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Sprouse, Mario

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Interviewee: Mario Sprouse
Interviewer: Mark Naison
Date of Interview: November 6, 2015
Transcribers: Andrea Benintendi and Morgan Mungerson

Mark Naison (MN): Hello!

Mario Sprouse (MS): Hello!

MN: Today is November 6, 2015 and today we are interviewing Mario Sprouse for the Bronx African American History Project. Mr. Sprouse who grew up on Ritter Place is a great musician, arranger, composer, musical director and we're very excited to have him here. With us—joining us are Bob Gumbs, community researcher for the Bronx African American History Project and a great music historian himself, Damien Strecker who is the graduate assistant for the project, and Morgan Mungerson who is one of our student assistants and on the camera Andrea Benintendi. So, Mr. Sprouse, could you please spell your name and give us your date of birth.

MS: M-A-R-I-O. Middle name Esteban, E-S-T-E-B-A-N. Last name, Sprouse. S-P, as in Peter, R-O-U-S-E. Born October tenth at 2:50 in the morning, 1948.

MN: Okay, could you please tell us a little bit about your family and how they ended up coming to New York and coming to the Bronx.

MS: My parents were born in the Dominican Republic. My father was born in San Pedro de Macoris. My mother was born in Samana. My father's mother was born in St. Kitts. Their folks were born—that is my grandmother's folks—were born in Nevis. So, in the West Indies during the last part of the mid-1800's right up until the early 1900's, you moved wherever the work was, that's where you went. And if you set up shop in one town and the work left, then you just followed the work. That's why people followed the islands. On my mother's side—my mother was born in Samana in the Dominican Republic—her mother was born in Mayaguez in Puerto

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Rico. Her folks were from Turks Island. We have a photograph of my mother's grandfather who was born in Turks and Caicos in the 1860's. He came, went from there to Puerto Rico, from Puerto Rico to the Dominican Republic. My parents came to the United States, part of the West Indie migration, to New York in 1929. They didn't know each other, they met here. So, and they lived in Harlem. That's where you lived because that's where the space was—they lived there. My father was drafted in the War at 37, got out of the war, married my mom like everybody else got married and had kids.

MN: Okay, did they meet in Harlem?

MS: Yes. My father Jose Sprouse—the funny thing is that we always say that in Hispanic households, the names are not all that imaginative. So, you have—you've got Joseph and Mary. So, my father's Jose, my mother's Maria. Then, there's Josephine and you know, all the various forms of it. So, they met in Harlem because my father, when he got here, they had something that's called benevolent associations, and the benevolent associations were formed by members of particular islands in the West Indies to help people from those islands. So, my father born in the Dominican Republic and his two BFFs, his good friends were Samuel Hawley from St. Martin and Andres Adams from St. Martin. They formed the Eaton Benevolent Society Incorporated Number One, which was at 120—no, 235 Lennox Avenue, 121st street, right across from St. Phillip's Church.

MN: Wow. Now, so this was primarily English speaking?

MS: English speaking. Yes. So, in the Dominican Republic where my father was born, you had English speaking families because they were coming from the British West Indies. And the

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Dominican Republic was the first island, the first place, where you could get permanent work.

That meant that you didn't have to then go from another to island to island to island. So, people settled there. My father's neighborhood you had names like Anderson, Campbell, Sprouse, David, all these English names. My mother's maiden name is Simons, so that's another and they come from Puerto Rico.

MN: Right. Now, what kind of work did your father do when he was in Harlem?

MS: Oh, you name it. I say that because when he was in the Dominican Republic he was a cabinetmaker. He was making \$12.50 a week as a cabinetmaker. Came to New York in 1929 and they offered him a job for \$12.50, so he used to pick up bowling pins, he worked as a—in a bowling alley. He worked in a hat-manufacturing place, he worked in a laundry. And almost everybody worked in the garment industry, garment district at one point or another. But those are some of the jobs that he had.

MN: Right. So, this Eaton Association, this was all people from—mostly from the British West Indies?

MS: Yes, and that was an interesting thing because being part of the British West Indies or any English West Indian community, the pronunciation and the accent was different. So, the Eaton Benevolent Society dealt with people from a variety of English speaking islands, some Spanish speaking because Dominican Republic is a Spanish-speaking island with an English population. You had it from Grenada, from Anguilla, from Antigo, you had all of these different associations. That's where my parents met.

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MN: Oh, so they met in—

MS: In one of the events of the Eaton Benevolent Society in 1931.

MN: Oh, in 1931.

MS: Two years later.

MN: Wow. Now, did your mother work?

MS: Yes. She worked in the garment industry—everybody worked. In fact, I think it's part of the chart of the West Indian Association that says, "If you're West Indian, you have to work 20 jobs." It's in the charter, somewhere it says that. So, everybody worked. And everybody lived in multigenerational families. So, there—at one point my grandmother on my father's side lived with us in the Bronx in that same house. In fact, that's where she died. When my mother's mother came to the United States to see her kids or the rest of her kids because she had eight and four of them were here, four of them were back in Samana. My father bought a house for them to stay in so they could—everybody's around everybody.

MN: So, your parents met in Harlem. What year did they get married?

MS: They got married in 1946.

MN: Wow.

MS: March 9th, after the war.

MN: So, they knew each other for all that time.

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MS: All that time.

MN: Now, when did they move to the Bronx?

MS: September 1950. We were supposed to move there in 1949 but whoever owned it trashed the place.

MN: Okay. So, this whole time they were living in Harlem?

MS: They were living on 118th street and Park Avenue. 1669 Park Avenue.

MN: Now, was that considered Spanish Harlem at the time?

MS: Completely. Absolutely.

MN: So, you were living—and did your parents speak Spanish as well as English?

MS: Yes, yes. They did. Now, they spoke Spanish as well as English. In my father's case, he probably learned Spanish as a kid as opposed to it being spoken in the household. You wouldn't find it spoken in the household. In fact, his sister, Francisca, came to this country in 1926 because their aunt lived on 121st Street between Lennox and Mount Morris Park. You had to have a sponsor, you just couldn't walk through the door, you had to have a sponsor. And they would tell me that when they were growing up, my father would get beaten by his father for speaking to native Spanish girls in the Dominican Republic. That was just one of the things. In fact, he also said that you couldn't look their father in the eye. When he passed by, you'd have to bow your head and walk by. Very stern. Very [growls] kind of thing.

MN: Now, what—did your father have better jobs after WWII than he had before?

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MS: Interesting thing. Talking in terms of music, my father loved to sing. So, my brother, sister and I would go into some of his things—he died in 1997, I think at age 91. He was born in 1906. He and a bunch of other people within the Harlem area—because he lived in Harlem, he lived in West Harlem prior to the war—137th street.

MN: So your mother lived on Park Avenue and your—

MS: My father lived on 7th Avenue Rooming Houses along 137th street. And they sang. We found programs from 1932, 1934 says “Jose Sprouse-Tenor, Jose Sprouse-Tenor” because they did recitals. Bobby McFerrin’s father and my father and a bunch of others would sing at various places throughout Harlem.

MN: Wow. Now, were either of your parents politically active?

MS: My father—I wouldn’t say politically active from the standpoint of rallies and all, but within my father’s papers, all his stuff, I will see “Marcus Garvey Rally”, “Marcus Garvey Event”, “This is being held here.” Black pride was huge in their lives, huge. I have an autographed book from Coretta Scott King. My father—in fact, in the March on Washington, I can remember my mother saying, “I have to go.” It wasn’t an option.

MN: Okay, so this is fascinating to me that your parents came from the Dominican Republic at a time when there wasn’t a huge Dominican immigrant population. Now, Dominicans are the second largest immigrant group in New York City and may soon be the first. And there’s also racial issues within that community.

MS: Completely. And it didn’t start here.

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MN: So, your family came here and identified as black.

MS: Yes. In fact, when people would hear my mother speak, they said, “What part of Carolina are you from?” What part of the—What? Because we all have, at some point an accent. I can go places right now and someone will say, “what island are you from?” Because of the certain way I pronounce certain words.

MN: So, they identified more as more like West Indians than people from the Spanish Caribbean.

MS: Yes. And also as different from American born blacks.

MN: Right.

MS: Huge difference.

MN: So, there was definitely a West Indian consciousness that was different from Puerto Ricans or Spanish Dominicans and African Americans.

MS: Yes, completely different.

MN: A West—and how would you describe that West Indian consciousness?

MS: There are two characteristics. One is industriousness—gotta work, gotta make something of something, you’re going to do it. And the other was family from the standpoint of—not progeny but you get in an area, you stay, you build it up, send folks out. You get in an area, you stay, you build it up, so you have large, longstanding West Indian families and communities within New York City. And we’re one of them, I said my brother still lives at 820 Ritter Place.

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MN: Wow, yeah. How did your family discover the Bronx? Were there people from—they knew who had already moved there?

MS: I'd have to ask my brother that specifically because originally I think he got an offer—this is 1949, right after, again, right after the war.

MN: Your brother was how old—how many siblings do you have?

MS: I have one brother, Jose Jr., he was born in December 1946. I have a sister Agnes—Agnes is named after my mother's mother. She was born in 1952. I have an older half-sister, sister, we don't make a distinction—her name is Connie. She was born November 1, 1936, so she just made 79. Just on the phone with her. Those are the only siblings that we have.

MN: And is your brother older than you?

MS: Yes, by two years.

MN: By two years, so you were born in what year?

MS: '48, he was 1946.

MN: Okay, so you were born in Harlem.

MS: I was born in—yep. Flour Fifth Avenue Hospital.

MN: Right. So, were there other family members in the Bronx or was your, you know, family the first of their cohort to move there?

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MS: No. In fact, when my father came over in 1929, there were three people who came over. One of them was the uncle of the person at what would be 820—2 824, the Lindquist family. They came over together—he was a cook. So, it's possible that he heard about that block from this guy.

MN: Okay, so they were in the corner building?

MS: No, they were right—just from where we had the ceremony?

MN: Yeah.

MS: Just down two blocks.

MN: Okay.

MS: Two—two houses.

MN: Okay, so they were on Ritter Place?

MS: Yes.

MN: And this is somebody your father knew?

MS: Yes.

MN: Okay.

MS: He knew the family and—

MN: Right. Okay.

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MS: In fact, that family's—the mother of the people that I knew grew up with—she was from the Dominican Republic, so we all knew each other.

MN: Now, what are your first memories of Ritter Place?

MS: Running down the stairs in that house like a herd of buffalo. I can see it in my head because it had three stories and a basement. It was the largest—the tallest, not the largest, but the tallest private house on the block.

MN: Right. Now, what was your father's occupation at the time when they purchased the house?

MS: He worked at Caroline Laundry, which was a very large commercial laundry. He along with several other people from the area. He worked at a laundry, he was a—I'm not sure what the job title would be, but he worked at a laundry. Went there, worked there several years after the war, was going to go to move to Staten Island. Too far. The Bronx. Worked at the Bronx. Caroline Laundry closed without notice in 1954. My earliest memory—I have two early memories, one is when my sister came home from the hospital being born. Which would be 1952, I was three and a half. And the second is when my father came into our living room wearing a multicolored terrycloth type robe that was popular at the time. My mother was combing my sister's hair, I walked in I was looking out the window at the backyard, and my father came in and sat at the dining room table and did this [puts hand on his forehead] and said, "Maria what are we going to do?" Because that—the previous day, the doors of Caroline Laundry had been locked and closed without notice. And everybody was out of work.

MN: Was Caroline Laundry in the Bronx?

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MS: I think it was in Manhattan. It might have been at that part of the Bronx and Manhattan on the east side where—

MN: Right.

MS: Or maybe in the South Bronx, somewhere in that area, not really sure. I'd have to—I think my brother still might have some stationary that says Caroline Laundry on it.

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

MS: PS 54. Which was on Freeman Street, right on the corner of Intervale and Freeman.

MN: Okay, so it's down the hill.

MS: Yeah. Just down the hill.

MN: Now, was it a multi-racial school when you were going there?

MS: Completely. Completely. My—our friend Caroline Lye had a laundry right diagonally across from the school towards Wilkins. My best friend at the time was Steiner who was, he was white. We had white Jewish, we had Italian, we had you name it. Everybody was in there. So, it was multi-ethnic, multi-

MN: Multi-ethnic and multi-racial, was there tension or was it a—?

MS: No.

MN: It was an integrated school where everybody was comfortable?

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MS: Integrated school where everybody had fun. If you got into a fight it had nothing to do with anything racial, it just had to do with disrespect.

MN: Right. Now, did you walk to school?

MS: Yes, it was only five blocks away.

MN: How old were you when you started walking to school? Did you start in kindergarten or—?

MS: No. Kindergarten, I remember my mother taking me there. So, it would be probably third grade.

MN: Right. Was your mother a stay-at-home mom?

MS: Yes, she was a stay-at-home mom until she had to go to work because my father was out of work. When he got a job at the VA Hospital which was—in fact, we just found out the other day, just opening. VA Hospital on 22nd and 23rd Street. That's when she decided that she wanted to be in the schools with her kids, just like Maxine Sullivan. Went into the school with her kids. She eventually got her associates degree at Bronx Community and became a teacher's aid.

MN: Wow. Now, was Ritter Place a racially mixed block at the time you moved there?

MS: Yes, yes. Very much so. We had all kinds of folks. At the time we moved and subsequent in terms of the neighbors across the street, the neighbors on Prospect Avenue and Union, the folks on Freeman and Jennings, you name it, we had it. I can remember—it's so distinct to me—going from where I lived at 820 Ritter Place, going up to Union, going down to Freeman, right on that corner there was a pharmacy. That's where I bought my first ice cream cone for seven cents.

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Right, a few doors down was an Italian—a real, Italian shoemaker. You know, whatever stereotype you look—that was this guy. And if you went down the street to Prospect Avenue and just made a right turn down two doors was Ira Goldberg's house. Ira Goldberg played with us on Ritter Place along with all the other folks from the street because our street was protected. You didn't have a lot of traffic. So, we're playing in the streets all day long with people whose parents were from Ireland and Poland and Italy. You name it, it was on our street.

MN: I mean, to my students, do you know how unusual this is in the United States of America to have that kind of an upbringing in the 1950's?

MS: Yeah, it was absolutely amazing.

MN: Now, what were your favorite stores in the neighborhood?

MS: That's funny. There was a deli right on Freeman Street and Prospect Avenue—Sessums. Albert Sessums. Al Sessums. Yes, I think it was Al Sessums, Junior we went to school with. But Al Sessums he ran a grocery store right on that corner. That was the neighborhood place you went to. In fact, I bought my first car from Al Sessums. It was a 1962 Ford Country Sedan Station Wagon. Hundred bucks, I bought it from Al Sessums. It was Al Sessums, Junior and his sister Rose. Rose probably was my brother's age and they went to school together. So, that's where we would hang out all the time. However, down Freeman Street a few blocks was Don Pepe. Don Pepe was a Spanish grocery. That's where my mother would send us all to get dulces and Spanish goods and stuff.

MN: Ah, which raises a question: what kind of food was cooked in your house?

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MS: Ay yai yai. We just had it. In my house we had all, and I mean all, of the West Indian delicacies. We did not eat American food, it didn't exist in our family. We had platanos, we had rice and beans, you couldn't have rice without beans. We would have the traditional three starches at a meal. You would have rice, you'd have potatoes, you'd have dumplings and bread. Now, I must say this, one of the primary reasons why my father and mother moved to the Bronx from living in an apartment on 118th Street and Park Avenue is because it had a backyard, it had land. Now, West Indians and land is like white on rice. That's it, you can't separate the two. So, growing up, they're coming from an agrarian society. We had a farm in the backyard. We had corn, we had string beans, we had broccoli, we had eggplant, we had tomatoes, we had a peach tree in the backyard, and at one point we had a chicken in the backyard. I said, "That's going a little too far, Pops." He grew everything. That was his passion that he carried with him until the day he died. He loved to grow. He loved, loved the land, had to get his hands in the dirt and work the land, work the dirt, and everybody else had a backyard. So, the Lindquists had—two doors down—they had the same. Next door to them was the Richardson Family and the Chipchase family. Mother Richardson that—we called her Mother Richardson because she was about 190 years old or something—she would make ginger beer. She would make all the West Indian beverages that one would grow up with and the smell of the block when she was making that ginger beer was [slurp], I don't know if you can translate that but that was wonderful. So, we had those fresh vegetables and I can remember my aunt, my father's sister Francisca saying, "Nothing is better than going in the backyard, taking those peas out of there." The same way my friends from the South would say, "Go in the backyard, take those beans, snap those beans, put

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‘em in some water, boil ‘em, and eat ‘em.” You can’t get any fresher than that. So, that’s what we got. That’s how we were.

MN: Wow. Now, what kind of music was played in your house when you were growing up?

MS: Several different kinds because my father was a singer and had been for twenty, thirty years by the time that I can remember. There was a lot of classical music. And he sang in the choir at St. Augustine Presbyterian Church, and I saw that, that was our church.

MN: So you were St. Augustine Church people?

MS: Yes, absolutely. From the time we moved to the Bronx until, well, my brother is still—still works there, still attends there.

MN: Wow, and so you got to know Reverend Hawkins.

MS: He is my mentor. I credit him—Edler G. Garnett Hawkins—I credit him with providing me with the spiritual as well as artistic foundation for the rest of my life.

MN: Really.

MS: For the entire rest of my life.

MN: Could you elaborate on that in terms of how you met him and what sort of programs in the church inspired your intellectual and musical development?

MS: A couple of things. One, met him as a kid because we all belonged to the church choir so we must have been that tall.

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MN: So, you were in the choir from an early age?

MS: Yes. Very, very early age. And every, I would say not every age group, but every well sort of. You'd have the primary kids, you'd have the junior high school kids, you'd have the high school, everybody had a choir. We must have had twelve choirs in that church. And we would all have a sunrise Easter service. Where at six—you know, people are getting ready and same thing with Christmas—you're getting ready for these events. It's four thirty in the morning, you know, we're all cranky, and we have to be at church at six because all the choirs are going to sing. You march in with candles and so on, I can remember candles dripping down my arm as I'm trying to not have it get on the robe. But when the sun came up through the stain glass window that faced Prospect Avenue, then it was "Wow!", big spectacle. Now, this church was a cornerstone church in the Bronx. Extremely historic because Edler Hawkins was a civil rights magnet, but he loved the arts. So, if you went—Duke Ellington, I first saw Duke Ellington in that Church.

MN: Duke Ellington performed in the church?

MS: He did the Sacred Music Concert there with—got Jeffery Holder as the dancer going up the aisle, and I know that because I'm in the loft—in the choir loft, taping all of this on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. Here's Duke Ellington, twice he performed there I believe. Whenever an actor came into town who was black Yaphet Kotto was the first one that I remember, he came to our church to meet the kids. I can remember playing in the fellowship hall, basketball with Peyton Bell and all these other folks and Rev. would come in and say, "Stop! I want you meet somebody. Stop! I want you to meet somebody." And it would always be someone—some up and coming actor, some up and coming dancer, some up and coming, and the arts was there.

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Elton Fax who was an artist, who I guess his claim to fame was that whatever he puts on the canvas—charcoal he uses a lot of charcoal—it stays. And he came. If you went into Rev's house, which was right next door to the church, the first thing you notice when you went in was artwork on the wall. All over the place. All over the place. He also was probably a founder, I'd have to check my facts on that, to the—was it the Coalition of Christians and Jews? It was something with Christians and Jews. He was always—

MN: The National Conference of Christians and Jews.

MS: That's it. And he would, he was very ecumenical. Very, very, very ecumenical—getting people together, working stuff together, working it out. I heard Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech because it was taped and he played it for the congregation with the mic text to the reel-to-reel tape recorder. That was the way our church was run. They also had a summer camp, called Camp Ohata, that I went to 1956 until '67 or something where I was a counselor and as well as a camper. So, we met all different kinds of people. All different kinds of folks, and that church was a cornerstone. So, understanding the connection between civil rights, spirituality, humanity, and the arts was right there and I continue that to this day.

MN: Now, were you academically precocious as a kid? Did you end up in the one classes because the school's were tracked then.

MS: Yes. All of my classes were 2-1, 3-1,4-1,5-1, 6-1, 7-1, 8-1, 9-1, high school.

MN: Right, okay. So you were academically successful fairly early.

MS: Yeah.

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MN: Was yours a household where that was a necessity or—

MS: You can't be West Indian and not be. Well, I say that just from the standpoint of education was stressed, and remembering that most of us were first generation American. That's a big deal.

MN: Now, were you encouraged by your teachers in your academic pursuits?

MS: Not only was encouraged, they were disappointed when I didn't follow what it is that they thought I should follow. When I was at elementary school, I was in the fourth grade, and I remember my teacher Mrs. Tenzerg sending me to the guidance counselor because if I went to this other junior high school—it might have been Herman Ritter Junior High School—I could get out a year early.

MN: Right because of the SP classes, right.

MS: I could out a year early, and I went, "No, I want to go with my friends." When I was in junior high school I had the same opportunity, I said, "No, I want to go with my friends." When I was in high school, I remember, the guidance counselor in 1965, fall of 1965, saying, "You could go to Columbia, Harvard, or Duke. Where do you want to go?" City College. "You could go to Columbia, Harvard, or Duke. Where do you want to go?" City College. Now, this is 1965, this is before open enrollment. "Why do you want to go to City College?" It's free. My entire expenses academically for City College in 1966 was 150 dollars for the year, and that was for books. There was no tuition. And at that time, you get a scholarship to go to Columbia, you get a scholarship to go to Duke or wherever, and you fail. My parents are not going to be able to

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afford to do that. It was a pretty simple decision for me. City College. Which is where I wound up going and I only applied to one school, and that was to City College.

MN: Wow. Now, in terms of formal musical training, how early did that start for you?

MS: Seven. Frederick Bell was the organist at St. Augustine Presbyterian Church. And I saw my brother—he would come to our house, teach my brother how to play piano and I can remember very, very distinctly, after one of my brother's lessons, I went up to the piano and did this on the keys and said, "I wanna do that." I was into piano lessons and the rest was history. I was seven years old.

MN: Okay, how aware were you of Maxine Sullivan living on your block?

MS: Very, but I didn't know her as Maxine Sullivan. I have pictures. I have slides—I have to actually dig them up and convert them to digitize them. But she would have events at her house, where all the kids on the block would go. There's a big picture of me at seven, or eight, or nine years old or something there. All about music. Now, her husband at that time was Cliff Jackson. And Cliff Jackson had an album. He was a stride piano player. I would hear him play. I would hear her sing, and I knew—I knew her as my neighbor. My father knew her as Maxine Sullivan the singer. So, we would be discussing the fact that there's a star next door. I didn't know. And he knew all the music that she had sung. And—because he was very proud of all of this. This was an enormous—Maxine Sullivan and Joe Lewis and the people who were—and I'm saying that just from the standpoint of black pride—these were people who went through firsts. First. The first. And that was huge in the community. So, to have her living there next door for my father was tremendous. For me it's the lady who sang and I see across the street at the school.

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MN: Now, did you have any early experiences with racism that made an impression on you?

MS: No, not until Edler Hawkins took a bunch of us teenagers down, midtown somewhere to see a movie, and they wouldn't let us in for whatever reason. And I don't—it didn't register why they would not let—why would you let a bunch of raggedy looking teenagers, black teenagers in your movie house. But Edler Hawkins was very upset about this, very, very upset. Why were you upset? Well, we found something else to do. I don't even remember what we did but he was very upset at the fact that they would not let us in. I can't tell you if it's because of—well, judging from his reaction it had to do with racism. His reaction but he never said to us “this is why that happened.” I don't have any recollection of that.

MN: But you didn't experience this from teachers?

MS: No.

MN: From storeowners?

MS: No.

MN: From neighbors?

MS: No. No especially not from neighbors. Neighbors would have gotten whooped. We had more—believe it or not—we had more fear of the gangs in the area than we had of anybody else's neighbors.

MN: Right. Now, talk a little bit about the gangs because this was—in the '50's this was an issue in the Bronx. Which gangs made an impression on you?

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MS: I have to remember the names of these gangs. I don't even remember their names, but I know some families that I wouldn't say on tape—might still have relatives around.

MN: Now, were there blocks you would worry about going on because of—

MS: No. Yes. No, the reason I say that is because our activity—if you went up to Boston Road which was just two blocks away, you have the Burland—it wasn't Burland Theater, they had a record store. Burland's Record Store was right there, and at 169th Street and Boston Road, this is crossroads.

MN: Yeah, I know.

MS: They were wide streets there.

MN: They're big, yeah, with all the—

MS: So, we would go up that street all the time, but on Jennings Street, don't go down Jennings Street. Too far because you're going to run into this family which is associated with that gang. We would play at Crotona Park, go up Prospect right into—towards Claremont, play right there. Don't go on that side street 'cause that's where that gang—I can remember as a young teenager, having gangs come on the block. I remember someone saying “We need a place to meet.” Really? You can come to the basement of my house and meet. Now, my parents were out. They would have slaughtered me if they knew in their basement—in our basement there were these groups of people meeting. I don't know what they were meeting about but it's just like Stevie Wonders'—what's the name of the song, “I Wish”, where he says, “hanging out with the hoodlum friends of mine.” They weren't my friends but they were there. “Sneakin' out the

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backyard hanging out with those foolish”—no hoodlum, hoodlum friends of mine, yes. That was it. So, the presence of the gangs was a source of anxiety for my parents that I did not know about until I was in my twenties. They said we were fearful every single day that you would not be absorbed by these folks. But at St. Augustine we had Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, you name it. At the other St. Augustine—

MN: Catholic.

MS: On Fulton, I guess it was.

MN: Fulton, yeah.

MS: The other guys up the block went to the Sea Cadets there. We all had a group to belong to.

MN: Right. Now, would you say that Ritter Place was a more middle class block than some surrounding blocks.

MS: Yes. Yes, I would. I remember—this is the ‘50’s—so, the tenement houses were all built in 1906, 1907, so by the time I’m growing up they’re fifty years old.

MN: Those are the ones with the fire escapes and all that.

MS: Mhmm. I can remember on Claremont and Fulton there was an apartment building that had a big 1906 on it, I said, “Oh, that’s when my father was born.” So, similar to Grand Concourse, you had apartments with apartments in—apartments in apartment buildings that were—had big rooms. Big rooms. A lot of our friends lived on Prospect between Jennings and Freeman. If you went to Fulton they were more condensed. Much more condensed. Even on

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Prospect, just up from Jennings they were more condensed. On our block we only had two apartment houses—810 and 811 Ritter Place. So, the area wasn't condensed at all and people were homeowners. Who owns a house? Well, you had to afford to live in that house. So, yes, it was more middle class. We didn't know what that meant because we were just folks growing up on the block but I can tell you that Mr. Collie Moore who played violin and sold the World Book Encyclopedia is one of the things that he sold. And other folks on the block were just busy making a buck.

MN: Right. Now, when did you become aware of heroin? Was that an issue when you were growing up or you weren't aware of it?

MS: No, was not aware of it. Heroin I heard about in high school because I went out of the area. I went to DeWitt Clinton High School, I heard about it there. That doesn't mean there wasn't violence in the area. I can remember being in seventh grade and a detective calls on the phone and they wanted to know if I knew Paco. Paco was my next-door neighbor. Yeah, I know him. Said, "What kind of guy was he?" "Ah, yeah," then, when he hung up I said, "Was? What happened?" He got shot. He got killed there, not on Ritter Place, but on Freeman Street. He got killed there, gunshot. When Easter Sunday in the mid-50's, I can't put a name on it, I'm looking out my window, second-floor window onto Ritter Place, my cousin, my mother's brother's kids were over 'cause it's Easter, everybody had to feast somewhere. I'm looking out the window and I see policeman coming up the street with weapons drawn. What's that about? My father rushes out the front door and I could see him doing this—he's pointing. Because between Maxine Sullivan's house and mine there was a little crawl space, and evidently two or three people had robbed a store on Boston Road and ran down Union and were running into the houses on Ritter

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Place. One guy was in the crawl space there. Where we had the naming ceremony it was open, but at that time there were hedges across, so, you couldn't see from the street, but my father saw that someone had come up the steps and was going in the corner. He went outside to point to the police that's where they were. It wasn't until later on that we find out that the person who was hiding there, pointed a gun at my father and pulled the trigger but it didn't—it did not fire.

MN: Wow.

MS: The next day, front-page daily news, there's a picture of somebody getting arrested—that sort of thing.

MN: Yeah. Now, what junior high did you go to?

MS: 136 right across the street.

MN: Right across the street.

MS: Walter J. Damrosch Junior High School, but I went to PS 40 first.

MN: Right. When did you first get formal musical training in the schools?

MS: Junior high school.

MN: At—which one first?

MS: In 136—well, because we moved two months after going into PS 40, we were on our way to 136. I remember Maxine Sullivan leading that parade from one school to the next. So, it was in seventh grade. I was a member of the orchestra. I played double base in the orchestra. My brother played violin and my sister played viola.

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MN: Okay, and you were still doing keyboards with the church?

MS: Yes, mmhmm. I was—interesting, I was playing for some of the choirs at the church but I was mostly playing piano at home and in a band that formed in junior high school.

MN: So, this was a band independent to the school?

MS: Correct. But we all started it because we learned all these instruments in junior high school. So, right across the street, we went to school, learned these band instruments and then decided to form a band.

MN: Now, did you take the double bass home with you?

MS: Yes. I can remember doing that because it was right across the street—we'd take the bass home.

MN: So you'd carry it through the street.

MS: Well, the back entrance of 136 was just across the street and down a few—

MN: Now, just ask my students, does this sound like your stereotypes of the South Bronx? That's why this is so important to put on record. It just totally confounds everyone's picture. So—

MS: Let me confound it even more—we had a concert in our—1964 Easter. The concert was going to be after Easter and it was on Easter Break. Miss Pigler, who might still be alive 'cause they have a junior high school 136 reunion every year and she was in her 90's at that point when I found out about it. We had a concert right after the Easter break, and we had a week that we

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weren't rehearsing. So, she said, "When are you going to do it?" So, I asked my father whether or not we could have an orchestra rehearsal in our living room. So, over the Easter break, we're rehearsing in my living room with these instruments that kids are bringing over.

MN: This is 1964?

MS: '64.

MN: Right, wow.

MS: And it went on through '60—no, I'm sorry that would not be '64, that would be '62. That would be '61, '62. 1961 or '62.

MN: Right. Now, did you know at that time that you wanted to be a professional musician?

MS: Yes. Yes. I knew that right from the—

MN: And were there people who were telling you—encouraging you in this path?

MS: My parents. And they did it in two ways. One, they continued the piano lessons and two, they never discouraged me. Because my father had experienced the racism of the area of New York because he couldn't sing in certain places. So, a group of blacks would get together and they would do it on their own. Largely, with the impetus from the Harlem Renaissance. Here they are doing all of this stuff that's going on in Harlem, and usually at churches or at concert halls or people—or places like the Alhambra or wherever it happened to be. So, he knew how tough it was, but he never said, "Don't do this."

MN: Right. Now, what made you choose DeWitt Clinton High School as opposed to Morris?

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MS: It was an academic high school and that was a place where if you wanted to get a good education you went to DeWitt Clinton High School.

MN: What was the reputation of Clinton vis-à-vis Morris?

MS: Morris High School was the neighborhood place where you took your chances getting to Morris High School. It was a tough school.

MN: So, in the sixties it was considered a tough school?

MS: Very tough. Yes. Morris High School was not the school you would want to go to. Now, I'm sure there are people—thousands who have gone to Morris and it's been fine.

MN: That was the reputation in the sixties because—

MS: Oh, yes.

MN: In the forties and fifties it didn't have that reputation.

MS: The sixties—it was. That was the reputation, and it's not the place that you would want to go. Now, on our block, four or five of us went to DeWitt Clinton.

MN: And what was that experience, going to school? What was it like going to school? How did you get there transportation-wise?

MS: Coming from going to PS 54, which was a few blocks away walking to junior high school 136 which was across the street, we had to take a cross-town bus 169th street bus up to Grand Concourse. Maybe that was the number one bus—no, whatever it was. Then, take the one or two up the Grand Concourse to DeWitt Clinton High School. So, we were on buses.

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MN: Okay. Now, certainly the second part of that would be going through white neighborhoods.

MS: Going through white neighborhoods after going through largely Hispanic neighborhoods because we're going up the Grand Concourse. The Grand Concourse in those years, prior to Co-Op City, was Spanish. So, we go cross-town, you hit Grand Concourse and you're looking at these big buildings—now, all of us had seen these buildings before but we just hadn't done it on a daily basis. So, the first thing I noticed when I got to DeWitt Clinton High School was that there were 7,000 other folks in that school. I can remember saying to my brother who was two years older, who went to that school, who told me what to expect going to that school, he said, "You're gonna see the biggest white folks you've ever seen in your life." Tree trunks. Because they were all on the football team. Name's like Sasso and [inaudible].

MN: Right. The coach, I've heard it was Joe Prezioso.

MS: Prezioso, yes.

MN: Was a legend.

MS: Completely. I remember him very, very well. Very, very well. I wanted to go out for the football team. He said, "You're not big enough, Sprouse!" You're not big, you gotta be big like this. But at the same time we learned about, in a sense, protection. I mean that from that standpoint that school pride of DeWitt Clinton—it comes with all his history, DeWitt Clinton High School. Our football team was untied, undefeated, un-scored upon. It was huge. So, you had—all of these people had this pride and people would take each other under their wings. The other thing that happened—I don't know if this happened at Morris High School or at Evander

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High School or other high schools—I was at DeWitt Clinton from '63 to '66, entered City College in '66. We're looking forward to the Vietnam War. When I say looking forward I don't mean it as if anticipating it—it's right there. It's right in front of us. So, as we are getting out of high school we're going, "What's your draft number? What's your draft number? What's your draft number?"

MN: Now, what was people's—this is, so, 1965, 1966, it's the time civil rights, black power, what—how did that hit you?

MS: Huge. Huge. I can remember being in my biology class when the teacher, I can see the expression her face now, she stopped the class and she said that our president had just been assassinated. And it was what? And we all were riding the train—the bus back home, Grand Concourse and the cross-town bus, and that was the first time that I became aware of the politics behind the bullet. Because Malcolm, and Kennedy and Kennedy and Martin all occurred within a few years. Then you had the bullets in Vietnam. I wanted to actually be a helicopter pilot. I love airplanes. I love things that fly. Take me to an airport and you can keep me there for two years, I will not move. To me, it's great. Until I realized that helicopter pilots go to Vietnam. No, we won't go, won't do it. So for me, the confluence of Black-anything: power, rights, whatever it would happen to be, voting rights, civil rights, and the Vietnam War, and what that meant in terms of losing your life in Vietnam and all of us knew people who did- and coming with a sense of consciousness about, what does it mean when you get back, if you get back, what are you going to be doing? Not that there were any solutions, it was a matter of questions-

MN- Now, was this something that your- that you spoke about with your neighborhood friends?

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MS- Yeah.

MN- So you talked about this together?

MS- Very much so. So much so that Stanley Lindquist, who lived two doors down, he was in my band at the time, he went to DeWitt Clinton High School- we all went to DeWitt Clinton High School, but he got drafted.

MN- Now, Lindquist must have been White?

MS- No, Lindquist was Black as Black.

MN- Was he West Indian?

MS- Yes, because his mother was from- Ulalia, you hear a Ulalia, you know that's coming from the West Indies. Ulalia Lindquist was the sister of the person that my father came to this country with. So, the Lindquist's, and of course that's Swedish I guess, or some Nordic-

MN- That's a Swedish name, yeah.

MS- He- his mother was from the Dominican Republic, his father is from the Virgin Islands. His father was an elevator operator at Harlem Hospital. He got drafted.

MN- Wow.

MS- He went to Bronx Community College, they called his number. He's going into the army. And we said, "You're not going to be in artillery." We drilled him like crazy on the baritone sax, which is what he played, baritone sax in my band, we drilled him and drilled him and drilled him

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and drilled him, and he went out for the Army Band and made it. Went to Vietnam, went to Danang, but was in the Army Band.

MN- Wow.

MS- Two other guys on the Block, Stanley's brother Tyrone, and Phillip Mason, also went to Vietnam, cause that was the track- you went to Vietnam. They were in the Air force, and they repaired planes and other parts of- maybe Guam to Vietnam, and some other places, but they all got back. We know people who didn't-

MN- Now, are you still in touch with the people you grew up with?

MS- Yes, in fact, we had a band reunion in July of last year. I have an old picture of- there's Stanley Lindquist right there dressed in red, he was always very flamboyant, there's my brother who was in- Stanley played baritone sax, Walter played drums, his brother Phillip played percussion, Mike Mariott who did not live on the block, we all rehearsed on the block, he was there, I was there, I mean, so we had a mini band reunion. And, so, yes, we definitely are in touch.

MN- So, how did you get involved with Upward Bound? We have a common experience in a program in Columbia called Project Double Discovery.

MS- That's correct. As I said, I went to Junior High School 136, the guidance counselor there was named Annie Parker. Annie Parker was like a second mom to me.

MN- I remember Annie, she's big right? Big and light-skinned. Very big.

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MS- Well, yeah! (laughter) But she was, maybe, sort of- I don't have that shade on me somewhere. Yeah, but anyway, she wasn't as light as many, but she was light-

MN- She was bigger than most.

MS- Yes she was. And she loved her some me. I'm telling you, for whatever reason, she just loved me, because one of the things I would do when- I got this from Edward Hopkins, if I was in Junior High School, I went back to my elementary school to encourage kids. If I was in High School, I went back to Junior High School to encourage kids, and when I was in college, I went back to- so I did that kind of thing. In fact, it was 1967 and my first airplane ride was to a civil rights conference at the Shoreham Hotel, somewhere in D.C., because of that same activity that I was doing. So, in 19-between 1961, maybe, and '63, and Annie Parker was my guidance counselor.

MN- Wow. And this was in Junior High?

MS- In Junior High 136. So I'm in City College, and the school is still across the street, and I'm living at 820 Ritter Place. I see her, she says, "I've just become Director of this program called Upward Bound at Columbia University. I think it would be a good place for you to come down and check out." I said, "sure". So that was May of 1968. I met Annie Parker and Mamie Stone and that was my first introduction to Upward Bound.

MN- And you came in as a counselor?

MS- I came in as a counselor.

MN- And I was a teacher.

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MS- Yes, in fact, if you remember that year, they had to postpone some classes on campus because they took over the campus in '68. In 1969, they took over the campus at City College.

MN- I was involved in all of those, including City College.

MS- I probably met him up there too. (laughter). You're one of those organizers, huh? But that was 1968. I did the summer program as a counselor, went back the following year as a division head, and then became Associate Director, then Assistant Director in 1970- and stayed through '74, and became a Bridge Coordinator in '77.

MN- Now, while you're- you know, it's City College, and while you're at Columbia, what's happening with your music career, and when did you start working with professional musicians in recording, and arranging, and-

MS- That happened in the mid-70s. I had always been doing music from junior high school throughout. But, a major thing happened for me, I always had the band, the Sounds of the City Band, or whatever name it was at the time, we had put out records of original material I had written or the band had-

MN- Do you have any of those around, the records?

MS- Well, yes, I do. And I say that with a laugh because throughout the years, we put out a compellation album in 1976, called *The Sounds of the City Experience*.

MN- Can you get it on Amazon?

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MS- You can get it on- yes you can, you can probably get it on Discogs, but you don't want to get the original, because it'll cost you about 2000 bucks. You want to get the reissued- and that's what happened. Through the years, it's not a long story but it's a crazy story, I had written a musical. Actually, I worked at Hunter College in their SEEK Program. I was musical director for that program because they were putting on show with Oscar Brown Junior and Gene Pace as the directors, the person who was singing in my band at the time, one of them was named Alfa Anderson. Alfa Anderson went on to become not only the background singers for Astrid & Simpson, and for Luther Vandross, but she was one of the two female leads in the group *Chic*. Alfa- all of the *Chic* albums, there's Alfa Anderson right on the cover. In fact, she has now her own business, she's the former lady of *Chic*, Alfa Anderson, blogs and everything. She does all of the tours. I'm in West Palm Beach and I see a poster of her up there. Anyway, she worked as a teacher at Hunter College in the SEEK program. She said, "We're doing a show, come on down and audition. Well, you're looking for a musical director." I said, "great!" So I go down, I become Musical Director in '72. Based on what happened with that, I wrote a musical in '74, lot of original material, in both of those shows. We took that material and made a compilation album and it was called *Attack Shelter* Album. During those years, if you spent say, \$10,000 on putting an album together, you would be able to deduct \$30,000 as a loss on the album. So these albums were recorded not for sale, but they were recorded basically not to make money. You needed to deduct three times. This was done for years, and I did several of them myself, a couple of those were Cornell de Priem and Richard Groove Holmes. My album sort of stuck because throughout the years, I was- I would get phone calls, "Are you the producer for this album?" I said, "Which one?" "Came out in '76." "That one?" This is the '90s they're calling me. "Yeah."

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“Do you have any copies of that record?” (laughter) Mint copies. Somebody’s after this. I didn’t pay any attention. I’m getting calls from Japan, I’m getting calls from the U.K., I’m getting calls from Finland. In 19- In 2013, I get a call from the U.K.- Jazzman Records. Same question, I said, “Yes.” He says, “We want to reissue that album.” And I’m laughing, calling up my brother saying, “Somebody wants to put out this album that we did.” *Attack Shelter Album*, which was not supposed to go anywhere. Come to find out that the Tiger Lily Records, which was the record label of this album, was owned by Morris Levy. Morris Levy Roulette Records was connected to the mob.

MN- This we know.

MS- I had no idea, except finding out from folks 40 years later. 30 years later, I had no idea. There’s all this interest- anyway this guy calls me up, Gerald Short, and says “Would you like to do it?” I said, “Yes!” So the album came out in December of that year- sold out, in vinyl. They also put two additional tracks on it from my very first recording session in June of 1965, those are on there. So the album is out.

MN- Now, how would you describe your style- do you have a- or genre, is-

MS- Both. My style- I have to put something Hispanic in my work because it’s in my blood. I have to.

MN- Okay. In the rhythms or the quave-

MS- Rhythms. The rhythms. The rhythms- there’s a, from my standpoint, when you asked about the music that was played, we had a victrola. The victrola played 78 records. I still have those 78

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records. In fact, one of the things that I laugh about is I heard a lot of music from Cole Porter and from Ira Gershwin, George Gershwin in Spanish, before I heard it in English. So when I heard it in English, I said, "that's not right". (laughter) Something's wrong with that. But on Tico Records, on whatever records- record label, that's what I heard in my house. When people would come over and dance on the victrola, everybody would be dancing and having a good time. So you have Spanish music, and so that's in my music right now. I mean, that's- you're gonna find me playing some Spanish rhythm unconsciously-

MN- Right.

MS- It's always there. The other thing, in terms of genre, it would be jazz and- jazz, R&B, and blues. That's what I play. And within the jazz, R&B, and blues, there will always be some sort of Latin rhythms sneaking its way in.

MN- Which you can see in like, the Drifters *This Magic Moment*.

MS- Yes, certainly. Yeah, oh yeah. We heard all of this, we were inundated with all of this.

MN- Now, that brings me another question. Where, when you were growing up, what were the live music venues you went to in Morisania?

MS- Boston Road Ballroom. The Savoy.

MN- The Savoy is over by Grand Concourse?

MS- Yes. Those are the two places. We played in those, my band played in those two places.

MN- Okay, and how long was the Boston Road Ballroom open until? When did it finally close?

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MS- I have no idea. I can just remember-

MN- So you were playing there in the 60s and 70s?

MS- We were playing there in the 60s and 70s. Yes, 60s and 70s, the Savoy we would play,
Boston Road Ballroom-

MN- Now, would your music be danced to?

MS- Yes, we were hired by people-

MN- They were coming to dance?

MS- Yes.

MN- You were a dance band, not a, like a John Coltrain listening-

MS- No, not at all. All dance. All dance music, and you had to play something that was West
Indian and Latin. You had to. That was just one of the things that we did. And at the same time,
there were places like the Bandbox, which was right down the street from Ritter Place, little club
there on the corner, it was a bar. And occasionally they would have some live music- and there
were other bars along Prospect Avenue that we would go to.

MN- Right, now, did you ever go to, like, the Blue Morocco-

MS- I remember the Blue Morocco, man, I forgot that. No, we never played there, but there
were, wow, I remember that.

MN- Do you remember Goodson's or the Royal Mansion?

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MS- Yes. Royal Mansion, no.

MN- That was a mostly Spanish place. But the places, so the Savoy and the Boston Road
Ballroom-

MS- Yes, those were places, as ballrooms, like a catering place. Somebody wants to have a
dance-

MN- What about the Hunt's Point Palace?

MS- We never played there. And I never went there. No, we didn't go there.

MN- Right. Did you ever play at St. Augustine's Church, at dances?

MS- Tons. In fact, in 1963, our band played for- we had just formed it in April, and in June they
were having some event down there, some bazaar, we played, I was playing, actually, soprano
sax.

MN- So, wait a minute, you have played a number of instruments-

MS- But those were to learn.

MN- So, your keyboard is your- and, but you also played soprano sax and-

MS- Yes, but remember, this was, we all learned in junior high school, which said, "what are you
playing?" "Piano." "Okay, you're now playing bass, because you know the piano already. So
you wanna play sax next year, or next semester."

MN- Was there a particular music instructor in junior high that made an impression on you?

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MS- Ms. Pigler. Ms. Pigler. Absolutely, Ms. Pigler, she made a big impression- and my sister will credit Ms. Pigler for allowing her to go beyond the music into another field. My sister went to music and art high school, based on what Ms. Pigler said, knowing she wasn't going to be a professional musician, but she said, "You gotta be around artists. You gotta have your whole vision broadened." And so she went right to music and art high school.

MN- Okay, so you're doing all of these things in the late, in the 60s, late 60s, early 70s, when the fires are hitting?

MS- Fires are-

MN- So could you talk a little bit about the fires, the disinvestment, and what it was like to live in the middle of that, even if it didn't hit your block.

MS- Didn't hit our block but it hit our sensibilities like crazy. P.S. 54, the elementary school I went to, wound up on the front page of either TIME or some magazine, it had- it was being demolished, but it wasn't completely demolished, so you see half the building or a third of the building up, and it's- this is the South Bronx. This is the face of the South Bronx. So in our- by that time, I started driving in 1967. So we're- and all of us have cars, we're coming up Bruckner from 3rd Avenue, we're coming across the 3rd Avenue Bridge, coming up Bruckner we see burnt out houses on the left, burnt out houses on the right. We're coming up to Hunt's Point, make a left on 163rd, we're seeing all of this destruction. We're going down towards Westchester Avenue, you're seeing all the destruction, all the lots, all the stuff that was happening. Right onto Prospect Avenue, and, wait a second, it hasn't touched here. Then Ritter Place. So in our driving around, we would see it.

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MN- Now did you hear-

MS- Or even Charlotte Avenue. Yes, we heard it all.

MN- Did you hear the sirens and-

MS- Yes, completely. All of the sirens, all of the fire- every- we heard it all. We heard it all.

MN- What did it feel like to be in a house, you know, where you hear all of these things that are happening around you, even if it's two, three, four blocks away?

MS- How did it feel. Honestly, because it was so much going on in my life, I remember I was at Upward Bound during those years, I'm seeing it on both ends. I'm seeing the hope of the kids in that program, and I'm seeing the devastation in the buildings. And I'm concentrating on the hope. I'm not concentrating on the bad. And just walk up from our block, three blocks up the Boston Road, hang a right, there's Charlotte. It's that whole area was leveled. And you go, and you look at it, you just shake your head. And my brother had an interesting concept, which I appreciated. He said, "okay, the Bronx is burning. What's coming out of the ashes? Because something will come out of the ashes." And that, it's not something that you would observe and not participate in. So, in 1974, 5, 6, 7, 8, my brother worked at Upward Bound also, 1969 my sister, you decide to stay. You decide to stay. It's like Maxine Sullivan stayed. We decided to stay. The people across Prospect Avenue that were our friends decided to stay. Because that's what holds a community together, not the people who leave, but the people who stay with purpose.

MN- Wow, and the Pruitts on 168th Street.

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MS- Yeah, sure.

MN- Now, were you aware of Hip Hop when it was happening?

MS- Yes, very much so. Very, very much so, for a number of reasons.

MN- Explain that because one of the things I realize is that this- when I was at Fordham, it was happening right outside at 183rd Street, PAL, and I had no idea that anything that important was going on.

MS- Nobody did at the time. It was just- okay, on the B Boys standpoint, you had- this was a way of energy getting out: you're dancing, you're moving, you hear this beat, you're moving and you're rhyming. Okay, and you see the dancers, you see the crowds of people around. That's one aspect of Hip Hop. But it became very politicized once it got out of something you- group of people are dancing to, to commentary.

MN- Yeah, when the rapping and the poetry-

MS- That came differently. In fact, during the early 90s, actually from 1989 to today, one of the things I do, I didn't put it down on the résumé, it's just the stuff that I do, I'm a musicologist for attorneys who hire me to determine whether or not a recording has an unauthorized sample on it. (laughter) That's why I chuckled when you said Hip Hop, I go, "I made a lot of money with this stuff". Because I would be hired, an attorney that I worked for, the very first, second record company I worked for, 1977, was my first foray with them, 1989 he calls me up and says, "You're a musicologist right?" I said, "Yes." "Do you have a degree in it?" I said, "Yes." "Can you tell the difference between these two recordings?" And I go, "oh that's a sample", and I

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knew nothing about what it was. I said, "That's the meters, here comes the meter man. That's the organ part, and that's being used on this record." "Can you write up a report?" "Sure." And it just kept coming.

MN- Now, did you ever feel like incorporating hip-hop in your own music?

MS- No. I did not, because our roots were West Indian, Spanish, and jazz. When I say jazz, coming out of R&B, to jazz, not necessarily bebop, which is a whole other- whole other element. Never thought of incorporating hip-hop. I worked with people who did, but they didn't do that until mid-90s maybe, somewhere in there, but not before that. Hip-hop was considered to be something that they didn't do, because it wasn't, at that point, remember, it wasn't a whole lot of original music, so to speak. I mean, you're taking beats. We knew rhythms, we didn't know beats. We're looking for where the music is going, it's not going anywhere. And the only person we knew who did that type of rhythm with music, not going anywhere, just on one chord, was James Brown.

MN- Who was the major person sampled-

MS- That's it! That was it.

MN- Now, when did you start getting into arranging albums-

MS- 1976. 1976 I was introduced to a producer, somewhat interesting story. 1964, George Chipchase was- Harry Chipchase was my temporary, his father, George Chipchase, the Chipchases lived on Ritter Place, just next door to the Lindquists. He hears our band play in 1964 and he says, "You all should go to the Apollo." "For what?" "You know, amateur hour at

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the Apollo.” “Okay.” So we go in 1964, we come in 3rd. At that performance was a fellow named Jodie Gill, who said, “I want to use your band for some recordings”, which we did in 1965. From that point forward, I began writing consciously for bands. Our band was pretty big; we had trumpet, tenor sax, baritone sax, two singers, drums, percussion, bass- I mean, it was a ten-piece band. So I’m writing music for all of these instruments. 1976 I begin writing music for albums, and I left the band in 1975 on my own to begin to write music for bands, so that started with albums in 1976 to the present.

MN- Now, when did you meet Gordon Parks?

MS- I met Gordon Parks in September of 1985. I was working with a singer named Donna Zencoff who said, in 1984 December, that she wanted to do a Gordon Parks song “Don’t Misunderstand”, which is from Shaft’s big score.

MN- And most people don’t know that Gordon Parks was a composer as well as a-

MS- It’s one of my missions, actually with the Gordon Parks Foundation, which is now 10 years in, Gordon has been dead since 2006, yes 2006 in March, we’re going to very much promote his music because that’s the least known of his artistic endeavors. That’s my job. But I began working with him in ’85 to notate his popular music.

MN- Now, at what point did you get involved with either writing or church music or spiritual themes? Is this fairly early?

MS- Yeah. Consciously, late, I would say late 60s, in terms of some of the material that I’ve uncovered that I’ve written back then. But it always had some sense of spirituality or some sense

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of justice, some sense of that, combining the two which is (inaudible) combining the two. Right from the late 60s through, heavily, the 70s, 80s, yeah. But you see, here's the thing. When I was interviewed by these guys in the U.K., who wanted to put out the album, they came here to interview me this very same way. Except it wasn't videotaped. They were asking me "How was it to grow up and write music during the 60s, when all this stuff is going on, how is it that- what was it like? Why isn't it happening today the same kind of way?" And I said, "Well, you know, we express through the creativity we had at our disposal- which was music, poetry." Didn't surprise me that Filipe Luciano got his name there because we were all together, in terms of doing this. We had all of those examples. So we were putting out music with a social message early on, coming out of folk music.

MN- Right, now with your band, did you always have a singer?

MS- Yes. Oh, no, I'm sorry. We did not. We had a singer- we did not have a singer from April '63 until December of '64. '64 is when we got a singer named Pat Woodhouse, who lived in the projects on Jackson Avenue in the Bronx.

MN- Wait a minute, why is that name familiar? Did she also go to Upward Bound?

MS- No, I would've seen her.

MN- Or is- so you always had a woman singer.

MS- And a male singer, that was- Bruce Carter was a male singer, both of them sang with our group, and then- but yes, we always did have, at some point, a female singer.

Damien Stecker (DS)- 4 minutes left on the tape, I'm sorry.

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MN- So, what I want to do is now let Bob and other people ask questions since, you know, we have four minutes.

BG- Gee, just listening to you-

MS- This is part one.

BG- Ha, part one.

MS- Part one of six.

BG- Mario, going back to growing up in the Bronx, because I also grew up in the Bronx, not too far from you, but I remember at that time, in terms of different groups, we had primarily Puerto Ricans-

MS- Yes, there were many.

BG- So-

MS- Where did you live?

BG- I lived on Island Place, not too far from you. And that's what I remember. I don't remember too many Dominicans. So, were you often times mistaken for Puerto Rican? Or how did Puerto Ricans view you?

MS- Puerto Rican, from the standpoint of identifiable group, was what you were assumed to be if you spoke Spanish. So, although I didn't speak Spanish, because our parents taught us English, "In America you learn English", our pronunciation, our sensibility with Spanish- so we did not, although there was some Dominican-Puerto Rican page on the kind of thing, we did not

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experience that. See, on Lyman Place going down towards Intervale, it would become more Spanish.

MN- Right.

MS- Going the other way, it would not be- it would be more Black, so to speak. So we did not- we didn't have any people from Puerto Rico as kids except my next-door neighbor Tony, they were from Puerto Rico.

MN- And it also sounds like your family identified as West Indian.

MS- Yes.

MN- Which- very interesting if your family had come as a very large Dominican migration, which you have now.

MS- It would have been a different deal.

MN- It would have been a different deal.

MS- There probably wouldn't have been the Bronx.

MN- Right, there would have been a Washington Heights. No, and do either of you have questions?

DS- Yeah, I had a- you mentioned St. Augustine Church as being influential for you, a cultural institution, and you mentioned a few other groups too- I think you mentioned Boy Scouts-

MS- Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts-

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DS- There was another organization that you mentioned, I never heard of before-

MS- Sea Cadets.

DS- Yeah, what were they?

MS- The same as the Boy Scouts except with a naval emphasis. So that had more to do with understanding the marine, not the Marines Industry, so more like navy. Boy Scouts would be more like-

MN- But did the Cadets also have marching, marching bands. The Cadet Core in New York City were huge-

MS- Yes. The Cadet Core, that was like yikes! That's the top of the line- menacing Cadet Core. I mean, that was it. That was it, the big marching band, so vis-à-vis the gangs in the neighborhood, we all went to Boy Scout meetings, Sea Cadet meetings, and everybody belonged to a group. They made sure you belonged to a group.

MN- Now, this is very interesting- this is a list Bob Gumbs has put together of famous African Americans who come out of the Bronx. If you wanna understand why so many successful people came out of this, this- all these organizations, all these mentors- you had mentors in the churches, you had mentors in the Boy's Clubs, you had mentors in the school and you had them in the community.

MS- Not only did you have them, but they worked together.

DS- We're out of- is it cool if I switch?

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MN- Yes, switch.

MN- You know, more questions, Bob-

MS- Oh, I was about to say, in terms of the mixing, when I was in the fifth grade, I made a lamp. My father said, we all learned electricity, we learned carpentry, but I went to the Young Men and Women's Hebrew Organization, which was right on Southern Boulevard and Freeman Street.

MN- Wow.

MS- Right across from the Bronx Center, right on Southern Boulevard, to learn how to make a lamp, from a Jewish Organization.

MN- Yeah, which is right across from the Whedco Building now.

MS- Yes!

MN- That raises an interesting question: did your family ever go to these big, outdoor markets, like-

MS- Yes, we went to, the one that we went to, the one that I frequented until just before I got out of college was La Marqueta, which is where they raised their families, so to speak, right on 116th Street and Park Avenue.

MN- So, did you ever go to any of the big markets in the Bronx?

MS- No.

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BG- Interesting, because, as you're aware, my family grew up in the neighborhood, and we used to go to, speak about markets, we used to go to what was called "The Jewish Markets", Simpson Street.

MS- Simpson Street!

BG- Wilkins Avenue.

MS- Those we went to, those were in the neighborhood.

BG- Right.

MS- Now, my mother's brother lived on 116th Street, between Park and Madison, 80 E. 116th Street. So when she went to visit her brother, she went to the market. That kind of thing. But, in terms of the neighborhood, I can certainly remember my mother saying, "go down to Wilkins Avenue and get me- go down to (inaudible) and get me, or Don Pepe's and get me-" all of that was neighborhood stuff.

MN- What about the movie theaters that you went to?

MS- The Burland Movie Theater, Junior High School 136 graduated their classes at the Burland Movie Theater, right down from St. Augustine's. That's where you went. That's where, whatever year it came out, St. Augustine's said, I call him "Rev.", Reverend Hawkins said, "we're going to see King of Kings as a church, at the Burland". So, we go down to see *King of Kings*, and it's the usual, not now, now it's multiplex, but this was the theater! You know, however many seats, the balconies, you're going to see *King of Kings*. I can remember the movie coming on, and, you know, the Panavision screen, or whatever it's called, and we're sitting, the whole Black

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audience, and there's this close up of these two pools of blue eyes, and the church, the whole congregation in the church went, "[gasp] Jesus!" I'm laughing, wow, there's Jeffery Hunter's Jesus, we're not thinking racially, we're just thinking "[gasp] Jesus!" But you went to these big theaters, you graduated in these big theaters, that was the neighborhood thing. We go to the theater, go to the movies on a Saturday, go down to check it out.

BG- In terms of growing up in that cultural environment, what people do not realize a particular, we didn't realize was that cultural environment, that mix of- well, which (inaudible) came from the different groups, you know, the people from the Caribbean, you had Puerto Ricans, you had Southerners, and they all came together but what also played a significant role, and you mentioned it, was the schools.

MS- Yes.

BG- P.S. 54, Junior High School 40, which had these programs which stimulated the people's interest, you know, certainly in music and certainly in art.

MN- Now, did you ever go to night centers in the schools?

MS- No.

MN- So you didn't use the night centers?

MS- No, we had too much fun on the block (laughter).

MN- So, you had, a block was like an organic unit for the kids on it, in terms of-

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MS- Let me tell you about our block. On the corner of Ritter Place and Union Avenue, there was the Irene Gary Dance Studio.

MN- Really?

MS- Right on the corner. Her sister, whose last name was Henderson, had two kids. Gregory Henderson was in my band. If you go further up the block, you get Maxine Sullivan. Then you get to me, and then you get to the next-door neighbors and the Lindquist's and the Chipchaser's. You had this music, dance, singing, band on this one block. So that influenced all the folks in the other area who would want to come to "the Block". Now, the guys got interested in dance only because that's where the girls were. And Irene Gary would say, "We need somebody to lift these girls for our recital- you, come over here, stand here and do this." "Okay!" But every Saturday, just imagine, on a Saturday afternoon, or Saturday morning into afternoon, you're hearing nothing but music, all day long. Dancing, all day long, until, at least, the late afternoon or early evening. So, that's the way that went.

BG- Did you know the Simmons family? Wiley Simmons-

MS- Yes! Oh man, I had to access a brain cell-

BG- Yeah, Wiley and- that family were very good friends of ours. Yes, but in fact, that family was involved in music, as well, yes. All on Ritter Place.

MS- It was amazing, when I first got to Marble Collegiate Church, where I've been now for 33 years, I was talking to one of the ushers in the area and he said, he's a salesman, and he said "oh, you're a Bronx boy? Where'd you grow up?" I told him, he went, "Where?" He grew up on 167th

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Street and Tinton Avenue. Talking to other people, “yeah I grew up right down the block, I grew up over here” I went-

MN- Now, where is Marble Collegiate Church?

MS- 29th Street and 5th Avenue.

MN- So, you're the musical director there?

MS- No, I'm actually on the TV ministry there, I'm actually an online, live-streaming host, which is why this is very familiar to me (laughs). But I've also, I've been working with Marble Vision, which is the media ministry of the church since 1997-

MN- Oh, now, are you an ordained minister?

MS- No, but I have run many of the spiritual programs there, that's what that legacy comes from. I have done, I am right now, have been since 1991, I'm in charge of the Arts Fellowship Group there. I've been in charge of the Entrepreneurs Group there. And it's all spiritually based. So, working for- walking into Marble Collegiate Church was like walking into St. Augustine's. It was very much home to me.

MN- Wow.

MS- And that's where I continue to work- that I learned in St. Augustine's I do there, continue to this day.

MN- Do they have large Youth Groups in the church?

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MS- No. Mainly because it's not in a residential area, per se, don't tell them that. I only say that because Chelsea has changed so much- we were talking about gentrification-

MN- Yeah, gentrification, right.

MS- But in that case, it went from Norman Vincent Pio was the famous minister there for 52 years, and it was a Sunday church. So after Sunday, 12 o'clock or 12:30, people disappeared to where they went to and they have no activities during the week because in the area, you had commercial establishments, mainly carpets.

MN- Right.

MS- Now, it's a seven-day a week programmed church where people have different particular groups from seniors to kids. But that's not the emphasis because you don't have the population in the area.

MN- Right. Now how did Gordon Parks find you?

MS- A singer, Donna Zencoff, in December 1964 was doing a cabaret show at a club that's now called "Triad", I believe, on 72nd Street. She wanted to sing a song "Don't Misunderstand". She said "I'm inviting Gordon Parks to this concert". I went, "You know Gordon Parks?" She said "No." (laughter). "But I'm going to see if I can find him". Well, she didn't for that occasion but she did set out to find him. In May of '85, she found him, got a audience with him, and he was looking for somebody to help with his original music, to transcribe it. She said, "I can't do it but I know somebody who can". So she recommended me. And that, again, was in May of '85, and it took until September to get to meet him. By the time I met him, he was working on a book. By

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the time I met him, we stayed together for almost 21 years, as his music assistant, see that was my job to transcribe his music, we worked on three movies together, I was just involved with every aspect of his life from the music standpoint, but just basically from the creative standpoint. I installed a recording studio in his den, so that we would be able to record directly. And that, for him, was revolutionary, because the way that you would compose music- if he is doing a score for a film, *The Learning Tree* or *Shaft's Big Score*, whatever it would have to be, or *Supercops* or *Lead Belly*, any of those other kinds of things, he would go to the piano and play it, it would be taped, it would then go to a transcriber, it might then- (inaudible) who was a cellist, and then they would transcribe it, and then get it back to him, and then somebody would orchestrate it, and somebody would play it. When I installed the recording studio in his den, with digital instrumentation, he would be able to press on the keyboard "violin", provide a sample of "viola", "strings". So when he's playing the parts, he's hearing them, and that (loud sound)- so by the time we did the second documentary, or the one on HBO, which is- we also worked on that in March which is another movie about Martin Luther King, Jr., which will hopefully come out again next year. But, he was able to work directly on the instruments, I was the engineer, I recorded it, and then he was able to hear it immediately. And that changed everything.

BG- How did you find working with this legendary, bigger-than-life-

MS- (laughter) He was just a guy. Because he treated me just like a guy. He called everybody "Champ", he would call me "Champ". (inaudible). "Hi champ, let's do this". He was not that big to himself, meaning he, if you went into his apartment, which was on 49th Street and the river, East River, the U.N. Plaza, his windows are facing the East River, and it's gorgeous, two bedroom block. No, he had a piano there, beautiful piano there, very, very soft to the touch,

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which you could play. He had a Chagall on the wall, he had all these paintings around, and he had so many awards: they're stuffed under the couch, they're in the back of the seat, they're under, they're stuffed- the place was cluttered with his work, the current stuff he's working on, that's what's on the table. So, my favorite story of Gordon's that typifies him and why he did not think in terms of, well, this whole big stuff- Gordon Park's, because that wasn't his reputation. There was a fire in the apartment above him on the eleventh floor, he lived on the tenth floor. He called me up early the next morning and said, "I had to evacuate the apartment, there was a fire." I said, "Oh my God", and I'm thinking 'he's got all this artwork, he's got all these books, he's got all this sculpting, he's got all this stuff around, my God, what is gonna- ah!' He put on his robe and he said, "I walked- I ran out the door. I had to go into the stairwell and go down the stairs". I said, "what did you take with you?" His next project. He's willing to let everything else (explosion sound effect). The next book I'm working on, that's the thing I'm taking down the stairs. That, that- you're talking about a high bar. He didn't care about the awards, he didn't care about this, he didn't care about this- they were material things that represented excellence or whatever people were doing, and the fact that he did not get a High School Diploma- he was not a High School graduate. His most treasured thing was an honorary High School Diploma, not the 50 honorary doctorates he got.

MN- Wow.

MS- That's Gordon Parks. That's the person I knew.

MN- Okay, I think we'll cut for this. This was amazing.