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Parker, William

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: William Parker
Interviewers: Lisa Betty, Mark Naison, Sarah Cavanagh, Third Interviewer (?)
Session 1, 12/08/2017

Transcriber: Bailey Barnett

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Welcome, William Parker, to the Bronx African American History Project. William Parker is a legendary and innovative jazz bassist [turning to William Parker] and we're very glad to have you here. So, we begin our oral interviews by asking: tell us a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

William Parker (WP): Okay. My mother, Mary Louise Jefferson, was born in Hardenberg, South Carolina, and my father, Thomas Parker, Deutsch Parker, was born in Goldsboro, North Carolina. I believe they met up here in New York, at the Savoy Manor or the Audubon Ballroom, I think it was the Savoy Manor, listening to music, jazz.

MN: Right.

WP: And they were married, and eventually [they] got an apartment at 1351 Washington Avenue, Bronx, between, it's like, 169th Street and 168th Street.

MN: Right.

WP: Why they came here...my mother was the oldest of nine children, and she is also—in the south, you may have a family where you have nine kids in one family, and then, I think her mother died, and then her father remarried and had a second family. But I think that, eventually, all the kids were moving, the brothers and sisters were moving, up north. All of my uncles were in the Army, armed forces. But they all ended up in Harlem or the Bronx, because that's where people were migrating [to]. My father [is] a little different story. I think he came up very early, when he was a teenager. His sister, my Aunt Bessie, lived up here in Harlem, she might have been married already, and he came here to work and to better himself, you know. He worked as a pinsetter in the bowling alley.

MN: Wow

WP: And, you know, when you knocked [over] the pins you'd have people back there setting them [up]. He worked in a slaughterhouse, where they slaughtered chickens. My father would never eat chicken, and the reason is because, I found out, he worked in the slaughterhouse. There's two things he wouldn't eat: he wouldn't eat chicken, and he wouldn't eat cheesecake because he also worked in a cheesecake bakery. (Laughter.) And at the cheesecake factory, the guy next to him would always be going like this (mimics smoking and flicking ashes) into the cheesecake batter with his ashes. So, it just, you know, "Oh, we don't eat cheesecake. We don't eat chicken." But he had other jobs. He ended up working for Morris Paul on east Broadway, and he learned how to repair furniture. It was a furniture store, but if they got a nick or a scratch they'd give it to him and then he'd fill it in and make it look new.

MN: Right.

WP: So that's what he did, and then he had a love for music, and I don't know where that came from, but he had a love for jazz, because nobody else that I know, [not] my mother's family, nor his family, really had a love for music the way he did.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: He really had that. And then [my parents] met and got married.

MN: So, what are your earliest recollections of the Bronx? You know, so it was on Washington Avenue, but you were on 168th and 169th.

WP: Well, I remember there being a...well, actually this is where my memory and reality clash...(Laughter.) because I remember what I thought in one instance was going from that house. But there's photographs of me and my mother on the roof, when I was a baby, wrapped in a blanket, and I think the house burned down.

MN: Now, was this a private house that they had?

WP: Yes, it was a tenement building, it could've been a brownstone.

MN: Right, okay.

WP: We have to look at old photographs to see what was there.

MN: Right.

WP: 1351 was the number. And so what happened was, we were...there might have been an interim house we stayed at, which I don't remember, but we were put in the Melrose Projects.

MN: Okay, so you moved into the Melrose Houses.

WP: Yes.

MN: And how old were you, when?

WP: I must have been six, seven years old.

MN: Okay.

WP: That I remember, you know?

MN: Right, yeah.

WP: And that was 156th Street and Melrose Avenue.

MN: Yeah, yeah, and we've done some interviews with people from [the Melrose Houses]. And what were your recollections of the Melrose Houses? What year were you born, by the way?

WP: 1952, Bronx Hospital.

MN: Okay, so this is in the late 50s that you arrived in Melrose.

WP: Right.

MN: So what was your recollection of that particular housing development, as a child?

WP: Well, it was... trees, and a big lawn, which I go back there now and it's not very big, but when you're a kid, it's very big.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: Our playground, where we played. Across the street from the Melrose Houses, where we lived, was the Patterson Houses.

MN: Right, which we know very well.

WP: And, you know, one of the first things we were told is, "You don't come over to the Patterson Houses," you know. Like "Where are you from?" "Oh, we're from Melrose." "You stay in Melrose. Don't cross to the Patterson [Houses]."

MN: Right, right, okay.

WP: There's memories of...the images of it were of these chains that sort of (makes a sweeping motion) you had to sort of go over to walk on the grass.

MN: On the grass, right.

WP: The sprinklers would come up, and they'd have that round thing, and just (makes spinning motion). The construction, because across the street they were building the Webster Houses.

MN: Right.

WP: And we were told, when the new Claremont Projects were built, we'd be moving from Melrose to Claremont.

MN: Right.

WP: But it was a place, I remember we took the bus to school, P.S. 2 and P.S. 3.

MN: Where were those?

WP: Fulton Avenue.

MN: Fulton Avenue. (Turns to the door.) Hi! Oh, the food is here? (Gestures for someone to pick up the food.) One moment. So, you took the bus to Fulton Avenue to go to elementary school?

WP: Yeah.

MN: That's a fairly long trip.

WP: Yeah, it was on 169th, from 156th to 169th, but you had to walk. But my mother trained us to do it by ourselves.

MN: Right. So you were going on the bus by the time you were six or seven.

WP: Yeah.

MN: Right, which was...you're not the only person I know.

WP: I also remember we used to get fresh milk delivered.

MN: To your door?

WP: Yeah.

MN: In the Melrose Houses?

WP: Yeah.

MN: Wow. Now, was Melrose multiracial when you were a child, in terms of the families living there? Or was it predominantly black and Latino?

WP: As far as I can recall, it was predominantly black and Latino.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: But when I got to the Claremont Houses, there were Italian families, and there was even a Jewish family, the Abates, A-B-A-T-E.

MN: Right. Now, so you moved from Melrose to the Claremont Houses,

WP: Yeah, maybe when I was 10 or 11.

MN: Right, okay. Now, there was—were you at all familiar with the little Italian neighborhood near the Melrose Houses? Did that...?

WP: Well, across from where we were, there was a pizza shop I know. And a deli.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: But I was not aware of an Italian neighborhood.

MN: Right.

WP: Because I didn't know what an Italian was.

MN: Uh-huh, okay.

WP: Okay. So we just kind of did what we did, and we weren't really that conscious of who was living around us.

MN: Right, okay.

WP: And that neighborhood, you know, when we got to Claremont, it was a little different. We did have some Italian people. But after the first year, if I recall, all of the non-black and [non-Spanish] people...

MN: Moved out. Right.

WP: They moved out from the projects. And I guess, I don't know, maybe they realized they were in the projects, they didn't like it, they wanted to get a house. And also, my relatives were all buying houses in the upper part of the Bronx.

MN: In the upper part of the Bronx, okay.

WP: Yeah, Deegan Avenue, off the Grand Concourse...

MN: Sure.

WP: Gun Hill Road, they were buying houses up there, and that was kind of the goal.

MN: The goal, if you're an upwardly mobile family, is to buy your own home.

WP: Yeah, yeah. My family was not, wasn't—we didn't think that way. My mother would've loved it, but my father was kind of...he was into, I guess his own political system in a way, you know. He was into talking about the Apache Indians, Geronimo was one of his heroes.

MN: Wow.

WP: And how he would...Geronimo, music, some sports, but...Marcus Garvey...

MN: Right. So there was a lot of political discussion in your home, coming from your father?

WP: Well he would just, somehow, say things. It wasn't any discussion. We didn't talk to our fathers then. (Laughter.) You just said you were afraid of your father. And then they'd say, "Why are you afraid of your father?" and you'd say, "Well, I don't know. We're not *really* afraid of him." Because, you know, my father would come downstairs, and we're playing sports, and he'd buy everybody ice cream. So okay, he never yelled at me, he never hit me, it was always like "Listen to this music," Duke Ellington. "Listen to this. Listen to that." So I said, "Well, Jesus." And then, you know, like... because I met other people's fathers. And there were some fathers you didn't want to deal with, because they were—you know, they drank, they, you know, hit their kids. So there was this unexplainable kind of little distance with my father, but he was kind of watching and always there to sort of help us out.

MN: Wow. Now, how many siblings did you have?

WP: I had one bother.

MN: Older or younger?

WP: He was two years... about a year and a half older than me.

MN: So there were four of you?

WP: Yes, the four of us. And then one day my father came home and gave me a trumpet, gave my brother a saxophone, and he said, "You're gonna to learn how to play this."

MN: How old were you then?

WP: About eight or nine.

MN: Wow.

WP: And so my mother took my brother up to Harlem, to study with a saxophone player named Fats Greene [?]. And then I went to the New York City Music School, which was on 149th Street and 3rd Avenue, so somewhere around Willis Avenue.

MN: And this was in the Bronx?

WP: Yeah, in the Bronx. And so I went from trumpet to trombone to cello to eventually bass, but... my father didn't have a car. All my relatives had cars, my mother's family had cars. My father's family was different than my mother's family. My father's family—he had three sisters who lived on 145th Street up in Harlem. They had kids, but they were all kind of, more grassroots and gritty. They didn't really... the aspirations were quite different. My mother's side of the family was, which I totally understood, was to get a job at the post office, get a civil service job because it was a job that you could keep and there were benefits from the job, and it wasn't for me but I understood why. If you're a domestic and you come up in the south, why working a job like that would help. And their ultimate goal was to turn around and go back down south, which they all did.

MN: Yeah, and buy property down there?

WP: Yeah, buy property.

MN: So that was...you know, you got a civil service job here,

WP: Yeah

MN: And then went down to retire there, in your own home.

WP: Yeah, those that wanted to do that.

MN: And this was in South Carolina?

WP: South Carolina. In Hardenberg, South Carolina.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And some of them would buy...and they didn't believe in—they only paid cash for things—they didn't believe in layaway plans. So they would save money, and when they got enough money they would buy land *and* pay someone to build a house. But we didn't do that, it just didn't happen for us. That wasn't really the way we were.

MN: Right, now was academics stressed in your house? In terms of pressure to do well in school?

WP: No. What was stressed was Duke Ellington. "Listen to music." That's all I was really stressed. My mother, of course, wanted us to do well in school, and we were quite alert and astute as far as academics. You know, reading at an early age and things like that. But it was something that we didn't, like, do headstands over.

MN: Right, okay. So what was your school experience like? Were you encouraged in your musical interests in school when you were in elementary school and junior high?

WP: Well, my brother, they found out he could play the saxophone, so he would play saxophone recitals at the school auditorium. They didn't know what I did, so they didn't bother me, but I didn't like school. I didn't like school, from day one I didn't like school because I had my own kind of world at home with my electric trains and my building buildings and erector sets.

MN: So you had all that stuff? I remember that, the trains and the erector sets from the 50s.

WP: Yeah, because my brother brought home Lionel Trains, you know, for us, but my brother didn't play with them, I played with them. So when it was like, "Oh, you've gotta go to school," I was just like "Oh, man, this just isn't..." (shakes head). And you go to school, and then you become social, and so the first day you're in school, you know, you're sitting there minding your

own business and someone goes pop! (slaps hands) and hits you in the head. (Laughter.) And it's like *woah*, you know, *I could've been home in, like, my nice world*. You know, *why are you doing this to me?* You know, and so you then have to begin to deal with [that]. But what I would do in school is I would—I had very strong discipline—so I would just sit all day like this (folds hands and puts them on table) with my hands folded, and everybody was crazy running around, and I would just sit there, so I always got “Excellent” and stuff, because I was well-behaved. (Laughter.) And, you know, my marks were okay, too.

MN: “Excellent” in conduct.

WP: “Excellent” in conduct.

MN: Yes, I remember those “conduct” grades.

WP: And that meant a lot for the teachers because, you know, I mean with P.S. 2 and then you went to Junior High School 55...

MN: Where was that located?

WP: That was on St. Paul's Place. It was...

MN: I know where that is, yeah.

WP: Yeah, it's on a...where is it? Because it's on Washington Avenue, [or] around there. Bathgate.

MN: Yeah, I know that area, yeah.

WP: And it was a fun school, in a way. But it was also—because that's when you met your characters, you know. You met your...the principal, Mr. Ryan, he would come out and shoot hoops with the people. But then you began to see, like, sports and individualism in like, “You don't tell me what to do!”, rebellion, guys who were, like, very academically advanced, in a way, and it was a—and you had to find your niche there.

MN: Uh-huh. Did they have a school band or orchestra at that school?

WP: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We had Mr. Grosser was the woodwind teacher, and Mr. Nathanson was the string teacher. So that's when I began playing cello.

MN: Wow. Uh-huh.

WP: And Mr. Nathanson was a very very—he looked kind of like Leonard Bernstein, and he was very frustrated, but he could, like, take a music stand and throw it like a javelin across the room. And you'd have to duck. (Laughter.) And he'd lock the door, but it was cool. I loved it. I loved it, you know. (Laughter.) And then he had all these—he had a lot of different people in the class who had, you know, nicknames Scoop, Tebow, The Downs [Downed?] Brothers, and they were

all very talented. So we played some symphonic stuff, we played some folk stuff, and it was, music was fun, but then some people in the school, they had like a schedule they had—we had this guy named Wheezer, and he would have like shop, shop, shop, gym, lunch, shop, shop, shop. (Laughter.) And they used to have these schools at the time called the sixers (21:04).

MN: Oh, the famous, oh yeah, I know all about those.

WP: Yeah, and so you, they'd send you there, because they would label people. They would label people like, "Okay, you're not going to..." So like, what the famous story is that Mr. Peseroff, our guidance counselor, and he taught some other things, he brought all the boys in the room. And he said, "You know, I've gotta tell you guys something. You're never gonna be anything. You're going to be pushing racks in the Garment District, or be messengers. So you better go to a—" because those days, they had academic schools, high schools, and they had vocational high schools.

MN: Vocational high schools, right.

WP: So he said, "You better go to a vocational high school and learn trade." And so, what was wrong with that is that a trade was fine, but the idea that you didn't have a choice, the telling you that you could not...

MN: Right.

WP: That, you know, you aren't going to be anything.

MN: It sounds like out of Malcolm X's autobiography.

WP: Oh, does it?

MN: Yeah, there was a story where the teacher said, you know, [Malcolm X] said he wanted to be a lawyer, and [the teacher] said you're [not capable], you know?

WP: Well, he wasn't like, "Well, William, you can't be a lawyer, a doctor, eh, you can be a writer," you know, all the professions. It was more like, "You're not going to be *anything*."

MN: Jesus. So you weren't encouraged to aim for, like, college, on your own, or anything like that?

WP: No, I wasn't encouraged to aim for anything in school. But on the peripheral, I was very, very lucky to have certain—and this is in junior high school and high school—but we would get like, a substitute teacher would come in, like Mr. Hoffman, who came in and the first thing he said, "I'm a communist." And so people are like throwing stuff, because they're substitute teachers, but he said that, and then the next day, you know, I'm reading the new Communist Manifesto.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: You know, and he's talking about the military industrial complex, he's talking about things about Social Security and healthcare and so, of course, nobody paid attention to him but I heard, and it really lit me up to say, "Okay." Now I go to the library now, and I begin to, like, go down an aisle, and I turn the corner, and books would say, "Come over here."

MN: Damn. Where was your local library, by the way?

WP: The local library in Claremont was...well in Melrose, I think it was on Melrose Avenue.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: In Claremont Projects it was on Boston Road somewhere, up the hill.

MN: Oh, up the hill! The Morrisania Library?

WP: Yeah.

MN: Oh, so you went all the way up there?

WP: Yeah, yeah.

MN: Wow.

WP: There was also a library in the school.

MN: Right.

WP: So I began just doing self-education.

MN: Wow.

WP: I found out about Thomas Dewey.

MN: Wow.

WP: And the Pavlovian Theory, about how school is kind of a place where you, if you give the right answers, you get a treat. (Laughter.) And the idea that it wasn't about making you think. Then I got another teacher, named Mr. Slaughkin [?], who would give us assignments like, "Define 'virtue'. Define 'truth'. Define 'justice'." Of course nobody handed it in except me, but I loved it. So then I began to, wherever I was, began to get an idea that, *Wow, I'm on*—what I begin to call now—a *destiny line*. That I run into people, I meet people, and I'm supposed to meet them and they were right there for me at that particular time.

MN: Damn.

WP: And so Mr. Hoffman, Mr. Hellman, I still remember these teachers because they were always were talking about an alternative idea. Even guys like Mr. Raggio, who was a Spanish teacher, who on Fridays would come in with a Hawaiian shirt (laughter), and he'd lock the door, and he'd but on Harry Belafonte, and just make us...and nobody said, "What is wrong with this guy?" but he'd put on Harry Belafonte and Joan Baez...

MN: Yep.

WP: Where Have All the Flowers Gone, and so he was beginning to play Cuban music, to play all this different stuff, and he'd just be dancing around because the other four days, you know, he had to be strict. And then we had *another* substitute teacher, his name was Mr. Mayberry, and he'd always come in with a tuxedo. We said, "What's wrong with this guy?" He comes with a tuxedo and he goes like this: (puts his head down on the table). He says, "Okay, do what you want to do," and he'd go out and go to sleep. But then one day he came in, and he had a case, and so someone said, "What's in the case?" He said, "That's my trumpet." He was coming home from gigs and then going to substitute teach.

MN: Got it.

WP: So he took out his trumpet one day, and this guy could play, you know. So again, that was another guy that out of nowhere just came, [I] said, "Oh, thank you Mr. Mayberry." You know, it was okay to be yourself. Because that was the whole thing growing up, was that, do you follow what's prescribed, a prescription that's written for you? And how do you resist that prescription, and how do you become yourself, and what is that self, and how do you feel comfortable being that self? You know, because everyone becomes insecure, but if you step into a cloud you can become yourself because you say, "Well, what saves you?" So, well, you know, when my teacher said, "You can't be anything," it went in this ear and out the other ear because I was in a cloud. I was thinking about, you know, Langston Hughes or Kenneth Patchen or some lofty thing that I was interested in. Or reading the dialogues of Socrates, because one of the other assignments was to read *The Republic*.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And so I got that book, and then one of the other things was to read the compassionate teachings of Buddha, so all of these things were, like, dropping on my head. And so I didn't know that the projects were, like, a little, you stacking people up, because I didn't really care. I mean, you go from a tenement to a project, there were no roaches, and no rodents in the projects.

MN: Right.

WP: I mean, people did strange things in the projects, you know, like you'd say, "Is this an elevator or is this a urinal?" (Laughter.) And you'd say, "Well, I think it's an elevator, but..." "So then, what's that corner for?" you know? "You can't wait 'til you get to your house?" You know? So, like, people, you know, that's when I began to learn about...black people are very interesting, you know. They're very interesting. You know, like, people will say, "Okay, okay dear," and it's not just black people, it's people who live in the projects that say, "Okay, can you

change the baby's diaper?" "Oh, sure dear." So you change the baby's diaper, and then here's the dirty diaper (gestures changing the diaper and then throwing it out the window). I'm like, *what was that about?* And they say, "Okay, let's have some water," and I know this because later on I worked in the housing projects.

MN: Right.

WP: I worked in the Madison projects, I worked in the Bronx, in the project I lived in, actually, for a while. And so you'd be out there cleaning the grass, and here comes some water going right down on you. Here come some baby diapers. And it's those kind of things you can't figure out, but if you don't understand it, then you label people and you kind of go, "Oh, all these people are *this*." But no, they're not *all* these people, these people are not *this*, they're human beings, and, you know, they happen to throw diapers out the window (laughs). But, for whatever reason, and they happen to do some self-destructive things, but you kind of learn, you know, to understand people on levels that are beyond what you see. Even the gangster types in the neighborhood, who you're like, *Oh, God*. You know, *Oh, this guy's, you know, Puerto Rican Frankie's out*—the one guy we call Puerto Rican Frankie—you say, *Oh, God*. So you're looking out your window before you go out, and he's walking back and forth, doing his patrols, you and soon as he leaves, then you run downstairs. But then after a while, you begin to understand, at least I did, this guy, and, you know, and you talk to him, and you come to some kind of understanding that he's going to be what he is, and you learn how to deal [with it]. And after a while, you know, you can wear your colors, you can wear your—you know, because we're looking at record covers and trying to dress like musicians, and everybody else is doing what they're doing. You know, playing basketball, you had guys whose fathers played basketball with them, and you get to understand people. And I think that it's very important to understand people, and not demonize people, not put people in categories or classes, you know? "He's bad, he's good, he's this, he's that." Because then you begin to understand, you know, junkies, you begin to understand people who came in the barber shop, and who, you know, guys who never worked but had a lot of money, you know, the numbers runners, you know, the drug dealers. And they'd always come in, immaculate, with a big wad of money all the time [and] buy everybody lunch, you know. So it wasn't like, "Oh, these guys are bad," because you didn't really—I mean, me, I was too afraid to do anything bad, you know, that was my personality.

MN: Did you ever get involved in sports, when you were coming up?

WP: Oh, yeah. You had to be! Well, you didn't *have* to be. Really, if you weren't involved in sports, then you'd be upstairs reading books, or staying away from that. But if you were going to play, you know, we played basketball, softball, hard baseball we didn't—I played in the junior varsity at [William Howard] Taft High School.

MN: Okay.

WP: And then later on I played in the Buddy Young Football League.

MN: Right.

WP: Down in River Avenue, Jerome Avenue, down there, near Yankee Stadium.

MN: Yep, yeah.

WP: And that was fun until playing music kind of took over, and kind of dominated my activity at that time. But, you know, sports was [sic], again, very interesting characters, very interesting people, because a lot of people on our football team were married, they had kids, because the age limit was 18. But that didn't really stop people who were older from playing (laughter). And, you know, like the St. Nicholas Vikings, we'd play them and they'd be on—it was a truck full of nuts (34:18) on River Avenue and Jerome Avenue there, and they'd be, like, smoking cigarettes on the 40-yard line before the kickoff (laughter), and the referees would have—this guy, one ref, had a little pistol.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And he said, "I've got to protect myself."

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: So it was kind of a funny football league, but I did that. And it gives you—there was nothing sterile (34:48) about any of that.

MN: It sounds like you had an inner sort of self-confidence that you could do things your way.

WP: Yeah, just luck, or whatever, I don't know what you call it. But when I ran into other people, musicians from the Bronx, I found out that, you know, just up the block on Washington Avenue were guys who went to music and art who were very, very good musicians who just lived in the neighborhood. And then later on the Housing Authority had a Housing Authority Symphony Orchestra.

MN: Really? For all of New York City?

WP: Yeah.

MN: The Housing Authority?

WP: Yeah, it still might exist. Check it out.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: The Housing Authority Symphony Orchestra. And I didn't audition because I wasn't symphonically trained, necessarily, but I thought about it, and said, *Well, you know, let me...* but I was happy it existed, you know, and so it was really—I mean, I would still have been living in those projects if I didn't keep...all the music I wanted to play was downtown. I kept going from—I used to, you know, sometimes walk from the Bronx to the Lower East Side with my

instrument on my back. I'd go to 155th Street, cross the bridge, and then walk down Eighth Avenue.

MN: Damn, all the way to The Village?

WP: Yep, all the way to The Village.

MN: How old were you when you were doing that?

WP: Like 17, 18.

MN: Jesus. So, at what point did you start playing...well, let me go from there. Did you ever go to see live music in the Bronx, at clubs and theaters?

WP: Well, I played at clubs. I used to play at a place called The Salt and Pepper, which was up the hill on 167th Street between Jerome and whatever the next street is. And the owner had a place called The Sugar and Spice, which was on 163rd Street. There was a club on Brook Avenue we used to play at. I never went to hear bands. I mean, I would go hear a band if they were doing a concert at a library, if they were playing at a...I don't think there were any concerts at the museums, but that's when I would hear music in the Bronx.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And then later on, you know, when I was living downtown and would come back to the Bronx, I played a lot of different places in the Bronx. There were a lot of clubs up near White Plains Road, and different spots.

MN: Uh-huh, right.

WP: But it was...my brother got stabbed once, one night, one Saturday night, and that was in a pizza shop. He was just buying pizza, I guess, and someone stabbed him, but I don't think that was all that had happened, I think there must have been more to it. But I remember going to the Bronx Hospital when that happened to him. And there were certain events and things which made you really want to stay in your house a lot. Because either you were part of a certain lifestyle, or you weren't. And I think the big loss was not really talking to anybody. Although we did have our local philosophers who would be at the barbershop, or stand on the corner and talk about things that were friends. Jarel Hudson, who was very, very well-read, and we'd talk about Malcolm X, we'd talk about civil rights quite a bit. And then there were street philosophers, one guy we'd call Windmill who'd go like this all the time (swings arms like a windmill) and flap his arms, and then he'd come to you and say, you know, something like, "Trees can fly, did you know that?" You know, "Look at them fly, they're blowing." And then he'd tell you something to whet your appetite. And we didn't know if this guy was a wino, he probably was a wino. There was a lot of winos in those days. People would drink this chemical wine a lot in the Bronx.

MN: Like Gypsy Rose, or...?

WP: Well, Swiss Up.

MN: Swiss Up? Okay.

WP: Yeah, Swiss Up was a—it looked like a lime juice.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And it didn't have one grape in it.

MN: Swiss Up, okay.

WP: Yeah. Investigate, Swiss Up.

MN: What about Ripple?

WP: Yeah, Swiss Up, Ripple...

MN: Did you drink Scuppernong?

WP: Oh, I didn't drink.

MN: Oh, you didn't drink?

WP: No, I didn't drink, I didn't smoke.

MN: Wow.

WP: But people around me did, and I've seen people that—chemical wines, we called it—would rot your brain.

MN: Wow.

WP: You know. Rot your brain. So a lot of people did that, you know, and marijuana, and I guess other drugs, but it was...when the rhythm was happening, the projects were happening. The Bronx was happening, you know?

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: We also once a week would come up here, to Fordham Road, to Gun Hill Road, where Evander Childs High School was, and that's where my cousins lived. They went to Evander, me and my bother went to Taft.

MN: Got it. Now how did you end up going to Taft? Is that where most people from your local junior high [went]?

WP: Well, there was either Morris High School, Taft High School...

MN: What about Clinton?

WP: Clinton was too far, you had to take the bus to go there. It was an all-boys school. My cousin went to Clinton, but they had a good football team.

MN: Yep.

WP: Roosevelt High School was another high possibility, but somehow it was deducted that Taft was a better school because it was mixed.

MN: Right, yeah, there were still some Jewish students there.

WP: Yeah, it was mixed, so, going to a high school that's mixed, it might be a better school.

MN: Right, now, so you went to Taft. Did you get involved in music there?

WP: Nope, not at all.

MN: Wow.

WP: Not at all. I should have, but I didn't.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: I didn't. I just liked the idea that you could *walk* there from my house, and you had different classes, and different teachers, that was really cool.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And you'd walk home, and you'd get out by 2 o'clock. You were finished. You couldn't beat that. So it was about that, augmented with self-education, and a blend of things.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: But I didn't have, for some reason, I didn't *really* make a commitment to being a musician until I was like 18. You know, 17 [or] 18.

MN: So when you were at Taft, what did you see yourself doing in terms of making a living? Did you have part-time jobs?

WP: I was afraid. I was afraid, I didn't know how. I didn't want to work on a Coca Cola truck, I had determined that. And then I didn't want to work on the Silvercup Bread truck, or the Wonder Bread truck, because there was a terrible fight one day between the Silvercup Bread guy and the

Wonder Bread guy (laughter) in the store, over putting the bread up. So I didn't know what I was going to do. I mean, I was really, like, in a, you know...

*****Please edit out 42:50 through 43:14 at William Parker's request; his phone rang.*****

MN: So, you're in Taft, you're playing music on the side?

WP: Yeah, I'm playing music, I'm doing different things. I'm writing a lot.

MN: Ah-ha!

WP: That's the period when I was writing a lot of poetry, writing a lot of plays, because when I was in Taft, I had a teacher named Vincent Versalo who read my writing and he took me down to Judson Church.

MN: Judson Memorial [Church], right?

WP: Yeah, where I met Al Carmines. And so we were trying to say, "Oh, well I like this. We're going to try to stage this, we're going to try to do something with this stuff."

MN: Wow!

WP: So I'd say, "Oh, how's that going to happen?" Because I was really into Nikki Giovanni, Mary Maraca, Larry Neil, all the black poets I was into, you know, James Baldwin...and so it was a very, very, very, very, you know, good period at that time. They had the Black Panther office up on Boston Road.

MN: Right.

WP: I would visit, go up there, but they weren't interested in music, so I was trying to get them interested into artsmanship (44:25), Charles Mingus, and some of the music that was, jazz music that was political, but they weren't, you know.

MN: So, it's interesting, there were all these teachers who were influencing you, but the school institutionally doesn't give you a focus, like writing plays for school or playing music for the school.

WP: Not necessarily. It was always, you know, something, a reaction to the school, or a reaction to—you know, you jump off the tracks, and you're on the train going somewhere but you jump off the tracks, and there's a story off the tracks, on the side of the road, that's more interesting than the story you're learning, [than the story] you're headed towards. And that's when I began to get into independent film, at that time. Because the idea of, the whole theory of what Stan Brakhage was into, the filmmaker, was that you're peripheral vision is much wider than your focused vision.

MN: Danm.

WP: And so the knowledge was over here (gestures right) and over there (gestures left), so if you're just focusing on going down there (gestures straight), there's more here (gestures right), and there's more there (gestures left). And those were the harmonics in the music, those were the sounds that you call blurred, that you call, sort of, colors. And so it was very interesting to begin to get into those things, because that's where inspiration lived. And so that study, also my aunt was a Jehovah Witness so I [was] studying that,

MN: Your mom?

WP: My aunt.

MN: Your *aunt* was a Jehovah Witness.

WP: Yeah, my Aunt Elbara [?] (46:25), she was a devout Jehovah Witness so she would come over every Saturday and I'd take these, you know, Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained...so I was beginning to get an idea of spirituality, also.

MN: Uh huh.

WP: And also listening to John Coltrane, "A Love Supreme," so everything was coming together it its own way, and still you had the windows. Like in the Bronx, in the projects, you'd look out the window of P.S. 132, every Saturday morning they had the drum and bugle corps, they'd wake you up on Saturday morning. They were playing and marching, and then what I really liked doing was listening to the kids play in the yard, all these kids and the pitter-patter of the feet and the laughing. And so I would really, like, just go and just listen to that, and that was like music to me. So I was in Heaven in the Bronx. I mean, really. And then what happened when I left around 1970... '72, '73...I got married in '75, but had moved out of the Bronx officially. But when I'd come up and visit my mother, who was still there, my father had passed away already, there was nothing there. She was able to walk to a drugstore [before], and then she had to take a bus to a drugstore. You know, like, everything was closing...

MN: Yeah, so the buildings were either burning or being abandoned.

WP: Yeah, and I would go to a place, I forget the name of the avenue, it was a place where, the singer Maxine Sullivan was up there.

MN: Ritter Place?

WP: Huh?

MN: Oh, The House That Jazz Built.

WP: The House That Jazz Built.

MN: Right, yeah, okay. That was on Stephens Avenue.

WP: Okay. And there was nothing else on the block! Except The House That Jazz Built.

MN: So how'd you—who told you about that?

WP: I just found out about it and ran into this guy, Lewis Rae Miller [?] (48:30), and Bertha Hope.

MN: Oh, Bertha? Oh yeah, sure! We interviewed her! Bertha and Elmo Hope.

WP: Yeah.

MN: Wow.

WP: And so I would start going up there. That was one of my stops, you know, when I was going up there, and I'd play up there, and that was where I met Maxine Sullivan.

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

WP: Bass. I was always playing the bass.

MN: Okay. So this is—so you moved from the cello to the bass?

WP: Yep. And I was playing bass, this is the early 70s.

MN: Right.

WP: And then [in] 1973 there was a place called the Third World Cultural Center.

MN: Wow

WP: Run by Ben Caldwell (49:19), that was on Park Avenue and 167th Street.

MN: The Third World Cultural Center? Because I haven't heard of that.

WP: Yeah. It was run by a poet.-writer named Ben Caldwell (49:29) and it was like the place in Brooklyn—10 Claver Place—called The East.

MN: Yeah, that I know about.

WP: But it was the same [type of place], it was upstairs, I did a residency there, they had a big band up there called The [?] Orchestra (49:42), 1974. Sun Ra played up there, he'd come up from Philadelphia every week.

MN: Third World Cultural Center on 167th and Park Avenue.

WP: Right, yep. And so that was really, like, one of the hubs that we played, Salt and Pepper, Sugar and Spice. And I always wanted to do a concert at the community center on 169th Street, which I still would like to do.

MN: Uh huh.

WP: One of these days.

MN: At the Claremont Houses?

WP: Yeah.

MN: Wow.

WP: Because I've always wanted to. Because I loved when the Jazz Mobile would come by, because the Jazz Mobile, you know, would have the traveling bandstand.

MN: Right.

WP: And it would come by, and it was great to see people come out of their houses and listen to music. Because the theory was that, you know, that you had 16 stories, you had, like, A, B, C, D, E, F (counting)—right, seven apartments on each [floor]. They even had like a nine room apartment, in the projects.

MN: Wow.

WP: Like, if you had, like, 11 people in the family. So what happened was, I always said, "Well, you have enough people in one project building to fill Carnegie Hall." And so the goal was: How do you get these people out of the projects to come out and listen to music? And that's still a question.

MN: Yeah. I [am] very good friends with the principal [at] P.S. 55 in the Claremont Houses, Louis Torres.

WP: Okay.

MN: And he would love to meet you and have you play at that school. He has—it's an amazing school because he has a farm in the school, The Green Bronx Machine. He has a step team, he has teams, it's like a little island of energy, and, you know. So that's your old...

WP: Oh, I'd love to.

MN: Yeah, I will make sure you connect with him, he's a great guy. But this is an amazing story about, like, finding all sorts of inspiration in this, you know, very vibrant, you know, environment, which, you know, people under stress, but there's a lot of variety and creativity to stimulate you.

WP: Yeah, and there was time for meditation. You know, we spend a lot of time doing nothing, just sitting on the bench and—what do you call—people [would] walk by and you'd laugh at them. That was a big thing to do. Or so saw, you know, what they'd call messing with people. And that was, you know, "Oh, I'm just messing with you." But, of course, you can't mess with the wrong person.

MN: Uh huh (laughs).

WP: See, and then in the projects they had, it was a show, a Clint Eastwood Show called "Rawhide," and there was a character in there—something about track down. And so we had—when we had to put housing police in the projects we had a cop called Track Down, and he would always mess with us. And it seemed like if you were doing something wrong, or climbing over the fence, or going in the grass, or doing something Track Down would be there. And he'd get your name and say he was gonna tell your mother. He wouldn't arrest you, he'd just say, "I'm gonna tell your mother." And so you had, up on the roof—there was Track Down, and there was a guy named Brother. Now, Brother used to, was like, similar to the Hunchback of Notre Dame. He was like—or the Phantom of the Opera. You know, on a hot day, you know, people would be opening the fire hydrants, and then you'd look up there and see Brother up there. He'd be on this building, then he'd be over there, and he was running around. So Brother came down one day, and he took a Hawaiian Punch can and put it over the hydrant, and then this guy comes by with his Fleetwood Cadillac. And that thing got wet, and Brother—boy, this guy got out and had a tire iron. This is my thing of how people would really upset me, the violence that people would, like...so he tracked Brother down and almost beat him to death with a tire iron. And, you know, blood was all over the place, and then I'd seen people, you know, hit people with their car, and then get out and start beating the guy because the guy, you know, the guy would say, you know, "I just came from the car wash and you got—you damaged my car!" You know, things like that, like, *crazy* things where, you know, it was like a little dark side of life. But, you know, but that's the way it was. You know, the thing is that, if you survived, part of it was like, it was luck. Some of it was luck. Because some people had, you know, awful parents. Their parents—they would be left alone *all the time*. Their parents would be working all the time, but they survived. Somehow, they didn't get into trouble, they knew, you know, if trouble was coming down this way, they'd be on another street. And most of the time, it wasn't like, "Trouble is on," you know, "on Clay Avenue, so I'm not gonna walk [there]. I'm gonna walk down Teller Avenue." But it wasn't like they calculated it, it was just, you know, I'd call it a guardian angel, or whatever. People had that. I think people have that today, where, you know, [some] people are just kind of protected and have things that kind of help them out.

MN: So how long did that Third World Center last? How long did it stay open?

WP: I don't know. I think, '73, '74...so...it might have been there until the 80s.

MN: Really.

WP: Yeah.

MN: Yeah, because we've got to look that up.

WP: Yeah, look it up. Third World Cultural Center.

MN: Yeah. The East has been documented pretty well.

WP: Has it? Okay, yeah.

MN: Yeah. Jitu Weusi, a friend of mine is writing a memoir with him,

WP: Okay.

MN: And he was very involved in The East, and [a] Brooklyn activist.

WP: Yeah. Because I know they moved from The East to The Armory.

MN: Yeah.

WP: You know, the African Street (56:05) Festival, July 4th. And then—I think they still have it, but I don't know where. I don't make those anymore.

MN: So what year did you move downtown?

WP: 1975.

MN: 1975.

WP: Yeah.

MN: Okay. So you were in the Bronx for like, 20 years.

WP: 23 years.

MN: 23 years. So, do you define yourself as sort of a Bronx person, shaped and molded in that world?

WP: Well...I mean I do. When people say they're from the Bronx and I say, "Well where were you born?" and they say, "I was born in Virginia." I say, "You're not from the Bronx." And then they say, "What do you mean? I went there when I was two years old." [I say, "I know, but you don't have Bronx blood." And so they say, "What do you mean by Bronx blood?" And I say, "Well, you know, [when] you're born in the Bronx Hospital, they've got this blood, [and] you get the Bronx blood."

MN: (Laughing) Okay.

WP: And so, I said—I dote on that. That, you know, like, especially in the music crowd, everybody will say, “Well, we’re from New York,” but they’re not *really* from New York, they come from different places. And so there were very few people who were *actually*, that I knew, who were born in the Bronx, you know, but they were *raised* in the Bronx. And so I say, “Okay, I know you were raised in the Bronx, so you’re from the Bronx.” But it’s—so I don’t really like, you know...then somebody told me about the “Boogie Down Bronx”.

MN: Mm-hm.

WP: I’d never heard that before.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: I said, when—and never—I said, either I was sleeping...I’d never heard that expression. So this guy used it, [and] I said, “Well you weren’t born in the Bronx. You didn’t come up in the Bronx.” He said, “Well, no.” So there’s those kind of expressions, but I never really...if they started giving out money because you were born in the Bronx, I’ll be the first on line to say I’m from the Bronx, but I don’t carry that as a, you know, as a plaque, you know, that I’m from the Bronx.

MN: Right.

WP: But I do when I hear, you know, this thing you kind of say, you know, “Who’s here from Brooklyn?” You know, “Who’s here from New Jersey?” You know, you kind of like, go with it because it’s kind of a—a feeling you get. But I’m not

MN: Right. Uh-huh. Yeah. Now, when you started playing music, did you think of that as your primary income support, or you needed to have a day job to support it?

WP: I had a day job at first, you know. I had a day job until—before I got married, you know, I had to...I went to my father-in-law and asked him permission to get married, and all that kind of stuff, but I had to have a job. I couldn’t say, “Well, I’m going to be a musician.”

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: So I got a job working at the Housing Authority.

MN: Right.

WP: You know, because it payed good money and it’s easy to get a seater [?] (59:03) program.

MN: Right.

WP: And so I was working in housing, I worked in the boiler room, I worked in the gardens, I worked with the maintenance guys. So I learned a lot about electricity, about putting things together, so it was a good job, but in 1975 I quit my job. I mean, later on in 1975, ’76, I quit my

job, and I concentrated on just playing music from then on. You know, I played at The Five Spot with Don Cherry for a week, and then from then on I concentrated on music. And I didn't know how I was going to make a living, but my rent was like \$90 a month, and it wasn't...and that's what the rent was on 6h Street between 1st and 2nd.

MN: Right. Alphabet City.

QP: Yeah. It was [\$]75, and then it went to [\$]90, so it wasn't—it wasn't that big. It wasn't like it is now. So I didn't really think about sculpting a way of how to make a living. I was never really worried about it too much, I guess I should've been, but I wasn't.

MN: Now, did you have, from your growing up years, close friends who you stayed in touch with?

WP: No, no. I don't have anybody I stayed in touch with except my cousins, who there was a *long* period where I didn't stay in touch with them, but I'm back in touch with them now. But as far as the neighborhood and people I grew up with, there's, you know, there's one guy I knew, Jerel Hudson, who actually became a labor organizer, and I'd like to look him up at some point. And I should look up some of the people I grew up with. I mean, I don't know where they are or what they're doing, but I never stayed in touch with them because I'm not, like, a stay in touch, you know...I mean, I've traveled all around the world playing music and doing all this stuff.

MN: Right. Now, as a bassist, who were your major influences musically?

WP: Well, I was influenced by *everybody* that played the bass, but I studied with Jimmy Garrison, and Wolver Ware [?] (1:20), and Richard Davis, and Art Davis, and Milt Hinton, I studied. So all of those people I was influenced by. But mostly anybody that played music and played the bass. I had, like, a big curiosity, so I liked all kinds of music, and I was influenced by it all. And, yeah, it all made a little imprint on me.

MN: Right. Lisa, do you have some questions, you know, to kick into this? I have a few more.

Lisa Betty (LB): Not right now. I forgot the one that I had because we moved on to something else.

MN: Mm-hm.

THIRD PERSON IN INTERVIEW: Can I ask one question? I was wondering if you could tell the story about how you got your first bass.

WP: Well, my first bass was purchased at Bronen's Music Store, which was on Webster Avenue, not too far from here.

MN: Right, it's—yeah, it's still there.

WP: It still exists. And they had a Juzek bass in for a hundred bucks. It was a wood bass, carved bass, and I put down \$1, and that would hold an instrument for you. You'd put down \$1, and then each week you'd pay whatever you wanted, sometimes you'd skip a few weeks, and a few weeks, and you'd pay \$10, and \$5 and so I don't know actually whether I actually paid the whole \$100. I mean, the guy might've said, like, you know, like, "You paid \$98, please, take it." Or I might've paid the whole \$100. It's kind of vague now. But it was paid like—that's how you did things. You know, you'd get these little odd jobs, carrying people groceries from the supermarket, or doing this, or doing that, and...or, you know, finding a dollar here in the house. We weren't very entrepreneurial, me and my brother. We would, you know...I had a typewriter once. I remember getting a typewriter and later on selling the typewriter because I wanted to get something else with it. So you'd barter, exchange, all kinds of different ways to getting money to buy records and...but, eventually I got a bass.

MN: And this is while you're still in the Bronx?

WP: Yeah, I was definitely in the Bronx. And then, leaving Bronen's Music Store to get on the Bronx 41 bus to go back home, you know, I was just about to get on the bus and a guy says to me, "Hey, bass player! You a bass player?" So I turn around, and I'm like "Who's he talking to?" because I didn't know anything about the bass. But he said, "Yeah, you know," You know, if I'd have been playing a flute, he wouldn't have known. Or [if] I played the piano. But a bass you can't hide. So he says, you know, "Come to this jam session." So I got invited to a jam session on Amsterdam Avenue, and I went to the jam session, and I had been playing along with records, because I ran into the bass player Charlie Haden, who played with Ornette Coleman, and he said, "Play along with records." [I] went to the jam session, and I played until my fingers were full of blood. I had no chops. And then I kind of faked getting out of it, and said, "Oh, I have another thing to go to," and—because all these guys were older than me. And then I said, "Okay, well I gotta learn how to play the bass." And then I went to The Jazz Mobile's music school, which was I.S. 201 in Harlem.

MN: Wow.

WP: And that was every Saturday, and I began to, you know, to study.

MN: This was when you were in high school, or this was [when] you were a little older?

WP: Like, kind of out of high school.

MN: Right.

WP: You know, like, just getting out.

MN: Do you have any recollections of when the fires hit the Bronx and buildings started burning and stuff? The abandonment, and that whole phase?

WP: Not really, because, you know, I was [either] absent that day, I was not there, or I was living downtown. I don't know the year that they started, but I saw it on TV. And I know, like I said, visiting my mom, that things were missing, that the infrastructure was, was beginning to...

MN: Right. Because they knocked down the Third Avenue El at a certain point.

WP: Yeah, that I remember. Because then they replaced that with the, the Bronx 41 bus.

MN: Right.

WP: Because that was, you had to take the subway to 161st and then take the bus home. And that I remember very clearly, because I remember it used to be 15 cents to ride the subway when I was a kid, then it went up to 35 cents, then it might have gone to 50 or 75 cents, and then I think it went from 75 cents to \$1.50. It doubled somewhere in there. And I remember the Third Avenue El, it had straw seats and it had fans.

MN: Yep, I remember. So, at what point did you become someone who people said, "Woah, we've got to get him!" You know, where you got to—the skill got to the point where you were really in demand?

WP: Well, the more I played, the more I traveled, the more I...it was like in the 80s.

MN: Uh-huh. So it's in the 80s when you "clicked" as a [musician]?

WP: Yeah, as far as being *known* as a musician, and getting reviews, and—yeah.

MN: And then you were able...so by that time you weren't working any other jobs?

WP: Since 1975 I wasn't working any other jobs.

MN: Right. Uh-huh. So you just, like, this was [everything].

WP: I mean, every now and then I had to get a job.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: Like, I laid the carpet at Studio 54. Yeah, I got a day job—for one day—and part of that job was to put down this red carpet at Studio 54.

MN: Okay.

WP: So I did that, you know, things like that. When you needed money, you had to do it. I had a family, so...but most of the time I didn't have to do a day job. I began to go to Europe in 1978, and then--

MN: Wow. And, now, was this as part of an ensemble, or?

WP: Yeah, yeah. And then I just kept going and going and going, and [I'm] still going today.

MN: So who was the...what was the name of the group that you first went to Europe with?

WP: It was called Ensemble Muntu.

MN: Yeah?

WP: And Jemeel Moondoc and, actually, Billy Bang was in that band.

MN: We interviewed him!

WP: Billy Bang?

MN: Billy Bang! So you worked with him?

WP: Oh yeah.

MN: Damn! Do you know his story? Billy Bang's story?

WP: You know, Billy Bang, you know, in the projects, you know, we'd be practicing in my living room, and my mother would be cooking dinner, and me and Band would be working on our lines.

MN: Because he was a basketball player.

WP: Yeah.

MN: When he was younger. [He went] to Vietnam, he was a tunnel rat in Vietnam, became radicalized, was with the [Black] Panthers, and went down with the [Black] Panthers to buy guns and saw a violin.

WP: Right

MN: And he became a jazz violinist.

WP: See, because those same guys, Badu (9:03) or Clive Hunter, when they went down to Baltimore—see Clive, whose sister is Charlayne Hunter-Gault...

MN: Wow.

WP: And he went to music and art.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And so they were gonna rob a bank, with those weapons. And they told Billy, and he was very intelligent [unintelligible] (9:27), when he was in prison. But they told Billy—he told Billy that, [he] gave Billy the wrong time of the bank robbery. Because when they went down there, Billy bought a violin. And so, I don't know what time the robbery was supposed to be, but when Billy showed up they had already been arrested, on their way to jail. And Billy had another lease on life.

MN: Wow. So they got all arrested down there?

WP: Well they got arrested in New York, for—

MN: The robbery was in New York?

WP: Yeah, I think it was in New York. Wherever they were gonna rob the bank, they failed and got caught.

MN: Right.

WP: And Billy was not with them so he was safe.

MN: Uh-huh. So he was living in the Village also when you were down there?

WP: Yeah, yeah, Billy lived on—

MN: Wow. And so you went to Europe together with that [Ensemble] Muntu?

WP: Yeah, the first time he went [and] the first time I went we went together.

MN: Damn. A lot to think about.

WP: Yeah.

MN: I mean, jazz geniuses out of the Bronx, you know?

WP: Billy was really—Billy was born in Alabama, but, you know, raised in Harlem, but he was really, you know...we had a band, a couple of years ago, called The Boys from the Bronx.

MN: You're kidding!

WP: With a drummer, Barry Altschul, who's from the Bronx, went to Taft High School.

MN: Uh-huh. Damn. They interviewed—Maxine Gordon interviewed Barry Altschul. Do you know Maxine?

WP: Yeah, yeah.

MN: Okay.

WP: And Roy Cavell (second video, 11:05), who was from the Bronx, myself, and Billy. A band we called Boys from the Bronx, because we were from the Bronx.

MN: What year? Was that the 80s or 90s?

WP: No, it was like, shortly before Billy died, about five, six years ago, before he died.

MN: Oh, so he only died...so this is pretty recently?

WP: Yeah, Billy died [in] 2014.

MN: Yeah. Because we interviewed him down in the—in his apartment, in Harlem.

WP: Yeah, yeah.

MN: So you were playing as The Boys from the Bronx, you know, like, 10 years ago or so. Or less!

WP: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MN: Wow.

WP: That was, you know, one of the last things we did. And there are a bunch of musicians from the Bronx, who are—or at least, even if they're from someplace else they ended up moving here.

MN: Yeah, yeah. Mm-hm. So, did you continue writing? You know, doing poetry, doing plays?

WP: Oh yeah, I do it now.

MN: You still do?

WP: I do it now, I do it now.

MN: Did you ever publish a book of poems, or anything like that, or...?

WP: Well, I have a book called—what's the name of that book? *Who Owns Music?* Which is a book of prose and philosophy and theories about music.

MN: Really?

WP: Yeah, I'll get you a copy.

MN: Oh, I've gotta get one, yeah!

WP: Yeah, and then I've got two interview books I did, called *Conversations I* and [*Conversations*] *II*, where I interviewed musicians, and Billy Bang is in that book.

MN: Wow. *Conversations I* and [*Conversations*] *II*?

WP: Yes.

MN: Can you get them on Amazon?

WP: Yeah.

MN: So it's under your name? So if I put—

WP: Yeah.

MN: Yeah, no, yeah I've gotta get these.

WP: Yeah, and then then [there is] one called *Voices in the First Person*, which is the interviews of four visual artists, and it's got their paintings—

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And it's got some poetry of mine in there. So it's like the childhood dream. That was a dream, to come, you know, to—you know, my first dream was to be a teacher, and then my second dream was to write books.

MN: And you've done it!

WP: Yeah.

MN: Damn.

WP: Being a musician was a later on dream, you know.

MN: So to write books was your first dream.

WP: No, being a teacher.

MN: Being a teacher was your first dream.

WP: Yeah.

MN: Now, do you teach music? Did you end up doing that at all?

WP: Yeah, yeah. I was telling [the third person in the interview room] (13:20) I gave a lecture at The New School yesterday. And so...yeah. Because I hated school so much [that] I had to say, you know, "I'm going to be the ideal teacher." And that's what made me want to be a teacher.

MN: Right. Now did you ever teach individual, like, individuals, you know?

WP: Yeah, yeah. I have people come to my house, I taught up at Bennington College, NYU, I taught at New England Conservatory, I do different things around the world.

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: And it's just basically about aesthetics and the philosophy of being yourself and finding yourself, finding your sound, and dipping into what we call the "tone world."

MN: Damn. It's pretty spiritual, it sounds.

WP: Yeah.

MN: I mean, because I think of, like, I have musicians who teach music like at, you know, the Manhattan School [of Music].

WP: Well see that—a lot of people can do that, you know. Eighth notes, quarter notes,

MN: Uh-huh.

WP: But what makes you and individual is the aesthetics, is your philosophy, is your intent when you play. Your idea that music can heal, that music can uplift people, you know, like, not just being able to organize it and read it and play a score.

MN: So are there videos of you talking about music as healing?

WP: Yeah, on YouTube.

MN: On YouTube? Because, I mean, I've sort of into this through—I came up as an athlete, but I think that in some ways music and the arts are even more important now for young people than sports [are], and, you know, getting music into the schools, but also this idea of healing is very powerful.

WP: Oh yeah.

MN: So you have videos of [you talking about this]?

WP: Yeah, I mean, there's lots of talks we've given. Just, you know, look up interviews. I always mention this stuff in interviews, I do, and there's even, like, a lecture from Bydgoszcz, Poland that I did. Actually, I was with Billy Bang that day. We were doing a duo tour, and we got up that morning to go to the train station, and there's nothing worse than a cold train station in Poland and five in the morning in the winter. Oh, we were cold! Just saying it I got cold, I got a chill! And we got on that—we were, like, snuggling together—on that train. Because we were like, “Where's the heat?” There was no heat. But it's beautiful.

MN: Yeah. I'm trying to take all this in. It's intense. But it's also really inspiring that, you know, just thinking, you know, genius and creativity are everywhere.

WP: Oh yeah.

MN: And, like, a small town in Canada, or somewhere in Soweto, or somewhere in Thailand there's somebody, like, everybody's doing this and then somebody's staying back and making, creating, using it as a creative...

WP: And they were that way—I told somebody this yesterday, I said, “You know, they were that way when they were five years old.” You know? Because I see it. You know, you'd see it when they were seven, they were eight, and you could see. If there's nothing [that] happens to this person, and he's allowed to have things flow through him and blossom, it's there. See, I think that everybody has the potential, but they don't [all] really, you know. Because everything is inside you already, it's just a matter of lighting, you know it's like lighting a lamp.

MN: I've got get you together with Louis Torres, this principal. The two of you will just (gestures widely) because he's—you know, that's the poorest housing project in the Bronx now, Claremont Houses, where he is, and he's trying to find that in all these kids. He works 24/7 at it, he's, like, you know. So, yeah...it's...this is what educators now, the best educators, are doing. Finding that spark and letting, you know, unleashing it and, you know especially with all this crazy testing they're trying to do, this rote learning.

WP: You know, the thing is, like, the first thing you learn when you go to school is that George Washington never told a lie. And so, if that's what schooling is based off of, you know, like, and then they say well facts, you know, like, well, you know, the War of 1812, the War of 1813—what happened here, what happened there? And you're, like, in a whole—you're in 2015 and you, you know, and it's, like, you don't even know why you're here. You don't even know why you were born, you don't even know how you got here, and they're trying to tell you about the War of 1812. And it's, like, that could be the most interesting thing in the universe, learning about a war in 1812. But how do you get it to *this* person so that it's interesting, so that you can *show* them that it's full of life, and that when you learn about it you can learn about yourself? And that's the goal of a teacher. I mean, a good teacher can analyze a situation. And I noticed this when I was in, you know, in early junior high school. You know, you have one kid [who] always comes late...and, you know, most teachers just say, “You come late one more time, you're out of my class.” But it's like, okay, why does he come late? Did you *ask* him why he comes late? Did you find out what's going on? And then you find out what's going on, you find out he's the oldest brother, he's gotta take one kid to *this* school-his younger sister—then he's

gotta take this *other* little kid to this school, then he's gotta go to school. And, but, you know, when you don't find that out, you label: he's stupid, he's this, he's that, you're out, you're going to be punished, you know? A kid in the math class, Raphael Vega, he'd always sit in the back of the classroom, and he'd have this art book, and he'd just be, like, looking out the window—he could just look at something, it's a photograph, and they next thing they know it's on paper. And they'd say, "Raphael, you're stupid, man! Raphael you're stupid, you don't wanna do any math," you know, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But I said, "Did you ever look at his sketchbook?" "No, I didn't look at his sketchbook." "Why don't you take a look in there, and then say, 'Raphael,' you know, man, 'that's beautiful.'" Let's talk about how math relates to this, so let's talk about—

MN: There's this rapper, Nas, who talks about this as he's growing, you know.

WP: I know Nas. I know Nas and his father.

MN: (Laughing) Okay. Wow, okay.

WP: Yeah, Olu Dara was his father. We did a movie with Olu Dara and Billy Bang about slavery, I have it at home. It's called [*Coney and the ?*] (20:45). It was never completed, but I've got clips—there's a guy from CBS who was doing it, and I have about 10 minutes of the outtakes of this movie. It's on VHS.

MN: Jesus Christ, okay.

WP: So it's a small world, and things get connected. But, you know, it's, like, you're not gonna let anybody out of this classroom without lighting that fire. You know, you're not gonna let them out and just let them go. You're going to chase them down the street and find some way of reaching something inside this kid, this person.

MN: Yeah. I think that's what I try to do.

WP: Yeah.

MN: That's why I'm 71 years old and won't retire.

WP: Yeah, there you go.

MN: You know. God, we should keep you here.

WP: There you go.

MN: You know, talk to everybody trying to teach, man. It's—yeah. Wow. I had no idea.

WP: Yeah.

MN: So, this is, I mean, I definitely need to connect you—

WP: Okay!

MN: I have—there are these great Bronx principals I work with whose philosophy is so aligned with yours, and I'd love to bring you together with them.

WP: Yeah, it's a philosophy that you have to come up with, you know. It's like, having a kid, you know, you have vegetables and you have candy. Alright, you have a kid—do you give them the candy or give them the vegetables? I mean, you know, if you think about it, the answers all fall into place of how human beings operate and what they need. And it's a very easy solution, if people would just think about it. And you find all the people come up with the same answers, and they all can relate, and if they hook up you've got a nice community, you know. You've got a nice community and a lot of connections that should be connected.

MN: Yeah. Yeah. I'm really blown away by the Billy Bang connection because, you know—I still have the albums that he did with Vietnam.

WP: Yeah.

MN: [Speaking to others in the room] Like, listen to this, he goes to Vietnam, he's a tunnel rat, which is the most dangerous—because he was small and athletic—the most dangerous single thing you could do in Vietnam. Comes back as a black revolutionary, becomes a jazz violinist, and goes back to Vietnam and does albums with Vietnamese musicians and they're *incredible*. You know, and this is, like, from Morrisania, from this [neighborhood], and, you know.

WP: And [Amanda ?] (23:34), that's where [Mandy?] went. And it was reconciliation, because his whole life he's been tormented by this Vietnam thing, you know. I mean, shoot. And I don't want to get into it, but, you know. So, just then he's beginning to get some kind of solace, some kind of—and then, you know, Agent Orange gives him lung cancer.

MN: [Takes a deep breath.] That's what he—?

WP: Yeah.

MN: Yeah. Agent Orange.

WP: Yep. So it's kind of ironic, but if he had been alive, he was really beginning to make that next step, that next leap. And then I think he would've just kept going.

MN: Damn.

WP: Yeah, because he was a brilliant [cat?], man.

MN: Oh, that was a pretty amazing—the experience of interviewing him [was] one of the most memorable [experiences].

WP: Very frank, very clear, very honest, and then he had this, you know, this natural brilliance, you know.

MN: Yeah.

WP: But things that his mother told him, “Don’t go,”—he signed up [to fight in Vietnam].

MN: Yeah.

WP: But, you know, you make mistakes.

MN: Yeah, yeah. And you know, also, Bertha Hope we had an amazing interview with, too, so. I know you’ve gotta go downtown...

WP: Yes I do.

MN: But this was an amazing experience, and I hope we can stay in touch, because there’s so much that you do that connects to what I’m trying to do as a teacher, but also in terms of revitalizing our schools, you know.

WP: Okay.

MN: So—

WP: Alright.

MN: But [speaking to others in the room] any questions?

LB: I think my question was answered by what he was saying.

MN: Sarah?

Sarah Cavanagh: No, I don’t think so.

MN: Yeah, I’m just—yeah.

WP: Okay, so it’s a wrap?

MN: [Nods.]

LB: Mm-hm.

WP: It’s a wrap. Okay.

INTERVIEW ENDS AT 25:42 IN THE SECOND VIDEO.