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Interviewee: Billy Bang
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: November 5, 2007

Mark Naison (MN): The 202nd interview of the Bronx African American History Project.

We are here with great jazz violinist Billy Bang who was also back in the day a great basketball player with Hilton White's Falcons and this November 5th 2007 and we are here in the beautiful Harlem apartment of Billy Bang and Maria Arias. So what we always do in the beginning of our interviews, is could you please tell us a little bit about your family? How they came to New York City, and how they came to Harlem and the Bronx.

Unknown Woman (UW): Excuse me, could you tell your full name, and your date of birth?

Billy Bang (BB): Yes, the name I was born with?

UW: Yes, and then you changed it right?

BB: Yes, it's been change evolutionary all the time. I was born, my mother gave me the name William Walker. I was born in Mobile, Alabama, which is really not the truth. It's a little town across the tracks called Plateau, if you really check it out. It's like a little African village, going up on the plateau, it really is a plateau. And then when I was born my mother immediately came to New York City for her sisters. She was seventeen years old and her sisters were like eighteen and fifteen. They all came up together, and they got an apartment in Harlem on Lenox Ave, between 111th and 112th St.

MN: Now what year was that?

BB: I was born in 1947; it might've been 1950. The latest '51. When I opened my eyes, when I realized I was a human being I was in Harlem. How I got here I don't know that kind of thing. So I went to school right around the corner, P.S. 170, elementary school.

MN: How do you remember the neighborhood in Harlem you grew up in?

BB: Oh man, I loved that neighborhood man, a lot of pimps, hustlers, con artists, everybody, dope dealers, dope fiends, everybody was up there. There was a lot of rhythm, a lot of colorful rhythms going on. And at the same time, we had a store right downstairs from our building called Nat Nevins and they had the slickest clothes I'd ever seen. Cats was buying shirts and slick hats, I mean I loved it, and everybody dressed that way. From the pimps to the hustlers, everybody dressed slick so I always wanted to dress like that you know? That's how I remember it.

MN: Now what was your first exposure to basketball?

BB: I started in elementary school. We had a tournament in my third grade class, me, Eddie Abraham, and Clifford Mayfield, we won the tournament. I was in the third grade, but my uncle pushed to play ball, because he was like five, six years older than me and he played on the senior team and he kept dragging me along with him, and I didn't want to go you know? So ultimately, I ended up going with him, because he was like in replace of a father, I never had a father. My mother came up she left the guy who gave me birth he was in Alabama, I never knew him, so called father. You know my uncle kind of took his place, for me, along with all the cats in the streets too. They always got something to say to you, you know? Hey youngin, or whatever, but I played, he was on a team on 113th St. called the Trotters, and there was a school there I guess. And I played for the 113th St. Trotters, the juniors, so I was maybe, I was still in elementary school, I don't know how

old that is, eight, nine, ten. I was playing organized basketball when I was eight, nine, ten years old. So in those there were referees, you had to know what backcourt is and three seconds and the whole game, so I was playing structured basketball very early, because of my uncle.

MN: Now what about music? Was there any music in your family?

BB: No music in my family other than people singing at the Holy Ghost, singing in the Baptist Church.

MN: Okay, which church did your mother go to?

BB: She went to the church, it was a storefront church, it wasn't like one these big Abyssinian type things, it was just a regular storefront on 8th and 122nd.

MN: Did you go?

BB: Yes, I had to go, they dragged me along every Sunday. But I stopped going after a while because I didn't like it.

MN: Now what about music in the house from the radio or what sort of music was being played in the house?

BB: Nothing but the music. My mother and my aunt Naomi, they were like dancers, they were always dancing. Maybe that is why I dance so much, they danced a lot. And the strangest thing is they used to come up right where we're living now, they used to come up here to dance at Savoy Madam, the ballroom, at the Savoy Madam. And Dennis Charles, the drummer told me, Billy Bang I used to dance with your mama, I said boy you better cut that out. I said I know you're making that up. He said no, I think so, she looked just like you. So that's a joke Dennis used to tell. But they used to come up in this area, which is why they call these buildings now Savoy Park, from Savoy Madam, so I

thought I made a whole 360 degrees circle and came back home where I should be. But basically they used to party a lot and we had babysitters. Me and my cousins, there were like fifteen of us.

MN: How many people lived in the apartments.

BB: About 25,000 people, okay.

[Laughter]

BB: There would be so many people in there; you'd be lucky to get a sandwich. I mean you couldn't get anything. My uncle used to try to help us out, he would make these peanut butter and banana sandwiches or something, banana and mayonnaise. I don't know what he was making. But whatever you could eat, you would have to eat, because my mother she would make sure we ate once in a while, you know pork chops or something.

MN: Now when did you first go to the Bronx?

BB: Well that happened in a very auspicious type way. This is a very strange way because I lived in Harlem, and from my junior high school, it was called William L. Edinger, Junior High School Thirteen, located at 106th St. and Madison Ave. I was in the orchestra.

MN: Now what instrument were you playing at that time?

BB: They gave me the violin. I didn't want the violin; I want the trumpet or the tenor or something like that.

MN: Now did you have to try out for the orchestra?

BB: No, my I.Q. was too high, they wanted to take some black kids, in those days, and they thought that they could push into another program, you know what I'm saying.

MN: So what you tested very well in all these tests?

BB: I tested very well, unfortunately, I did. Yes, I was in all these one classes. In those days, if you had three one and four one, five one, and six one, those were the classes that excelled.

MN: Now did you pick this up because there was a lot of reading in your house?

BB: No, I read a lot. I read a lot as a kid, I read from the beginning, from day one I read. Maybe my mother did, maybe. She loved the Reader's Digest but she didn't read like Dostoevsky.

MN: When did you start picking up books on your own and going to the library?

BB: Always did. I always did, one of the first things I started reading was Edgar Allen Poe, it just happened to be in the house. So I started memorizing the poems, I just like to memorize things, I had a pretty good memory in those days.

MN: So school came easily to you?

BB: School came too easily to me. So that means I never worked at it, it came too easily. Between my charm and my love and my attitude and my character I didn't have to work at all, and I kept passing.

MN: Now did you find that being a good student--?

BB: I wasn't a good student. I wasn't a good student. I wish I would've been, I would've gone a lot further, academically. Academically I would have.

MN: Did you hide from the other kids the fact that you were smart or read?

BB: Yes, I did. That was one of the things I purposely did. That was a very conscious effort of me to do that. Because at some point, I was even speaking a different way, then I started speaking more ghettoish and it's still with me now. But I had to change the habits that I was on. We had two languages, I grew up with two languages.

MN: So you had a language that you used--?

BB: I had a language that let me proceed to the world and make a lot of money, capitalism and stuff like that and I also had a language that could stay in my neighborhood.

MN: And you were pretty aware of that at an early age?

BB: At a very early age. I was living in a contradiction. I was living in a world of irony. As I mentioned earlier off camera, that I became almost professionally a schizophrenic. But what maximized that, what really took that to the epitome of itself was when they allowed me, for some reason or another, to go to private school. So out of my entire junior high school, the eighth grade class, myself and two others were chosen to go to three preparatory schools. One in New York City, one in Connecticut, and one in Massachusetts. I was chosen to go to the school in Massachusetts.

UW: Which one?

BB: Called Stockbridge. Interlocking up in Pittsfield, near Lenox and Taylorwood.

MN: Now this was when you were in eighth grade?

BB: I started there as a freshman in my ninth grade. So yes, so that materialized in my eighth grade. I went to many, many different screenings and interviews and to the Negro college things and all kind of scholarship.

MN: Now what did you think when you were going to all these interviews?

BB: I don't know, I was thinking I was getting out of my orchestra class.

MN: So you didn't like the orchestra class?

BB: I hated it.

MN: You hated it?

UW: You hated the violin?

BB: I hated the violin, absolutely. I just wanted to get away from the violin, by any means necessary.

MN: Now when they recruited you for these schools, did they know you were a basketball player?

BB: No, not at all. They found out when I got to the school, and that helped them a lot because these prep schools these kids don't come there, you know what I mean, they come academically.

MN: And plus the basketball is not that good in rural Massachusetts.

BB: No, each school had an attendance of a hundred people. I mean Lenox School had one hundred and twenty. We had about a hundred, there is no, there is nothing to compete with. But fortunately I brought a decent Harlem game up there.

UW: Did Jackie Robinson's son go to school with you?

BB: Jackie Robinson's son did go to school with us. He was older than me, but he was in the tenth grade when I was in the ninth grade. But we knew each other because it was only but so many people on campus, and then there was only so many of us on campus. So we had to meet each other.

MN: Now was music important to you up there?

BB: Yes, but different kind of music. Very different, very important but extremely different. I got into folk music because that was the time of the day. Arlo Guthrie went to school, we were in the same class, so Arlo knew Peter, Paul, and Mary he knew all these people.

UW: Had you ever heard them before?

BB: No, never in my life, I didn't know what music he was talking about.

UW: What year was that?

BB: '61, '62, so I didn't know what Arlo was talking about. I had no idea, I didn't even know who he was. I found out his father was sick in the hospital before I even knew he was Woody Guthrie. But I learned, we all had to know, we learned and Arlo and I used to play together. Because on Saturday mornings was the days of our chores, we had to clean up the campus, drive the garbage truck, do this and do that. Every Saturday it was mandatory for everybody, they don't care how rich or poor you were. That's what I love about the United Nations, equal civilization. It's not like I'm too rich, none of that, some kids behaved that way but they couldn't get away with it. Heddie LaMarcus was there, I never knew who she was, but nevertheless Arlo and I played after we did our chores in the afternoon we were free. So Arlo and I would meet above the gym and he would play piano and I would play drums. I always wanted to become a drummer, that's why that drummer joke got me. But I always wanted to become a drummer, all my life, the only thing I ever wanted to do was become a drummer.

MN: So what was that experience like? Did you at a certain point feel like stifled up there and want to come back?

BB: I felt very free up there at first, I really did. I felt very special actually, I actually did, I felt I was able to compete with these kids. Basically I was a kid equipped with just basic intelligence and if they show you the way to go, I can handle it, you know. And they were showing me the way to go and I dealt with it. But the school was a boarding school, I was away from my neighborhood, I was away from the Bronx. My mother had moved to the Bronx during this period.

MN: OK, and where did she move to?

BB: I lived in Harlem when I went to school, when I came back home she was in the Bronx.

MN: And where was she?

BB: 160th St., 161st on Caldwell Ave.

UW: Is that Morrisania?

MN: It certainly is.

BB: 851 Caldwell, right between 140 and 120 right between those two schools.

MN: It's right near P.S. 140, it's about three blocks from Johnson's Barbeque.

BB: I used to walk up the hill; the hill goes down and goes back up, that's how we went there. But I didn't know where I was at that time. I said what the heck.

MN: So you came back home from school and all of a sudden you were in the Bronx?

BB: Yes, I didn't know where I was at.

MN: How did that neighborhood differ from Harlem?

BB: Well I didn't know anybody. It wasn't the neighborhood, I just didn't know anybody. But I was watching these kids playing basketball and I said I can do that, so I just slowly--.

MN: She moved up there alone?

BB: She moved up there alone with my little two fathead sisters, well I shouldn't say that.

MN: Now was your mother working at that time?

BB: She always worked.

MN: What was she doing?

BB: Domestic work. She cleaned the Jewish peoples houses on the Grand Concourse.
Grand Concourse was a big deal in those days.

UW: Did you ever go over there?

BB: Yes, I had to meet her one day up there to get like five dollars or something because I had something to do and she was taking care of these little brats, kids up there. I hated it, and that's what really turned me out, that day. I'll never forget that, she had to go find five dollars to give it to me, I don't even think she had it, I think she borrowed it from the people she was working for. That really hurt me a lot because the school I was in, I was attending, I was on full scholarship, totally full scholarship, except there were times where the parents had to pay for certain things. Like school on wheels as they called it when we went to Canada.

MN: On the field trip yes.

BB: Studying about the place and the workers and what they did. I will never forget that, I went to Riviere de Louvre in Canada, outside of Quebec where they only speak French. Because they were teaching us French, you know first year we learned Latin, then we learned French, the next year we would go to Paris. And that next year I never went back to the school because I knew we couldn't afford it, and that's one of the reasons why I didn't go back. My mother could not afford it.

MN: The extra money, yes.

BB: Yes, I felt very badly about it. It wasn't really the school that kind of hurt me, I mean the school. Then I started getting a little bit older, and then I started feeling a little bit of racism, type thing, they were ignorant things from children from adolescent kids. You know when the barber comes to the campus and he's up cutting our hair and they

look at mine and say what is that, what is like the texture. So I took it the wrong way, and it wasn't really a problem, it was just the life. Kids will do that to kids. But I didn't have anyone to bring that to, and I had no one to listen to me. But I always lived on my own, always. But I never really talked to anybody growing up, except the guidance counselor that sent me to the prep school, and we never talked about much. He always talked to me pretty much.

MN: Now tell me a little bit about that schoolyard at 120 and when you started, that became an important place for you.

BB: Right. When I was coming home on the holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and in the summer I started playing with cats. The cats started to recognize that I had a decent game, alright.

MN: You would've had some training in Harlem.

BB: I had a lot of training in Harlem. I had training in prep school--.

MN: So you played up in prep school too?

BB: I played in prep school too, I was the number one guy on the team. Chevy Chase on the team he couldn't play ball. Tall, stupid cat, he was a senior, I was a freshman, big dummy. But he would make a lot of jokes, I knew he would make a good comedian then.

MN: He was funny then?

BB: He was funny then, he was really funny then. But I mean we didn't have a real team, but we didn't play against competition. It wasn't like that. But I excelled because I came out of competitive ball playing.

MN: Now OK, you go to the schoolyard. Now were there organized games or was it mostly pickups?

BB: Pick up, street ball. I mean the cats they were hanging out. So I'm kind of, not nervous, I'm not nervous about what I can do, but I don't know the cats. And I'd been playing all my life pretty much, so I just had to meet some guys.

MN: Now when they played pick up, did they play half court or full court?

BB: They played full court.

MN: They played full court pick up?

BB: Yes. They had to pick cats out.

MN: Now you are a relatively small guy.

BB: I'm a short son of a gnat boy.

MN: Did that mean you had to pass?

BB: No, no they didn't even want me to play, until they saw me busting up on some of their favorite cats, they couldn't check me.

MN: And you get around them and you take it straight to the hole?

BB: I would lay it up. I would jump higher, than I looked. I could really look, not now, don't even go there. But I could go over the rim when I was a young cat. I was a high jumper, but I had a lot of heart too. So when I played ball I would take it up the middle and didn't care if I got hit or not. I had no fear, I had no fear, I've never had fear in my life.

MN: Did you have two good hands? Could you go left--?

BB: I had all my hands were good. It wasn't just my hands, see that's the problem, if I teach basketball, it's not just your hands, it's your legs your feet, your mind, it's everything coordinated. Interconnectedly, harmoniously into oneness, that's what it is. It's not about your hands. It's not even about your look. I mean if you want to pass left you

have to look right, you know what I mean. I never did that. I never made these dumb mistakes. Cats were learning that stuff, I already excelled in that area, I knew about bounce passes, I knew how far I could throw to a cat. I knew how to dribble, I just knew the game very well. I started as a kid man. I was a phenom as a seven year old.

MN: When did Hilton White notice you?

BB: He must have noticed me. That's what must have happened, I didn't realize who he was, I didn't know who Hilton White was.

MN: So you were just playing pick up?

BB: I was out there playing. You know we were out there--.

MN: Nobody was having any uniforms or anything?

BB: I'm just out there trying to hang out with the cats, new cats I'm meeting. I didn't even know them. The cats didn't want to pass me the ball. They don't know me.

MN: Were they older than you?

BB: We were pretty much the same age. Yes, for some reason they seemed to keep their boxes, they would box in the same weight class, somehow cats would play in same age area. I don't know how that happened.

MN: And what was the level like? Were they pretty good?

BB: They weren't good at all. They were just, they were novices. They were trying to learn the game, some of them was coming out of junior high school, some of them played junior high school ball, like Tony Fields.

MN: I saw him the other day.

BB: Tony Fields?

MN: He was in from California.

BB: He lives in California.

MN: And he was at the meeting, yes. With Swinton.

BB: With Bobby Swinton?

MN: Yes, they were both at the meeting

BB: But Tony was a little younger than me. He was about a year younger than me, because we had to check his birth certificate to see if he could run with me. Because I started taking the cats back down to Harlem.

MN: Really?

BB: Yes, to the tournaments down there. I knew the Harlem program, so I brought all the cats from the Bronx with me to play in Harlem.

MN: Now when did Hilton White notice you? How old were you?

BB: I must've been in my junior year, my first year, I went to Evander Childs.

MN: How'd you get from that neighborhood all the way up to Evander?

BB: I always lived in the neighborhood.

MN: I know but how did they send you there?

BB: No, no I wouldn't go to Morris, they told me don't go there.

MN: Who are they?

BB: The cats in the neighborhood.

MN: What did they say about Morris?

BB: They hated Morris. Let me tell you something. You know what bothers me about this today is Colin Powell went to Morris. This drives me crazy, how can Morris be so bad if Colin Powell. But he was a few years earlier than me.

MN: So they told you Morris was a dangerous school?

BB: Don't go to Morris, and I definitely wasn't going to Clinton. I ain't going to no all boys school. So my question to the cats on the bench, we have a thing called the bench man. It's right near one twenty; it's 163rd St. and Tetan Ave. You ask anybody out there.

MN: The bench?

BB: Yes, that's what we call it. The bench, and we sat out there all the time. That's where I would meet in the world. We would finish our meeting, we would sit out there and I asked all the cats. I said man ya'll got to tell me something, where the finest sisters? What school they go out to? So everybody naming their school. Cats talking about Roosevelt, cats say George Washington, man come on man, I want to really know. So one brother said man Evander got the finest freaks for real man. He said, they not just coming from the Bronx, they coming from like down in Harlem, they coming from these projects right here, Riverton. I said really? That's the school I'm going to go to.

UW: That's how you picked the school?

BB: That's how I picked Evander. So I applied for Evander, the next year my mother helped me but they didn't want to take me. They told me I had to go into a school in the neighborhood, or go to Clinton, where they would take anybody from the Bronx. Or you had to come out of junior high school directly into the schools. But when they found out I went to a private school, all of the schools were wide open for me. But I made a mistake because I wasn't going for academics, I was going to hang out. I had a choice to do the right thing, and I didn't take advantage of it, you understand? So I went to Evander, that's when I was playing for Hilton at that time.

MN: Now tell us a little bit about how Hilton White organized his teams and where you fit in?

BB: Hilton was a tough, tough, tough, guy.

MN: What did he look like? Describe him.

BB: He was a big guy. He was a big, wide cat. He played a little ball too. I couldn't imagine him playing ball. But he's like a football player. He ain't like no basketball player, he was a big guy. But he was a very sincere. He was one of the most, he was like the first cat that I might've respected as a man. All these years I been out here, Hilton in particular, any contact out of Morris, he would go see my mother, find out what I'm doing. In other words, Hilton just didn't do basketball, he would make sure you weren't in the street shooting drugs or doing this or doing that. He would make sure you would stay good and clean. And that was sure enough Hilton White.

MN: Wow, so he was a very special person.

BB: He was a very special person, and he was a hard cat. He was a disciplinarian, I mean Hilton did not--. In other words, for me to be on The Falcon was an honor in the Bronx.

MN: Describe The Falcon jersey.

BB: It was a red jersey, red and white or something with a falcon on it. That's all I knew, and when I wore that jersey I could do anything I wanted in the Bronx.

MN: You had that kind of respect?

BB: You had that kind of respect. Chick Jewes couldn't hang wit us, nobody could hang with us in the Bronx. We played all over, we played Ruckers, we played everywhere Hilton wanted us to play. I played in Ruckers, I played in--.

MN: Was it the Rucker junior division.

BB: No junior, I played in Rucker tournament. The Rucker tournament.

MN: When you were in high school?

BB: I was in the high school age.

MN: But you were playing against all those.

BB: I didn't play against Lou Elson, he was there too. I didn't play against Wilt Chamberlain and them. And Tony, what's his name, him and his brother he used to take a half and hour and put him on top of the backboards.

MN: Jackson?

BB: Yes, Tony Jackson. I don't know what they was at. All I know this was some heavy competitive basketball man. Because the boy from Queens was busting me up, I couldn't check this kid, I was really upset, the whole first half. I pushed up on him, he would go around me, I stayed off him, he'll bust 'em with a jump shot. I said damn I can't do it. So at half time, Willy Worsley, not him Frankie Townsend, from C.W. Post, he knew me as a kid, I played ball all my life in Harlem, called me to the side and he said man, I can't say all these words he was saying, but he really scolded me man. He said man you got to push up in this cat's jock strap man, don't give him no daylight, don't let him get the field man, stay on him like white on rice. And that's what I did, that's what I did and it helped a lot. Because we won that game at least, I don't know how far we got, but we did win that game. But we had cats playing for this brother, I can't think of his name, he went to Houston, guy like 6' 9", Evans I think his name was Evans. Yes, we had serious ballplayers on the team.

MN: Did people come from all over?

BB: All over the world, I don't know where they come from, but that place was packed. It wasn't where it is now, it was up there on 128th St.

MN: Right that is where the Rucker tournament was.

BB: Yes, that's where I played. I know where I played. People talking about where is that? I'm like I don't know where it is now it's on 155th St. somewhere, they changed it. But Holcomb Rucker did the tournament, but his son went to school with me, he didn't play no ball, he went to Evander. He was in my class so--.

UW: The reunion is it a Falcon reunion?

BB: No not Falcon, it's just they call it Old Timers.

MN: It's from all the people from Morrisania.

BB: My aunt even goes out there.

UW: And it's the first Sunday.

MN: And it meets at--.

BB: Two places, Crotona Park and 23 Park.

MN: 23 Park across from the Forrest Houses.

BB: And Crotona Park.

MN: I was there with Arch.

BB: I played up there. I played music up there in Crotona Park. My aunt came up with all the little babies and the kids, I was so excited. I felt like a hero.

MN: Now when you were playing basketball in Evander and all this.

BB: No I didn't play for Evander.

MN: But when you were playing for the Falcons, you were going to Evander? Are you doing anything with music at that time?

BB: No, God no, not at all. Except listening to Coltrain.

MN: So you were a ball player and a player?

BB: Yes, for players only.

MN: Ball player and a player.

BB: That's it.

UW: Why were you listening to Coltrain?

BB: Because I love Coltrain.

UW: Who introduced you to that?

BB: That's a good question. I think that happened in Harlem all that music happened in Harlem. They played it here. When I lived here they played it in jukeboxes outside of the candy stores. You know like Eddie Harris and things like that.

MN: Now I also want to go back to you Latin music. Were you exposed to Latin music in Harlem or in the Bronx more?

BB: No, no in Harlem. Because we had bands playing in Central Park in those days. With boats be, the boats on the lake, they had bands out there, I heard them from my window. I'd turn around and say oh they are playing on Lenox. But the thing about the Latino music, I learned a lot about Charunga. Charunga, and then basically they called it at that time, the Puerto Ricans at least Charunga y supa changa. It falls together generally. Doesn't have to be but usually was. And then I never heard violins like playing so rhythmically with so much color and so much music and love and color man.

MN: Now this was in the Latin?

BB: This was the Latin. Yes, because the only thing I ever heard was classical music. To violin, and this is what brought me back to the violin. Because I could dance to this music, I could feel this music, it was in my soul. So I owe my violin coming back to the Latino people.

MN: Now tell us a little bit about clubs in the Bronx.

BB: The only time I went to a club in the Bronx man I'll be honest, was on Southern Boulevard. What's that club there man?

MN: Hunt's Point Palace?

BB: Yes, Hunt's Point Palace, right. And I went up there to see The Ronettes. Yes, that's who I went to see. And other than that--.

MN: Now what about 845?

BB: I just walked past it. I used to listen to the music outside. I was like fourteen or fifteen man. I didn't know how to get in there. Cats was playing in there, but all I knew was cats that lived on Tisdale Place. I can't think of the piano player, I still can't remember his name. But a lot of musicians came through there man.

UW: Ella Houghton--.

[Crosstalk]

BB: And even my man lived up there he played with Cecil. What's his name, his name was Cecil Taylor, alto player. Jimmy Lyons, he lived in the Bronx. I didn't know there were so many musicians up there at that time.

UW: Did you know Bobby Kapers?

BB: I knew of him, piano player.

UW: No, he played alto as well.

BB: No, I didn't know him. But I was focused on basketball.

MN: Now, Hilton White had plans for you to go to college?

BB: Yes, Hilton had some scholarships for me. If I finished high school. Yes, I went to high school, I went to my, I went to examination one day you know, and there was a proctor out in front of the examination, I had my jeans on, I always wore my jeans you

know. And she said I can't let you in to take an examination looking like that. I said what are you talking about? What are you examining? How I look? I told her I'd take the test, she wouldn't let me in. In prep school they wouldn't do that, you know and I left. I just left. So I had a way to make it up, so I explained all this to the people, they said OK we understand it was a misunderstanding, just go to summer school and then when you finish summer school, you can go to this college. I had a couple of colleges that Hilton had set up. I didn't know these schools, some black schools in the South man. But they were junior colleges. If you make it there you can go to senior college, but it didn't matter. I wouldn't have gone to Vietnam. So at that point I went to summer school for about two weeks, and every time I got up in the morning to go to summer school, my friends in the Bronx, my buddies, they were carrying their bathing suits, towels, and they were going to Orchard Beach, Reese Beach. I said where are you all going? We're going Reese Beach, same time I was going to school, I said this is not working, something is not working right. So I go to school and I'm all depressed and sad, not listening to the teacher or nothing, and the sisters in the schools said man, you are smart you can do this. I wouldn't listen to them, I just got up and I said I'm not coming back, and I just left. So I knew I was getting drafted, because everyone was getting drafted.

MN: It's what year are we talking about?

BB: '66.

MN: Bad year.

BB: Soon as I got out of high school. But anyhow, I think I went to find out when I was going to get drafted, they said you are getting drafted in about six months. I said well, I'm not going back to school, you might as well just make it as soon as you can. They did too.

I don't know why I said that, they jammed it right up, September I was gone. Right to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. They weren't even playing, they didn't need no fool to come down there and say--. My mother was so mad.

UW: Did you know what was happening in Vietnam at that time?

BB: No. I just would see it on TV, they would be shooting at each other. My mother tried to tell me because she didn't want me to go and then there was a guy who just come back, a boyfriend of my aunt's and she sent me to his house so he could tell me like to scare me. All he did was make me excited. He didn't deter me, I knew I had to go, I had to go. I just had to go because everybody was going, they were taking cats left and right, they called the cat in the middle of a jump shot. He was coming down shaking, and he took a jump shot and he came down and the M.P.'s had him. Get him out the air. They took him right down the street.

MN: So it was a whole bunch of people from the neighborhood?

BB: Unless you were shooting up drugs, or a stick up kid or something, they wouldn't take you then. So one of my friends name Elante, he went down there to the draft board because and the cats say roll up your arms and they took the needle from him and said you finished. Send you home. See but I didn't think like this man, I'm always obeying the rules and the regulations, I'm trying to do the right thing. They surely took me. I was athletic so I went right to Eleven Bravo, Eleven Charlie, right to infantry. Right to infantry.

UW: When did you go over?

BB: I went over in 1967. I was in the Big Red One. First infantry division.

UW: So you were in the Tet Offensive.

BB: Yes ma'am.

MN: Did you become a L.R.R.P. or anything like that?

BB: That's Long Range Recon Patrol, you are trying to fool me here. I took out ambushes man, I was the point man. I set up ambushes, I did everything. I was in infantry, I did everything. I'm just lucky to be here right now.

MN: Now, your size, did they try to make you a tunnel person?

BB: I was a tunnel rat, not a tunnel person, a tunnel rat. I was one of the first tunnel rats out, you take a flashlight and a .45, it's on that record. That's one I wrote. That's why the record is so accepted, because it's like a real experience. It's not like a made up dreams and things. It's like a person who writes from experience. We checked out that record and gave USC that, it's called Tunnel Rat, parentheses, flashlight and a .45.

MN: No because the way they describe most of the people, they were small athletic guys.

BB: Yes, you had to get down there. You had to get in that hole, they couldn't be your size, you would get stuck in there.

MN: I'd get stuck, even when I was thinner.

BB: Be in there all day trying to get you out. But listen, that's not the thing I was a tunnel rat. The thing is what I saw when I was a tunnel rat. This is what changed my life around. I got to stop here. When I went down to one tunnel, and the tunnels are elongated, they are connected by connections. They can go forever, they can go miles and miles, we never got to the end of this, we didn't need to. When we got into this tunnel, we only went a few feet, there were boxes, propaganda tunnel, luckily. Luckily there was not a guy down there with an AK-47. But it was a propaganda tunnel and later they might've

left it dd'd out or come back to it later. We don't know. But nobody was there, thank goodness for me, but the boxes were there. And sometimes the boxes were booby traps. It took us a long time to check this out, we'd take the rope, we'd do this tie. It was like hours to get one box up. We finally get this box up, we open the box up, they are 8 ½ by 11, in those days mimeographs, what we call Xerox, or copies or whatever. And it is a black G.I. standing there, and on the top was written words, in Vietnamese letters, and it said, Black G.I. go home, this is not your war. Freaked me out. I said damn they know it better than I do. I mean of course they did it to go to my mind, but it did go to my mind. I said they know better than me, because there were times when I know they shot over our heads and they had their sights on us and they spared us. I know this man, nobody going to tell me anything differently. Because I pulled point, I was the first one up there and I know they shot too high. You could see the leaved get cut down on the top of the trees and I hit the ground. Nobody shoot that off man, they see a black cat they let him go. Let him get through, let him survive, at least until the next day. Maybe he'll wake up. But when I got home, that's when I got misconstrued in my mind. That's when I became discombobulated as an American. That's when I became confused as a human being. And that's when I went to music. This is the truth.

UW: Tell the story back.

BB: That's the truth because I cannot, now I cannot do anything no more. I cannot have a nine to five, I can't work with the capitalists no more. I cannot confirm the existence of this society. I can't doing nothing now, now I'm reading the red book, now I'm reading the Black Book by Kwame McComb. I'm doing everything that is political. Political, to save my soul now, because I knew nothing, I was ignorant before. And they called it

ignorant person, I think I was victimized. I felt like I had been raped man, and used by society. I never had an even chance out here.

MN: Now were there discussions in Vietnam of people. Were you talking to people before?

BB: When we get to Stars and Stripes, it was like the Daily News here. They don't put nothing about Willie B. Newton and the Black Panthers. They don't put nothing.

MN: So it was when you came home, that everything--.

BB: Even when you came home, you start learning. Or your eyes start getting opened over there. Because that wasn't the first time. When I went to Hong Kong, I don't know, the Chinese prostitute I'm with told me, what are you doing over here? I look at the TV News, I see your people getting sicced on by dogs and water hoses, what are you doing representing these people? The Chinese woman said that to me. And I'm saying when the hell am I going to wake up? So I'm getting angrier and angrier inside, so I finished my rotation, when I come home I'm really upset. I felt misused, I felt abused, I felt tricked. It was American tricknology, I felt terrible man. But have I gotten over it? Yes. The only thing that allows me to breath to the next day, is to play the violin.

UW: How'd you get back to the violin?

BB: Well, that's another story.

UW: How'd you do it?

BB: Should we go into it?

UW: Yes.

MN: Tell me also what the Bronx looked like to you, when you came back.

BB: It looked devastated. It looked like a war zone, it looked worse than Vietnam when I came back.

MN: And this was what? '68, '69?

BB: '68 when I got out. I could not believe it. All the buildings were down, I mean places I used to hang out in, it was terminated. I couldn't believe it.

MN: In two years.

BB: In two years yes.

MN: So '66 to '68.

BB: A lot of cats I knew who lived there got killed. A lot of cats got killed and Attica. I mean cats was killed all over. And the Bronx was devastated, I said damn I would've been safer in Vietnam. I couldn't understand that. Two years, I can vouch for this. '66 I left, '68 I returned and I didn't recognize the Bronx. But it was, obviously there was a plan to this man, it's not just an accident. People burn out things and setting us up to rebuild. I mean you know there was a plan to it, it was not just coincidence that, that really happened. But I really do need a break.

MN: You're coming back and the neighborhood looked--?

BB: Yes.

MN: Now did you actually see any fires?

BB: No I might've seen the resemblance of the ending.

MN: The endings.

BB: No but I didn't really see. It must've happened when I was away.

MN: Now was Hilton still in the Bronx when you came back?

BB: Yes. I saw Hilton when I came back and he was smiling and talking.

MN: He was still running his programs?

BB: I don't know if he was doing that at that time, but he showed at a day where he was all. It could've been one his first days, first Sunday in August. Or it could've been another. But he was happy to see me, and I was very, very happy to see him. And that was the last time I saw him.

MN: In '68?

BB: No, it was after that. It could've been '70. I don't know when he passed away, between that time and the time he passed.

MN: So you came back.

BB: I was very happy to see him.

MN: One more thing. When you came back to the Bronx, did you get involved with any political groups?

BB: Yes, I did.

MN: And which groups did you become involved with?

BB: This is going to get very tricky here because there weren't many names. We didn't have nomenclatures for the ideologies we were living in. But there were no names. There might've been, but I wasn't privy to any. The truth is, they brought me in because I had information and knowledge about weapons. I was a weapons expert, and basically they wanted me to purchase firearms. Particularly, pistols for them. So in New York City, it is difficult. State laws and things, so we would get in a vehicle and drive down to Maryland, Virginia, places like that and that was my job was to pick out weapons that I thought would work. But this is why this is bringing me to a very special point. Because one of

these times, which might've been the second time, of me doing this, doing my job for the revolution.

MN: These were cats in the Bronx?

BB: I don't know really where they were from, but I met them in the Bronx. The second time that I went with them, it was in, this time it was in Baltimore. Because I remember this, and went to a pawnshop, sometimes that was the place we went to, because they had them in a glass case, little .22, .38's, you just need some paperwork, you could've been false with it. I wasn't buying them, I was just looking at them to inspect the weapons. But this particular day I looked at some, but then I heard some sounds coming from the rear of the store. And I don't know what kind of sounds they were, it sounded like music, it sounded like notes and songs and melodies and mostly melodies. So I said what the hell is going on, what is that? And nobody else was hearing this you know, so I just politely stopped doing what I was doing, and I went to the back. And when I went to the back I saw in the rear of the store, violins hanging up, by their necks. They didn't have no cases, they were strung up by the neck, almost like electric things. So they were hanging, that's the way to show them, they were hanging up with a little string around the violin neck, hanging up, like ten of them. And I think I heard this, I think I heard this, so I asked the guy in the shop, how much is that? And the guy is looking at me, you know the guys I came with like I'm crazy, somehow I flipped. I didn't really flip, I was just going with the magic and the madness that I've always lived with you know. And I really heard this melody and I went back and asked the guy, he said twenty-five dollars, maybe thirty-five dollars, I don't know. I had some money I paid him for it, so he gave me the violin and gave me a bow and put it in a shopping bag, or a bag, because he didn't have a case. So

after we finished what I was doing for them, we went back to the Bronx. I didn't see these guys anymore, but I went home now with the violin, and I showed up in the same parks that I played basketball in, with the violin the next day. Trying to learn how to play.

MN: You were there by the benches?

BB: Yes, I was at the benches.

MN: This is 163rd?

BB: This is 120 Park.

MN: 120 Park. You went to 120 Park with the violin?

BB: A little bit.

MN: So you were sitting on the benches with the violin?

BB: And the guys saw me, and the work got out Bang done lost his mind. That was it, that was the last time I heard something from my partners or whomever, and I told my girlfriend at that time, I'm getting out of the Bronx.

[End of Side A]

[Begin Side B]

UW: How old were you?

BB: 21, I might've been 22 or 23.

UW: That's when you picked up the violin?

BB: Again.

MN: And this time there was a point at which you were saying, this place is not for me anymore?

BB: The Bronx wasn't because of the conversations I was hearing about me up there.

Like he flipped and all that, and I said I got to go somewhere where people appreciate the

art and the music and your culture of life, you know? And then also cats were really, the cats I was with were upset with Barack. They called him a cultural, natural, antievolutionist, you know and they'd say we can't win this Goddamn war with two cultures. Everything I'm thinking about is anti what I'm trying to deal with right? So I told my girlfriend at that time, the mother of two of my kids, I said, I don't know what you want to do but I'm leaving, I'm going down to the East Village. I'm just going down to the East Village, and she said well you are not leaving me up here. So I had to go with her to her mother's house to talk to her mother and her brothers were there. They said well look, you with our little sister, Puerto Rican guys and they don't play no games, so I'm saying well look man I'm not really asking her to come you know what I mean, but she wanted to come, so we ended up, everybody was cool and we ended up going together down to the East Village. I moved on E 5th St between Avenue C and Avenue B. 1969 or '70 maybe, '69 and that's when I started playing Johnny Get Serious with me.

UW: Did you go to Slug's?

BB: Yes I did. That's what brought me down. That's what I knew about the East Village, because I used to go to Slug's from the Bronx. And I got tired of that long train ride. Me and Arnold Nims we used to go down there. Arnold Nims aunt was called Black Rose, she was a big time sister up in the Bronx.

MN: Now Arnold Nims is a--?

BB: He's a saxophone player, he's not a ball player.

MN: Where did you meet him?

BB: I met him through the music. I started playing music in the Bronx, I started trying to put bands together up there.

MN: With the violin?

BB: Yes, with the violin, I was crazy man.

MN: Now where did you find the other musicians?

BB: They were playing music already, Al and all these cats.

MN: OK, so where did you play in the Bronx, what sort of stops?

BB: We just played at people's houses, we didn't really play clubs, we weren't good enough yet. But we were just starting out.

MN: Now what was your image or how you would, how would you classify the music at that time you were playing? Would it be --?

BB: Very free.

MN: Free form?

BB: Yes, absolutely free?

MN: Were there any people who were models for what you were trying to do at that point?

BB: It came later. Yes, Coltrain was. Coltrain, Eric Dolcker, Jackie McClean, cats that was throwing down. Cats who were throwing down. And they all have different reasons. I have different reasons for every one of them. Jackie McClean I love his rhythm, Eric Dolcker I love his intervals. And Coltrain I loved his freedom.

UW: Were you listening to Sun Roven?

BB: I liked it a little bit later, a year or two later I got into it. Then I ended up playing with him. A year or two later, but not at first.

UW: For the interview, could you explain how, or what I would say, there is no real separation in what they call free, what he said what he identified as free jazz and the

political movement at the time. Because you said, you gave up the guns and you went over to the violin but you know these things are completely interrelated.

BB: Yes, they are interrelated, but that's a helluva question, that question is a study in itself as you very well know.

UW: But you know how they always try to separate the categories, but Jackie McClean, you know they were talking freedom now, but I'm thinking about Jackie and Joe Henderson.

BB: If you are not part of the solution then you are part of the problem. That music to me, it wasn't free, it was very political. It was very political, it was really black political for me, and that's why I identify with it. Because first of all, I came out the army and now I'm trying to become political and find how to incorporate the music with it. Now I became more politicized through the music and that's in some of my interviews. Valerie Willmer would tell you that in a minute. She said Billy Bang is the most politicized musician I ever, hard-headed musician I have ever met in my life. Because I wouldn't, the truth is it got me so strong I wouldn't take no more stuff from the white people out there. I wouldn't personally, not at this time. Not this time, I had a lot of problems when I went to the festival at Marist in '79 with Burkhardt Henry and these cats. And I'm with them when they were Rasheed Ali and Butch Morris, Butch and I got a sick set.

UW: You have to say who Butch Morris is. I mean Butch Morris was in Vietnam also.

BB: Yes, he was, he was a medic over there. He was on that record with me, I love that too. Butch was a heavy cat. Butch and I identified with each other because we were around the same age and sometimes when you are around the same age or you have the

same experiences as people there is not a lot of conversation. And it's not ESP you just know.

MN: Now when you went down to the East Village were there other political people down there, did you--?

BB: Well, I think the climate was. I don't think it was each individual I met. I just think it was a sign of the times. The climate was that. And I went there because the Bronx was stagnant for me, the Bronx was not political man, at that time. There was a few political cats, and I was running with them.

UW: Did you know Alombe Brass and Kwame Brathwaite in the Bronx?

BB: No, but I know that name though. I don't know them personally.

UW: They are from Kelly St. The Black Arts Society.

BB: I knew a bunch of cats up there who, but it was all over, it wasn't just the Bronx. It was all over, I mean let me tell you this man, because I was so indecisive when I came out the army. My best friend his name was Bay, he just passed away, a matter of fact we have pictures of him, you got to find those photos of him, it's really important now. But from the Bronx days, but the thing about it is, his brother was a police officer and his brother was working for the mayor in New York, bodyguard, but his brother called me, met me, took me to the Ballet African at the Apollo Theater, but during that meeting he was trying to draft me to become a undercover cop. He told me, this why we are meeting right now, you know you have Vietnam experience, you're a weapons cat, you're not afraid of fire, if you get shot at and shit. We need young cats like you, I need to bring you in, we are special corps right now, to fight against the radicals, the revolutionaries. I told him, look man I made big mistake fighting against Vietnamese people man, who did

nothing to me in my life and I can't do this again. I just can't go against us now, and I turned him around, I never talked to my best friend again for a long time until two years ago when we had these pictures.

MN: On that note, how much exposure did you have to Vietnamese culture when you lived in Vietnam?

BB: Not a lot, I can tell you the truth.

MN: So this is something that came, sort of revelation after?

BB: This came through my studies and through my experience of doing research and doing hard work to learn more about Asiatic cultures, not only Vietnamese but Japanese, I studied a lot. I been going to Japan for the last twenty years, since '81 I've been going there longer than twenty years. I've been studying them, I study a lot. Absolutely, because I know studying is knowledge and knowledge is the key to power.

MN: Now when did, was there a point when you came back that you sort of said, OK I have to educate myself?

BB: Immediately. Before I got back home, immediately, because I knew I was duped, I knew I was intelligent enough to study on my own, but I really didn't know what to study or was studying in the wrong direction, now we going to learn the wrong tools of the trade you know. So I really had to find out the ying and the yang of life. I had to find a balance, I had to find the harmonies of what we live out here, not just the white and the black, I need to find out the truth. And that's what I searched out.

UW: And plus you mentioned earlier, that you studied with [inaudible]. So could you say something about him? You said he was so significant.

BB: He was extremely significant.

UW: To that whole period of the seventies.

BB: He was with his own Delmark when I first heard him. That's a label out of Chicago and I have, we have a very strong relationship, I do with Delmark. When I could record with them, I can't do that now. But that's not the point, the point is Leroy took the violin from the background to the foreground, so he started improvising right along with the saxophones and the trumpets and that's what I always wanted to do, so to hear someone actually implementing something I had theoretically designed in my mind, then I was very excited to hear that. So I almost moved to Chicago to go meet him except I find out he came to New York, so it made my life a lot easier.

MN: So what year did you meet him for the first time?

BB: God, somewhere in the early '70's. Somewhere in the '70's, yes I can't remember the exact date. I don't live by dates, I had a history teacher in prep school that said don't live by dates, just know the procedures, what's what, what came after what.

UW: And his teacher was part of a group called the Revolutionary Ensemble. I'm just trying to make this point that this, the music, when Billy comes into this music thing you know called jazz, is in a time that never was and never will be again because it's not separate from the political movement of the time, it's not separate from Black Power it's not separate. So the music they were playing got such a strong action that there were fist fights, they were fights in Slug's where they rolled out on the street because of what they were playing. And if you liked it the people are going to beat you up because you couldn't like straight ahead they said.

BB: It's true.

MN: And who was the straight ahead people?

UW: The beboppers, but they didn't say that.

[Crosstalk]

BB: I studied the blues, as a matter of fact I don't do non-rhythmic stuff. Some cats are really free. I'm not as free as most cats, I'm like a dialectical understanding of a musical balance. That's the truth. I don't go all the way left and all the way right. I am the balance and the truth man. What I'm saying is, I might open up in my design of melodic appreciation, but my band is definitely locked in man, they playing chord changes and everything, rhythm, that's the only way I could make money out here man. And communicate, but it doesn't deter me from being who I am, so when I witnessed this and realized this, my realization brought me to this truism, that's what I worked from. This is my music now, but I did the same thing in basketball, I did the same thing in basketball. I had to do things to modify that I didn't have the height to do certain things, so I don't try to defend a cat who is 6'8", I don't do ridiculous things in life. I do what I'm capable of doing and try to maximize that. If I could take a ball up court nobody can take the ball from me. If I can set up a fast break if I could throw a great bounce pass if steal and lay it up for an extra two points that we might need towards the end of the game that was my key. So I specialize in what I'm good at, I don't try to take over the whole program.

MN: What I'm interested in is, OK who were the people who were starting the fights?

BB: I never said that.

UW: You know this is like, you know, in the so called jazz world, people who are like devoted to this music, especially people who hung out in Slug's, who got high. They'd be devoted to one kind of music or one player, so if they hear somebody doing something new, they're very threatened. Eric Dalfy, people would fight over Eric Dalfy.

BB: Lee Morgan.

UW: But Lee loved Eric Dalfy so you know what I mean.

BB: I know what you saying.

UW: Or like when Woodie Shaw made the record and he used Lou Hall, people were like. It was a very particular thing where people take it so personally.

BB: It's like a religion. People were fighting about religions.

MN: OK now, we were talking about inventing, creating Billy Bang. Are you still William Walker when you start?

BB: No, not at all. When I start?

MN: In the village.

BB: Yes, I was. That's I all I knew, that I was William Walker.

MN: What did Hilton White call you?

BB: Billy. Everybody called me Billy. From day one, my mother called me Billy. I've always been Billy.

MN: So he called you Billy, but not Billy Bang?

BB: Actually, he knew I was Billy Bang, I don't know if he ever called me that. He might've when he got angry. Billy Bang started in the Bronx. Because I used to hate that name. I said don't call me no Bang, my name is Walker, and everybody would laugh, you Bang. And it got stuck. It got so stuck to me man, let me tell you something, this name got out so quickly, like a fire storm, that there was a young black woman who really liked me a lot in high school, she loved me. Came into my homeroom class to try to get me to come out in the hallway so she can rap a little bit, told my homeroom teacher, can I see my brother? He said which one? Who's your brother? Said that one sitting over there. He

says what's his name, Billy Bang, he said get out of here girl. That's Billy Walker, so she ran away, she didn't even know my name was Walker. Nobody knew it in the Bronx.

MN: So you're down in the village, so when did you see yourself like creating a whole new identity?

BB: Not by name, by music, by music. Well the truth is, you know, I had to go back in time to do that. I had to go back to Stuff Smith, I had to go to Ray Nats, Papa John Creech, I mean this goes on and on and on. Let me tell you what really happened man. How I really got down to my true research, I found out the fiddle meant on the plantation. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say.

MN: I've done a lot of this work.

BB: OK, well this is where I am coming from now. Not European style, I'm coming from us on the goddamn plantation. Where they would teach us how to play Irish Jigs and Scottish Jigs and the loan out the African fiddle player, slave, to plantation, to plantation, to plantation the way you might loan out your CD player. Where we entertain. If you ever see *Gone With the Wind*, you see the same thing. Before Itelly made the fiddler a main character in *Roots*, which he is, Ben Barene, so the fiddler is not just a passing moment for me, so I said damn this shit is blacker than I thought it was. Not European, it doesn't acknowledge who is teaching you. Who is asking the professor where did your education come from? My education is self taught, I understood that, and I went for that. That's where I go. I play music from the plantation brother. I play black music from the African plantation to the fiddle to the Billy Bang. I didn't have to recreate myself, it was already there. I just need to invest in the continuation and bring it on home.

UW: When did you take the name?

BB: The name was given to me in the Bronx.

UW: I know, but I mean when did you take it when you were playing the violin?

BB: It came with me. The truth is if I had given a gig, my first gig I put down Billy Walker nobody would come. Some people knew Billy Bang from the Bronx so I put that down and I been living with it every since.

UW: And you first records were Billy Bang?

BB: Every one of them.

UW: All of your recordings?

BB: You can find out from the very beginning.

UW: So then you legally changed your name?

BB: That came later. The legal part, but I've been Billy Bang from day one.

MN: Where did you find the information about the plantations?

BB: Well check him out. I like this. It comes at different places. There are some books that came out during the WPA and they interview a lot of slaves.

MN: You were using the slave narratives for this?

BB: I wasn't using it for this, I was using it for my information. I'm not quoting this, I'm not citing this, I'm not giving it to you verbatim, I'm just trying to talk to you.

MN: No because for years scholars neglected that source.

BB: I'm a super scholar my friend. Don't worry about scholars they only in academic productions. Don't worry about them.

UW: We all scholars.

BB: I deal with the truth. If the information exists and I can find it, I'm going to juggle with it. That's all that's about. I got some from there, and then I got some from other areas. I don't know all the remnants of where I got it.

UW: Leroy Jenkins knew a lot about that.

MN: Leroy Jenkins was the--?

UW: Was his teacher.

BB: But one of the things I was trying to do, I was trying to do music from pre-Civil War music. That I was trying to do music with that. But ultimately it came out as a videotape, I have somewhere in this house, I don't know where it is. [inaudible] And we were playing songs from pre-Civil War music.

MN: Is there any way to find this?

BB: It's in the house somewhere.

MN: I want to use this for teaching.

BB: I researched it, and that's what I put together. A Nightmare in Colored Square or something.

MN: It's like a video of all of you playing this music?

BB: Yes.

MN: Is this in any library?

BB: No, God no we haven't gotten that far.

MN: This is one copy?

BB: No, not one copy. Mike Malloy was the director. One guy I wish you would've met though, he passed away last year, Wayne Providence.

MN: I met him. I met him the week before he died.

BB: That was my best friend.

MN: Holy shit.

BB: Me, him, and Bay we were three of us. We used to go to Johnson's together, come back to Bay's house and watch, remember Quincy Troupe, he did the cover for Blue's record.

MN: Wayne Providence was an amazing person.

BB: I got the record right here.

[Crosstalk]

MN: Him and Pete DJ Jones, DJ Jones was the first DJ to use two turntables and he was a great basketball player, he was 6'9", he was the guy who did it before Herc and Flash, but he did the downtown clubs.

BB: Wayne played ball, we all knew each other from the court. Bay, Wayne, and myself used to play ball. And we would stop, we would go to Wayne's house. Wayne lived on Eagle Ave., listen to me, we played ball we would stop you know like a break for ice tea or something, Kool-Aid, I don't know. We would go to Wayne's crib and Teetee was in there, Oneida there, Teetee played bass for the Four Tops, that's Wayne's uncle, Teetee. His mother is still, Wayne's mother is still alive, you can call her up and ask her all this information.

MN: She's very active in the reunions.

BB: That's how I got the gig, that's how I played up there. You know we had to know each other. That's how I played in Crotona Park. But she's trying to give it up now to her daughter Valerie and Oscar Grant. You know Oscar Grant, you know this name? I'm going to give you his number, you need to shake him up. He's the one who gave me Billy

Bang. You need to shake this young guy up, he's my age. Oscar talk more stuff than--. I'm going to make sure, he's the one I'm passing on. Oscar told me he's going to be in charge of the Bronx thing pretty soon, the Bronx day, I'm telling you. What was I talking about before that though?

MN: Wayne Providence and Teetee.

BB: Yes, Teetee played base, this is one of the first electric bass players out here. He played with the Four Tops, he played with a lot of groups man.

MN: They lived on Eagle Ave. between 163rd?

BB: Well we used to go over there and play on his instruments. Drums, I used to play the drums, I told you I was born to be a drummer, I told you I was born to be a drummer, and Wayne played something and Bay played something. He'd say, hey you get out of here you crazy kids, and we'd laugh and run out.

MN: During the time you were playing music, did you have other jobs that you used? Or you just did music?

BB: No I had to work, I had a family man, I had to shovel coal man, at P.S. 1 man. You ever heard of project Studio One out of Long Island City? When they first opened up, I worked there as construction, I was going to Queens College. I was playing music as a hobby, when I came out.

MN: So you got a GED?

BB: I got a GED in the army, in the army, and then Queens College accepted my GED and my prep school record. And they accepted me during the SEEK Program. It's called the SEEK Program. He might know, he's my age.

MN: I know about the SEEK Program. I'm forty six.

BB: Well, you about a year younger than me.

UW: You are forty seven.

BB: I know I didn't want to tell him, I was trying to make him happy. But the thing is, the SEEK Program accepted me and I went out there and I was a Pre-Law student. I wasn't trying to play music man and I wanted to play music but I wanted to fight the revolution through the law. I did.

MN: Was there a guy name Kudrow out there?

BB: The dog?

MN: He was in black studies at Queens College.

BB: I know everybody out there man. Corinne Jennings was out there, I knew everybody.

MN: Kudrow was an African guy with a patch over his eye.

BB: I think I knew this guy. I think I know this cat man. But I was out there during '70, I came out the army I was in Queens College, I was there forever man. I mean for me, Geraldo Rivera was out there. Jerry Rivers, I didn't know him as Jerry Rivers, I didn't know about any name. A lot of people out there. But I was just getting, I was collecting the money to be honest. I was one of those cats like what do you call it, not a pimp, but it's a get the money kind of pimp. I was getting SEEK money, I was getting money from the army, I was making more money than I ever made in my life. Checks was coming left and right. But I was playing music on the weekends and trying to learn. I was using Queens, but I started getting serious about Pre-Law so one year, I worked one year as a paralegal, for Queens Legal Services in civil law, landlord and tenant housing and I took that very seriously until I saw some like under the table stuff then I quit and said here we go, Vietnam again. So I quit. And that's when I really got into music. I couldn't trust

anybody no more. I couldn't trust anything in life anymore except the purity of music. And I said I'm going to do this whether I make it or not. You know as black folks, we need a cat like this and that, I just won't give it man, I'll be happy the way I am. But I'm going to go for the truth. And that's what made me settle, I'll settle for the truth. And I looked on, I met a beautiful woman, Maria, so I have no problems. But I only went for the truth.

UW: What made you do the Vietnam aftermath? Because that really, I know you don't, I mean people know your name and know your recordings, but that really took you into a much broader audience and put you in the mainstream cloud.

BB: It really did, it really helped me.

UW: What made you do that?

BB: I just moved home, back to America from Berlin.

UW: From Berlin, I remember when you were in Berlin.

BB: That was 2000.

[Crosstalk]

BB: So I was OK, but it wasn't home. I was just there, just floating, and I said I don't want to die here like Eric did.

UW: Eric Dalfy died in Berlin.

BB: Like die and be a nothing and be and nobody. My kids don't see me, my family, I really felt badly about this, so I got up one day. I was coming back and forth that particular summer. The last gig I did at the Cool Jazz Fest, I just stayed home. I had nowhere to live, nothing, so I stayed at my eldest daughter's house with my granddaughter and I stayed there for three months and then I stayed home and then one

guy told me he was on a, a trombone player told me he had a gig on a cruise, and I could keep his room for two months and I said sure man just to give my daughter a break. I did that for two months, he never came back, that turned out to be five years. Yes, that's when I met Maria about a year before there. Or six months before I left there. And we just decided to live together. I was in Sicily and I asked her to check on the apartment I was looking for for myself and I said forget that place, something is wrong, I could feel vibes, something was wrong, don't even go, take the money back, I don't know what I said. What did I say? Something happened, she don't want to be on camera. So the truth is, she didn't do it and she felt funny about it later too and then she said I'm going to move out as well so why don't we try to live together? And that's what happened and that's how we got here.

MN: And the album, how did that?

BB: That's what she asked me. So here's what really happened. Because I came back so down and out, so economically debased, I mean nothing, I had nothing. I wasn't working I just got home. Yes, I was working a year but I didn't save anything, I mean I was paying bills, I just came home, so I had no place. So I called up my record company and said look I need a record date, I need to get out of this, so they said Bang we don't want to offend you, but would you consider making a record about Vietnam? So man are you crazy I don't put that out in public man, that's in private. So I said I'll get back to you, so I waited about three or four days and I said I'm broke as hell, I better say yes to this. But I always wanted to do this, but I said let me just do it. But I came back with some, how do you call it, like flexing my muscles, said look I can do it but only if you send me an advance that I can pay my rent two months and eat for two months. And Bob Atlantic

comes out to me and this is Bob, said sure. First time I expounded upon myself and they agreed. So I took advantage of that time and I really wrote. So I cried, I relived Vietnam and it helped me a lot. It actually was therapeutic because I'd been keeping this down.

UW: And you know something else you did was, you brought forward these guys that never talked about it. These jazz musicians you know that we all would wonder what happened to them. We knew something happened but we didn't bring it up and we know we had, anyway.

BB: We all had problems

[Crosstalk]

UW: So this, beyond this great music that he wrote, what he did was bring out his part of the jazz musicians, this group who had kept it very quiet. If they would have some episode they'd go, he went to Vietnam. Nobody talked about it, they didn't bring it up.

BB: When we talked about it through this music, that's what I loved about this record. We really did, I mean the next record I brought Eddie Threadgill through, because he is also Vietnam. But I'm happy to be in the forefront to do this.

UW: And then what happened with the Vietnamese musicians?

BB: I remember, I met them through a society out there called, Funding for Reconciliation and Development, and they bring speakers, They host people from Vietnam, Cambodia, from Laos, from Cuba and when they come to the U.N. they have parties and get-togethers, so they loved the record. They heard me on National Public Radio talking about it, sought me out. And I met them and then I started hanging out with them, and I met the Vietnamese musicians through them.

[Crosstalk]

BB: So I met the musician and we came to be good friends and here's the big thing about it. I went to Vietnam last year, this is the biggest thing of my life. I went December 06 to January 07, six weeks I was in Vietnam, all over.

UW: Did you perform?

BB: Yes, I did .

UW: With the musicians?

BB: No, completely different. Same musicians who played all the traditional music. I played with musicians from the highlands. Brown skinned like me, with their instruments. I played with the jazz musicians.

[Crosstalk]

BB: I also played with the Han-Noy Symphony Orchestra. They took one of my compositions and wrote it out symphonically and I performed with them.

UW: Is that recorded?

BB: Yes, it is all recorded. The documentary film is coming out this year.

MN: Really? Where is that going to be?

BB: In Berlin. That's when I might go back to Berlin, at the Berlin Film Festival.

[Crosstalk]

UW: Could you screen it in the Bronx you think?

BB: I'll put you in touch with the people.

MN: We'll do a screening at Fordham or we could do it at the Hostos Art Center with Wayne.

UW: With Wayne he could talk and everything.

BB: I would love that.

MN: That's a slam dunk.

BB: It's a featured documentary.

MN: We are going to do this in Bronx, no ifs, ands or buts.

BB: I love this guy here, Professor Naison, Dr. Naison, you're too much man.

UW: But the irony that you know that the Vietnam experience comes back around to be something--.

BB: That's a whole story in itself because I went there really confused, I left there very humble and very beautiful and I feel better today for that.

UW: And how did you feel when you were in Vietnam?

BB: Which time?

UW: This last trip.

BB: It was confusing in the beginning, and then later on I cried and I went back to my old battlefields.

UW: You did?

BB: I did everything over there. Wait until you see the film, I haven't even seen the film. I have no idea.

MN: This film is so important.

UW: Did you talk to any people who had fought?

BB: Yes, up at Han-Noy. I talked to a bunch of them. It's over now, no, let's keep going.

UW: You don't want to talk about that?

BB: No, it's in the film, it's in the film, he might get upset with me if I give out too much information.

MN: No, we'll show the film.

[Crosstalk]

MN: We got another ten minutes. We'll do another ten minutes and then everybody can rest. Until the next one.

BB: Thank you Mark.

UW: Are you going to perform with the Vietnamese musicians again?

BB: Yes, I did twice with them. I did one in Paris and then one at Iridium I think it was.

UW: No you were at Jazz Standard weren't you?

BB: Jazz Standard, I don't know these names. You're right. I can't remember.

UW: Are you going to do anymore?

BB: We did one there and we did one in Paris, maybe, I don't know. But it has gotten larger, the Han-Noy Symphony Orchestra want to come here. I have to find monies to bring them here.

MN: If you want to bring them to Berlin I've got good contacts now in Berlin.

BB: They would love to go anywhere. I'm telling you, they were begging me when I was there. Take us to America!

UW: Are you still involved in Berlin? With the Berlin Jazz Festival?

BB: Yes, I guess so. But I'm not in touch with Berlin anymore.

MN: I have the House of the World Cultures connection. That's where I spoke.

[Crosstalk]

BB: He said it English.

MN: I don't speak German.

BB: I didn't know what that was he said. But I know that place, that's a beautiful place. That's a gorgeous, wonderful place.

MN: And Suzanne may get a job there. Five more minutes and then that's it.

UW: So talk a little bit about Dennis Charles.

BB: Boy, that's one of the most wonderful guys. Dennis Charles, with Dennis Charles actually I needed him more than he needed me. Because when I played with Dennis, anywhere in Europe, wherever, everybody knew him from the past with Cecil and this cat Anar Fuwana. We don't know no Billy Bang, so he brought attention to me. I mean we played well together and we have a duet record out, from a big festival, it's called Billy's House.

UW: Billy's House.

BB: Billy's House, and we played there, everybody played that night. Charles Lloyd, but then the guy from [inaudible], his wife comes running out after and I played the last note, I need this record, I need this, I need this. She went crazy, so we had to make a deal right there on the spot. And they paid us, Dennis was very happy, good money, he's an incredible drummer. Dennis was basic drummer, simple drummer, don't give him like no six, eight, seven over twelve, but just give him straight fours, three four, just give him some basic stuff, but Dennis was incredible drummer because he was very melodic. And Dennis could play songs on his drums, he made his drums like teponies, so they could play the melodies. So he was an incredible drummer, he cleared a lot of music that I was trying to write. He would put the drum part to it and create it. I have records here of him, especially Rainbow Gladyear, was on the first records that did bring some attention.

MN: What year was that?

BB: '81, '88.

UW: The reason I asked about him was I know they are associated and but I just want to make the point about Dennis Charles and other people that we've mentioned is there are so many great jazz musicians who don't get mentioned every day. Who are just as important as the one's who are mentioned.

BB: If not more. At least as.

UW: At least as, and their contribution is great. Not only musically but Dennis Charles is one of those people, like Billy said, he spent all these generations and also he had this way of communicating with young people. If you'd be there he'd be like just be cool, just sit there, don't talk, you know, and then he would watch over like the young crowd, and had people come onto that scene because [inaudible].

BB: He's originally from St. Croix.

UW: Yes.

BB: St. Thomas, St. Croix right?

UW: I think St. Croix.

BB: And then he grew up in Harlem. Came and his brothers are still there hustling. And his other brother works at the post office, I forget his name, Charles, I guess. They are all still there. But they were some heavy cats, they come to New York, and then Dennis told me a story one time, I will never forget this story. He was busted he was in jail, you know there was drugs, we all messed with drugs, in and out. But Dennis was in jail, probably for that or whatever and the guard came. And he liked Dennis, Dennis is just a sweetheart, but this particular racist guard didn't like Dennis. Dennis was too beautiful. You can't be that beautiful and be black. Something is wrong here, so he went over to Dennis, he said what is your favorite baseball team? He said baseball team? I like the

Yankees. And the guy, BAM, punched him in his face. He said damn it I know you like the Dodgers. They got that black boy on the Dodgers, that nigger on the Dodgers, I know you like the Dodgers. He said no, no I like the Yankees, POW, hit him again, he said no what I guess I like the Dodgers.

[Laughter]

BB: This is the first time I told this story to somebody, because I didn't want to repeat this stuff. It just got too many things happening with this. Too many inferences.

UW: That's like this morning I had to go get my [inaudible], we doing it at the Yankee Stadium Club, so the guy says to me, the security guard, he says to me so are you a Yankees fan? I was like no, black people don't like this, they American, we only like the National League. I said my husband said no black person could like the American League. And the guy was like OK. I'm sorry I asked.

[Crosstalk]

BB: But he told me I couldn't believe it, but this is 1950 something, yes it had to be, because Dave [inaudible] came in '47. '47 so it was 1957. Came the year I was born, he really did.

MN: Well listen, this was just amazing.

UW: Yes, phenomenal.

MN: And we are definitely going to show this film.

BB: Well, listen you all got to edit this thing man.

MN: No, no. We will edit it.

UW: We got the Vietnam thing we going to show.

BB: I would love that. I got to put you in touch with the right people. Got to.

[End of Side B]

[End of Interview}