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Oral History Interview with Reggie Workman
Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.17
Interview conducted by Amaka Okechukwu at the New School on June 9, 2017 in
Manhattan, New York

WORKMAN: Are you hearing me?

OKECHUKWU: Yes, I'm hearing you. It is -- what? -- June 9, 2017. This is Amaka
Okechukwu interviewing Mr. Reggie Workman for the Voices of Crown Heights
Project and Brooklyn Historical Society. So to begin, if you could just say your name,
your birth date, and where you were born.

WORKMAN: I am Reggie Workman. Born [date redacted for privacy], 1937 in Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania. Left Philadelphia, Pennsylvania after -- after high school, actually. A
while after that, traveled back and forth during high school to New York to different --
Wilmington, Washington, Baltimore -- and eventually settled in New York, and I've
been in New York most of my adult life.

OKECHUKWU: OK. So when you first started traveling to New York as a young person,
what are some memories that you have of -- of here?

WORKMAN: Wow. First of all, memories of coming -- not going to bed, but run -- getting in
the car, driving a hundred miles up the -- up the turnpike with Spanky DeBrest and
parts -- people from his neighborhood; Lee Morgan and other people like that—
Running up to hear the last concerts at the Café Bohemian, places in New York, and
then running back in time to go to class, or to work, or whatever I was up for the next
morning. And as a result of that, I have no end on this thumb because I went back to
work and I was working in a garment factory that makes towels for— to hang-up in the
kitchen, and there's a brass ring and you hang it on the hook, and I was making those
by the piece and I fell asleep on the machine and the machine came down and took the
end of my thumb off. So that taught me a lesson about not getting sleep and trying to
go to work; painful lessons. And the other thing is, like, the importance of us leaving
Philadelphia to come up to New York to hear the music; I ran into many musicians I didn’t know. Got a chance to see what was happening on this end vis-à-vis being down in Philadelphia and having a certain community and a way of life there, then coming to New York and people -- As we usually go to bed, they’re just coming to life. Then— that doesn’t happen anymore. We used to start going to work, back in the day, around ten o’clock. Nine thirty you’re getting showered, leaving for work to start at ten, eleven, and finish at four in the morning. Now at ten or eleven, people are going to sleep, and starting earlier; dinnertime. It’s a little different now.

OKECHUKWU: The nightlife has changed a little bit?

WORKMAN: Quite a bit. Nightlife is evening life now, and there’s nothing wrong with that because I enjoy being in-tune with the sun. You know, being up with the sun and doing -- I’ve learned my lesson, you know. You have to live a certain way according to your profession and according to what you do, but it doesn’t mean the Creator didn’t -- is not going to change his rhythm. You know? Or -- I shouldn’t say "His;" I should say “It,” the rhythm.

OKECHUKWU: So as a jazz musician who became engaged with a lot of community work, had you -- I’m trying to figure out how to ask you this question. I mean, I don’t know how common that was for folks to be engaged in more grassroots things as well as to be doing their music.

WORKMAN: Well, you know, Amaka, all the time that I can remember, everybody was involved with community work. There was -- there was no -- no -- no reason not to because the activity was in the community and if you wanted to be involved with something, then you had to be involved with that community work. For example, my older brothers -- I’m from a big family in Philadelphia, and my older brothers have always been involved with community work. My brother -- my late brother who went to the Navy and became a recognizance photographer was teaching photography and woodshop and history and, just, he was teaching practical things in the community. We would have a storefront. That was when— I was a baby boy— they were doing things like that, and then my oldest brother, like, started a business for the family and
in order to do that, we had to be involved with all kinds of people; knowing people, making landscape situations, delivery situations, and I'll never forget that. That was called Ebony Enterprise. That was my oldest brother, God rest his soul. He's gone too. You know, he started a business for the family when he came out of the Navy. So I grew up with that. So I've always been about that, all the time, and when I'm not involved with myself, I'm involved with everything else that deals with the community. So I think that's a part of me and it never ended from the time I was very young right up into now. This program where we are now to me is a continuation of what we started many, many years ago. When we started music programs that resulted in something like the New Muse Community Museum, we -- we had an idea of having a school like this. But it started in The East, or it started in the storefront, or it started in the living room of somebody, but-- and it grew and it grew, and we -- and some of us stayed with it and even today there are some people on staff here who remember those days and now -- There was a New Muse Community Museum -- I was -- I was going to write it down because I just remembered the name; The Tilden Community Center was not in Crown Heights. It was outside of Crown Heights, further uptown in Brooklyn.

OKECHUKWU: OK.

WORKMAN: I don't know if you recall or if you've ever heard of those names.

OKECHUKWU: Tilden? Is it Flatbush?

WORKMAN: No, no. No. It's further uptown --

OKECHUKWU: OK.

WORKMAN: -- in, in Brooklyn and I wish I could remember the address because maybe you could do research on it. But I ran a music program there and I don't know where the money came from for that, but that was another community outreach -- or in-reach, I should say -- that -- that we were able to reach a lot of people. It just keeps going and if you stay on your mission, it becomes something, like here we are at the New -- at New School. The New Muse and New School; it's a continuum.

OKECHUKWU: Can you tell me a little bit about— Because, you know there was a lot of jazz venues and Black arts happening in Brooklyn, and I know initially, I guess -- When you
were initially coming to New York, were you— you were mostly in Manhattan? Like, when you were first visiting New York and --

WORKMAN: Yeah.

OKECHUKWU: -- coming here as a musician? So when did you start engaging with the scene in Brooklyn? What was going on with the scene at the time?

WORKMAN: Well, I had a sister who was married to a Liberian guy. She went to school here and her place was in Brooklyn. So a lot of the times I would come and stay with her, and then I got the feeling for what was happening around the Brooklyn area. But that was mainly -- Her place was mainly Bed-Stuy because I remember those beautiful fronts and steps and all that as a child, and that was something that kind of stayed with me. I just had a gravitation to that kind of life. But when I came to New York, I found that most of the people I needed to be around were in the New York area. So I had to find a way to stay there, but my -- my life in Brooklyn was in and out. I would go -- If I couldn’t afford a place in New York, then I would go and look for places wherever I could find a room and stay and afford and survive, like that. So at that time there was a lot of activity in Brooklyn. There was, you know, clubs that -- I can’t even remember the name. Like, you mentioned a couple names, like The Continental, like the one on Beverly and Bedford, way out there. The one -- Flamingo Lounge on Franklin, I think it was. No, it wasn’t Franklin. It was Kingston. The Muse— Now it’s coming back, I’m just talking around, I hope that you can stay with me. The program that Kenny Barron, Bill Barron, Chris White, and Rudy Collins started because the Children’s Museum had moved out of the automobile place at Bedford and, and, Bedford and Eastern Parkway, and when they moved out, they started -- They had planned to move out and they were building the com-- the New Muse Children -- Not New Muse, but the muse, Children’s— But the Children’s Museum on— The Children’s Museum was located— I think that was Park Place and Brooklyn?

OKECHUKWU: Yes.

WORKMAN: Yeah, and -- and soon when the construction developed, they moved out of the automobile place and left this big vacant building and the politicians got together and
the -- We got together and my predecessors got together and said, “OK. We’d like to have some music involved this— with this building.” And so, in that building was a planetarium. In that building was a menagerie for animals to -- Wow, there was a great guy; he used to have programs for the children from the high schools all around Brooklyn where the children got a chance to come and hold the snake or hold the rat or hold the animal, or eagle or whatever he had there. He used to keep all the animals. That was special for the children; really great experiences for them. And then we said, “You have got to have music here.” So there was a choir started. There was a band started. Then we have to have dance here. So some of the floors were worked out so that we could have dance teachers come and teach classes and things developed like that. And grassroots are bootstrap style, so I kept on with that and that lasted a long time. We serviced thousands of people from the Brooklyn area. There was a big Haitian community there and that’s another person that I need to try -- He’s in a wheelchair now; Alex Etienne. I couldn’t get in touch with him. He was the one who -- who reached out -- He was a friend, a guitar player. He studied guitar with us, and he studied jazz with us, so he said, “You know, I have contacts with the community. I would like to be a part of the Muse and reach out to my community to come here.” So he got many Haitians to come to be a part of our program at the Muse. Alex Etienne. His wife was -- I think his wife is still work -- active in Brooklyn. Name of Valerie Maynard, I think is her name.

OKECHUKWU: That’s the same last name as Joan Maynard from Weeksville.

WORKMAN: Right. I may -- That -- that might be, I might be crossing the two over. I’m going to get my phone and see if I can zero in on his wife’s name, but I don’t want to waste your tape.

OKECHUKWU: No, that’s OK. So around what time is this? This is what— the— when the Muse Community Museum is coming together?

WORKMAN: That was around 1969, ’70, I think, about that year. Somewhere around there, and it was just developing, you know, and the building was vacant and the -- the administration, politicians were trying to figure out money. Eduardo Standard was the
name I couldn’t remember, too. He was one of the directors at Muse and I did mention Waldaba Stewart. He was a politician. He was part of it and Andy Gill eventually became a part of it. I told you about Charlene Van Der Zee and we had photographers there who’d teach, who taught the photo workshop. I’m going to bring those names to you— and even though they’re not in my mind clearly now, they’ll— I’ll research and go back and get that for you.

OKECHUKWU: So you directed the music program. Can you tell me a little bit more about the activities of music at the Muse?

WORKMAN: OK. The music program was like -- First of all, Larry Lucy was the guitar player who had a real -- He had published books and he was -- had been around for a long time, and he opened the program for guitar. That was the main focus at that point, and Larry Lucy had many, many very young students and he taught them meticulously. He was very patient and very beautiful with those kids and developed, developed, developed a long time. He stayed there a long time after Bill died and I was still there, he would still come in even though he was in his 90s then -- or 80s then. Larry Lucy had the guitar workshop and that was developing. We had a piano workshop and that was one of our problems because we had trouble getting pianos in there for students to practice on. We had to rotate, rotate and do -- and there were many students who wanted to study piano but we didn’t have very many pianos. That’s another part of the story I’ll tell you about later because we had to do a fundraiser to get a piano when -- when I came in to -- to do the music program. And -- and then we had people in the community. Bill Barron was a saxophone player and he’d played all the reeds. A great composer, and I hope that sometime you can hear some of his music. He taught the different type of music. He taught how to read, how to deal with the saxophone, the instruments. He was able to reach out because he knew a lot of musicians. He was able to reach out and bring in a lot of people. Chris White was the rhythm section person. He was a bassist and he played with Nina Simone. You probably remember his name and he was involved. The drummer Rudy— Collins, I think his last name was. So we -- we developed a program just like we have here on --
on a, you know, microscopic level and it became bigger and bigger and bigger to the point where there were so many people who came to the Muse. Like, I used to go all over the world— now, even today— and I see people who remember me from New Muse. I was in Switzerland once in an old hotel on tour and I was coming down the steps with my bass— coming up the stairs because I was just checking in— and somebody said, “Reggie Workman! I remember you from the Muse.” He was an African guy who had studied at the Muse and he’s living in Switzerland and he remembered me, and that was like just somebody -- I didn’t even see him. I didn’t know he was there. He saw me and talked about the Muse and that to me is important. When people remember their experiences like that, that’s important. He may be doing anything in Switzerland at that time, but he remembers that starting point. And that is the reason why our politicians and our people today must realize how important the arts are. You may not stay with it. You may not become a professional or someone who’s known or who stays with that craft, but it starts something in you. There are many tentacles. I used to have a graph with all the tentacles of music that -- it looked like a tree -- that said all the places that music will help you to grow into if you concentrate on the science of sound at first, and that is something that we taught from the very beginning, and from there, we found that the community was well-nurtured as far as that’s concerned. It became very important, and while that was happening, due to Jitu Weusi, Al Vann and all the people at The East were disenchanted with the teachers union and what was happening at the schools. So they said, “Well, we have to do our own education system.” And that started The East where parents were bringing their students -- their children to learn more about their roots, the African history, more about the community, more about another approach to mathematics, and all that. I notice in your writing that you know Connie Lesold and she’s one that I’ve been trying to reach. She’s so busy, I can’t catch up with her. She was traveling, but I’m glad she, she told you to contact me because she’s -- she was one of the people -- one of the key people who helped us a lot at the Muse. Wow. As I talk, things begin to come back to me.
OKECHUKWU: Yeah. So you mentioned lessons a lot around teaching children around music, but you also engaged adults also. Like, were adults learning or were their performances?

WORKMAN: All ages. All ages. So there were kids from six years old coming there on to sixty, sixty-six. "Six to sixty-six," I used to say, and the older people would come because they loved the music, too. Some would come because they wanted to be with their children while they learned and there was no limit on what age you had to be, and it was something like $10 for x amount of lessons for -- $12 for a semester or something. The price was such that people from the community could afford it, and, of course, the administration's responsibility was to go out and get the funding from New York State Council on the Arts, from Department of Cultural Affairs, and I remember – Andy Gill used to go, always to Albany; trying to raise money for the things that we needed to do at the Muse. And, like any other program -- I think all programs even today it's the same thing -- you have to really be on the political side. You have to be on the cultural side. You have to be on the grassroots side, and have a foot in all of those areas in order to understand how to make it relevant, and that's what we were about there at the Muse and when we ran that program. So thinking back, watching the program grow and watching the kind -- remembering the kind of people who we eventually started to bring in, it's moving because I, I have-- Now I'm working on a project of going to my -- I have three storage rooms full of stuff. That's one reason I couldn't put my hands on a lot of the information that you're asking for and some of those trunks, boxes have Muse fliers and things from the New Muse in it. I couldn't keep all that because I moved many times and lost dumpsters full of stuff, but I still have some things that are important and that will help me to remember some of the things you're asking about. The kind of people -- When I finally get in touch with Connie— There was another person who was, Marjorie Battle, who was hired to help me with the music program. She lived right across the street from the Muse, and I don't know what happened to her. It's been many years now since I've even thought about her name. It just only came because you said Con-- or you wrote Connie Lesold— and when you said Connie, it
made me think of Marjorie and she was one of the persons who, who would come and do office work and clerical work and help me with that sort of thing. I had children from high school who would get certain things free, a tuition fee free to come and do things after school, and I was -- I think I was the dean of being able to Xerox and call late and make fliers and, you know, do things and get information out to the people and children around the table would always have the responsibility of helping me with that, and that’s how we survived, you know? That’s what I call grassroots; and it’s not much different today. When you think about it we have like two or three hundred students here. But we still have to struggle the same way now. When you came in the elevator— digress with me for a minute— when you came up in the elevator, you see one floor has— is fully carpeted, painted, looks beautiful, and then you come up here and it’s— You can— it’s a little older. Mannes has merged with the classical department, which has big purse strings, has merged with us and moved from their building uptown down here. So that we’re sharing, now, this space with the classical -- the European classical, I like to say -- department. Because African American classical is one thing too; and so we’ve been here for a long time and they’re just coming in, but they’re coming in with millions of dollars to renovate and move and so forth. So we want to make that a positive instead of a negative. See our programs going on this glass box; you were downstairs seeing the people practice and so forth. It was an idea from meetings that we had. We were supposed to be -- You seen the new building up the street?

OKECHUKWU: Yes.

WORKMAN: The new building was supposed to include us, but the crunch, financial crunch came down in New York and the money went, so instead of 14, 13 floors going up. Or I think it was 14 floors, was supposed to be. Now it’s only about nine, and we were excluded. It was supposed to bring all of the New School things under one roof, all theater, you know. Every entity, philosophy, everything under that roof, but it didn’t happen because—

OKECHUKWU: —Money.
WORKMAN: —Money. So here we are still in -- This used to be some kind of a pro— textile building that was renovated for us. Before that, we were sharing the building on 5th on the southwest corner with the fashion and design and we had little corners in there. That’s how we developed this program and we couldn’t -- So since we couldn’t go in there, we came in -- we moved from that corner over here. Developed this, but not too much was thought about as far as the acoustics. Electric instruments are louder. Drums are louder. Saxophone’s louder. So you can hear, through the sound system, somebody in the next room. Thank God though, the classes are not happening today because you would here concerts going on in that room because the way the place is built -- has been built, it wasn’t thought about. These things weren’t thought about, and forget about that at Muse. It was just an old factory or auto showroom, so there was nothing like that. But we did expand there into as much of that space as we could and we used every bit of it for classrooms and for meetings and so forth, and the Muse became a place where— not only the music program met, but— the community politicians would have meetings there. That’s why I mentioned Reverend Daughtry because he used to have meetings there with his entourage, and I haven’t talked to him lately either.

OKECHUKWU: Yeah I heard that, like, the Brooklyn Tenant’s Union, which was a housing organization used to have their meetings there --

WORKMAN: That’s right.

OKECHUKWU: -- and I know that there was some sort of, I guess, federal grant, the CETA grant, I guess?

WORKMAN: Yes.

OKECHUKWU: New Muse was— distributed for funds for that or something?

WORKMAN: Yeah and, and many things like that came through there because we had a room here, a room there, a room that might not be used in the daytime. Our program was basically an after school program, so it was targeted for after school and evening. And in the day time, what was happening was — I can’t remember the man’s name who took care of the planet— It was a boy; he wasn’t a man, he was a young boy who liked
science and he directed the planetarium. We would have contact with all the elementary schools and preschools to come in and deal with the animals and high school and elementary school would come in and deal with the planetarium. In the community, there was no such thing as a planetarium that was at the -- you know, a cultural program run, but the Children’s Museum had that. They had that and they left that for us. I’m sure they have a better one now in their new building, but— Just to jump from this part of the story. Speaking of one, of the planetarium; in 19— I think—82, I think I went on the road with Max Roach. I went to Japan; stayed for a while, and they -- All this fight was going on between all of the factions in the community, and I came back and the building had been trashed. Some of the politicians had their constituents to come in and trash the building, tear down the planetarium. I had -- We used to have to get people to vote and support the place, so I had thousands of names. I had a data— not a database, but lists— everything was by hand then— but lists of people. I used to get on, out in the street, on my phone, and go around the community. When I had a car, I would drive around the community and announce the concerts and announce programs that we were having at the Muse. Having people to come and sign, you know, and be a part of getting the community together. Those were the things that happened then and like, CETA programs, parents programs, the community tenant’s associations. All that would meet in the daytime and all we had to worry about were the young children who would come to the planetarium and the menagerie for the animals, but in the afternoon when the kids got out of school is when our program would begin. That was in-tune with me because I was, like, working ’til four, three or four o’clock in the morning and I could come to work at noon and one and two instead of eight and nine, so that was a good rhythm. It was a nice rhythm and went on for a long time.

OKECHUKWU: I was going to ask about challenges, but you mentioned the factions and the -- Like, why would that have happened? To trash the building like that?

WORKMAN: Well --

OKECHUKWU: What was going on?
WORKMAN: Because one person wanted to be in vogue as far as the political scene was concerned, and therefore he would disagree with Andy Gill or Eduardo Standard, and he would fight or have his people -- We had so much strength as far as reaching out into the community, that it was necessary to destroy that. Like, in order to -- for me to be strong, I have to have you weak. You know, that kind of thing. That's what was going on. For example, Reverend Daughtry— when he was meeting there—he discovered that one of the major politicians was gay and he was cruising young boys, and when he pulled the covers off of that, he became a target.

OKECHUKWU: Oh, this was Richmond, huh?

WORKMAN: Richmond. That’s right. You remember that. I’m glad you heard about that because Richmond was the one who— Daughtry said, “We can’t have that in our community. We have enough problems,” and when he blew the whistle on him, he became a target; therefore, Muse became a target, and therefore the Muse funding was shaking and that’s the sort of -- You know, it’s the survival syndrome. I don’t think it’s much different today. It’s pretty much the same except that -- People are out, so that’s not as important now as it was then.

OKECHUKWU: Yeah, but I heard he was corrupt in all kind of different ways. Did a lot of --

WORKMAN: Now this is -- Excuse me for cutting you off. There was one brother whose name I can’t remember who was killed. He was involved with a lot of real estate. Do you remember the -- talking --

OKECHUKWU: He was a politician?

WORKMAN: Yeah, he...

OKECHUKWU: I know who you're talking about. Um...

WORKMAN: He was -- He was murdered.

OKECHUKWU: Yeah. On Washington Avenue. I can’t— It’ll come to me, but I know who you’re talking about, yes.

WORKMAN: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And that was all part of that whole pot of scheme. Pot of scheme, I’ll say, instead of pot of stew. You know, there were many, many things that you had to wade through in order to get to the positive. But getting back to the
positives, the Muse; what was happening there. Aside from the teaching the people the
music, we also had this -- When I came in after Bill, I started a bi-monthly -- a bi-weekly
concert program; concert and lecture. Because part of the thing was, like, to bring the
community in and have them learn about the music and, and how it relates to our
evolution as African peoples. So every two weeks I would be with my bullhorn out in
the street and with my fliers saying, “Come to the Muse for this concert.” It started out
with just a few people up in the auditorium area, in the performance area. But it grew
and grew and grew to the point where many people were coming, and then we had this
little old spinet piano which was not adequate, so we had to have a baby grand. So we
went on out in the street to raise for funds to buy a piano. That was another campaign.
We finally got one. It wasn’t a very good one, but we got one. I think it was maybe a
Salvation Army or something. We -- we used to go and get instruments refurbished
and have them done, and the bi-weekly concert series became really, really big, and I
got a lot of very -- You may remember Ivan Van Sertima. He was a politician, a
historian. You may remember Acklyn Lynch, Gil Noble, Ed Williams. A lot of the
people who were really in vogue then, you would come, because they knew who I was
and my credibility would maybe make it possible for them to come there, and that built
and built and built to the point where it was really big. So politicians who were looking
to oppose whomever was in power at the Muse would, would -- were adamant about
making, “let’s destroy this,” and we don’t need that opposition. So that’s where the
fight came, and that’s where things came. When the Muse got trashed like that, you
know, a lot of people coming in, stealing things, walking off with equipment and, you
know, that -- It’s very, very sad -- very sad news. Very sad news. And I came back and
there was no job. There was no Muse, so I had to get on, where do I work? Where do I
find some work? And I did everything in the community. I started an oil -- I used to
sell oil for Bernard Beaty. Beaty Oil Company? Do you remember that? That was at
the New York and Fulton Street. Like they had --

OKECHUKWU: Was the politician Vander Beaty?

WORKMAN: Vander Beaty. That’s who--
OKECHUKWU: That’s how we [unintelligible] -- [laughter]

WORKMAN: That’s who, all—

OKECHUKWU: Well, because you said the oil.

WORKMAN: —right. He was the one.

OKECHUKWU: Sorry.

WORKMAN: Yeah, you have a good memory.

OKECHUKWU: But I’m sorry. You were selling the—

WORKMAN: Yeah, anyway. I start at the oil company and I used to sell oil to people. I used to help Beaty. He was a Black businessman in the community, so I said, “I need a job. Let me be a salesman for you.” So I used to go around and sell people; get people to buy oil from him and that way I was able to help feed my family. That was my job after the Muse. Did that, and then eventually I got a job at the Crown Heights Community Services Corps. That was on -- I think their office was on Nostrand Avenue or something? And we had programs that we would do. Summer programs and outdoor concerts and programs in the schools. Do you remember that one?

OKECHUKWU: No. I’ve heard of it, but I haven’t heard people talk about it, so thank you for mentioning that.

WORKMAN: Crown Heights Community Service Corps. [Interview interrupted.] Yeah. And I wish I could remember the director’s name. I did that then. That was another outreach into the community then, and one of the focus was to help young people find a way to go from high school -- through high school to college, and so we had all kinds of workshops there that would help people to go from school to college and keep on with your education. I reached out into the community, what kind of programs are needed and so forth. Now while I was doing that -- oh, wow. So many things happened, positive and negative. I do -- I do remember one time we had -- We had an outdoor program and some kind of an outdoor rally, or program, or picnic or something, and somebody got stabbed— and I don’t know— I was somewhere around. I was nearby, but not right on the scene of the -- of what happened. I think the person survived it. I don’t
think the person was killed. But then, arguments and things broke out. Just, you know, the usual kinds of things that happen in a community where people have -- where people are not fully awake yet. So that happened, and I did the Crown Heights Community Service thing for a long time and then from there, I went down to LIU and I was teaching adjunct at LIU, teaching music. At the community college, we used to do concerts, because at the Billie Holiday Theatre, we used to be very much involved with that. So we had programs that would, you know, develop from there. As a matter fact, the Collective Black Artists seminar; the big seminar that we had, was at the Billie Holiday Theatre and we had really a lot of people. At that time, by then we had started the Collective Black Artists because the same problems in the community were, you know, in the New York community; with all the musicians not having work and so forth. So we started things like Professionals Unlimited, which was all the bass players with Bill Lee and -- that's a -- and, a lot; Chris White, you know, many bass players, Ron Carter. All of us got together and started Professionals Unlimited and started a bass ensemble and began to work together and try and make music. That's what hap—That's how Bill Lee's thing developed, and Bill Lee being -- I think he's from the Chicago area. I'm not sure where his start-off point was, but they used to do more than one bass in Chicago. So it developed in New York to the point where Brian -- A lot of great bass players came together and started that as, as a way of survival, and out of that came the Collective Black Artists having a big band. Because we said, "Everything that we've done in life has always rallied around music, so we have to leave the politics out and concentrate on the music, and make sure the music entity is strong and then maybe you'll have some longevity." Because that reaches beyond the borders of the Atlantic and the Pacific, so that's how we've built our thing. That's how we've sustained our things over the years, and all of that is -- the germinal seed is Crown Heights, Community Museum in Brooklyn. And, of course, a lot of— like you said before— a lot of what I do; it started when I was a child in Philadelphia because of family and because of standards, but that's what it's all about, and it's still here today. Right now I'm like the spook sitting by the door, trying to just make sure that the
mission is maintained because if I -- if I’m not here, a lot of our constituents -- The reason I was brought in here is because when Arnie Lawrence started this program with Dave Levy his idea was, we need people who perform this music to teach the people, not just people who went and got a college education. We need the performers to show musicians how -- what’s necessary when you get on the gig. So he started this program with that concept in mind, and he would bring in all of the major musicians who were performing, most of them being Black. He needed a place and a school that was futuristic like New School was in order to house it, so he moved in here. I think he was a lead alto player with Doc Severinsen’s Orchestra when he started that; on, on-- that was a big thing on television. And Arnie was -- had the great ideas and great concept, but he wasn’t organized. So he brought in Martin Mueller who was also going to LIU when I was teaching there— when I was adjunct there— and I began to know Martin and all through that and Martin reached out to me and asked me. When he was brought to this school, Martin reached out to me and said, “Do you want to come and work with me at the New School?” I had already been doing some adjunct work for Arnie. So those two things came together and that’s like the continuum of the seed that I’m talking about that started at the Muse, it started at places like Collective Black Arts, like Professionals Unlimited. All the things we do, like Ornette Coleman. I think Ornette Coleman’s being honored tonight by the Stone, who’s moving in. That’s another thought. My mind is racing off to something else. But, that -- that is the kind of thing that has to keep on happening all around. I lost my thought. I -- Like, too many things got in there.

OKECHUKWU: You mentioned on the phone that you had a music program at one of the housing projects. Was that the Tilden thing or was that something—?

WORKMAN: That was the Tilden thing.

OKECHUKWU: OK.

WORKMAN: That was Tilden Community Center.

OKECHUKWU: Right. I’m going to look that up. OK. So when you were living in Crown Heights -- I mean, can you describe just the -- You know, this project in focusing on
Crown Heights, we’re really interesting -- interested in how the neighborhood has changed over time, so I don’t know if you've been there recently, but it’s one of the, you know, fastest gentrifying neighborhoods in Brooklyn --

WORKMAN: Yes, I -- I have been there. Right. It’s just, I -- I don’t even know some areas now.

OKECHUKWU: So I wanted to hear you speak about when you were living in the neighborhood, you know; what it looked like, what it felt like, when you were living there.

WORKMAN: Well, I -- When I was living in the neighborhood it -- it -- it -- First of all, it was a great place to live. There were a lot of musicians who lived around. The community was a lot of -- Black people owned property and lived in those great apartments. A lot of the famous musicians were my neighbors, and you can always go right up Nostrand Avenue and find anything you need to buy, to eat. You can find every fish and chips joint. Every -- All the kind of food that you need; you know, fish patties, whatever you like was there. Now, when you look at that stuff, you see a sushi restaurant. You see maybe something that doesn’t relate or wasn’t there before that is there now and that’s what gentrification does. And the people -- I wonder, as people move out, I don’t know where our people have gone. I don’t know where all of them have gotten to. Not just Crown Heights, but every community that’s gentrified, where are the people going? You know, they can’t build enough projects to house people, and that’s -- which is not a good thing to talk about. That’s another story in itself. But, I don’t know. The community is feeling different. The businesses are different. There are a few people who are still left -- still in the community doing things. When The East moved from 10 Claver Place to the Armory— that was a major— and started to use the Boy’s and Girl’s High Field for the Festival? Those were major things that happened. You don’t see anything like that anymore. The whole community became relevant. The stores and the shops that were open up and down Fulton Street, all the way down Atlantic Avenue to the river, they were relevant. I mean, they were people who owned the stores and you see an African shop. You see African instruments. You see all kinds of things that
were relevant to the folks who, who were in the community then. Now it’s not happening. Now gentrification has happened. The yuppies are— I use that term loosely, I shouldn’t— who come in and— Well, they, they got their parent’s inheritance; sometimes millions of dollars. So they have so much money that they have to spend before, before capital gains tax gets them. So they come in and they don’t mind dangling half a million in front of somebody’s face or hundred, two hundred thousand in somebody’s face who has never seen ten thousand. You know? And so they’ll buy that property, spend another million dollars renovating it, and there’s another business popping up that is not relevant. I should not use that loosely also, Amaka, because things grow; communities grow, people grow. People expand, and I can’t say that it’s not relevant, because where people have to move out and expand and do things, I can’t say they can expand in any area that they want to, have to. This is America; that’s what they supposed to do. But where do the people who cannot afford that cut; that million more. When you push the property values up, when you push the tolls up so high that you can’t afford to cross the bridge to go to work, where do the people go? There was a time -- Back in the days when the Dutch had New York, there was a time that, you know, people were running away because they didn’t want to be around those people and we wanted to get out of this so-called ghetto and get out to where we can have trees and be in our own gated communities and so forth, and then the oil prices hit and it became too expensive to drive your car all the way into New York and park it. It became too expensive to heat those big elephants, white elephants out there in — in Queens or wherever they moved to, and the value of the New York City— the urban property— shot up, and therefore the target became, "Oh now, we’ve got to get those people out of those places again and get back there." So that’s what gentrification is all about across the land. It’s been written about. It’s been in lots of books, about that, and it’s actually happening just like it’s— was written. You know? So I think Crown Heights is a typical example of that sort of thing that’s actually having -- The value of the property and the places in Crown Heights is superb. They are so beautiful and it’s such a great area. So, regardless of whether it was valued by people who ran away from
it, it’s valued by them now because the pressure has come to the point where people who were comfortable before are not comfortable being way out there now. So they want to come back into the main area. Crown Heights being one of those areas. A lot of our students here from this school live in that area of Brooklyn. Bed-Stuy, some of our students living in Bed-Stuy; I can’t, can’t even imagine that this is where you would come from Europe and live as a student at the New School, but that’s what’s happening. And the landlords are right in tune with that because they solicit these students because they know that when students come into Crown Heights and don’t know what has happened and they know that these students are going -- only going to be in school for two or three years and when they move out, they can push the rent up higher. Another semester, the rent goes higher, an— you know. So, it’s valuable for the landlords to rent to the students because they can keep pushing the rent up. Each time that somebody moves up, they paint and renovate; the rent goes up. And I’m experiencing the same thing in the area where I live because I lived there in the ’60s, right around the corner, paying $137 a month for a six-room apartment. But it was a walk-up. But now, I live in a place with elevators as big as this cabinet here paying --

OKECHUKWU: A lot.

WORKMAN: —almost $2,000 a month for one room, for, just for one bedroom. That’s the way things change and I’m thanking God that I’m able to be on the planet still to see those changes and talk about it, but I’ve got a youngster coming up who has to deal with this. So I have to be here to do something about it if I can, and I’m glad you are on the team.

[laughter]

OKECHUKWU: Me too. Can you tell me—? You had mentioned on the phone that you --

We were asking about the Jewish community, and at the Muse, that you had done some -- I don’t know if you would call it outreach or --

WORKMAN: Oh yes.

OKECHUKWU: -- something. Can you speak about that?
WORKMAN: Part of my music directorship at the Muse was that we need to have other people to learn about our music as well. So we need to go into the Jewish synagogues and go into all the Baptist churches, the Jewish churches, you know, Indian places, all that we could find, and use our resources; the money that Andy Gill was raising from Albany to come into the music to do these programs as a part of the relevance or the reason for, for being able to get it is because we could say, “We’re doing this.” Where it’s not just servicing our people, we were servicing all kinds of people. So I would take groups into—jazz groups—into the Jewish communities; do senior programs, do programs for them. We would have all kinds of lectures and things. But I made the mistake of having one gospel guy singer to do one of the concerts for me and go into the synagogue. This guy went into the synagogue and he started talking about Jesus Christ and, “Oh Lord,” this and, you know, baptism, and the Jewish people raised hell. They—My phone started jumping off the hook, “How dare you send somebody to us in—you know, and sing and praise everything that we hate.” So that was a lesson for me right there. I knew that that wasn’t a place that I could reach to because I couldn’t turn my back on our community. We had a strong gospel church right across the street from the Muse and they used to do strong gospel concerts, so we had strong gospel constituents. You know, people coming into the Muse who would come to me and say, “Well, when are you going to sponsor something for us to be a part of?” So I did everything I could, but I did the wrong thing when I sent them to the wrong place. I was not aware of—this group is going to make waves like that. That was something else.

OKECHUKWU: So these were synagogues in Crown Heights?

WORKMAN: On Eastern Parkway.

OKECHUKWU: Oh, OK. So it was with the— it was — it was the Hassidic community?

WORKMAN: Hmm?

OKECHUKWU: Was it the Hassidic—

WORKMAN: Yeah. Yeah.

OKECHUKWU: It was the Hassidic community. OK.
WORKMAN: Yeah. I mean, right -- just a couple blocks down on Eastern Parkway was, really, a very strong Hassidic community. Hassidics are all over Crown Heights, and those who you don't see own the building. You know? So -- so it's the -- One of the reasons -- When I was living there, I lived on Brooklyn and Dean. There was a bassist student of mine who had this apartment, who got some commitment to move out, and he had the corner apartment, which was the doctor's apartment on, right, this first floor apartment on Brooklyn and Dean. It had an entrance off the street, entrance off the lobby, two bathrooms because one bathroom was for the doctor's office; one bathroom was for the other part of his living quarters. I got that apartment and let me tell you that was like a Godsend from -- with the dues I had been playing -- paying all around. So when I moved in there, I was -- I was in heaven and I started fixing that place up and I had a studio built in there for me to have just jam sessions and parties and all of the stuff, and then I was living and my kids were having their own bathroom and their own space and my wife and I had our own bathroom and -- Oh, it was fantastic. So you can imagine, the landlord looked at this from his standpoint, "Well what, how are we allowing this to happen? That's two apartments. I could have two rents getting three times the amount of money." So, then the place started flooding and then the heat went off and then the water went off. Everything happened to run me out of that place, and I went to court. I went to war, but I couldn't win. I couldn't win because when gentrification sets in and the landlord decides that you're going to move out, they have a way to make it happen. You know? And it's not always positive and most of the time it's illegal, but that's what happens.

OKECHUKWU: Was that in the '80s? When was that?

WORKMAN: Yeah. That was late '70s.

OKECHUKWU: The late '70s, uh-huh.

WORKMAN: And prior to that, I was living on that corner and at the time that that happened, I looked around and found out, like, right on that corner where you said you used to live where I bought that -- I moved into the house on Lincoln Place and New York Avenue, and Chris White used to own the house right next door. He was one of
the names I mentioned who was involved with the Muse before. There was a woman who owned that house who had -- She was an invalid. She had— it was a wheel— You know, she couldn’t walk, and she ran into me and I eventually got to the point where I could get a mortgage and buy it and had a hell of a price, a steal. But I didn’t know as much as I know now, otherwise I would never have let that place go, and then -- You know, I got in trouble and, as I said, I was in trouble trying to raise a family and make a living too. So I almost -- I lost it to—and Jitu Weusi sent me a guy who had some m-bucks, who had an apartment, and this guy saw me with my pants down and he took the bucks and got the apartment, got the house. And prior to that, I had -- This house had swimming pool paint on walls, over top of oak wood, and I had a European friend of mine to come and this guy used to help me to renovate this place. He used to every day come and get his work clothes and roll up his sleeves with the lye and the steel wool to strip this paint off of these walls, do the floors. I had to put a roof on that place; I did everything. But I didn’t have the money to keep it, so I lost it and that family is probably still in there if they’re smart. Smarter than I was, and I ended up moving over by Parkside at that time and by then; that’s when my wife got shot and we had separated already, and my life’s changed. But I was still in tune with what was happening in Crown Heights because I had been living in that building and then I moved to the— I think his name was Joe, I don’t remember his last name, who bought my house and he had to move his family from over there into my house and he was happy because he was -- had a child raising up, and that was the crack den by -- over there by Parkside right across the street from the hospital, that’s where his apartment was. And I was happy to take it because he had a basement where I could store all this stuff that came out of the house and so I had storage in his basement and I lived upstairs. But across the street, like the hospital would put red bag waste right -- dump right out on the street, you know? And I could get up and see children marching to the crack den right across the street with their book bags on, like an Army, marching in and out of the crack house; not a police car around.
OKECHUKWU: Well, can you tell me about that? I mean, I know that it’s not just Crown Heights. But I think New York, just during a certain time period, it just was a different place, and I know that— you know— like any other neighborhood, Crown Heights also had its issues with crime and drugs and things like that. So what was, you know, what was that environment like in Crown Heights? Was it—? Like, how did the, I guess, the drug epidemic sort of impact the neighborhood?

WORKMAN: Yeah, it was there, but it was a little bit more subtle in Crown Heights than it was further down into Bed-Stuy. One thing about the drug community, it was very sophisticated; where if you were into drugs, then you knew where everything was and you recognized it and you’d see it. If you were not, you could go every day to work— back and forth— and never see what was happening. But anybody who was into drugs or knew people who were, knew the spots and the places that were doing things and because I knew -- you know, that’s been my life -- I knew what was happening; why Joe was happy to move out of that area because it was all kinds of shooting galleries and crack dens and everything right across the street in vacant buildings that were being renovated and so forth. I recognized that immediately. But fortunately I didn't have any children that were affected by it, because my older family didn’t, didn't move with me. I changed at that time. There were no children. So, so in Crown Heights there was certainly a drug community and certainly drug cartels, you know; buying and selling and things, but it was much more subtle. It was much more subtle there than in places like further into Bed-Stuy. Because I think you had to be -- It had to be because you could see everything more clearly when you move into a new community and Crown Heights was a little bit more sophisticated, therefore you had to be a little more subtle and things were happening. For example, well I— I don't want to say that because I know too many names that I shouldn’t put down on here. But people who, who I knew were involved with, with drugs and all that in that community who were— they were there. They were doing their thing. They weren’t bothering anybody. They were just destroying themselves. You know? Or any of us who are involved with anything illegal, negative, like that are probably not alive today. You know? So, that’s another
thing about the drugs. You know, the Billie Holiday story and all the situation about -- I mean, drugs are used to exterminate a community of certain people. You just, you just put that and make it available. That was the whole scene with the crack craze. You know, make it available for five dollars. You get five dollars instead of $25. Give it out for five dollars and children can afford to do that, therefore you’re getting— you, you’re planting the bomb— you're planting a time bomb at a very early age and that is what has happened in and out of the community. But now that it’s spreading over into the suburbs and spreading over into other communities, it’s becoming a problem.

OKECHUKWU: I mean, so we kind of already touched on this. You mentioned in the— I guess— early ’80s was when the Muse basically shut its doors; both in response to— I guess— the political factions, but I’m sure funding was probably one of the main issues why.

WORKMAN: Yeah, that was one of the main issues, yes. Because things were changing in Albany. Things were changing as far as who controlled the purse strings. That was one of the main issues, yeah. And where we were getting support from New York State Council, some of the people who were supporting us— with the Council of Cultural Affairs and all— were moving to different positions, so things changed quite a bit. But still, all of us kept shoulder to the wheel trying to make sure that we were able to function and still exist on whatever shoestring that we had to, and that went on for quite a while. You know, even when the Muse was closed, there was still a community that was active and things were still happening like all those spots that I was trying to get people to tell me about -- I couldn’t reach everyone. All those spots were still happening and the music was still going. One of the guys who used to study with us at Muse started a recording studio right in the community, right down the street from where I had that corner apartment. As a matter of fact, I saw his brother— his younger brother— at Alice Coltrane’s concert the other day; Ricardo Strobert. Andre Strobert was one of the guys who studied with us and taught with us at the Muse and he started a recording studio in his house. He owned a house at Bergen and New York Avenue. How many great things like that were happening in those days? And I hope that
whatever I’m able to say to you in this interview is giving you some of the information that you can --

OKECHUKWU: It is.

WORKMAN: -- that you can draw some things from. I think that one of the important things that I want to continue to harp on is, like, how important it was for the Muse -- that the Muse was a really strong cultural entity in the community, and because of being a strong education and cultural entity, it was a strong political stronghold, and therefore, you know, the boat was rocking a little bit and that’s why it kind of fell apart.

OKECHUKWU: I guess before we close, are there any other places or locations in the neighborhood that you, you know, have memories of? Places that may not be there anymore? I mean, you talked about the Muse. You talked about -- What was it? -- the Crown Heights Services, Community Services --

WORKMAN: Oh, Community Service Corporation.

OKECHUKWU: But, yeah. Any -- any -- It could be anything. Any businesses? I don’t know, places you liked to eat, or anything like that in the neighborhood that you could remember? Because we’re just trying to get a sense of like -- OK some people mentioned -- What was it? – Syl’s, the trophies -- There was a --

WORKMAN: Oh, yeah. Syl’s Trophies. Yeah.

OKECHUKWU: Just little places like that.

WORKMAN: Yeah, we used to get some of the awards for our people from -- from folks like that and like all the fish and chips joints. I don’t remember all the names of those places. Now, there was a place up on Fulton Street that used to serve really great meals. A restaurant. Goddamn, I can’t remember the name of that restaurant, but everybody used to go there. You used to have to wait in line to, to get served, you know. You know how the sisters used to cook those meals and, and they eventually made a great business as a result of it. There were some, some juice places. Natural juice, food places up and down Nostrand; a couple of them and the East had their own market on Claver Place. Right on the corner of Claver Place and Fulton Street. It’s not
considered Crown Heights, but that’s all part of what we do. I just have to go into my mind to find out the names of those businesses because I can’t remember them now.

OKECHUKWU: That’s OK. That’s totally fine. That answered most of my questions. Do you have -- Is there anything about Central Brooklyn in this time period, Black arts, Black institutions that you would like to share before we end that you haven’t been able to speak at length about yet?

WORKMAN: Well, one of -- one of the things I have to talk about is because I said -- There was a karate teacher on the corner of -- Where was he? He was on Nostrand and I had my son to go there to try to teach him martial arts, and it was a brother who had that school open for a long time who serviced a lot of people in the community. Hakigo used to sell African instruments. He called his name "Hakigo," but his actual name was Nat Boyd. He’s still on the planet. I saw him at a concert not too long ago and he had a business that people used to come and work for him. We used to deal with him, buy from him. He was supporting all the work we did at the Muse and the East at the concerts. It’s funny, you said Syl’s Trophies. I actually remember a lot from Syl’s Trophies.

OKECHUKWU: Yeah, I heard he was looted really bad during the blackout. Were you in Brooklyn when the blackout happened? The '77 blackout?

WORKMAN: Yeah, I think so. OKECHUKWU: Yeah, I heard he was looted real bad during the blackout.

WORKMAN: Yeah, I think I was. Seventy-seven, I think I was then. Yeah. OK. I, I can’t -- I won’t just talk to be talking. I have to talk from a clear memory. Otherwise it may not be beneficial for you, but that’s why I said I want -- Now that you sparked some thought in those areas, I’d like to come back to you again and talk some more because I’ll -- I will go out and reach out for other information and try to remember a lot of things that I can’t remember now.

OKECHUKWU: OK. That’s totally fine. You have the time. WORKMAN: Can we put a pin in this for a minute and let me go out and come back? OKECHUKWU: You can [unintelligible].