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Merchant, Jimmy

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Interviewee: Jimmy Merchant

Interviewers: Alessandro Buffa, Loreta Dosorna, Dr. Brian Purnell, and Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 7, 2006

Transcriber: Samantha Alfrey

Mark Naison (MN): This is the 154th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We are here at Fordham University on April 7, 2006 with Jimmy Merchant, an original and founding member of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, who has also had a career as an artist. And with us today, doing the interviews, are Alessandro Buffa, Lorreta Dosorna, Brian Purnell, and Mark Naison. Jimmy, can you tell us a little about your family and where they came from originally?

Jimmy Merchant (JM): My mom basically came from Philadelphia. My dad – his family is from the Bahamas. He – my dad – was shifted over to the south as a youngster. His mother was from the Bahamas and she moved into the South – South Carolina, something like that – and he grew up there. His mom came to New York City and left him there with an Uncle. My mom, her parents – she’s the only one in Philadelphia. It looks like they were both planning to come to New York during the Renaissance time. People [were] coming up from the South and the West and ease into Harlem to take advantage of a better life. Somehow, her father – when my mom was born in Philly – her father had got killed. So, her mother still stayed with the plan and she came to Harlem in 1925. My father, when he hits Harlem, it is 10 years later, 1935. My mom was 15, she was 5 but by now she’s 15. He’s 17. They meet; they get married.

MN: Now where do they meet?

JM: They meet in Harlem.

MN: In school, or in the community?

JM: She said that he whistled at her.

[Laughter]

Brian Purnell (BP): And they say that doesn’t work.

[Laughter]

JM: It worked, it worked. He was a very good-looking young man who had street smarts, and he did things with regard to employment, like shine shoes in a barber shop downtown. She was moving into education. Her parents were very strict. Her parents, her mom was very, very strict.

MN: When they met, was she still in high school?

JM: In fact, she would be going to Stit – the very school that I ended up going to in 1954. So she was going to junior high school Stit. She was an artist, and she was going after clerical, what they called clerical, commercial – not commercial but the clerical field. They met and he taught her how to ride a bicycle. He started to take her on different trips. He asked her mom, could he take her on a double-decker bus ride. It would go down maybe 5th Avenue. He would take her to movies. One day he took her to Coney Island – his mistake was to ask her to get on the Cyclone.

[Laughter]

JM: And so she got pregnant, and they married somewhere around 1938, because my sister – the one that you met last night – she was born in March of 1939, by now they are married. They are moving around a lot in Harlem.

MN: Now are they mainly – are they living in apartments or kitchenettes?

JM: Basically in kitchenettes and from parent-to-parent. His aunt and her mom, my grandmother.

MN: So they never had their own apartment in Harlem?

JM: If it was, it was very temporary. It wasn't until the big move came that people started moving into the Bronx.

MN: Right. Now, when your mother and father moved to the Bronx, how many children did they have?

JM: Three.

MN: And which order were you in, of that?

JM: I'm in the middle.

MN: You're in the middle.

JM: Yes.

MN: So it was your older sister, you –

JM: And a younger sister.

MN: Right. Now what kind of work was your father doing when they decided to move to the Bronx?

JM: He basically was a shoe-shine boy. Yes, that's what he was. He was basically a shoe-shine boy – that type of a thing. When the war came, he went.

MN: Right. So he went into the military?

JM: He went into the military.

MN: And did the military pay more money than he was making on the side?

JM: Yes. My mother will tell you that she enlisted him.

[Laughter]

MN: Now did your mother work at all?

JM: She would take odd jobs. He was a street guy, and he hung out a lot in the street. He wasn't a gangster-type street guy. He was just a street hustler. He ended up taking numbers – that was his big thing.

MN: The numbers may have been a bigger source of income than the shoe-shine?

JM: Oh, no doubt. Yes.

MN: So in those days, numbers were respected. Did he dress well?

JM: Yes. I would say along with the shoe-shine boy, he was a pin-setter.

MN: In bowling alleys.

JM: In bowling alleys. I remember him taking me up to Harlem Lanes as a child, and there was one up on Boston Road.

MN: It was a bowling alley?

JM: You might have heard about it by now.

MN: What was it called, because nobody's mentioned it?

JM: Oh no? Okay. Boston Road Lanes, possibly. It's just up there by Herman Ritter High School, just before it?

MN: Okay so it's further, it's past Maresena. It's close to the L.

JM: Yes.

MN: Okay. Now what level of education did your father get?

JM: Very little.

MN: So would you say less than an eighth grade education?

JM: I would say easily, yes.

MN: The legal jobs he had were shining shoes and doing pins

JM: Yes.

MN: But he also did numbers.

JM: Yes. He was aware of the numbers game. And he was also [inaudible].

MN: Okay

JM: He ultimately became a gambler, and he would run poker games. He would run them in the Bronx, right there on Boston Road. And after awhile, after 1954, which is after they separated, he still had his poker games because he went back to Harlem. He was always in Harlem. He never left Harlem.

MN: Are these poker games are in social clubs?

JM: Mainly in his apartment setting. People came there like Sidney Porteir, bigger names. He was a classy fellow.

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

JM: My mother worked in factories, she was a presser, she worked in a hotel down in the Village at one point, cleaners. From my recollection that was about it.

MN: Now how did they find the Bronx? Did they know people who were living in the Bronx at the time they moved?

JM: She couldn't find an apartment that she liked. The straw that broke the camel's back for her, she would mention, probably was when they were going to take an apartment on the top floor. She's one these kinds that didn't want to be on the top floor because of the roof. People hung out on roofs a lot.

MN: This is in Harlem? They couldn't find anything in Harlem except on the top floor?

JM: Yes. 1939, 1940.

MN: So somebody told them that there were better apartments in the Bronx?

JM: I don't know – more than likely. She would probably be better off answering that question. I know the availability was a lot better.

MN: And what was the first building they moved to in the Bronx?

JM: 966 Boston Road.

MN: And that was the one you stayed in the whole time?

JM: The whole time.

MN: Now describe the building for us as you remember it.

JM: 966 Boston Road was one of the classiest buildings on the block. There were other tenements as you move towards 164th street. This is between Teesdale Place and 164th Street. But 966 – it had marble inside. Yes.

MN: Now which side of the street? –

JM: – And it had those steel railing staircases –

MN: Now which side of the street was it on? The west side, or the east side of Boston Road?

JM: The east side. The west side – there's a stairway going down into Third Avenue.

MN: Now is 966 still there?

JM: No it's not.

MN: What floor did you live on?

JM: We lived on the fourth floor.

MN: Was this a walk-up or an elevator?

JM: A walk-up.

MN: How many rooms were there?

JM: Five room apartment.

MN: Five room apartment?

JM: Yes.

MN: Which is fairly large

JM: Yes.

MN: How old were you when you made the move?

JM: 1954. The summer of '54. I was 14.

MN: And you moved to the Bronx in what year?

JM: When I made the move to the – ?

MN: To the Bronx.

JM: Oh – she [my mother] moved into the Bronx shortly after I was born, around 1940, 1941. I was born in February 1940. Around 1941, '40.

MN: What are your earliest memories of the Bronx, the street, the neighborhood?

JM: The cobblestone going up Boston Road. And horses, believe it or not, horse-drawn wagons, and horses slipping on this cobblestone with their shoes. Slipping. There were Charlie cars going up Boston Road.

MN: Were you on a hill?

JM: Yes, an incline. There was a slight incline

MN: There was an incline? So that could account for the horses slipping?

JM: Yes. Going up to at least 165th street before it leveled out again. A block away now you're at Morris High School.

MN: Were you allowed to play on the sidewalk when you were growing up? Or was the street, you know cause Boston road was a main thorough fare, you were watched carefully?

JM: Well because of my mother's issues with finances and my father's issues with being a street-runner, she had us stay at various places a lot, so I don't really remember being in front of buildings playing a lot. We moved – she moved us around a lot because she had to take jobs, odd jobs, to cover for him –

MN: So you lived in other people's apartments?

JM: She had us stay at her aunts – I mean her mother's. My grandmother's. And at another time we would stay at his aunt's. And another time I remember her taking us out to basically Long Island, or Queens, out there. Long Island. Rockville Centre, Long Island.

MN: Now did you go to elementary school in the Bronx?

JM: Yes.

MN: What school?

JM: PS 23

MN: And how did you walk to PS 23?

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JM: I would come up Boston Road, make a right turn at 164th street, go up Cauldwell Avenue, make a left, and go up to 165th street and make a right. Make a right at 165th and Cauldwell Avenue, and then walk across Trinity and up to Tinton and Union Avenue.

MN: Did you start in first grade or kindergarten at PS 23?

JM: By now I'm in the 3rd grade, I think that's where we began.

MN: So you were at other schools in other places?

JM: Yeah – I remember coming to PS 23 around the 3rd grade. We went to PS 10 for a minute.

MN: And that was down –

JM: That's off of 163rd.

MN: Now what was the ethnic, racial composition of your neighborhood?

JM: It was all black.

MN: It was all black?

JM: At that moment in time, yes.

MN: So this is when you're in 3rd grade, which is the late '40s.

JM: Yes

MN: Was this true of the streets you walked through to get to PS 23?

JM: Yes.

MN: So this was an all-black community by this time.

JM: Yes.

MN: Did you feel safe in the neighborhood growing up?

JM: Yes.

MN: What was the school situation like at PS 23?

JM: It was great. There were a few Puerto Rican's there. There was one Puerto Rican in my class, that basically went from 4th, 5th, 6th grade. A handful of people in my 4th grade were also in my 5th and 6th grade. There was a handful of Puerto Ricans, but mostly blacks from my recollection.

MN: And the same was true of your building 966 Boston Road?

JM: All black.

MN: It was all black, and the building next door?

JM: Yes. There was a deli on the corner – Sam and Charlie’s – I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of that one –

MN: No, no.

JM: – But they were Jews. And they would give my mother and a lot of people in the neighborhood credit. My mother could go to the store and buy a box of cornflakes and buy eggs, and they would write it down and she would pay them later when she got the money.

BP: In school did the black students and the few Puerto Rican students get along well?

JM: They seemed to get along well. They got along well. There were gangs starting at that point in time, and the Puerto Rican gangs and the black gangs had an issue between each other. There was a Puerto Rican gang called the Lightnings, and there are a couple of black gangs that I can’t remember the name – but killing happened.

MN: So there were some gang killings actually that you heard about when you were growing up?

JM: Yes. They used to make – they made – the type of guns? What’d they call them?

MN: Zip guns?

JM: Zip guns, yes. 22s. I don’t know how that could kill anybody, but apparently they were able to fix them up – make them be able to kill.

MN: Now were you ever chased out of a neighborhood when you were walking through it when you were a kid?

JM: Yes. When I went to PS 51, it was an all boys school. So I’m leaving –

MN: Now what street was that on?

JM: PS 51. That was on Trinity, maybe – on the other side of 163rd street. Do you recall it?

MN: It’s down there, not up the hill?

JM: Right.

MN: Okay, I've heard of that. So you were saying that when you were going there – what grade were you in at the time?

JM: They used to have something – they said if you were going to PS 51, it was an all-boy's school. They were going to "rookie you." That was the terminology that they used. And what does rookie mean? It means they were going to chase you and beat you up to show you that you were coming into a new situation and they were going to rookie you. And I would go with boys that I knew I wasn't afraid to stand up.

MN: Did you grow up street smart, would you say?

JM: I would say I was between street smart but withdrawn. Yes.

MN: Did you do well in school in those years?

JM: It always seemed I was in the higher, best class

MN: In one or two classes?

JM: The best classes, yeah. For some reason – I don't consider myself an "A" student at all. It was maybe the fact that I was an intelligent person, and bright.

MN: Now this is an almost all-black neighborhood. Were the teachers mostly white in this school?

JM: Yes.

MN: Do you recall tension or any problems as a result of different racial compositions of the students and the teaching staff?

JM: No, only when you got a crossover to – what are they called? By Kelly Street? There was a movie made with Burt Lancaster?

MN: *Blackbird Jungle*?

JM: *Fort Apache*?

MN: Right, yes.

JM: You heard of *Fort Apache*?

[Laughter]

Voice: Paul Newman.

JM: Paul Newman played in it – that was Paul Newman.

MN: So that neighborhood –

JM: Yeah that's where a lot of the problems were – a lot of them with regard to Latins and Blacks.

MN: So your neighborhood was pretty peaceful?

JM: Oh yes.

MN: People felt comfortable out on the streets.

JM: Yes

MN: There wasn't like fighting in front of your house.

JM: No, not at all.

MN: So the gang area was down in Hunts Point, Fort Apache?

JM: Yes

MN: What about Boston Road as a street – with the stores, movies? What was it like in those days?

JM: Well it seemed to me that it was a lot more elegant than certain areas in Harlem. And, you know, the buildings were tenement buildings and by the time you got up to Morris High School – Morris High school seemed old to me, because it had this castle look to it.

MN: Did your parents and their friends see the Bronx as a step up from Harlem?

JM: I would say. I would definitely say.

MN: So they thought the housing was better, the schools were better –

JM: Yes. Up to a new level for them.

MN: So they were happy with the move.

JM: Yes, it seemed to me, yes.

MN: Do you recall any of the live music, clubs or venues in the Bronx? Either having seen them or having people mention them?

JM: My sister – the one you met last night – she's only one year older than me.

BP: What is her name?

JM: Gigi. G-I-G-I. It seemed to me she was catching on to entertainment. But, my father, two things he loved: he loved the New York Yankees, and he used to take me to the baseball games, and he loved jazz. So he was a collector – he collected Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie. I don't really remember Miles being in his collection. But it was Duke Ellington, and he had some big band albums. My mother, she liked, like I said last night, Billy Eckstine, Billy Holiday, Sarah Vaughan – she was kind of romantic – lots of Nat King Cole. And I used to watch them and listen to this music that they were playing a lot.

MN: Was it mostly on the radio or the record player?

JM: On the record player. Phil Cole, it was a Phil Cole record player, and it would pull out and they would put the record on and when I heard this “Mood Indigo.” “Mood Indigo” that was Ellington, Duke Ellington

BP: That's a song by Duke Ellington?

JM: Yes. It had such a haunting type sound. It had a haunting type sound in comparison to Bebop. You know, Bebop is Bebop, and Bebop had a lot of improvisation to it, but Ellington's music was organized. When I heard this “Mood Indigo”, later I learned that Ellington used miscellaneous instrumentation: the clarinet, possibly oboe. And he mixed these instruments into his harmony, and it enabled me to hear the parts that these harmonies perfected. So I'd hear [humming] real slow, but I could hear the other three horns playing along with that melody. The reason why I could hear those three horn parts is because each horn was a different horn. It was a woodwind, and I forget the horns that he used. But it was that particular sound that I think registered in me with regard to having the ability to hear music and then copy it.

MN: Did you play an instrument at any point?

JM: Not at all. I remember in PS 23, when I'm getting ready to go into PS 51, I took a music test and passed it. They just gave us the sound test. And I was already playing a violin in the 6th grade I believe it was.

MN: Now this was a violin you got in school?

JM: Yes.

MN: Because you were in a special music program or –?

JM: I think it was a possibility that the violin came when I got into – going out of PS 23, an instructor came from PS 51, a Chinese gentleman gave tests to find out if there were any students that were musically inclined. And it was at that point they would move you right into a music class. So you would learn – they would ask me what was your favorite instrument, and I told them drums, and trumpet, and I don't know why I didn't think of piano. But it was drums, trumpets, and I threw another horn in, like a saxophone, but they put me in the string class.

MN: Were you exposed at all to Latin music growing up?

JM: Definitely.

MN: Where did you hear it?

JM: My sister was playing it. My sister. They were doing that mambo you saw when I was doing it.

MN: Yes. This is when you were still in the Bronx?

JM: Yes.

MN: She was doing the mambo in the Bronx?

JM: Yes.

MN: Now where did she go to dance mambo?

JM: Different centers. PS 99.

MN: Oh, she was at the PS 99 Community Center, and they had dances there. And they played Latin music at the dances.

JM: Yes. And they were trying to, if they could, go to the Palladium. You only went to the Palladium if you were really great.

MN: So you didn't want to embarrass yourself there?

JM: Yes. That was her now – I'm watching all this. She and her girlfriend would teach me some of these steps. You know, I'm like 12 years old, 13 – 12 or 13. She's only one year older than me – 13 or 14. And already she's looking like a woman, and going out to these dances, and learning how to do these – the grind, you know?

MN: Oh we know the grind.

JM: Yes. I watched that stuff. And of course I used to watch my mother and father dance on his Bebop records – they were real jitter bugs.

MN: Did you ever go to the Hunts Point Palace, or hear people talk about it?

JM: Yes, and I believe Gigi might have gone there as well with her girlfriends

MN: So your sister used to go there?

JM: I think they did go to Hunts Point Palace, yes

MN: And did they ever take you there?

JM: No I never went there. Now Hunts Point Palace was—

MN: Over on 163rd and Southern Boulevard.

JM: Right, right.

MN: Did you ever hear anyone talk about Club 845?

JM: Yes, definitely. Up on Boston Road.

MN: On Prospect.

JM: Yes, that's right it was up on Prospect and where?

MN: And 161st street

JM: Right – next to a theater?

MN: Yes, next to the Prospect Theater.

JM: Yes.

MN: Now was there any Latin music being played by people in your building? Or was this more an African American –?

JM: Not necessarily in my building, but during my elementary school years it was happening. It was definitely happening.

MN: Now when you were in elementary school, did you listen to music on the radio?

JM: My sister was beginning to collect records, and they were getting mambo records. What they were calling mambo records.

MN: They were getting the mambo records?

JM: Yes.

MN: Did you ever listen to WWRL? And which shows did you listen to?

JM: My mother and father were playing those jazz collections that I spoke to you about. But now my sister started to tune into this new music that was coming out, vocal group music.

MN: Rhythm and blues.

JM: Rhythm and blues. It was rhythm and blues then, and Tommy Smalls of WWRL was where she would be listening to this music now. I said – oh wow listen to this stuff here. Woah. It was [inaudible]

MN: That was the thing that captured your imagination along with the Duke Ellington?

JM: Yes.

MN: So there was something in you that responded to harmony?

JM: You got it. Yes.

MN: Tell us again about the gentleman in your building who introduced you.

JM: My father, like I said, he used to take me to the baseball games, and he wanted me to be a baseball player. He wanted to have an [inaudible] And I couldn't agree with baseball, I don't know why I couldn't agree with it. And I loved being with him – what little time he spent with me personally, like a son with regard to a father, wants to be with that father, and same with daughters. My father, that father being available made me at least want to try to do baseball. And Arthur Sterling came around, Arthur Sterling on Teesdale Place, and I didn't know that he was a musician, see, and he rounded up some fellas and he said he was starting up a baseball team, and he was naming them the Black Panthers.

BP: [Laughs] What year was this?

JM: This was 1952, '53.

MN: Were there any fields nearby where you could play?

JM: Yes, we played at the – what's the park where the swimming pool is?

MN: Crotona Park? You went all the way up there?

JM: Yes.

MN: Did you walk up there?

JM: We would walk.

MN: That's a nice walk.

JM: Yes.

MN: So you'd walk with your gloves and bat and Mr. Sterling

JM: Yes, right. And one day, he used to go to Sam and Charlie's on the corner too, for food. Now me and Lawrence Wence were in front of my building. And me and Lawrence became very close because Lawrence was very creative. And I didn't know Lawrence could sing, and I didn't know I could. But I knew I was listening to records and trying to pick out the harmony parts. I would just listen closely. And Arthur Sterling comes up and he's got his baseball hat on, and we say here comes Arthur. And he stops and he must have had music on his mind. He said, James, do this – [sings]. And I did the part. Then he told me buddy Lawrence Wence to do a harmony part to it. And then he said "do it together, with me," and he threw his third part in, which gave it a three-part harmony thing. And I said, that's great, wow. I got a rush from that

MN: How old were you?

JM: I would say about 13 at this point in time.

MN: Were there other people singing in the neighborhood at that time?

JM: Absolutely

MN: And you saw them out in the street doing it, or in the community center?

JM: In the community centers. Gene Red, a guy by the name of Gene Red lived around the corner from me.

MN: Oh he lived around the corner?

JM: Yes, on 164th street, and as you know he is one of the original members of the Fi Tones. His brother Donald was in a group, I can't think of that group. Donald Red.

MN: What was the group that Gene was in you said?

JM: The Fi Tones.

MN: Is it P-H-I?

JM: No, I think it's F-I

MN: F-I T-O-N-E-S?

JM: Yes. The group that comes to mind the most in regard to our neighborhood was The Crickets.

MN: Dean Barlo and the Crickets.

JM: Yes.

MN: Did they live near you?

JM: I don't know where they lived.

MN: This was a word of mouth thing?

JM: Well, it seemed to be in the air you know. Guys were saying, "hey man, you know, singing, have you heard this group?" There's a group that practices up by Morris High School, and one day I made it my business trying to go up there. Because remember I was a youngster and I didn't go above 165th street. I didn't travel anywhere. It was school, and there was a park around the corner from me. That was where we played. That is where my father and my mother told us we could play, me and my two sisters.

MN: That's the park where they have that little monument – it's raised a little?

JM: It may be a monument there now – I think it's called Teesdale Park. Have you heard of it?

MN: I think that's where the Veterans is – it's right off Boston Road.

JM: The entrance is on 164th, between Boston Road and Cauldwell, and directly across from the street from the park there's a park called Grace Gospel Church.

MN: That's it, we know the park. That's where they're building, where Arch is doing the monument. That's the park we used to play at.

JM: Yes. You used to play there too?

MN: No no, but they're putting a memorial for Korean War Veterans, for African-American Korean War Veterans.

JM: Oh, I would love to know about it when that happens – whatever goes on

MN: Yeah, I'll let you know about that.

JM: My father used to whistle. Now, remember, that park was behind my building. Even though my building is on Boston Road, the park is behind the building. My father used to come out to the back window, because we had a front window and a back window, and he would whistle when it was time for us to come in. [Whistles] He did that. So my sister, Gigi, would grab me and my other sister, and we would come home. But that's the park – there were swings there, sliding board, and one of those – you hold onto the swing on.

MN. Right, right. Now did your family go to church? Were they a member –?

JM: Of the church across the street?

MN: They were members of Grace Gospel?

JM: Yes.

MN: And did they go regularly?

JM: I went to the church. My mother didn't go there a lot, but she sent us there because Dr. Bente was very popular in the neighborhood, you've heard of him.

MN: How do you spell his last name?

JM: B-e-n-t-e. We called him Dr. Bente.

MN: Dr. Bente?

JM: Yes.

MN: And he was a major figure in the community?

JM: You better believe it.

MN: What was his background?

JM: I don't know.

MN: Was he African-American?

JM: No.

MN: He was a white minister?

JM: Yes

MN: Who was tremendously popular?

JM: Yes.

MN: Was it that he was a great preacher, or he was somebody who was very compassionate? What's your memory of him?

JM: I don't recall the preaching aspect of it, you may want to speak to other people and they might say "hey he was –" But what I remember – he was basically a community leader. And one who knew all the families. He knew the families that were poor. My mother was poor. And how they got into that nice building on 966 Boston Road is amazing, because it was one of the best apartment buildings in the neighborhood. But she still had a struggle making ends meet, because my father was inconsistent. He was a street guy, and he would bring some money home, a few dollars home, and be out in the street for the next five days.

MN: So he disappeared?

JM: Oh yeah, he disappeared.

MN: Now did he have alcohol issues at all?

JM: Yes. He was just a street guy.

MN: So would Dr. Bente help families find money for rent or food?

JM: I don't know if he ever gave my mother any money, but certainly. I was kind of withdrawn, and he approached on the street one time and he told me we have Cub scouts, we have Boy scouts. And he said "I'm going to talk to your mother to see if we can get you in church, so that you can get involved with other kids." And – I was kind of a sad guy.

MN: Do you think it was being aware of what was going on in your family?

JM: I think what it was that I wasn't getting foundation or love. Very important. Love and affection from that father, in particular. The head of the home, you know. Nurturing. I didn't get any nurturing. That's what it was. And it made me withdrawn and low with self-esteem. So I was just quiet and fearful. After Dr. Bente approached me a few times, then I kind of felt him to be somebody who cared about me.

MN: When did people begin to recognize that you had artistic talent? Was this in school, or was this later?

JM: The artistic talent was something I kept to myself, in a way, because I didn't get into any drawing groups or take any drawing classes. There was an advertisement that used to come out called "Draw Me." It would be a profile of an individual. I think it was Art Instruction, Inc, if you recall. And my grandmother, she saw that I could draw. She said, "I want you to copy the picture and we are going to send it in." And she did that for me. She sent it in, and I followed the instruction to a certain point, until I just didn't want to go through with it any longer. But I knew I could draw. My father saw pictures that I drew and didn't give me encouragement.

MN: What about teachers? Were there ever any teachers who did what Dr. Bente did and saw you as somebody who needed encouragement or nurturing and took an interest in you?

JM: I would say that they – teachers – saw that I needed nurturing and encouragement, but I still didn't get the attention that I needed from home. My mother, she had a very strict upbringing. She was never shown love herself. Her mother never gave her a hug, you see. I knew that to be true, because my mother never hugged me. She didn't know – very beautiful woman.

MN: Oh yeah, I can see.

JM: She was a beautiful woman, and she still is. Her husband and her – she loved him dearly. And they apparently loved each other, but he was a street guy. He thought he could have both. And then when he came home from the army, he got even worse.

BP: Mr. Merchant?

JM: Yes?

BP: When you say your father was a street guy – aside from the economical aspect of being a street guy – the different hustles and the different jobs that he did – what else went into being a street guy? What did it mean for men at this time to be street guys?

JM: Oh that's a very good question. I would say that – because I became a street guy. I would say that you feel that you got a handle on the system. Because you are able to generate income without a legitimate, full employment. Okay? So when people talked about numbers, people who did numbers, who took the numbers, they were kind of, almost like looked up to in a way. Because they were not killers. They were not people who went around killing people. They were not drug dealers. They were not people who stole. They were people who took numbers. Everybody knew it was illegitimate, but these number-guys, they all looked pretty kept-up, nicely.

MN: So your father dressed well?

JM: Yes.

MN: Now what about in terms of family, other woman, things like that? Was that an issue?

JM: Other woman?

MN: Yes.

JM: Yes, that was an issue with him, definitely. My mother went – she – stashed us over [Break in tape when switching to other side]

MN: –Temporarily until she finally did permanently?

JM: My mother? No. Just the other way around. She was stationary. She was with us all the time.

MN: She was with you and he would periodically disappear?

JM: His lifestyle was – he lived in the street. I don't know where, no one knows. But more than likely he had a place where he was staying where he could sleep. And he would come home, it seemed to me sometimes as long a week away at a time, come back, give my mother some money, go to sleep, maybe sleep overnight, and sometime during the following evening he's gone again, after taking a shower and a shave and changing his clothes. So he stayed in the street, but he really stayed in the street, he wasn't a daily street guy. He was away from the home

a lot. So I learned that he ran poker games for other people. By running games for other people, that gave him places to stay, nights and nights at a time.

MN: When you say running games for other people –?

JM: He was a dealer, card dealer.

MN: He was a dealer, and he'd get a piece of the game, and the people that hosted it would get a piece of the game.

JM: Yes. So he was a card dealer and also a player himself, and that led into the numbers game.

MN: Now when all this is going on, are you getting intellectual encouragement at home in terms of doing well in school, going on to college, or anything like that?

JM: No. I never got none of that. No one said, you know, you need a degree. If nothing else, you need to at least need to get a high school diploma. That is a must. No one never ever encouraged me to do anything else.

MN: Not teachers?

Loretta Dosorna: What were your dreams during this time?

JM: At that time I didn't have any dreams – I didn't know how to dream. Things didn't break for me until I relocated out of the Bronx, with regard to seeing what the world was about. My Bronx experience was very closed off for me personally, and it started to open up when this music came, this rhythm and blues, this vocal group harmony stuff. That's what broke it for me with regard to – hey you know, this is something I know how to do.

MN: So that gave you the first feeling of something that inspired you and energized you?

JM: Other than being able to build scooters, being able to build a bicycle, because my mother couldn't afford a bike.

MN: So you were mechanically skilled? Tell us a little about the things you built, and how when you started doing that?

JM: I started around 1950. There was a store down Third Avenue. It was a hobby store, and you could go down there and look in there and buy models – plane models, boat models. And you bring the box home with the pieces in it and put the pieces together and build your own airplane – stick model planes. And from there led me into buying sticks, and I used to build kites. So I knew how to build kites. Me and my buddy Lawrence Wence – Lawrence Wence's brother had electric strings and that was popular then. Lyonel trains. Americans flying trains. The American flier was, I think, three tracks. Then it was the H-O, if you were remember that?

MN: Yes.

JM: So I started to become artistically, or creative. So I was very creative, I could build stick model planes, I could build kites, build a scooter, look for parts to put a bicycle together. I knew I could draw a little bit. There was something else – oh, I used to go down to the A&P to stand outside, carry packages and make money.

MN: Where was the A&P located?

JM: Right at Third Avenue and 163rd.

MN: It was a big A&P?

JM: Yes.

MN: And you used to make some extra money?

JM: I would make some money there, and that led into me having my own paper route. So even though I was withdrawn, it seemed to me that at some point I was able to become enterprising, because I had a paper route and I had two or three guys working for me.

MN: Now what was a paper route like in those days? Where did you pick the stuff up, and who did you deliver it to?

BP: What was the newspaper?

JM: I don't know if it was the *Daily Mirror*, but it could have been the *Daily Mirror*.

MN: The papers – there was the *Daily Mirror*, the *Journal American*, the *Daily News*, and the *Post*

Man's voice: *The Tribune*

JM: It probably was the *Mirror*.

MN: The *Daily Mirror*, that was more of a working class paper.

JM: Yes. So I delivered papers after school, and Sunday was my best day because that was the day we got paid.

MN: When you deliver the papers, where they to mostly private houses or people in apartments?

JM: Apartment buildings. It felt good to see that I had a way to make money on my own. The withdrawn part of me was that low self-esteem. I didn't know what it was like to have parents who set them, and spent time with you, do your homework with you.

MN: Did you have friends who had that situation?

JM: Yes, it seemed like they did.

MN: So you saw that with other people and sort of said, I don't have this.

JM: Right, exactly. So even though I was moving on in life, there was going to be a self-esteem issue that I would have to confront sooner or later.

Alessandro Buffa: So did you hang out in the street in this situation, sometimes you don't want to deal with a situation, so did you hang out in candy stores or other places in the neighborhood to forget about – sometimes you don't want to feel low self esteem?

JM: Yes, I felt I was fearful. And I didn't want to let people know that I was fearful. In other words, there were other guys that I knew would be ready to fight in a minute. Not to pick a fight – but don't touch me because if you do, you're going to have trouble on your hands. I wasn't that way. If I felt I was in somebody's sphere of influence or their environment and they were threatening, I would get out of that.

MN: So what was it like when you were hearing this rhythm and blues, this harmony? When did you start actually trying to sing it? Was it when Mr. Sterling showed you?

JM: After that, I would go to my class. It was around the sixth grade, anyway.

MN: And this was at [PS] 51?

JM: This is at 23.

MN: At 23, you're in the sixth grade.

JM: Yes.

MN: And so you're singing in the school –?

JM: And I might have said 1952, 53, but it was already going on – lets see, I got to 51 in 1952. So that's going to be the 7th grade. '53 is the 8th grade, '54 is the 9th grade when I went over to –

MN: So you're saying even in the 6th grade, which is 1951, you're singing?

JM: Yes. My ear was picking up this stuff and there was a couple of guys in this class who also knew that stuff.

MN: Now where did you go to sing when you were in 23?

JM: Well I didn't go anywhere because they were talking about, they wanted to start a vocal group. How old was I then? 11?

[Laughter]

JM: You know? Start a vocal group at 11? I was saying let's do it, let's do it! Because there was a couple of guys I related to, you know. So we would go up to Morris High School and look for somebody who could sing.

MN: You mean to challenge them, or to –?

JM: No, just to look for somebody we can sing harmony with.

MN: Oh so you're looking for another person for the group.

JM: Just looking for another person

MN: Did you find anybody?

JM: No

[Laughter]

MN: So you were thinking of a vocal group, but it never quite happen.

JM: Right, exactly. You got it.

AB: Why exactly vocal harmony? Was it popular at the time, vocal harmony? Or something new?

JM: Yes, it was about to happen, apparently, because it did. And it was something that certain boys were attracted to – I was one of them, big time, and it paid off, didn't it?

BP: How was your attraction to the vocal harmony? Was it the same as your attraction to being a street guy? Was there a connection between being a guy who could sing and who could harmonize, and being a street guy, from what you described both about your father's generation and even you, what you were doing as a young man, seeing that and even gravitating towards it a little bit?

JM: As a street guy with a newspaper route, and then later on in life I became a real street guy – I was a real bad guy. I became a drug addict actually, and doing all things to remain a heroin addiction. But the singing thing, the singing thing was like – there has to be something special about me. Because not only did I love music, love to listen to it, but I could make it.

AB: [Question inaudible because of tape beeping]

JM: Nothing. The first group that really hit me, and a lot of vocal group people agree with me, not agree with me. When I began to talk to a lot of veteran vocal group people [inaudible, beeping].

MN: Which group was this?

JM: The Hilos

MN: The Hilos? Spell it for us?

JM: H-I L-O-S

MN: Where are they from?

JM: They're four white jazz singers.

MN: The Hilos?

JM: Yes. Have you ever heard of them?

MN: No.

JM: Wow. And so my father used to give us a dollar allowance every week, when he was home. And the first thing I would do is go up to the Tower Theater.

MN: And that was what street?

JM: I would say maybe 168th street.

MN: Right, that makes sense.

JM: And the Tower Theater, for 14 events, with three movies, maybe two chapters, a Rocket Man chapter, a Batman chapter, 10 cartoons, and a special subjects newsreel.

MN: And you could stay there almost all day?

JM: I guess they would run the whole series 2 or 3 times a day. And you could stay there all day. And in that special subjects, specials film, a group came out singing. That's where it really happened to me. And I looked over the Hilos albums this week, I said "wow I can't believe they came out in 1953, I thought they came out in 1952." But these four men were jazz. They were like Glen Miller, but they were a lot brighter, a lot more fancier, a lot more dynamic in their vocals. [Inaudible name] had discovered that.

MN: So they really made an impression?

JM: Big time.

MN: Now was your discovery of music coinciding with the discovery of girls? Was there a connection between the two?

Deep voice: Hello!

[Laughter]

MN: Remember, I grew up in the same time.

JM: Yes.

[Laughter]

JM: For some reason or other, girls recognized people who were good entertainers. Girls knew that at an early age. Haven't you ever heard of swooning? Where did it come from? It came from the old Frank Sinatra – he had all the girls swooning. He was the original. You're talking about mania, Beatles mania? Sinatra-mania. He was the original in that. But then when we came out, the lines were around the Brooklyn Paramount. I mean, in England, screaming, and all of them were girls. All of them.

MN: Let's say you and three of your friends are harmonizing in the hallway – you're going to get some attention?

JM: Yes, if people coming in and out of the building –

MN: Are girls going to know that there are these three guys harmonizing?

JM: Girls are pinning you down, but they are not letting you know they are. So they get together and they act like they're not listening or watching but they are, because girls have eyes in the back of their head, and they're watching.

[Laughter]

JM: Am I right, am I wrong? Am I right?

LD: Maybe the men have eyes closed, I don't know?

JM: You know girls – they like to see musical genius. They look up to that, and when I saw that we got girl's attention, I said, "oh this is a way that I can get attention."

MN: And that was something you were realizing maybe even in sixth grade?

JM: Not quite. I would say more when I got over to Stit Junior High School. I'm fourteen.

MN: You didn't have girls following you around the Bronx because you were a singer?

JM: I probably had sex once or twice, but it wasn't about that.

MN: Now what about school? Was that emphasized in your house? Were you expected to do well in school?

JM: I knew I had to do homework every single day, but it wasn't getting done after awhile. I was just getting through my classes basically.

MN: So you did well on the standardized tests?

JM: I'm not at the point today where – shame doesn't come in – but I'm sorry about that. Because education, I learned later in life, the importance of education. And why, since I work very hard. I study my art. I have hundreds of art books – I want to see who did what and when. I study every detail of art, and when I'm sitting down and writing a letter, or teaching Sunday school – this Sunday coming – and I'm going to spend two or three days on just that teaching. So I'm a person who knows about preparation. Then why? What happened with school? Why wasn't it instilled in me, the importance of it, so I don't have to go around begging for a mattress to grieve, an honorary one, you know?

BP: You had said earlier that you were in the higher classes in school.

JM: Yes.

BP: But did you do well academically?

JM: I didn't do well academically. I believe I was in those classes because I was just bright, but – see, I knew stuff. It was stuff that I knew. I wasn't immature. I wasn't immature, I knew stuff. But as far as being able to pass tests, and be good at math, Brian. I just couldn't – what's that? Not biology? Algebra. That's French to me.

BP: The reason I'm asking is because you were bright, but had you done well academically, people had would have been saying, hey Jimmy you're really good at math, who would have known? It's like you said last night, things happen beforehand to bring you here. So that's partially why we're asking you about academics, because had somebody said hey Jimmy you're great at math, you might not have said “singing makes me feel good, but doing well in math really makes me feel good” that's kind of why –

JM: Right I hear what you're saying.

MN: One other question. Did your father ever try to show you street stuff like cards or dice or anything like that? Did he ever try to school you in some of the things he was doing?

JM: No, he would let me know – he would say something that, “you need your education.” But it was rare, because “faith without work” is dead. You can tell somebody something, but especially with children, children aren't going to do what you tell them to do, they're going to do what you do. They'll do what you do. You can't come home with a six pack every night from work and tell your son, who is being trained in school about the difficulties of alcoholism, and you're coming home with a six pack and telling your son to pay attention to what they're telling him

about alcoholism, not to drink because it's bad for your health, bad for your mentality, bad for your emotions. It's just a bad thing, alcohol, but you're doing it. So maybe the fact that I became a street hustler myself, years later, was something that I had remembered my father doing. You know how it comes.

MN: So that part of your life happened in your 20s, would you say?

JM: It was when the group was torn apart, after 18 months all of a sudden, nothing.

MN: Wow. And that was when you moved in that other direction?

JM: I moved into that direction.

MN: And you didn't have the education as a back up.

JM: Right. Getting back to that education – that's something that I'm not ashamed of, but I really regret. I really, really do regret it. When this whole music thing fell apart – before I make that statement, the music then was brand new. It was – the civilized movement had not come in. The recording industry was new, rock n' roll was new. Because rock n' roll – that form of rock n' roll – wasn't considered sophisticated music, and it wasn't. It was two or three – rather it was four or five, scratch two or three off the record – it was four or five school chums, neighborhood guys, or family members that would form a vocal group. And no one had written music. They would, for the most part, just emulate stuff that was on the radio. So we would get together, and when we found out there was a pattern, the guys that knew, the guys with the ears that when they knew that these patterns, these musical patterns were basically the same, then we could say, okay, lets take this pattern and put our own words to it. But it didn't last. And getting back to your situation, what you asked, so when it fell apart, there was nothing for me to fall back on. I didn't have an education – I didn't have a degree. Because the thing to do now, is if I had a degree in music, is to set up coaching. Teaching. Teaching music. Teaching how to play guitar. I taught myself how to play guitar. I taught myself how to play piano. But I had no formal training. And I had a great ear. I could song write. But I had no formal training where I can go to the Board of Education and say “I have a degree, I got a Bachelors. I can come in as a well-known professional teacher.” There would have been money there. So you got your career that you had no formal education in – that went down. Now you got the low self-esteem, even though you're able to get up onstage and what they call “front” – Brian knows what that means. [Laughs] I can get up onstage and be this hero-like person. This star. This superstar person. And me, Jimmy Merchant of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. The guy that played at the Apollo and did this special performance for the Queen of England and etc. But now what happens is the group falls apart – that's the main thing in my life. Jimmy Merchant doesn't even exist. That person doesn't even know who he is. So what happens then is you begin to say that something wasn't meant to be. It wasn't meant for me to be famous. Why? Because I never had anything going for me to make me that way, and I didn't have knowledge of who I am. Because Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers is not who I am. That's not who I am. But I didn't know that then. So, where do you go? You go backward. You go back to where you think you belong, which is to a lower class. Back to the Bronx mentality, which is where my mom – she was on something called home relief – which is actually welfare. And even though the Bronx neighborhood was cool – I just went to a

Interviewee: Jimmy Merchant

Interviewers: Alessandro Buffa, Loreta Dosorna, Dr. Brian Purnell, and Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 7, 2006

lower standard after traveling worldwide as this well-known vocal group, as a member of this well-known vocal group. I went backward to a lower standard, and the only thing that was left to do was to run and hide was heroin.

BP: And what year was this? This was after Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers? So about 1957?

JM: Yes. From about '57 right on for the next 20 years.

BP: Where you in Washington Heights at the time, or did you come back and forth?

JM: I went back to – I went to Jamaica. My mother had relocated from Washington Heights to Jamaica.

BP: Out in Queens?

JM: Out in Queens.

MN: So you spent 20 years in and out of that world?

JM: Yes. That was the dark period.

AB: Heroine at the time became very popular?

JM: Very. It was everywhere.

AB: Also, a lot of musicians had experience –?

JM: Oh, yes. Miles Davis, Charlie Parker –

Man's voice: Was it easy to find heroine?

JM: It was everywhere. It was backstage, it was offstage, it was even in my pocket [Laughs]

MN: Now were you exposed to this while you were in the Teenagers?

JM: Yes, the first time I experienced using heroine was backstage at the Apollo Theater.

MN: Was this sniffing, or –?

JM: Sniffing. It starts off with sniffing, and then you graduate to skin popping, which is the needle in the arm. Then you go from there into the vein.

MN: This was being given to you by other musicians, or were there dealers right there?

JM: The whole Apollo situation was somebody goes out for you and brings back your heroine.

[Goes off tape]

MN: While we were off tape, you were saying that when you went into the music business with Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, there were a lot of white entrepreneurs that exploited young African-American artists. Could you talk a little about that – both from your experience and what you were observing?

JM: The company that not only recorded Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers but are known as the company that almost spear-headed this vocal group, rhythm and blues, rock n'roll movement, were primarily out for themselves.

MN: Now which company was this?

JM: Rama Gee? Rama Records. They started out with Tico Records. They had all the Latin bands. The same owner of Tico Records, Mr. George Goldner. As you know he had Machito, Tito Puente, there was a third one – the three of them were the three top –

MN: Tito Rodriguez.

JM: Tito Rodriguez, Tito Puente and Machito. They were the three top people from his company. And he moved from Tico Records to Rama where he brought in The Crows, he brought in – I know the Valentines came in but there were another group before The Crows. The Rens, the Crows, the Valentines, and then he decided he was going to start another label called Gee Records, which he brought in the Clutch Tones and the Teenagers, were his first two. George Goldner was a guy that operated out of his hat until he got an office. But he, with the Teenagers – he managed us. We were the one group that he managed. He was the head of the company that we recorded on but he was also our manager. And he was a gambler, you know, racehorses, that type of thing, and he was a sharp guy – silk tie, banana point shoes, embroidered shirts, leather jackets, big pinky ring. He lived in Central Park West. He was a smooth-talker, smooth-operator, nice smile. You would take him to Grace Gospel Church with you, and then take him home to dinner. George Goldner, like I said, was not only one of the independent and movers of the shakers, but I believe that he was the one. Because when you talk about golden oldies, I believe that golden oldies reference comes from his name, George Goldner.

MN: Interesting.

JM: Yes. And you won't hear that nowhere, but I believe that – that's my personal belief. Now what does golden oldie mean? It basically means somebody's going to turn 50, or something like that. Or 40 or 50. Something older. This golden oldies – these wonderful records – Mr. Goldman was the one who created a lot of that stuff. The Chantelles. The Teenagers. The Imperials. But Mr. Goldner took advantage of us. He's the one that put it in my heart to watch out for white people.

MN: Now did you know – did anyone tell you that when you got into this that you were swimming with the sharks?

JM: Yes. Cly McPhatter.

MN: Of the Drifters?

JM: Yes. Cly McPhatter. And I'm standing next to him and Chuck Berry is on the stage. And I'm dressed up, I'm suited up ready to go on. And Cly McPhatter is standing next to me because he was going to follow us. And I said, "Mr. Cly, I really like your voice. It sounds like Frankie's." He said, "Yeah son, but watch out because they're going to take Frankie away from you guys. Watch out. They're going to take Frankie away from you guys." That was the beginning of this crushing blow that I was talking about off the audio. With this gentleman, I said the most crushing blow that occurred in my life was at 17, when they told us that Frankie was being taken from our group. You can't know what that is. Because, wait a minute, my mother signed papers with you, sir. And you're supposed to be in support of us. By now, George Goldner had been run over by another white gentleman by the name of Morris Levy. Morris Levy, if you look up the name you're going to find out, that he was mob-tied. And not only was he mob-tied, but he stole 40,000 copyrights. "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" being one of them.

MN: So he pushed Goldner out?

JM: He pushed Goldner out, took over Goldner's enterprise, including Goldner's fever. When we walked into that company, we had four songs before we knew Mr. Goldner. Before we knew Richard Berry, we had four songs. One of them was a song called "Why Do Birds Sing So Gay" which was actually "Why Do Fools Fall In Love" The second song we had was a song called "Come On Baby" which was actually "I Want You To Be My Girl." The third song was "Please Be Mine." And the fourth song was "Am I Fooling Myself Again" Those four songs we never got credit for writing. How is it that we walk into your office, with these four songs, and when it's all said and done, the writers that are registered in Washington D.C – are George Goldner, Richard Berry, and Morris Levy – what ever happened to Frankie Lymon? Jimmy Merchant? Herman Santiago? Sherman Garnes? Joe Negroni? Answer that.

MN: So they took the songwriting credit.

JM: Yes. Never got paid.

MN: Did you know that they did it, when they did it?

JM: Remember, they are operating on the fringes of the big companies. Capital. And it's a business that just started. That's one part of it. The other aspect of it is that we're coming from minority experience, and the minorities don't know anything about the music business, except that they have got kids that are famous, and they're told to sign something.

BP: When somebody gets the author writes to a song, what does that mean?

JM: You got everything. You own the publishing. A song has two lives. Two lives. This is something that artists didn't know then. The first life that a song has is that it's an emotional

soundtrack that affects people emotionally. The other life of that song is that it is a property. It is a property. Someone owns it.

MN: It's interesting – when we interviewed Arthur Crier, the only thing he ever made real money from was the songs he wrote, in the long-run.

JM: Well, consider himself blessed. Because I wrote “Why Do Fools Fall In Love”

MN: And never got any credit.

JM: Years later – went to court and proved in Federal Court – I proved that I walked in there, into that office, with this material. Forget about what happened before, forget about whether or not it was handed to me in a hallway as a letter, that's none of your business. When I came into your office, this music, I auditioned for you. That means it belonged to the group, not you. We proved that in court, and the Federal Court, the Judge found Herman Santiago and myself legitimately the co-writers of “Why Do Fools Fall In Love.” Because at this time, Frankie's dead, Sherman's dead, and Joe is dead, so what did we do? We said let's go in for ourselves. Let's claim this.

MN: And did you get a share –?

JM: We won fifty percent share.

MN: Wow, what year was this?

JM: This was '93. And we began collecting. I mean, we got telegrams from Billy Joel. We got telegrams from a lot of artists, because it was something that was turning around, like those guys with the Superman story. Remember them? The original cartoonist of Superman, it went to court, years later, after Superman became good, movies. So it was those that were run over that finally had their day in court and won. But it was turned around, because of the statute of limitations law. Now the statute of limitations law simply says that when you find out who stole your pocketbook, you have seven years to get that person in court. But here we are talking about 20-something years later when me and Herman went to court. So the opposition – who's the opposition? Morris Levy. The one who had bought –

MN: Was he still alive?

JM: No, the son had the estate. Levy had overrun Goldner with a phone call, “we're taking this from you, we want you to put it in writing. You owe me, you're going to pay me off by giving me everything you own.” And check this out, Goldner writes this: “I am giving the rights to “Why Do Fools Fall In Love” to Morris Levy – a song I never wrote.”

MN: He actually wrote that?

JM: That's in the files in Washington D.C. And in Washington, they transferred the rights to “Why Do Fools Fall In Love” to Morris Levy. So if Goldner wrote it, Levy has it now.

MN: So they applied the statues of limitations to you?

JM: Yes. We didn't deserve to have that applied to us.

MN: Who did this, the same judge, or was there an appeal?

JM: The appeal came from the Morris Levy estate – the son. Adam. Adam Levy. He told his attorney, “You know what, find out if there’s a way to get that song back.” And the attorneys looked into it and they realized there’s a statue of limitations law that says that no court can grant beyond seven years. They brought that to the appellate division, and the appellate division said we’re going back in court on an appeal from the Levy estate, and we had a hearing. By then they stopped the royalties from coming into me and Herman, we were getting fifty percent share. And even after fifty percent was broken up into two or three different ways because we had to get attorneys to get that done. And then the final place you’re allowed to go is a place called the United States Supreme Court. So now the royalties have stopped, no one’s getting nothing. It’s found in an appeals court that we don’t have any rights to the song because of the statues of limitations law. Now it’s offered to us, if you want to precede any further you’ve got 90 days to go to United States Supreme Court. We now have to get another lawyer, promising him a bigger piece of the pie, to get a guy that has experiences with United States Supreme Court. He goes into the United States Supreme Court telling them the story of me and Herman Santiago, the two remaining Teenagers who really are the writers of “Why Do Fools Fall In Love” who had earned or won fifty percent share that was taken from them based on this law. The United States Supreme Court said to our attorney, “we know that Jimmy Merchant and Herman Santiago are the true owners of ‘Why Do Fools Fall In Love?’ They proved it in Federal Court. However, the law is the law. Because they cannot come up with a reason why the Statue of Limitations law –

End of tape 1.

Begin tape 2.

MN: [Question cut off] –Supreme Court said?

JM: Okay. When you win a case in Federal Court, the opposition appeals based on a legal technicality, and now they win. So you won, but your opposition now comes in and they win in appeals court. You got 90 days to fight back, to find a reason to fight back, and if you are deciding you are going to go and fight back, you have to go to the next level which is something called the United States Supreme Court. We went to United States Supreme Court with a brand new lawyer. And at the United States Supreme Court, they told our attorney that – if you can come up with a reason why the technicality that caused you to lose your case in the appellate division – if you can come up with a reason why that particular law, that technicality, the law of the Statue of Limitations needs to be rewritten or changed, then we will give you a hearing. Our attorney could not come up with a reason – he tried, but it wasn’t accepted. And they gave us their final statement, which said something like – we do know that Jimmy Merchant and Herman Santiago are the legitimate writers, co-writers, of this song “Why Do Fools Fall In Love?” because they brought it into the office when they auditioned, and everyone else before that said they saw them singing “Why Do Fools Fall In Love?” in the neighborhood, in Washington

Heights. But because they can't come up with a reason why the law of the Statue of Limitations need to be rewritten or changed, we have to continue to allow the Levy estate to have the rights to the songs – the very persons that they claim have ripped them off all these years. That's the law.

MN: Was this the first time anybody from your generation of singers tried to challenge ownership of songs in court?

JM: Yes.

MN: So this was a big test case for the whole generation of artists?

JM: Yes.

MN: So the implications would have been, if you had succeeded, there would have been a proliferation of losses.

JM: Yes.

MN: Wow.

JM: They would have come out of the woodwork.

[Knocking on door – break in tape]

JM: – If you wrote only about the court case, I will get you a real [inaudible]. See, I almost had a book deal. We were very close. I had an international – what's the name of the company? – down on 57th street – it's Devin and William Morris. A movie company approached Herman and I and told us we will get you a book deal if you let us buy the book to make a movie. So we promised that we would give them access to our book to make a movie, if they would get us the book deal. So we got this, a guy, to write us an outline, and now we're sitting in front of a publisher. Now our agent, you name the big people who were her clients, I mean big, huge people, including the one from the Supremes, Mary Wilson. She had just gotten married, her second advance \$150,000. She had a Jackson sister, the other sister –

BP: Latoya?

JM: Latoya. Her book with the same agent. But we're the Teenagers, we're us, those people do not exist! And she, our agent, thought she could get this deal, and we're sitting in front of the publishers, the soft cover and the hard cover. The hard cover person didn't show, but the soft cover showed – they were convinced about this whole story. And the war broke out. The first one.

MN: The first Iraq war?

JM: Yes. What was the first one? The sand – ?

MN: Desert Storm.

JM: And they claim, they called me up and said, they wanted to do the book but now they want us to do some war books. So, Mary got her deal. But anyway, so much for books. This story here, this whole thing about the court case. I mean much went down with Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, but this is later on in life. We finally have our one way to get something resolved. The part of getting something resolved, the only comfort that I do have, because of one thing – you're either going to stay in that spot, or you're going to move on. So, the comfort is this, and only this: I had my day in court. Now what are you going to do, Jimmy Merchant? You had your day in court. What are you going to do? Yes the court system stinks, it's screwed up, and it seemed like they're on the side of the wicked – but what are you going to do with yourself? Are you going to go back like you did when Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers fell apart? Are you going to go back to drugs? Or are you going to move forward? So this was my second chance in life, to not go backwards, like when the Teenagers broke up, but to move forward. So I left that where it was. If something ever happens in the future – I came across an attorney who said “I could get you back in court!” Okay, well, O.J. Simpson told me no, you can't get back in. Once the United States Supreme – he told me this. And if Mr. Hot Dog tells you that himself!

[Laughter]

JM: What's his name – God bless him his gone –

BP: Cochran.

JM: Cochran, yeah. He told me that personally. He said, “you should have called me before you went to the United States Supreme Court.” [Laughs] So, I had to move on. Restating this story – and I was just telling the young lady here – that the difficult part about writing the book isn't so much putting it into a form, but reliving it.

MN: Oh, yes. As somebody who wrote a memoir, it's rough stuff to do. You have to be at peace with the other people whose lives you talk about. In other words, you're revealing things about a lot of people. And I could not have written my memoir if my parents were alive. It wouldn't have been fair to them, because there were a lot of heavy things that went down. So I understand exactly what you're talking about, and all the different things in touches on a lot of people.

JM: Yes.

MN: I wrote mine when I was ready – when I needed to write it. We can talk after we shut this off –

JM: Sure, sure.

MN: But I also want to go back to the subject of the artists of the pre-1960 period, and you sense that they have been neglected in the way that our music traditions have been honored in the public.

JM: Yes, it's almost like what's going on with the Bronx African American History Project. The issue is why is there no history on the rocks? I mean, come on. We exist, folks. Who said that the Bronx and the history of the Bronx should not be recorded with the rest of the world? Who said that this genre of music, Doo-wop, should be forgotten and never recorded? When this music is at the foundation – the root of hip hop. It really, really is. Hip-hop is nothing but rock n' roll. That's all hip-hop is. It's another way of projecting a black form of music, with drums and the guitar. Things have not changed. So, one aspect of it is – I had a conversation with you on the phone where what came up with the Academy Award situation, where certain, respectable individuals argued the point with regard to this "Pimp" song, which leads into the hip-hop movement. Why not the "Pimp" song? I'm with all that. If the song was strong enough to get an Academy Award, then it deserves it, whether it's black or white, or green or yellow. But the fact that it happens to be black and a music that's hated, well, hey, that's nothing new under the sun, either, because rock n' roll was hated when we came out with it. I toured the south. And outside of the civic centers, where I performed, they were walking around with – what do you call those? – picket signs, with "We don't want your black music here – go home." "You black folks with straight here stealing our white girls." Little kids behind those older folks had picket signs saying "Rock n' roll is here to stay." And it is.

AB: And that was the situation here in New York – was it the same with other white people in vocal harmony, or did people like this music, or did you even have problems with white people here in New York?

JM: Well there's always the bunch, that say it's hate music, it's race music. So you see that in hip-hop. Now I'm with the hip-hop people, and I'm primarily with them, not because I love the sex part, or I love the freedom of it, but because they figured out how to beat the system. They figured out how to beat the white system because they all stay together. You'll see five or six big names in one video. But the part of it I dislike about that is that on all their award shows, you'll never see my music, or anyone that represents my music, and none of those award shows, when they talk about the history of the music, where it came from, it stops where hip-hop began. Something's wrong with that, too. What happened before that? Everything began somewhere. And that's why I wanted to be sure that I recognize the groups that came before me. I didn't want to say Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers began it, because there was Arthur Crier, it was the Velvets, it was the Vocaliers, it was the Auriels, it was the Spanialds, it was the Flamingos. And before them it was the people like the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots. But it was Frankie Lymon that picked up where they left off and took it to a new level. And that new level was bringing the youth into the business. And we were major. The Platters were big – but we – I mean the Platters spanned a longer period of time with more hits. But we, in a short period of time, we changed everything. We said we're opening up the doors for the young folks. And those young folks don't, for some reason, and I'm talking about the movers and the shakers. And the movers and the shakers are Jay Z, Jermaine Dupri, P. Diddy, Queen Latifah, Quincy Jones is in that. Those five people need phone calls. P. Diddy. Those sick people need phone calls. Now wait a minute, you been having award shows every second you have this hip-hop movement. But what happened before that? What about the people that opened doors for you? I mean if you don't want Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, bring somebody from their era, because there was

something that happened before you guys came on the scene, to open up the doors for you guys. That's what my whole problem is with this.

AB: Doo-wop was changed, before, we were talking, Dr. Naison was asking you about the Bronx – so this music from the neighborhood – and now you went to TV shows. How had it changed? How was the audience changed? Was it a wider audience, or was it still something connected with the neighborhood, as it started?

JM: Well let's see if I could answer the question, because I want to make sure I answer your question. Before Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, I never saw a rock n' roll, or a rhythm and blues group, on Ed Sullivan, on the Ed Sullivan show. There were two or three big shows like that: The Shower of Stars, Ed Sullivan show, and something maybe called the Hit Parade show. There were no rhythm and blues groups on there. We did those shows. Dick Clark, was a smaller level, on a lower level, he was more local. He had what was known as record hops. Record hops were growing in all of the [inaudible]. A record hop differed from a coast to coast television show like Ed Sullivan, in that the record shop ministered – if you will – to the local community, so they couldn't afford to bring stars on there to perform personally, to perform with a big band, and do a live performance. But what they did was played records and we would lip sync. See that's the difference. We lip sync on those record hops show, but sang live on –

MN: You sang live on Ed Sullivan?

JM: Yes, right. Ed Sullivan and Shower Stars, because Frankie later appeared on Ed Sullivan. But we were the first in a lot of areas – we even got a telegram from the Platters when we got into England. So how could you say this never happened? When you never mention us, you're saying it never happened, right? When you don't mention Frankie Lymon, or Earl Louis and the Channels, or the Cadillacs, or the Flamingos, or the Harp Tones – if you don't mention these groups, you're saying it never happened.

MN: What's also interesting, to me, in kind of looking at the Bronx, is that in the same way hip-hop came from the streets, so did doo-wop, in the very same neighborhoods.

JM: You got it.

MN: There's just a 25 year difference. The same neighborhoods and the same competition and mutual encouragement, battling –

JM: So whatever principles, Doctor, that you're using to get the Bronx promoted into it's proper place, needs to be used with this click-click doo-wop, if you will.

MN: Well I think it was a very interesting experience for Brian to bring some of his students to the event last night, and to see this in person and to feel its power. I think he's going to have some very interesting conversations in class next week.

JM: Brian you're a teacher?

BP: Yes.

JM: You're a professor?

BP: Yes.

JM: Oh I didn't know that.

MN: He just handed in his Ph.D thesis. He's going to be Dr. Purnell in a month.

JM: Oh, congratulations! How old are you?

BP: I'll be 28 at the end of this month.

JM: Oh a young doctor.

MN: Young Dr. Purnell – he could have a soap opera [Laughs]

JM: That's great. What's your nationality?

BP: My mother's from Barbados and my father's white.

JM: Oh – wow.

MN: Both from the Bronx.

BP: They met in the Bronx.

MN: Prospect Avenue, Crotona Park.

JM: Are you proud of yourself?

BP: Very much so.

JM: Please be. Education is everything, everything.

MN: Well, you know, this interview has been one of our longest and most interesting. But why don't we bring it to a close now and eat some pizza. Thank you so much for joining us –

JM: You're very, very welcome.

MN: As we said, one of the great things about these interviews, you never know what's going to happen. And this court case is very important and it's something that many people never heard about. So thank you –

Interviewee: Jimmy Merchant

Interviewers: Alessandro Buffa, Loreta Dosorna, Dr. Brian Purnell, and Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 7, 2006

JM: That and also the fact that if you never revealed – there's a principle that knowledge unrehearsed is soon forgotten. I'll leave it right there.

MN: Okay, well thank you very much.