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Conzo, Joe Jr.

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Transcriber: Laura Kelly

Mark Naison (MN): This is the 165th interview of the African American History project.

We are here with Joe Conzo who is the first hip hop photographer whose grandmother is the pioneering radical and South Bronx - -

Joe Conzo (JC): Community activist.

MN: - - activist, Evelina Antonetty. Whose mother is the leader of the United Bronx Parents and whose father was the major scholar of Tito Puente. So we have a lot to talk about. With us today is Maxine Gordon, our jazz researcher, Marvin Cabrerra from Double Discovery at Columbia, who is our guest, and our videographer Dawn Russell.

Today is, what - -

Maxine Gordon (MG): Tuesday.

MN: - -[laughs] Tuesday - -

JC: May 9th.

MN: - - May 9th [laughs] and we're at Fordham Univeristy. So to start off Joe, tell us a little bit about your family, how they came to New York City and the Bronx.

JC: My grandmother, Evelina Antonetty was born in Puerto Rico, she came over, migrated over to Puerto Rico during that large Puerto Rican migration in the late '40's, early '50's I guess. And she came over, went to school here, got married here. And I guess that was her start in activism when she moved to the Bronx. And my grandmother's credited with starting bi-lingual education in the public schools in the late '60's and '70's. Also starting the summer lunch programs feeding the inner city kids, the youths of the Bronx. And she started an organization called United Bronx Parents, which it started

out as a PTA, a parent teachers association, that grew into a community organization which my mother now runs thirty- almost thirty five years later. And today the program consists of rehabs for women with children- drug rehabs, feeding the homeless, drug prevention programs, HIV prevention programs, ESL programs, English as second language programs. So it's a whole host of community grown workshops and programs for community people.

MN: When your grandmother moved to the Bronx, what neighborhood did she move to?

JC: Let's see, Westchester and Jackson avenue, that would be - - that's the Hub? Is that part of the Hub?

MN: I guess you'd call it Motthaven.

JC: Motthaven, okay?

MG: What school was the PTA at, that first PTA?

JC: I think P.S. 25. Which P.S. 25 in the Bronx was the first bi-lingual school to open up.

MG: Okay.

JC: My mother went there, her kids went there, so we all went there.

MN: So your family remained in the same section.

JC: Same section of the Bronx until today. We're still pretty much in the same section.

MN: now were you living in private or publicly owned housing?

JC: Publicly, publicly. I mean, I grew up St. Mary Projects on 149th street.

MG: Oh - -

MN: Oh you grew up in the St. Mary Houses?

JC: I remember when the plane hit - - crashed into St. Mary park back in, I don't know, '67-'68. You know, that was my playground growing up.

MN: Uh huh. And what about your grandmother, was her first residence in public housing?

JC: Of course.

MN: In St. Mary's or - -

JC: No, the other projects on Westchester and Jackson.

MN: Oh, the Jackson Houses.

JC: the Jackson Houses, yeah.

MN: Okay, so she went into the Jackson Houses.

JC: Yeah.

MN: So your family's one of the great public housing success stories?

JC: Yeah. And then you know, from there we moved into the Michael Angelo apartments across the street from the hospital. We were one of the first families to move into those- those projects.

MN: Now I wanna talk about two themes in your family- music and politics.

JC: [laughs]

MN: So, let's do politics first. What was your grandmother's political history - -

JC: My grandmother was a community activist. Everything she did, she lived and died for her community, for the Bronx. Whether it was from education to food, better quality of food, parent-teachers, you know, whatever. And at that time it was a turbulent time. There wasn't that many Latino or black politicians at the time. Today, people like Freddy

Ferrer and Congressman Roberto Garcia, you know, all these people credited, give thanks to my grandmother for having them start, for you know, giving them their start - -

MN: did she have - -

JC: - - in politics.

MN: Did she have a labor movement background at all?

JC: Her labor - - yeah, she worked for, and forgive me if I don't remember, Mark - -

MN: Vito Mark - -

MG: Mark Antonio.

JC: Yes, Vito Mark Antonio.

MN: So she worked under Mark Antonio?

MG: Yeah that's where she worked.

JC: That's where she worked.

MN: Wow.

MG: Where was she born in Puerto Rico?

JC: Salinas.

MG: In Salinas.

JC: Salinas, Puerto Rico.

MN: And did she live in East Harlem first?

JC: I think at one time she lived in East Harlem.

MN: Uh huh. And then she worked for Mark Anton - -

JC: Yeah.

MN: Do you know what she did, was she like - -

JC: She was one of his youth workers in the beginning - -

MN: And what about - -

JC: [inaudible]

MN: What about school, where did she go to school. I mean like college and stuff like that.

JC: She went to Hunter, she also taught at Hunter College. Their library is named after her there [inaudible].

MG: Yeah, that's right, it is named after her.

MN: Who were some of the people who were around your home as a kid when your grandmother was active?

JC: I mean who's who in Puerto Rican politics, you know. Ramon Valez, Carmen Arollo, [inaudible] Jiminez, I mean it just goes on and on and on. I mean, god, I don't even know where to begin, it's just so many people.

MN: Right. Now let's move to the music. That's another big part of your family. Your father was very close to Tito Puente - -

JC: My father was Tito Puente's manager, assistant, publicist for the last 30, 40 years. And through my father I was introduced to him, Tito Puente, Samuel Cruz, Hector Lavoy, Candido, you name it, everybody.

MN: What was your father's educational background? Was he trained as a journalist?

JC: No, my father was a struggling conga player. He just couldn't make it as a conga player. And he just struck up a friendship with Tito I guess, I'm not sure but maybe the Hunts Point Palace was the first time they had met - -

MG: Was your father from the Bronx also?

JC: Yeah.

MG: From the same - - what area? Also from Motthaven?

JC: Yeah, also. Spanish Harlem first and then - -

MG: - - and then. And how many children did your grandmother have? How many siblings did - -

JC: My grandmother had three kids, my mother and my aunt and my uncle. And then my father had myself and my brother.

MG: Uh huh.

MN: And where did your parents meet?

JC: Probably St. Mary's [laughs]. Who knows? St. Mary's Park. Or maybe one of the jams on Southern Blvd.

MN: Uh huh. Now when you were growing up, do you recall going to live music in the Bronx?

JC: Yeah, my father used to take me to these venues, you know. I wasn't old enough to really appreciate it, but I remember going to a couple of the venues and I remember just hanging on to my father's coat tail. I didn't know who Tito Puente was, I didn't know who Sonny Cruz was until I was a little bit older. But those are my idols today.

MN: Did you grow up with American Star, rock, soul as well?

JC: Well, in my house I had a variety of music from the Latin music to the jazz music to heavy Hispanic music, you know, the boleros, the planas and all that. But in my room,

behind closed doors, I listened to WEBC, AM radio, because there was no FM radio. So I had a good variety. But I appreciated, as I got older, my heritage of music.

MN: What were the schools you went to, like the elementary schools where - - do you feel you got a good public school education?

JC: Real good because going to school in the Bronx and being the grandson of one of the biggest [laughs] political activists at that time, you know - - I went to P.S. 25. Like I said, my mother went to that school and that was the first bi-lingual educated school in the public school system. From there my junior high school was chosen to be Clark 149. My mother went to Burger.

MN: wow.

JC: Okay, so I graduated from Clark and then in '77 one of the first brand new academic high schools opened up in the Bronx, which was South Bronx High school and St. Anne's, and that was chosen for me too. And I went to South Bronx high school and I was in the first graduating class, 1980. And, you know, I gotta be honest, it was a little difficult being the grandson of or the son of going to school because not only did you have - - you had many eyes on you, you know, just because of who I was. So I had to meet certain expectations but it worked out well because I was a product of the SP program back at the time. I skipped, I went from 7th to 9th grade. So I got a really good education growing up.

MN: Now this - - you went to Clark junior high?

JC: Yeah.

MN: Was Eddie Bonamere the pianist still a music teacher there?

JC: I don't remember his name but Vincent Corazone was the principal at that time and a few other good teachers.

MN: Were there any kind of gang problems that you had to deal with growing up?

JC: Growing up, no. Because I had, I would say - - I mean my grandmother never shunned or ran away from any community problems, and yes, there were a lot of gang problems at the time. She took in people like Benji Malendez from the Ghetto Brothers, the president of the Ghetto Brothers. She took in people from the Savage Skulls, all these community people. So I knew all them growing up.

MN: When you say she took them in, she invite - -

JC: She involved them in her work and gave them their jobs, gave them jobs. I mean Benji Melendez who had a brigade of gang members totaling a couple of thousand will tell anybody today how Evelina Antonetty walked into their gang house, pointed them out, said "You want a job? Go home, take a bath, shave, and come see me." And gave him his first job.

MG: [laughs]

MN: That's a great story.

JC: But that's how - - she wasn't afraid of anybody. And she was doing something for her people in her community. You shouldn't be afraid of anybody if you're gonna do something for them.

MN: Now you mentioned when we were talking outside that Ramone Valez when he began was different from the Ramon Valez - -

JC: Well, Ramon Valez did a lot for the South Bronx Community. He's also referred to as the first slum lord of the South Bronx. But you know, put that aside, he did a lot of good things in terms of property and housing. It's a shame when you hear nicknames- the first poverty pimp- but all in all, Ramon did a lot of good.

MN: And you grandmother could work with him?

JC: Yeah, yeah. I mean, they never - - there were times when they didn't see eye to eye. But it's like that in any type of thing when you have different organizations working together but they pretty much worked together.

MN: Mmm, hmm. Now when did you first become aware of what today we call hip hop?

MG: Well that's you wanted to get to. You [inaudible] over all my stuff to get to the hip hop, okay?

JC: [laughs]

MN: Okay well you - -

MG: You went to 1980 already and I wanna go - -

MN: Okay Maxine.

MG: Thank you. Before you get to the hip hop, I want to talk to you about [inaudible]. I don't know anything about hip hop.

JC and MN: [laugh]

JC: I'm just so impressed I'm sitting next to Dexter Gordon's - -

MG: No, I'm impressed, you know, you got the pedigree. I want to talk about Tito Puente.

JC: Okay.

MG: and I'm very interested - - how old were you when you first, when your father first took you?

JC: I must have been 10, 11, 12.

MG: So what year are you born - -

JC: I was - - '63, I'm 43 years old.

MG: - - say - - could you say your birth date, we should have said it at the beginning.

JC: Yeah, well, I was born Joseph Anthony Conzo.

MG: Okay.

JC: I'm not really junior because my father's Joseph Louis Conzo but I call myself junior anyway.

MG: Uh huh, because Joe.

JC: I was born February 6, 1963.

MG: Okay, '63.

JC: I was born in Flower Fifth House, Flower Fifth - -

MG: I was born in Flower Fifth [inaudible] House, but it's not even there.

JC: I know. My father was in the service at the time and that was the only hospital that accepted the GI.

MG: Yeah, wow, see [laughs].

JC: [inaudible]

MG: So you were 10. That means it would be like in '73.

JC: Yeah, around there.

MG: So do you know where Tito was working that you went?

JC: It might have been, maybe the Corso on 96th street, the first time I met Tito.

MG: So your father took you to a lot of gigs?

JC: Yeah.

MG: And was [inaudible] working with him then? It was a little early right?

JC: No it was around that time.

MG: Okay so you knew her also.

JC: I knew of her. You gotta understand something, a 10, 11 year old, we're not really - - you know, we listen to the music that was playing in our house, okay? But when we're outside of our house we're gonna listen to whatever our peers are listening to. So back then, Three Dog Night, Blood, Sweat, and Tears, you know.

MG: Right.

JC: Those are stuff [laughs], you know. But I'd listen to Tito Puente. I knew who he was. And Sonny Cruz, and Machito, and all those people.

MG: Mmm hmm. But your father, how did he become - - do you know the history of how he became associated with - -

JC: He, like I said, my father was a struggling conga player. And he - -

MG: When was he born?

JC: He must have been born in '43.

MG: Oh, okay.

JC: '43. And he just idolized Tito so much. He met Tito I guess at a gig and from there one thing led to another where - - my father's also one of the four most music collages in the world. He has - - his record collection outweighs anybody. You know, he - -

MG: Where is it? In your house?

JC: In his house. But it's probably gonna end up in my house [laughs].

MG: Mmm, we wanna see his record collection.

JC: But people call my father when they need to know history. And he can tell you everything about Tito, Machito, everybody.

MG: Wow.

JC: Everybody.

MG: Yeah, [inaudible].

[laughter]

JC: Sure.

MG: Tito Rodriguez, Junior, all of them.

MG: Okay.

JC: But I guess my father met Tito probably at a gig, like in the '50's, early '60's and struck up a friendship. And one thing led to another, and that was a 40 year friendship.

MG: Did he travel with him to Europe?

JC: Everywhere.

MG: Yeah, I know your father.

JC: Yeah.

MG: Tell him - - I'll tell him myself, but yeah, now I know. Because in the jazz festivals Tito Puente and [inaudible] were on the same bill with Dexter and Miles and everything because in Europe, as you found out probably about your photos, they don't separate into these little categories - -

JC: But they love us in Europe so much more than in our own country.

MG: Well, I mean, please, Latin people love Latin music.

JC: Yeah but my dad also told me, my dad - - I asked my dad one day, "Why do I have to go to London and Europe to show my first gallery showing?" He goes, "Well, Tito was bigger in Europe than he was here." And the same with all the jazz - -

MG: Celia Cruz was the most popular star in Finland. She's like the queen of like pop music in Finland. So go figure right [laughs]. So you know, it was a great response. They were huge. So did you ever get to go out of the country?

JC: No, mostly I went into pictures of Tito, Machito's bands playing together at the Boston Symphony which happened in seventy something - -

MG: when did you begin as a photographer?

JC: I began photography in junior high school, in Clark junior high school.

MG: They had a course or something?

JC: Pretty much, yeah, an extracurricular course. I was the school photographer and I became the high school photographer. But photography you know - - I was a chubby little kid, you know, big afro and I played sports but I wasn't good enough to be that all school baseball player, or football. And photography was my gateway to meeting and documenting my community. And girls loved having their pictures taken.

[laughter]

MG: [inaudible]

JC: Yeah, so photography was my art from. And I just took my camera everywhere I went.

MG: What kind of camera?

JC: I started out with a Minolta, Minolta SRT 200.

MG: The photos on your website of Celia, Machito and all, what are they taken with?

JC: [inaudible]

MG: That same camera?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Very good.

JC: Thank you.

MG: I like those. So then did it become sort of a job?

JC: No, it was my hobby. It was my hobby.

MG: Even the ones of Machito and all that, were they used for publicity or anything?

JC: No, no.

MG: You never went commercial?

JC: I didn't know how.

MG: To market them?

JC: To market them. I just liked taking picture. You know, my dad would use them some years later. Tito would put out a CD or stuff - -

MG: And he'd say you got - -

JC: - - my dad would write the liner notes and, "Oh my son Joe has this beautiful picture." You know, Sony would say, "Sure put it on, give Joe one hundred bucks."

That's how I did CD covers for Tito and stuff like that. But anything outside of that. You know, I didn't know how to market. But the first picture I ever had published in the

newspaper was in the New York Post, and that was of Paul Newman chasing me away because I was - -

MG: I saw that photograph.

JC: Yeah.

MG: That's a famous photograph.

JC: Yeah, during his Fort Apache, the Bronx.

MG: that's a famous photo when he looks so mean.

JC: Yeah.

MG: Because he was photographer on the set, and they didn't want the set photograph.

JC: So, and who would think 30 years later, 35 years later, my archives are so much in demand.

MG: The, before we get to hip hop - -

JC: [laughs]

[laughter]

MG: - - I did read in the article that you fell on tough times.

JC: Oh yeah.

MG: Could we talk about that?

JC: Sure, why not?

MG: And tell - - and I want you to tell the story about the negatives and how they were saved, okay?

JC: I'll just come to [inaudible]. I've been clean and sober 14 years now.

MG: Yaaaay [claps].

JC: And my father has also been clean and sober 27 years. But - -

MG: Oh he beat Tito.

JC: Yeah.

MG: [laughs]

JC: Please - - I can tell you stories [inaudible].

MG: [inaudible]

JC: Like so many people in my community, they fell on hard time, I fell on hard times. I was introduced to drugs through peers. And you know, my dada had a history of drugs and so I knew to stay away from them to a point. Because I remember my dada bringing me to shooting galleries and seeing him get high.

MG: Oh really?

MN: Oh, so you really?

JC: Oh yeah, yeah. And it's a vicious cycle and it happens in our community.

MG: It's funny. I don't mean to interrupt, but I want to ask you something. What do you mean when you say, "I was raised by Dominicans?"

JC: My magarata.

MG: Godmother or stepmother?

JC: During - - because my mother raised five of us by herself. So while she was at work she hired a woman to come take - -

MG: Oh yeah, yeah.

JC: So I don't know if Magarata is a good word for - -

MG: No, or - -

JC: A nanny. But I don't know how to - -

MG: Cuidada.

JC: Yeah, so - -

MG: Caretaker.

JC: Caretaker. So this woman, who was Dominican, didn't speak a word of English, who raised us while my mother worked.

MG: I see, okay.

JC: And you know, she was known as picky.

MG: Uh huh.

JC: So I got to eat Mongul, camalone - -

MG: That's like [inaudible].

JC: Yeah.

MG: We have that.

JC: So that's how when I tell people, they ask me, my background is in Puerto Rican, part Cuban, part Italian and raised by a Dominican.

MG: Okay, I just wanted to make that clear. Now go back to the drugs.

[laughter]

JC: So I got into drugs during high school. Started with marijuana and gradually - - and drugs for me were pretty much a recreational thing for me. Hip hop scene, disco scene, whenever we used to go out dancing, you know, we'd pool together all our money and buy whatever was on the menu that day. It wasn't until that I experienced death for the

first time in my life, and that was the passing of my grandmother who raised us, who was so dear to me, that was a pain I could not fathom and I turned to drugs.

MG: what year is that she dies?

JC: She died in '83.

MG: '83.

JC: and that's when I fell on hard times. And I turned to drugs to hide the pain I was going through and that's what a lot of my people turned to drugs for, to hide from the despair and pain that they're going through. So when that happened it was just all down hill from there. The passing of my grandmother, one thing led to another. I lost my job. I was working at Lincoln Hospital as a clerk in the emergency room. I lost my apartment. I was given an ultimatum by my father to join the army or go St. Raymond's. I'm like, what's St. Raymond's. He goes, St. Raymond's cemetery because that's where I'm gonna put you at if you don't get your act together. So I joined the army because my father went to the army too to get away from his drug problems. So in the army I stopped doing drugs but I started drinking. You pick up one thing, it leads to another. So after like almost 5 years in the army, you know, I'm working as a nurse, a medical person, I knew when the drug tests were being given because I used to give them.

MG: [laughs]

JC: So I had started getting high again in the service and one day I was home for Memorial Day weekend, I got high, went back and at 4:30 in the morning my entire company got this test and I got kicked out of the army.

MG: [gasps softly]

JC: It's tough to fight. So I came back here, struggled, I was married at the time, had my first son. I struggled a lot from job to job. Went through a divorce. And it wasn't until I got arrested for the first time in my life - - you gotta understand something, my family background, very political, very outgoing, my dad, Tito and all that- I had a standard to live up to, so to speak. And it was embarrassing. I have always worked, and I never was homeless or anything like that but with drugs, it's just a progression. I don't care what kind of job you have - -

MG: you will get busted.

JC: - - what you do for a living, eventually drugs will get you. So that's what happened to me. I became homeless, I was living in the street. I got arrested for the first time in my life, and that's when I just threw up my hands and said, you know what, enough is enough, you know, I surrender to God. And I spent 18 months in a drug facility upstate. And through the grace of God I dealt with a lot of family problems, family issues, other issues, a lot of baggage so to speak and [knocks on table] I'm going on 14 - -

MG: Good.

MN: Wow.

MG: And so are you working - -

JC: I work for the New York City Fire Department. I'm a paramedic there for last, about 14 years.

MG: that's excellent.

JC: And you should see me preaching in the back of the ambulance - -

MG: Yeah, right.

JC: - - when I pick up overdoses and homeless people.

MN: Wow.

MG: Excellent.

JC: So I preach to them, then I send them to my mother to get help.

MG: Really? What's her program?

JC: The United Bronx Parents.

MG: Ohh.

JC: She went into drug rehab for women with children.

MG: Excellent.

JC: I'm her best referral.

MG: Wow. That's something. So, the photos - - let me ask you about being a young guy on the Latin scene of the older musicians, you know. How - - tell me about the audience, tell me about the [inaudible].

JC: It was alive, so vibrant. I mean Latin music is so vibrant, so alive. The scene was just incredible. Being young, you know, seeing this happening is just amazing. Beautiful, flamboyant, you know.

MG: I'm very interested in this African American-Latino crossing, cultural cross. You know, the black audience, so called black audience for Latino music and African Americans playing, not speaking Spanish - -

JC: Not speaking - - even for the - - some Caucasian people playing Barry Rogers didn't speak any Spanish.

MG: Uh huh, right. We remember Barry.

JC: He was one of the biggest - -

MG: [inaudible]

JC: Yeah.

MG: Were you there?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Uh huh. Bobby Precellia?

JC: Bobby Precellia, all of them were there. [inaudible], all of them. Because that was my playground, hanging with my dad and all of these musicians who played with Tito and all these other people.

MG: Did they get on you about the drugs?

JC: No because I was probably doing drugs with them.

MG: Oh really?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Not good.

JC: Not good but you gotta understand the music scene back then ruined - - drugs ruined a lot of these musicians lives because drugs was so integrated into the music era, at least at the time that I was hanging around. And you know, there was a lot of drug usage, from your common musician up to your biggest band leader.

MG: Is there any conspiracy theory around who brought the drugs in and who made the money on the drugs or you don't go for that? You know how some people say they were brought in and eventually - -

JC: You see, I've heard so many different conspiracy this, that, and the other - -

MG: You don't go for it?

JC: I don't listen. You had a choice back then and if you chose to get high then you chose to get high. I can relate why you would make those choices but ultimately, we all have choices.

MG: It just was so prevalent?

JC: It was just really really prevalent.

MN: Of the people you grew up with, did a large percentage get involved?

JC: Yeah, it was - - in my community yes, yes. You know, there was exceptions to the rules. Out of like, let's say 5 of my best friends, I was probably the only one that really got heavily involved in it, but the 5 of us used to get high all the time. And we all came from good family backgrounds. One of my best friends, his mother is Carmen Arollo, one of the first Hispanic women elected to office. But he didn't get as much enjoyment - -

MN: I'm very interested in how your father became a writer when - - you describe him as a failed conga player. He's writing articles for Discarga - -

JC: He - - I mean, that was his love. Latin music was his love. The joke with our family is - - my father's been married five times legally - -

MG: Oh [laughs].

JC: - - but he's been married to - - but never divorced Tito, that was his first - -

[laughter]

MG: I mean if I said, "Oh tomorrow we're interviewing Joe Conzo Jr.," oh, Tito, "Oh yeah, oh that little kid." [laughs]

JC: Yeah. But he was just a plethora of information. My father wrote liner notes, wrote this - - he could tell you stuff about Tito that Tito didn't know.

MN: [laughs]

JC: I mean, whenever people wanted something from Tito, Tito would say go see Joe, go see Joe. The book started happening, the albums and this, that, and the other and next thing you know my father is just the person who loves [inaudible].

MG: Mmm hmm. So tell what happened with the negatives.

JC: Okay, I had what's called some lost years, and my lost years were due to my drug uses. So, from about '77, when I picked up camera, I documented everything, the birth of hip hop, me hanging out with my dad, and Tito, and Celia, my grandmother and her various demonstrations across the city, and City Hall and stuff. But around '80 to '83 I stopped taking pictures because I was too busy chasing the drug and I pick up late '80's, early '90's, when I pick up the camera. But, being a drug addict, the camera - - I sold all my camera equipment, I sold everything because your first thing is trying to get drugs. My mother saved my negatives and held on to them for all these years.

MG: So did she pull them out or did you ask her what happened to them. How is this - -

JC: you know, I got clean, I started getting back into photography. I finally got a stabilized home, I wasn't living from house to house. After my divorce and after the army I went back home to live with mom and my brother. After a few years of sobriety I started building a foundation. And you make a phone call, "Hey remember when I left this over there for you?" I said, "You still have it?" "Sure."

MG: [laughs]

JC: Come by and picked it up. And I just started collecting my negatives again. A.D. from the Cold Crush Brothers had a bunch of my black and white negatives. "Joe, I still have them." Gave them all back to me.

MG: Isn't that - - you're very lucky.

JC: Yeah.

MG: Because you know these stories where people - -

JC: Well look, I'm blessed. I'm not lucky, I'm blessed.

MG: Yeah, yeah. Right.

JC: I should've been dead years ago, you know what I mean. With the stuff that I've done and this, that, and the other thing, I'm blessed. You know, I was almost killed in 9/11. It's just - -

MG: you were down there working?

JC: Yeah, I was in the Marriott, evacuating people when the first tower fell down. And I was buried alive for a good half hour, forty five minutes.

MG: Oh my God!

JC: and came out. First person I call is my mother, hysterically. She's saying, "Shut the blank blank blank up! Get the blank blank outta there."

MG: Yeah [laughs].

JC: I'm like, "Ma, I can't leave I gotta find my [inaudible] and stuff." She goes, "Well you find your [inaudible] and get outta there." Well [inaudible] I stayed down there for the next 24 hours [inaudible]. But I'm blessed Maxine. My God forbid I should leave this earth tomorrow, I've been blessed with a legacy and I have a lot to contribute.

MG: You ever had an exhibition of the Latin photos?

JC: Small ones, small ones. My born in the Bronx exhibit was in London. This is really huge, I had a smaller one in London at a small venue there which was well received and like I told you, you know, I just signed my first book deal with Rizzoli Books for the hip hop stuff. And as soon as that's done there gonna sign - - do another book on my Latin stuff.

MN: Oh okay.

MG: So could you - - alright, now we can move into this. How did this association begin with [inaudible] - -

JC: I went to high school, I went to South Bronx High school and I was the school photographer there, okay? South Bronx high school is the home of Adriane Harris, a.k.a. A.D. and Angelo King, a.k.a. Toni Tone. Who Toni was just putting together his own hip hop group called the Cold Crush Brother, okay? Now I was the school photographer so I was taking pictures of A.D. who is also the school's star basketball player.

MG: Oh.

JC: and they invited me to take pictures of this group they were putting together. Now mind you, I'm into disco, you're talking '77,'78. So I'm into disco. So I went along thinking maybe I could make a couple of dollars taking pictures and one thing led to another and I started following them on all their venues and we started distributing all my photos to the crowds, using my photos on flyers - -

MG: wow.

JC: - - and I became their official photographer. I was - - a matter of fact, they were the only group who had their own photographer - -

MG: they knew that they were - -

JC: Pretty much.

MG: - - they had an idea about how popular - -

JC: Pretty much.

MG: - - they were gonna get?

JC: Some of them will tell you today, they knew. They had to epiphany thing 30 years later this would all be. I didn't know. I just loved taking pictures.

MN: So you didn't have an idea that this was something new that was gonna sweep the world?

JC: I had no idea. And don't get me wrong, they were very popular and very - - I love telling people I'm with the band you know. I'm with the band. Because when you're with the band you can get into anything.

MG: Yeah, it's like your father.

MN: [laughter]

JC: Yeah.

MG: I'm with the band [inaudible].

JC: Yeah, it was nice. And then when Rapper's Delight came out, it was like, wow this is gonna be big. And the Cold Crush did a few albums, The Weekend, Punk Rock Rap - -

MN: Yeah, I got all those.

JC: - - Fresh Fly [inaudible]. They never made it commercially as big as Rapper's Delight but you know. But hanging out with them, I got to meet and photograph Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaata, the Treacherous Three, you know, all these, Kurtis Blow, all these pioneering foundation laying people.

MN: What was the sort of cultural-social scene between blacks and Latinos in your community.

JC: We were all integrated.

MN: Uh huh.

JC: We were all integrated.

MN: and that was in elementary school, junior high - -

JC: Elementary, junior high, high school, we were all - - I mean, you had your social class where blacks were on one side but when it came to hanging out, having a good time, whatever, sporting events, whatever, it was all integrated.

MN: What was Kool Herc like in those days?

JC: Very tall - -

MN: [laughs]

JC: - - very heavy Jamaican accent, and very to himself. Very innovative, he has the foresight to see. And very- I'm trying to look for a word where - - people were afraid because he was such a tall guy, but he was lovable once you got to know him.

MN: did you have any contact with Flash in those days.

JC: somewhat. You know, you gotta understand too, since I didn't have the foresight to see where this would go, I could be around Flash and I wouldn't care who he was

because I was too busy taking pictures of Cold Crush and whoever passed throughout their circle. The majority of my archives is of the Cold Crush, the Treacherous Three, because there was an alliance back then, Kool Herc, Kurtis Blow. Flash was like a rival to the Cold Crush Brothers even though they played in the same venue. I didn't care about Flash.

MN: Did you take any outdoor jams?

JC: Mmm, hmm. I took some outdoor jams.

MN: And how did they hook up the sound systems?

JC: Through the light bulbs. That's how they drew their electricity from.

MN: Uh huh. They'd just unscrew the - -

JC: Unscrew the plate. You get your local electricity, flock on the corner - -

MN: [laughs]

JC: - - put the green wire with the green wire and hopefully you won't get electrocuted.

MG: [laughs] Hopefully. What's the name of that bus driver that Brian and I met?

JC: [laughs]

MN: Cool Clyde.

MG: You heard of Cool Clyde? He recognized Brian when we got on the bus.

JC: Yeah, Cool Clyde's a good guy.

MG: Driving a bus for 13 years.

JC: Oh look at him. See, we all became city workers.

MG: Right? That's very interesting.

JC: A.D. from the Cold Crush runs the Harlem YMCA for the last 13 years also. I'm a paramedic with the fire department. And pretty much, you go around, you can pretty much see a lot of the pioneers are doing a lot of different things.

MG: Joe Batan?

JC: Joe Batan works at Spofford for the last 20 years. He was my idol.

MG: could you say something about Joe Batan.

JC: Joe Batan. Funny story- When I became a teenager I loved his music. And growing up when I got married, I mean, you name it- Gypsy Woman to you know, just any one of 'em. And I used to tell this to my dad.[inaudible] They went to school together - -

MG: Oh.

JC: - - I didn't know that. "Yeah, one day I'll introduce you," my father's raspy voice, I'll introduce you to him. And all these years I've never met him. Last year was the first time I met Joe Batan. And we had struck up such a good friendship. We e-mail each other, we go to concerts together and everything. He's such a cool guy. And he's another pioneer of another genre of music that never got its just dues- Latin Soul.

MN: Right.

MG: Yeah. Who else- I know this- but who else is in that group that was popular in - -

JC: Johnny Colon, Joe Cuba, you name it. That's a genre - -

MG: Joe Panama.

JC: Yeah. That's a genre of music that really don't get their just dues also, which I relate to hip hop also.

MG: Yeah I'm very interested also in talking about that genre.

JC: I'll put you in touch with him.

MG: Yeah.

JC: He's so down to earth.

MG: And that relates to something in jazz where then you go to what they call soul jazz.

JC: Yeah [laughs].

MG: Where people are like, "Huh! Is that authentic." You know, Canamal and Russ Silver and all that. So it's in the same period.

JC: Well, you know, we're all related. [inaudible]. We're all related.

MG: Of course. So this Latin Soul, you know?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Mongo.

JC: Mongo, when he first came from Cuba, used to live in [inaudible] in Spanish Harlem.

MG: Oh yeah?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Okay you want to continue about the hip hop stuff?

MN: Where were the major places the Cold Crush played?

JC: The Cold Crush, they played in the Tea Connection, Harlem World, which is in Harlem, Ecstasy Garage which was off Jerome Avenue, the Fever. We had - - the Hibalo - - they had their own home base, was a place in the old Burger King called Your Spot. It was on Webster Avenue and 178 streets. Not too many people speak about that place but that was their home base for - -

MN: It was a Burger King?

JC: An old Burger King - - no, not - - I know the stories about Lovebug Starsky playing at Burger King, but this was an old Burger King that they had closed down and they made it into a little club - -

MN: A club.

JC: - - which was called Your Spot and that was the Cold Crush's stronghold. But you name the venues. They played everywhere.

MN: Did you ever run into Arthur Crier who lived with some of the Cold Crush. He's a very tall African American guy - -

JC: Bald?

MN: What?

JC: Is he bald?

MN: No he actually had a head of hair. He was a former doo wop singer who did talent shows.

JC: I know Arthur. Yeah, yeah. He was one of the Cold Crush's first managers if we're talking about the same Arthur.

MN: Yeah, yeah. And he took them to Riker's Island - -

JC: Yeah.

MN: - - and the Murphy Houses - -

JC: Yeah.

MN: When hip hop was beginning was there any people from earlier generations who were encouraging these groups or was it pretty much the young people by themselves?

JC: It was a young people's movement. That's how I can best describe it. There was a young cross-section of Latin, blacks, you know, wanting to make their voices heard. At that time too, late '70's early '80's, the Bronx was burning, drugs were rampant, gangs were prevalent all over the city. And these were just some youth trying to do their own thing. And as far as being coached by any other people, I really don't know because even though I was there, my thing was not the music itself.

MN: Right.

JC: I was documenting it. But this is a very famous picture.

MG: Yeah it is.

JC: This is a picture of - -

MG: Could you talk about that?

JC: - - the Cold Crush Brothers performing at my junior, my high school prom at South Bronx High School.

MG: Wow. [inaudible].

JC: This picture appeared in the Chris Rock movie, CB4 - -

MG: Oh that's right, that's right.

JC: - - in the beginning of the film. No film credit, no payment, no nothing. So imagine -
-

MG: [inaudible]?

JC: Who knows? So imagine - - I mean, we used to give out hundreds of pictures during shows so imagine my surprise I'm sitting in a movie theatre and I'm seeing my picture on a 30 by 40 foot screen and it says, "Photo by Joey."

MG: Oh!

MN: It had your name?

JC: On the picture itself, but it got no credit, no nothing. But this is a very famous picture.

MG: So could you tell whose in it and where - -

JC: This is the Cold Crush Brothers, the Cold Crush Four. You have, [inaudible] K.G., Easy A.D., Charlie Chase, Toni Tone, J.D.L., and Grandmaster Caz who wrote Rapper's Delight.

MN: Right.

JC: Who never got credit for it or anything like that.

MG: And this is at your high school?

JC: South Bronx High School.

MG: South Bronx High School.

JC: 701 East [inaudible] Avenue.

MN: Right. Tell the story about Grandmaster Caz and Rapper's Delight.

JC: Well, Grandmaster Caz - - Cold Crush Brothers, when they were pretty much - -

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A] [BEGINNING OF TAPE 2 SIDE B]

MN: Joe, could you show us some family pictures and explain what they are.

JC: Okay, this is something I did myself. It's a picture of my grandmother, Evelina Antonetty and my mother taken about 25 years apart. But the similarities - -

MG: Ohhh.

JC: - - the similarities are so unique. I did something on my computer and I put them together.

MG: Oh! So a real picture of them together. Oh wow. How great!

JC: This is a picture from a demonstration on Prospect Avenue with the banner from my grandmother's organization that she started, United Bronx Parents, which my mother Lorraine Montenegro still runs today. This is a picture of the opening ceremony of La Casita. La Casita is the first drug rehab for women with children in the nation. Years ago if a mother had drug problems and had kids, she would literally have to give her kids up for adoption to enter a drug rehab, okay? My mother opened up the first of its kind. Subsequently later on Mother Hill did the same thing, and it got more famous - -

MN: what is the address of this building?

JC: This is 833 156th street or something like that.

MN: Yeah.

JC: Old Sports for the People building.

MN: People, yeah.

MG; Uh huh [laughs].

JC: And in this picture you have Governor Cuomo there, you have a picture I took with my grandmother in the background. And this is a black and white picture of my mother. My grandmother at her office at 810 East 156th street - - 152nd street, an old factory that she took over. My grandmother was good for taking over stuff.

MG: [laughs].

JC: [inaudible]

MG: are those your photos all over the walls?

JC: Some of them I think. My grandmother took these building from the city, give them a dollar for a year for rent, and she'd renovate them and make them into community organizations. Ummm, that's basically it.

MN: Show the proclamation.

JC: This is the proclamation from June 1985. My grandmother died in '83, but this is in June of 1985 where Governor Cuomo gave a proclamation and named the open space of the first multimillion dollar building that the Bronx had seen in a long time, the Fordham Complex that's - -

MN: It's right across the street from the University.

JC: And - -

MN: Evelina Antonetty Plaza.

JC: Yeah.

MN: But there's no plaque up.

JC: We never put a plaque there.

MG: So there's no street sign or anything?

MN & JC: Nothing.

MG: Oh, so you could fix it.

MN: I plan to.

JC: Yeah, go fix it [laughs].

MG: He runs [inaudible].

[laughter]

JC: And That's basically it. Some newspaper articles.

MN: Now something you said before really rang a bell because we've interviewed several people from the St. Mary's Houses. Did you watch the Bronx burn before your eyes?

JC: I lived there. You gotta understand something, you know. Five fifty five Cauldwell Avenue, okay? Surrounded by abandoned buildings. Once a week there would be a fire in there or another building. We were on a first name basis with the firemen. They used to come, because that's how many fires there were in the Bronx during those times. My mother used to open the window, "You want some coffee laughs], you want some this?" But you know, the Bronx was burning, the Bronx burnt before my eyes. And there's so many different reasons why landlords wanted to collect insurance to drive the Hispanics and the blacks out of the Bronx. Just so many different things. But you know, that was a big thing.

MN: Do you think that would have on some subconscious level, an effect on young people growing up in that environment?

JC: Of course it did. Of course it did. When your entire neighborhood is ravaged by fires and drugs and everything, of course it does. I was just fortunate enough and blessed that there were some family values in my upbringing. Even though I did stray the path as a drug addict as a little while. Of course all that. Your environment definitely has and effect on you.

MN: So in your neighborhood most of the tenements burned?

JC: Of course.

MN: And it was the public housing that held up?

JC: That held up, yeah. You don't see too many projects burned. It's the smaller tenements - -

MN: [laughs]

MG: Right.

JC: Yeah.

MN: Was St. Mary's Houses always well kept, well preserved?

JC: Pretty much. From what I can remember, from what I can remember. Also too, during the time I was also - - you know, my mother remarried for the second time. We moved from the Bronx to Manhattan, across the street from Columbia University. My stepfather taught at Columbia where he was getting his doctorate. So I went from the slums of the Bronx to the radical movement with Columbia University and that area during the late '60's and early '70's.

MN: And but you were still going to school in the Bronx?

JC: In the Bronx, yeah. I also did 2 years in Agnes Russel at Columbia University, their private school. We also lived in Chevy Chase, Maryland for a little while. You know, house, picket fence. It was nice. But when she divorced him it was back to the South Bronx.

MG: [laughs]

MN: Oh! [laughs]

[crosstalk]

MN: So there were five of you?

JC: My mother raised - - I had four brothers - - there's five of us all together. I have four brothers and sisters.

MN: Uh huh. And did all of you go to Chevy Chase?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Where she goes, you go, right?

JC: That's right. That's right. But basically, I was born and raised in the Bronx - -

MN: Right, and then - -

JC: - - I had to live outside for a little time.

MN: and then you went back to St. Mary's?

JC: Yeah. Not the projects itself, right across the street, 555 Cauldwell. Cauldwell and 149th street which is right across from St. Mary's projects. But I was born in those projects, yeah.

MN: Now what is your recollection of the '80's? That was a tough time.

JC: [laughs] The '80's were a big blur to me. Not really. I mean listen, I graduated from high school in the '80's, in 1980. I worked freelance for a photographer for two years after high school. I was exposed to business photography. I worked for a fine arts photographer downtown. We used to go to galleries and all over photographing artwork worth hundreds or hundreds or thousands of dollars. And I worked for him. I was his assistant. [inaudible]. And the School of Visual Arts down on 23rd street. All while taking pictures and building my archives. But also getting deeper into drugs. So the '80's were good years but it was also hard years for me because '83, '84 began my lost years, so to speak.

MN: Now it seems like women were the ones who held the community together. Would that be fair to say?

JC: Well ,from my background it is fair to say. My mother raised five of us on her own. Two failed marriages, but kept us together. My grandmother ran one of the largest and longest running community organizations. She was still married at the time. But my grandfather took a step in the background. He ran - - my grandmother opened up a day care center and he ran that but the political front lines, that was my grandmother's doing. She - -

MN: Do you think there was any kind of culture clash for people coming from Puerto Rico to New York in terms of women playing a larger role?

JC: women always, and this is just my perspective, women have always played a large role in family upbringing because the men were too busy going out and making a living to support. A lot of them would take jobs in the service, traveling. So to me, the women had those roles of role models and stuff. But in the opening the machismo of the Latin man saying I'm the breadwinner, I'm the, this, you know. But to me, the women have always held that strong role.

MN: but here's your grandmother whose not only a leader in the family, she's a major force - -

JC: She was the matriarch of our family.

MN: but of also the whole neighborhood.

JC: Of the community too.

MN: How did the male leaders respond?

JC: they had to respect her because she had no problem with cursing you out or causing you bodily harm.

MG: [laughs]

JC: I'm not lying. My grandmother was arrested numerous times because she had no problems cursing a cop out or beating up on a you know, beating up on a little kid. She had no problem taking garbage down to the steps at City Hall and dumping it there saying, "Have your kids [inaudible]."

MG: Brian should hear that. Brooklyn Cor - - I wonder if they did that?

JC: who knows? Probably.

MG: If they did that first?

MN: They know, they all know each other.

MG: Yeah, because I was - - remember that when they did that in Brooklyn?

JC: Yeah, yeah.

MN: everybody in New York knew who Evelina Antonetty was if you're an activist. I don't care if you're in Brooklyn, Queens - -

JC: True.

MN: - - or Manhattan.

JC: True. But she had no problem because these are her people [inaudible].

MN: Were you brought up with consciousness of Puerto Rican history?

JC: Yeah. Very, very important in our family. Very important. Even though we weren't living in Puerto Rico, in our family, we had to know our history. Especially the political history, [inaudible]. All those political prisoners were released and were pardoned by

Carter I think. I'm not sure who pardoned them after twenty something years. The first place they came to was the Bronx to see my grandmother. I have pictures of Lolita

Labrone - -

MG: Wow.

JC: - - and my grandmother. Oscar Coriazo, Raphael Hernandez, all of these from prison coming to the Bronx to see her.

MG: Did she work for their release?

JC: Yeah.

MG: When she was on that committee?

JC: Yeah.

MG: So was she pro-independence?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Of course. Uh huh.

MN: Did your family have any relationship with Santeria?

JC: Depends on what part of the family you spoke to.

MN: [laughs]

JC: It was respected. Let's just put it that way. It was respected. Because it is part of your culture. It is part of your culture. I wouldn't say my grandmother was the biggest church-going person there was, but she respected the Catholic Church. On the other hand, my mother respected out culture of Santeria and [inaudible] and all that. So, you know.

MG: Tito Puente had [inaudible].

JC: Big time. Big Time, Tito Puente, big time.

MG: You know that, since you're asking, African religion, especially in Puerto Rico is all over the Latin music scene [inaudible]. And he'd go like that and - -

JC: Of course. People thought he was just - -

MG: Yeah, right. No everything means something. And to see Tito do that. And Candido last night too.

JC: I wish I had known about it.

MG: You know, he took the - -

[crosstalk]

MG: your father didn't practice.

JC: He respected it - -

MG: Yeah, yeah right.

JC: - - big time.

MG: Okay he did. Yeah, well.

MN: Next we'll show the hip hop pictures.

MG: This is great that you still have this. We love this kind of memorabilia as you can see from the article on [inaudible].

MN: Okay, Joe, could you show us through some of the amazing hip hop photos and memorabilia that you have accumulated.

JC: Well, this is a catalog. I just returned overseas from London where myself and my good friend Johann Kugelburg, he was a Swedish gentleman who loves - -

MG: Hip hop?

JC: - - hip hop. He's from Sweden.

MN: [laughs]

MG: Get out of here.

JC: And he put together my first exhibit and it was called Born in the Bronx, or is called Born in the Bronx.

MG: How did he find you?

JC: Same way Mark found me.

MG: Through that article in the Times?

JC: No, no. We've known each other for about 2 years now. But through Grandmaster Caz and - - he's a collector. He collects old records and stuff. One phone call led to another. I got introduced. He says, "I love your work. It should be an exhibit. Let's do it." So this is a catalog. It's a visual record of rap's early days. It's three catalogs. One catalog is of my photos.

MG: This is you [inaudible].

JC: Yeah this is me. This is a self-portrait I did of myself for school.

MG: Hmm, so cool.

JC: When I was thin and had an afro.

MG: [laughs]

JC: And this is a kid from the neighborhood, Boogoo. This is 149th street and Park Avenue. The Maria Lopez Houses are built there now but they weren't built there at the time. And this was our playground. You know, open lots, stuff like that. And he's some pictures of, some of my early pictures of hip hop. Kool Mo Dee and Grandmaster Caz, two of the greatest emcees ever. Easy A.D. and Dj Tony Tone.

MG: Do you do your own printing?

JC: at that time I did.

MG: You did.

JC: I had my own dark room. My mother says if its gonna keep you off the streets, take one of our extra bathrooms and make it a dark room.

MG: You had a dark room in the St. Mary's Houses?

JC: No, in Michelangelo.

MG: In Michelangelo?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Wow. Great.

JC: You know, the abandoned buildings were so prevalent at that time. They were all over. This is one of the first pictures of the Cold Crush Brothers performing together at the Tea Connection which was on White Plains and Gun Hill. Kool Herc, the father of hip hop and dj Tony Tone, this was at the Tea Connection. This was at a club downtown called Negril's. Negril's was one of the first clubs - - you know about that right?

MN: [laughs]

JC: Negril's was one of the first clubs to allowed hip hop to come downtown. Because hip hop was basically concentrated up in the Bronx. And Kool Lady Blue, the producer and promoter, is instrumental in bringing hip hop downtown.

MG: Where was Negril's?

JC: Negril's, 1st avenue and 18th street. Something like that, I'm not sure. Self portrait of me. Me and my Angela Davis Afro.

[laughter]

MG: Nice.

JC: Picture of Chief Rocker Busy Bee at the Bronx River Community Center at one of the Zulu Nation Anniversaries. This is one of the early pictures of him. And what's so good about this picture in the fashion. You know, the British [inaudible], the pea coats. Dj Tony Tone at the Tea Connection. Cold Crush Brothers performing at Night Harlem. South Bronx High School. This is the Cold Crush Brothers at Harlem World. Harlem World has a very famous venue in Harlem on 168th street. It started out as a disco and transformed into different things. But what makes this picture so great is the mural in the background. This is the famous UFO mural in Harlem World. A lot of rappers today sing about Harlem World but weren't even old enough to get in. There is a picture of K.G. and King Mario, disco King Mario, may he rest in peace, one of the pioneers of hip hop also. And just some various other pictures you know. K.D.L. lighting up.

MG: [laughs]

JC: Smoking. Cold Crush Brothers performing on stage. This is a picture of Master Rob and Kevy Kev. This is the rehearsal for the movie WildStyle. And this was shot on [inaudible] Avenue and 180th. And Charlie Ahern today who did Wildstyle [inaudible].

MG: Oh.

JC: Because that was just a rehearsal that day from the famous basketball scene.

MN: right. I remember that.

JC: This is a picture of Cold Crush Brothers on Hull Avenue - -

MN: On Hull Avenue.

JC: - - Hull Avenue Boys Club. This is K.G.. Like I said, my photos, we used to make, I used to do 8 by 10's of them and we used to throw them out to the crowd. That's him throwing out some posters and my pictures and stuff.

MG: Wow. And the band would pay to make the copies as a promotion?

JC: I would do it. You know, I would charge them like a dollar a picture. So if I blew up 50 pictures that day, for that show, I'd collect 50 dollars from the guys.

MG: And they gave them away?

JC: And they gave them away.

MG: That was very, very smart.

JC: Oh yeah. Listen, the Cold Crush Brothers were so innovative. They used smoke machines and you're talking 1980, '81. They had a tape master. The tape master was a chubby Puerto Rican kid that taped all of their shows - -

MG: Oh, see.

JC: - - thirty years later - -

MN: Oh we still have them with Troy Smith.

JC: Yeah and you still have copies of them. I photographed all their shows.

MG: [inaudible]

JC: You know, not Grandmaster Flash, not Sugarhill, not nobody else can boast all of that. This is a picture of Tony Tone, Afrikaa Bambaata, and Busy Bee. This is the Treacherous Three who were really close with the Cold Crush Brothers. Kool Mo Dee, L.A. Sunshine, Special K. Kool Mo Dee is a big Hollywood actor.

MG: Mmm hmm, yes.

JC: This is the famous battle between the Cold Crush Brothers and the Fantastic Romantic. And they dressed up as gangsters with toy guns.

MN: [laughs]

JC: This is before gangster rap.

MG: Right.

JC: We're talking 1980, gangster rap came out early '90's. And they actually dressed up like [inaudible]. This is a shout out for a girl whose name I forget in Crotona Park. One of the United Bronx Parents summer festivals. So this is a book of my photographs.

MG: that's the catalog for the show?

JC: Yeah this whole thing is the show.

MG: But then where was the show?

JC: In London.

MG: In a gallery?

JC: Yeah. In a gallery.

MG: And you did the prints or they had to print?

JC: They did all, they did everything. They just flew me over there and - -

MG: That was nice, right?

JC: Yeah, and this is a book of flyers - -

MN: hold these up, these are - -

JC: - - original flyers. You know, hip hop didn't have radio air play at that time or money to advertise so they used to do flyers. And Buddy Esquire, whose known as the

King of the flyers, used to do flyers. And a lot of the flyers used my pictures to promote the shows, took - -

MG: Did you have these?

JC: Huh?

MG: You kept these?

JC: This is part of Johann's collection.

MG: Wow, wow.

JC: He has one of the largest collections. So this is the flyer collection that is traveling with my - -

MN: Bronx High School of Science presents Grand - -

JC: Yes. So these flyers are traveling with my photos. They'll be in Japan and - -

MG: You're going to Japan?

JC: Yeah, in August.

MG: Oh, how great! This is so great.

JC: And I'm going to Harlem World. Three dollars to get in, Brothers disco. I mean this is a beautiful art form.

MN: wow.

JC: and that's basically it. The next booklet is just interviews of myself and Charlie Chase, Tony Tone. And this I leave.

MG: [inaudible] So full time now, you're working on this collection and your older photos or are you still taking photos?

JC: I'm still taking pictures.

MG: Oh, where do you photograph now?

JC: Everywhere. This weekend I shot Public enemy at B.B.King's.

MG: Oh! So you have access to everybody?

JC: Yes, pretty much now. I'm the house photographer at Lehman College.

MG: Oh.

JC: So I shot B.B. King there. Last month was Jose Feliciano.

MG: Oh yeah.

MN: and it turns out Jose Feliciano lived in the Bronx.

JC: Lived in the Bronx. I never knew that. He told the entire audience. Lived on - -

MG: Because now you know, everybody wants to be from the Bronx - -

JC: That's right.

MG: Right?

JC: Lived on Elton Avenue.

MG: [laughs] People deny it for years and now everybody - -

JC: Lived on Elton Avenue and moved down to the Village and we used to smoke marijuana with Bob Dylan and all those people. But my 9-5, my bread and butter in New York City fire department. I'm also the treasurer at my union. So when I'm not working in the ambulance saving lives, I'm out fighting City Hall for a better contract.

MN: Right.

MG: Yeah.

JC: And traveling. And then when I have time, my camera goes with me everywhere I go.

MG: You still do any Latin - -

JC: Yeah.

MG: - - photographs? Latin bands?

JC: Yeah. I'm doing a Grandcongo - -

MG: Oh no, when?

JC: - - June 16 on the Congas?

MG: Oh the Conga[inaudible].

JC: Yeah. Write it down.

MG: Okay. I'll be there.

JC: Also I'm the staff photographer magazine out in London. Whenever they need a new photographer they call me.

MG: Do you have photos of the Grandcongo?

JC: Yeah.

MG: Old ones?

JC: No.

MG: Oh, that's something new?

JC: Yeah.

MN: Okay. Marvin, do you have any questions that you'd like to ask?

Marvin: How does it feel to be - - to have all that history? Because one of the things that's hard for me is that I don't have any of that from my neighborhood and I miss that.

JC: You have - - it's, like I said and I'll keep saying, I'm blessed. Not only am I blessed of the contributions I made to my culture but of documenting my culture and to know

your history. It is so wonderful to be able to ask, you know, for a kid, hearing your own brothers and sisters saying where did this come from or why did this happen and have the answers for that. It's so rewarding. It's a really good feeling. And then I'm grateful to my grandmother who instilled those family values in me and my father for exposing me to a lot of my culture. And its just a good feeling, you know, everybody should know where they came from, where they're going, their background. And to take it a step further, to document it like I have is just awesome.

Marvin: And second question, how do you feel about what's happening, or about what's slowly happening to the Bronx and how it's becoming a place to live now.

JC: Well I've always felt it's been a place to live at - -

[laughter]

JC: - - but its just now that the rest of the world finally realizes it. It's wonderful. I've always called this home even though I've lived in various areas. I lived in Chevy Chase, Maryland, I lived in Columbia, South Carolina, [inaudible] North Carolina. I've lived all over. But the Bronx has always been my home. My grandmother gave her life to making the Bronx a special place for its people. And it's beautiful. It's getting a little bit expensive for me [laughs] because everybody else wants to come live here. But born and raised here and I'd probably die here.

Marvin: You could do photography full time?

JC: I would do it in a heartbeat. I would do it in a heartbeat. But I can't. I'm a family man. I need my pension. I need the benefits, the health benefits and everything like that. I'm just grateful that I'm able to make some money, not a lot of money - - but to me, its

not about money for me. It's not, it's not. I love what it - - if you love to do something, it's priceless. Nobody can pay you to do something you love to do, they can't. So my job is, my 9-5 is saving lives and delivering babies working for the New York City Fire department. Also being an activist involved in Union work. Because my grandmother, besides her community activism was a great union worker also, advocate. So I'm grateful that she's instilled that in me and my mother's instilled that in me. But if I'm capable of doing something else that I love, which is my photography, great. And who'd think that 30 years later, your first love, now everybody wants to be a part of it. I remember getting an e-mail from Mark over here after the New York Times piece, who is this Joe Conzo and why don't I have his work over here and this, that, and the other thing.

[laughter]

JC: And now we're the best of friends.

Marvin: What advice would you give someone who's interested in documenting history through photography, through writing of their community?

JC: My secret to good photography is to take a lot of pictures everywhere. Have that camera with you everywhere, whether it's a little one or a big one, whatever. Document, document, document. Read up on your culture, read up on your community and you can't go wrong, you can't. If photography is something you like to do, take pictures. I tell people the secret to a good photographer is to take a lot of pictures, you're bound to get one or two good shots.

MG: Yeah right.

JC: And in today's world of digital photography - - you gotta understand something too. Back then there was no digital photography. I had to buy my own rolls of film and develop them. That cost money. I didn't have no money. I didn't have no money. You know, maybe I'll steal 20 dollars form my mother's pocketbook and she probably knew I was the one taking it but she knew I was doing something good. But in today's photography world you can buy a digital camera and take thousands of thousands of pictures and not spend a penny because your dark room now is your computer. You can do everything on your computer. You can delete what you don't want and save what you want. Document your history, document your surroundings. And just follow your dreams.

MG: But a lot of people - - what I'll say to you, this idea you have for your project.

There will be other people who did keep things once you do uncover those people. Then they know somebody or they got pictures or they kept there's.

JC: It'll be a snowball effect.

MG: Yeah, yeah.

JC: Because one person will know fulano whose got this and fulano whose got this and it's like - -

MG: Or might have something in the closet.

MN: I mean this project started with me doing one interview and its been a snowball. A snowball turning into an avalanche actually, which is a metaphor. One of the people who got involved, Harriet McFeeters said, "You know, this is gonna turn into an avalanche. It's gonna be out of control." Because there's so many people who want to tell their story. One question I wanted to ask you which is sort of relevant to Marvin, do barber shops

have the same importance in Puerto Rican communities as they do in African American communities? Do people go back to the same barber shop for 40 years?

JC: I've been following the same barber, the same person, from barber shop to barber shop for the last 10 years. There's one person that cuts my hair and that's it. Barber shops are institutions in our communities, they really are. They are the equivalent of say, the moms' beautician, beauty parlor.

MG: Yeah, right.

JC: Very important in the Spanish community, very important in the black community.

MN: Yeah. So if you were looking in the upper West side, the barber shops are a place where - -

MG: Shoe repair.

MN: Shoe repair.

JC: The mom and pop stores, the mom and pop stores - -

MG: Yeah, if they're there.

JC: - - that they have survived all of this. Those are great sources for information.

MG: A lot of them sold Puerto Rican soul.

MN: Dawn do you have any questions?

JC: Dawn, I got married in Negril, in Jamaica.

[laughter]

Dawn: That's fantastic.

JC: where are you from.

Dawn: I'm from Kingston, Jamaica. No it's just, I really related to so much of what you said and being a video maker myself, you talked about you don't need to be concerned about money or anything. Because really it doesn't have anything to do with those things.

Although you would love - -

JC: Of course.

Dawn: But that's so totally relevant in a way. That you're just happy.

JC: I just love what I do.

MN: Okay. I just want to thank you for an extraordinary experience form all of us. I think the thing about this interview is that it touched each of us in different ways in different parts of our experience and that's a really powerful thing. So this is the beginning, not the end because we're gonna be working on a whole bunch of ways to of bringing this to more people. This legacy which is so precious and so powerful. So thank you so much.

JC: My pleasure.

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]