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Interviewee: James Henderson

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: January 13, 2004

James Henderson (JH): I have to say now around junior high school, I begin on going to Mars-

Mark Naison (MN): - now was this on your block or other blocks? - In other words your block was mostly black but you'd walk through areas that had Latin families----

JH: and there were Latin families, now by this time moving into my block.

MN: right.

JH:.. moving into the surrounding neighborhoods

MN: Now what about this music appeal for you-do u go back-

JH: the drums!

MN: the drums

JH: the beat is the common thread. The rhythm- you know its all the same- drum, jazz um- Latin music, um-Caribbean West Indian Music, elipso- it was all the beat

MN: So was there any West Indian music in the neighborhood at this time?

JH: Oh sure, yeah everything. Cliposy was heavy.

MN: Now were there particular clubs- or is this mostly being heard from apartments?

JH: Um there was clubs on Boston Road too. There was about 2 or 3 jazz clubs. Um Freddie's,- it's a good jazz club on Boston Road 168th. And then there was a Blue Morracco – across the street from Freddie's which Blue Morracco is next to that movie theatre . And uh 169th street there was another-

MN: was it Goodson's? Is that-

JH: Goodson's was the loud music. That came about in the- I guess the late 50s.

MN: Did you ever go to Club 845?

JH: Yes I went to Prospect Ave

MH: Uh-huh. Now did these- so they would have a very wide range of music- they would have Calypso knights

JH: calypso, Latin music, R & B

MN: It would be the same bill or different nights?

JH: On the same night

MN: On the same?- you would have Latin music, calypso & R&B?

JH: Yeah, just different crowds there who normally wouldn't be together except for this big dance, then they would come together.

MN: Now, they dancing in these clubs?

JH: Oh yeah.

MN: Were they big enough to dance or were people squeezed in and danced in small spaces?

JH: Yeah you had a little room, yeah- I mean Goodson's had a dance floor.

MN: Uh-huh.

JH: The 845 also had a dance floor

MH: Uh-huh

JH: Im thinking about the other ones-Freddy's- now of course Freddy's was basically jazz- you had people in there, Lu Donaldson- I mean the jazz men of that time. Theloniou Monk.

MN: He would play at Goodson's? At Freddy's?

JH: At Freddy's

MN: Were you a collector of records?

JH: Yes I was.

MH: And so you had a jazz collection, a rhythm and blues collection?

JH: I basically- yeah.

MN: And a Latin collection too?

JH: Right.

MH: You still have those records?

JH: yeah some of them. Yeah. I switch to CD's now.

MN: James, what were some of your favorite groups? Rhythm and blues, for example?

JH: Rhythm and blues? Outstanding groups- the Shy Lights- and go back to Billy Stuart and this other guy (inaudible)

MN: Gene Chandler

JH: Gene Chandler- you know. A lot of the groups- I hear them now because I listen to 88. 7.

MN: Oh the rhythm station (inaudible & interloping while talking)

JH: Right. It plays a lot of that stuff on Saturdays. Uh- the Orioles. Sunny Till. Outstanding groups of the day.

MH: What about some of the Bronx groups like Arling Smith and the Chantels?

JH: That too.

MN: Did you ever run into her in the neighborhood- did you know them from the neighborhood?

JH: You know who I knew? are The Fieste Brothers- they did that Shaboom.

MN: Oh Shaboom. The courts.

JH: The courts, the courts. Right.

MN: They were from Morris High School?

JH: Right. They were from my block. Morris had a lot of talented musicians and groups.

MN: So the Fieste brothers were from your block- Boston Road?

JH: Yeah they were from 169th street, next block up but on Boston Road.

MN: Did you ever go to Bird land or any of the other places on 52nd street?

JH: Bird land, Louis Vanguard, Kathleen Bohemian, uhm- Slugs in the East Village.

MN: Five Spot?

JH: Five Spot?

MN: Did you ever go to the Palladium?

JH: Palladium.

MN: Did you dance at the Palladium?

JH: Right.

MN: Now did all of your friends know Latin music and get involved in it?

JH: Well yeah.

MN: That was the typical thing -If you were African American from that neighborhood and that time, you were a Latin music?

JH: Well the Latin, the Hispanics started moving in – heavy – trying to thinking- in the late 50s- cause I graduated high school in 57. So I would say late 50s and early 60s- it was a large.

MN: Into Boston Road? Because they were in Kelly's place earlier?

JH: Right. At Hunts point.

MN: Now when did you start thinking- did you go into the military right after high school?

JH: I was in the Reserves when I was in high school for one year before I went in on active duty.

MN: Now what made you decide that you were going to do that?

JH: because all of my peers were doing it and it was my Father and Uncle been in the military

MN: Now was there a heavy push in your family to go into college?

JH: There was but it wasn't really pushed because they was no financial needs. You know I wanted to do that but at that time I didn't have the grades or the money. So I figured go into the military first but I didn't know what my next step would be but that's what most of us did.

MN: So of your friends a very large group went into the military you would say?

JH: yeah

MN: did any of your friends end up going into college? Right after high school?

JH: A few of them. A few of them did. Yes.

MN: Now in what wing in the military did you go into?

JH: I was in the navy.

MN: How many years did you spend in the navy?

JH: two years after- right after high school.

MN: And then did you take the fire test when you returned from the navy or did you wait a while?

JH: I took it after 3 years after I got out of the navy.

MN: Did you go to school first after the navy or?

JH: College?

MN: Yeah

JH: No I started college in 1975- past community.

MN: Okay after you worked?

JH: I was in the fire department for over 10 years at that point. I joined the Fire Department in 62.

MN: Okay. Now what did you do in the intervening period between the fire – you know leaving the navy and joining the fire department?

JH: I worked in a liquor store on 149th in Burden- wine and liquor. I worked there for 3 years.

MN: Now during all that time, was it your plan to become a fire fighter?

JH: uh I thought about civil service when I was ready to get out of the navy when my time was coming short in the navy I thought about the next move I'd make so I thought I'd take the civil service exam. My father and most people I knew in the neighborhood worked in a post office or some form of civil service.

MN: There was a heavy component of civil servants among the fathers in the neighborhood.

JH: Right.

MN: Now where were you assigned when you first joined the fire department? What station house?

JH: I was assigned to a company 49 on Argon Ave and 167th street.

MN: Now what neighborhood would you call that?

JH: That's over by the Yankee Stadium- High Bridge.

MN: High Bridge.

JH: High Bridge

MN: Now was that mostly Irish area at that time?

JH: Yeah at the time.

MN: Now you know the fire department was here now very heavily Irish and Italian- was that what it was then?

JH: It's the same- the numbers were the same.

MN: Did you experience any hostility when you joined?

JH: A few individuals.

MN: Was this something you were prepped for so you were ready to deal with?

JH: Yeah I was in the navy.

(laughter)

JH: I was a veteran so I knew what was going on and how to handle myself.

MN: Now when did you first start to notice- you grew up in a neighborhood I guess was you know a pretty safe neighborhood there were some problems. When did you start to notice things really starting go down hill in neighborhood in like Morrisana, Hunts Point and Melrose?

JH: Oh the drugs.

MN: So in even in the 50s you felt?

JH: Oh sure. Sure it was the drugs-heroin. It was beginning of the end. The beginning of buildings becoming partially vacant, fire traps- you know squadders in buildings.

MN: now was this even visible before you joined the fire department? You said even in the fifties-

JH: Late fifties.

MN: Late fifties that things were really starting see things to go down.

JH: him

Speaker 1: Now James in terms of the number of African American fire fighters with you at the time, were there significant numbers? Distinct minorities? Two or three in your fire house?

JH: In 62?

Speaker 1: Yes

JH: well the numbers now, the numbers then- are not too different then what the numbers are now in terms of percentage, or actually the numbers now- when I joined the fire department there were 600 blacks out of 1200. Today there almost 1200 fire men but there's only 300 blacks- so there were less than 300.

MN: So there is half the number of fire fighters now than when you joined. What do you attribute that to?

JH: A combination of things. Recruitment primarily. You know information about recruitment- when the tests, encouragement, connections- different things. Because that's a puzzling question why don't blacks and Hispanics join or come out for the fire department and we don't have an answer to that because I've done tutoring for the last fire department test- which was last year- the year before last in 2002. And you don't get the numbers. So you know its not an easy job to get but the fire department doesn't spend as much money recruitment as the police department does. The budget for recruitment is very low.

MN: Now when did your family decide to leave for Wakefield? Your parents?

JH: When I was in my house- lets see I had to be--

MN: Where did you get your 1st apartment away from your parents? Where did you move when you 1st got your own place?

JH: My first place? Im trying to think. A friend of mine- Lee-vy Scott. We rented a house up on 222nd street and Balding ave.

MN: So you left the neighborhood for the North Bronx.

JH: Right.

MN: How long did you live up there?

JH: About 3 years.

MN: And then you moved back down?

JH: Then I got my own apartment in Kingsbridge section of the Bronx.

MN: And how long did you live in Kingsbridge?

JH: I lived in Kingsbridge about 2-3 years. Then I moved back to the North Bronx- (inaudible) Ave. Westchester Line. And I Stayed there for another three years. And I moved back to the South Bronx- where I am now Franklin Ave in the early 80s.

MN: So you were out of the area between what years?

JH: Out of the South Bronx area? Lets see- cause all this movement was after I got out of the military. I was 22 at that time so you're talking about the early 60s

MN: So you were out of the South Bronx for 20 years and then moved back?

JH: Uh no not that long. I was out for from- okay right maybe almost 20 years because it was from the early 60s to the early 80s.

MN: So you were out at the time those neighborhoods were burning?

JH: I was living there, I was working there.

MN: So you were there to watch the Bronx burn?

JH: it was devastating- to see things you know buildings, neighborhoods that you know people in to see these buildings destroyed.

MN: Who was doing the burning?

JH: Who was doing the burning? Different people. In some certain cases the landlords had something to do with it. It was accidental -you know people were trying to wrong. But it was an abandoned building- anybody could do into a building and take over.

MN: So you see the drugs as being the big blow that set the stage?

JH: The drugs broke the family down. Remember this neighborhood is a tight knit family neighborhood. Once you broke the family down, the neighborhood was finished.

MN: Were the drugs broke the family by taking the men out of commission?

JH: The drugs themselves inherently- this heroin would make you steal. So where are you gonna steal from? You cant go down to Park Avenue and steal. You had to steal from your home's home. Literally.

MN: So people were stealing from their owns brothers sisters and parents?

JH: Mothers, everybody- it was terrible thing that the sociologists should really study what happened.

MN: Well part of what we're trying to do here is put this story on record cause nobody is trying to tell this story. I mean they start it from the fires- as though the fires.

JH: cause there wouldn't have been any fires if there was stability- the building would be solid. You wouldn't be able to breach this building. Once you break this building down- all you need is one or two apartments to become what they called as shooting galleries. Theres a fire there, the fire department goes in and you have to go to put the fire down. The process of putting the fire out should mend this water damage. You know the rest of the building- you know anything below the fire is damaged. So now the whole building over time becomes vacant. The landlord at this point is gonna pull out because hes not making any money.

MN: So you saw at one point a lot of broken people out on the street and this was already in the 50s when you were in high school?

JH: Oh yeah. They didn't go to school or anything. The question should be -ow these drugs didn't come from our neighborhood- where did these drugs come from? See that question will never be asked- they will never go into that area.

Speaker 1: So James based on your recollection, there was nobody dealing as so much as people were using?

JH: they were using, we didn't have any dealings

MN: So in other words, people were getting it from some other part of the city?

JH: No they can get it from the neighborhood. They were dropped off in the neighborhoods. Ive seen that in Hunts Point. I've seen the big Cadillac with the Jersey Plates come in and drop off this product to the neighborhood people who sell it. This is in the 90s.

MN: It wasn't like in the 50s there were drug dealers like there were in the 80s and 90s they were very visible, they were making a lot of money off the people suffering or-

JH: You mean people on the street?

MN: Yeah

JH: I wouldn't call them drug dealers, those were the soliders. The dealer is the one you don't see. It could even be the gentlemen. Gentlemen business. You know hes in the background.

MN: But did you have kids growing up, like when you were in high school, who decided they wanted to make money selling drugs?

JH: No. The ones that- they got hooked on drugs; they were drug consumers they weren't selling drugs because if they were selling drugs why would they stay in school? They have no use for school. And at that time there were always those older people running that operation.

MN: Now what made you- you watched these neighborhoods be devastated first by drugs then you know the fires the abandonment, what made you decide to move back?

JH: My sister lived in the building I live in now- there was an apartment available there. Not too expensive. Plus it was close to where I worked. I didn't really like living Dreamer Ave- it was like a two fare zone. It took me like an hour or something to get to work.

MN: Now your sister felt safe living all those years? You have these drugs you have gangs and yet your sister stayed. What made her able safe being around all this stuff was happening around her?

JH: Well you grow up in a tough neighborhood you learn what to do what not to do ,when to go out and stuff like that, and the other thing is you have no place to go. Where are you gonna go? Riverdale? You know so you basically stuck in the neighborhood. I mean its not open housing.

MN: So people were very aware of racial discrimination about housing through this whole period? What neighborhoods you can move in?

JH: I don't know if you can call racial or where there were restrictions where you can live- now how that's interpreted as racial or what have you- I know when I was growing up Fordham Road we couldn't go there. We were told by the neighborhood kids- you'd have a problem going up to that Fordham Road area. There was a gangly Fordham

Baldings and they'd let you know that you're not in your neighborhood and it was enforced. So you know that's there territorial ways. And we had the feelings that their territorial areas and turf was also protected by the police.

MN: So the police would also tell you what are you doing here?

JH: Oh sure if you did something wrong up there then you were definitely going to jail.

MN: were you ever walking through the area and told by the police what are you doing here?

JH: yeah

MN: When you know you were a teenager? What are you doing in this neighborhood?

JH: yeah you went into a neighborhood you weren't arrested enough.

MN: So the police were doing this also not just the neighborhood kids?

JH: But then I grew up to understand the police and the neighborhood kids could be related. That could be his nephew. Or the police came in that neighborhood Or the fire men and the police came from the same neighborhood. East Tremont the Bronx they know each other. You know it's the way it is. They are not gonna be as hard as on their own family members as if they as an outside. So what that taught me was you're suppose to keep your nose clean. No matter what. You know

Speaker 1: James how many years did you spend in the fire department?

JH: 34

Speaker 1: 34 years. Of which most of the time was spent in the Bronx?

JH: all of them

Speaker 1: all of your time was spent in the Bronx?

JH: All my assignments were in the Bronx. I worked in other boroughs though.

Speaker 1: I see

JH: Through what they call a detail where you have to go in and fill in an accomplice or someone was sick so I was in Manhattan and relocations where the company goes to another fire and another company has to come in and keep an eye in on their fire area because they are busy at another fire house.

MN: Now which was the busiest fire house you've worked in?

JH: Hunts Point. That and Interval Ave. I worked there before I went to Hunts Point. I transferred from Argling Ave I did 30 days at Interval Ave.

MN: Interval and what?

JH: Interval and 16 was it 9?

Speaker 1: 169th street.

JH: yes.

MN: And what fire house was that?

JH: 182 ladder 31. They were doing about 10,000 runs a year.

MN: 10,000 run a year?

JH: 10,000 runs a year

MN: What's average?

JH: average? Well the (inaudible) for our company was at least 3,000 runs a year. Companies below that were not so busy.

MN: So 10,000 runs a year is off the charts?

JH: Yes

MN: If that the highest runs ever?

JH: No Brooklyn claimed they did 15000, but that might be-

MN: they were bragging

JH: right.

MN: 10,000 runs a year.

JH: break down to 20-30 runs a day or so.

MN: Did you ever seen the movie (inaudible) the Bronx? Did you?

JH; yeah it's a movie, its not real. Only 10 percent of it is real the rest is Hollywood.

MN: did you feel a sense of pride and satisfaction of what you were able to do in those years as a fire man?

JH: oh most definitely. I got numerous awards and medals, the rescues I was involved. But that's what the job was to me- helping people.

MN: Now when you moved back to Franklin Ave I guess this was in the 1980s? Did you see things improve in the last 20 years? Do you think things are getting better?

JH: No. No things are on a slide.

MN: really? Since 80 or would you go through a cycle of down or up and down?

JH: Downhill and then up to the breaking up of the family unit which is the heart of it I believe. Once that family unit broke down then you have individuals out here. And you have no structure you know children are doing what they want to do. And the children today are children of a generation that itself was irresponsible. You know the crack problem of the 80s and these are the children today growing up. These are the children I imagine are at public schools today there was these problems with.

MN: so you have no authority structure at home? And therefore theres no authority structure on the streets?

JH: except for the gangs and stuff like that. But to not to jump the subject, the idea of putting police in the school now, to me is wrong because that is not a school. You change the whole idea of education is more like a prison.

Speaker 1: Discipline problem has become so—

JH: I think you ought to remove them from the school and everybody raise you hand in here who doesn't want to be educated? If they say that and put them somewhere else. They have no business in school if they don't want to learn. If they are not there to be educated, what are they going to school for? I mean it's it amazes.

Speaker 1: So you definitely noticed the changed when you growing up in the neighborhood, nuclear family, everybody looking out for one another?

JH: to neighbors looking out for you. Neighbors would keep you in check. Your parents didn't need to be around your neighbor. You have nosy ladies sitting at the windows all the time, she got something on you. By the time you get home nobody answered the telephones either. It was word of mouth. By the time your father got home at night, they know about it. They don't have that anymore its all about glitz and looks and no substance. And its not just people in the neighborhood. Its about making money.

Speaker 1: So James from where you look today you remember it from going to elementary to junior high school, so you remember it and see the physically changes.

JH: The block I live now was a very quiet block even at that time. Even at that time Franklin Ave from where I am to Boston Road was much more activity.

MN: Sorry Franklin from where and where?

JH: Franklin to 166 and 165.

MN: Right and that as a quiet block?

JH: right nice apartment, quiet buildings, things like that.

MN: now would you call it quiet now?

JH: My particular building is quiet. But the neighborhood no, there's a women shelter across the street and you have open drug dealers who stand out in the corner every day there so you know that's the difference you know how can you raise children around there with what people do

MN: You know I'm kind of out of questions. Do you have any other things you want to say when looking back in this experience that you'd like to leave people with and making sense in all of this?

JH: Making sense out of the development of the Bronx? I don't think I can go back. But you know what's happening in the Bronx Is happening all over the country and other cities too you know the break down of the family unit, the individualism, what I do see- back in the day what kept us going was sort of like a consciousness

(END OF SESSION)