



2-18-2008

Altschul, Barry

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Altschul, Barry. February 18, 2008. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham Research Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Fordham Research Commons. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu, bkilee@fordham.edu.

MAXINE GORDON (MG): Monday February 18, 2008. Bronx African American History

Project interview with Barry Altschul. A-L-T-S-C-H-U-L. We're going to begin. Could you tell me the date of your birth?

BARRY ALTSCHUL (BA): January sixth, 1943.

Maxine Gordon (MG): And where were you born?

BA: In the Bronx. What's called now the South Bronx.

MG: It wasn't called the South Bronx then?

BA: No, they didn't do things North and South. They did it East and West. So, we were the West Bronx. I was on the line between the West Bronx and the East Bronx, which was I think the line was Webster Avenue or Third Avenue, something like that.

MG: And where were you born in particular? What hospital?

BA: Dr. Leffs Baby Hospital on the Grand Concourse

MG: So, do you know the history of your family moving to the Bronx? Do you know where they came from?

BA: Yes, they came from, well, they came from actually – started in the Middle East, now we're talking about a thousand years ago. Started in the Middle East, went into Spain, got caught up in the inquisition, so, from Spain they went to the Alsace up in France, and from the Alcace they went into Eastern Europe, Russia. My parents came from Russia. They landed at Ellis Island and started living in Harlem. They moved from Harlem to what was then called the East Bronx, where Jimmy Owens and those cats came from, and then they moved over to where I was born, and I lived there in that area for 22 years. I moved out of my parents' house when I was about 17 and a half, 18 but moved near there. So, I stayed in the Bronx for 22 years of my life.

MG: Wow. And so, did you have siblings?

BA: I have an older sister.

MG: Was she born in the Bronx also?

BA: She was born in the Bronx, but on the other side near Jimmy Owens. I think it was Prospect Avenue, is where we were.

MG: And so, did your father work in the Bronx?

BA: My father was a laborer, so he worked wherever he could. And then he got hurt and he drove a taxi for the remainder

MG: And your mother, she stayed home?

BA: Housewife, yeah.

MG: And where did you go to school?

BA: I went to school in the Bronx. PS 70, was my public school. PS 117 was the Jr. high school, and Taft High School was the high school.

MG: And did you start playing music – studying music in school in the Bronx?

BA: No, actually my sister is a Julliard graduate concert pianist and like that, so, she was practicing at home and I used to go to the piano and imitate what she played when I was two, I'm told. I remember being forced into piano lessons from the age of two to five with my sister's piano teacher, and then I rebelled against the piano. It was too much. They should never have given me formal lessons at that age and didn't touch the piano until I was about sixteen. But I tried clarinets when I was nine, and when I was 11 I got to the drums and that got me.

MG: But did you play the drums in school?

BA: Yes, in public school.

MG: [inaudible]

BA: They had an orchestra. They had – yes.

MG: So, would that be elementary school?

BA: Eleme – I started in, well, I started in elementary school. Mr. Tuddleman.

MG: PS

BA: PS 70

MG: And where's [inaudible]

BA: Yeah, PS 70 is on 171st street, it's right next to where the Cross Bronx Expressway goes now.

MG: But it wasn't there.

BA: The Cross Bronx Expressway wasn't there, but as you drive across it, you can still see the high – the public school. It's still there. One of the only public schools in the Bronx with a swimming pool.

MG: Oh, okay. So, tell me about the ethnic make up of elementary school?

BA: Elementary school was mainly white. A few–

MG: Were they—was it Jewish, Irish, Italian?

BA: It was a little of all of that. Maybe four or five families being black. It was almost the same but there were some Latinos and a little more blacks thrown in the junior high school. But in high school it was 21% black. I know that 'cause I was very involved in that crowd.

MG: Oh, that was your crowd.

BA: That kind of was, yeah.

MG: So, what about in the neighborhood where you lived, was that Jewish – what they call Jewish neighborhood?

BA: The neighborhoods were—it was blocks.

MG: Uh-huh, by the block

BA: By the block. So I lived on a fairly Jewish block, around the corner was an Italian block, down the other way was the Irish block. Then you walk down these steps of Claremont Park and you were in the Latino and black areas. Which was about a five-minute block from my house.

MG: So, looking back, how was the interaction between the—

BA: It was great.

MG: Yeah.

BA: It was great.

MG: Is this really true, I have to ask you this, we've interviewed many people, and in this period you're talking about – you were born in '43, so early 50's—everybody says, "We all got along."

BA: Everybody got along.

MG: And I really want to know is this really true or –

BA: This is absolutely –

MG: Or is this like we're trying to write the history of the Bronx, that everybody got—

BA: No, no, this is absolutely true. The only problem that was going on at the time was with gangs. Now, these gangs weren't like the gangs today. Guns and stuff wasn't really used, it was chains and fists, and so on. And it was one white gang against another white gang or a black gang against a black gang. But when you weren't involved in the gangs, everything was cool. I mean—

MG: Did the Jews have a gang? No.

BA: Everybody had a gang.

MG: Oh yeah?

BA: Oh yeah. Everybody had gangs, yeah.

MG: So, like an Italian gang, Irish gangs?

BA: Yeah, there was the Fordham Baldies for example.

MG: Oh, the Baldies, they're very famous

BA: Yeah, or the Scorpions or the Archangels or the – all these gangs, you know, New York City gangs, everybody knew who they were. As a matter of fact, there was one glorified, and he lost a lot of money on this, he did a Broadway play of *The Capeman and the Umbrella Band*.

That was – New Yorkers didn't want to remember that – that was heavy stuff.

MG: Paul Simon

BA: Yeah, Paul Simon. Right

MG: But the Capeman is in Manhattan.

BA: But they came up to the Bronx.

MG: Oh. That was the Puerto Rican gang.

BA: Yeah, they did a lot of damage up in the Bronx. So, it was you know. But—

MG: Did you know people who were in gangs?

BA: Sure everyone knew people in gangs. And then, you know, on the other side, even when you started playing little gigs. You played for these Italian joints, and there was nobody in the clubs. Nobody cared. They paid you what they said they were going to pay you. And it was all like you can see, what was that movie? *A Bronx Tale*? And it was like that! There was a whole bunch of mafia people, I suppose we'll say, that were idolized. And that there was a group of people who wanted to be them, but there was other creative thing going on, and that was pretty much it. You were sports, some creative endeavor or gangsterism. That's pretty much what it was.

MG: Did you play sports?

BA: Single sports. I was a swimmer and I dove for my high school.

MG: Diving?

BA: Diving.

MG: They had a pool at Taft?

BA: No. We used the PS 70 pool and different pools, The Y pools and so on. But, yeah, there was a swim team. I did a 50-meter freestyle and I also was one of the divers.

MG: Wow, did you continue with that?

BA: I was doing some AAU—I was going into the AAUs – really starting to get into it—when I got hurt on a dive, and I couldn't get it together after that. I got—I really got—I was knocked out. I went under water, my eyes opened up bleeding and stuff, and I was trying these trick dives off of a thirty-foot platform and after that forget about it.

MG: So, how do you describe yourself when you were in high school doing trick drives—dives? Were you pretty outgoing and – ?

BA: Well, yeah, but it wasn't that. The diving and, that was one thing, but I was in a rock and roll singing group, a doo-op group, in high school and that was the one that we, you know, we actually made a record. I was on the Clay Cole Show and on the one with – Dick Clark Show and I was a “ooowawa” in the background kind of a guy.

MG: What was the name of the group?

BA: The group's name – they had a few names – one was called “The Students,” one was called “The Preludes” and “The Diplomats.” It was all the same group but we changed our names.

MG: Are you—those guys still around?

BA: A few, three of them, yeah. Yeah.

MG: They live in the Bronx? They all grew up in the Bronx?

BA: They all grew up in the – I was very, I grew up very different than a lot of people. I was involved with my family, but I had a group of friends that were very close, and we were like a

foster family. And it was seven black guys, one Filipino and two Jews. And it was where we could be at anybody's house, at anytime, for any reason, as long as one parent called the other parent, said "Don't worry, he's here." So, that group of people is still in touch with each other.

MG: No kidding?

BA: Yeah.

MG: Have you had a reunion?

BA: Oh, we have lots of reunions.

MG: Can we tape a reunion?

BA: Can you tape a reunion?

MG: Can we put together a meeting of the group [inaudible] all talk and we just tape it.

BA: Well, two are in California. You'll have to wait until they come in. He comes in once or twice a year, actually. When they do, I'll give you a—

MG: And they're all from the Bronx and all went to Taft?

BA: All from the Bronx, all went to Taft.

MG: Oh. Oh my.

BA: There are three of them dead.

MG: Three are dead?

BA: Three are dead.

MG: [inaudible] We can talk about them. We—do you have pictures and [inaudible]?

BA: I only have one right there on my desk. Can I? Is this? Let me see. Missing. Okay, it's put away somewhere else.

MG: Okay.

BA: I don't have it. But I have, yeah, there's like six of us sitting at this picture.

MG: Wow. Where do you get together now?

BA: At here, or actually at Sydney Mitchell's house. His mother, Freddy, has this house up in Mount Vernon.

MG: Wow.

BA: So we go up there a lot to hang.

MG: Wow. So maybe, you know, not now, will you give me all their names and we could

BA: Yeah but we were fa—we were like family, really like family

MG: [Inaudible] So great to talk about them, 'cause you know, something we're going to be interested in.

BA: Yeah, I mean it was like—

MG: You know, back—because we hear this thing about community and these friendships

BA: There was, there was—there was in high school like I say there was 21% black in my high school. But we were all together and there—we were singing a lot. So, my, first, we also, the school let us cut classes to entertain other classes during Christmas time and so on as singers. But my mother was called to school a couple of times because they said, "All he wants to do is sing with black people." And so my mother couldn't understand why she was being called to school for that, but and so, one day, we decided to cause a little problem with school. So, we walked down the hallways and one of black guys bumps into me, and I start cursing him out, he started—and we started to use words that are not politically correct today. To each other.

MG: You did it on purpose?

BA: Absolutely. In the school we—they're calling "You kike motherfu—" and I'm calling all kinds of stuff, back and forth. So the teachers call our parents to school and explain what

happened. Our parents look at each other and say, “They do that at the dinner table.” So the teachers really didn’t know what to do with us. I mean, we were very close.

MG: Wow. And the two friends were Filipino?

BA: One was Filipino. Two Jews. Me and Lee.

MG: Oh, one Filipino.

BA: Two Jews—

MG: Was there other Filipinos or was that, was that a little unusual for your school?

BA: No, he was pretty much—

MG: [Inaudible] we interviewed Joe Batan. You know, Joe Batan. Of course he was [inaudible]

BA: Yeah. No, he was pretty much the only Filipino family. He had a couple of brothers and sisters and stuff but

MG: ‘Cause it does come up now and then that there were [inaudible] families in that area

BA: Yeah, oh yeah.

MG: And you were [inaudible]—

BA: A lot of the Filipino families lived where a lot of the Puerto Rican families and Dominican families lived.

MG: Right. Joe Batan thought he was Puerto Rican

BA: Yeah, there you go.

MG: He was really surprised when he found out he wasn’t.

BA: Yeah, but the Bronx was really cool. Especially, I mean, at the places, the jam sessions, and the places where musicians congregated. Everybody was very helpful to each other. I mean, I was taken under the wing of, not only my peer group, but some of the big guys. Cats like Philly Joe and Art Blakey and so on. And when I was even younger, guys in the neighborhood, Leo

Mitchell and this guy Bruno, and telling me, “No, no, you’re not swingin’ right,” or “No, no there’s a—”, putting me in a right direction. Not holding anything back, being very honest and open and very helpful to me, actually. But there was no animosity, was no, it was all great. And at the jam sessions – there was a different jam session in a different borough – so you know, each time you went back to the Bronx which was Webster Lanes, everyone was, you know, stealing each other’s shit for the week. Practicing, coming back, and showing off and so, it was great. It was great.

MG: So when did you start? Let’s talk about when you started the drums.

BA: I started when I was 11. I made a tin can drum set and played to the radio.

MG: What? You just—something about the drums?

BA: Yeah, there was a guy in school that walked around with his drumsticks in his back pocket, you know. And he showed me how to play a roll and Chuck, his name was. Chuck.

MG: So drums was it?

BA: So dru—and I, yeah, it intrigued me.

MG: And what did you listen to at home?

BA: At home I was, at the time, it was the Crooners. It was the radio which was Billy Eckstine, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Julius La Rosa. All those Big Band, Neal Hefti Arrangements. All that stuff that was going on.

MG: But it was radio –

BA: It was radio.

MG: ‘Cause you’re parents were listening to records or to

BA: No, my sister—

MG: Your sister was classical.

BA: No, my parents were classical. They listened to classical music. My sister gave me my first Miles Davis records, and my—for birthday presents and stuff. So, she was into Billie Holiday and Billy Eckstine and Ella and Sarah, so I heard all of them too. Maybe a lot of singers at the time.

MG: She still play, your sister?

BA: Yeah, she teaches mostly now, but yeah.

MG: Did she have a big career?

BA: She didn't have any career, she gave it up. Shirley Jones was my sister's understudy. My sister was supposed to star in *Oklahoma!*. She was like a Oscar Haminstein protégé. Her teachers in Julliard was Oscar Lavant, Leonard Bernstein and Vincent Persicettie.

MG: Wow. She gave it up

BA: Yeah, she gave it up for her family, and totally happy about it. It's my brother-in-law who feels bad about it.

MG: Oh, she –

BA: But she's cool.

MG: She has no problem.

BA: Yeah, no problem.

MG: So did your—the neighborhood on your block, did your block change?

BA: My block was –

MG: Did it stay?

BA: No, see, my block, you go into the park. So across the street was Claremont Park. And—

MG: You're at the top of the park though right? In the map, I was—

BA: Yeah, well, yeah. The bottom I guess was 170th street, 171st street. But when you came to the park, everybody came to the park. So, there was the conga players over there, and there was the rock and roll—well, it was actually rhythm and blues, it was before rock and roll—the rhythm and blues over there with the radios and the jazz cats sitting there talking, and jailhouse musicians talking about stuff. That was the park

MG: So, that was the meeting place, was the park?

BA: The park. The park, yeah. Or someone's house. The one who had the biggest record collections.

MG: And who was that?

BA: There was this guy named Fred Etkin.

MG: He's the other Jewish kid?

BA: Not of this group or thing, but he was part of that extended group. And he was a trumpet player and we used to call him Miles, 'cause he had the, yeah, a lot of space in his playing, but he had a fabulous record collection.

MG: What, what was his name?

BA: Fred Etkin.

MG: Did you ever hear of Vincent McCuin?

BA: Sure.

MG: He was one of the older cats?

BA: Yeah, Vincent McCuin. Well, there was, well, let me, all these guys

MG: Arthur Jenkins. Did you know Arthur Jenkins?

BA: Yes, and Henry Jenkins.

MG: Was that his brother?

BA: I think it might have been his son, I'm not sure. Drummer. Henry Jenkins was the drummer.

Well, the older guys in here—

MG: Can you read my writing?

BA: Yeah. Well, John Hart might have been a little older and Jimmy Lines might have been a little older.

MG: Jimmy Lines was —

BA: Oliver Beaner. But my group of guys was—Billy Morimen didn't come from the Bronx but he was in the—Jerry Jemmott, Harry and Larry Hall, Bobby Capers, Leo Mitchell, Patience Higgins, John Sprolls and John Hart. Jimmy Lines. But Fred Etkins he gave up music but he had the record collection. Arthur Sterling is from the Bronx.

MG: Oh, yeah, yeah.

BA: Guy by the—piano player by the name of Lefty Sims whose one of the underground legend cats. Donald Bird, Tina Brooks, Jr. Cook lived in the Bronx.

MG: Oh, did he?

BA: Eddie Henderson went to high school in the Bronx.

MG: I didn't know that.

BA: Yeah.

MG: But he lived in Harlem, right?

BA: Yeah, but he, yeah, he went, for a while he went to—who else was there? Ashley Fimmel, trombone player. Patience I guess I mentioned. A guy by the name of Nat Valentine. Then there was the guys who disappeared. These were young legends. Bobby Ragoven, Larry Gladamen, Frank Mitchell, Nat Valentine. These were cats everybody knew about at the time, but either got chilled, OD'd, died before they were 24.

MG: Wow.

BA: All of these guys

MG: I got chills because I had never heard this before.

BA: Oh man, they were these—

MG: And this is when [inaudible]

BA: These cats could play, man. This cat Tommy Lee, he hung in the Bronx, but every night he went back to Manhattan. But he never was in Manhattan, he was always in—this cat at fourteen years old, sounded exactly like Sonny Rolans and he could do big band arrangements in his head on the bus.

MG: Wow.

BA: He'd come off the bus and there's a big band arrangement ready to be played.

MG: And where would you play?

BA: There was recording studio called Mira Sound Recording Studios, which was—

MG: Mirror?

BA: M-I-R-A

MG: M-I-R-A

BA: Which was a very big, big commercial recording studio. It was, Carol King and Leeburn Stoller, and these—I was a janitor in that recording studio.

MG: Yeah?

BA: And it was—

MG: Where is it?

BA: This was in Manhattan.

MG: Oh.

BA: And there's a guy named Alfie Wade who took all the young musicians and took them in the studio, taught them about recording, put the big band thing together. Billy Cobrin was the other drummer. But he was from St. Aldan's.

MG: Right.

BA: And the Bronx was the Bronx and there was a time when everybody got together from the different boroughs. And this was an event called Mixed Birds.

MG: And he put it together?

BA: This guy Alphonse Wade who now lives in France.

MG: Wow.

BA: Yeah.

MG: But where would you play in the Bronx?

BA: Oh, we played in—first of all, you could play in people's houses of course. But then there was Freddy's Bar

MG: Play in your apartment?

BA: In the apartment that I moved out of my parent's house from, yes.

MG: Oh when you had your own apartment?

BA: Yes, yes.

MG: How far did you move?

BA: I would say a ten-minute walk from my parents'.

MG: In the same? You stayed in the same—

BA: Near the same—in the same high school district. You know, I was near Taft.

MG: Is that your own apartment? You could afford to—

BA: Me and two—me and three other guys.

MG: There were four of you.

BA: There was four of us. This guy's parents got divorced, we had just been graduating high school, and they said to him, "You don't have to come with either one of us and if you want you can keep the apartment." And so he called us at first, said "Ready!" and we moved right in. Four of us.

MG: Wow.

BA: And I had my own bedroom with my drums set up and that's when all the cats started coming over to my house. It became a center, and we went to—they used to carry my drums actually—to these jam sessions.

MG: On the subway?

BA: Subways or walking or on rollers.

MG: Nobody had a car, right?

BA: No. We were also too young a lot of it. Freddy's Bar,

MG: Oh, I wanted to ask you—

BA: Webster Lane, the 480 something Club whatever that was.

MG: 845?

BA: The 845 Club.

MG: Did you ever go to a place called Kenny's?

BA: Where was it?

MG: Near Freddy's.

BA: Yeah, possibly. 'Cause we didn't remember the names, we just knew the joints here. And a lot of them gave us little gigs on the weekends, you know. Someone once asked me when did I

turn professional. Said I don't really know, one day I'm at the bowling alley, the next day I'm up the block in a bar playing for ten dollars. You know, so you don't know.

MG: And who would put the band together?

BA: Well, my first trio I remember was a New Year's gig at the Webster Lanes was with Larry Willis and Walter Booker.

MG: Wow. You put it together?

BA: I put it together. They asked me, said, "You want to bring a trio in for New Year's?" I said, "Yeah, sure." And I call Larry and—

MG: And how'd you know Larry Willis?

BA: I knew Larry from he lived in the top of Harlem. He was like 155th street or 149th street. So, you know, like I say, there was Wednesday night was Webster Lanes, Thursday night was Lennox Lanes. So you know, you met at the jam sessions, everybody, another night was Brooklyn—

MG: Webster Lanes is a bowling alley.

BA: Yes and so was Lennox Lanes.

MG: And it was on Webster Avenue?

BA: Right in the Bronx. And all these bowling alleys had lounges.

MG: Yeah and bars, right?

BA: And bars. So, they didn't stop us because they didn't have to pay us. And we just came there to have a jam session and it brought in all kinds of people who were drinking and all this, so they were cool.

MG: Wow. And you'd get tips?

BA: Sometimes they'd pay, but we weren't really into it. I mean some of the guys, whoever

brought their drums, you'd pay something so they could take a cab back or whatever it was but that was—no, there was no money involved. The one in Manhattan was up these steps, I think it was the Take Three it was called or something like that or the Penthouse. The Penthouse. And it was great. But in the Bronx then there was the whole Latin scene, and that was going on at the same time. And it was Hunts Point Palace.

MG: Did you play Latin?

BA: Yeah, well, there was these guys Larry Wints, the trombone player from the Bronx. Bobby Capers.

MG: So—

BA: Or Pete Marrow, conga player. Black American conga player, all these—they were on the Latin scene. They were playing with Mumbos at the Mario or Pucho.

MG: Right.

BA: Or all these cats.

MG: Pucho who is not Latin, from Harlem.

BA: No, yeah, but he was—

MG: Did you know Phil Newsom? He was a drummer on the Latin scene also black American.

BA: No, I didn't know him.

MG: He's a little older. But we interviewed him and he said, told us about all these guys from Harlem who play Latin—

BA: Do you know why Pete Loroca became Pete Loroca?

MG: Yes, of course we interviewed him [inaudible]

BA: That's right

MG: And who's his favorite—who did he idolize? [inaudible] Puente

BA: That's right. Yeah, yeah, he was – and you can even hear it in his trap set.

MG: Yes!

BA: That Timbali approach.

MG: Exactly true. And this—

BA: Milfred Grays—

MG: Newsom said that actually Pete Loroca was the best Timbali player.

BA: Yeah, he was great.

MG: He was a great Timbali player.

BA: Yeah, so all those cats. Junior Cook, another one from there. You know, Elmo Hope lived there for a while. Jimmy Co—

MG: Elmo Hope lived in the Bronx for a long time.

BA: Yeah, Hunts—

MG: He was saying he lived all over the place.

BA: Yeah, Lyman Place, around Boston Post Road and all that.

MG: But Lyman Place is not far from you, is it?

BA: No, that's why I was hanging out over there. I was sitting at the feet of the masters and you go and you walk out and Monk is coming into the house or Philly Joe or Donald Bird or—

MG: Let's go back, let me go back to the Monk myth in the Bronx. Did you actually see Monk in the Bronx or do you think you saw Monk in the Bronx?

BA: That was Monk. On certain street corners, fooling with the people 'cause he wasn't catching anything. He knew he wasn't ca—and yeah, he was in the Bronx. Monk came up to the Bronx. I don' know, he wasn't living in the Bronx.

MG: No, he did live in the Bronx for a while because—

BA: Oh, well that I didn't know.

MG: [inaudible] in their apartment, and so they moved in with Nellie's family and Nellie was a Smith, the Smith Sisters are from Lyman Place. One of them married Oliver Beaner. Oliver Beaner married into that family, and, of course, Elmo was there at Lyman Place. So, Monk and Bud would come to Lyman Place and they would play. And we interviewed someone named Robert Gumbs, do you, probably don't know him.

BA: Gumbs.

MG: But he's from Lyman Place and he remembers seeing the Baroness come and—

BA: Yeah, they all came up there. They all came up there. I wasn't hanging out then, I was a little young then, but as soon as I was fifteen, sixteen years old I was there.

MG: You were hanging out.

BA: That's where I met Junior Cook and Jimmy Lye, everybody was hanging at Elmo's house. His was, "Let's go hang at Elmo's house!" and me, I was the little white Jewish kid from the Bronx and all of a sudden, you know, Art Blakey and Philly Joe and all are taking me under their wing.

MG: Who come to Elmo's.

BA: Come to Elmo's and then sometimes come to the—

MG: Do you remember his mother? You don't remember the family

BA: No.

MG: You just remember the—the reason that everybody was there

BA: This was before Bertha.

MG: Yeah, yeah.

BA: Way before Bertha.

MG: She comes later. But the reason that that becomes the spot is he had the piano

BA: That's right

MG: You know, so I mean then you try to think why is everybody there and then you realize he has the piano. Which is the same thing Dexter said about Dizzy's apartment. Dizzy had the piano. So when you had a record day you had to go to Dizzy because

BA: [Inaudible] the changes

MG: He had to show you. Right. So, Elmo had the piano so everybody-

BA: So, Donald Bird had a piano too.

MG: Oh, he did?

BA: Yes, and when Herby came to move from Chicago to New York, he moved in with Donald.

MG: So, did you know him?

BA: Donald?

MG: And Herby?

BA: Well, I didn't know Herby at that time, but we knew each other.

MG: But, Donald you knew.

BA: Oh yeah. Donald Bird was teaching all of us. He was teaching in Music and Art at the time and most of my friends at that time were going to Music and Art.

MG: Did you go?

BA: No, that was a whole other story. My parents didn't want me to go.

MG: Didn't want you to be a musician?

BA: So, I made it. I made music and art. Matter of fact, I made music and art on the recommendation of all my teachers throughout school, I didn't have to take an exam.

MG: But you're parents didn't—

BA: They didn't sign the permission slip. And then when I started—I've been teaching somewhat at LaGuardia—and I told this story to the staff in the office, and they said, you know a lot people your age, their parents didn't give permission but they signed their names anyway and they turned it in. And that I was stupid I should have done it.

MG: So, why? They didn't want you to leave the neighborhood or what?

BA: Harlem.

MG: They didn't want you to go to Harlem?

BA: On the train. On the train all the time. Yes, they were afraid. I mean, but they weren't afraid when I went to Harlem to stay at Sydney Mitchell's mother's house because I was staying with Sydney Mitchell's mother. But going to Harlem back and forth, well, in a sense she was right. I did turn into all her fears.

MG: But not because of Music and Art.

BA: Not because of Music and Art. Actually, that's one of my big regrets that I didn't go there.

MG: You didn't hold a grudge against her, I hope.

BA: My parents?

MG: Yeah.

BA: I still hold a grudge against them for that. They're both dead.

MG: And you're still holding a grudge because they didn't let you—

BA: Yeah. It did a thing to my head where it stopped me from learning. It stopped me from doing things academically. I did everything by ear and all that kind of—

MG: Made it harder.

BA: Yeah, made it more difficult. And plus, now with my composing and stuff I wish I had that knowledge, you know, so I could just write the shit right out instead of figuring it out at the piano and all.

MG: You know, there's an interview with Charlie Parker in, I think it's a year before, maybe it was '53 with Paul Desmond in Boston, have you heard of that?

BA: No.

MG: Where he says, I want to go to Paris and study composition.

BA: Oh yeah, with Najat

MG: He said, I need to do that, and you think, you know, we think, what? I mean nobody can play what he played. But in his mind, you know that, he wanted—

BA: Najat Bloudonje.

MG: Donald Bird did go study with her, right?

BA: You know who else studied with her? Astor Piazzolla.

MG: Oh, I bet he did.

BA: He did, yeah.

MG: Down the street with the plaque for her and the sister. They were sisters, right?

BA: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

MG: Yeah.

BA: Yeah that was great.

MG: So then what did you do after high school since you didn't go to Music and Art? Did you graduate from Taft?

BA: I graduated from Taft. I had to go in the summer—during the summer, and then I just, I started playing gigs in Canada—Montreal—with this guitar player named Billy White. He came

from Montreal, but he used to come down to the city, and we hooked up somehow, and I was going up there playing all these bebop big gigs. That's when I first met John Hicks, came in from Detroit, Montreal was right there, you know, easy to get to. I played with Linton Gardner, Arnold Gardner's brother. Nelson Bittles, this bass player, another—Nelson Simons another guitar player up there. All these, Freddy Coles was up there a lot. And so I was doing that quite a bit. And then, I was also playing with guys from the Bronx. Frank Mitchell, who eventually joined Art Blakey's band, and then eventually did some records with Lee, Lee Morgan, and Jackie Mack. And then he got murdered.

MG: Yeah, when was that? Do you remember?

BA: He got murdered, let me see, it must have been in the 70's, early 70's sometime.

MG: And he's one of—Frank Mitchell's one of that group?

BA: Yeah.

MG: Of the, how many were there?

BA: Oh, no. Frank was not one of the group. There was no musicians involved in that.

MG: You were the only musician in that group.

BA: Yeah, this was—

MG: Frank was of the local—

BA: But then when I started getting involved with musicians in high school, see this was, these people were like from junior high school into high school and so on. The musicians that I met, I met when I was at high school. When I was in high school at the time.

MG: But the group that we were talking about—

BA: No, they have nothing to do with the musicians.

MG: But they sang.

BA: They sang and then when I started to hang with Frank Mitchell and all these musicians they all came. They all came to the gigs, to the jam sessions, they still do. They were all very hip.

MG: Did they all follow your career and everything?

BA: They're all very hip, jazz listeners, hip jazz fans. Their parents were jazz fans. So, I mean, we used to go to their parents' house and just take out their records, and they had all these bebop records at the time. And yeah, they were all, we were singing—

MG: But their parents would be born in the twenties if they're born in the forties.

BA: Yeah. So it was, you know, it was all black culture that I was involved in pretty much. When they came to my house they got the matzo ball soup and all that so, they, it was a great exchange. It was wonderful. And my parents felt safe with me with these people. They came into the house, they got to know everybody and so on, and so there was a whole other attitude than I guess most people their age at the time, with what was going in the Bronx.

MG: So, did your parents stay in the Bronx until the end of their lives?

BA: Yeah.

MG: And they always stayed in that same—

BA: Not in that same area but they lived in the Bronx. They wound up at Co-Op City.

MG: Oh, they did. That's the next move.

BA: Right. That was there last move.

MG: That's their last stop in the Bronx. That's a common story. So, the, okay, so, what, you said this remark about I became their worst nightmare or all their worst nightmares came true. So, what happened?

BA: Well, it was, you know—

MG: There's a lot of drugs?

BA: Drugs.

MG: In what period did the drugs start? In the fifties?

BA: Well, with me?

MG: Yeah.

BA: Drugs started with me in junior high school.

MG: That's kind of young.

BA: It was passing the handkerchief, sniffing glue or cleaning fluid, whatever it was, drinking a little wine before classes, and so on.

MG: What junior high?

BA: That was about the eighth and ninth grade. Wade, 117. And then, Taft high school was a whole other story. Marijuana, pills, uppers, downers, all that kind of stuff. But it was never, I gotta say, my whole drug experience has been with other musicians and other, or writers or people that were involved in Buddhism or Subud, all these esoteric things. And we used to get high and either play, practice, dissect records, have these intellectual discussions and so on. So, it wasn't ever an escape. Even high on acid. We would take acid, and wait until that first thing is over, and start picking up instruments. Of course, I guess you had to trust these people because after we finished playing everybody would talk about how they played or what they felt about the other person playing. You turned the time around or you did this, and you couldn't—and high on acid

MG: Yeah, you couldn't lie.

BA: Not only couldn't you lie, but you couldn't, you didn't get so paranoid where you freaked out. You really, it was just open, nice shit. There was nothing harsh about it.

MG: Is this in the Bronx?

BA: It was in the Bronx.

MG: You took acid.

BA: It was my apartment in the Bronx.

MG: But who brought the acid?

BA: You could buy it anywhere all over,

MG: In the Bronx?

BA: Everywhere. You could buy drugs anywhere in the Bronx. Yeah, all kinds of drugs are covered in the Bronx. I mean, everything, I mean from my whole drug experience—and then I got, started sniffing heroin, and eventually shot, was shooting heroin and got strung out.

MG: And were—a lot of people had a habit?

BA: A lot of people had a habit.

MG: You knew?

BA: Yeah.

MG: So, do you recall when it came in the Bronx or was it just there?

BA: You mean when heroin came in the Bronx? It was always there, and if it wasn't in the Bronx, you crossed the line to go into Harlem. I mean Nikki Barnes. We used to see Nikki Barnes all the time at the—

MG: Count Basie's.

BA: Count Basie's or the other one up the street a little bit. I'm blanking on the name.

MG: Was it Small's?

BA: Was it Small's Paradise or it was someone's name. There was a third one.

MG: I know he came to Count Basie's.

BA: But anyway, yeah, we used to go there.

MG: Did you see *American Gangster*?

BA: Yeah, I did. We used to see those guys hanging out in the bars, and it was the cops that was giving us the trouble, the problem. There was two cops that worked Harlem, and they were called Batman and Robin, they were really called—and they were some mean guys, man. They were really mean. And they would put bullets in between your fingers and squeeze and take a Manhattan telephone book and put it on top of your head and hit you with their billy club. And me for being Harlem, they just did it for me being in Harlem. I remember playing a gig during the Harlem riots. The gig was on 125th street, and my back was to a plate glass window and I played—and I was living in the projects behind—this was with Sydney Mitchell, one of those guys—he lived behind the Apollo Theater, 127th street in those projects, so that's where I was living. And nobody bothered me during the Harlem riots, because they had seen me in the neighborhood, they had known I was there, except the police. They put me through the changes. I mean, it was cool. So Harlem and the South Bronx was pretty much—

MG: That was your territory.

BA: One unit. I mean you just walk down the street a bit and you're in Harlem.

MG: Yeah, it's only, you know, two subway stops. You know because sometimes, now, we think of them so separately, but you know, if you take the two train to Club 845

BA: Yeah, it's right there.

MG: You get right off at the corner and you go down the stairs. We with—Dawn filmed it. You know, so we—then, all of a sudden I realized, because, you know, being from Manhattan, the Bronx seems, to me, I had no idea all this was happening.

BA: Oh yeah. It was really hip. Then I heard—who did I hear recently? Lee Morgan, when he got shot was living with Helen up on the Concourse.

MG: Did you know Jimmy Owens?

BA: Sure. I still know Jimmy Owen—

MG: No, I mean when you were a kid?

BA: Yeah, sure.

MG: He went to Music and Art.

BA: Yeah, Jimmy was one of those guys that you always passed his window and you'd hear him practicing. He's always practicing. That was the thing about Jimmy.

MG: He has an interesting block. Because Valerie and Bobby Capers first lived on the same block as Jimmy Owens across the street, and then, when she was sick, since she lost her sight, they moved around the corner.

BA: Right.

MG: Did you ever see or know about Maxine Sullivan or Cliff Jackson?

BA: I, no I didn't see them. I mean, we've heard the names but I didn't, no.

MG: Because she had an after school program and she had a building called The House of Jazz.

BA: Right, yes. Okay, that was Maxine Sullivan. You know who else? Gigi Grice.

MG: Yeah, right.

BA: The Gigi Grice High School.

MG: Yeah, right.

BA: He taught up there for years and years and years.

MG: When nobody, when people thought he disappeared.

BA: Yeah, he disappeared.

MG: He was teaching in the Bronx. That's very true. So, what, in what age did you get strung out? How old were you?

BA: When I got really strung out? I was about twenty, nineteen, twenty.

MG: Twenty. So that was would be in 60?

BA: I got strung out pretty much a year or so, just pretty much, yeah '64, '65, when I was with Paul Bley. I was just going to say something before that. Oh yeah. I remember when I was a kid, I was like thirteen or fourteen years old, they had The Y on 167th street or 163rd, wherever it was, used to have people Clock Terry come in and play and Billy Taylor come in, and you could go sit in with them. I sat in with both of them when I was like fourteen, fifteen years old and they were very helpful. This is what you're doing, or don't do this or pay attention to that.

MG: Would that be in the afternoon or at night?

BA: No, afternoon. It was like four, five in the afternoon. After school. After three o'clock. After school. Yeah, that was great. And then there were these, the parks. Louis [inaudible] Stadium, Poe Park, Van Cortland Park, a couple of places in Pelham, used to have these concerts. Free concerts. That's one thing, my parents—we were poor, but my parents were cultural, so to speak, and we went to all these free concerts. I saw Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, all for free, you know. In these places with Louie Bellson and Benny Goodman with Gene Crooper, and Anita O'Day and Roy Eldridge.

MG: In the summer they were—

BA: All these free concerts and it was fabulous. It was really great.

MG: So, they would go to that?

BA: Oh, yeah. They went to all those things.

MG: [Inaudible]

BA: As well as classical. Oh no they loved it.

MG: No, about you wanting to play jazz?

BA: It wasn't, it was okay, up until I was a certain age. It was okay because it kept me off the streets, practicing, and being on the streets at the time, I mean, there was some heavy shit going on in the Bronx at the same time, with the gangs, and so on, I mean, you know. But we were kind of isolated, and another thing was that if you were in a neighborhood that was really gang ridden, and there was, and they saw a talent in you, or a chance to get out of the neighborhood, they protected you. You were allowed to do that. You were allowed to get away. Yeah, they protected you.

MG: So they were [inaudible]—

BA: No, well, one day, well, one time, there's a period where you get beat up every day. Really. They start to see that you're practicing and you're carrying these instruments around and so on, and then they start leaving you alone, "Hey, leave him alone he's okay," you know, something like that. But there was a gang—you know, two guys come up to you and they say, "Give me a dollar," you say, "I don't have a dollar," so what the guy looks to each other, to his friend, says, "Give him a dollar." So, the guy gives me a dollar and he says, "You owe him a dollar and we want it tomorrow."

MG: Oh, they're practicing for the big time

BA: So, you know, they get you. You gotta give back the dollar, then another dollar, and they beat you up. So, one day, so you know, you do something crazy one day after a while, which I did. And then, I was left alone. And then the music thing got into there. But before the music thing, I was getting beat up a lot.

MG: Really?

BA: Yeah, well, I had to do something really crazy. You know, take a weapon and use it. And then they say, "Oh, he's crazy. Leave him alone."

MG: That acting crazy is more effective. I've learned that from being on the road.

BA: Right. [inaudible]. And being little, you know.

MG: And being short. [inaudible] say "don't fuck with her, she's crazy." And then they tell you, "you'll be sorry."

BA: Yeah, that's true. And then you see that works and then you get a reputation.

MG: And then you're stuck. "Oh yeah, don't fuck with him." Right?

BA: I had a birthday party recently and a guy from junior—from public school came that I know. Noah Brandell, he's a photographer, sometimes on the scene and so on. And we've known each other 55 years.

MG: You have friends from the Bronx from elementary school?

BA: 55 years, we know each other. And he was telling a story, he said "when I knew him from the Bronx I was afraid of him." He said, "He was with the Garrison belt and the studs with this thing and the guinea curl haircut and all that, and the rock," and he said, "I was afraid of him." And that's what I had to portray to be left alone.

MG: Oh, he remembers that about you. Very cute. Could you, you know, since you have a very good memory, could you give me a description of some of the clubs? Can you remember some of the local clubs in the Bronx? Because we don't have photos, we don't have people who can remember.

BA: Well, there are, was it Freddy's? Or the one that was down on Claremont Parkway?

MG: Well, there was The Blue Morocco and there's Freddy's.

BA: Okay, so The Blue Morocco was over there near Boston Road, I think, right?

MG: Yeah.

BA: Okay, so this was Freddy's.

MG: [Inaudible]

BA: Yeah, you walk in there's the bar, it's dark.

MG: Okay, is the bar on the left or the right?

BA: The bar was pretty much I think on the left.

MG: Okay, and narrow, right?

BA: Yeah, and some tables over here, and a stage straight back, and that's where you played.

MG: Okay, small then?

BA: Small. Oh yeah, they were all small. Webster Lanes was, there was a street entrance to the—

MG: Bowling Alley.

BA: No, well, there was a street entrance to the bowling alley, but to the lounge, that's the word I'm looking for. There was a street entrance to the lounge. There was a bar in between the lounge and the bowling alley and there was no real stage, you sat up in the corner. They'd move their little tables around and you set up the drums. I remember on an angle, kitty corner, you know, to the point of the wall. And there was a piano, a little old, smaller than that, those old Wurlitzer uprights I think. And, the horns. You know, there was room for a bass and the horns. Everybody played two tunes. Everybody played two tunes.

MG: In the jam sessions?

BA: On the jam sessions, right. Unless you were the big star.

MG: And you played all the time. You were the only drummer, right?

BA: No, no.

MG: Oh, you played two tunes and then another drummer—

BA: Everybody played tunes, everybody played two tunes unless you, if you brought the drums, then you had a whole set. One set with the cats that's running the jam session, and then you had to give everybody a chance to play.

MG: That's too funny. But if you brought the drums—

BA: You had—you were able to play the first set.

MG: So, did you bring the drums?

BA: Sometimes, yeah. And this is when all the guys came over to my house and we literally carried it from Monroe Avenue to Webster Avenue. No taxi, no bus. I had a trap case with wheels on it, we put the bass drum on top of that, and the guys carried the tom-toms. And we rolled down the street.

MG: I remember when drummers used to take their drums on the train.

BA: Yeah, I used to—

MG: Did you take your drums on the train?

BA: Of course, of course.

MG: The whole set?

BA: The whole set.

MG: Would you have something on your back or—

BA: Yeah, your cymbal bag over your, you know, and yeah, you rolled everything up. Did two or three things up and down the stairs 'cause there was no elevators in the trains, no escalators, so you carried them up and down. And sometimes, you know, you even snuck, pushed them under the turnstile and snuck with them and went.

MG: When you played with Paul Bley, did he ever play in the Bronx or you went down to Manhattan?

BA: I went to Manhattan. I remember the first gig I, you know, meet Paul Bley and Dave

Izenzon opened Slugs. We were the first group to ever play at Slugs.

MG: Is that true?

BA: That's absolutely true. It was a Sunday afternoon.

MG: Dave Izenzon—

BA: Dave Izenzon lived—

MG: What year was that?

BA: 1964, I think it was. Jerry Shultz was a friend of Dave Izenzon's.

MG: No kidding.

BA: I'm still in touch with Jerry Shultz by the way.

MG: He's living?

BA: He lives in New Zealand. Yes.

MG: I bet he got some Bob Thompson [inaudible]

BA: He might, he might.

MG: Remember Bob Thompson?

BA: I could tell you another story about Bob Thompson and me in Rome.

MG: Wow, oh.

BA: Yeah, matter of fact, I was knocking on his door and he was dead in the apartment. But with

Paul Bley, that was '64—

MG: The first gig?

BA: Sunday afternoon experiment, Jerry wanted to see how music would go in the club. Dave

Izenzon talked him into having music in the club and we were the first—

MG: Well, what was he going to have?

BA: Nothing. It was a sawdust on the floor bar. That's what it was. It wasn't about, it wasn't music, it was just a neighborhood bar, and it was Dave Izenzon that talked him into that. And then it turned into Slugs.

MG: Wow. And yesterday, they had a party for Lee Morgan in Harlem.

BA: Oh yeah, I didn't know that.

MG: She—a woman has it every year. We were talking about the last gig at Slugs.

BA: Oh yeah, Frank Mitchell was on the bandstand with him.

MG: And Billy Harper.

BA: And Billy Harper.

MG: And Maybrum they were both there yesterday, talking about it—

BA: Oh, they were there.

MG: That was in, if it opened in '64 then it closed in '73.

BA: Something like that, yeah, yeah.

MG: [inaudible] after that.

BA: Yeah, a little bit after that. It was open a little bit, but then it closed afterwards, yeah.

MG: And you're still in touch—

BA: Oh yeah, Jerry and I are pretty close.

MG: You became friends from then?

BA: Yeah, plus he had—we had a lot of mutual friends not in the music world. On the hippy trail world.

MG: He had that snake?

BA: He had all kinds of stuff, man. He, you know, he had a lot of money; he has a lot of money.

Family—

MG: Yeah, he already had a lot of money.

BA: Yeah, family money.

MG: So, you would come down to play from the Bronx and go back or you moved?

BA: Oh man, no, no, I lived in the Bronx. I used to go even before Bley. Bley always had a gig at Slugs. I moved out of the Bronx—I think I used to go to Slugs everyday, every night I hung out there for a year or two from the Bronx. Take the D train back up to the Bronx, man.

MG: From Third Street?

BA: Every single night.

MG: That's a long trip.

BA: Yeah, every single night. Me, Frank Mitchell, this guy Bobby Regoven.

MG: Is Frank Mitchell living?

BA: No. Frank Mitchell was the guy who was shot.

MG: Oh shot, he got shot—

BA: This guy Bobby Regoven—

MG: He got shot, when did he get—after Lee?

BA: After Lee, yeah.

MG: What happened to him?

BA: He messed with some people's women that he wasn't supposed to. He was found floating in the East River with his dick in his mouth

MG: Oh okay, so that gives you a clue what he did.

BA: Right. Yeah. So, but, like I said, this guy Bobby Regoven who is a bebop maven, he knows all kinds of stuff, you know, every single night—

MG: The three of you would come from the Bronx and go—

BA: Yeah, sometimes five of us. A gentleman by the name of Bernard Chambers. The thing with Jerry was he let the musicians in for free, even guys that never worked the club. People that he knew or learning—

MG: But there was no admission anyway, was there?

BA: Yeah, sure.

MG: You paid at the door?

BA: Yeah, you paid at the door.

MG: Because we lived down there [inaudible] and so we never paid.

BA: That's what I'm saying. There was lots of people who never paid.

MG: Lots of people.

BA: If he knew you, yeah lots of people. If he knew you were a player or—it was great that way. He didn't really care about it that way.

MG: That's a whole other—

BA: Well you know who's the other—his other partner Bob?

MG: Yeah.

BA: The other guy, he has the health food restaurant on Spring and Lafayette.

MG: No.

BA: Yeah, that's Bob's place.

MG: Wow.

BA: For years.

MG: And remember Carl Lee?

BA: Yeah, sure. Oh, it was a great place. And who was the bartender? That big black bartender, really muscular? Oh, I'm blanking on his name. Anyway, it was great that period. And so we

used to come down from the Bronx. All of us were still living in the Bronx. Leo Mitchell, Jerry Jemott, Nat Valentine, all these people came from the Bronx every single night. We used to get home three, four, five in the morning. It didn't matter.

MG: Right? Well that, I mean, people learned a lot from those nights.

BA: Oh yeah. It was great, yeah.

MG: People who played there were unbelievable.

BA: Oh yeah, it was fabulous. It was fabulous.

MG: [inaudible] played there.

BA: Everybody played there.

MG: Jackie McLean.

BA: Everybody played there. Everybody played there.

MG: That was a very good period. You had a drug problem in that, during that time?

BA: Mmhmm, I used to get high with Lee. I used to get high with all these cats, I mean. You know, I was in a band with Sonny Chris and Hampton Horse—

MG: Oh dear.

BA: The three of us together was out there. I was with Art Pepper.

MG: You played with Art Pepper?

BA: Yeah.

MG: At Slugs?

BA: No.

MG: Oh, no he wasn't at Slugs, right?

BA: No, no. No, no. But I mean just with these junkie guys that I was involved with, so yeah.

But, it took me a while but I'm cool. I've been cool for over 15 years.

MG: Oh very good.

BA: Yeah.

MG: Very good.

BA: Stopped when I was fifty.

MG: When you were fifty you stopped?

BA: Mmhmm.

MG: You started when you were 20?

BA: 18, 19. Almost thirty years.

MG: It takes a long time.

BA: Well, it took a long time for me to want to. I mean, I was kicking to cut down the habit not to stop. You know, and look, I was hanging out with all the cats, I lived in Europe and going back and forth all the time. So you know, Dex, you know, all the cats. Kenny Drew, Chet, all the—

MG: There's one.

BA: Sal Mystico, all the people that were living in Europe that before they decided to stop, everyone was getting high.

MG: If they lived anywhere near Holland, it wasn't a problem.

BA: Holland was never a problem, you know. It was great, it was cool. Don Bias was living in Amsterdam all the time. I mean, so you know, I got to hang with all these people 'cause I spent a lot of time in Europe in '66, '68, a couple of years in the 70's, and then from '83 to '93, I lived in France. And so, I played with Carmel Jones and Leo Wright in a band, I mean all these guys, but in Europe. And that junk scene, it was like, you know, it guy calls you on the phone and brings it to your house. You didn't even have to go on the streets. I mean, in the Bronx. You didn't really

have to—if you knew your connection, it'll come to your house, you didn't have to go on the streets.

MG: And you made enough money to support the—

BA: Well, you see I was always working. I took day jobs. Carrying packages or I was a stock boy at Alexander's or Corvette's, all that stuff up there on Fordham Road. I worked all those stores up there.

MG: Really?

BA: Yeah, and—

MG: So you had a day job and you played?

BA: I had day job and I played and after six or nine months, I'd get fired from the day job so I could collect unemployment. So that was a cycle until pretty much the end of Paul Bley, the beginning of Chick Corea when I never had to take a day gig again.

MG: Oh, good. So, you were able to maintain the habit through all those years?

BA: And the apartment with the three or four other guys, yes. But I wasn't just working, I mean, look, you maintain your habit anyway you can. And I was a street kid and I wasn't—

MG: But you also don't carry a reputation of having a habit?

BA: Some people knew.

MG: Some people never, they could stop forty years ago and they never

BA: There's a few people. I mean, there's a record company, you know this record company Simp? S-I-M-P. Anyway, the owner of this record company recently told me that there were people in the 90's still thinking I was really strung out. And there was a few people who knew, but I was one of those kinds of junkies who when I left the house, I was just maintaining. I

wasn't into nodding out and so on. So, I was kind of a closet junkie for a long time. There's a group of people who knew, but I wasn't out there in the streets, no, like that.

MG: Because sometimes that reputation stays with people way past—

BA: Well, from what I understand there's still a lot about me with certain people.

MG: Well, sometimes people like that, also.

BA: No, people—I mean I think it's stopped me from getting some gigs and stuff. But I'm really straight, now.

MG: But I mean, Billy Bang saying, you know, the thing that stays over you kind of hangs over you, and you know, Frank Lowe, you know he never—they had a whole other problem because of Vietnam.

BA: Yeah, well, there's another—other guys from the Bronx that we didn't mention, Roy Campbell, the trumpet player and William Parker.

MG: Is he from the Bronx?

BA: Yeah, Webster Lanes. He lived right across the street in the projects.

MG: Did you know him?

BA: Not from that time. He was much younger than me.

MG: I didn't know he was from the Bronx.

BA: Yeah. Those guys grew up in the Bronx.

MG: Well, you're young even for the people we talk to. You know, you were born in the '40's but we kind of—

BA: Yeah, I was kind of —

MG: [inaudible] our video producer, she laughs at me because, do you know Will Calhoun?

BA: Sure.

MG: Okay. He's from the Bronx.

BA: Oh yeah, he's from the Bronx too. That's right.

MG: Well, she wanted me to interview him and I was like "He's too young." You know, I have to interview people who are in their 80's and 70's, and now I say, if their born in '42, '43, okay because there's so many people in that period.

BA: Yeah, there's a whole group of people.

MG: I can't start with people born in the '50's.

BA: Who else moved to the Bronx? Charles Tolliver.

MG: Yeah, right, he was living out here.

BA: Yeah, he got his rep—we used to hear about him at the bowling alley.

MG: Oh, really?

BA: Oh, yeah. It was Charles Tolliver. Have you heard, did you hear this guy named Tolliver.

MG: Yeah he was—But he didn't go to school there?

BA: No, I don't think so.

MG: I think he moved up there later or something, I'll have to ask.

BA: But during the bowling alley days, his rep was coming around.

MG: There's all this music happening. A lot of music.

BA: Oh yeah, they had the Bronx Music House.

MG: What's that?

BA: Man that was, that was Fordham Road. No, was it Fordham Road? No. Tremont. East Tremont Avenue. East Tremont. The Bronx House, it was called, and they gave you music lessons for fifty cents. You went there for fifty cents and it was a great place. I took a couple of

lessons there, when I was eleven. With this Ben Halpern, he was the [inaudible] he was the drum teacher.

MG: The, you know, because your parents are more working class, rather than striving into the middle class and then up out of the Bronx, did you have an idea of the people on the Concourse as being—

BA: Oh, they were rich. They were the upper class. I mean as far as we were concerned, if you could move to the Concourse, you made it, man.

MG: Well, the Concourse didn't let black people live over there.

BA: Well, I didn't realize that they didn't let them, but I mean—

MG: Or walk, unless they were working. The police—

BA: That I didn't know.

MG: Harassed them, there were a lot of problems about black people and the Concourse.

BA: I didn't know that 'cause we hit the Concourse. Me and my friends hit the—oh yeah, man, all the time, but that was, you made it when you lived on the Concourse. That was Richville. That was very wealthy.

MG: But in the block you were on, those people were not.

BA: My parents, I think, were paying thirty-one dollars a month for rent and when it went up to thirty-four dollars a month, my father was worried. Me and my sister shared a bedroom until she got married. They slept in the living room. So, it was that kind of a block.

MG: So, there was, you think the people on that block fled from crime and—were there fires over there, do you recall?

BA: Not, not—

MG: Do you know when they say the burning of the South Bronx—

BA: Oh, that was afterwards, that was way after.

MG: You were gone.

BA: Yeah. I mean, I was gone by then, that was the 70's. That's when the South Bronx was really heavy, there was heavy danger at that time. Matter of fact, there was a couple of these guys that we grew up with, these black guys that still lived up there during that period in the 70's. I used to go visit them, and they used to walk me to the train station. I said, "I know the neighborhood—I can—I know where to go." And he said, "No, you don't know anymore. We have to walk you."

MG: Right. It's not the same.

BA: It's not the same, yeah.

MG: And do any of them still live in the Bronx from that group?

BA: Mount Vernon and some of their kids live in the Bronx now.

MG: Oh, Mount Vernon is—

BA: Right on top of the Bronx.

MG: Yeah, right, and people try to—

BA: Right, got little private houses or a condo up there or something.

MG: Have they—those guys from that group from Taft, you know the—how many are there, you said there were ten—

BA: Seven, seven or eight.

MG: Three are dead already.

BA: Yes.

MG: They died young?

BA: No, they died within the last two years.

MG: Oh, dear. They got sick and died?

BA: Yes. Well, one surprised us. He woke, I mean, he had a heart attack in his sleep, and one was sick, and the other one was sick also.

MG: Yeah, that starts to happen.

BA: Yeah, it sure does.

MG: Rough, isn't it?

BA: It's the first time, we've been together since we were fourteen, fifteen years old, and we're not all there anymore, you know.

MG: That, being with that group, that was the beginning of you moving into black culture and being with black musicians easily or.

BA: No, well, I always felt easy but I had a superintendent in the building that I was living in who had eight natural children and adopted four or six more, there were like fifteen or sixteen kids.

MG: In your building?

BA: He was the superintendent, but he lived directly across the street and he had this basement apartment that had umpteen rooms in it and a big cement yard, where he used to throw barbeques and so on, and he was my babysitter. My parents threw me in that family when they went to a movie or something. And he was friends with John Lee Hooker.

MG: Oh, oh my god.

BA: So, when he used to wash the floors or when I—the blues was always playing. So, that was my first real introduction into black people. Except my sister had a good friend who was a Billy Eckstine impersonator, Jimmy Fox, his name was.

MG: Oh, I think I've heard that. I think from Arthur Jenkins.

BA: Yeah, okay.

MG: I'll have to check.

BA: Yeah, Jimmy Fox. And he and my sister were very close and so, they also—he—that was another black influence in my life, coming into the house and so on. So no, I felt very comfortable from the get go.

MG: And black people seem to notice when you—

BA: Seemed to feel cool with me, yeah.

MG: Never feel like you had a problem?

BA: I never felt that I had a problem from people I knew. There were times when I had a problem, I remember a time being on the road with Sam Rivers and Cecil McBee when there was a couple of people from the audience who came back stage—

MG: [Inaudible]

BA: —who didn't think I should be there, right. And there was some musicians as well who felt I shouldn't be the drummer with Sam and stuff like that. Sam was very honest with me, told me everything.

MG: I'm sure he had something to say to the people who commented.

BA: Well, no, I told Sam, I said, "Sam, if you can find someone who can play the music better than me, by all means," you know, and he never fired me. Put it that way.

MG: Because the director of this program is Mark Naison, he's the one who started this, and there's over 200 interviews already. I only do the part that's about jazz because it kept coming up about the Bronx and Jazz and they didn't have anybody, so I was very fortunate, but as a group we've done over 200 hundred interviews, and he's white. And he wrote this book called *White Boy* because he teaches African Studies and African American Studies at Fordham and in the

sixties they tried to get rid of him to replace him with a black professor, he refused to go. So, he's one of those. And now he's you know, he does what he does and he's a good guy. You know, just refused to go. You know, you don't go, I don't go, you don't go or like Amiri Baraka said, you know there's always those people who when we start talking about white people, they didn't leave because they're like, what's that got to do with me? Right? So, you know when you lived through that period—

BA: And usually I was always very well accepted and taken care of and I mean, I found myself alone in Africa a couple of times, and that's a whole different experience than the Afro-American, but the African African.

MG: You traveled in Africa?

BA: Quite a bit.

MG: When you were living in Europe?

BA: There was one time when I was living here, I went off, I spent nine months on my own traveling around Africa and I was in Zaire, I walked a thousand miles into Pygmyville.

MG: Is that true?

BA: Yeah.

MG: A thousand miles?

BA: Mmhmm. I went over land a thousand miles.

MG: How do you walk a thousand miles?

BA: Well, by boat, and by hitchhiking, in the trucks.

MG: By yourself?

BA: I went by myself and hooked up with two people who lived there and they took me around, yeah.

Was that for—you just felt like you wanted to--?

BA: Well, I was on a roots search musically, drum-wise. So, I went to Africa and from Africa I went to Brazil, from Brazil I went to Haiti, and back up into America. I was gone for nine months.

MG: Wow. That's fabulous. Fabulous. And do you think that that—I wonder how something like that happens to a kid from the Bronx?

BA: I don't know, but there's one thing that I always was able to do, so I'm told and so it feels, and especially with the people I've been playing with, I can swing. And I think that had a lot to do with it, being able to swing.

MG: Yes, that does—but I mean, how, I mean, you think you are just born with the ability to swing?

BA: Actually, I think that, I don't know, maybe.

MG: It's possible.

BA: Though I've heard someone say to me, you know, if you take two newborns and you put them in an African village to grow up, their both gonna come up dancing and their both gonna come up, you know, playing and so on. I don't really know. I know that there were times when I first started playing the drums, I played the one and three instead of the two and four. I played white but I still was able to swing. I was still able to get that—a feeling that when the guys heard me, they said, "Turn that high hat around and you'll have—and that's what it's about." So, there was a feeling that I had even playing on the one and three that was the feeling that the body received which was swing. And the cats told me, you know, walk down the street singing a tune, and make sure that your left foot is always on the two and four as you walk, and they gave me all this information, it was wonderful.

MG: But of course you listened.

BA: Of course I listened. I wanted to play and I wanted to play that music.

MG: I mean they could tell you and it didn't—

BA: No, but I wanted to play that music and I heard it myself. I mean, I'm playing on two and four and all of a sudden it's the one and three and the guys are looking at me, what's going on? I say, oh yeah, okay. That was when I was like 11 or 12.

MG: But you must have been a very good student, are you teaching? You teach?

BA: Oh, yeah.

MG: So, do you apply all that you've learned to—

BA: Sure, sure. I tell them the same stuff, you know, walk down the street singing a tune, eight timed.

MG: [inaudible] when you teach?

BA: I'm teaching privately now but when I moved to Maryland. I was adjunct at Sarah Lawrence, but now that I'm moving back I'm going to ask them for the position again.

MG: Did you teach in Maryland?

BA: No.

MG: So, when you were in Maryland you could travel out of town from there to go on the road?

BA: Oh, when I was in Maryland I was an hour from Baltimore in one direction, an hour to Philly in another direction, near D.C and so I was able to do those things and travel a lot.

MG: There's no place to play in the Bronx anymore.

BA: Not really. Not really.

MG: You ever heard of anybody?

BA: Well, there was a couple of gigs—there's a gig in this Irish bar some place up in the Bronx that's still happening. And there's a gig, I think around 160 something street, that has jazz sometimes but mainly Latin. But there's a lot of Latin clubs up in the Bronx right now.

MG: Right, right. You still play Latin?

BA: Oh yeah, man. Latin is, I mean, the streets. That was the music we hear, you know, everyday. That was one of the reasons Paul Bley said he hired me is 'cause he liked the way I played Latin.

MG: Oh.

BA: Yeah.

MG: Could you play now with a Latin band?

BA: I could play somewhat now with a Latin band. If I know where the clave is I could play with a Latin band, but sometimes I get confused where the clave is.

MG: 'Cause there aren't a lot of guys who can do both. Play with jazz and the Latin.

BA: No, not too much. But, of course, you know, when—up in the Bronx, I was trying to play Timbales and all that kind of stuff.

MG: Oh you were?

BA: Yeah, I mean, it was there, you know, it was on the streets, so you go over and say, "Oh, let me try." And then you tried to do it at home. I brought a lot of that stuff to the drum set. The stuff that I played with Latin stuff, I was able to bring to the drum set. But not like Bobby Sanabria, for example, who's got that shit beautiful, I mean.

MG: Yeah, you like him?

BA: Oh, man, who's from the Bronx, by the way.

MG: Yeah, of course he is. Very proudly from the Bronx. No, he's very good.

BA: Oh yeah, he's got that stuff down.

MG: The Latin and everything.

BA: Yeah, he's got that down.

MG: I want to ask you about Bobby Capers because we're doing an ongoing oral history of Valerie.

BA: Well, he was like one of those guys that you heard about.

MG: So, if you could talk about him.

BA: He was—he was in the Newport Youth Band and then he got into Mungos Band. You just—when he was in the Newport Youth Band, “Have you heard this cat Bobby Capers?” I mean, there was these guys that before they were eighteen years old, they were very mature players. And maybe that's why a lot of them died so young 'cause they had a, they did, I mean, they were complete musicians. You could, you know, you hear some of the stuff they did today and they were seventeen, eighteen years old when they were playing it. It was great, man.

MG: Did you ever know him?

BA: We hung out a little bit. We played—he was a few years older than me. And then when he got to Mungo's he was on the road. Big time.

MG: But you call people being really proud?

BA: Oh, absolutely. Oh, yeah. I mean, it was like that, Bobby Capers, one of those cats.

MG: From the Bronx.

BA: From the Bronx.

MG: And do you think there's the kind of Bronx loyalty thing, you know, somebody from the Bronx makes it or

BA: I'll tell you something. The bass player who's playing with me and Billy Bang, Joe Fonda, there are a lot of moments when he turns around or he stops, turning, he says, "What is that? Some Bronx stuff you're playing?" Both of us look at each other and laugh because yes, that's exactly what it is.

MG: That's good. That's good. So there is a camaraderie?

BA: There is and there's also a certain—like, I'm writing this tune out with Joe to give to Billy and I'm writing out the thing and the bass player's writing the rhythm. And he says, "Is this the right rhythm?" I said, "Yeah, that's right." He says, "Well, what about Billy? Will he be able to get this rhythm?" I says, "Just you and me play it, this is natural rhythm for Billy. It's the Bronx Stuff." It's the Bronx stuff. And it was true.

MG: And he knows what that means?

BA: Yeah, yeah. Billy, play that Puerto Rican beat and he'll know just what to do.

MG: Very, very interesting because, you know, if I'm gonna—being from Manhattan—if I'm gonna write about jazz in the Bronx. Of course, it's Latin and jazz and doo-op and all that kind of music that influenced it. But I think, you know, there's something about growing up there and a way of thinking that does influence the people.

BA: Oh, absolutely, it must.

MG: You know, it'd be true anywhere, but you know, how it becomes this thing about New York, and it's what do they mean by New York. They mean Manhattan and Harlem

BA: Have you checked out the other aspects of the Bronx? Like the filmmakers that came out of the Bronx, the actors and actresses that came out of the Bronx? The opera singers that came out of the Bronx?

MG: There's a lot of opera singers.

BA: Roberta Peters and—

MG: Did you know the Pruitt family? Bess Pruitt, Harriet McPheters, James Pruitt.

BA: No.

MG: Okay.

BA: There's all kinds of people. You know, Penny Marshall's family came from the Bronx.

Mazursky, Paul Mazursky.

MG: But that's another project because we do African American history.

BA: I know, I was gonna say. But this guy Paul Mazursky, the film director, his father owned a delicatessen on the corner.

MG: Oh, is that true?

BA: Yeah. We used to go there—

MG: Did you know the—Eddie Palmieri?

BA: Sure, the Palmieri brothers, both of them.

MG: You knew Charlie?

BA: Charlie and Eddie. Yeah, sure. And well, their whole Hunts Point Palace—

MG: Did you go in the store? In the, father had a candy store.

BA: No, I didn't. Johnny Pacheco and all the Hunts Point Palace people were up there. City Island, Tito Puente had his restaurant up there.

MG: Did you go to the Hunts Point Palace?

BA: Sure.

MG: You did?

BA: I also went to the Paladium at that time.

MG: The Hunts Point Palace, you went upstairs?

BA: Yes, it was upstairs. That's right. Yeah. Right by, near the train station. The train turned around.

MG: Did you ever hear jazz there or?

BA: No. I went there for Latin.

MG: Do you recall who you heard?

BA: At the—

MG: Hunts Point. Tito?

BA: Tito Puente.

MG: Did you hear Tito Rodriguez?

BA: Tito Rodriguez, Johnny Pacheco. Of course, my dear friend who revolutionized Latin music and was not Latin.

MG: Willy?

BA: Well, Willy Codolen was there too. Johnny Pacheco was there. But Larry Harlow.

MG: Who was Jewish, right?

BA: Who was Jewish. They call him the Mirlacular Juda, and that's the Miraculous Jew. And he has influenced Salsa music all over the world. He's a god in South America. We know each other. He went to Music and Art.

MG: Oh, did he?

BA: He took—

MG: He's a little older than you, right?

BA: Two, three years, not much. But he learned, he got these gigs up in the mountains, these summer gigs where he had to play Latin and he couldn't get it, and he said, "I gotta get this."

And he got into it and that was that. 'Cause he was a jazz player.

MG: Did you ever play up in the mountains?

BA: Sure.

MG: Oh, you did?

BA: Sure with all those cats. Harry Hall, Oliver Peano, all these cats.

MG: Everybody played in the mountains, right?

BA: Everybody played in the mountains.

MG: Would you stay up there?

BA: Yeah.

MG: Arthur Jenkins he played up there. Pucho, they all played there.

BA: Pucho. There was two times, if you played, there was like girl singers and the big, they had weekend gigs, so you stayed there for the weekend. But then, in the places where you got a gig for the summer. You were the house band. You did the shows, you played with the singers, you played with the ventriloquists, and backed up the comedians and all that shit. Yeah.

MG: So, you did that?

BA: I did that for a couple of seasons. Yeah, sure. They were great gigs. They paid some money, man.

MG: And those would be mixed bands? White, black?

BA: Oh, yeah, yeah. It was playing. It was how you played and how you read.

MG: But often you were the only white musician, right?

BA: Oh, a lot of times I was the only white musician. Oh, yeah.

MG: But in the, up in the mountains that wasn't a problem, right?

BA: No.

MG: It never came up.

BA: No.

MG: Really?

BA: No, it never came up. Even—it never really came up from the guests. I mean—

MG: Maybe they didn't notice.

BA: They noticed. The guys were hitting on all the women up there, everybody's hitting on all the women, you know.

MG: [inaudible]

BA: You know, but they, it was cool. It was cool. And there was, mainly those bands were up in the Jewish mountains.

MG: Yeah, yeah, the Jewish mountains.

BA: You know, there was the black mountains.

MG: The black mountains, right.

BA: And Harry Hall and his brother Larry Hall had their Hall's Bungalow Colony. Their parents owned the only other, besides Peg Leg Baits, black resort up in the mountains. One was a drummer and one was a trumpet player.

MG: And which one of them is living?

BA: Larry. Larry Hall.

MG: Do you know where he is?

BA: Yeah, he's an usher at Lincoln Center.

MG: Oh, yeah. Do you think we can interview him?

BA: I'm sure you can.

MG: So, how would I find him?

BA: I'd have to get you his number from Bobby Regoven.

MG: Oh, would you?

BA: Yeah. Bobby Regoven's got everybody's number.

MG: Oh, there's always one. That's very [inaudible]. Oh, that would be excellent. That would be excellent. So he's at Jazz at Lincoln Center as an usher?

BA: No, he's at Lincoln Center. He was at Jazz at Lincoln Center until they moved the Jazz to the new building. So, he's at Albert, Tully Hall, or one of those halls. Alice Tully Hall, right, as an usher.

MG: Wow. The—what was I gonna—I wanted to ask you about your pa—one more thing go back when you were a kid. Did they go to the synagogue? Were they religious?

BA: Only on the holidays. My grandfather went to the synagogue.

MG: Did he live in the Bronx also?

BA: Yes. He certainly did.

MG: In the—right near you?

BA: Yes.

MG: In the same apartment?

BA: No.

MG: Oh.

BA: No, but around Taft High School. Let's say we all lived around Taft High School.

MG: Was that your paternal or maternal grandfather?

BA: My maternal grandfather.

MG: And he was very religious?

BA: Not very religious. Matter of fact, he kind of—he studied to be a rabbi but he was a great jeweler. And when he came to America, he thought he'd be a rabbi, but when he saw that you

had to pay to go to shul and do it, he said “To Hell with this shit, I got nothing to do with this” and so he just went for his own religious reasons and he went on Fridays and Saturdays. Didn’t force us, but my parents went on holidays. But my grandfather was one of the cats who did the clockworks of the Faberge eggs, and me and my sister went to the museum recently when they were showing them and there was—and we saw his name and all that there.

MG: At the—

BA: Met.

MG: At The Met, yeah.

BA: Yeah.

MG: He did it in Russia?

BA: Yeah.

MG: Wow.

BA: He was chosen as one of the artisans to work on the Faberge eggs—the clock parts.

MG: So, then when he came here he didn’t want—

BA: He came here. By the time he came here he was totally broke. He had to bribe people, you know, the Cossacks and everybody was trying to kill the Jews and so on. So, he had a few diamonds, from what I understand, and each time they got caught at a place, he bribed the people with diamonds. By the time he came to America, he had nothing and he fixed watches for the rest of his life on 48th—47th wherever the jewelry [inaudible].

MG: But then your parents came then? Or did your mother come?

BA: No, no. He smuggled them in.

MG: Later?

BA: My grandfather on my mother's side. My father has eleven in his family and my mother has nine.

MG: Oh my.

BA: So, my grandfather went back and forth a bunch of times smuggling one or two kids at a time. And the same with my paternal grandfather who died when I was nine months old or something, so I never knew him.

MG: Eleven? There were eleven?

BA: I've got a hundred and one first and second cousins.

MG: Get out of here.

BA: No. It's true.

MG: Do you know all these people?

BA: I know most of them, yes.

MG: That is quite unbelievable. Did they all live in the Bronx?

BA: A good deal of them did.

MG: When you had family gatherings wasn't it kind of large?

BA: Every Sunday was either one family or the other. Yeah. Let's see—who lived in the Bronx?

MG: You have a hundred and one first—

BA: First and—there must be more now because that was when I was bar mitzvah-ed.

MG: And they all came?

BA: Oh, it was a very large bar mitzvah, yeah.

MG: And were they all—

BA: It's like a wedding.

MG: Working class?

BA: Yeah.

MG: Did they all have that same? Or did some of them make it to the top, or?

BA: One or two. No, well, one of my mother's brothers moved out to California and became successful in real estate. Another cousin moved to Chicago and became a doctor.

MG: Okay, so they were—

BA: So, there was just a few, yeah. My father's brothers, they all worked in construction. My mother's two brothers were upholsterers—chair upholsterers. One as a hobby made furniture—beautiful furniture. I wish I had a couple of those chairs now. He's still alive. Ninety-six.

MG: Wow, that's good.

BA: Yeah, but Astoria. He lived in Astoria, not the Bronx. But yeah, I had a lot of relatives. Matter of fact, there was a time when I said I'm no longer going to hang out with you guys. That's when I started wanting to practice and stay in instead of going every Sunday to the family's house, you know. One family or another or they came to our house. But families were close, yeah.

MG: But, and they didn't—I mean, they still—did they come to hear you play?

BA: Some of them—the younger generation, not the older.

MG: They did.

BA: Yeah, the younger generation. Matter of fact, I have a wedding in March to go to. People coming in from California, from Argentina, from here and there and all over.

MG: When that—so, when they have a wedding it's like five hundred people, right?

BA: Something like that, yeah.

MG: And they're all related to you.

BA: They're all, yeah.

MG: Goodness.

BA: I mean, I just found a whole group of Altschuls in Buenos Aires.

MG: If they're—are you related to Altschuler also?

BA: No.

MG: It's only—it has to be your, spelled the way?

BA: Yes.

MG: Bob—remember Bob Altschuler?

BA: Yeah, sure. There was also a whole bunch of bankers named Altschulers. But no, nothing to do with us. No. And some of them spelled their name the Russian way, instead of C-H, with a Z.

MG: Oh.

BA: Yeah. And there's a part of that went to South America. There's a part that went to Prague, Czechoslovakia, who, from what I understand, Miroslav is my third cousin.

MG: No kidding.

BA: Mmhmm. Even though he's not Jewish, it was part of that being afraid of—and converting and being baptized.

MG: [Inaudible].

BA: His parents—yeah, but his parents weren't Jewish either. It was—they told me. His father came up to me when I played the Prague Jazz Festival in '66, '65. He came up to me, he says, “Excuse me. Can I ask you some personal questions?” He started asking me about my relatives that came from Russia and so on, he says, “I think we're related.”

MG: Wow. But they were Jews and then they—

BA: Yes, right.

MG: Couldn't be Jews.

BA: Couldn't be Jews anymore. And then, I met a whole bunch of people in Argen—in Buenos Aires that showed me pictures of my father, my mother, my aunts and uncles and the reason they knew I was there was I was interviewed in their like *New York Times* Arts and Leisure section, and one of the kids—one of his children—read it and said, “this guy said--,” they asked me about my family and how do I like Argentina. And I said, “You know, I have some relatives here. We haven't heard from them in over fifty years. I don't know where they are,” and I told the story, and this guy called his father—

MG: So instead of coming here from Europe, they went to Aregentina?

BA: They came here but the quota was—

MG: They wouldn't let them in.

BA: They wouldn't let them in, so they had to go to Argentina. And the guy comes to my gig with these pictures and I said, “What's your father's name?” And he said “Ruban” and I knew about cousin Ruban. And I said, “I have a feeling we are related.” And he said, “Do you know any of these people?” and he shows me my father—

MG: Wow.

BA: I says, “You are my cousin.”

MG: Oh, how great. Isn't that great?

BA: Yeah.

MG: [inaudible] living there?

BA: No, it just happened two years ago. Just two. But I had called the family and I said, “I'm going to Argentina. Give me every information you can about Ruban and his family 'cause I'm gonna find him.” And I was—I shared the front cover with *The Desperate Housewives*, so a lot of people read that page.

MG: Right. Wow, isn't that great. Wow.

BA: And it was the music. The music brought all of that, you know.

MG: Have you ever considered telling your family story? I mean, just the little bit you told us today, have you considered writing it or—?

BA: I've considered it lots of times, but I never did it, you know.

MG: Well, I mean you might try to put a little time—

BA: From what I understand—

MG: [inaudible] you're busy, but on the road.

BA: Yeah. I never do that—

MG: [inaudible] have an hour.

BA: I was on the road with someone like Turk Marrow and he writes everything. He's got books full of stuff, from all the cats. You should talk to him about—not the Bronx—but in general.

MG: Yeah?

BA: He's got diaries and—

MG: He kept—

BA: Yeah. Every—

MG: And he'd talk to me? You know Harold Ashby. We got his archive when he died. He did mock interviews with everybody in the Ellington Band on the bus or in airports. Pretending to be, you know, a reporter. The stuff is unbelievable.

BA: Yeah. No, it's great.

MG: Turk did that?

BA: Yeah, Turk, every night.

MG: What? Just 'cause he was—

BA: Yeah, no, he likes to do it. Every night he wrote what happened to him during that day.

What happened on the bandstand. What happened with the cats and—

MG: Wow. So, what happened to it? I mean what was—

BA: He's got them.

MG: But, I mean, what—did he have an idea of what he might do with it?

BA: No. Not that—he didn't talk to me about it. Maybe now he does. You know, this was years ago. He was still doing—he was doing it.

MG: Where is he?

BA: I think he's in Florida now. In Hollywood, Florida.

MG: I wonder what he plans to do with all those diaries and notebooks.

BA: I don't know. Call him up. Find out.

MG: No, because it—you know this—what you're talking—

BA: This is the history, yeah. It's the oral history.

MG: And, not to be negative, often, the way that history is written and what we see in books about jazz history, never talks about what really happened.

BA: No, yeah.

MG: It never talks about the culture. It never talks about people's families. I mean, it's like you were born and you made a record. Alright, you were born, you went to work with Paul Bley. You know, it's like—

BA: Right. They don't know—

MG: It's like—and if you didn't make a record, you're not famous and you don't count. And if you're from the Bronx, and you're Arthur Jenkins or Vincent McCuen, you know, why are you talking about them? I was like, "well, wait a minute." You know? These people are—

BA: Vincent McCuen was strong. He was around.

MG: important and you know, and we know that there are guys in all these towns, you know, in Pittsburgh. Chicago, who never left.

BA: That's right. Who played—

MG: Who played just as good—

BA: They played great.

MG: Or better than the guys who did leave and made a reputation.

BA: I mean, if you look at Vaughn Freeman and those guys, you know. He never left Chicago until Chico made it a little bit and brought him out.

MG: Right. And what's the name of one—the one from—Buck Hill.

BA: Buck Hill from Washington. Yeah, right.

MG: But, I mean, you know, when you talk about Tina Brooks and Oliver Beaner, you know, it's like—

BA: Yeah, yeah, they don't know—they don't know about Tina.

MG: But I ordered their—the Elmo Hope. First of all, I ordered Elmo's LPs from eBay and I got the Tina Brooks recording from Mosaic. And—

BA: They talked to me about those records before hand.

MG: About Tina?

BA: About Tina, yeah.

MG: Yeah, Michael did?

BA: Yeah.

MG: Yeah? I'll have to read. Are you in the—

BA: I'm not sure. I'm not sure, but we did talk about him, yeah.

MG: But, you know, and so, when I told, the people are interested in doing a book, I said, “Well, I want to write about those guys.” You know, you have certain legendary figures, whether they heard of—

BA: Right, no. Tina Brooks was one of those guys, man, he really was. A guy like that from California, Frankie Butler.

MG: Right. Oh, Frankie Butler. You mean the drummer Frankie Butler?

BA: Yeah. That’s exactly who I mean. But he was like one of those jailhouse musicians, so to speak. And really could play.

MG: And what about Larance Marable?

BA: Yeah. Well, he’s kind of doing stuff now.

MG: A little bit with Charlie.

BA: With Charlie, yeah.

MG: But still.

BA: Yeah, all those guys, man. Great players, those jailhouse guys.

MG: So is Turk.

BA: Yeah.

MG: But anyway, if, you know, you do decide to—

BA: To write something.

MG: Organize something. I’ll show you a way to make it easier.

BA: Yeah, good.

MG: You know, I really—you’ve got a great story.

BA: But I really should, actually.

MG: You know, you've got kids, you have grandchildren. Plus, I think it's jazz history because you talk, you know, can talk about Paul and Sam Rivers and these people and talk about Slugs and Dave Izenzon and you know, if you don't do it then—

BA: That's true and I also, what people don't really know.

MG: They are left out, as you know

BA: Yeah, they are really left out, yeah. And the whole—

MG: [inaudible]

BA: Oh, sure. Even Roswell and those guys. But then there's the whole other part that people don't really know about, my stuff with Hampton Hawes and Sonny Chris, or Lee Konitz Or Art Pepper or Grif in Europe.

MG: When did you say was Sonny Criss and Hampton Hawes?

BA: From '68—nine months in California—'68 to '69.

MG: Oh, you were living in L.A.?

BA: No, in San Francisco.

MG: In San Francisco. Oh Sonny Criss was in—

BA: Yeah. Well, Sonny Criss was in L.A. Sonny Criss was in Watts. I used to go to his house, stayed with him and his father.

MG: Oh, wow. And Hampton Hawes.

BA: And Hampton, yeah.

MG: Wow, great players.

BA: Yeah, great players.

MG: Do you have this box set called Bopland from 1947?

BA: No.

MG: I'll send it to you. They're on it. They're like 18 and 19.

BA: Oh yeah, it was great.

MG: Dexter and Wardell are on it.

BA: The first time I—

MG: [inaudible] hear that. I'll send it to you.

BA: Oh, Dexter and Wardell, yeah. No, I got a bunch of tapes with them.

MG: They're kids. They're kids though.

BA: Yeah, that's great.

MG: I think Hampton Hawes was seventeen.

BA: Yeah. I first met Hampton Hawes in Paris and sat in—

MG: Oh, that's the only time he went to Europe.

BA: That's right. With Nathan Davis and all these guys in Paris.

MG: When he played in Montre.

BA: And I sat in at the Shacky Pesh with them—this club in Paris. And then came back to—and then went out to California and me and him—well, it was me and Sonny Criss hooked up, and he said, told Hampton Hawes that I'm here, he said, "Oh, I remember him form Paris. It's cool."

And so, I was allowed in that band, which was one of my great—what a band.

[End of interview]