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Will Calhoun Interview

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Will Calhoun Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Maxine Gordon

Interviewee: Will Calhoun

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Maxine Gordon (MG): [recording starts mid-sentence] – interviews with the Bronx African American History Project since 2004.

Will Calhoun (WC): Nice.

MG: So, it's 160 something. There's several of us. I was brought on to do jazz, which became jazz and Latin music, which becomes 'music' in the Bronx, because really in the Bronx, you can't separate the different genres. They cross, the people cross. There isn't one genre. It's not like other places where, you know, you could just talk about jazz. It became ridiculous to say jazz. And your name has come up for a long time. First it came up with Dawn. She was like, "Will Calhoun is from the Bronx. You must interview him." And I was like, "That brother doesn't have time for that. He's very busy and he's too young." Because what we try to do is interview the older cats, you know, while they're here. Because, you know, we don't want to miss them.

WC: I can understand that. Right.

MG: So I've been looking for the musicians who are living, you know, 70 plus. And then I do research on people who've passed. I'm doing Maxine Sullivan, who was from the Bronx, Elmo Hope, and Oliver Beener. Tina Brooks. Do you know about them?

WC: Tina Brooks?

MG: Uh huh. He was a tenor player in the sixties. He played in the Ray Charles Band. And so did Oliver Beener, he played trumpet. His daughter's working at Blue Note now in marketing, Angelica Beener. But they're legendary in that period in the Bronx when there were these clubs, you know, Freddy's and The Blue Morocco. So everybody says how great they were, but then nobody ever has done any research on them. So anyway, I do that. But we're very pleased, honored. Dawn is very happy because she's nagged me. Then I started nagging you, so we're very grateful that you would participate in our research on the Bronx. So let's just begin. Oh, I have a release for you. I'll show it to you after. You can sign it if you want. Let's begin. This is Will Calhoun. I'll introduce him. Would you like to say when you were born and where? You don't have to say when.

WC: Well, I was born in a hospital in Brooklyn.

MG: Okay.

WC: My parents always lived in the Northeast Bronx, the Baychester section. At that time it was called Baychester, New York. That was in the early 50s. But it's the North Bronx. And immediately upon leaving the hospital, I went home to the Bronx. And that's where I grew up.

MG: Do you know why you were born in Brooklyn?

WC: My mother is from North Carolina –

[INTERVIEW PAUSED]

MG: Your mother's from where?

WC: Originally from North Carolina. And upon her finishing at New York University, she started to work at – I'm going to forget the name of the hospital – Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn. And we originally were going to live in Brooklyn, but she wanted to stay in the – my grandfather was a farmer, organic farming, and her father, who I'm named after, William, he believed in being self-sufficient.

MG: In North Carolina?

WC: Yes.

MG: What part?

WC: A very small town called Pactolus, which is right outside of Greenville. Cigars – they had a lot of tobacco farmers, cane, those kinds of things. Cotton. And he had both livestock and his vegetables. But he felt like New York wasn't a good place to raise children. So he was kind of against it. So, my mother's compromise was to move into a house in the North Bronx and not live in an apartment building, when her other sisters wind up moving in Brooklyn and Queens and parts of Long Island and even in the South Bronx. But she always wanted to stay in the house. That's where that started.

MG: So you never lived in an apartment? You always lived in a house.

WC: And you know what's funny? I always wanted to. (laughs)

MG: Oh yeah, that would seem so cool, right? I know. The kids livin' in the apartment want to live in the house.

WC: The elevator, the doorman, you know, everything. Whenever I visited my cousins, it was just a different experience for us, you know. But the house was, as I started to become a bit older, it was really special. Especially our house, because it was the neighborhood, it was called the Sugar House. All the kids were always there.

MG: So what neighborhood is it exactly where you grew up?

WC: It's right between Gun Hill and Boston Road. The North Bronx.

MG: So what is that called? The North Bronx.

WC: It's the Northeast Bronx.

MG: Northeast Bronx.

WC: And we had a two family house. And my mother decided to take the bottom apartment and turn it into a neighborhood studio. So a lot of – my older brother was a prodigy, played drums.

MG: Oh, no kidding.

WC: Really great when he was a kid. He stopped playing at 21, but at 5 he was really amazing. So he was involved in bands and Latin bands, funk bands.

MG: Oh yeah? Is he living?

WC: He's living.

MG: Well, we want to talk to him.

WC: Absolutely. He just got married so he's on his honeymoon. Oh good. And there's a pioneer of the Bronx that I would like you to bring into this series and he passed away. His name was Pumpkin, Errol Bedward. And Pumpkin, in my opinion, is solely responsible for Hip Hop. Period.

MG: Oh, well we want to know about him.

WC: He's a drummer. He lives not far from Tariq. He was the first one to take the music – not classically trained, pianist, all that – but interesting guy. Originally, his parents were from Costa Rica. And he had the gazelles and the afro and the gold chains, but the guy can play Rachmaninoff and Bach and all of these kinds of things. But he was also street. And he was the first one to take the music and the rap – rapping – and put it together.

MG: When would that have been?

WC: I would say mid 70s, 72, 73 is when it started –

MG: So why does he not –

WC: He was selling beats to labels in 1974, 1975. Before - first one I saw was the LinnDrum, a drum machine, which at that time was almost the size of a keyboard now. Pumpkin was kind of like our hero because he played fusion, he played jazz, he had Miles' music, he had Dexter's music, he had Mahavishnu, he had Sly Stone. Yeah, so he was a neighborhood hero for us, and he was full of love. He only was happy. I never saw him pissed off. Always was happy, always cracked jokes, but he had a gift I think from God. When he played a beat, you just felt good. You started dancing. Sometimes as a kid as I watched him practice in his garage, when we would open the door there were 75 or 100 people standing out on Laconia Avenue, just listening.

MG: And where is this? On Gun Hill?

WC: Laconia Avenue. 223rd and Laconia Ave is where he grew up.

MG: He lived in a private home also?

WC: He lived in a private home also. Steve Jordan, also, locally, around the corner from me, from the Bronx. And those, as a kid, those were the two drummers I would stand on a crate and look into the garage window and watch them practice. Pumpkin –

MG: And your brother, what's his name?

WC: My older brother's name is Charles Calhoun.

MG: Charles Calhoun.

WC: And that was a different generation. That generation was the kids that were born around 1956. And in that generation, bands were horn sections, keyboard, background singers–

MG: And they played latin.

WC: They played latin music, they played salsa, and they played in the park, and their parents organized bands.

MG: What park?

WC: Haffen Park for us was the main one, in the Bronx, in the valley. When you wanted to see something cool and new and hip, you went to the valley. That was the park where we saw the beginning of it. Turntables were not on stage. They were nowhere to be found.

MG: See this is so good for us. Because we, you know, the people, how we start this project is about Morrisania. And so when you do that, then you talk about Sedgwick and you talk about Kool Herc. Nobody – this is the first time we have moved out of the neighborhood, where of course other stuff is happening everywhere. You know, it's not just happening in Morrisania

WC: Absolutely. Now there's a box set available, the label was called Enjoy. And now they have a compilation of Pumpkin's work. His nickname was Pumpkin because he was just like a really – he had a big afro. He was like a brownish, light brownish colored brother and he was round. So he's got the nickname Pumpkin. But Pumpkin, I have to say, single handedly instrumented – created – that scene. It wasn't existing like it was. Herc and those cats are killing. They came with turntables.

MG: Later though?

WC: Later. In the Bronx – I'll speak for the Bronx. When it started, it was the best singers, guys who could sing like Marvin, Eddie Kendricks, so on, and the best musicians, who could play straight ahead, who could play jazz fusion, who could play salsa, who could play merengue, the best of the best of the best got together. And rapping was with singers who were rapping about positive things, and the bands were always the best musicians. That's the way it started. DJs weren't even allowed in the park at that time. They weren't even – that was for clubs. That was for somebody's pub. It wasn't credible at that time.

MG: Wow.

WC: To come on stage with a turntable, you would have got thrown out of the park.

MG: (laughs) Did you play in the park?

WC: I only watched. I was a kid, I was a fan. I was 10, 11, 12 years old and I was sitting there just taking it in, taking it in. I don't want to get too much off on a tangent, but I can't not talk about Pumpkin because people don't know about him enough. And he's a king. He was a king for us. He was a Miles for us. He was a Hendricks for us. You know, he was a Coltrane for us, without a doubt. And the guy had it. Some people have it.

MG: Could he make a living?

WC: Of course he made a living. Of course he made a living.

MG: Playing music and hustling his music, or...

WC: In those days it was easier, because what I liked about the beginning of hip hop was they didn't want to be on record labels. They didn't wanna be in the – they were so locked out of the scene. They already had a scene.

MG: Right.

WC: Let's look at the reality of how the industry is made. The math of it.

MG: That was to their advantage that they were locked out.

WC: But they already had their fans. They didn't have to go looking for people. When they played in the park, it was packed.

MG: And so did they sell?

WC: They sold records out of the trunk of their cars. You put the money in your hand. Or you went to the local DJ in whatever local clubs and the Disco Fever, you know, the Audubon Ballroom. You went to these places and you gave the guy your print, your press. And he would either say “no” or he would check it out. And if everyone started dancing, it was a rap. You knew that that was a hit song and those guys made it a hit song. So it was a different kind of connection at that time with rap music – to me – musicians, rap, and styles–

Dawn Russell (DR): Can I say something?

WC: Yes.

DR: It just reminds me of the last interview I did, which was with some guys from the beginning of hip-hop, from in the 70s. DJ Rock'n'Rob, and quite a few of them, and they were all people

who played with Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel and all these people, and I'm struck by the fact that they said the same thing. They said at that time, nobody was thinking about how to get an on record label. You wanted to sell this shit to your friends.

WC: Yeah, yeah.

DR: You know, you wanted to get a name in the community. They said it never even occurred to them. So the music then just had a different spirit because of that.

WC: And if you go to Africa and you go to South America and you go to these countries and you go like – in my research, I've spent probably 60 percent of my time with music and musicians that don't play for entertainment reasons. They're only spiritual reasons, they're drum rhythms for healing people, rhythms for medicine, weddings, a woman wants to have a healthy baby. What's called a pre-marriage is when the woman decides – the young lady decides – she's going to get married and the families meet and there's a four day jam session, all of this killer music and great food and everyone's looking great. You know, these are the first – when I started to research – these are the first things that I looked into rhythmically. And I guess the best example that I could give to it is most people are James Brown fans, and if you listen to James Brown after 1969, you'll hear – his Nigerian trip that he took in 68 and 67 – you'll hear the immediate influence on how James changed his band.

MG: Exactly, it's exactly true.

WC: And the horn started playing rhythmic things.

MG: Ray Charles after he went to Brazil.

WC: Exactly. These are – there's Fela and there's other Nigerians. Nigerians groove. Their thing is groove. It's a groove for weeks, months, and years. James took the best bits of that, in my opinion, and mixed it up with New Orleans funk and this kind of vibe–

MG: You know when Salif Keita came to NYU, he was a visiting scholar, you know, so he was here for a week. And so they had these seminars and his translator at this seminar was Angelique Kidjo.

WC: Oh wow.

MG: Cause you know, he can speak English, but he didn't. Anyway, so she was translating. So the anthropologist asked him, he was like, “Well, you know, in your traditional music–”, you know, African traditional, they like to keep him in some kind of box, “--what would be your

greatest influence?" And so he said, "James Brown." So they were like, "Well, no, we mean African." And he said, "James Brown's not African?". (laughs)

WC: Oh, he is a very special man and a very clever man. And I was in Mali, so—

MG: Yeah. Yeah. I want to ask you about that.

WC: So I recorded in the studio, I recorded with Oumo Sangaré—

[INTERVIEW PAUSED]

WC: — it's a brilliant guy, and a lot of — it's difficult for people to understand, in some of the western world's arrogance, the connection between spirit and music and wherever it comes from, with the spoken word and jazz and rock and funk. And sometimes the power nations want to sort of build up this wall of "We have it, it's here, it's ours."

MG: And have these categories.

WC: And these categories. And I think that's the beginning of the end.

MG: I want to go back to the Bronx. So, okay, where did you go to elementary school?

WC: I went to Lutheran schools. I had a very interesting childhood. I went to Lutheran schools and I went to — first school was Grace Lutheran. First I went to a — excuse me — a Montessori preschool and first grade. And then I went into Lutheran schools, Our Saviour Lutheran, which is still on 199th Street and Valentine Avenue.

MG: I didn't know they had such a thing as Lutheran schools. A lot of kids?

WC: Oh yeah, a lot of kids.

MG: What kind of kids? Black children?

WC: For some odd reason, in the Bronx it seemed to be, you know, 70-80 percent black students, a few Spanish students, and they were always in these racist Italian neighborhoods.

MG: Right!

WC: That's just the — that was the makeup.

MG: Did you have to cross into white neighborhoods to go to school?

WC: Absolutely.

MG: So what – how's the boundary there when you were a kid, where it becomes Italian?

WC: My generation would be leaving from, I guess like, The Gun Hill Road/Boston Road area and heading over to the Morris Parks section of the Bronx. That was Italiano.

MG: And Jewish too? Or just Italian?

WC: Jewish were closer to the Gun Hill Road/Boston Road side. Cause I went to Jewish camps every summer and I went to Jewish music schools every summer.

MG: Were there other black children?

WC: A few, but my mother just felt like you got to do something else. So we went to Pearl River. And we went up to Pearl River, upstate New York, and went to the Jewish – I had to learn all of these kinds of songs in Yiddish and the whole vibe, it was an interesting experience.

MG: It probably was good, right?

WC: It was an interesting experience, but all my summer camps, there was an organization which still exists called Bronx House, so at Pelham Parkway, in the Bronx, and they had ballet and violin and summer camps, and my piano lessons started out also at Bronx House. So Bronx House was my–

MG: And how old were you when you started piano?

WC: Eight years old, something like that.

MG: Wow, great. Just you and your brother?

WC: I have a sister in the middle who's also a brilliant dancer and a brilliant singer, but also like my mother, a brilliant academic. So she went through the kind of – I was the rebellious one that just basically said, after – I didn't even want to go to college – but anyway, after college, I'm going to just come back to New York and find out who I am and be an artist. You know, I felt like New York had what I needed between the clubs, the record stores, the private people I can study with, drummers, piano players. I just felt like, why go away to college when, you know, you have all these tremendous musicians that you can just phone up and say, “Can I take a brush

lesson, or can I take a harmony lesson?" And you had the best of the best. You had the records in your collection.

MG: So were they Lutherans? Or you just went to Lutheran school because that was—

WC: I went to Lutheran school because my mother felt like she didn't trust the public school system. She wanted us to wear uniforms because she didn't want us to be caught up in the jacket and the sneakers and the latest turtleneck and the latest—

MG: Was your father from the South also?

WC: My father is from Norfolk, Virginia. Military – he's a Naval engineer, civil engineer. So he wanted me to get into that scene, but we're left and right when it comes to politics. So being in the military was not on my top 100 list anyway. So he was immediately – he was an interesting guy. I mean, he had an amazing record collection in the house, and I have to say, that was my introduction. My parents separated when I was young, but he left all of this tremendous music of Mahalia Jackson and Harry Belafonte. Sparrow, Coltrane, Gillespie, Miles, all of this. So we had this international music scene. But the interesting thing was when one day he said, what do you want to – he would always tell me, you know, "listen to Parker, he's a genius. Dexter's a genius. Hendrix is a genius. This one's a genius. Everybody was a genius." Okay. And then he said, "What do you think you want to do when you get older?" I said, "I think I want to be a musician." He said, "You can't do that. Whatever gave you that idea? Those guys are all drug addicts."

MG: Right, I know. It's a horrible life! (laughs)

WC: After like eight years of telling me about all these hit records, you know, when I decided I wanted to do it, it was a crime. But, I'm into taking information for what it is, even if it comes from a bad source or a good source. It doesn't make a difference. The most important thing is the information and that you get it. And I was fortunate to have those records.

MG: Yeah, right. It's always the records.

WC: Cause Sparrow was my first introduction to sorta rap. The Mighty Sparrow. I liked his records because it was – he had Moms Mabley records as well. So there were all of these different things that I could go in my living room and—

MG: You know, I never thought about Moms Mabley in relationship to rap. But yeah, she rapped.

WC: Yeah, she did. She did some things with music too. And she was entertaining, and she was really funny, and those were the days when I guess you would sit in your living room and you would put all of these album jackets on the floor and you can read them and you know, it was a different kind of an experience as a kid growing up and listening to these kind of things. So the Lutheran thing was – I'm not Lutheran, never wanted to be. I went to those schools. I left that grade school and went to a high school called Our Savior Lutheran on East Chest– no. What's the name of that school? What's the name of that street? I'm sorry. It's in the Morris Park section as well. Williams Bridge Road. 1774 Williams Bridge Road.

MG: That's the stop for the MTA, right? Yeah, yeah.

WC: Extremely racist Italian neighborhood. Bats, 30 year old guys chasing – we were like in fifth grade. Yeah. Yeah. It was–

MG: You had to run.? Oh, that's like Woody Shaw going to arts high school where you have to run through the Italian neighborhood.

WC: It was insane. And then when I got to the 10th grade, and I'm the youngest in my family, period. My cousins, my brothers, everyone's older than me. And I just told my mother, “I'm done. I'm not running. I'm not, you know, if I have to get a weapon, I'll get one. I'm done. This is it. How are you paying to send us to a school where the school doesn't protect the students? That's the investment of the school.”

And I was on the basketball team and all these kinds of things. So I would get out of school late, me and my friends. And we always had to kind of take the rush together. And, you know, watch out for my – most of the time it was just lip service. But there were a few times when it got physical. And there was one time when we didn't want to wait for it to get physical. So we just went for it. And they called my parents, they called my mother's house and they said, “Hey, you know, William was involved with this altercation.” And I told my mother, “Wait a minute, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. My cousin that's 15 years older than me went through this. My cousins that are 10 years older than me went through this. My brother and sister went through it, and now I'm going through it. And they're telling you I'm causing an altercation.” Well, I gave my mother an option. I have an extremely strict aunt in Brooklyn, who's extremely strict. I told her I'm either gonna move in with her or I'll go to school in the South. I'll go back with my grandparents. Because this is it. Or I'm gonna go to a local school where I can walk and go to school finally with my friends that I grew up with. So I went to Evander Childs. It was great. Ironically, there were not that many white kids in school and nobody bothered them. And they had their heavy metal tshirts–

MG: You had a music program, right?

WC: A great one. Great one. College and career counseling. You can – teachers can come visit.

MG: You played the drums then, right? In high school, or no?

WC: In private school, we were fortunate. I'll tell you why I love being at the Lutheran School. We were able to – I don't know how it happened – the musical director for The Wiz, the original one, wound up coming to our school to get a job.

MG: Oh, what's his name?

WC: Alex Alexander.

MG: Yeah, right.

WC: And he had a gift of pulling things out of people they didn't know that they had. And he was a genius at it. So, I don't not go into the school because Mr. Alexander had a massive impact and role on me becoming a musician. He used to say “Calhoun, you have to”-- he always felt like I played the slow songs better than the fast songs. “You only like to play the ballad. You got to learn how to play--” you know, and he was, he was a cool young dude. The girls liked him.

He was hip. He was off of Broadway. He had the jewelry and the hair and high heel shoes. So he was, he was kind of young, a little bit older than the seniors. So he related to us. He wasn't a stiff guy that graduated from Concordia College and had a tie and a plaid jacket. He was a guy that was at the clubs, in the record stores, knew the latest songs, you know, and was a brilliant pianist. And he sort of was my first introduction into the life of music, studying, practicing, rehearsing, perfection, those kind of things, because he was a perfectionist. He believed in rehearsal until you – like Jack Lane, you know, work out until muscle failure. And Mr. Alexander had this kind of quality to him. And when I left the school, I went to Evander. I looked into a magazine and there was a school starting called Drummer's Collective. And I did really well in school that year and my mom wanted to give me some kind of a trip, like a gift, you know, a flight to go somewhere. And I said, “You know what I'd like to do? I'm gonna spend my whole summer at this school.” She thought I was crazy, but I said this – I called the school, went down there and I met Horacee Arnold. And to this day–

MG: You were in high school then? When you stayed with him?

WC: I was in high school.

MG: Wow, he loves you.

WC: And to this day – he's like a father to me, Horacee. And I met Horacee and he told me, “You know what? Don't come to the school anymore. Come to my house.” And Horacee really, really–

MG: For the sake of the record, let's talk about Horacee Arnold. So that, you know, we say his name, we both know who he is, but unfortunately, more people should know who he is and don't, right?

WC: Absolutely. Well Horace Arnold is a very interesting and tremendous artist who did some very profound records for Columbia. Drummer, composer. He worked with Woody Shaw and Chick Corea and I think one of the original versions of Return to Forever, when there was some kind of acoustic thing. But anyway, tremendous, tremendous, tremendous drummer, and Horace opened up for me. That's how I met Max. That's how I met R Blakey. That's how I met Elvin. I was a student, I was 16 years old, and he was taking me to The Vanguard, taking me to The Village Gate, taking me to The Blue Note, and I got to see the guys up close.

MG: He's a very generous person. Excellent teacher. He taught at William Patterson. He lives in my building, he has a studio in there. And, you know, whenever he sees talent like he did with you, he encourages it. He's very close to Max, you know, we are praying for Max Roach in this – you know, this is a difficult time. So I'm glad, you know, that we're talking about him. And of course, he's a very independent person, which is why maybe people haven't heard of him or his career didn't advance like it should, because he really had his own idea of staying out of any category and made this very original recording. So I remember because Dexter was on the label at the same time. When he had the opportunity to make those records on Columbia, Bruce Lundvall was the president.

WC: Yeah, yes yes.

MG: So there was a moment, you know, but then you know, of course with anything that's you know so called “experimental,” you know, it just sits there. But you know, never deterred him. He's a very positive guy. I never heard him complain, you know.

WC: I was really – am, and at that time – very fortunate to meet people like Mr Alexander and to meet Horacee Arnold and stuff. And Horacee also took me to the business side. I went up to the Zildjian cymbal factory and I met the Zildjian family and they gave me cymbals. I mean, I freaked out. They gave me a set of cymbals and they said, “You know, maybe one day you'll get in the band and you'll do something with yourself. But anyway, take these cymbals.” And I still have them. I have the bag and the cymbals.

MG: You don't use those cymbals, though.

WC: No, no, no, no. Those are archived now.

MG: Yeah, good.

WC: But Horacee was the one who, you know, called my mother and said, "Look, I'm driving up. We're gonna go up and spend the day, we're gonna go to the factory." And I went up there with him, and I got to see how they're made. The wall with all the legends, all these things when you're a teenager, they inspire you.

MG: Is that when you decided to be a drummer, or to be a musician?

WC: I decided at 16. Yeah, I was into motocross before that. It drove my parents crazy.

MG: (laughs) This is safer.

WC: I wanted to be the first African American motocross champion. So I took private instruction and taught to lift weights and get into my whole vibe. And my mother bought me a bike which was quite shocking – off road riding. And I just got hooked. I started buying magazines, I started to learn how to fix transmissions and do things with the motor. I just really got hooked on it.

MG: You still ride?

WC: No, no. It's probably good. I'm addicted to it. I wouldn't ride on the street anyway. Maybe a couple of years from now I can buy some property and I can just ride out in the woods. I would prefer that. But, that was – the motocross thing was a mental strategy of, I raced, but I raced really with myself. It was me and my helmet, knowing that I had to do all the things right. I had to brake right, I had to shift right. And then once I–

MG: It somehow relates to the drums though, right?

WC: Absolutely. Well you're trapped on the machine, and you have to make–

MG: And both feet, both – everything working at once, right?

WC: Yeah, it was such a beautiful meditation moment when I felt like I was – it was silent. Although it's loud and you're racing, I felt like I was in a hot tub or some room with a nice pillow. Because it's your thoughts and you're making sure you're doing all the right things on that machine. And whenever I did, I won. It was really a simple thing. You didn't race against

people or, this guy's bike is louder than yours or bigger or brighter. You know, I was taught to really know the machine really well. How it works. And that was, at 16, I sold my bike and put the money down on a drum kit.

MG: Wow.

WC: And that's when I did the transition into Drummers Collective and meeting Horacee, and then taking private lessons with Horace. And—

MG: Who else did you study with?

WC: Tommy Campbell. Kenwood Dennard. One of my favorite teachers of all time, Kenwood Dennard. Lenny Nelson in Boston. And then I just took lessons from people when I could, you know, Ed Thigpen.

MG: Oh yeah? He's a great drummer.

WC: Elvin – I didn't study with Elvin, but I've seen him play about 300 times.

MG: Or like, when my son asked, “Elvin, I need a lesson.” He said, “Come to the gig. There's your lesson.”

WC: The last thing he told me was, “Will, just play every day.”

MG: Right. Now there – they'll never be, in this, – I mean, I'm here to say on tape: There's only one Elvin Jones. That's it. Okay. That is it.

WC: To me, he was rock. He was jazz. He was the Congo. He was electric. You know, he was – when he played, he had all of those elements to him. I never – he was undefinable in a lot of ways. He played with Train, and he did his own thing. But when I heard Elvin as a kid, I heard rock and roll, I heard funk, and I heard African music in his playing, you know. And he had this amazing technique sometimes of being a heavyweight champion in one hand and a ballet dancer in the other hand. You know what I mean? He can just—

MG: And when he played with brushes. Oh my god.

WC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He could knock you out of your seat, but he could also play something so subtle and so soft you almost couldn't hear it. And that's having a dynamic personality, outside of being a dynamic musician.

MG: When he – I lived on 12th Street, he lived on 11th Street. He got drumsticks for all the kids on the block. So this is like '64. And so – and then he showed them all the rudiments, right? And in those days you had metal garbage cans. So at 7 in the morning, all these kids would be playing, and people are screaming out the window. And he'd be like, "They sound good," you know. And people were cursing at him, "How could you do that?" and he said, "Would you rather they did something else?" And they were all like, "Mr. Jones, Mr. Jones, how am I," you know, it's hilarious to hear like this orchestra. That was great. He was something to–

WC: Special man, special man. When you guys come to my place, you'll see one of the – I'd say it was more spiritual gifts I received from one of my friends when I purchased my place. It's a massive photograph of him in the studio.

MG: Oh, no kidding.

WC: On the kit, with the cigarette. And he's got the, you know. One of Coltrane's recording sessions. My friend, he's a fireman, and we grew up together.

MG: I know the photo.

WC: And when he bought the – he bought a – maybe it's the size of this board piece you have here. It's huge.

MG: Wow.

WC: And that was the first thing – I mean, when I moved into my place, I had no interest in furniture. I just wanted to play. And when I had a stereo and a couch, I was happy. No phone. I didn't – but that's the first thing that I put as a piece of art in my house, for at least the first two and a half years. So, that was a very, very sensitive moment.

MG: Well, we have – we're not the only ones – but those who have Elvin in common, you know, we have something. That was something special. But I want to hear –so when you graduated at Evander Childs you went to Berklee, right?

WC: I went to Berklee. I decided–

MG: Did you ever have a local band when you were a kid?

WC: No, because the drumming in the Bronx means you played with six bands. It was like a library card, you know. You knew – people knew who the hottest drummers were and you just

played around. So, to be honest with you, in the end of high school and in my summers from school, I worked at the Parks Department. I played in those band trucks.

MG: Oh, in the band shell? Oh, in the trucks.

WC: In the truck. You go to different neighborhoods. I had a funk band. We just played the pop, the top 10 songs. We mixed it up with some other stuff.

MG: All local cats?

WC: All local cats from the Bronx. We did Haitian music sometimes. We did, you know, reggae, dub, but basically played the popular R&B tunes and we would throw in some Bob Marley and throw in some James Brown and throw in some Sly Stone. And that's how I paid for my cases for my drums and things like that.

MG: Were you the leader?

WC: No, no, no, I wasn't a leader. I was hired by – we all knew each other. One of my friends, the keyboard player's mom, worked with the Parks Department and she got him the position. And he just brought people in. And I did it maybe five or six years in a row. So I was also, all summer, five days a week in Staten Island, Queens. You have to do at least two or three a day. And you know, you get – it was well paid.

MG: Good experience, right?

WC: It was great pay, great experience. I learned about New York City, parts of Staten Island I didn't know, and Queens. And it gave me a chance to do what I love to do. So, graduating from–

Production: What was the name of that band?

WC: The band that I – at that time, at the Parks Department, had a horrible name. It was called Fun Shine.

MG: Uh, oh! (laughs)

WC: We were all dead against it, but the person who writes the checks felt like that was the appropriate title.

MG: Fun Shine. He didn't know what shine meant, right?

WC: So I had to just, every time they announced the band, put my fingers in my ears. But it was a great experience and they were great musicians on the stage with us.

MG: Any of them continue on?

WC: All of them went on to play.

MG: They're all professionals?

WC: Oliver Lake and, yeah. Hiphop. They all went on to do many, many different things. Guys went on to do – even some of them went on to, you know, bigger – Ashford and Simpson, Sting, and Whitney Houston and those kind of gigs. So yeah, we all – I was just, I always felt like I wanted to do my own music. I love doing cover songs and I lean always towards trying to find my own space and my own sound. Elvin and Max and R. Blakey and these kind of drummers reminded me of the importance of that. Learning about music, but also having your own thing. So, my parents didn't want me to go to Berklee because I got into NYU.

MG: Oh, you did.

WC: And you probably know Abdul Malik was teaching and running the program at that time. And Abdul's wife worked under my mother at Kings County.

MG: Oh, no kidding.

WC: So, she told my mother–

MG: What's her name?

WC: I don't remember her name. She told my mother – my mom would go to work, as the ladies do, and the chatting at lunch. And said, you know, “My son's hooked on this Berklee and this music. I don't think he's qualified.” And she says, “You know what? My husband, he's a bass player.” And I knew who he was. My mom came home and said, you know–

MG: “Have you ever heard of this guy?”

WC: “Of course, I got his music.” “We're gonna go talk to him.” I was like, great. So I went down to NYU. Academically was accepted to the school, but I needed to do like an audition. My parents were there, and for me, it was like poetic justice just to meet him, talk to him about Morocco and Islam and the music, jazz and this kind of stuff. And he told my parents right in front of me, “He doesn't need to go here. He's got his own – you should let him go to Berklee.”

MG: Oh, good.

WC: So it was a really amazing, amazing, amazing, amazing moment. And because they didn't trust me so much, I went to summer school. I finished at Evander, two days later went up to Berklee for the summer program to see if I liked it.

MG: Right. That's a good idea.

WC: And I liked it. I called my parents back and I said it's fine, but I felt like I was missing out on the immediacy of New York, so I became a recording and engineering major. I changed my major.

MG: Yeah, I saw that you did that. I think that's very good.

WC: And I decided to study the drums. Horace was around, Kenwood was around, Tommy Campbell was around.

MG: Instead of majoring in the—

WC: Benny Nelson. Why major, I'm from New York? So, I took the recording and engineering. And I took a few courses at Harvard. Psych and some other science and some other things, because they had a program where you could do that.

MG: Yeah, consortium.

WC: Yeah. So, that made it interesting. And Boston is a great educational city.

MG: And that was very good that you had to learn the skills of recording.

WC: Absolutely. Absolutely. I was torn in between film scoring and—

MG: Have you done film scoring?

WC: Yeah, yeah, I've been to Sundance. I have a couple of — I'll give you — I have done a couple of films. I'll get you a copy.

MG: Good, I want to see it.

WC: I scored a few documentaries and stuff. Really interesting, but that's another head. It's a scene and you know, it's the way they want you to be. The agents are different. It's much easier to play music. But, it's a good scene. You can stay at home and–

MG: It's good to have.

WC: Yes. You can be creative and get paid well and be right in your house.

MG: I advocate that for young musicians.

WC: But after Evander, Berklee–

MG: Did you play in a band when you were in Boston?

WC: I had my own group in Berklee. It was called Dark Sarcasm.

MG: Were you writing?

WC: I was writing–

MG: What was it called?

WC: Dark Sarcasm.

MG: (laughs) That's to make up for Fun Shine, right? It's like the opposite of Fun Shine, Dark Sarcasm.

WC: I was an engineering major, so I figured I'd record my band and get myself a deal. Which the school was against me doing, but I had to try to – I was under the radar. So I figured I'd have a band. I played around in Boston often. Really started to get into composing. Had to get back to the piano. A little acoustic guitar. And then I decided to start writing my own material. And Berklee was my opportunity in learning how to write, record, cut tracks. You know, in an environment – you don't have a lot of time, you don't have a lot of money, you have to nail this thing. That was the beginning of my introduction into playing live and recording, knowing the difference, how to tune my drums for both, how to approach both. How to hit the instrument differently and, you know, how to get headphone mixes. All of those things. How microphones work. Baffling, reinforcement with the room, how to make the room sound – like to get big rock and roll sounds, we didn't have a lot of time, a lot of money. So what I would do is we put microphones on my kick drums and plugged them in the big bass speakers. And then put the speakers in the room with the other microphones. So you have twice the sound being recorded at

once. Those kind of things, you know, imaging. We call it sound imaging. These were the things that we would experiment with.

MG: But is that your own idea or is that some technique that they've been using?

WC: It's a technique that's been going on for – not, I'm sure they use better cabinets than bass stands. But we, we decided to sort of–

MG: Good idea.

WC: You know, yeah, I'm sure the Beatles did it and Led Zeppelin and all those other guys did it as well, I'm sure. But the imaging was interesting for me because then you can color your music, academically color it. There's the coloring that you do with your technique, and then there was the things like, I wanted to know why when you heard a Motown track, you knew it was Motown. And even if you didn't like the song, you wind up liking the song. There were elements of those songs, there were elements of TSOP, you know, there were elements of Columbia, there were elements of Blue Note that we knew. CTI, you can go down the list. They had these sounds.

MG: Blue Note, Rudy had the sounds.

WC: Yeah, yeah. And being – I've been to that studio one time, and it's just as well built as The Power Station.

MG: Oh. Unbelievable.

WC: So, that was one thing I started to understand, and that helped me to focus on my environmental playing, as well as my academic playing.

MG: Wow. That's very good. Very, very good. So, when did you – did you form Living Colour, or how did that happen?

WC: I didn't form Living Colour. Living Colour was an interesting story. Before Color was–

MG: What year did you – was the first recording?

WC: Living Colour existed before I got in the band.

MG: Oh, before you went in? Oh, they had a band?

WC: Yeah, Mark Ledford was a lead singer and he had JT Lewis playing drums. It was a different – it was an instrumental band at that time.

MG: Did they have a hit, no?

WC: No, no. It was just a band playing in New York.

MG: They played at CBGB?

WC: Right, right. I was introduced to – two things happened, I have to tell you, the stories about Living Colour. One of them was, there was a band that I thought was amazingly tremendous called Bush Rock, which was Delmar Brown, Kenwood Dunard, and Ray L. Wesley Grant. To me it was one of the bands that, once in a while a band comes along and it scares New York. Everyone's at the gig, but no one wants you to be seen there. It was one of those kind of bands. And Jaco Pastorius–

[INTERVIEW PAUSED]

MG: Did you know Miles Evans, Gil Evans' son?

WC: Yes, yes, very well.

MG: And Noah, do you know Noah?

WC: Very well, yes.

MG: You know, who's an engineer and he loved those bands, Kenwood and them. He was always telling me, “Maxine, you got to come with me to see.” I was like–

WC: Bush rock was–

MG: And Bush rock, I was like, “Noah–,” because he's my godson, I was like, you know, I'm with Sarah Vaughn [intelligible], “Maxine, I'm telling you, this is a bad – you'll wear earplugs,” you know, because he said the volume will be – said the music is killing, the volume might be a bit much for us. But he used to tell his mother and me.

WC: I saw him all the time at the gigs. I drove down from Berklee just to see those guys play. And I went to the – 55 Grand at that time. And Jaco was backstage, and I had sat in with Jaco once when he was writing music. He wanted me to play drums on a trio gig where he played piano. He was writing the music for one of his solo records. Jaco was, you know, a genius.

Pencils in his hair, music on the piano. He hired a bass player and me, and he would write the music while we were doing the gig in front of people. And he said, you know, Vernon was there, and he said, you know, “You two guys should know each other.”

MG: Oh. Vernon didn't have a band then?

WC: No. So we just, you know, we just, “Hey,” you know, “Hey, how you doing?” Left town, and then the next introduction was Belafonte. My third year of school, I came home to sub for a drummer. Kenwood was with Belafonte, he left, and I subbed for a drummer who was there, and Woody recommended me. I went to audition, met Harry Belafonte. I never really get auditions, so I didn't think I was going to get it, and they called me and said, come back. And that band was Brooklyn based. They were either African, South Africans at that time, or Brooklyn cats. And I was starting to play with some of the side projects of the Brooklyn guys at the African Festival in Brooklyn. Fulton Street Festival, Boys and Girls High. So Vernon started to see me play with some known Brooklyn guys and said, “Hey, you know, I'm doing this project with – called Living Colour and you know, you should check this out.” I said, yeah, and then he said, “What are you doing?” I said I was still in college, I have this band called Dark Sarcasm. And him and Greg Tate had a radio show.

MG: Oh, no kidding. Oh, that's how I got in touch with you, through Greg, right?

WC: So I gave my tape to Vernon and Greg Tate and they played it. I was home that night at my mother's house listening and it came on the radio and I'm like, “That's my music from school.” And they talked about my band. It was really a cool thing. So it started out as just being friends and supporting each other and then I graduated the following year and then he just called me and said, “Look man, I need a drummer.” I said, great. I have your tape. And boom, that was the beginning of Living Colour for me. That was 1986.

MG: Wow. But that's when the band really...

WC: That's when it started. And then 88–

MG: Is that when you got the record deal?

WC: Two years after that. Jagger came down to see us and it was a bit of a vibe.

MG: Oh, is that why? Why you went to Epic?

WC: Yeah, yeah, we were at Columbia. Well, everyone came to see us, honestly, Maxine. But nobody would sign the band because no one thought the band was going to happen.

MG: They didn't know what to do with it, right?

WC: No, no one thought the band was going to happen. Let me cut to the chase.

MG: What'd they think?

WC: They didn't think we were going to be able to have an impact in the industry. They liked the band, it was cool, it was talented—

MG: Oh, because they didn't know what to do – it's hard rock and they're Black.

WC: Well, there was rockers painted with the blonde and the torn jeans, and we look black – not like we don't look black. (laughs)

MG: (laughs) And they couldn't put out the record – and they couldn't have like a different cover. Like they used to put –

WC: I won't mention any other artists, but they couldn't change the chromosome coloring of the photograph and turn it into like a digital negative.

MG: Pick up the white side, no.

WC: Yeah, yeah. But to me, one of the things I liked about—

[INTERVIEW PAUSED]

WC: But, the attraction for Living Colour for me was three other guys that politically thought the way I thought, that were challenging, interesting, very intelligent guys, and very talented guys. And we wanted to make our music. We didn't care about racism. We didn't care about what people – we knew our history. We knew it was created by African Americans, this entire art form. We were very clear about that. We were very clear about who our influences were. And we knew that if we were just to go out and do it, it was bound to happen at some point. Maybe not the way we wanted it to happen. Now, you know, Mick had been hearing some things and he showed up. Vernon auditioned for one of Mick's solo records. And Mick told him, "I'm gonna come down and see your band. I've been hearing about it." And Vernon said, "Sure, right." And Mick showed up. And that was the beginning of that relationship. Mick liked two songs in particular. He took time out of his recording day to produce two songs for us which wound up ending up being on – "Which Way to America" and "Glamour Boys" – wind up being on the first Living Colour record, *Vivid*, which came out in 1988.

MG: That was – the second one's the big hit though, or the first one?

WC: The first one was the most selling. That was the most selling of all the three studio records. That was the biggest record. That was the one that people–

MG: Double platinum or something.

WC: Well, it was, yeah, it was shocking. Winning a Grammy. You know, it was–

MG: What year was that?

WC: We won a Grammy in '88 and '89.

MG: Is that the first record on Epic though? That's when you signed?

WC: Our first record on Epic.

MG: That four of you signed.

WC: Yes.

MG: Do you sign as a group or individually?

WC: Group.

MG: You didn't have to sign individually also?

WC: Yes. Well, yes, because labels are like, you know, I don't have to tell you, they're like organizations. And if you two ladies are in a group together and the group's called Flower, and they signed Flower, the only advantage they have is you can't use a name anymore. But if Maxine Gordon writes a hit for Bruce Springsteen, and they don't own it, they're going to get pissed. So they want to make sure that they have the–

MG: So you were all tied.

WC: We were all tied to Epic.

MG: For how long was that?

WC: First contract was about four years.

MG: So you – then it was over.

WC: No, we re-signed, did a couple more records, and then Vernon broke the band up. And the band, we sort of – he unplugged it.

MG: Oh, he did. But now you've come back together.

WC: Back together now, and we're–

MG: Why, he wanted to do something else, or? We don't have to say why–

WC: Well, Maxine, you know, this industry, it's interesting. And bands are like marriages, you know, they're tough, they're work. You have to – I'll say, like relationships, sacrificing, you know, ego checks. And I think you have to be really clever in the music business on your survival techniques. You know, you have to be really clever, because they'll work you to death. And you have to be really clever on how you want to present yourself. You're going to get some knocks for it. An example is probably Ornette Coleman.

[INTERVIEW PAUSED]

WC: You know, it's one of those things where you're in it, I'm sure–

MG: Did you know you were gonna make money?

WC: No, the answer is no. I had no intention on it being–

MG: Well, you thought it might hit, right?

WC: No, I was happy with the music.

MG: What did Vernon think?

WC: We were happy playing the music.

MG: And playing the CBGB? What kind of money did you make there, 50 dollars a night?

WC: It was packed. Made 400 bucks a night each.

MG: Oh, that was very good. That's more than they were making on the Vanguard. You know what I mean? Did you ever think about playing jazz straight ahead?

WC: I wanted to do that my whole life.

MG: And make no money. I'm so happy you're making money. I love to see a good musician make money.

WC: (laughs) And make no money.

MG: No, no, but I think it's such a good example. You know, that you could still play music, write original music. My son was like, you know – I'm very lucky that I have a son who's 28 because he's like, “Ma, forget the categories, you know. You limit the possibilities. It's not like you're gonna like everything that everybody does, but you know, these people are good,” and he loved Living Colour. And because Noah helped raise Woody, that's my son. He's the one who took him, when they went on trips and camp and everything, that was Noah. Because Dexter died in '90, you know, and so Noah stepped up. And then Gil died, you know, so we were all very close. He was a very good son to his father, Noah, because we were living in Mexico and he brought–

[INTERVIEW PAUSED]

MG: When you had the band – when you first formed Living Colour, and you were working in New York, you had no idea it was going to be as successful as it is?

WC: No. I was excited about – there was a revolution in the early '80s in New York, I felt. And Living Colour was trying to do our rock and roll thing. Spike Lee was starting to do his movies. Public Enemy was starting to change the face of rap. And I think there was like this small kind of, I know Lisa Jones and some other ladies had their Rodeo Caldonia. The ladies had their own acting and dance and progressive studios. And there was like, almost like a second renaissance happening in New York at that early '80s period. And I felt like we were creating something. Tate was one of the new younger writers. We had young lawyers, male and female. We had young business managers. We had people that were on the inside that worked for Capital and Warner and Sony and so on. So, like, to me, something between like '80 and '86, '87, there was this interesting movement happening where, in my opinion, it was a fuel. It was like this energetic buzz happening in town – a new one. Not the Harlem Renaissance, but also not like a new funky style of playing music. It was happening with all of us, with writers, with poets, you know, Sekou Sandiata, you know, God bless him. And we started to have a direct connection with people that influenced us. You had June Jordan coming to New York to do things, we had these kind of things happening. And the events – like when the Black Rock Coalition started, we

started out more so doing tribute things to people who inspired us and we invite them on. When Living Colour did the second record and we did “Elvis is Dead,” we wanted to have Maceo on the record and Little Richard on the record. It's very important for us. Maceo is that special alto player and Little Richard really lived in that generation of Elvis. He watched the making of the mold and the destruction of the mold. So why not have a guy like that on there who was really the pioneer of the music anyway? So to me, that's what was really happening at that time. It wasn't just us. I can't take credit for it. I can't say – it was a movement. You know, it was all of those things. What was happening in rap, Spike with his movies, Rodeo Caldonia with their theater projects, Living Colour was doing kind of a rock thing. You know, it was a very interesting artistic movement happening in the Bronx and Brooklyn and Queens and Manhattan and the Village. CBGB's had interesting – you started to have rappers showing up at punk shows. And you saw people with spiked hair uptown at the hip hop gig. It was – something was happening at that time. And fortunately, we were in the mix of that, and it made us completely fearless to get on stage and be able to play music of – live music – rock and roll, but also to play Hendrix, to not be afraid to play the Stones, or to play the Beatles, or play David Bowie. But also be aware of Big Mama Thornton and her music. And, you know, this is what Living Colour really, really was. It was this combination of life. For us it was important. Bob Marley's music was really important to us, you know. So was Coltrane and Miles and so on. But we – if you listen to the records, we're mixing all those things. We grew up in and around projects, in and around hip hop, in and around African music, in and around – you know, Vernon's from Montserrat. His parents are from Montserrat. There's a lot of Caribbean influence, there's a lot of things that we – and, in meeting and in talking it was deep, because we joke about so many things–

MG: You know who's from Montserrat? Connie Kay from the Modern Jazz Quartet. He's Montserratian. And Bruce Wright, Judge Wright, they call him “Set ‘Em Loose Bruce” [Turn ‘Em Loose Bruce], he passed now.

WC: Connie Kay?

MG: Yeah, yeah. Montserrat is very heavy, there are a lot of people, very serious people from there.

WC: To me, you know, this was what was attractive about it. Making money, of course. I mean, you want to be able to survive.

MG: Could you – were you supporting yourself as a musician in the beginning?

WC: I was, I had my own van. Thank God my mom bought it for me, but I had a van. I was able to get around with my drums. Like I said, on a good night at CBGBS, we made anywhere from 2

to 400 bucks each. When you're living kind of under the radar, that's decent bread if you want to get a little falafel here and something there.

MG: You know the jazz guys weren't making that, right?

WC: And, you know, on bad nights we made a hundred bucks or fifty bucks. But then we did keg parties, we went to do college frat parties where we, you know—

MG: Was the word spreading from—

WC: It was starting to. Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Florida. We started doing parties. And then the schools have the budgets, so you can go to a school and say, “I want twelve grand.” And they say, “Oh, it's in the budget. No problem.” So the university thing, but all the while—

MG: You were booking yourself or you had a manager?

WC: It started out with two managers that worked with Vernon. So what the advantage Living Colour had too, in the beginning, it was always two guys on phones in a room looking for work, hunting. Teamwork is important in this business. Whether it's PR people, managers, agents, it has to be a team that moves across the chessboard as a team. And we were fortunate enough to have that. The band was talented enough to get noticed.

MG: Were these new guys who were the managers? New young guys?

WC: Green. Totally green.

MG: Black?

WC: White. Both Jewish. Totally green. Green to the point of—

MG: Came in new. Did they stay when you went to Epic?

WC: They stayed. They did the whole thing. They stayed to the end.

MG: They still there?

WC: One of the guys is back now. One guy went his own way. They really believed in it. They were there for the good times and the bad times. They helped us look after a couple of things, I didn't feel like anybody was pulling anything out of the pot. You know, I personally ask for

copies of everything. I'm just, that's just – the other guys felt like it was too much paperwork, but I always was like, I want to see the tour receipts, how much you're spending for batteries, earplugs, duct tape. I want to see all of it. Because all of that money could be–

MG: It's your money.

WC: Well, you know, you can cut down on a tour. Five grand you can cut down by looking at one sheet of paper.

MG: When we asked for the costs on the movie *Round Midnight*, they almost had a heart attack. You know, cause that's the money.

WC: Yeah. And you could – what's the matter, you know? Like when I realized – Epic used to send limousines to pick us up to go to MTV. I thought they were paying for it, so I would always say, “Yeah, I'll take a limo.” And one day I was in the management office and I said, “You know what? I don't like the company that comes to my house, the car. So I want to change. I want to use one of the local Bronx companies.” And my manager said, “You may as well. You're paying for it.” And I was the last limousine I took. I called my friend Joe or Freddie or homeboy uptown to take me to the airport. It's not a big deal, it's just a ride. You know what I mean? That changed my perspective on things. And I started to realize that 100 a trip or 200 a night adds up when you do 50 trips. So, a combination of things.

MG: Did you study business at Berklee?

WC: You had to, with the engineering–

MG: Did that help?

WC: Yes, you had to know about publishing, copyrights.

MG: You have your own publishing?

WC: Yes. Absolutely.

MG: And you started writing for the first album? You had tunes on it?

WC: Yes, yes. And that's probably what helped pave the way for me financially, was not only the success of the record, but the publishing on that first record, which is still selling.

MG: Do you know any other drummers? Can you think of other drummers who write that you like?

WC: That I really like? Yeah—

MG: Have you heard Joe Chambers?

WC: Joe Chambers is fantastic. Marvin “Smitty” Smith is fantastic. And more commercial guys—

[INTERVIEW PAUSED]