



11-5-2005

Mercado, Albert

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Recommended Citation

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Interviewee: Albert Mercado
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: November 5, 2008

Transcriber: Kaitlin Campbell

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Today is November 5th, 2008. It's a great day in America. We have this amazing victory in the presidential election, electing Barack Obama as president – a truly history-making event. We're with the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University and we're interviewing Albert Mercado, whose name was called "Straight Man"—

Albert Mercado (AM): A.k.a. Lava 1 and 2.

MN: Lava 1 and 2? Wow. Ok that's a pretty –

Alan Meridueno (Alan): Straight Man a.k.a Lava 1 and 2.

MN: We're also here with Alan Meridueno, is that the correct pronunciation?

Alan: That's right

MN: Also known as Alan Cat. Helping us with this interview is Anna Neumann who is here with us from Berlin and our videographer Charlie Johnson. Albert, could you please spell your name and give us your date of birth?

AM: My name is Albert Mercado. I'm spelling my name now: a-l-b-e-r-t. Last name: m-e-r-c-a-d-o – Mercado. I'm a graffiti writer. My graf-name is Straight Man a.k.a Lava 1 and 2, and my birth date is 4/26/54.

MN: How did your family come to the Bronx and where is your family originally from?

AM: Both of my parents, they are both from Puerto Rico. They came to New York during the '40s and '50s. My father was here already in the '40s like late '40s. Then later on my mother got here like in the 50s, early 50s. They been around this country for a long time, been here for a while. And, we first lived in Harlem, in Spanish Harlem. I was born and raised in Spanish Harlem and then I migrated, moved to the Bronx. I started being raised with my uncle which is my mother's brother. He raised me. That's what brought me up to the Bronx and got involved with everything that has to do with the Bronx. But today I live in the Bronx.

MN: Now what year, or, how old were you when you first moved to the Bronx?

AM: When I moved to the Bronx – I moved to the Bronx like about '66, like around '66.

MN: And, what neighborhood did you move to?

AM: I moved to Daly Avenue. 181st and Daly Avenue.

MN: OK, so it's not too far from here.

AM: Yeah, not far from here. It's around two blocks away from the Bronx Zoo.

MN: Ok, and what was that neighborhood like when you moved there?

AM: Well, when I moved to that neighborhood it was – everybody got *along*. Everybody got along pretty well – it was a nice neighborhood to be growing up at, at once point. You know,

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because, at that time, there was still a lot of Jewish people in the neighborhood, in that area. It was mostly dominant Jewish and a lot of Latinos before Black people started moving into the area – and it was pretty well. I mean, I had a very good time doing my childhood coming up on Daly Avenue and 181st, until later on when I got to a teenager, when I got to the point where I became a teenager, all of my cousins friends and them – they used to always call me – because they had nicknames. You know, my older cousin, he’s like 4 years older than me, he’s like 59. And his name is “Junebug.” Now his brother, his younger brother – he’s the same age as me. We are both the same age – and his name was “Capone.” Alright, these are the nicknames they had.

MN: “Junebug” and “Capone?”

AM: Yeah. Cause they other one that is name “Junebug,” his name is Adrian June Aponte. And the other one is James Aponte, and that other name, he just picked up.

MN: Now, what elementary school did you go to?

AM: I went to Elementary 79, right over here at a 183rd and Crescent. I went there and then from there, later on, as I got older, and started maturing and when – I was having little problems back and forth. You know, going to my uncle’s house and going back downtown to Harlem and all that. So, when I got out of elementary school I went back to Harlem and went to junior high school in Harlem. When I graduated out of junior high school I went to Art and Design.

MN: Ok, and that’s in Manhattan?

AM: In Manhattan on 52nd and 2nd Ave.

MN: Now did you have to take a test to get into Art and Design?

AM: Yes, you do. You had to take a test to get into schools like Art and Design, Fashion Industries and all those music and arts –

MN: Now, when did you develop your artistic talent?

AM: Well, I developed my artistic talents since I was a kid. I was like 8, 9 years old. You know, I was always getting awards from school like in elementary school for being nice with art, and stuff like that.

MN: Now did you do mainly drawing or painting or sculpture –?

AM: Drawing and cartoonist.

MN: And whose style, whose cartoon style were you most like interested in?

AM: I was amazed with the cartoon styles of like Board, Hawk – stuff like that, Super Marvel Comics. [Crosstalk]

MN: So, you know, you got into Art and Design. And what did you see yourself doing? Did you want to become a commercial artist, a cartoonist –?

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AM: What I really was going for was cartoonist – to you know get my profession a lot better in cartoonist. That's what I wanted to go for, but then – you know I was having a lot of discrepancies inside the school because in that school when I was there at the time, I was a minority. In there, there majority of the people in there was white. And, I would always have problems with some of the students in there and stuff like that – there were like very few Latinos and Black that were in that school, you know. So, I was having problems with that and I told my mom, I said – 'I don't want to be in this school no more, I see too much racist – stuff going on, in the school. So, I want to get out of this school.' And from there I went to Manhattan Vocational –

MN: --and what street was that on?

AM: On 96th street between 2nd and 1st -- Manhattan Vocational Tech. I went there and I stayed there for about a year, I didn't like that. I didn't like that school because there was too much gangs going on at the time. During that period there was too much gangs going on over there, and the problems I was having over there at the school with fights and stuff like that, so I got out of that school and I went to the Dewitt Clinton. I went to school, attending at the Dewitt Clinton high school with my cousin.

MN: Now were you living in Harlem when you went to Clinton or were you back in the Bronx?

AM: --come back in the Bronx—

MN: You're back in the Bronx. So is that the '70s you're at the Dewitt Clinton or –?

AM: 70s. In the 70s. I got out of the Dewitt Clinton. I graduated from the Dewitt Clinton in '72.

MN: So you graduated in '72. Now, '72 is when the Bronx is starting to burn and all sorts of – did you see that process?

AM: I saw all of that process. See, a lot of people don't like to speak about the Bronx because like you just said a little while ago, it was kind of left out. You know, the Bronx was left out, you know what I mean? They didn't want to talk about it, because, you had a lot of these guys that owned these buildings, these landlords and stuff like that – and they were having the people living in those quarters like that there, in those conditions, living in those buildings. Sometimes you'd see like a whole abandoned building, and out of a building that had made a whole like 60 units -- 40 units! You know, only 3 or 5 five families live in that building. You know what I mean? – I mean, it looked like it was hit. It was hit like – like during World War II –

MN: --it was like bombed--

AM: Like it looked like it was bombed up. You had some parts of Harlem like that too, but the Bronx was like the worst borough throughout the whole New York City. I mean it looked like if someone ran through there and just bombed it up – or, either the landlords was burning – they were actually having people to burn the buildings so that they could get the insurance off the building, or make money on the building –

MN: Now did you actually know people who were hired to burn buildings by landlords?

AM: Well, I knowed one or two cats that burned—

MN: I don't want any names—

AM: --No no no, I ain't mentioning no names but I know one or two cats that I grew up with that was told, you know – “we give you a certain amount of money if you just go in there and burn this building” –

MN: Because my students couldn't believe, you know, we talked about this in my class. I said “that was what happened – the landlords burned their buildings for insurance.” How many did you burn down?

AM: I didn't burn anything down. [Laughs] [Laughter]

AM: I didn't burn anything down [Laughs] – but as far as like me knowing this one particular person, he did like two buildings.

MN: What sort of music did you grow up with? You know, in the '60s and stuff?

AM: Well, ok, in the 60s I grew up with Rock n' Roll and that old school south-side, and the slow jazz, back in the days, you know what I mean? I grew up with that kind of stuff, you know. Going to the clubs back then, you know what I mean? Then when I got into, like later on, I got into Hip-Hop –

MN: Now did you ever go down to any of those fancy discos downtown?

AM: Well I've been into Roseland, I've been into Copacabana, Latin Palace, the Hunts Point Palace that used to be on Hunts Point up in the Bronx on Hunts Point Avenue. I've been to several clubs, you know, during the late '60s and '70s. Then later on during the mid-70s is when I got more into Hip-Hop. You know, during the like the late '70s is when I got more into Hip-Hop and I was hitting all those other clubs, like, well-known clubs that were up in the Bronx like the Heballo, The Sparkle –

MN: So you were there when Hurk was spinning?

AM: I was there when Hurk was spinning, he's one of my favorite friends, we grew up together, we've known each other for many years. I used to do the flyers for them. I have the flyers here. I got stuff here –

MN: Can you hold stuff up? [Crosstalk]

AM: I got flyers, pictures, and slides – if you want to do a slideshow—

Alan: Before you jump into the mid '70s, which I feel you're about to – I want to pull you back for a second to Dewitt Clinton. Dewitt Clinton is a very important high school as far as the birth of the graffiti art movement – [Crosstalk]

AM: Also, as well, a lot of writers came from out of that school –

Alan: Really? So Clinton was a big source of writers –?

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AM: Yeah, being that he's bringing that topic up, we used to always meet at the Donut Shop that used to be at the corner, the Wellmans/Fraemans corner, the Donut Shop at the corner. When I was leaving out of the Dewitt Clinton these guys were just not coming in there – like Fays and all these other guys were going into that school. You know what I mean? When I was on my way out they're just getting into Dewitt Clinton –

MN: Now when was the first time you were exposed to writing?

AM: Well I was exposed to writing in like '69. I used to cover my territory, because this is what we used to do as a Black Spade member--we used to sometimes tag out names in certain neighborhoods and cover our territory.

MN: Let's go backwards. When did you get involved for the first time with a gang?

AM: '69

MN: What was your motivation for doing so?

AM: Because of me having the problems in the schools and stuff like that – I figured I'd become about being somebody with somebody, being something, you know, getting involved with something that would protect me. You know what I mean?-- that I would have back-up if I need to –

MN: Right ok, so if you were going to have problems in school with other gangs, you'd need to have –

AM: Something to fall back on, you know?

MN: Right. Now, how come, you know, you got involved with the Black Spades as a Latino? Did they recruit everybody?

AM: Well I first started out on 179th street and Bryant Avenue which was like two blocks over from where I lived at on Daly Avenue. That's when there used to be the old candy factory that was down there that it was burnt down just as well, like everything else that was burnt down in the Bronx. It was right down the block; we had an old clubhouse in one of those big abandoned tenet buildings that was already tore-up, we lived in the clubhouse on 179th and Bryant Avenue – I was a reaper—

MN: That was the name of the gang –

AM: Yes, the reapers—

MN: Was it a neighborhood gang or bigger than a neighborhood gang?

AM: Well, it started as a neighborhood gang and then it got larger. It started having divisions and chapters and all that. It started spreading.

MN: Now, in terms of your identity, did you identify as Puerto Rican primarily or did you also identify as Black?

AM: Both.

MN: Now was that something that – when did you start to see yourself as both Black and Puerto Rican?

AM: Well, I started seeing myself as well, because see I have Black relatives in my family. I do have Black, you know, family. So we kind of are mixed up in my family with the Puerto Rican and Black and all that. You know, my cousins marrying into Black into – and me myself. My first wife *and* my wife that I'm with now – she's Black, African-American, you know, that have kids with. So my kids are mixed. And, that kind of most likely runs in my family. So and my stout, you know my swagger, my stout, the way I act and all that, a lot of people would think 'Oh this guy's Black, he's just a light-skinned Black guy,' you know, a high yellow Black skinned Black guy.

MN: OK, so you started off with this, you know, The Reapers in an abandoned building on Bryant and 179th Street, not too far from Groncona Park--

AM: Right, so when I became a Reaper, I was asked 'what name do you want to be called?' And I was told, I told the president at that time, I had mentioned to the president at that time, 'Yo I don't know, you know, I don't know what to think of like what kind of name to pick, but you know my friends on Daly Ave, they call me "Straight," right?' So he wasn't feeling that too well, with that "Straight," so he says 'why don't you add the m-a-n on the back of it and call yourself "Straight Man,?"' -- you know what I mean? So I kind of like stuck with that, you know, that's what I got stuck with. I got stuck with the "Straight Man" and that just carried on throughout years, you know, and it stuck that way. So, make a long story short--I got out of The Reapers for the simple fact that my two younger brothers were already Black Spade members. So if being that they were in Black Spades it made me easier for me to get involved with them, you know, and be a part of them – because why would I want to be in a different gang and my brothers are two others, you know, in another gang.

MN: Now were the Black Spades a bigger gang—

AM: Yeah it was a bigger gang, a much bigger gang, and it was large in New York City and we were like 704 something thousand deep throughout New York City. You know, for back then, we had divisions and chapters throughout all boroughs. But mostly, most of us was mainly in Bronx – the majority of the Black Spades were in The Bronx and in Harlem. You know, I had them from Lower East Side, Spanish Harlem, and Harlem on the West Side where the Blacks is at. You know what I mean? But in the Latino areas, we had, I had them kind of mixed – and Lower East Side I had them kind of mixed, so it wasn't like, all Black. Like in the Bronx, you would see mostly that the majority of the Black Spades were Black.

MN: Now you became a leader? –

AM: Yes.

MN: Now what did it mean – what was the – how did you rise in the hierarchy?

AM: OK, hierarchies, I got to the hierarchies, became a leader – this is how it all happened. We went and we had a "set-down," at one of the Soundview meetings where we used to hold the big

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meetings, you know, as a counsel, you know with all the heads and stuff like that there, from all other divisions. And, I was told that day that – they asked me ‘are you willing to accept this opportunity that we’re giving you? We want you to be supreme commander of all Harlem’ – which is Manhattan, the borough itself, you know, I want you to be, to cover all of that, can you handle that?’ ‘Ah, I’ll take a try at it,’ you know what I mean, ‘I’ll take it, I’ll give it a try’ –

MN: Now how did you, what made you stand out? Was it, you know, fighting ability? Talking ability? Leadership ability?

AM: Well it was mostly leadership ability, and sometimes I was down for what I needed to do. If I had to get down, I get busy, you know what I mean? It was no punk shit, I was involved with – when it came to like, we got to run move we going to do our thing – and that was it. You know what I mean? And as far as leadership I held that pretty well – you know what I mean? And from there, I had my brothers opened up some chapters, I took them under my wing – and say ‘yo, I want you to be prez of this, and I want you to be prez of that,’ and it spread, and I started opening all the chapters and divisions all through the PJs-- the PJs is you know what we call that: The Projects. Mostly all the Projects throughout Manhattan – half of the projects back then from out of Manhattan, they all had Black Spade members in them.

MN: Now how did you, like, if you wanted to start a chapter in let’s say The Wagner Houses—

AM: I *have* one in the Wagner Houses –

MN: Yeah OK, so how did you – [Crosstalk]

AM: How did you know that, because I had a division there in Wagner Houses [Laughs] –?

MN: I didn’t know, I just figured, I know the Wagner Houses, I know New York pretty well –

MN: Ok well, I’m going to tell you where I had my divisions at – as far as Spanish Harlem. OK as far as Spanish Harlem I had my divisions – I lived out of Johnson Projects, housing projects, which is on 112th and Lexington Avenue – back then there was no Spades there, there was Young Saigons, they were there—

MN: Young Saigons?

AM: Yeah the Young Saigons—

MN: So did they get that from Vietnam?

AM: I don’t know where they get the name from, but the dude there, the dude his name was [snapping] – High Jar, his name was High Jar they used to call him – he knew the heart, and all his little crew, they knew they heart too, so they used to call themselves the Young Saigons—

Alan: Why cause they knew Marshal Law?

AM: Yeah, like a Martial Law type gang style. So I had my division like in Leman Projects, Carver Houses, which is on 106, right across the street from 106 and Park Hall of Fame Wall, right? There were projects there, then I had another chapter over at the Washington Projects, and then I had a chapter at the Wagners, you know, and then I had a chapter in Douglas Projects

which was on the West Side and then one was on 140-something street, the, Jew Hamlin Projects, I had another division there –

MN: Now did you, when you had a chapter, did you like—

AM: --The chapter came off of the division. Like if I had six divisions, I broke off –

MN: But let's say, you didn't have anything in the Douglas Projects, but you wanted to get – how would you go about getting something in the Douglas Projects, if you didn't have anything?

AM: Oh, this is what it was – most of the guys that we had, they were like living in all areas. So, if you was already a member and you living at so-so Project, it make it easier so that you—

MN: Yeah, so you're already there, you just get other people, you get your friends—

AM: Yeah, you just, or you just get your friends, your neighborhood friends to join up with you –

MN: Now, joining. What's the – why would somebody whose just going about their business want to join the Black Spades?

AM: Well, again I say, they might've wanted to become a Black Spade because we were numbers, as far as being big or well-known --or for protection.

MN: OK, protection. Now what about economic activities? Was it mainly protection or did you have like businesses that you –?

AM: No, at that time we didn't have any businesses. We were too young, we weren't even thinking about —

MN: How old, so this was mainly 14, 15, 16 ?

AM: Yeah, like guys from anywhere the age of 13 all the way up to like maybe 17, 18 when you start like more or less start growing out of stuff, like that.

MN: So like, you're doing all this – how are you, you know, how are you making money? Did you like work in stores or factories or—

AM: Well I had several jobs; I was, well – doing when I was a Spade?

MN: Yeah.

AM: No, when I was a Spade I wasn't doing nothing! I was just running – just making sure that everything was running right, you know what I mean? That was my goal, was to stay on top of them – you know, I wasn't having no J-O-B or nothing; I ain't even thinking about working then—

Alan: Were you still in high school or no?

AM: Yes I was still in high school—

Alan: At Dewitt?

AM: At Dewitt Clinton—

Alan: Yeah, but running stuff in Harlem?

AM: But running stuff in Harlem -- and still attending school, at the time.

MN: Now what did you see yourself doing, you know, for a job in those days, like when you'd get out of high school what did you see yourself doing?

AM: Well, I didn't really look at any goals to go at, really. I wanted to really go out with my art, you know what I mean? But, I just went into like other fields, you know like – electrician work and doing handy work and stuff like that. So my first, very first job that I had for a long time, I held for a while, was my job that I had in the Municipal building. You know, I used to be a maintenance man there, you know I was a maintenance man helper under a supervisor, and – I held that job for like six years during my marriage and all that – this was like back in '74-'75 before I even got married with my first wife, you know? We were just girlfriend and boyfriend: she had kids by me and stuff like that.

MN: OK, now, let's go to, you know, the first tagging you did was when you were in the Black Spades?

AM: In the Black Spades.

MN: Now, was this a different form of tagging then what becomes famous city-wide--[Crosstalk]

MN: You know the Cocky 183s—

AM: OK, this is like before he came into the picture. Alright, we were just doing things around, like I said, most gangs or most areas people were tagging their neighborhoods, and from there I went into, started hitting the buses and all that – you know I became a very, hitting the buses a lot –

MN: Now what was your tag at that point?

AM: At that point, I was writing 'Straight Man,' and "SM 1."

MN: "Straight Man" and "SM 1."

AM: "SM1" is an abbreviation, cutting it short, cause it's too long –

[Crosstalk]

MN: But that would be, you'd put that on the buses?

AM: Yeah—[Crosstalk]

Alan: What about, sorry I cut you off Mark-- Black Spades? Were you also writing The "Straight Man Black Spade?"

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AM: Yeah I would write “Straight Man Black Spade” to represent who I am.

MN: Now, having this artistic talent – did you do something a little more elaborate than other people who didn’t have that talent, or was it something you just, at that point you weren’t thinking about artistic?

AM: No at that point I wasn’t even thinking about artistic to be for real, because, we were always tagging, we wasn’t trying to do pieces or nothing—

Alan: No but even your signature, was your signature whack? Or did you have any style at all?

AM: Oh ok, signature-wise. Ok my signature was pretty regular, you know, pretty decent, it wasn’t real fancy and too, like -- I got really more into graph and then my style started getting, you know, my signature style started getting better. You know, because I started created a lot of different signature tags, you know what I mean? I was like, I wouldn’t even stay with one for long – you know, so, I would change up the style some.

MN: So when did you start moving from tagging ?

AM: On the trains –

MN: On the trains, and then becoming part of a group that is different than the Black Spades.
[Crosstalk]

Alan: Or even, to add to that, you were tagging the Black Spades, and you were tagging “Straight Man,” that was what year, ‘69, you said—

AM: ‘69 all the way up to like ‘71 –

Alan: Was the only things in the Bronx, in the streets that you saw – gang graffiti? Or was there anything else happening on the walls?

AM: It was gang graffiti, and also, you saw religious stuff that was being put on the wall.

MN: Now did you see what, was there any political stuff that you saw, like “End the War in Vietnam”?

AM: Yeah, those too—[Crosstalk] You had guys like Black Panthers; they would put markings on the walls. You had the Young Lords, they would put markings on the wall – and these were big political groups coming back in the late ‘60s—

MN: Right, so, you know, because I was part of political groups that were spray-painting walls with political slogans—‘69 and the ‘70s—

AM: Yeah, exactly. They were putting these slogans up, and you had dudes that were like I said again, going back to Religious stuff like ‘pray,’ and ‘Jesus Christ,’ you know and all this religious stuff that they used to be putting up on the subways. And then later on I started seeing cats Tree 127, Tacky 183 – these were like guys that caught my eyes and then one of the guys that came out of my project like Greek 501, Awk 62 – all these dudes that came from out of my projects and then –

MN: Now this was the Johnson –?

AM: The Johnson Houses, and then you had—

MN: --and what street was the Johnson Houses on?

AM: They run from 115 to 112. They-- this is the streets they cover: from 115 to 112 from 3rd Avenue to Lexington and Park, because there's two sections—

MN: Yeah, no, OK, I know exactly where that is. So, these were, you were meeting guys at Clinton and you were meeting guys in the Johnson Houses who were doing this stuff separately from gangs—they were individuals, you know, out for fame so to speak –

AM: Yeah well, one of the ones that was out for fame – they inspired me, and took me into the Subway system, was my brother, Cool Breeze—

MN: Ah, older or younger?

AM: He's younger. But he took me, he put me out there, he was like 'Yo, we need to go out to the subway man, you doing all of this marking and stuff like that' – cause he was also a member of the Black Spades. There was three of us. Three brothers. My older brother, Afro, he didn't really like to get on the trains too much. His name was Afro; he used to write "Afro 2." But—

Alan: With the Black Spades, was there – guys that wrote on the walls and guys that didn't? Because you knew how to do it, did you do it? Or did everybody do it?

AM: Everybody did it – all. There was several members that got up, and some, they got up on the subway system – they, later on when they left from the Black Spades they focus on graffiti like I did. When I left out of that – I grew up out of that gang stuff; I focused on to my graffiti now—

MN: Now when did the term 'graffiti,' enter, you know, into this?

AM: Well, graffiti was entered because the society named it that, they trashed it like that –

MN: Ok so that was negative—[Crosstalk]

AM: That was like the negative term of using 'graffiti,' you know, some, 'you tearing up the city'—

Alan: Right, 'you're a bum, you'—[Crosstalk]

AM: 'You is a bum,' you know, 'you do graffiti.' You know, to us it was like art, writing, you know?

MN: Now when did you start going from – you're tagging for a gang and when did you start seeing what you were doing as self expression for you?

AM: OK, I started seeing my self expression for me like doing it really hard-core in '71.

MN: In '71, that's when you're becoming an artist?

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AM: Yeah, I'm becoming an artist, I'm putting my work on the subways, on the outside not only on the insides, cause, I was bombing the insides – forget about the insides, the inside – my brother was the one that told me, 'let's go on the outside,' and start doing pieces on the outside –

MN: Now you have to do the outsides in the yards, not, or you did both in the train yards?

AM: We did both. Well, the tagging can be done while train is moving. You know what I mean, when there's people can still be in there, and I mean, you just, took it upon yourself, 'fuck it!' you know, and write it on the train, for like regardless who was next to you [Laughing] You know what I mean? I just look around make sure there's no police and all, or nothing that looks funny and then I just – write on the train. That didn't matter, you know what I mean – but we mostly went to the lay-ups and the yards.

MN: Now which yards did you go to?

AM: Oh I've gone to – a lot of them. I went to the D yard, I've been to –

MN: Now tell us where these spots are—

AM: OK, I've been underneath Tracy Towers, that's a yard where the 4 line is at – its right across the street from Dewitt Clinton high school. I've been to the D yard –

MN: And where's the D yard?

AM: The D yard is right in between the stop Moshula Parkway and what's the next stop between—

Alan: Bedford Park.

AM: Yeah and Bedford Park. The D yard – I've been there, I've been to the ghost yard 207, I've been to Esbenar Gardens under 140-something street. I've been there, -- I've been to the Utica Lay-up, I've been to the Newstron and Kingston Lay-ups during the rush hour. [Laughing] They used to park them up, right there. I've been to, over there by Port Chester, the lay-ups that used to run all the way by there, the lay-ups that are on the 2 on the Allenson, by Allenson Avenue all the way to Gunhill – all those lay-ups up there – the 4 lay-ups, you know where they used to park the 4's during the weekends on the, on the tracks, in the middle of the tracks, I've gone—

MN: Now what was the relationship between the people who were doing this? Were you guys like partners? Rivals? Both?

AM: Partners. And sometimes we run into rivals, where's dudes that come from other places like Queens and Brooklyn and we so happened to meet up with them, and it was like 'Yo, where you, who you at? Where you from?' You know what I mean? Like that, you know what I'm saying? Then, you know, the beginning is not, not a good look, but then after a while when they see you more often it's like 'Oh OK, this guy's getting up,' you know 'he's like being around at a lot of places,' – you know these guys that coming from out of Brooklyn like Bop, Spin, Supertruck, Keeter.

MN: Now when did you know you had a city-wide reputation? How quickly did that come for you?

Interviewee: Albert Mercado
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: November 5, 2008

AM: Oh, well that came to me, like, quick [Laughs] – by ‘74 I tore New York up. [Laughter] By ‘74 I really destroyed the city. I mean, my brother, he went and he joined the army, he left me – you know, he left me at like ‘75, he went into the service, he joined the army so, I took it from there. You know what I mean?

MN: And did you create masterpieces and stuff?

AM: Well I was doing – for us; it was like we was doing some pieces then. But then like really masterpieces, it really really took place in like ‘75, ‘76 on up. You know, as far as bringing the three-dimensional out, and stuff like that. When I was doing it, you know, we would just take a fat cap, you know, and do outline and put stars or stripes or whatever inside the fillings and stuff like that there and we left it like that – you know? And then after a while we started clouding people’s piece, you know work-- there was tags underneath it. So, that way all those tags don’t show up – we would come out with clouds so that we’d cover all that background before we put in the piece – to bring it out.

Alan: When you were doing that, the clouding the pieces, you were still in Dewitt Clinton?

AM: No, I wasn’t. I got out of Dewitt Clinton then.

MN: And you’re working--this is while you’re working at the Municipal building?

AM: Yes.

MN: So, you got a job downtown and then you have this whole other life--?

AM: This whole other life.

MN: You have two lives—

AM: Yeah, I am a working guy now, and with two kids. You know what I mean? You know by then I already had my two kids.

MN: And you’re living in the Bronx?

AM: No I wasn’t living in the Bronx; I was living in Harlem then.

Alan: But you were still painting in the Bronx?

AM: But I was still painting in the Bronx because most of my members and, you know, and guys that I dealt with like Phase, Liney, and Riff and all these guys – Skee 168, Purple Haze 68, 168, Tracy – all these dudes are dudes that I hung out with. So they were all from the Bronx.

MN: Now were any of them Black Spades?

AM: No.

MN: So these were artists?

AM: They were artists, you know what I mean? They later on became well-known, became known artists.

Alan: These are Dewitt Clinton high school people or—?

AM: Some of them, some of them attended that school.

MN: Now when did this, you know, this seems like it's absolutely taken off, it's become this whole thing around the city, you've got, you know – serious artists doing this, you know – when does it connect with B-boying as, you know, and the DJs who created Hip-Hop, or does it ever? Or did you connect with Hurk accidentally rather than being a natural connection between you – ?

AM: Alright, how I connected -- I connected with Cool Hurk. Well, first of all, I was more connected at one point with like AJ, Grand Master Flash – dudes like that for the simple reason I was connected with them throughout Phase, because Phase was doing their flyers at one point.

MN: So what happened was the DJs were looking for ways to promote what they were doing and they went to the graffiti people because they were the most talented artists they knew—

AM: Right, so they would go to them and they would come to us and they'd say 'Yo, I'd like you to do me a layout of a flyer with a character or something on it,' you know what I mean. And 'we'll give you all the information we want you to put on paper.'

Alan: And why was Phase the one that they went to?

AM: Well, Phase was one that was out there like that first because of so much of his art – and, he had a lot of connection with people that was getting into the music at the time. And so he was like, he went out there, he said, "Yo, I could start promoting and start doing flyers for ya'll."—

MN: Now I just want to say that AJ is part of the Cold Crush Brothers –

AM: No, he's not.

MN: No, wait a minute, AJ is –

AM: AJ is, Cool DJ AJ – I mean the MCs that were with Cool DJ AJ was Disco Beat, right, and Love Borstaski – those were his MCs. He was just the man on the turn-table, you know, and then he had several other guys that came—

MN: Now he was a Bronx guy—?

AM: Yeah he's a Bronx – all these cats that I'm basically mentioned that I'm going to talk about as far as Hip-Hop in the Bronx, are from the Bronx, even though we have a few of them that I've dealt with in Manhattan too. Later on, when I went from doing the flyers, maybe becoming a promoter. When I became a promoter of LTD3 Production, in Manhattan, I had mostly all the DJs and MCs in Manhattan like Spooky G and all these dudes was under my wings.

Alan: So you started doing artwork as well—?

AM: As well, but Phase was the one that put me on—

MN: Now this is what like '75 or so? Or, earlier than that?

AM: No, about '74-'75.

MN: Now were you aware of Hurk's parties when he started throwing them in '73-'74 over at like 1520 Sedgwick and Cedar Park?

AM: Yes, I'm aware of that.

MN: What were people saying about that at the time?

AM: People was loving it at the time. They was really actually having fun, I mean he brung it out – he was the first that ever did it – to bring it out to the park, and then later on guys like Mean Jean and AJ and all these dudes started doing promoting and parties and parks – all, and public playgrounds or closing-in the streets, you know? Like, on certain occasions like holidays or whatever, closing-in the streets and having block parties and stuff like that there. You know it started booming, everybody else started doing it, but the trendsetter that started the whole thing was Cool Hurk.

MN: When was the first time you were asked to do a flyer?

AM: The first time I was asked to do a flyer was from Ray Chandler –

MN: Ray Chandler? Big Ray Chandler?

AM: Big Ray Chandler – he was the first man that came to me and says 'Yo, um, I hear that you are very good, you know, you have talent, as far as drawing and doing flyers and stuff like that, I've seen some of your work from other people that you've dealt with in the past – I'm interested and I want you to do me some flyers.' Because back then, he was having some discrepancy with Phase, he was having a little problems and he wasn't really dealing – because, now Phase; he got to a level where he was charging him more money. So he says, 'maybe I can get this guy, I can get him to do it for a lot cheaper, it would be cheaper for me and give me good quality as well.'

MN: Now he was Flash's manager, Ray Chandler?

AM: Yes, he was. Grand Wizard Theodor and all of those—

MN: --now they were working out Morrisania mainly, right?

AM: Yes, Morrisania area. Like Cyprus, St. Anne's, all that.

MN: Now do you have any copies of those flyers here?

AM: Yes, I have a few.

MN: Because, I'd love if you could show them to Charlie and hold them up so we could film them because this is like – totally historic stuff. I know Ray Chandler pretty well, he's a character.

AM: Everybody yo. [Laughs] When we used to do parties together or he used to do a party and I'd be at the door with him –

MN: At the Black Door?

Interviewee: Albert Mercado
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
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AM: Yeah, at the Black Door, at The Renaissance, Older Bar and Bar Room or when we used to do the big Armory shows when we brung out Sugar Hill Gang. And – Blondie and all of them out, and we took them out of there, and what's his name – Madonna, we had these big shows done in the Armory because that place holds a lot of people. Armory is very big – that's like, going to the Garden.

MN: That's the armory up at 168th?

AM: No, not that one – No, the one in Harlem on 142nd street—

MN: Right near by the river?

AM: Right, by the river, that one we used to rent a lot.

MN: So yeah if you could hold up some of these flyers, that'd be great. – Now where was the Black Door located?

AM: The Black Door was located on Boston Rd—

MN: Between where and where?

AM: It was more going into like, getting ready to hit 174th street—

MN: OK, so it's further up, close to like where Prospect was?

AM: Yeah, close to up where Prospect and stuff like that—

MN: So, yeah, Anna?

Anna Neumann: I was just wondering, like, at the time when you got kind of more, started to tag around with the graffiti artists – how did the other gang members react to that?

AM: How did they reacted by me being involved with graffiti? When I got out of the gangs and got more into more graffiti? There wasn't a problem with that because we had other Spades there kind of during that time, and during that time it was hitting hard the subways. Two, like Slide 2, Cool C – you know what I mean? Cool Kevin 1. You had a lot of dudes that were Spades, they were all Spades as well, so it wasn't a problem with that.

MN: Now when did you get the name, the Lava designation, as opposed to Straight Man?

AM: OK, how I got to coming up with the Lava is that one day I come back from the yard and – my brother didn't come out with me that day, he did something somewhere else that day, I think he was hitting somewhere else, he was already home when I got home – I got home like at four in the morning. He tells me 'Yo, the best thing you can do is to get that paint off of you is go get yourself some soap, some of that Lava Soap they sell down in the store, ' you know what I mean? They sell it down in the store, so when I go, because they had – it's a construction soap, the way it takes a lot of stuff out her. So, I brought it and I took it upstairs, and I was looking at it, and I was looking at the bar of soap, the wrapper, how it used to look – it was in big block letters, saying "Lava," with the volcano drawing on the background, and I said 'Wow,' – cause everybody at that time was getting other names. Like Phase 2 was writing Cassie AD, you know,

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Riff was writing Worm – everybody was writing different names, everybody was coming up with other names so that that would throw off, you know, the vandal squad. – You know, we'd throw them off. So my brother Cool Breeze, he went from T. Sip. So I said “Well, let me pick something that's short and I can get around with this a lot quicker.” You know, so, I looked at the bar, I said ‘Yo, bro – I think I'm a use this name, man, this name it sounds hot. I liked the drawing and everything, you know, the way it looks, so I think I'm a go run with this man,”[Crosstalk] From the soap, before anybody else comes and grabs it and run with it—

Alan: Why 1 and 2?

AM: OK, well, the reason why I brung in the 1 and 2 later on – because you had other cats that was using the 1 and 2 like Little Rock and Prince and all these other guys that was back then they were putting 1 and 2, Pinky 1 and 2 and all that, you know what I mean? So, I was like ‘Oh, I'm a go with that, with the 1 and 2.’ Before it was just Lava 1. When I first did it it was just Lava 1, and then I put the 1 and 2, so it would be Lava 1 and 2, one and only, and that's how it stayed – From there, it stayed that way.

Alan: So 1 and 2 means, you're locking down?

AM: The whole thing—

Alan: The ownership of the word?

AM: Of the name, that word, name. Locking it down-- and it stood locked. I mean to my knowledge I don't know of anyone in any other state that came with the idea of the using that name –[Crosstalk] I think it's a respect because there's been other places like in other – states where other writers come from – they, fortunately, they end of copying or either writing someone else's name that has already been used, and it was used here first. Because this is the Mecca of graffiti, where it first started.

Alan: Well what if someone wrote Lava 3?

AM: You know, if someone wrote Lava 3 – Hey, it's alright, if I hear about now in these days—

Alan: No no, not now in these days—

AM: Oh back then? Then I would probably have a little problem with that. With that situation, you know I was like ‘Yo, you can't use that. I'm locking this down right here by telling you 1 and 2. Why would you want to come and put Lava 3?’ You know what I mean? – or either write the name period, have it even have the intentions of using the name.

MN: Now did you ever have to have a deal with anybody like that? Who tried to—

AM: No, I have never ran into that situation, cause I have not yet – and from then to now I have not ran into anyone that use that name.

MN: Now did you have – did people know of your Black Spades connection so that people didn't challenge you the way—?

AM: Well – now that we're speaking on that, yes. A lot of people did not—

[End of Side 1]

AM: -- want to challenge me on that there, to that fact, because of me and my brothers, the reputation the reputation that we had. And being from the reputation of being a Black Spade member – ‘don’t fuck with those cats, they’re not to be played with,’ you know what I mean? –

Alan: How tall are you Albert?

AM: I’m almost 6 4,’ my brother is 6 5,’ with [inaudible] change. You know? And my other brother was six foot – so you’re talking about 6 feet is big guys, you know what I mean? They was like ‘no, we’re not playing,’ and then have these other guys – they were little! [MN: Laughs] Fuzz and these guys were young! Fuzz-- I remember when I smacked him in the face on Allenton Avenue for going over somebody’s stuff – and one day my brother had him peeing in his pants because he had him like this – turned upside down, you know what I mean? So—

Alan: That’s because he was probably 3 feet tall.

AM: You know what I mean, he was short, he was a little twelve year old kid, you know? Because I remember when we got off of Allenton Avenue one day we happened to get off the subway because we smell the paint, right? We’re on our way to Gunn Hill, you know to hit those lay-ups that go by 225th and all that – and we said ‘yo let’s get off at this stop,’ – and we got at this stop, it was Fuzz and two other guys that were there with him – they clouding somebody, over someone’s piece. So I told them ‘yo, come over here man,’ it’s odd for we first – met, ‘It’s good come over here,’ and he says ‘what do you want me for?’ I said ‘Come over here,’ So he said ‘alright give me hand,’ boom, I lift him up, you know got him up from the track and stuff – then his other boy, I said ‘Yo you your boy,’ to that other boy ‘Bring that can, that bag of paint, bring it upstairs too, bring it up,’ you know? [Laughs] So, later on that day, you know, I end up [smacks] what I did to him [smacks] I say ‘yo you don’t go over no writers, you don’t disrespect writers. You know what I mean – ‘that shit about putting ‘Toys,’ or ‘Hot 110 you,’ or try to cover somebody else’s piece to try to throw yours on top of his stuff – that’s a no-no.’ You know what I mean? You know, cause we were going around, doing things like that – catching guys that was out there like doing foul play to other writers, disrespecting other writers. And they knew, ‘Nah, don’t mess with those cats, these guys are not playing,’ you know what I mean? If they see you disrespecting, *their* work, forget it. If they see you disrespecting someone else’s work than they are probably – are part of friendship, of like Phase or whatever or whatever or the writing group that was involved with, you know like – well I was involved with Ex-Vandals before I became I and These. I and These came about Phase bringing that out – he’s the one that first one that brung out the independent writers, you know what I mean?

Alan: What’s Ex-Vandals? [Crosstalk] What is the Ex-Vandals, what are you talking about?

MN: What does that stand for?

AM: The Ex-Vandals? It was just a writing group, you know, as far as knowledge of what it means – no, it’s just like, we were vandals—[Crosstalk]

MN: Was there a certain standard you had to be up to, to do this? Was this only people who had a certain level of expertise?

AM: Yeah, well –

MN: Was it like a trade association?

AM: It was a trade association most likely, it was like a name where people was just using –

Alan: The Ex-Vandals were the most famous – [Crosstalk]

AM: Writing crew, yeah back then, besides Vanguard –

Alan: Right, the Vanguard, and ‘Ex’ stand for ‘Experienced Vandals,’ –

MN: Experienced Vandals, that’s very –

Chris: Yeah, and they were out of Erazmis High School. [Crosstalk]

AM: Right, they started from Brooklyn and then later on, they went from Brooklyn to Manhattan, got to all of a lot of Manhattan writers where then later on you had these dudes from the Broadway writing ‘Ex-Vandals,’ you had Stay High, he was one of the first ones—

MN: Now were these guys like racially mixed? Like you had Black, and White kids also?

AM: Yeah, we have Blacks, Latinos, Whites that were Ex-Vandals as well.

Alan: Was that the first writing group that you were down with?

AM: The first writing group that I was down with.

MN: Now let me ask you a question that you don’t have to answer because I know like Chandler, and I know Disco Whiz – Did you have enough juice so you could get away without carrying a gun?

AM: Yeah.

MN: OK, so you never had to carry a gun?

AM: No I never had to carry a gun.

MN: OK, well that’s amazing in those things, because some people did. [Crosstalk]

MN: I knew Chandler, so –

AM: There was a couple of guys that carried guns, he carried a gun—

MN: Well I know Chandler –

AM: He carried a gun because he’s making sure that whatever he’s doing that day goes well, and nobody comes with the idea of trying to stick up the place.

MN: Now, did you know Louis Sedanio? You know, Disco Whiz, that guy?

AM: I know Disco Whiz—

MN: Yeah because he was, a, you know, a guard for things – so he had to carry –

AM: Right, cause he was down with the Casanova crew—

MN: OK, so, let's hold up some of the stuff because I think this – Ex-Vandals, wow. Ok that's like –

[Holding up flyers and other materials]

Alan: There's the Lava 1 – and 2, and the Ex-Vandals signature, and then why did you write 'Do it,' down here?

AM: Ah, 'Do it,' because we was like 'Go ahead, do it,' [Laughs] you know?

Alan: A lot of times when you, you know, capture with their signatures, they would write slogans—

AM: Slogans on the bottom, like –

Alan: --next to their names—

AM: Like 'Go ahead, do it!' or 'Can you dig it?'[Crosstalk]

AM: Or, 'yeah, you dig?'

MN: So that's almost like Hanthy young lord stuff?

Alan: Well that's, cause that's the same era and there's an "SM," and 'SM 1 on the bottom,' and then this is—

AM: OK this is strictly Black Spades pictures, photos of us, as members, you know, at certain events—

Alan: Can you show him the flyers?

MN: Yeah we want to hold that up for Charlie, you know—[Crosstalk]

AM: Ok, this is a magazine that I – I was put in this magazine and – in 2005. It's called *The Streets: the Untold Story of Hip-Hop*. Alright, and in this book here you're going to see the Cold Crush Brothers—

MN: Now did you know them back in the day?

AM: Yes, Grand Master Cash and all of them, from the Cold Crush—

MN: Yeah they're from the Phips Houses some of them—

AM: Yeah some of them from Soundview and all that. Then right here is [Laughs] the book, I tagged it all up, on the front cover.

MN: "Graffiti artist pioneer," Wow! [Crosstalk]

Interviewee: Albert Mercado
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: November 5, 2008

AM: This is another; this is another flyer, a guy here that signed my book. His name was Buddy Esquire, a very other famous flyer maker—[Crosstalk]

Alan: Where was he from?

AM: He comes from out of Soundview; he's from the Bronx too.

Alan: And he used to write something else before he wrote Buddy Esquire.

AM: Yeah he had some writing name, but I forgot, I don't remember his writing name. But he did, he did wrote graffiti; he was around during the time where KRS and Scott LaRock and all of them was doing graffiti—

MN: Right, now one question: did you ever get into B-boying or breaking?

AM: I did, I wasn't crazed so much of a dancer. I did a little bit, but I wasn't all that stuff like spinning on the head and all that stuff. No, I wasn't – You know, I was too tall for that.
[Laughter]

Alan: Did they print some of your flyers in here?

AM: Yes. I have something of my work in here too as well. They were Tolly Tone—OK, it says right here, the guys they put this book together, you know it says: “Art and graphic: right direction, right director.” Right? Then you got, you got this guy here meeting the Straight Man, Joe Konzo and Sleepy Johnson—[Crosstalk]

MN: Joe Konzo is a good friend of mine.

AM: Oh you met Joe Konzo?

MN: More than met. We've interviewed and we hang out together.

AM: Ok, he's good brother. [Crosstalk] He just came out with a book—

MN: --with a book! Yeah, no, yeah we were [Crosstalk]

Alan: --*Born in the Bronx*—

MN: His mother is a real good friend of mine, Larena Montenegro from Genited Bronx Parents, so, we go back a long way, looked for some [inaudible] together.

Anna: Suzanne knows him too, no?

MN: Oh yeah, Suzanne knows his father—

AM: Look it: this is a photograph of how the Bronx looked—[Crosstalk] [Silence] these are images that were done to the book.

Alan: Are those Joe's images?

AM: Joe's images.

Interviewee: Albert Mercado
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
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MN: We all set Charlie? Ok, so yeah that's what those buildings look like, man I watched – I used to take the third avenue L up to Piod and 70—

AM: Oh I got pictures here of the Third Avenue when it was up.

MN: Really? Oh wow.

AM: You have to look at it in the laptop.

MN: Yeah, you have some pieces on the Third Avenue--?

AM: No I don't know no – I have it where they were writing on it, but I got pieces that's on the train from like other trains. Not like on the Third Avenue. [Turning of pages] This is DJ Hollywood, one of the famous Hip-hop artists. He's one of the well-known—

MN: We talked about him in one of the books we're reading—

AM: He just had his birthday party a week ago. They had his anniversary party, and he's one of the oldest founders of Hip-hop--then later on came Lovebug and Cool Hurk.

MN: Yeah, I saw Lovebug over in Crotona Park in one of the old-time park [inaudible]—

AM: Ok this is a flyer of mine at a party that I gave at the PAR on 123rd street—

MN: Wow—

AM: This is one of my flyers right there.

MN: Are any of your flyers in *Yes yes Y'all*, that book by--?

AM: Yes, I have some. Three of them is in there, it's in that—

MN: The Charlie and Hurn book.

AM: Right, the Charlie Hurn's book.—this is a gang group which was called back then The Seven Immortals. They come from Port Chester, over that area. – This is the Black Spades, telling the story about us throughout the whole thing, if you read the book it tells you, you know how we was there—[Crosstalk]

MN: Now can you still buy this from somewhere, this edition?

AM: No, this is a collector's item. Very much you'll find this – maybe you might, if I could get connected with the dude, you might could get it through online.

Alan: But its 2000, it's from 2000, right?

AM: Yeah from 2000. So it's a possibility you might get it, you're not finding it in no store because this magazine, when it first came out, it came out and it was doing quarterly. You know, it wasn't doing, like, every month, just like Vibe and Source they were doing quarterly first like every other three months—

Alan: Do you have any other examples of your flyer work with you?

Interviewee: Albert Mercado
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: November 5, 2008

AM: Yes, of course. Now this here, this is talking about us; this is from the first division of the Black Spades. See, he's wearing his colors. And then in there it tells you how they went from Black Spades to Casanovas and then from Casanovas—

MN: Right, so the Casanovas were recruited out of the Black Spades by Chandler?

AM: Yes. They were security, for Hip-hop—

MN: Yeah, security for Flash.

AM: Yeah for Hip-hop, period.

MN: Right, ok – and they were all Black Spades?

AM: They were all Black Spade members, Tiny and all of them. Yeah, may they rest in peace.
[Crosstalk]

Alan: Did you become security for Casanova?

AM: No, no I never became security. I never got involved with all these other groups. Later on, you know they went in from that to the other – I was more business, you know, doing flyers and start becoming a promoter—

MN: --You weren't the strong-arm guy anymore, you more the business guy.

AM: Yeah, more the business, trying to get money, you know [Laughs] [Laughter]

MN: For Casanova you probably had to carry a gun.

AM: [Laughs] Yeah—

MN: What everybody tells me is that your equipment-- [Crosstalk] you'd better be armed because somebody's going to take your equipment.

AM: Yeah, exactly, especially when it came down to battles. – And here's, this is K Slate, now he's on the stations now. That's K Slate's work, right? This is me and Buddy Esquire together.

MN: What year is from that?

AM: This is a 2000—

MN: Oh so that was the picture then—?

AM: Yeah. That's me and Buddy Esquire here – and that's, right here they is talking a little small thing about Smiley 149 who was a writer too.

MN: Now one thing I want to ask you: what were these places like the Sparkle Lounge and the Hevallo Lounge—?

[End of tape]

Transcriber: Robert Cardos

[BEGIN TAPE 2]

Albert Mercado (AM): Got that? And then this is another one here. This is by Siscar Digdis and this one was done by Sisco. This was done at the PAR on 123rd St. See this is—

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Gold Crushers Grand, wow --

AM: This is where you see the graph again. How graffiti takes a part at playing this. [Crosstalk] They were under me.

MN: That's a high school jam.

AM: Yeah. Jekyl and Hyde have no—well, I've met Jekyl. He used to live on Jackson Avenue years ago, which is Andre Orell, and he's a big rich man now today.

MN: From Mo-Town.

AM: From Mo-Town, and I remember when he was nobody. I was paying him, putting money in his pocket.

MN: Really? And he was a Bronx Guy?

AM: Hyde was from Spanish Harlem. His partner- he was from 110 and Lexington.

MN: But Jekyl?

AM: Jekyl was from the Bronx.

MN: Andre Orell was from the Bronx?

AM: Yeah, he's from the Bronx.

MN: Gotta' get him sometime.

AM: He comes out of the Bronx.

MN: Yeah.

AM: He's the one that helped put all these other cats on—you know, like Puff Daddy, and Biggie Smalls.

MN: Look, you know, this is kind of amazing. This is one of our longest interviews ever.

AM: Yeah, and then here is where we're going into the Black Spade. This is our prayer.

MN: Wow.

AM: This is our prayer when we're first opening our meetings. You want to read it?

MN: Sure. "Our Black Spade, God of the Universe, help us in this hour to unite our people in the power. Help us in this fight to get our people to unite. Oh, God that's above, help us get our people to love and give us aid to help people see what it is to be a righteous Black Spade. O Black Spade, God of the Universe, help people to forgive us for our trespass against them, and help us to forgive those who trespass against us, cause forgiveness is a must. In the Black Spade God we trust, and God bless those who gave the ultimate sacrifice so Black Spades could walk in glory twice and be upright and precise. Help us to walk in the path of intellect and help us in the struggle for your respect, because it is in Your image that we are made to be a righteous Black Spade. Amen."

AM: That's the other one.

MN: "Straight Man: Black Spades' fraternal order." Wow. "Fraternal order of the Black Spades is a brother-sisterhood, organized in memory of the brothers and sisters who sacrificed their lives in the struggle for identity and purpose in our community. Brother and sister who call themselves Black Spades, whose original purpose was to be a contributing force in our community, but was unconsciously diminished down to the level of nothing but a so-called 'street gang.' Our reorganization as a brotherhood-sisterhood organization is to set the record straight by showing our true creed by reorganizing ourselves to help deal with the many concerns that affect our communities. This action is so that the brothers and sisters who made the ultimate sacrifice would not, and will not, have given their lives in vain. Mr. Albert Mercado, a.k.a. Lava 1 2." Now, when was this written?

AM: This was written five years ago.

MN: Okay, so it's like an attempt to reorganize as a community organization.

AM: Now, we'd gotten back together like five years ago. We'd gotten back together so that way we could—we're not in big as numbers as we was. But the little that we are—you know what I mean—we keeping this legacy of the Black Spades still going.

MN: Now, these are mostly people in your generation?

AM: In my generation. These are all members that's keeping this going. From my time, when we first started this.

Dr. Oneka LaBennet (OL): How many are you?

AM: How many are us? Well, we like somewhere maybe like a hundred and something heads right now, as we speak.

OL: And before? Like back in the day?

MN: Thousands.

AM: Before, back in the day, there were thousands. We were in thousands. You know what I mean? Like, I said, seven thousand four hundred and something members strong, throughout New York City. Now, today, we're little. We're trying to expand it. You know what I mean? You try to go other places where there was. I brung it to the table at the last meeting, about me opening a chapter for the fraternal order, to see how far we go with that, you know what I mean? If I dared to put that situation in before, I don't think I would have a problem with it now. So, it's like on the table. We haven't okayed it yet, you know what I mean, but we—I made a counsel. Our counsel is fifteen members, of the council that runs the whole body. And I'm one of the consuls. You know, my part in the Black Spades today is events and entertainment. You know? That's my program.

MN: Yeah.

AM: Everybody else has other programs, you know, like treasury, secretary, you know, stuff like that. Speakers, you know what I mean? Whereas we can all speak, but we have particular speakers that speak, like when we going into—like, we be in the background. They do all the talking.

MN: Right.

AM: You know what I mean? And these are guys that go into the schools, you know, go inside the schools and talk to the kids, and tell them “Yo, this is not what it's all about.” You know what I mean? We don't “been there, did that.” You know what I mean? There's things about the Bloods and the Crips and all these other gangs' arrivals that's out here now today. You know, we try to reach out to the communities, and letting the kids know that's not what it's about, getting involved with that. You know what I mean? Cause we almost stopped the violence now today. You know, we have marches and parades and anything that has to do with some big stuff about police brutality, beat on a kid, or whatever, and use their force or violence, we be marching down there. You know what I mean?

MN: Yeah. So let me have your card, because I—you know—I work with a lot of community leaders.

AM: Yeah. Okay, this is a cookout memory –

MN: A cookout!

AM: Yeah, a cookout we gave. Memory Cookout. We do them every year. These are certain, you know, different logos.

MN: Look at this.

AM: This is what's in back of—well, we have the same logo on one of our T-Shirts. And we have that same logo on our new jackets, on the back, you know?

MN: This is fascinating.

AM: This is some more reading material, there. Now, we going to get into—this is like a trio of things that we do.

MN: Yes, okay.

AM: Okay, there's a picture of me wearing the black spade.

MN: [Laughs] With a Zulu?

AM: Yeah, with a Zulu. This is my jacket. This is my—our—first jacket I got. See?

MN: That's the old jacket?

AM: The new one's got different colors. They got, it's like: red, black and green.

MN: You still have this jacket?

AM: I still have this jacket.

MN: Does it fit?

AM: Yes, it fits.

MN: [Laughs]

AM: That's me there. One of my members: Campy. He's a spokesman, a speaker. This is our banner in the back at one of the functions. That's me with a Zulu. The Zulu brothers. That's me looking red alert [MN Laughs], a whole bunch of—one of the old cats, when he was rock steady. He's real fat now [MN Laughs]. A couple of female rappers that was rapping back in the days. This is at one of the Zulu things—parties—two years ago at the Kennedy center. They go Africa Bambada there. That's Grandmaster Cash, right there, from the —

MN: Cold Crush?

AM: – Cold Crush. There's all our spades here. There's a shirt of a member, the other shirt of another member with the other logo. We got all kinds of shirts. You know, t-shirts that we always come in on making. There's some other shirts here too, see. These guys like the wings. See?

MN: Yes.

AM: This was at my birthday party. A birthday party I gave. This was this summer at Crotona Park—

MN: At Old Timer's Day?

AM: Old Timer's Day, exactly.

MN: So you guys have a reunion?

AM: Yeah, a reunion thing over there.

MN: Okay.

AM: That's me again. Who do you see there? Do you know?

MN: Charlie?

AM: Charlie.

MN: Charlie (Eo?)

OL: Eo.

AM: You know him?

[Crosstalk]

AM: These are the parades that we attended—you know—

MN: Well good. You know, this is great stuff. So, I mean, this is—again—most of the time we go this long we end up doing two interviews. This is like close to a world record [AM Laughs]. But, you know, in winding it up: is there anything you would like to leave—especially for young people who are going to be listening to this interview, or some portion of it? What would you like to say about your life and your legacy?

AM: Well, as far as my life and my legacy, from taking it from a negative turn to a positive, turning it over to a positive-type thing: mine wasn't going very well at the beginning, and then it turned out to, you know, it took me a couple of punishments, you know, like to wake up and smell the coffee. It took me at old age to learn "No, you ain't got it in you too many more. You ain't got too many more time to do. You know what I'm saying? You're getting too old for that shit." You know, when I came home I was at the age of like forty six going at forty seven, and I'm now fifty four. You know, I can't picture myself going in this system again, you know, first of all. Unless I, you know, someone there's very dearly close to me, or hurt one of my family

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members or something like that, well I might have to go out, all out, and do something that might cause me to do time—which I'm not trying to go there.

Dr. Claude Magnum (CM): You mean like John McCain or somebody?

AM: You know [laughter] I'm not trying to go there with that, you know what I mean? But, you know, I did a big turnover, and a lot of people see that, a lot of my friends and peers that I dealt with, they was like: "You made a whole 360. You a changed person today. You're not the same guy that I knew like 20 years ago, 30 years ago. I mean, when you was like—you wasn't trying to hear shit. You know, you was hard headed, you was just going for whatever you wanted to go for and that was it. You know what I mean? You didn't want to take heed to what people was telling you." You now what I'm saying? I was very hard headed. You know, I guess we all like that when you aren't a tourist like me, very hard headed [MN laughs], bull headed. [Laughs] But you know, as far as the kids is concerned, you know, all I can say: "Yo, we all learn from mistakes, man. We all learn through our struggles, you know? And I've gone through many struggles doing my time, you know, from doing my late 60s—from late 60s all the way through the 70s and 80s—I've seen a lot of barriers that came across me. You know what I mean? That I've seen a lot of things happen, you know, as far as where I see our society is versus in my family relationship, you know, with my own peers and my families and cell members going through stuff. So, I've learned a lot from that, you know? All I could the kids now today is: man, you know, don't wait too long to wake up like I did, you know. If you go through these things, you know, just try to avoid that. Avoid from other guys like telling you "yo, let's get involved with this," or "let's do this, that and the other." You know, have your own head. Think for yourself. You know what I mean? Don't let nobody think for you. You know what I'm saying? You know, put you up to doing anything you don't want to do. You know. That's all I can say.

MN: Well, thank you very much. You know, this was a very powerful and important interview. Thank you for sharing things with us and, you know, stay part of our family and, you know, keep us posted on what your organization is doing and maybe we can help out.

AM: Maybe there'll be a day, maybe we can come up in here as—

MN: As a group.

AM: —as a group, a few of us could come up here and talk.

MN: Absolutely. And if you need me to come talk to your group, you know, I do all sorts of stuff in Bronx history with music. I can do that too.

AM: Alright, we can do that. We can work that out. You know, we can work it where we meet with you or you meet with us.

MN: Yeah, either way. Thank you very much. And Alan: great job and thank you for doing this.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]