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Black, Phil

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Renee A White
Phil Black Interview
May 3, 2012
6:00 pm

Renee White (RW) Alright, first of all could you state your name?

Felix Sarpong (FW): My name is Felix Sarpong: F-E-L-I-X S-A-R-P-O-N-G. I'm also known as Phil Black.

RW: And, where were you born?

FS: I was born in the Bronx, New York, October 14, 1974.

RW: And where did you grow up?

FW: I grew up in the Bronx- I grew up a great deal of my life in the Bronx. I went back to West Africa the early years of my life to learn my culture. My parents are immigrant parents, my parents are immigrants who emigrated from West Africa Ghana in the late sixties and they came to settle here in the Bronx at Townsend at the time, Townsend Ave.

RW: Alright, what street did you live on? What was your address?

FS: Well the address I lived at-that I recollect at the time of birth-is Creston Ave. And that's 2385 Creston Ave located by 184th Creston.

RW: And, what did your parents do for a living?

FS: Well my dad was a teacher, and my mom, she-during the time I was growing up- she was involved in Ghanaian politics so she traveled back and forth to Ghana and the states and then afterword she got settled. She was working in the hotels and hospital scene as a supervisor for housekeeping.

RW: What was the principal reason for you guys going back to Ghana?

FS: The principal reason for me going back to Ghana was pretty much to learn my culture and my heritage. My parents wanted- they came to America you know, to try to seek a better life for themselves and I guess their future kids which is myself, my brother at the time-my older brother and my other sibling: my younger brother- to seek a better life. But in a nutshell my parents decided to take my brother- my older brother and I back to Ghana so we could learn our culture and the language pretty much. And at the time my mother was running with the current president. She was into politics. And my father, he was going back and forth because they pretty much had all of the rest of their family there. So they were running back and forth and the Americas was a new place to them. And that was dating to the early seventies- mid seventies- pushing towards the eighties.

RW: And what was your childhood home like?

FS: Well my childhood home I will tell you was actually very great. Um, when I was younger I was surrounded by a lot of family, and, ah just a whole bunch of different characters. My grandfather actually (chuckles) had, what was it? Six wives? You know, West Africa in those days they tend to, you know, marry you know more than one woman so I come from a very large family. So it's just a lot of family life. Also when we came back to the states it was just basically

getting to reknow America again and get back into the school thing, and just reliving a whole nother lifestyle here in the Americas.

RW: What was it like coming back to the states after you'd been gone so long? How old were you when you came back?

FS: Well when I got back here, I was about five and a half, going on six. I was in first grade when I came back. I attended first grade at PS 33 located on Jerome Ave. And, funny story, it's very true: when I came back from the states the first year and a half or two years, if I recollect well, I would say I could barely speak English. So I had to go through learning English. It was just a weird interaction with the teachers who could not understand me and vice versa. But I had a wonderful teacher, Miss Zizner. I attended her second grade class. She always took me under her wing and just really cared for me like she was my mother, my school mother, at the time. She helped me out a lot as well as my father who was an educator at the time and gave us a lot of books to read and would just go over reading exercises and phonics and just pick us up, me and my brother.

RW: So learning English helped you be reintegrated back into the culture?

FS: Exactly, yes. And, how did you get along with your peers?

FS: I got along very well with my peers because like I said I come from a very loving family so I'm used to being around-I'm a people person- I'm used to being around just pretty much socializing, entertaining, or, you know, I just like the presence of people. And I'm used to being around gatherings so socializing with others, getting along with others is natural for me.

RW: And what kind of social activities did you do when you were younger?

FS: When I was younger? Well you could say similar to normal things such as play baseball, play basketball, uhh I used to play soccer a long time ago, I played a little bit of soccer uh, you know we would play some fun games on the block. At the time, on Creston, we'd play silly little games like "hot piece and butter," "kick the can..."

RW: And what are those games?

FS: Those games are what you would call homemade street games. Urban, urban street games that we played in our young years. Scalsies is a game in which you draw on the concrete floor, sort of like what the kids do now-a-days with the chalk when they draw the hopscotch! And so what we would do is we would draw the scalesy board- it looks like a board on the floor- where there were dimensions and numbers and then in the center you would have the greater numbers in the center. The objective is to make sure you get to all your numbers and then the first one to get to all of the numbers...they would win...something to that nature! But pretty much, you know, just that whole social interaction with my neighborhood and my family, it really helped me get to learn different culture as well. You know, being that, once again, my parents are coming from West Africa Ghana, and just basically having to integrate as a first generation Ghanaian American into the American culture. Because my parents obviously didn't really have a great clue on what the American culture was because they never attended school here- as far as high school or anything like that- so they didn't know. Everything was a new experience for our family so they just, I'm thankful to them that they let me and my brother explore the culture.

RW: Right. And when did you start getting into music?

FS: Well I started growing an interest into music in the late, actually the mid eighties. You know at that time I was around...actually it wasn't the mid eighties. Early eighties actually. I think it

may have been around '82-'83. There would through 'jams' around the corner from the area where I lived at on 184th and Creston and they would plug up the whole stereo system into the lamppost. And you would have artists, you would have local musicians, you would have musicians *we* would consider old school today. They would come out and play on the weekends and things of that nature, and we would have block parties and jams. So that was, that was the beginning of my experience. And also, you would tune into the radio and things of that nature. I lived-like I said-in the summertime, in the area that I lived at, music was everywhere. We had a diverse group of people who lived in here, lived in my neighborhood. We had Puerto Ricans, we had Jamaicans, and actually our family was at that time- there were barely any African families. I'm assuming it might have been just only three, about three African families who coexisted in that neighborhood. So, I got a chance to really experience all different type of music around that time. So I really grew in love with hip hop because at that time it was the new fad that came in. Then also, you know, I thought I was *cool* and the whole breakdancing, the dancing, we used to dance at school. I had friends who were really into it. We used to bang on the tables doing the beatbox and things of that nature and then we would love to take pictures and pose like the artists that we would see perform in our neighborhood at the jams. We used to call ourselves "B Boys," so we would stand in our B Boy poses and take 'flicks.'

RW: What kind of, *which artists*, were you listening to at that time?

FS: Okay, at that time we were listening to artists, like umm, what you call it, who is it...Kumo D Tekaris one. We were listening to, what-you-call it, funky...oh god, what's his na... Afrika Bambaataa, it was just a whole sleuth of them! LL Cool J, Mc Slam, Big Daddy Kane, uh, just a whole sleuth of artists. I'm probably leaving out a whole bunch at this time. But just...oh man, Grandmaster Caz, who else? Oh my god, it was just a whole bunch!

Far...anyways! Let's just...too many to name!

(Both laugh)

RW: Now you said that, um, there weren't a lot of African families and there was a really diverse area. Would you say that everyone was listening to the same type of music that you were?

FS: I mean, at the time in our neighborhood, well, it was diverse, we had some Hispanics, that, you know, would come out and play with their congos and things of that nature. But just in front of their buildings and things of that nature. But the Jams? Everyone pretty much heard: Hip Hop. Everyone was entwined with the hip hop. We were breaking cardboard and breakdancing on the floors. I mean, everybody, whether you was black, Latino, African, Jamaican, everyone was engaged in that. And that, that's what it was. And then we would also travel to different neighborhoods like: Cedar Park, roofpark towers, they just would travel around different blocks where there were jams and we would just participate. It was like a serious movement at the time.

RW: Um and how has your influence in music changed since then?

FS: How has my influence in music changed? Well, actually, I would say it really heightened, it really heightened my influence in music because now I stand today as an executive producer slash management for African Hip Hop artists here in the Bronx and throughout New York City as well as in Ghana. And this started for me in the early nineties. I went back to Ghana- in the early nineties- I went back to Ghana to visit from not being there for a long time- and then I heard a genre called "hip-life" which was a combination of, uh, American Hip Hop and the native music which we call "high life." So, that's where the name even derives from. "Hip-life:" it comes from 'Hip Hop' and then 'High Life' which is the native music that Ghanaians, West Africa Ghanaians were listening to.

RW: And who originally got you into music?

FS: Who originally got me into music? Well, who originally got me into music...it, I would say my- I would say it was the influence of the old-school artists that would come around my area and rock the Jams.

RW: Was there anybody in particular that really got you into the business of music?

FS: Oh in to the business of music? Ok. Into the business of music. I ventured off into the business of music solely because I wanted to make a difference in the Ghanaian youth's lives. I see that there was no outlet for the Ghanaian artists. And I see- going back to what I was stating earlier- when I went back to Ghana, the genre that came up which was "Hip Life," I heard it for the first time. When I heard it, I wasn't even impressed with it, honestly. I was like, "oh what they trying to do? They're trying to take away their own heritage and now they're trying to get with this." And later on I looked at it from another angle. Where I said "Oh wow, this is similar to what I saw in the early eighties when I was growing up!" The whole hip hop movement happening. So, um, I came back and about, let's say a year and a half later I went to 167th on Mclean Ave, which we call "Little Accra" because of a whole bunch of Ghanaians who migrated there at this point, now. And, I saw a whole bunch of young kids. And I believe this is about the late- no, like- '95-'94. Ninety....'98...late nineties I believe. I seen the young kids hanging around that area and they were rapping! You know they were rapping, they were in a circle, they were rapping! So I said, "Okay, I like this!" I'm sitting in the background just watching. I'm just like, "wow this is the same as the movement in the early 80s"- what they did. So I said "wow this is nice." So you know, I just, I just looked at it for what it was, kids just making some noise and just hangin' out. So, what I saw was, I saw one of the kids had a handkerchief, which was red, in

the back of his pocket. Which, me, working in the schools system, I know that signified, a flagging of like, bloods, and at that time, 'bloods' and 'cripps' was heavy. So, I stepped over to the young man, I asked him, I said "look, do you know what that's about?" And he said, "Yeah." So, you see, in Ghana there's no true like, 'gangs' that's going on there, so I believed that he might have saw this either on television or he might have thought that this thing was something cool. But I explained to him that, "look, this type of stuff that you're wearing, and you're flagging-it's called 'flagging'- you're wearing it out in the streets like that. You can get killed for this." So he said, "Ohhh, this is nothing." And he thought he was cool because they didn't really understand the culture because what happens is that around the time in the mid-nineties they were getting what you call 'visas.' And they were winning the lotteries. So they were coming here and they, and they just were spinning off of what they've seen either on satellite TV back home in Ghana, so they thought when they come up here, it's nothing. But, not realizing that this thing is actually very dangerous. Long story short, I asked the boy one question. I said, "Look," – and the boy's name was, Jay Vellie. His name was Jay Vellie. He also went by "Cree Gangsta" but I told him he don't need to put that gangster element in there because it's not, he's not, a gangster. So, he told me, "Well, you know what Phil Black? If you really want to do something for me, why don't you take me to the studio and produce me. And then, I can, I will, leave all of this type of stuff alone." So I said, "you know what, wow he just pretty much put me to the challenge," so I stepped up to the plate. I said, "Look, you know what? Lemme go find a studio for this guy." At the time, I found a really good studio and a great engineer on a 168th St, down off of Amsterdam. I took him to the recording and then, you know, he got so happy! That was his first time going to a real recording studio. He went and put the word out there around 168th, "oh I got a producer man! I'm recording music." So, at that point I decided, you know what? This is

one of my callings: to produce these African Hip Life artists. So I started doing it. I went from him, then I got another artist, now, presently living in Atlanta, Teezo. Teezo raps and sings and Jay Vellie rapped and then they ended up becoming friends and I had them do tracks together and I had them going into the community. Pretty much having them do shows and you know, I started getting a host of other artists that, you know, I helped produce their music or I managed in one form or another.

RW: Now you said you were a part of the school system. What do you do in the school system?

FS: Well, I am an educator first and foremost. I work as a dean as well, as a head dean which deals with disciplining students. And so, that's the other thing I have about me, that's beautiful about me- I say beautiful because education is key. My father was an educator, and through education I learned to become a great man. I learned to help people. I learned to expand my mind and learn different things through education. So education, working as an educator and dealing with the youth is two of my great loves. And, actually, I have a third: I'm a giver. So, I'm also a humanitarian and a philanthropist. Anything that has to deal with helping people, I'm always ready to give and push things forward in that aspect. But, education, definitely, and dealing with the youth, is my thing. That's why I'm in education.

RW: How do you feel about arts cuts and how art is usually the first program to get cut in the school system?

FS: It's really, really sad because artists, as much as people think art is just play, from the structure of a building to the music that we listen to, from the paintings, the museums, that we see, from, just everything is art. So, when they cut these types of programs, what you're doing is you're cutting out a generation of creativity; you're cutting out innovation, you're cutting out so

many things because art is everything. Everything that we see is through a drawing of art, through a visionary's eye. So, art is part of our lives whether we like it or not: through fashion, through drawing, through music, through structures, everything is art.

RW: How do you feel that art has affected your community?

FS: Oh, it has affected my community both in a good way, and in a negative way. Reason being in a good way, first, I'll talk about the positive, It has affected them because now I see that people are now moving towards becoming musicians, so in terms- basically what rap is, is poetry- so they're becoming writers, which is good. Another aspect of the arts is that people are now getting paid to do graffiti, in which, normally, you know, it was sort of like vandalism, but now they're using it in a creative way. Whereas now they're doing murals for big projects and actually getting good money for it. Whereas back in the day, it was really a travesty to see all of the buildings and it was sort of disrespectful and done in a very distasteful way. So, right now, with the arts, the bad thing about it is it's becoming more raunchy, if I could use that word, it's becoming more raunchy. It's becoming harsh because people feel comfortable with the freedom of speech so they just say what they feel. And, I mean, I don't have anything against that, but, I also think about the little ones and the people who are listening. So we have to be a little bit- we have to use more discretion- in how, you know, we deal with the arts in terms of poetry. But the live arts is also happening two ways. People are now exhibiting their talents in the forms of drawing and actually even designing clothes. We have, I think the guy, Mark Ecco, he's from the Bronx, and he's a designer. So the arts really has influenced him in that way which I think is a good form, and he's from the community of the Bronx.

RW: How do you feel that the music you listen to has changed in the last 10 years?

FS: The music, well honestly, if we're talking about the state of hip hop, I would say that, there's a lot of changes. I would say it was a little bit more conscious, and more witty, there was more thought in it. Nowadays, what you get is a lot of good music as far as far as music production and you get hooks, music production, and that's about it. You don't get a lot of meat anymore. So, you're not getting a bang for your buck, or something like that. You're not really getting a lot of quality content. There's not too much effort put into the music like their used to be. For the Hip Life music, actually, I think it's getting more creative because originally, when the guys came out, they had very poor engineering of the music and things of that nature. Now, There's a lot of development in it, it's getting more creative. So, as far as the hip life genre that I deal with, I think that there's a great improvement. And by no war far am I putting hip hop down 'cause Hip Hop is the base and the foundation of the generation of "Hip Life." So, Hip Hop is definitely doing its thing, however, we need more quality music inducted back into Hip Hop.

RW: If I could talk about more, or if *you* could talk a bit more about Hip Life: what sort of demographic do you feel like it reaches?

FS: Well, right now, currently, definitely the Ghanaian population here in the Bronx, which now, if I'm correct, you know, don't quote me on it exactly, but, it's about roughly 130,000 documented and undocumented together, in the Bronx. So, it's definitely reaching the Ghanaian demographic as well as the Nigerian demographic and even, I would say it's actually getting popular amongst African Americans as well. The Ghanaian populous is expanding its wings and all of the different cultures and neighborhoods here in the Bronx. Everyone pretty much has a Ghanaian friend. So, Hip Life is actually spreading through the Bronx on way. It's spreading through the Bronx and New York City and other states as well, such as DC, Virginia, Delaware,

and other states. But, in a nutshell, I definitely see that it's reaching a lot of different backgrounds.

RW: What do you feel that the essence of Hip Life – or the music you produce- is?

FS: Okay, the essence...

RW: For example, what do you feel is the message that is generally being given by...?

FS: Ohh, Okay! Well the message that's being given to the people- are we talking about the listeners of Hip Life or the initial goal?

RW: The artists

FS: Oh, ok, well right now what we're basically trying to do is we're trying to make good music, that's one. Two, we're trying to be basically very, very creative with the music and sort of like, tie people into the new and take them back into the old. They got something in the Ghanaian language called "SAncofone." So we're trying to take the people and bring them back home. You know what I mean? Let them get that home feel type of music and at the same time enjoy the new tunes. Like, let's say for instance, I have some artists; they would use American instrumentals but rap in Cree. So they would hear something like a Lil Jon or they would hear something like, Pharrell type of beat, but they would hear the native tongue. So it's like you're getting what you hear on a regular basis but at the same time, you're getting you're background language or your native tongue in a mix.

RW: How do you feel that that hybridity of music helps impact your community and bring people together?

FS: Well, it definitely helps bring people together because at times, there are promoters, aside from ourselves that promote Hip Life, strongly, so by concerts and things of that nature. There are currently even shows that air on television now. There are shows, videos, and production that's being done here in the Bronx as well as Ghana. So, it's definitely opening up.

RW: Alright, so you mentioned earlier how education is really important to you. Tell me a bit about your education and your training in the arts.

FS: Ok, my education and training in the arts. Well, once again, education wise, I am a masters degree holder in education. I attended Mercy College and received my bachelor's degree. As far as my education in music, I have family members who actually produce music here in the states, and so, I've been around this sort of training background if you want to call it that. I did not attend any music school, per se. But I have been around a lot of studios and musicians, and producers and things of that nature. So, I would say that I got hands on music training.

RW: And what kind of music did they produce?

FS: What kind of music do they produce? Well, I have a cousin who I'm very close with and have been around, and he has produced a lot of great music for Hip Hop artists, big names. He has produced beats for Mase, who was originally with Bad Boy. He produced beats for Cam'ron, which people may know, and Cardan, which at the time is called "Hallmoral"? So you grow up with these types of guys who work with Biggie Smalls as well. And you know, he is one of the greater influences that let me see what production was about. His name, once again, on the record, is Super Sam- S-u-p-a S-a-m.

RW: Speaking of pseudonyms, you said you go by Phil Black?

FS: Yes

RW: Can you explain the meaning behind that?

FS: Ok, well Phil Black- it's weird- I've been called 'Phil Black' for the last, let's see, almost 25 years. The name comes from- originally, like I told you, in the area that I lived at, there wasn't too much African families and as you can see, I'm very dark skinned, you know I'm the true definition of "tall, dark, and handsome," (laughs) but that's off the record! But, anyways, yeah my brother and I are very dark skinned and the people in the neighborhood used to call us "the Black Brothers." So, they would say, "Oh there go the Black Brothers." And because we would never know who they were calling- they would say, "Yo black, yo black!" And it's like, who are you calling? My name is Felix, so people used to call me Fel for short, so it was just like, "yo Phil Black." So, that's how I got that name, "Phil Black."

RW: Do you use that name in the music industry?

FS: YES! Everyone knows me as Phil black. I print my cards up as 'Phil Black.' And it's very true to the point where my mother even calls me Phil black. That's how much...my family members even! When I hear "Felix" that means that this person must have known me for *years*, to have called me Felix. Because *I* sometimes forget that my name is Felix 'cause everyone calls me Phil Black, *everyone* calls me Phil Black.

RW: Now do you still live in the Bronx?

FS: Yes I do; I do live in the Bronx.

RW: And whereabouts in the Bronx do you live?

FS: I live in the Bronx in the Woodlawn section.

RW: And how would you say that area differs from where you grew up?

FS: Oh, it differs; it's very different. First and foremost I would say that, definitely- I'm not sure that there is a lot of people who are interested in Hip Hop around that area. It's very quiet. It seems like it's not a lot of African Americans in that area. You know, not that I've seen. I haven't seen a lot of Latinos as well. So basically, the culture that I experienced living where I used to live when I was younger is definitely different from where I live now.

RW: Why do you think that there is less diversity where you live now?

FS: Um, well, you know what...I don't know how to answer that. I guess, that's just the way that community is, in that section.

RW: So, what do you see for your music career and what you're doing in music-how do you see that growing in the next 5 years?

FS: I see it growing very big. I see it growing very big. In fact, I was just contacted by New York Times, recently. And they said they want to do an interview with me regarding the African Hip Hop music and they said they sorted my name out from somewhere. So definitely, the noise that I've been making- oh! Also, I should have mentioned, I've been making noise about the Hip Life and getting people to recognize and see that there is an African music culture here in the Bronx. And by the help of great guys such as Dr. Mark Naison who's at Fordham University- you know he's helped me out a lot- and my networks dealing with different people. And also the Bronx Heritage music center as well. Linking with them is helping. The growth is coming full force. I just recently went to Ghana and I took one of my artists back for a television interview. The called me for a television interview and things of that nature because of what I've been doing here in the states with the artists. So it's starting to really pick up. So it's sort of like, it's a dual

come up because what we're doing here is affecting back home in Ghana and Vice Versa. What they're doing here, as far as artists coming here to perform herein the Bronx, is also affecting here, and out people are seeing it because the gatherings are getting bigger and bigger.

RW: What do you think the success of the Hip Life and the music you're producing- how do you think that will impact the Bronx?

FS: How do I think it will impact the Bronx? It will definitely have an impact on the Bronx because what we're bringing is, we are bringing, what do you call it? We're bringing culture diffusion. Basically, we're bringing a new flavor. Definitely for the African populous, their getting something that they're familiar with, and then also you know the Bronx is where everything starts out. So definitely this is the place where Hip Life history has to begin. It's no way, it's no two ways. The Bronx is my home, Ghana is my home and I wouldn't have it any other way. Hip Life has to be birthed here where the home where hip hop is born.

RW: And finally, I just wanted to ask you, what does music mean to you?

FS: Creativity, innovation, community service, humanitarianism, community involvement, kids-talented kids developing a craft and compensation for raw talent and undiscovered talent.

RW: And how do you feel that the Bronx has, perhaps, missed out on that compensation?

FS: How do I feel the Bronx has missed out on that compensation? Well I feel that right now, the Bronx actually is a swing borough now because everything is coming back towards in it. And what they're doing with the Bronx, first and foremost, Ruben Diaz, big up to him. He's helping do a lot of great things here in the Bronx as well as other Bronx leaders. We are really doing

some big things that are definitely going to turn the Bronx around and make the Bronx relevant as far as artistry goes.

RW: Now you said you had an entertainment company? What is the name of your entertainment company?

FS: My entertainment company is called Victory Entertainment International.

RW: And what exactly do you do?

FS: Well, Victory Entertainment International, what I do is I produce artists as well as manage artists. And this is a company that we call international 'cause definitely I'm looking to do world tours with my artists as well as just bring a whole new taste to the people here in the Bronx and around the world of international talent.

RW: So are you interested in making your music international?

FS: yes, that's the goal. That's one of the goals, to definitely make the music international because it's good music. And actually music is universal. You may not necessarily understand the language but, look, hey, reggae ton came and honestly, as you can see, I am far from being Hispanic but guess what, I love me some reggae ton. That stuff comes on, I start moving, I can't keep still! So at the end of the day, if you hear some good Hip Life music, you will not be able to stand still either because the music is definitely good. You may not understand the words but you know what? Music is for the soul. Music is for the soul and once it touches your soul, you will definitely move.

RW: Wonderful! Thank you so much for your time, Phil Black!

FS: Yes! Thank you also!

