th-160th street. That club is no longer there. They tore down that and built housing for the elderly I believe on that site. We used to rehearse up there and the neighborhood kids would go up there and dance while we were rehearsing. Eventually the union delegate showed up and told us that if we didn't join the union we were going to be in big trouble. Being we were all kids we thought a union delegate, wow, this is like the police. (Laughter) So the whole band ran down to the musicians union and joined up. Which was a funny experience because I never got to tell you how I got from trumpet to bongos but I got from trumpet to bongos because after playing trumpet in a few rehearsals I realized that this music was way too far ahead of my confidence as a trumpet player. So I suggested to the bandleader, Hugo Dickens, and I said well you know Hugo what this band needs is a bongo player. So Hugo said that's a good idea. And he said, "do you know one?" And I said yeah - - Me. (laughter) He said "You play Bongos?" and I said sure do. So he said "bring your bongos to the next rehearsal". I ran home asked my friend Bourbon if I could borrow his bongos. Took my allowance and went to the store and bought a couple more Tito Puente records. Came home and listened very close to the rhythm sections. Copied the bongo beats and went down 125th street and bought a cowbell. Went to the next band rehearsal and nobody knew that was the first time in my life that I ever played Bongos. I really was

a great counterfeit. We went on, we started working with that band, we played with the big band- -

MG: Before we go on, can we go back a little. I want to know about Hugo Dickens. He would be your age? He was in school with you?

PN: Hugo would be older than that. He would be maybe a year and change older than I was.

MG: and what did he play?

PN: Tenor Saxophone. He was a rhythm and blues oriented but Illinois Jacket was his idol. He was a little out of his depth with his band but he hung in there and loved the Latin Music, he loved what - - we used a lot of stocks for the American Dance Band music. Most of which I don't even remember the names. But Hugo was very mild, mannered fellow. All he wanted was the best possible band and so did his mother. At that time Hot Lips Page had passed away and his wife was very friendly with Hugo's mother. She gave Hugo all popular band uniforms, which we all tried on and rejected because they were too outrageous. At that time in the 50's everyone was trying to look cool. This was the BeBop era and everyone wanted to look cool. Those uniforms were just too outrageous. We said no, no, no, we are not going to wear those. In fact they didn't even fit us. (Laughter)

MG: Do you think we should insert here who (INAUDIBLE) was?

PN: If you are going ask me about (INAUDIBLE) I am going to be slipping and sliding because all I knew he was one hell of a powerful trumpet player in the the late 40's.

MG: Late 30's I think too. Probably.

PN: Yeah, I don't know enough about him to really nail down any facts that I would want to go on records.

MG: He is one of the classic and most famous trumpet players of the era before Bebop. But he transcends- - he comes into Bebop, he played in Minton's Playhouse. He has recorded there. He comes before Dizzy Gillespie. He comes around the time of Royal George but classic - - he did have this band and it is so interesting to me. He kept the uniforms and then here comes this new young band in the 50's that said oh "your uniforms" and they said "no we are not wearing them." So what did you wear?

PN: Blue suits that got us in trouble. We had a job once for a group called the Jack and Jill.

MG: Oh yeah sure.

PN: they were composed essentially of upper middle class and upper class blacks. Light skinned blacks preferably. There was a lot of racial politics involved in belonging to that organization. They hired us because all of the kids wanted - - Oh Hugo Dickens Band. So we all come in in our blue suits and I think that job might have been in the New Yorker Hotel. The mothers were so upset that we did not wear tuxedos and bowties - - that we did not present ourselves in a formal way.

MG: you wore long ties and blue suits.

PN: we just wore blue suits and - - very informal. Business attire but nor formal music attire. Not that they wanted and I think they had objections to the veracity of the music and the African element that we specialized in. Very powerful, African rhythmic element.

MG: Was that Hugo that brought that element or did you, or Barry or when did all that come into the band?

PN: It was really a group effort. Pete LaRoca was a team ball player. His father had been a trumpet player. And Peter played timbale so well that Tito Puente used to call him up on the bandstand.

MG: Didn't he play bass drum with his foot? Or was that later?

PN: With timbales? No he just used the timbales. He became a rather well known drummer worthy of Sonny Rollins and he did some time with Coltrane and a lot of groups.

MG: I know he played with Stan Getz.

PN: Stan Gets and Sly Hampton and - - But Arthur Cross, Pee Wee, myself and peter, we tried to play as ferociously as we could and Mongo Santamaria who is Tito Puente's congo drum player and Vitato Balvez who eventually went with machito - - you can almost say that they were mentors of a sort. Mongo was definitely my mentor because he sold me my first really good pair of bongos and my first good Congo drum. He was very good to me. In fact all the musicians - - I used to go to the Palladium and wanted to learn how to play this music. I went to the Palladium ballroom two or three times a week. Did not cost a lot but - - I would just stand there on the bandstand and study. It was like going to school. Arthur Cross Hugo's bongo player, used to go off too. You do that long enough and musicians look into your eyes and see that look that says I love this stuff and want to learn how to play it and they help you. If you are humble enough and you show them that you really respect them they will help you. They all help me. Tito Rodriguez, Mongo, Chaquito, Rodrigues Hungero, Little Ray Romero, Machito Munoz (inaudible) these guys were impeccable assistants not just in helping me learn how to play but in helping me build my self-esteem in the business. Remember I am not Hispanic and for a non-

Hispanic to want to play, what was at that time, Afro Cuban music it was like - -

(laughing) It was like you cannot do that you are not from there. You do not have it in the blood. But I was hungry. Although I did not have it in the blood I put it there. (Laughing)
I gained their respect, and Peter gained their respect.

MG: who else? Wasn't Latin that played Latin Music who was African American that played Latin music with you? Arthur Jenkins?

PN: Arthur Jenkins, If you want to go through all of those guys who was in there. You had Eddie Bodamier, Hoocho Henry Brown, Joe Panama, Dave Patoodum - - even like I said this gentlemen Rupert Branker who was a piano player for the Players had a love of Latin music and could tinker with Latin drums. In the end most of the saxophone players - - Bobby Capers, George Braith- - all of them. They were Bronx musicians. They were all oriented towards Latin Jazz. They all understood it and the concept and they could all play it. I suppose if I went on - - Vincent McKewen another trumpet player from the Bronx played a style like Miles Davis. I don't know what ever happened to Vinny he kind of disappeared - - Olivor Beano who I never really knew well - - I think he touched Hugo, he touched us- - but he was essentially a Bebop trumpet player and we didn't see a whole lot of him. Im not even sure how to spell his last name.

MG: Let me ask you, about Hugo's Band. I want to ask Phil Newsum about this photo.

PN- I will give you a few brief statements about it I think. I know virtually everything in it. I know how it came to be. I know they used to get together and jam.

MG: At Arthurs House?

PN: Yeah

MG: He said he was leaving, Arthur Jenkins. This is his house. He said he was leaving to go to college. So we are looking here at Union Avenue in the Bronx in 1956. So is that the college age?

PN: When Roger Grant left Hugo's Band Arthur took his place. So I do not know how much time he spent in college. - - Well the trombone player is Barry Rogers, probably one of the few Jewish guys who were big in my music. There were piles of Jewish guys who were big in Latin music. They did arrangements - - they were trumpet players. Tito Puente had a piano player who was Jewish. So there were a large number of Jewish musicians that played Latin Music. - - Barry was one of the young up and coming ones- - he played a trombone, which was completely off the charts at that time. Nobody played a trombone- - sound like an elephant. But Barry did and went with Hugo and he actually made the instrument a viable component in the band. So much so that when Eddie Palmiere started his band he hired Barry and the whole front line was Trombones.

MG: That was the sound, then was the sound of the front line in Eddie Palmiere. that sound of La Profecto, rite?

PN: That was the sound and Barry is responsible for it. He had to idols J. J. Johnson, who was his idol in the Jazz world. Then there was this Cuban trombone player- - I wish I could remember his name. He was a well-known Cuban, Latin Jazz trombone player who Barry had a lot of respect for and modeled himself after. This fellow here Benny Bonilla , came up in the Bronx working with Latin Bands. I worked with a very large Latin Band with him. And Angel - - That was a huge band. That band was about 14 pieces. Jonny Pacheko played drums for that band. We worked in the Cablo Henry Ballroom at 145th street and Broadway in Manhattan. It was one of the most popular Latin venues in

Manhattan at its time. Uptown, there was a lot of clubs downtown. - - This fellow here I knew him as Franky Blueeyes. I never knew his real name. - - This was Rubert Branker, Platter's piano player who was playing timbales. - - I did not know these two gentlemen in the back. I am not sure who they were.

MG: Is that the pipes player? No the one you recorded with?

PN: I did not know him - - at that time the (inaudible) player I recorded with one. - - Willy Question mark who his last name escapes me. - - Willy escaped me. I have no idea where Willy went. Pucho might know. He was a very good vibest. It is a shame that we lost our Business.

MG: Who booked the band? How did the band get its bookings?

PN: Hugo booked himself. He went around and made phone calls, pushed the business. - - He spent a lot of time doing that. How he did it I do not know. It was easier in those days. A lot of clubs and a lot of dance halls.

MG: What about in the Bronx? Where did the band work in the Bronx?

PN: We worked in the Woodstock Mall. I don't know if anybody ever even heard about that. Dance employee somewhere. Don't ask me where because I do not know how I got there or how I got home.

Dr. Naison: There is an apt complex called Woodstock Terrace on 163rd and 161st off Trinity. So it is possible it was in that area because if this was in the 50's it would probably be in that area that the apartment complex was built. St. Augustine Presbyterian Church was originally called Woodstock Presbyterian church. So it is probably in that area, 160's in the Morrisania Section.

MG: Do you remember the place?

PN: The Bronx and I were not close. The only other place I could remember off the top of my head - - when they closed the famous Harlem Dancehall, the Savoy, they opened a place in the Bronx called the Savoy. I do not remember where it was but I remember playing there.

DN: What about the Embassy Ballroom on 161st street near Grand Concourse?

PN: There were so many places we worked. They were all dances. There was a lot of social clubs at that time in Bronx and Manhattan. They would get together and have an annual dance. Hugo managed to get the band booked for plenty of those. All over between Manhattan, some of the Bronx - - none in Brooklyn, we did not go to Brooklyn. The interesting thing about Hugo if I can give you a little background. He studied with Garvin Muchelle. Garvin was a very well known- - I'm not sure which saxophone he made his bones with in the 20's. He was very well known. He wound up in Puerto Rico with some house bands there and I think he past away in Puerto Rico. He had a studio with a trumpet player named John Castello. If I remember correctly it was 49th street and 7th ave in Manhattan. Garvin's studio was on one side of the hall and Castello's studio was on the other side of the hall. Many of Hugo's trumpet player studied with John Castello and - - Hugo and Milton Summers studied with Garvin Muchelle. So it was a lot of interchange- - John Castello's father was known for making the Castello mouthpiece, which was a very popular mouthpiece for trumpet players in the 50's. John himself was a very good trumpet player. With society bands and show band he taught trumpets. Unfortunately he never succeeded in teaching me enough for me to move on professionally. - - Hugo was a product of that studio studying in that environment. But he

spent so much in the business, promoting the band that he did spend as much time with his horn. I will put that little piece to sleep there.

MG: When the band played in these Places who was the audience? Who was dancing? How did they look?

PN: In those days, these were all kids from 16 up to late 20's. In those days people danced to everything. You could actually play a Horris (inaudible) and people would dance to it. They would do the Lindy and the Bop to it. They did not need a backbeat to know where the beat was. We got a lot of complaints because of our Jazz oriented approach to the music. We were not laying it down in a Rhythm and Blues way. Which is a lot of what people were oriented to, they wanted to hear that backbeat. But we did not give it to them. We did in the end somewhat. When I became the drummer we gave it to them more. Peter never liked it and he refused to do it. - - Lenord Seed, I don't know whether Lenny came from the Bronx. But he was Jewish and he was a drummer. He worked with Hugo and I believe he spelled his name SEED. He lives upstate now. Lenny would not play backbeats either. I played backbeat because I was not that good at drumming. This was a good excuse for me to play simple. I was like the Ringo Star of Hugo's drummers. - - Oh the audience, they danced to everything. It was a younger crowd, they danced everything. They would dance and dance and dance untill we played "There is no place like Home" which we played vernetically(?). In the older clubs- - the older bands would play "Good Night Ladies" "Grace of Date" but Hugo it was "No Place Like Home" as a comparsa. You know a Latin street comparsa (Furious). They would be blinking the lights and we would give them their monies worth. - - Those days black kids took great pride in dress. Dressing well was important - - you know you wore a suit and

tie - - you wanted to look elegant. The kids were not into zoot suits but they were into looking elegant. IV League was very popular amongst the black youth at that time.

MG: This would be in what year, 56?

PN: In the 50's. Girls also took great pride in looking elegant. You had very few places that we went was there any violence, or any drug abuse or anything like that. We did not have any jobs like that. We had one at the Elps Hall at 126th off of 5th avenue, where we were playing and all of a sudden a chair went into a big mirror, screams and bottles started throwing and fights started. The trumpet section started putting on their coats. The rhythm section could not put on their coats because we were playing. I turned around to see all the horns at their coats and hats on. - - The guy ran up to the bandstand with the money for the band. In those days if there was a riot we continued playing because we wanted to sooth the crowd. (Laughter) That did not work too well. The owners ran up with money for the band. They offered it to Hugo. Because everyone was there looking Hugo did not take the money because he figured he was going to get mugged. He pointed to Peter and Peter didn't want the money either. We finally got the money and got out of there in one piece. We all went over to Peter's house and paid off. I think that was the worst riot we ever played in. I really don't recall any others that were as furious. Cause it was a long flight of stairs to get out of the Elps Hall.

MG: Its always a long flight of stairs at these ballrooms right?

PN: Nobody wanted to go down there headfirst. It was an interesting thing. - - This fellow here Ray McKeetha. I have to mention him because he does not get much press. Ray is a bit of a Harlem Historian. I know it is a small photograph but he is a Harlem Historian. He can tell you the history of black dance and music.

MG: He is a dancer right? I know him.

PN: His father was a minister. He was a very fine - - He is very hard to find. He will talk you under the table. Ray will go on until the sun goes down. He knows everything. He was also a very fine drummer. Even though he has very thin, delicate hands. He is an excellent Conguero. He plays Congo drums very well. He does not do it professionally, he never did it professionally. But he spent all his time calling information on the black social life of Harlem- - well I don know how far back Ray starts. But he can start talking before the 40's and go right down the line. Fashion, dance styles, knew all the people.- - SO I think when it came to Latin Music, Ray was very close to Mario Balsa. Machito's arranger and director. In fact Ray loved Machito's band. You remember Machito played in Savoy Ballroom a lot before they went downtown and started playing in the Palladium. They used to play a lot in Harlem. They would work in the Audubon Ballroom in the main hall where Malcolm X was assassinated. - - Every mothers days there was a dance fair. Mario and Machito would put it together. They would have like 10 bands and the place would be jammed to the ceiling. They did that every year. - -Ray just loved it. - -In order for me to hear all these bands play I started working for Machito's band boy, Eddy. I used to help him move all the bandstand and the instruments so I could get into the dances for free as the band boy. - - Ray got so close to that band that he could tell you all about it. He knew all the great Palladium dancers. He is an extremely graceful dancer himself. He is a guy that never wanted to blow his own horn. He never promoted himself so nobody ever heard of him. - - I have to mention him...

MG: I think that mentioning him, and mentioning Hugo Dickens band. This is important because Hugo Dickens's band keeps coming up. Who ever you talk to in the Bronx

research has heard of the band or they played in the band. we have Arthur Jenkins and do you remember the Brethway brothers? Then there was Alambe and Kwale, they changed their names. They lived on Kelly Street in the Bronx. They had a group when they were kids called the Jazz Arts Society. And they promoted George (inaudible). They brought him downtown where he would be in contests and he would win. They promoted in club 845 on Sundays. But you do not hear about them. They were young black promoters. You know, kids that wanted to have Jazz in the Bronx and did it. The Hugo Dickens band keeps coming up but there are no recordings. So there is this idea in Jazz History if something is not recorded it does not exist. There is the same thing with woman bands in the 40's. When the guys went to the Army there were all these woman bands. They traveled, they played in the Apollo, they played in Minton's. It has been verified. But because they did not record and it was a recording band, when you tell people, when you talk about it, they act like are making it up, they act like it never happened because there is no records. So then we are saying that Jazz history and Black music history is only people who made records. Which we know is not true so that is why I think it is important that we talk about this.

PN: Most of us were - - I don't mean it in a negative respect- - but we were very derivative. Our ideas really came from both people that came before us. We did record. We based a lot of what we did on what had been done. What creative elements we added to it I can't really say because when we were doing it we just did it. We never recorded it so we can't listen to it again and say it was good what we had just done. - - Hugo had a tape that was made at his mothers' house with Eddy Veal, Joe Vorgus, Vicor Hiendi, who was a companero who played with Joe Panama and worked with Hugo. I am not sure

who the piano player was that afternoon. I think it was Arthur. It must have been Arthur because Roger had moved on Bill Salter was the bassist or Sheryl McCants. We recorded that- - Joe Vorgus was (inaudible) player, and I played bongos. It was a relive Tequila- - it was a jazz tune that had been recorded. That was really worth listening to. If Chris Rogers can't find that tape.

MG: He was at my house last Night. He came over. He brought me some Berry recordings with Eddie Palmieri. But he is now searching the tapes and searching the films because he said there is a millimeter of Hugo Dickens band that Berry Rogers took.

PN: Berry did do that.

MG: We will be able to digitize that and use it in presentation. So what music- - when you were in the 50's what music did you listen to on the radio and then live? Was that Machito that you told us you followed? Tito Puente you told us you follow.

PN: Tito Rodriguez, Elmo Garcia only made one record - - Brooklyn Mambo. He was very popular uptown as Latin bands go. Well there was another- - I wish I could take about 20 years off and the names would come easier.- - Anything that was swinging. If it moved you we listened to it. There were also a lot of great Jazz stations on the radio.

Milk Kamen, Simply Sidd- - Simply Sidd I listened to but I seem to recall listening to him later. The Pong café had a Jazz show at night that I used to listen to. - - Sidd was all over the place. He did Jazz then he did Latin. He was doing a lot of things. - - We listened almost exclusively to Latin music and Jazz. Very little rhythm and blues. You couldn't get away from Rhythm and Blues because at the time it was the standard. It became big when Rock N Roll - - When they changed the name to Rock N Roll that is when it really got big. That was everywhere but that was not what interests us. What interested us was the

music on the edge. Latin Music and Jazz were on the edge. They sharpened your critical faculties. - - You had to think more when you played that and we liked that. Everybody would know if I bumped into a guy from the Bronx who was my age and was part of the scene. If I started to rattle off names he would know them - - Getting together to play jam sessions was no problem because everybody knew the tunes. Jam session venues in Freddy's in the Bronx- -

MG: When would the jam sessions be in Freddy's?

PN: In the fifties.

MG: What night? Was there a certain night?

PN: I don't know.

DN: What did Freddy's look like as a spot? This physical description- -

MG: We have an exact address for Freddy's. I like to put this on the record- - 1204 Boston Rd. at 168th street.

PN: I really don't recall what night of the week we had jams. But I do recall one night jamming up there - - Bobby Kapers was taking an alto solo. Lou Donaldson walked in and stood right in front of him and stared at him. - - You could hear Bobby suddenly become so conscious. Now every cliché that Bobby was going to play- - Lou Donaldson would know the cliché. - - When the tune was over I kept busting his horns about it. - - I told him Lou put the whammy on him. - - But older guys used to do that a lot to us. I was playing with this- - In Freddy's they had a fellow named Sir Harwell in this trio—Now I worked with Sir Robert Harvell in count basis with Eddy Deal and Bill Salter.- - It was a quartet.- - That could be Harvell where they put a “w” there instead of a “v”.

MG: You think it is the same?

PN: Harvell used to play like Arol Gardner and sing like Nat King Cole. He used to bang his foot on the floor with four beats to a measure-- very loud on the bandstand. You could really hear it. When I was working with him I did not use a bass drum that way. You could imagine all the noise that would come- - that would have dominated the whole scene with the bass drum and his foot. So I eased up with the foot. - - Bruno (inaudible) who was at that time playing in Count Basie's. - - I was in Joe Well's place- - Did I say Count Basie's? - - I mean Joe Wells place, that is where we were working. In Count Basie's Steve Pullium had a group - - He was a trombone player- - He had a Jazz group in Count Basie's. His drummer was named Bruno Carr. - - Bruno came over and stood next to me staring at my right foot. Suddenly I got very self-conscious. (Laughing) When the tune was over Bruno asked me what happened to my foot. He wanted to know if I broke my ankle. I told him No. He asked me if I could even use my right foot. I told him to get off my back. - - Musicians used to do that. They would put a little psychological whammy on each other.

MG: Going back to how Freddy's looked, where was the bandstand?

PN: I remember the bandstand itself. It seemed to be on the left towards the back. I think the bar was over here on the right. It was a small bandstand. Every time I went up there to jam I was scared to death. (Inaudible break)

PN: Now out of respect for him I did not want to turn everything around. So I was playing right handed on the drum set that was set up for a left handed drummer. It was very uncomfortable and the tune was very fast. - - In a jam session everyone keeps playing. Chorus after chorus. Everybody will take as many choruses as they can until they drop. By the time the tune was over I actually think I raised a blood blister on my

fingers from the right symbol.- - Those are some of the interesting things that happened when you were young and coming up in the clubs those days. Everybody had a chance to play- - there were a lot of places to play. I consider my self extremely lucky that all these venues existed. Nowadays I don't know what kids do when they want to learn how to play. They have no clue where they should go. - - Where I live now- - if I were to so much as tap on the drum the office would receive 100 complaints. (Laughing) Where as where I grew up- - in the apartment house I grew up. - - I grew up in a building with Roy Eldridge.

MG: In the same building? What was the address?

PN: 270 Convent ave. - - Taft Jordan lived on the first floor. Roy was on the fifth floor. - - Lucky Roberts was one of the Harlem (inaudible).

MG: One of the Harlem (inaudible) but also had a clue on 133rd.

PN: He had a little after hours place uptown near St. Nicholas where sometimes I would go and play with brushes on a book - - because we could not use drums because we could not make noise. Lucky was - - All those guys were really sweet people. The building was owned by a guy who came from Antigua. - -He bought the building and put all his friends in it. All the tenants who lived in our apartment house were A. Austins friend. There were no leases. He used to go around the apartment and tell people he needed to raise a little more money and asked people how much more they could afford. People would say that they would give five dollars more and that was the way it went. - - William Elmore who was a piano player in the style of Fats Waller - - he might of even sang a little. I think I recall him singing a little bit but I am not sure. He lived two flights down from me. He had a band- - anyway it was one of the downtown clubs - - he made good money there.

Everybody in the building was used to music- - they were tolerant of it and they put up with me. - - I am very grateful and when I was in my 30's I wrote - - my 40's I wrote a letter to the people who lived below me who now lived in Washington D.C. - - Stolen their virtues and especially my gratitude for the powers that they had for all the years I was trying to learn drums over their heads.

MG: Do you remember the audience in front of the Jam sessions?

PN: They were just habituaries of the bars. Guys who would come in and sit at the bar and drink and listen. For the most part I don't think anyone paid attention to the audience - - to the woman or anything. We were strictly there for the music. It was a very narrow focus. - - Even in the Blue Morroco where they had more women than Freddy's the only woman I paid attention to was Nancy Wilson because she was the singer.

MG: Did you ever play with her?

PN: Only in the Blue Morroco - - The guy who had the band there Charlie Hawkins. When Charlie could not make the gig Arthur would call me and I would fill in for Charlie with Chris White. Nancy worked there before she went with - - Cannon ball took her out of the bars.

DN: What was she like?

PN: She seemed like a nice lady to me. Very attractive.- - At that age I did not want any attractive woman to think I was interested. Nancy was really a good-looking lady. - - She was outstanding. (Laughing)

MG: She had arrangements?

PN: Arthur did her arrangements. Arthur Jenkins - - He arranged all her music. It was basically her and the piano. There were not horns in that group. She was very good. I

never heard any woman sing the way she did. - -I felt like it was loss.- - I almost felt like come on Mitch - - I was angry that she was going off to be successful. - - I liked her the way she was.

MG: When you played at the Blue Morroco and at Freddy's - - did you take the subway?

PN: Public Transportation was- - that was me. Even if I had to carry my drums. In the Blue Morroco I used Charlies Drums. In the Jam sessions there was always drums there. Anytime I had a job where I had to play drums I carried them myself. - - Tom Toms, Bass Drums, Symbols. I never had enough money for a cab. - - We never made enough money. To take a cab- - that was half of the money I made in the whole job. I remember when my first wife - - we had a job in the Bronx- - I'm trying to remember where the job was at the time. It was on the concourse some place. My wife was pregnant at the time and there was an enormous snowstorm but we needed the money. We took the train - - she carried the tom toms with her stomach out and everything. We did the job and came back home - - I really gave her a medal for that. That was very good.

MG: The reason I asked about the Subway is that David Carb pointed something out.- - He called them cluster of venues that developed around subway stops. If you look at the Hub and Boston Rd. and Club 845. - - Everybody says if you come down the stairs and the club is right there.- - There is this relationship with public transportation which connects the Bronx to Manhattan. Sometimes we have this false divide between the Burroughs but they are so much back and forth. From Harlem to the Bronx and from the clubs up here to downtown.

DN: Tell us a little bit about Joe Panama. - - Did you play with him?

PN: Only with his steady group- - His regular group disbanded. None of these groups stayed together longer than a year and half. Then guys would leave.

DN: What was his real name?

PN: David Prudone. Somebody told me he really was from Panama. His father had a store down on 116th street. I met his father once. - - Joe and I went to George Washington High School together. I am fond to say that Joe was there when I got there and he was there when I left. (Laughing) The original Joe Cuba band was Joe Panama. When they left he created another band. Pucho worked for him. Musicians - - Victor Hiendi, Papiro they called him. Between Hugo's musicians, Joe Panamas musicians, and Pucho's musicians there was always interchange. Pucho had a conguero player named Richie Lynne but went by the name of Pablo. Richie worked with Hugo on many occasions. - - He was good. - - Hugo's first conguero was Al Bunn. Both of these guys are deceased now - - Bunn and Richie. - - Bunn grew up in the same neighborhood with Pucho- - Down by 112th street and 8th Ave. Most of the musicians that he started off with - - Willy Bivens who was his vibest. Who is not doing so well these days with the physical problems due to age. - - You know we are all aging. - - There was this great interchange - - Joe played a lot of jobs but most of his work was in central Harlem. I don't know whether he came to the Bronx very often.

MG: Was there a reason you particularly asked about Joe Panama and Pucho?

DN: Just curious because the Latinization of names. Which is an interesting phenomenon in American History- - you have all these Italian and Polish Boxers who gave themselves Irish names to fight . Here you have African Americans and Afro Caribbean's giving themselves Latin names.

PN: You had to do it if you wanted to attract that crowd. You had to do it- you wanted to phycological- - for instance Al Lang who was Al Fordito. He was Jewish but took on the name of Alfordito. He had a very well known Latin band in the 50's and sold a lot of records. I don't know where he is now but - -

DN: You mentioned Juan Amoburt. - - This was the group the Latin Jazz quintet.

MG: Was this the group that was Eric Daufey?

PN: They recorded with Eric Daufey. I was not in the band at that time. But they did do an album with him.

MG: He mentioned this group to me, Latin Jazz Quintet and I looked it up and it was listed under Eric Daufey. It is now called Eric Daufey and the Latin Jazz Quintet because they did one record when Eric Daufey was a sideman. When they reissued it they made it his record.

DN: When we put it on Amazon, Juan Amoburt we came across two CD's called Hot Sauce - - So I am going to order those.

MG: Latin Jazz Quintet.

PN: Jean Casey was the piano player but on the recording it is Arthur Jenkins. I don't recall- - Jean might be on some of the tracks. Because those are two LP's put together on one CD. This is Jonny and Me. This is me when I had a mustache. - - This is Willy- - I cant recall his last name- - he was great guy and very good vibest.- - Bill Ellington who was the bass player.- - We backed up - - we were the band for a singer named Solomn Blair who was relatively popular in the late 50's in the club scene. She was a singer of sexy exotic tunes. Very attractive lady. We provided the back up music for her. Arthur was with that group. (Inaudible)

DN: In those days late 50's early 60's was there more music in club dates or recording?

PN: That is hard to say because I did not do very much recording so I don't have a basis for comparison. - - Club dates did not pay good and there was not very much recordings. I don't know what musicians made when they were doing 78's. That was behind my time. Guys were going into to record two tunes and that was a record. Maybe they made two or three 78's with six tunes. So I don't really have a basis for comparison about how much money was made. I will tell you this much- - we did not made much money because we did not play music that was popular amongst the masses. The music was popular amongst Blacks and Latin's in the Bronx and Manhattan. It was not music that was big nationally. - - I don't think it ever got popular nationally until it became Rock N Roll.

MG: Well Joe Panama had his hits.

PN: What is a hit?

MG: We don't know if he made any money.

PN: I don't think so. And I don't mean that in any negative way.

MG: He did have a lot of air play.

PN: We got a lot of publicity. - - The A N R men and (inaudible) and the Promoters made all the money. Just to see our pictures in print - - our names in print - - that was big for us.

MG: I noticed here that this Latin Jazz Quintet was - - were you booked by Joe Glazer?

PN: Yes. See this guy Buddy Pinkster. - - He got a lot of the bookings. He worked for Joe Glazer.- - He got a lot of bookings for the band. - - We didn't do Night Club single dates. We did contract jobs. - - two weeks here two weeks there- - we went to Canada for quite some time. I don't now how low we were there but we were there for quite a while. - - I remember the piano player that went with us was not Berny, It was not Jean Casey and

was not Arthur. It was a fellow that would wake up at four o'clock in the morning and wash his socks. He would drive me crazy. - - If I did not go to sleep before him I could not go to sleep. He snored - - He snored like a freight train. Finally when I would get to sleep he would get up, turn on the sink and wash his socks before he went on a walk at five o'clock in the morning. - - He was nice guy so I tolerated it. - - He was a Piano player and I wish I could remember his name. - - I liked him. - - These bands were the glue that held the little places together. The dance halls and the little places together when the big name artists moved on. I know that Mac Beth's band- - big bands were very popular in Harlem in the 30's and 40's. You had Buddy Walker who had a band. He is gone now. He worked in the Renny a lot- -Renaissance ballroom a lot - -and there was a trumpet player named Jimmy Jones - -Jimmy Jones- -I don't remember where jimmy played but he had a very large band, about sixteen pieces, I played drums with him and Bill Salter. Then there was a big band called Jack- -Jack Somebody or other and he was a very good trumpet player - - studied with Costello- -and I got a job playing corner drums with him from Costello. He worked in the Renny and a lot of these one night pops and dancehalls- - and I don't know what happened to him either but there's so many bands- -there was a Haitian Band La Belle Haiti Orchestra- - Simeon Benjamin and La Belle Haiti Orchestra- - I think that's how they say it in French- - I worked with him and the "Conguero" with the Great Mac Beth, which band of course after Mac Beth died became Claude Pat's Green- - Jon Montouth was - - he told me he was cousin of the "Chongito" who was Tito Rodriguez' trumpet player and Jon booked a lot of jobs- -I worked with him with some Latin "Charanga -(inaudible)" bands with violins - - and now there's a picture I could have brought, there's a "Charanga" band there and the flute player, in fact

the major flute player is Jewish. Where Oscar Beaufortite plays violin, and there was a female piano player with that group and uh, we did a lot of work. We did a lot of work and I can't believe, that all of that has disappeared.

MG: Right Right.

DN: ...that live music culture that was

MG: But also the names though - - the discussion of those people has disappeared. Which is—what I think part of what you have started in the Bronx, ya know bringing the story forward that is, the same thing in the music.

DN: But something else strikes me: Here you have people; you're talking about the subways. People carrying their instruments in the subway--it presumes a certain safety that people had going places, carrying things, you weren't worried about getting robbed.

PN: The only borough I was nervous about was Brooklyn.

MG: (Laughter)---They're from Brooklyn--They'd probably be worried about the Bronx and Manhattan.

PN: Well we had—one night coming back from a job—Pete Simms, myself, and I believe it was Ray McEithan was the congo drum player –we took out all of our instruments on the train coming back from a job in the Bronx and had a jam session right in the train car-- with people dancing and it was so great. And we weren't self-conscious about it at all. We didn't care, we were just having fun.

DN: Really -- Wow -- Do you remember what number train it was?

PN: It's have to been - - either the five - - It'd have to of been one of the IRT trains that came into the city from the Bronx.

DN: Right.

PN: Either the three or the five

DN: Yeah, the ones that went up towards prospect avenue - - the East Bronx - - Towards Hunts Point Palace or towards the west Bronx?

PN: I think this was the train that stops on Longwood - -

DN: That would be - - yeah - - that's the number five.

PN: 'Cause we never came up out of the ground

DN: Yeah - - the number - - oh never came out of the ground...ok

PN: Not while we were on it that I recall.

DN: I think I know which one is- - yeah

MG: Is that the five?

DN: It's either the five or maybe the three.

PN: We had a hell of a time. I mean we were just playing and the people were dancing - - cause everybody on the train was Hispanic.

MG: Do you speak Spanish?

PN: No, I mean I can speak enough Spanish to order my food in Puerto Rico or Venezuela but not enough to sit down and really have a conversation. In fact my next-door neighbor is very upset with me because I wont learn to speak better - - you know because she doesn't speak any English - - And she gets very upset because she tries to communicate with me - - I told her, I said - - as soon as I see her - - I call her "La Professora" and as soon as I see her all the words flee right out - - all the Spanish words run right out of my head

MG: Were you there when Pete La Roca took the name La Roca?

DN: What was his name?

PN: Simms, Peter Simms was his real name and there was a recording by Tito Fuentes called Mambo La Roca - - and Peter says, "I'll call myself Pete La Roca".

MG: and he kept that name with Stan Getz. In his jazz career

DN: But this is fascinating, again the assumed identities that people do in order to shape their careers.

MG: And he kept that name when it didn't have anything to do with what he was doing.

And then he went back to Simms when he stopped playing and became a lawyer.

DN: The funniest story is when the communist party tried to organize the transit workers everybody there was Irish but they had very few Irish members. They had a lot of Finnish members, so they sent Finns and gave them Irish names into the subways. So Mike Warrington became "Mike Walsh" and in the south they saint Jewish organizers who became WASPS - - so Aurabach became "Allen". So there's a whole history of this, and of course in boxing - - people becoming Irish.

MG: Joe Wilder the trumpet player played with Lucky Millender's band, and lucky Millender wanted to have a Latin band as part of his band because of the popularity of his music so he asked Joe Wilder to put a group together fusing parts of each band and they called him Jose Valdez.

DN: And Jose Valdez is

MG: Jose Valdez is Joe Wilder

DN: Jesus

PN: Have you ever heard of Jose Madera? That's Bobby Woodland. The old trumpet player Bobby Woodlin - - Worked with Luccido's band, Bobby Woodland. But then when

he went to start his own band he said, “ahh, a Latin band” - - “I’ll call myself Jose Madera” So I wired with him in the Savoy Ballroom.

DN: The Savoy Ballroom in Harlem?

PN: Yeah the one in Harlem

DN: How long did that... When did they close that?

PN: Well that was- - They must have closed that - - Let me see now I was working with him there somewhere around ’58 or ’57.

DN: And then they closed that down.

PN: Yeah, well at one point I remember he was having financial problems. I remember he came up to Jose and told him “I don’t know why you need so many drummers” Cause he had a bongo player, I was a bongo player - - then he had a conguero player. And the drummer, who’s son went with Mongo Santa Maria, I’m trying to remember his name but it wont pop into my head right now. He said “why do you need three drummers? Why do you need two singers?” cause he had a female singer and a male singer. This was a band in the old traditional - - So they got rid of her and they got rid of me.

GN: Laughs, Oh the bongo player is the first to go. So when did you first make the switch from Latin percussion to Drums, or did you always do both?

PN: I switched after Peter went with Sonny Rollins, and - - See Hugo needed somebody who could play timbales and drums - - And Lenny C was a good drummer, but he wasn’t that adept as a timbales although he could play timbales, play at them, he wasn’t that tight with the instrument. So Hugo asks me “Why don’t you play drums, it’ll be easy.” Well, as I had listened to a lot of jazz, I had the concept in my head. It was just a matter of going to my mom and asking “Mom, would you do me a very big favor, could you lend me one

hundred and twenty dollars?” Drums weren’t expensive in those days. You could get a decent set of drums and symbols for a reasonable amount of money. And my mom said, “What do you want a hundred and twenty dollars for?” I said, “I need a set of drums!” She said “Drums? Oh no!” But she gave me the money. I bought the drums, I practiced for- - oh- - how long did I practice- - six months.

DN: In your house?

PN: Yeah, in the house. Not a lot on the drums, on the drum pads - - Billy Joe Jones had said, “Practice on a pillow, cause a pillows not going to help you, you have to do all the stick work yourself because the pillow absorbs it.” - - I went with Robert Harvell before I played with Hugo?- - Now the time frame is screwed up. I don’t know where I went first. But I know I worked with Jimmy Jones big band and I worked with Robert Harvell and I played drums for Hugo.- - I remember Jimmy Jones telling me he wanted me to play backbeat more. He didn’t like all that stick work on the snare drum. In those days Art Bikey and Max Roach- - you were busy on the snare drum. He didn’t want that. He wanted a nice steady backbeat. I could not stand it because it was so boring to play a backbeat. It was one tune after another. It was good experience. - - I wound up putting myself in a position to play any job that did not require me playing shows because my reading was terrible. Terrible sight-reading. I would have to rehearse before I could play something. I could not just sit down and do it. Which is another reason I ended up leaving the business because I had one foot in recording studios but I did not have the technical background to support myself making a living in the studios. That became the only way you could make a living was in the studios.

DN: I know Jenson told us he got into Jingles.

PN: I remember doing the Jingle with him and Bill Salters when they were sending them down south for some product. Arthur did all these little things. I was a dance band drummer and when the dance bands died I died with them.

DN: How did you re-invent yourself professionally after the music?

PN: I lost my girlfriend in 1966 after she told me she wanted a life. Working hand to mouth - - my apartment was 66 dollars a month. I lived on 82nd street and Broadway. I had not credit. I had one suit and one sport jacket and a few records and some books.- - That's all I did was play. She told me she loved me and needed more out of life then that so she left. I thought about it- - I was already paying child support from my first marriage. My first wife told me she couldn't handle it either. She told me if I went on the road one more time she was not going to be there when I came back. You have to go on the road. If I didn't go on the road how was I going to pay my rent? There was no work in New York City in the summer time. Either you went to work in the hotels or you went on the road somewhere.

MG: There was no air conditioning?

PN: NO air conditioning. - - I went down to New York state professional employment people and told them that I needed a job. They asked me what I did now so I told them I was a Musician. The lady said no - - the musicians tend to want to get a job when there is nothing in the music business as soon as a gig comes around they quit the job and they go back to the music business. - - I actually convinced this woman that I was tired of living hand to mouth. - - There is another reason too. I was down on Union floor standing next to this guy in his late 50's who had died his hair and had a white shirt with the collar frayed. He was wearing a bow tie and a tuxedo. - - I saw this guy and he had a desperate

look in his eyes. Thousand yard stare. - - This guy was looking for something for the weekend because he had nothing. His mustache was died and his tuxedo was shining because it was so old. I said to myself that was me someday and I said no. - - The lady told me I could be a banking assistant, a welder assistant, a police officer. Then she said that there was an interesting job as a correctional officer job that did not have to wear a uniform. I said that was good because I really did not want to wear a uniform. - - I took that job. I took the test and went into civil services in 1967 and I did 15 years as a correctional officer for New York State and I did 20 years as a parole officer for New York State division of parole. The last of 15 was in the fugitive unit. - - Never looked back. - - That was a great time.

MG: You still listen to recordings and cd's?

PN: I have more cd's then I know what to do with. I have XM satellite radio so I can hear everything. I am still a member of the musicians unit. I joined in 1955 and I never left.

DN: Do you ever come out of retirement to play at anybody's parties or jam sessions?

PN: My wife's niece got married in Puerto Rico a number of months back and they talked me into playing bongos with the band at the wedding. (laughing)

MG: Did you enjoy it?

PN: Well the guy didn't have bongos. He had what they call a Caja. Part of the (inaudible) .Here I am playing on this Caja and the things you can do on a real set of skins is a lot different then what you can do on a box. My repertoire was diminished by one third but I got through it.

MG: Have you heard any of the younger Latin Bands? Have you heard Chico (inaudible) or Arturo the Son?

PN: There are so many.- - Most of the musicians are out now.- - There is just too many and too much stuff so I catch it on the fly. I might listen to WBJO. My current wife is not a music buff so I don't lay that on her. When she comes home from work she wants peace. She does not want a lot of concavity. - - I just bought Felonious Monk with John Coltrane.

MG: Isn't that good? In Carnegie Hall, Isn't that great?

PN: That is a great CD.

MG: With that beautiful piano and tune. DO you notice a difference because of the piano?

PN: All I know is Monk takes better solos on that CD then I have heard in a very long time. I try to get her to listen to this and she tells me not now honey. IT is really just me and my CD's.

MG: Well thank you so much.

PN: Just take good care of these pictures.

