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Mills, Kenneth

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Danielle Lund

Mark Naison (MN): [Laughter] This is the 157th interview - -

Maxine Gordon (MG): [Gasps] No kidding.

MN: - - of the Bronx African American History Project. It is April 18th, 2006, and we are here with Captain Kenneth Mills, a great musician who is the director of security at P.S. 153 in Co-op City. Interviewing today are our jazz researcher, Maxine Gordon, along with Brian Purnell and Mark Naison. Captain Mills tell us a little bit about your family background and how your family came to move to the Bronx.

Kenneth Mills (KM): Well, you have to realize that in the early '40s there was a big exodus to the Bronx and Long Island, and northern Manhattan. We moved from 8 West 118th Street, and we moved to 841 Kelly Street. That was around 1943. I went to school. I went to Cooper for kindergarten, but when I got to the Bronx, I started first grade in P.S. 39. In P.S. 39, Cecil Brathwaite; Elombe Brath was in that school; Eddie Palmieri; Kenneth Dickkersun, the numerologist; Colin Powell; Alger Yumar, Ralph Corer - - Ralph Corer was an artist. Cesar Pagan was an artist. He used to draw comics. Elombe Brath was a - - an activist. We all went from P.S. 39 to Junior High School 52.

MN: Now the 800 block on Kelly Street - -

KM: Is now a park.

MN: Is now a park. So - - what was the number that your family lived at? 841?

KM: 841.

MN: And was it a five story walk-up?

KM: Five story right.

MN: And what - -

KM: Two apartments per floor.

MN: And floor were you living on?

KM: Ground.

MN: The ground floor?

KM: Yes, I wasn't thinking about walking any more. [Laughter] I just came from 8 - - from 8 West. We were on the third floor.

MN: Alright now what sort of work did your - - did your parents do?

KM: My mother worked - - in what do they call that? Mama worked in millenary.

MN: Making hats?

KM: Yes, then she used to do nail heads on - - on dresses, so it was really piece work. Of course she used to gravitate from job to job, you know. I had three uncles, all of whom went into the army, and thank God they all came out safely, and they went to work - - two of them went to work for the IRT, which was unheard of at that time.

MN: Now was your family from the Caribbean or the South originally?

Brian Purnell (BP): And also - -

MG & BP: Could you say your birth date?

KM: My birthday, December 20th, '36. One year before the Hindenburg.

MN: Now was your family originally from the South, or the Caribbean?

KM: No.

MN: Neither?

KM: No. My - - my grandmother and grandfather, their parents came from the Caribbean and they moved to Brooklyn when they were like that, my grandfather and grandmother, and they - - they met in Brooklyn and got married in Brooklyn, and then my family moved to Manhattan.

MG: What island in the Caribbean?

KM: One of them - - one was from St. Croix. The other one was from St. Kitts.

MN: Did your family know a lot of people in that Kelly Street neighborhood when they moved there?

KM: No, when we moved there it was all Jewish. It was an all Jewish neighborhood. They had three houses on the opposite side of the street that - - 828, 832, and 8 - - 30. No. 828, 830, and 832 were the Spanish houses. And 838 started with African Americans moving in. The three houses that I just called out were Hispanic. All Hispanic lived there. Cuban, Puerto Rican - - they all lived in that house. That's where Eddie Palmieri lived. Eddie and Charlie.

MN: Was - - was your family affiliated with any church when you were growing up?

KM: Yes - - St. Philip's.

MN: St. Philip's.

KM: 134th Street, right off of Seventh Avenue. Episcopal.

MN: And did you continue to go to St. Philip's when you were living in the Bronx?

KM: Yes.

MN: So you didn't switch to St. Margaret's?

KM: No.

MN: Okay, remained a tie with St. Philip's. What was your elementary school experience like?

Were you challenged academically, or were teachers fairly insensitive or indifferent?

KM: No, I had a ball in school. All the teachers loved me. [Laughter] I hate to sound like a - -

I mean really they - - I didn't - - had no problem. I had one teacher named Sally Melson. I never knew her name was Sally, until another teacher called her by her name, but everybody's name was Mr. or Mrs. - - Ms. Melson, who found out that I played, and had me do all her plays.

Whatever music that was necessary for her plays, and she's the one that helped put me into 7-1, which is in Junior High School, which was a music class.

MN: Now where did you learn to play the piano?

KM: I've been playing ever since I was three.

MN: Was your - - was your family musical?

KM: Yes, my Uncle James had a nine piece orchestra, and he thought he was the Savoy Sultans because he loved them, and I'm trying to think of the lady's name that played piano. I think her name was Viola, and I think her last name was Fipps, who lived over us. She played piano. I remember them telling me a story. We lived in a - - off the hall apartment. Everything was off the hall, except the first two rooms. Eight West, there was the living room, then there was my mother's bedroom, then everything was off the hall, until you got to the dining room - - dining room and kitchen, and then there was a room in the back. That was - - that was a walk through, that was railroad. Everybody used to congregate in the dining room. The living room was all the way down the hall. My aunt Bernice who's one of the historians there said that one day - - or I should say one evening, Uncle James's band was rehearsing.

MN: In your apartment, yes?

KM: Yes, but every rehearsal was in the apartment sure, and we had two doors to that apartment. One that opened to the hall, the other one that opened to the living room. So naturally when the guys get through playing, they went out the door that's closer, you know, in the living room. Anyway, I understand that - - they heard dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum - - dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum, and that was "Jumpin at the Woodside".

That's the piano part. So my grandmother said, my God, you mean to say Viola is still there, why don't you go up and get her - - bring her something, some soda, or some tea or something,

so they all came from the living room - - I mean from the bedroom - - I mean the dining room all the way up to the living room, and they saw me playing. Dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum. I was three, and I've been playing ever since. My mother took me to the Apollo to meet Buddy Johnson, and she wanted him to hear me play. I was about seven or eight.

MN: Buddy Johnson lived in the Bronx.

KM: Yes. And he heard me play, and he said, great, I'll take him. He's a novelty. He's a genius, and he doesn't read any music, that makes it even better. That makes him a real genius, but we have to take him on the road, and my mother said, no he's got to go to school. He's got to go to school, can't take him on the road. So that was the beginning of the end of my career.

[Laughter] [Crosstalk]

MG: You had a piano in the house?

KM: We had a George - - George Steck - - George Stark piano. Upright. Had a lot of sound, had a lot of sound, because I had a - - a knack for playing motion picture themes. [Laughter] You know, I loved motion picture themes. And radio of course, radio themes. I used to play a game with all the people in my family, aunts and uncles. I would play the theme from a radio show, and then they would guess it. If they didn't guess it, they had to give me a quarter.

MG: Oh, good.

KM: So my Aunt Bernice she used to walk around with a hat, you know, and - - alright Merrill it's your turn. Uncle Merrill he was up on most of them, but a lot of the themes they couldn't remember, and they were radio people.

MN: So did anybody send you for formal piano training?

KM: I started formal piano training in Junior High School. I had a teacher named Martin Greenbaum - -

MG: Oh other people had him.

KM: - - who, who passed, and he told my grandmother - - he said, she's - - he told her, he said, Mrs. Brown - - my grandmother's name was Henrietta Brown - - I can't teach him how to play. The only thing I can teach him how to do is read, which is what he did. Taught me how to read music. But you know, I can't teach him how to play, knows how to play. But he always told me, he said, Kenny, play what you see. I know it's a drag because what they got on the paper is - - you know, it's not really that hip, but just play what you see. [Laughter] You know, put in all those little things which is much hipper, you know, much - - play what you see, so I had to learn to play what was on the paper, which was a drag, because I heard so many other things going on. So many other things.

MN: Now were, you know, you had a chance to play in school for, you know, the teachers had you play during plays.

KM: That was in - -

MN: Elementary school.

KM: Elementary school.

MN: Right. Were there any other venues - - did you play in church at St. Philip's?

KM: No.

MN: No.

KM: We had a church, a local church that I played in, and you had to remember St. Philip's church was 134th Street. Many times we couldn't make that trip, so there was a local church that I played in, and the man's name was Father Lamart. I think his first name was Luis Lamart, and I played in his church, and I played for the communion. I played vibes, because they have at

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Episcopal - - they have these vibes that you have to play when the ceremony is going on. I

played that and I played piano.

MN: Now other - - when you weren't being involved in music, were you part of the sort of street life of the block and the neighborhood?

KM: Yes. We just played - - we just played ball, and that's all. No, I stayed out of trouble - - I didn't - - I didn't have - - listen. Uncle James, Uncle Frazier, Uncle Merrill, Aunt Edna, Aunt Bernice, my mother, my grandmother - - that's a gauntlet man. [Laughter] That's a gauntlet.

MN: You couldn't do anything wrong?

KM: No, no. I wasn't even thinking about doing anything wrong.

BP: The three uncles that you just mentioned - -

KM: James, Frazier, and Merrill.

BP: Were they Veterans - - were they Veterans from service?

KM: All of them were Veterans, yes.

BP: What - - did they serve overseas?

KM: One was in Okinawa, one was in Guam, the other one was in Saipan.

BP: What were some of the stories that they shared with you about their life in the service, particularly serving in World War II.

KM: Well they told me about the racism. That was first and - - one particular story Uncle James told me - - he said that they went to Aswego, New York to train. When they got through training up there they sent them down to - - I think it was either Fort Dix, or another camp that was further south, and while they were down there, they had Hispanics in the group. So, Uncle James said the Sergeant said, alright all Negroes on this side, and all the whites on this side, so all the Hispanics went to the white side. So the sergeant said, come on, you get over there with

those niggers man, what's wrong with you - - who do you think you - - get over there. And that was one of the stories that he told me about racism. Because they went over to the white side. Get over there with the rest of them niggers, and he, Uncle James said he said it just like that, you know. The other - - the other story was in Hawaii. Uncle James was in Hawaii, and he went into a bar, and they weren't serving African American soldiers, and the bar tender said, we don't serve niggers here, and Uncle James hit him. And he went down, and there was a fight that broke out in the bar, and the MPs came, and Uncle James said that the bar tender who was by that time out in the middle of the floor, who was on the - - on the floor bleeding - - MP said, what happened to you? He said, that nigger, nigger hit me. And the MP said, and I'll never forget it, which nigger? Which nigger? So in other words, the MPs, who are siding to a certain extent, instead of saying which soldier, which nigger. What's that about. Uncle James told me about that. Uncle Frazier told me about bed check Charlie who was a Japanese Silver Flyer. He flew a Silver Zero, and every night at twelve o'clock he would come back and find out who was in bed, and who wasn't in bed got shot down.

MG: Oh shit.

KM: Every night at twelve o'clock. He'd come over, and fired if there were any stray soldiers. Made no difference of whether they were black, white, or anything different. They were Americans [Tape error], and this cat would just shoot them down. Now Uncle Frazier said one day bed check Charlie came around on time, and he came looking for who he can find, and he found P-38 waiting for him. P-38 Lockheed Lightning, and blew him out the sky. No more bed check Charlie. Those are the kind of stories they would tell me. Very interesting.

MN: Now you were in - - clearly in a very politically conscious household.

KM: Yes.

MN: Was - - did people ever talk about the Marcus Garvey movement or - - or any other political leaders in - -

KM: No my grand mother didn't. She didn't bother with that. No.

MN: How did you correlate the stories about racism in the army with your experience growing up in a multiracial block and neighborhood in the Bronx? Was there much racism in your immediate - - like environment?

KM: One of my best friends was Michael Seroni, who's an alto saxophonist, another bassist, who's name was Charlie Rivera who lived on Union Avenue. Michael Seroni lived on Avenue of St. John. Donald Balastrarie played trombone. He lived on Avenue of St. John. Wilbur Enice lived on Dawson Street which is around the corner from me. He played clarinet. Eddie McCollins and Wilbur Enice were both African American. Eddie McCollins played trumpet. He lived around the corner. He lived on Longwood Avenue. Frank Garsher was the drummer. We had a band called the 52 Bop Band.

MN: The 52 Bop Band.

KM: We called it the 52 Bop Band. Mr. - - Mr. Greenbaum called it the 52 Bop Band. I went to Thomas Knowlton. Thomas Knowlton Junior High School was one of those schools that had - - Milton Burrow went there, John Garfield went there, you know, that kind of school, so it had celebrities. They called it the 52 - - Junior High School 52 Bop Band, and we did tours in the Bronx. Mr. Greenbaum [Sneeze] set up - - set up tours for us to go to schools, different schools. We went to Junior High School 51, and we went up to 180th Street to different schools up there to play. The band dwindled down. There was only four people in the band. Later on we would be called the United Nations, because of the personnel in the band.

MG: Dizzy had a band called that.

KM: The United Nations. We called ourselves the United Nations because we had one Hispanic playing bass, and we had an Italian playing alto sax, we had another Italian playing drums, and me African American playing piano. And we did a tour of the Bronx. Mr. Greenbaum saw to it that we went from school to school.

MN: Now - - were you aware of local music venues when you were growing up. What were the clubs, or the places where live music was played that you were, you know, aware of?

KM: Well, 845, was one of the clubs. One of, one of the main clubs was 845.

MN: Did your uncles go there?

KM: No. My uncles didn't go there. As a matter of fact, I didn't start playing in the 845 until I got into my twenties. By that time, my uncles had gotten married, and left the household, so they lived in different areas. I started playing at the 845 around twenty, twenty-one. I also played at almost - - I can't believe - - I played at almost every dance hall. The Embassy Ballroom.

MN: Yes, right near - -

KM: 163rd Street. The Concourse Plaza Hotel, when they didn't allow African Americans to play in there. That was in 1960. I had a - - I had a gig in there, and I had a group called The Jazz Harmonics. It was a Bronx bass group - - alto, trumpet, rhythm section - - and we played at the Concourse Plaza. And the union man came in and said, who's in charge, who's in charge of this band. Because the Concourse Plaza had their own band, so when you hired the room, the grand ballroom, you had to hire the band. Well, this was an African American club, and they hired us. So the union man said, you guys in the union, so we said no, but we were in the union. We said, no, we're not in the union, we're from out of town. He said, I'm going to have to stop the band - - you know, I have to stop the dance. I told him, you see the guy over there collecting tickets, that's the club president, you go over there, and tell him you're going to stop this dance here, and

see what happens, and I didn't see him for the rest of the night. [Laughter] I didn't see him. He disappeared.

MG: Who was in the Jazz Harmonics? Do you remember?

KM: Clarence Martin, he lived on Union Avenue in the Bronx; Winnie Underwood - - Winnie Underwood played trumpet. Winnie Underwood lived over near Bruckner Boulevard. Watson, Watson Avenue. Roy Haskin played bass. He lived in Queens. Eddie Yearwood moved to Queens. He lived in Manhattan, moved to Queen. Roy Haskin lived on Brook Avenue in the Bronx. Later on, after he got married, he went to Queens. Eddie Yearwood played drums. And we had a vocalist who lived in the Bronx. Her name was Sheila.

MG: You were the leader?

KM: No. I was the arranger though. I did the arranging. Good band.

KM: We lived at the Dawn Casino. That was our venue. The Dawn Casino was in Manhattan.

MN: Now the Dawn Casino was where?

KM: 139th Street and Seventh. Between 139th and 130th - - 140th.

MN: Right that was - - that's in Harlem. Now when did you start writing and arranging? How old were you when you started?

KM: I started writing and arranging when I joined the La Paris Sextet. The La Paris Sextet. Alvern Bunn. Alfred DuMire played vibes, Alvern Bunn played conga and bongos. Charlie Lee played timbales. Bill Salter played bass. Alfred DuMire played vibes. I'm trying to think if there was anyone else. There was about five of us. Pucho was in that band for a short time.

MN: Where did you meet this group?

KM: I used to play - - see I belonged to the Police Athletic League, so they would call me on occasion.

MN: Which PAL is this?

KM: Lynch - - Lynch Center in the Bronx. That was on Beck Street, and 156th Street and Beck, and they would call me to come down to the radio station, WNYC, to play part of the program. Now I went up there. My brother took me up to that PAL Center. I had never been up there. My brother took me up there because he met a lady who turned out to be my supervisor. Her name was - - name is Kitty Kirby. God bless her she's still - - she still here, and she was in charge of performing arts for the Police Athletic League. And she heard me play, and she had me play for her choral group. At first I was part of the choral group singing, sang tenor, and then I started playing for the choral group. So because of this, they found out that I played - - they called Ms. Kirby and asked her if they can get information on me so I can come down and play. Bill F. was the name of the person in charge of the Pals of the PAL. That was the name of the program. Now I used to go down there and play.

MG: How old were you?

KM: I was - - about fifteen. Fifteen. And I met a girl down there named Neline Canton. You don't know Neline Canton?

MG: No.

KM: Professor Neline Canton?

MG: No. Tell us.

KM: Of Bronx University.

MN: Bronx Community?

KM: Bronx Community College.

MN: How do you spell her last name?

KM: Canton.

MN: C-A-N-T-O-N.

KM: T-O-N. Yes, Canton.

MN: N-E-L-I-N-E?

KM: Yes.

MG: [Indecipherable]

KM: N-E-L-I-N-E. Neline who was a close friend of Valerie Capis.

MN: Okay.

MG: Oh okay. We know Valerie.

KM: Her and Neline were close. At that time, Neline wasn't working up at Bronx Community, but Neline used to be there, and she would play. She had a quartet. She had a group, singing group, and she would play for them, and sing as well. She was one of the acts on the show. And Alfred DuMire played vibes. He was one of the acts. So Alfred heard me, and Alfred said, oh we need a piano player man. Call one down. Where do you live? I said in the Bronx. Well they used to rehearse at 114th Street, Alvern Bunn's house. He lived on 114th between St. Nicholas and Eighth.

MG: Did he play, Alvern?

KM: Alvern played conga, bongos, and timbales. And during that time, he played - - he was playing bongos and oh I just remembered - - we also had for a short time with us, Ray McEthan.

MG: Oh yes. I know Ray.

KM: Ray McEthan played conga for us.

MN: Okay, one second. I'm - -

[Tape stops and restarts]

MG: - - ordering from?

MN: Pete's, do you want some?

MG: Tea, yes.

BP: Let me just take this off.

MG: Well I want to go back because we got - -

KM: Would you order a Danish for me too?

MN: A Danish, okay, with - - what kind of Danish? Cheese?

KM: Cheese is good.

MN: Okay good [Crosstalk] I'll take care of everything.

MG: A little more air in here would be good, but we - - yes - - don't you think it's a little stuffy?

KM: It's a little.

MG: And the sun beats in here, but we can't open the window because we get - - you hear too much noise comes on the tape. Right professor?

BP: Yes, that is correct.

MG: Do you need more water?

KM: No. This is fine. I'll just wait for the tea.

BP: It's going I believe.

MG: Yes it is. Okay, so now Maxine Gordon taking over interview. Why - - where do you get the Captain, as Captain Mills.

KM: Yes, well my supervisor - - I was her first officer. She was the supervisor, and that's where the Captain comes from.

MG: From the job now?

KM: Yes - - no. From the police, from the police department.

MG: Oh. You were in the police department?

KM: I'm part of - - well the Police Athletic League - -

MG: You're still security, or how - - how does that work?

KM: Police Athletic League is a function in the police department.

MG: Oh. Okay.

KM: It's a very important function at that. As a matter of fact it is an official agency of the New York City Police Department. It was started by the police department. It was started by Captain John Sweeney, and it was called the Junior Police Athletic League at one time, in the '40s, and then they just dropped the "Junior" and just called it the Police Athletic League, which is part of community affairs of the New York City Police Department, so when I joined - -

MG: So you've had the title Captain how long?

KM: '79. 1979. When I joined they were trying to get - - they were trying to get kids out of gangs, and so they wanted to get people with children's age, you know, the teenagers' age to speak to them and work with them, which is what I was doing.

MG: What gangs were there in the neighborhood where you grew up?

KM: They had the Slicksters, they had a chapter of the Bishops.

MG: The Bishops is a Manhattan gang.

KM: Actually it's Brooklyn.

MG: Oh Brooklyn gang.

KM: They had chapters all over. They had a group called the Royal Englishmen, and then they had a couple of Spanish gangs, which I, you know, never interested me, because they were away from my area. We didn't get to see them. They had the Brown Bombers. They were at the lower end of Kelly Street. As a matter of fact, when I first moved to Kelly Street, I wasn't allowed to go past 855. I lived at 841. I wasn't allowed to go past 855. That was Brown

Bomber territory. So only when I started growing up, and the Brown Bombers started working, the ones that did work, did that soon end. But - -

MG: The Brown Bombers - -

KM: - - Brown Bombers - -

MG: - - named themselves for Joe Louis?

KM: Yes, I guess so, because Joe Louis at that time was the Brown Bomber.

MG: Didn't Colin Powell live on that part of Kelly Street?

KM: No. He lived in the 1000 block. He lived between 163rd Street and Westchester Avenue.

MG: Did you know him?

KM: Yes, he was in my class.

MG: So how - - what was he like?

KM: We used walk - - well we used to walk home everyday from school. I used to walk him down to the end of my street, which is Intervale Avenue, and he'd go on by himself, from school. We used to - - I used to meet him outside on Kelly Street. He came out - - I don't know why they did this - - he came out at Kelly Street entrance, and they let me out on Beck Street entrance, which means I had to come all the way around Longwood Avenue back to Kelly Street. He would wait there for me, and we'd walk - -

MG: Was he interested in music at all?

KM: No. No. Colin was interested in so many things. He didn't even know what he wanted to do. He had no idea, but we'd talk about a lot of different things he would like to do.

MG: Are you surprised by his success?

KM: No.

MG: You knew that he - - he seemed to be one of the - -

KM: Yes, Colin was one of those - - yes, Colin was one of those guys that, you know, a getter, you know.

MG: Has he stayed in touch?

KM: No.

MG: Does he stay in touch with anybody from Kelly Street?

KM: No. He had his own people up in the 1000 block. He had an aunt I think that lived in the 900 block, which is what they called Banana Kelly.

MG: Banana Kelly, yes, we know.

KM: Banana Kelly. We gave it that name.

MG: Oh really?

KM: You know, that's where they came from. Banana Kelly - - it was the 900 block, that was between Intervale Avenue and 163rd Street. Colin lived between 163rd and Westchester.

MG: Okay.

KM: I lived between Longwood and Intervale, so I would walk him down to Intervale - - I'd let him go. Then he'd go on home, or he'd go to his aunt's house. No, I, as a matter of fact, I didn't even know that Colin went to Morris High School. I found out when I was in fifth term that Colin went to Morris High School. And his parents moved out of Kelly Street. I think they went to Hunts Point. They went further up to Hunts point, because I didn't see - - I didn't get to Colin - - I didn't see him in Junior High School. I saw him in Morris, but I didn't see him in Junior High, which means he must have - - when they moved, they must have went to another junior high school. I didn't see him in 52.

MG: Did you have siblings?

KM: One brother?

MG: Do you have?

KM: One brother.

MG: One brother, still living?

KM: Oh yes.

MG: Oh good.

KM: He's younger than I am. Yes.

MG: Is he involved in music also?

KM: He used to be many, many years ago. Not anymore. No. He as a matter of fact - - he and a man named Hugo Dickens - - Hugo Dickens - - he and Hugo [Paper crumpling] got a company together called Nightlife, Nightlife label.

MG: Here's Hugo.

KM: That's him. That's Hugo. He played tenor.

MG: Yes. I brought this for you to see.

KM: Yes, he played tenor.

MG: At the rehearsal at Hugo's house. I have two pictures.

KM: I want to see if I recognize anybody else here.

MG: Okay, good.

KM: No. Now Hugo played - - I recognize him. What's his name?

MG: I have actually the name over here. [Crosstalk]

KM: Hugo used to play a lot of Spanish music.

MG: Yes, this was his - - what they called La Roca de [Indecipherable]

KM: Yes, yes - - he used to - -

MG: Here's Pete La Roca, remember him?

KM: He used to play - - that's Pete.

MG: You remember Phil Newsum.

KM: Yes, Phil Newsum, yes.

MG: And we call him Peewee. He was a very tall conga player.

KM: No, I don't remember him. Pete La Roca, yes, I remember Pete.

MG: You remember Hugo?

KM: Yes, oh yes.

MG: Okay so - - go ahead.

KM: Hugo had Nightlife. I'm going to see if I can get one of these - - I just put this in a bag.

These are all the records I ever made, believe it or not.

MG: Oh good.

KM: But I wanted to get Nightlife.

MG: Just keep talking or are we - -

BP: It's okay.

MG: Okay.

KM: I just want to get Nightlife for you.

MG: Here's Ray McEthan, but it's very small on congas, Ray.

KM: Yes, yes. Ray played with us for a while.

MG: Rodgers Grant on piano, Bill Salter bass.

KM: Rodgers Grant, good piano player, good piano player, excellent.

MG: And here's Pucho's band.

KM: Pucho and the Latin Soul Brothers?

MG: Well they have - - this is a gig they had up in the mountains, and Bobby Capers is on alto here, remember Bobby?

KM: He used to play in the mountains. I knew Bobby Capers, and his sister Val.

MG: Remember this band. This - - I think I - - I [asked about this band]. It's Latin Jazz Quintet.

KM: Latin Jazz Quintet?

MG: That's Phil Newsum again.

KM: That's what they called themselves?

MG: Yes. Willy Coleman, Bill Ellington.

KM: That was a bass player.

MG: Bill Ellington.

KM: Bill Ellington. That name sounds familiar.

MG: I know. They sound familiar, but - -

KM: Yes, I played mostly - - I played mostly jazz. The only Latin I played was with the La Paris Sextet. [Mumbling in background]

MG: Was - -

KM: This is another one of these labels, Hartown - - it means Harlem Town, but this is Nightlife.

MG: You got this right? Should I load it now or you want to do it later?

BP: This is what you were just talking about?

MG: Yes. This is Hugo Dickens.

BP: Could you hold it straight?

MG: Well I could.

BP: Perfect, so who's in the picture?

MG: This is Hugo Dickens who we're talking about, and the other people I can identify, but not this second. [Laughs]

BP: Which one is Phil Newsum? Did you - -

MG: That's another picture.

KM: Phil Newsum - -

MG: Phil Newsum, who we interviewed, and Pete La Roca, and this is Arthur Cross.

KM: Arthur Cross?

MG: Isn't it? Yes, Peewee they call him. Okay, but - - but - -

KM: This is Night - - Nightlife.

MG: Oh, that's the label they started? Oh how great.

KM: Nightlife.

MG: Wow, *Soldier in Saigon*.

KM: Yes. Two sides.

MG: EP - - what was I going to say? Dickens Productions, 120 E. 56th Street. Wow, and he had this label with your brother?

KM: Yes.

MG: What's your brother's name?

KM: Bobby, oh, Richard Mills. We call him Bobby.

MG: Nightlife. This is excellent.

KM: Here's another one.

MG: Here you go.

KM: *On My Street*, Charles Knight.

MG: Do you have this protected in some - - no you don't.

KM: Yes, I have them in plastic at home. I took them all out to bring them here.

MG: Okay. Oh I'd love to hear that.

KM: This is like a subsidiary of Nightlife, Hartown.

MG: So they start - - Dickens Productions. This is great.

BP: Where were these recorded?

KM: That I don't remember. I know it was off 54th Street somewhere. I can't remember.

MG: Wow.

KM: Hartown.

MG: This is also a Hugo Dickens label?

KM: Yes, which is Harlem Town. That's what he's saying.

MG: Outer Limits Dickens Productions. Writer, William Salter; Arranger, Arthur Jenkins.

KM: Yes, Arty Jenkins.

MG: These are all people we have interviewed. The - - Arthur Jenkins, remember - -

KM: Bill Salter is in [Iowa].

MG: - - and, and you see the, the link here it says Hugo Dickens. We don't know where he is or what happened to him.

KM: Arty Jenkins is a good pianist.

MG: Isn't he good, yes.

KM: Excellent, Excellent.

MG: I have to [go].

KM: And Bill Salter's an excellent bassist. He and I were very close. As a matter of fact, I still got one of his cards - - from MacDonald?

MG: Ralph.

KM: He and Ralph MacDonald hooked up.

MG: Yes, they did really well. So you're on this?

KM: No. Arty Jenkins is.

MG: Oh Arty's on that, right.

KM: The ones that I'm on - -

MG: Recorded in '64.

KM: Yes.

MG: You're on *Soldier in Saigon* and *On My Street*, right?

KM: Yes.

MG: Okay, you're on this. *Soldier in Saigon*, 1963, recorded February, '63, the single *Soldier in Saigon* - - I want to hear that. We - - or maybe we can transfer. You - - do you ever listen to this on the forty-five?

KM: Yes, I listen to them all the time.

MG: Oh, I'd like to see it transferred to digital. Do you have seventy-eights also?

KM: Seventy-eights of the Latin - - I mean the La Paris Sextet.

MG: You do?

KM: Yes.

MG: Can I see that?

KM: Yes, I brought them.

MG: Okay. [Paper crumpling]

KM: This is a Latin plus Soul quintet.

MG: Oh this is great.

KM: That's Norman Carr, you know who that is.

MG: [Gasps] This is fabulous. Okay and?

KM: That's Ernie Clayton, who passed away. Lenny King, Clarence Robinson. And you know who that is.

MG: Where's it taken?

KM: At Basin Street West.

MG: You mean in California?

KM: No, that's the name of the place. It was up on Dyckman Street. It was a little bar owned by a police officer that liked Latin music.

MG: There you go.

KM: That was in the '70s though. If you look on the other side, you'll see - -

BP: So who - - who is featured in the photo?

KM: Okay - -

MG: Let's give me left to right.

KM: Okay, left to right is Norman Carr on the vibes, then there's me in the middle, Ernie Clayton playing conga, Clarence Robinson playing bass - -

MG: Robert - - Robinson?

KM: Robinson.

MG: Yes.

KM: And Lenny King playing timbales.

BP: I just want to zoom in on you a little bit. There you go. What year was this photo?

KM: This was '72, '73. [Sirens] And I've got something else to show you. There, there's a big picture.

MG: Oh a close up.

KM: A close up.

MG: Nice.

BP: Man, that looks like it was taken yesterday.

MG: Yes. [Indecipherable] You look good. This is great. So who was the leader of the Latin plus Soul quintet?

KM: That was Norman and Ernie.

BP: Were they all African American?

KM: Yes.

BP: How did, how did African Americans, you know, start becoming innovators in Latin music.

KM: Okay that's a hard question, but there's a wonderful answer to that. Mario Bauza used to play at the Savoy in the '40s.

BP: That's in Harlem right?

KM: It was 143rd, 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue. He told this story. He said that when he first came here, he came here to play with Count Basie, or Duke Ellington. He wound up playing with Cab Calloway. After the Cab Calloway group broke up, he was so involved with jazz, he loved jazz, that he started this group of his own, and he went into the Savoy. He called the music Afro-Cuban. Now Mario Bauza, Dizzy Gillespie, and Cello Polzo, they're all hooked up with this Afro-jazz thing. Anyway, Mario Bauza took this music down to a Hispanic section of Harlem, Spanish Harlem, and played it for them, so they can get one step up, you know - - introduce them to Afro-Cuban jazz. Everybody loved the music. And when they asked, what kind of music is this, he said it's Afro-Cuban, so then they rejected it. They rejected it because it was *Afro-Cuban*. If they said it was Cuban jazz they would've - - right, they would've accepted

it, but it was Afro-Cuban, so they sort of shied away from it. So, Mario said that he was upset, and he said, I don't know why - - what I'm doing down here, let me go on back to the Apollo, let me go on up to the Savoy. So he went back up to the Savoy, and he played it for the people up there. The people didn't know what it was, but they said it sounds good. It sounds so good man that they just went to see the Machito band, because by that time - -

MG: Machito came from Cuba.

KM: - - he had sent for Graciela and Machito who came over, and he said around 1949, 1950 a man came up to Savoy, and said to him, listen, they're opening a new place downtown, we want your band to play. Well, he didn't want to leave the Savoy. He liked it. He said - - he told the man, I'll think about it, and the band members got after him. Oh man, come on let's go downtown, because at that time, there were so many venues in Harlem it wasn't necessary to go downtown to play. It - - I only start playing downtown when I start playing with Jimmy Castor. I never had to play downtown. There were so many venues up there, I just played. All over. Carver Ballroom, Hotel Theresa, the Skylight Room. That - - had a bunch of places to play. Finally the band got after him, and he went downtown to play. He said he was in his dressing room drinking because he had to leave the Savoy. He said, and when they called him out on stage to start - -

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

MG: Oh look at this.

MN: Okay I'm leaving this to you guys, and - -

MG: Look at this.

MN: - - this is unbelievable.

KM: There's two records there. [Crosstalk]

MG: This is a demo.

MN: If you want anything else, I'll get you.

KM: Yes.

MG: Did it ever come out?

KM: No. [Crosstalk]

MG: Are you leaving us? Until when are you leaving us?

MN: I'm not going anywhere. I'm in my office.

MG: Preparing for class?

MN: Yes. I do have to work.

MG: You have to work, okay. *Blue Moon Cha Cha Cha*, the La Paris Sextet. So is this - -

KM: There's two records there. So you'll see that.

MG: *I Get a Kick Out of You*, so seventy-eight. 1957. Was this ever released?

KM: Not as far as I know.

MG: Wow, but you have the demo. But this you don't listen to right? You don't have a seventy-eight player.

KM: Yes, I've got a seventy-eight. [Laughter]

MG: Oh you do.

KM: I've got all the [?] listen. I'm from the past.

MG: This should be - -

KM: You know, I've got all that - - you've got to have all that stuff.

MG: I'm worried about how you're preserving this.

KM: All that is in - - encased in, in plastic. I took it all out to bring it here.

MG: Okay, good.

KM: This is when I was playing with the - - Bill Hudson was part of the Hugo Dickens - -

MG: Oh really?

KM: Yes, he was one of the arrangers. I played on that, and on the other side.

MG: Tell me when you met - - how you know - -

KM: I met Hugo through my brother, Bobby.

MG: And so did you play with the band? Your brother played in the band?

KM: Yes, but not, not long.

MG: And what about you?

KM: I used to play gigs with Hugo. Hugo needed a piano player, so - -

MG: He would call you.

KM: Yes, my brother is the one - - yeah man, Kenny can play. You know that kind of - - Bobby was - - well my first manager was my brother.

MG: Oh great.

KM: Yes, got me in - - anybody needed a piano player or something, yeah man, get my brother. When I went to Morris High School, Bobby played in the, in the dance band, and the teacher was looking for a pianist. My brother said, yeah who's asking, you need a pianist, I know a guy that can play. My brother plays. At that time I was a monitor in school, and - - Bobby told me, come down to the rehearsal in the auditorium, and I can't - - I went down there, and we played Glen Miller's "In the Mood", and the teacher heard me play that, and he said, man, he can play, so I played with the dance band. All through my manager, my brother Bobby. [Laughs]

BP: What years did you attend Morris High School?

KM: From '50 to '54. Four years.

BP: What was this school like then? Was it - -

KM: Integrated. I mean really integrated.

BP: Could you describe that a little bit please?

KM: Well I went to Morris High School - - they were looking for people to perform. I had just come from Junior High School 52, so the world knew me. At least I thought the world knew me until I got to Morris High School and I heard all those other piano players that were smoking, and I just eased out, you know, and we had a dean whose name was VonKempf, who called me to his office. I said, what do you want me for? I didn't do anything. And I went to Mr. VonKempf's office. He said, Mills right? I said, yes sir. He said, okay. What class are you in? You're in 4? You're in 532? I said yes sir. He said, okay. Alright, you've been selected. Selected? For what? He says you're going to be a monitor, because we didn't have security. We were the security, the upperclassmen, but you had to be in the fifth term or up to be security, so I became a sergeant. During that time - - you know a lady named Lillian Leach?

BP: Yes, we've heard that name many times.

KM: Lillian Leach and the Mellows?

BP: Doo-wop singers. Yes.

KM: I played for Lillian Leach on Red Letter Day. She sang "The Man I Love". All the piano players that were smokin' nobody knew that song except me, and I played for her, and she was very grateful too, and nobody liked the tune because it was - - well they didn't like the tune - - well, I mean, they were into Doo-wop. I mean that's too syrupy, you know, but I played it and she thanked me for it, and I was glad that I was able to play the song because I - - all I knew was a lot of standards. When I was in seventh term, I started playing with Oliver Bino.

MG: Oh I need to know that Oliver Bino.

KM: Oliver Bino, Stanley Warden, Bobby Beech. Stanley Warden played tenor, Bobby Beech played drums, Franshaw Turner played bass, and they played b-bop. Now I wasn't aware of b-bop. I mean I heard it, but I didn't know the songs. I didn't know the name of the tunes.

MG: Why was that band called the 52 Bop Band, if they didn't play b-bop?

KM: Well that was a different one. That was a different one. That was junior high school.

MG: But they didn't play b-bop that band?

KM: No, they were playing stuff like "Oh Babe", but that was the beginning of b-bop. You know, that was b-bop to them.

MG: But it wasn't actually - -

KM: No, but it wasn't b-bop. It wasn't really b-bop. I didn't start playing b-bop until I started going to high school, and playing with Oliver Bino. Now he started calling out tunes, God rest him, and Bino said, we're going to play "Anthropology". What's that man, I don't know. I don't know, just play rhythm changes. I said, oh, okay. Rhythm changes in B flat. I said, oh, okay. So I'm playing rhythm changes, and then they played the head, "Anthropology". [Sings a rhythm]

MG: Charlie Parker.

KM: Charlie Parker. And all the tunes that I learned, I learned later on, because they were either blues changes, or rhythm changes. Now if the tune had its own changes, then I'd have to learn, you know, those changes. We played some Thelonious Monk tunes, but Thelonious Monk didn't deal with blues, or - - you know, you had to play his changes, you know, so we played some of his things. Then the band broke up because everybody graduated. It was much later on I heard Oliver Bino was playing with Ray Charles. I don't know what happened to Stanley

Warden, or Bobby Beech. I don't know what happened to Franshaw Turner, but it is - - everybody just split up.

MG: Did you ever hear what happened to Oliver?

KM: Well I knew he died, and I think I played with Oliver before he died. I played with him a year or two before he died. He had a gig, and he found out where I was. He found out, because see, everybody found me because I was playing with Jimmy Castor, so they - - they knew where to find me - - yeah, Kenny's at Small's with Jimmy Castor - - because we lived there. That was our home. So, as a matter of fact, Small's Paradise had a policy. They only had four bands a year at one time. They had David Taylor Jackson. They had King Curtis, Bill Charles and the Sidewinders, and Jimmy Castor. So anytime you went to Small's, you would see one of those four bands. So everybody knew where to find me. So, we were at Small's for a long time. Many, many weeks at Small's. Then we would go out on the road and come back, when we come back, we go right into Small's. It was like that.

BP: How did you come to play with Jimmy Castor?

MG: What - - well, before he tells - - I want, want him to talk about Jimmy Castor, but tell - - explain to those who don't know who Jimmy Castor was, and, you know, how - - about the success, his success, and about that first group of kids, because - - well of young people.

KM: Well Jimmy Castor had a group that I don't remember in the 1960s though. The first group was Billy Mashburn. I remember him. He played drums. I don't remember the drums, the bassist - - I - - he did have a bassist. Al Fontaine played guitar. I do remember Al Fontaine. I know Al Fontaine, but I don't remember when he and I were playing with Jimmy. It had to be very early in the '60s when we went to Bermuda, and then I left Jimmy, and started playing with the Jazz Harmonics. That's with Clarence Martin and - - that was '60, '61. Well that band

started in '58. I didn't hear from Jimmy until about '64. Sixty - - Jimmy got in touch, and he asked me if I wanted to play with the band, and I went - - I played a couple of gigs with him in the village, and - - everybody in the band said yes, keep him man, he's bad. And so I got - - I got close to everybody, Rohan Martinez. We had a fantastic guitarist. He became a Muslim, so he stopped playing. He didn't play with the group anymore, but I missed him, because he was, he was excellent. He was excellent. He loved Curtis Mayfield, and he used to sound like him, because Jimmy used to play Curtis Mayfield tunes. He was part of the repertoire. I can't remember his name. Ronnie - - it'll come to me. First name was Ron. We called him Ronnie - - Ronnie something. He was the first one to get a - - a '64 Mustang convertible, light blue. I'll never forget it. Can't forget - - I can't remember Ronnie's last name. It'll come though. But that was the group, after Ronnie left, then there was Gittens who came - - we only called him Gittens. I can't remember his first name. Got a funny - - Hillyard - - Hillard Gittens, but we never called him Hillard, you know. Hillard, man, I mean. Gittens, you know, so everybody called him Gittens. That's probably why I don't remember Hillard. That was the group that stayed together for the duration of time that I was with Jimmy, and then Reggie Barnes left. Then they got another drummer.

MG: Where's Jimmy Castor from? Do you remember?

KM: I understand that he was born in Bermuda, and he came here - - I think he lived on 167th Street, and Amsterdam. I think he lived on Amsterdam. 167th, 166th. Rudy Lawless lived around there.

MG: Oh yes, Rudy Lawless.

KM: So he knew Jimmy when he was a kid. The lawless one, and he is truly a lawless one. I love him to death. Uncle Rudy. Fantastic drummer too. Fantastic percussionist. Rudy Lawless.

MG: Could you, you know, this album which is very rare - - this is very rare, the Jimmy Castor album - -

KM: I'll tell you where you can get one. It's going to cost forty dollars though.

MG: On ebay?

KM: No. Down on Grenada Street. They got a record shop there that sells all kinds of albums in sleeves, plastic sleeves, and I went down there. I heard about it, and I went there, and asked the guy about it. I said listen, do you have "Hey Leroy" by Jimmy Castor? He said, yeah, I got it. And he went and got it. Still in plastic, you know, smell, everything, and I said how much does it cost. He said forty dollars. I said, man, that's a lot of money.

BP: Did you - - did you play on that song, "Hey Leroy"?

KM: Played the whole album.

BP: What, what, what was the - - the origins of that particular song?

KM: Everybody had a piece of that song. Everybody put something into that song. Everybody in the band had something, you know, to add to that song. The other side, I arranged for Jimmy. I don't know if you remember "Ham Hocks".

MG: Yes. "Ham Hocks Español".

KM: I wrote that little baroque introduction.

MG: Oh yes?

KM: It's a baroque introduction.

MG: Oh, it's very good.

KM: And Jimmy liked that, because it showed that the band had class. So nobody knew what was going to happen after that baroque. They were listening to hear this Bach type thing.

What's going on with that? And I just wrote a little four bar, eight bar thing, and Jimmy liked

that. He said, yeah Kenny that's bad. It shows that the band has class. So I arranged that whole thing. So "Hey Leroy" was Roland, Jimmy, Reggie, they all had input. Everybody had something to put into the group - - to put into the song.

BP: Did - - did the theme of the song - - was it something that somebody heard one day just on the block.

KM: No, well, you know, Leroy is a name, and it's usually referred to African Americans, especially the ones that come from the South. Leroy, you know, and so, if you were considered country, you were considered Leroy - - [Voice change] Hey Leroy, what's wrong with you man, you country, you know. So that's, that's where the origins came from, and - - like kids, Jimmy and the rest of the guys, they get a hold of something and they use it. Leroy, and it means the country, so anytime would make a mistake while we were rehearsing, Jimmy would say, hey Leroy, you know, say we ought to cut something.

MG: Hey Leroy, your mama's calling.

KM: Well, being Jimmy is Caribbean orientated, we decided to make it a Calypso, and I played - - I played the first solo on there, which is very Calypsonian. As a matter of fact - -

MG: We want to transfer that, so we can use it.

KM: As a matter of fact I - - when we went to the Apollo, after we cut this - - next year we went to the Apollo - - I didn't even play the same solo.

MG: How soon after you recorded did it become a hit?

KM: The same year.

MG: The minute it came out, it went on the radio and became a hit?

KM: It didn't come out until. We did it in August '66 - - October '66.

MG: It was on the radio?

KM: It was on the radio.

MG: Right away it was.

KM: Jimmy couldn't get anybody to play it. He went to Frankie Crocker, Frankie Crocker wanted five hundred dollars a day.

MG: Oh, you're telling them Frankie.

KM: Well, I'm telling you what happened. Jimmy couldn't get anybody to do it, but he went to Eddie - -

MG: See that's really - - that's, that's an important thing that should be shaped out.

KM: He went to Eddie O'Jay. Eddie O'Jay said we'll do it for you. And Eddie did it. And we heard, you have to listen to Eddie O'Jay to hear "Leroy". You ever heard of The Beaufort Express?

MG: I think so. I thought I had.

KM: The Pazant Brothers?

MG: Yes sure with the - -

KM: I played with them.

MG: Oh Pazant Brothers.

KM: I also have some records here that I made with them.

MG: Let me, let me ask you something here about - - some more about Jimmy Castor. There's "Southern Fried Frijoles", and the "Ham Hocks Español" - - are there - - and then "Bang Bang".

Are there any Latin players in his band at all? Did he ever have Latin players?

KM: No, he had - -

MG: The rhythm - - he had Latin rhythm.

KM: He had Latin rhythm.

MG: But African Americans playing Latin rhythm.

KM: Yes, African Americans playing Latin. One of the guys on here, they call him Pablo. His name was Richie Landrum.

MG: Oh, yes.

KM: Richie Landrum. Used to call him Pablo. Yes, he passed, and after Richie, Charles Martin came, I mean Martin Charles came, and he played conga.

MG: Did you know any guys, musicians - - African Americans who took Latin names? Other than Pucho or Joe Panama?

KM: Joe Panama, he was the only one - -

MG: Or Pete La Roca.

KM: Pete La Roca.

MG: Any other guys that - -

KM: No, no.

MG: - - did that?

KM: See what happened was when Jimmy did "Hey Leroy" the managers tried to change his name to Jimmy Castro.

MG: To make everything like it was Latin.

KM: It was part of Latin. Because, come on let's face it, the producers didn't know the difference between Calypso and Latin. They didn't know the difference, so they just combined them all in one, you know - -

MG: But you'll see that he had a big market, because the [Indecipherable] notes are in English and Spanish. The producer is Latin right?

KM: Yes.

MG: Or is that a fake name?

KM: No, Luchi DeJesus, yes - -

MG: Is that his real name?

KM: Yes, I think he was - - that's his name, but I think he was Italian.

MG: Oh he's Italian?

KM: I think he was Italian.

MG: DeJesus is Italian?

KM: I think he was - - I think he was Italian.

MG: But it's definitely crossed though.

KM: This was Mercury. This was Mercury. Mercury Records.

MG: And it definitely crossed. Latin boogaloo crossed to African American, so he had a hit in both markets.

KM: Yes, and that's the reason for doing things with the Latin background no matter what we played. We played - - you know, because they were looking for a different name for this kind of music.

MG: Did you ever play for a Latin audience?

KM: Yes, we played for a Latin audience, but it was usually mixed.

MG: Mixed.

KM: Yes, not strictly Latin. It was usually mixed.

MG: Did you play with him in the Blue Morocco?

KM: We opened up the Cheetah - - no.

MG: He played in the Blue Morocco.

KM: Yes, he played there.

MG: Would that have been later?

KM: Yes, yes.

MG: You played in The Cheetah?

KM: I played - - I opened up The Cheetah. Jerry Lee Lewis opened The Cheetah. After Jerry Lee Lewis came and left, we went in, and we were the house band just about - - for about almost a year. We were more than a year, which was interesting because African Americans didn't go to The Cheetah.

MG: No.

KM: Because they had The Blues Magoos, and they wasn't listening to that kind of music, and The Iron Butterfly. Those were white groups, and they didn't listen to that music, but when Jimmy was in there, they tolerated The Blues Magoos. [Laughs] And Iron Butterfly.

BP: What is the Blues Magoos?

KM: That's the name of a rock group, because rock came in very heavy [Crosstalk with MG]. So Jimmy was there. We played opposite all these different 1910 Bubblegum Machine - - all of those are the white groups. You can always tell white groups by their names. They had very odd names. [MG laughs] They did. They did. And they dressed the same way. Our off-night attire - - our off-night - - that means there wasn't a great big occasion, our off-night was black suits, red shirts, black ties, red handkerchiefs, patent leather shoes, and that's when we were lounging. That was our lounging, you know, attire. When we were about to play was either tux, which is formal, or it was what they call ice cream, white suits, white shoes, blue shirts with open collar, that's when we, you know - - if we went out to perform at some place like - - like - - I'm trying to think of the place on 8th Street, and Sixth Avenue.

BP: The Blue Note?

MG: No, no. I know what you mean.

KM: Right on the corner.

MG: Yes. That was probably - -

KM: Trudy Helen's.

MG: Yes.

KM: Trudy Helen's. Trudy Helen's we used to wear ice cream suits, you know.

MG: 9th Street. Wasn't she on 9th I think.

KM: 9th Street, 9th Street. 8th Street - - she had a son if I'm not mistaken - -

MG: Yes, right.

KM: - - that had something called - - what's the name of that place?

MG: The Dome.

KM: No. It was right around the corner from Trudy Helen. I can't remember the name of it, but we opened that place.

MG: So how long did you play with Jimmy?

KM: About nine years.

MG: Nine years.

KM: Yes, about nine years.

MG: And then what happened with him after that?

KM: Nothing. I left the group.

MG: Yes, but did his career continue, or - -

KM: Yes, he went on to do "Bertha Butt" and all that. Yes, that was in the '70s. I played with them until about 1969. I left and I started getting into composing music for plays. I lived on Kelly Street. Right next door to me was a young man named Henry Miller. They call him

Bumpy. Bumpy used to write plays, and I used to write music for Henry Miller's plays. And he -- Bumpy was an activist as well. It was -- it was Henry Miller, Bumpy, that introduced me to a playwright, I mean to a lyricist named Herb Martin who wrote the lyrics for *The Yearling*, and it was Bumpy, Herb, and myself, and we used to call ourselves Miller Martin and Mills. You know, like Rodgers and Hammerstein, but we called --

MG: Yes, right.

KM: I'm the one who named it Miller Martin and Mills. And Bumpy did quite a few plays. He did *Unjust Do Not Prosper*. He did, he did *Death of a Dunbar Girl*. I wrote the music for all this. Now there was another young man. I can't remember his name. His name was Roger. I think his first name was Roger. Wrote a play called *The Magic Drum*. I wrote the music for that.

MG: Where was it performed?

KM: Where?

MG: Yes.

KM: It was per -- first it was performed at Harlem Hospital in the auditorium, in the auditorium. And then he took it to other places, you know, other theaters. And I wrote the theme for it, wrote all the music. Herb and I wrote the music, wrote -- Herb wrote the lyrics. Herb said it's the first time he ever wrote lyrics to music. He usually writes the lyrics first, and then the composer -- but he said that the music was so -- so nice. It was easy to follow. You know, I -- I wasn't a person to write music that was difficult, because, you know, when you write difficult music, people can't hum them. Can't hum the tunes. So I wrote lines, you know, and coming from, coming from songs -- coming from standard tunes, and playing those tunes

with the Jazz Harmonics, I learned how to write flowing lines, you know. I didn't - - I didn't bring anything with me.

MG: Could I go back a minute to Oliver Bino?

KM: Oliver Bino.

MG: Could you describe him, you know, what he looked like, and his personality, and - -

KM: Yes, Oliver was a b-bopper personified. He was tall thin. He had wavy hair, wavy hair.

We had a bassist. I can't remember his name before Bubby Tanner. We were waiting for him at the Apollo Bar to play, and he didn't come for the first set, and Oliver got worried. He called the house, and the mother said, oh he's here, sleeping on the chair. So she called the boy's name, and said come on, get up man, they're waiting for you downtown. They're waiting for you down at the Apollo Bar, which was on 160, 169th Street, and she went to shake him, and he was dead, because he oded. Yes, see that's - - that's the kind of stories. Yes, he oded.

MG: Was it a lot of drugs around him?

KM: Yes.

MG: In your high school years?

KM: It was a lot of drugs in the high school years, but it wasn't in high school.

MG: Outside?

KM: Outside. You know Morris High School was relatively - -

MG: Did you lose friends to drugs?

KM: Oliver. [Plane noise] I think Stanley Warden. I don't know what happened to Bobby Beech or Franshaw Turner - - I don't know what happened to them.

MG: Did you want to say something? Oh, okay.

KM: We - - after high school, I didn't get to work with them much. Then you know, everybody was scrambling for work, and I went with a group called the Jazz Harmonics, and I stayed with them. I stayed with them, and it - - they started playing R&B gigs, rock and roll gigs, and I got a little annoyed and upset, because I had to play rock and roll. Of course I wanted to play b-bop. Yes, I wanted to play jazz. So I said well if I've got to play b-bop - - I mean if I got to play rock and roll I may as well go live in the blues, I might as well go on and play with Jimmy Castor. So I went with Jimmy. Not because I was crazy about playing with Jimmy, because I liked the guys in the band, but I mean it was like out of my venue, you know. I was a jazz player, at least that's what I called myself a jazz player. But I'm glad I got a chance to play with Jim because it helped me to learn the craft well. I played for cotillions. In 1979, I played with a gentleman named Sid Richards who I've know for a while who started playing cotillions, and he called me. He said, Kenny I'm calling you because I want you - - you and a few piano players that know how to play all this music now. Because they were playing Beethoven's music for the waltzes, you know, and - - other, you know, classical music. So, he called me for the gig, and I - - I've been doing cotillions with him since '79, up to now. I think I've got a cotillion next month.

MG: Oh really.

KM: Yes, in May.

MG: See, that's not over in case you didn't know.

KM: Cotillions are still going on, and this cotillion that I'm playing for is one of the largest - - it's supposed to be the largest in the state - - it's the Westchester Cotillion. And they usually have twenty-five, thirty debutantes, and I've been doing that since '79. I only started doing that with them around '98, and we had choreographers. I'm just trying to think of the lady's name.

She lived on 139th Street. Wonderful choreographer. She came from Washington DC and she had a doctor as a husband. Anna, was her name Anna?

MG: It'll come to you.

KM: Yes.

MG: That's what happens - - I want to ask you - - can I ask you about - - or do you want to stay on that? Anna.

KM: I just wanted to see if I can get her name.

MG: Yes, see if you can get it.

KM: See if I can get her name. [Pause] Oh, Ava Jones.

MG: Good for you.

KM: Ava Jones. I couldn't, couldn't forget Ms. Jones. Ava Jones. She was very - - you know. Kenneth. And she was one of the few choreographers that knew just where the music was, and she didn't read it. You know, she didn't really read it. She said Kenneth, start from the fifth bar. And I looked, and I'd say, okay. Ready, here we go - - one, two, three, four, and I'd start playing. She was - - yes. Ava Jones. She was a fantastic lady. And her - - her husband, Dr. Jones, walking historian. They lived on Strivers Row, 139th Street. I don't know if they're still there, but Ava Jones was a wonderful lady. And we also had a gentleman with us too that passed away. He's another one that used to say, left foot country, start on you left foot. He was something else. I did cotillions with them because they were - - the majority of people that had cotillions would hire those two. And I played with Sid Richards. By the 1980s Sid would have me conduct the orchestra for the cotillions, because they used to have the orchestra go to the cotillion rehearsals, so the kids would get a chance to hear what the band sounded like, so they can get the steps correct, but a lot of people couldn't afford to pay the orchestra, so they would

just send me. Sid just sent me, and I would rehearse the kids. And at dress rehearsal, I would rehearse them again, and exactly what I played is what the orchestra would play. So, that's how worked.

MG: Wow.

KM: Yes. I'm still doing it. I can't believe it.

MG: It seems like when you get a job, you keep a job. Have you noticed?

KM: Oh yes. I was one of those. I was on the radio with WNYC for twenty-six years. They took us off. Everything became NPR, National Public Radio. But Ms. Kirby and I was on - - were on - - we were on there for twenty-six years. We had two shows. One on AM, *The Wonderful World of PAL*, FM, *A Look at Ourselves*, with teenagers. It was a talk show, and we held that from '61 to '87. Then other things started - - they started dropping - - generating out of the studio. Everything started coming in from NPR which is in Washington, so they cancelled the show.

MG: Could you tell me something about Boston Road? About the clubs on Boston Road?

KM: Boston Road had Freddy's, the Apollo Bar, Blue Morocco. Now the first time I played in the Blue Morocco I was playing with a Latin group. A guy named Apache played conga.

Apache and we had a timbale player. I can't remember his name. We didn't have a bass player because the gig payed so little we couldn't afford a full rhythm section. I played with him there for a while. The piano was so bad I couldn't - - I couldn't deal with it. We played at McKinley Hall. McKinley Hall was on 169th Street over - -

BP: Near the library.

KM: And there was a theater called the McKinley Theater which they must have taken down when I started playing at McKinley Hall, and I have a joke about that - - well, a story really,

because I've got so many stories. I was playing up there with Clarence Martin, and The Jazz Harmonics, and it was a cocktail sip, six to ten. That's what they called them, cocktail sips.

MG: Cocktail sips.

KM: On Sundays. Well we're up there playing all the b-bop in the world, and this young man came in, and he said, hey fellows can I - - can I sit here, so Clarence said, yeah man, come on up. So he came up, tuned up his horn. Clarence said, what do you want to play. He said, well what do you want to play. So we called the tune, and he played with us, and he played one full set with us, and then he left, and I've never seen him again. About two years later, we're sitting down listening to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, and I said that's - - that trumpet player sounds familiar man. Clarence said, yeah man that's the cat that was playing with us. I said, who? Lee Morgan?

MG: Oh, no kidding.

KM: Lee Morgan. That's who it was, Lee Morgan. Now he was in the Bronx. I don't know if he lived there at the time.

MG: He did live in the Bronx for a minute. I have to see when that was.

KM: And he came in [Crosstalk] - - he came in and - -

MG: And that was in McKinley?

KM: McKinley Hall, yes. They also had the Boston Road Ballroom, which opened much later on. I never played there exclusively.

MG: What kind of crowd hung out on Boston Road?

KM: Well Boston Road was where all the drugs and gangs were. They had a guy named Sir Charles.

MG: Harvel?

KM: Harvel. Wonderful piano and vocalist. He used to - - we used to play opposite him.

MG: At the Morocco?

KM: No, at the Apollo Bar.

MG: Apollo Bar.

KM: Yes.

MG: He played at the Blue Morocco too.

KM: I didn't play at the Blue Morocco much.

MG: What about Freddy's? You play at Freddy's?

KM: Well Freddy's was usually jam sessions.

MG: Lou Donaldson played at Freddy's.

KM: Yes. Papa Lou.

MG: Would he have - - Papa Lou - - would that be a gig or a jam session you think?

KM: Yes, usually - - usually a jam session at Freddy's.

MG: You know Brian, well - - his introduction - - one of his introductions to [jazz] is "Jazz Won't Be Our Last Summer", where Lou Donaldson played on [Indecipherable] and for, you know - - on "Jazz Won't Be Our" - - and Brian - - our Brian came and it was like, it's so great, because it's that reaction that people that don't hear all the time, or don't know who Lou Donaldson is [Crosstalk]

KM: Yes, Papa Lou we used to call him.

MG: He's like - - I don't know what it is, but this is great - -

KM: Yes, Lou Donaldson is - -

MG: - - you know, he was in - - he got like the immediate - - call to the music so now he's, you know.

KM: Kenny's Bar is another venue.

MG: Is that on Boston Road?

KM: Boston Road on the corner of Prospect, and they had an organ in there, which I didn't like.

MG: Oh you didn't like organ [trio].

KM: No.

MG: I like organ.

KM: No. I didn't like organ. And - - I played up there with the Jazz Harmonics.

MG: Oh piano player don't like organ players I guess. Take the gig away.

KM: No, it's not that they don't like organ players. [MG laughs] I don't know - - I don't care for organs. I just - - I think they're great instruments, but I don't care for them. I didn't like playing them, but I played it. We had some gigs up at Kenny's, so I had to play, because he didn't have a piano. He had an organ, so I had to play it. Goodson's Town was another one - -

MG: Oh, Goodson's yes.

KM: - - had an organ. Didn't have a piano. And Goodson's Town used to have organ trios.

MG: The organ trio comes in and it's three people that can sound like a band, so that was what happened. They put a lot of people out of work, and they're - -

KM: Yes, and they put a whole bunch - - that's the purpose. Everybody was getting organ trios, you know.

MG: They thought it would save money.

KM: It saved money for them. 845 still had bands. Lester Morse Band - -

MG: Let me ask you about club 845. When you walk in the door of club 845 right, the bar is on the right?

KM: Yes, right. Tables - -

MG: Was the bandstand behind the bar?

KM: Yes it was a little platform.

MG: Like raised?

KM: Yes, a little platform.

MG: And were there some tables on the left?

KM: They had tables on the left.

MG: Okay, but then is there a back room?

KM: That's where they used to hold all their functions.

MG: Oh I see.

KM: And they had a stage for the band, and a bunch of tables.

MG: So when they had - - during the week shows would be in the back?

KM: Yes.

MG: What would be in the front?

KM: They would have - -

MG: The jam sessions?

KM: No, they would have people coming to play.

MG: Would the front be one band, and they could have a band in the back at the same time?

KM: Same time. They used to do that in the Small's. King Curtis would be in the back.

MG: Right, and have the band in the front.

KM: The front, yes.

MG: Yes.

KM: Yes, because I took The Jazz Harmonics into Small's.

MG: But that - -

BP: This is done, but keep going.

MG: Oh okay. Why, because to be on audio you mean?

BP: Yes.

MG: Okay, what time is it though, because we have to go to - -

BP: Ten to 4.

MG: We have ten more minutes. Could we - - oh, but I wanted to show his other covers. Okay, alright, well let's talk about them since we can't - -

KM: This is Charlie, you know that.

MG: You're on the - - that's Charlie Palmieri, Latin Boogaloo.

KM: Now here's a man that nobody speaks about. He lived in the Bronx.

BP: Let me see if I can get another tape.

MG: J.J. Jackson.

KM: I'm on this album by the way.

MG: Wow.

KM: And he lived in the Bronx.

MG: He did?

KM: On Prospect Avenue.

MG: And where did he play?

KM: He was a localist.

MG: I know, but did he play in any places in the Bronx.

KM: Yes, he played all over.

MG: In the Bronx?

KM: All over New York.

MG: Born and raised in the Bronx.

KM: Not only in the Bronx, downtown. "It's Alright". "It's Alright" was his big hit. [Sings]

It's alright - - da da da da da. That's one of his big themes.

MG: He maintains restaurants in New York and London? Is that so?

KM: Yes, he passed away.

MG: Oh he did.

KM: This is a guy who went to school with us, Orlando Mardin.

MG: Oh yes.

KM: And a good friend of mine as you can see. He knew Eddie. He lived in 900 block. He lived in the Banana Kelly.

MG: He did.

KM: Orlando. He played timbales.

MG: Wow. [Indecipherable].

KM: And that's why I brought those albums, so you could see.

MG: Oh, [Al Lindio] is on this.

KM: I wasn't on there. Now I played with a - -

MG: Oh Louie Ramirez, he played with Arty Jenkins and them.

KM: Yes, Louie Ramirez, yes. There was a saxophonist on there that I played with all the time.

He played alto sax.

MG: Where's that?

KM: I see right on the bottom line.

MG: Walter Jefferson?

KM: Yes, yes. Jean Jefferson.

MG: Charlie.

KM: Walter Jean Jefferson, and he plays - -

MG: Oh Julien Priester is on here. Louie Ramirez.

KM: Yes. Now I played opposite Julien Priester, and Max Roach.

MG: Oh it's produced by Herbie Mann.

KM: Yes. And Max Roach. Max Roach, Julien Priester, for a short time, Julien Priester. At the Jazz Gallery.

MG: Oh yes, I remember the Jazz Gallery. Who'd you play there with?

KM: I had a trio. I had a trio. They were combining jazz with the show. The show was Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, Booker Little, Eddie Collin, Mal Waldron, Julien Priester, [Pause] Walter Benton. They played the show. We also had Helena Walker, and Charles Moore, who did African dances.

MG: Oh yes.

KM: And the conga player, I can't remember his name, but he's the one who got the gig for me. He lived on Longwood Avenue, so he played conga. And they wanted a trio to play dance music. When the - - when the show was finished, people would come up on the bandstand and dance.

MG: Is this the Jazz Gallery downtown?

KM: Yes, First Avenue.

MG: Yes, on Eighth Street.

KM: Eighth Street.

MG: Yes.

KM: Yes.

MG: I remember the people dancing. Okay.

KM: That was something new. They wanted people - -

MG: Yes, they were going to try.

KM: And we stayed there a long time. Six nights a week.

MG: Perhaps - - what year was that?

KM: '60.

MG: I wasn't '60. I was too young. I didn't come until '63 downtown.

KM: '60.

MG: Wow.

KM: And I played there with - - opposite Max - - we stayed there for about - - maybe about six weeks.

MG: Oh good. That was a nice place.

KM: Five or six weeks.

MG: That was a nice place.

KM: Yes, I made a hundred twenty-five dollars, which was a lot of dough. Julien Priester left the group. He and Max got into some kind of misunderstanding, and - -

MG: You know Max is in a nursing home.

KM: Yes, I heard. And what's his name? Britt Woodman came to take his place.

MG: Oh yes, Britt Woodman.

KM: Yes, he came.

MG: Oh he's a great player.

KM: And he was there for the duration. Until they, they closed the show. I had Alvern Bunn with me and Pat Gaskin. Pat Gaskin played bass. Pat Gaskin though also sang with a group, and

sang bass. He sang with a group on Eighth Avenue, The Solid Tears. I think he sang with The Solid Tears.

MG: When did you stop playing bars and clubs?

KM: Oh, I stopped playing in the late '80s - - I started playing restaurants. I started playing with a - - a young lady named Lillian Phillips, and her husband Jim Phillips, and they started playing at restaurants, and I was playing before. I was playing restaurants before that, but that was really the juncture.

MG: Did you, did you - -

KM: I have - - I have a tape of Lillian here.

MG: Was that a decision because you didn't want to play where - -

KM: Yes.

MG: - - they were serving alcohol? But restaurants serve alcohol right?

KM: But it's a different venue.

MG: It's not a bar.

KM: Different venue. And people see shows, and then they deal with the show. The bars are usually rowdy. I played in - - I mean I played in almost all the bars off 121st Street.

MG: Showman's Lounge?

KM: Yes, Showman's. I played in the Apollo down there. The Apollo Bar, which was homosexual-ville. There's a bar on 125th Street, right on the corner of St. Nicholas, right next to the motion picture theater. There was a motion picture theater there.

MG: I'm thinking because I'd always take the train there.

KM: I played in there for a couple of weeks, until a guy tried to pick me up, and then I had to leave there. That will come to me.

MG: You remember the Braths right?

KM: Yes.

MG: Elombe and Kwame Brath?

KM: And John, who was [Drake's] brother.

MG: Drake, right.

KM: John.

MG: We've interviewed all of them.

KM: Okay.

MG: And I see Kwame quite a lot. Quite often.

KM: His - - John's wife works at my school.

MG: Oh no kidding.

KM: Jacqueline Brathwaite. She's a teacher at my school.

MG: Oh that's great.

KM: Nice lady. Nice lady.

MG: That's a nice family.

KM: I mean a real lady man. I mean, you know.

MG: That's a beautiful family. Very interesting. Right? Very interesting all of them. They had a group, The Jazz Art Society.

KM: Right, they used to give stuff at 99, and I used to go up there. I didn't perform, because they hired other people, but I used to go up there to hear.

[END TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO; BEGIN TAPE TWO SIDE ONE]

MN: Tell us a little bit about your church and what your wife is doing.

Interviewers: Maxine Gordon, Brian Purnell, Mark Naison

Interviewee: Kenneth Mills

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KM: I showed - - an album. I have an album here that I recorded and her name is on there. And - - Lillian Holloway Mills. I did the arranging. There's two bands on here. I'm with The Forces of Freedom. And the other band is The Pages of History. And Mrs. Gordon asked me about my wife, and I told her that she has a church. She's the pastor and founder of Trinity Tabernacle of Truth Ministry Incorporated, and that's located on 4047 Laconia Avenue in the Bronx.

MN: In the - - in the - -

KM: Williams - - in Williams - -

MN: In Williams - -

KM: [Indecipherable] And I played there. I play the services.

MN: How long has this church been in existence?

KM: Almost ten years, almost a decade. Almost a decade.

MN: Was this her first church?

KM: Yes. She's the pastor and founder.

MN: Now what was her background before this church that - - and how did evolve that she moved into this?

KM: She sang with the group.

MN: Right.

KM: She sang with The Forces of Freedom. Then she decided to go into the ministry.

MN: Did she go to a seminary?

KM: She went to Brooklyn Tabernacle - - of Truth. I mean Brooklyn Tabernacle which is on Norstrom in Brooklyn. She went there to school. And I played at that church as well. And then she started her own church.

MN: And are most of the people from the Williamsbridge area? Or do they come from - -

KM: They come from the Co-op City area, because that's where we live. Co-op City. We have people that do come from the Williamsbridge area that attend the church. So, I play there on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays, they have services.

MN: Now you play organ?

KM: Piano.

MN: And are there other - -

KM: My wife doesn't like organs.

MN: Right, so you play piano and are there any other instrumentalists with you?

KM: My wife plays drums.

MN: Wow.

KM: She's something else. She's fantastic. And she preaches. Reverend Doctor Lillian H. Mills, that's who she is. I'm very proud of her.

MN: And do the two of you have children?

KM: Two.

MN: Are they in the Bronx?

KM: Yes. Kenneth and Kendell. KenDELL. Kenneth and Kendell.

MN: Did they pursue music?

KM: No. Kenny played for a while. Kenny likes drawing, and he got that from me. I know that, because I like to draw, so he's a - - mapmaker. He likes drawing maps.

MN: And how did you get into the security industry?

KM: I'm like a liaison between the Board of Education and the police department. They don't have that kind of title at the school. They call them school aids. So I'm on the school aid, but in 1998 Giuliani took over, had the police took over - - take over the schools, so I just went on in.

MN: Now you were a - - New York City police officer?

KM: I worked for - - I was a specialist with the Police Athletic League.

MN: Oh okay.

KM: That is special events, and community affairs. And I'm still with them. I'm still with them.

MN: Did you still - - was this mostly in the Bronx, or the entire city?

KM: The entire city. I did all the - - I did all the special events. Excuse me. I played for anything the police department gave me. Anything the Police Athletic League gave I played. I started off by playing for - - retirement breakfasts for the department. I represented the Juvenile Aid Bureau. That's what they called it at the time, in the early '60s. They called it the Juvenile Aid Bureau. Now they call it Youth Service. But I represented that. I played for the breakfasts. I played for the dinners, you know, that kind of thing.

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

KM: Morris.

MN: You went to Morris, and what year did you graduate?

KM: '54.

MN: Fifty - - the same year as Jim Pruitt.

KM: Yes. Jim Pruitt. I don't remember Jim Pruitt in the school though. But yes, '54.

MN: Now did you play music when you were in Morris?

KM: Yes I was playing with Oliver Bino. Oliver Bino was playing in Morris High School. Stanley Warden, Bubby Turner. They call him Franshaw Turner.

MN: Now were there any teachers there who - -

KM: Bobby Beech - -

MN: - - who were particularly supportive of the people who were musicians? Teachers at Morris?

KM: Mr. Englewood. He was the only one that I remember. So after I had him, I really didn't want to leave him. He was really a nice teacher, and he's the one that - - he's the one that said, no man get out of here. Because you know I started like getting left back, but I wasn't thinking because see a lot of - - if I got left back I wouldn't have had a home to go to. [Laughter] You know what I'm saying, so I thought about it after he said it. No, no. Kenny, you're a good piano player, and you're going to do well for yourself.

MN: Okay I'm going to have to - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]