

# ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

**Interviewee: Al Holmes**

**Interviewers: Melissa Keeling  
Jennifer Souder  
Yvonne Clayton**

Date: September 17, 2019

Time: 5:30 pm

Place: 1403 3rd Ave., Asbury Park, NJ

Melissa Keeling:

Al, thank you so much for coming to our AP-AMP interview today. Thank you for taking the time.

Al Holmes:

You're very welcome.

Melissa Keeling:

We're honored to have you share our stories. We'll just start by introducing ourselves and then I will start with your questions.

Al Holmes:

All right.

Melissa Keeling:

I'm Melissa Keeling and I've been part of this project. We've been doing this a couple of years now.

Al Holmes:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Melissa Keeling:

And I'm a music educator and performer myself. So I, when I moved here a few years ago, I was really struck by the stories of the West side that weren't very visible and I'm excited to get to talk to people like you so that this history can be preserved and saved for the people here today and also the future generations to come. So thank you for your work.

Al Holmes:

You're very welcome.

Jennifer Souder:

I'm Jennifer Souder and I have lived here for about 10 years and when I first came to Asbury Park, I was also, um, really interested in the history of Springwood Avenue, the African American community and music. I'm not a musician myself so I feel really, as I said, it's feels like a gift to me to sit with you and with uh, all these interviewees who have just, um, really we sit here and each story we hear makes us

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want to hear more. Um, and we really value your time and your story cause it's yours and you're willing to share it with us. U

m, and so we started as a really, really informal little project and then we just realized there was so much to share that we kept growing and growing. And um, about a year ago we started as a formal nonprofit-

Al Holmes:

Aah.

Jennifer Souder:

...and that's been helping us to get more visibility, get those stories out farther. Um, we've had an opportunity to work, uh, other parties, a lot of really talented people. (laughs)

Al Holmes:

Oh yes.

Jennifer Souder:

And a lot of people who have been willing to help us with, um, bringing together a little short videos, documentaries and things like that. But the main goal is, well we have a few goals, but the main goal is to share the history, share the stories. Um, and the second part is we really want to share across generations.

Al Holmes:

Aah yes.

Jennifer Souder:

So that's been a big part and we've, we had the opportunity to work with the school district, um, get some curriculum going about local history, African American history and music from Springwood Avenue.

Al Holmes:

That sounds great.

Jennifer Souder:

So with that, we'll let Melissa take over and then I get to sit back and hear the stories.

Al Holmes:

Well, what I will do, I'll introduce myself as you ladies introduce yourself. Uh, I am Al Holmes. Uh, I am a musician, uh, part thespian... part thespian and which is not to be confused, but, uh, I've been working on being a performer for years, as many years as I can remember. And uh, I can start basically from the beginning if you like.

Melissa Keeling:

Yeah. When and where were you born?

Al Holmes:

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I was born in Woman's Hospital in New York city and I've been coming down to Asbury Park since I've been in the placket. I didn't even know where I was going. I didn't know from anything, but, uh, I was always here, this was always a part of my life.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Al Holmes:

And my first introduction to music, uh, was as a pre... pre toddler. Uh, I was told by my mother listening to the phonograph is what started me walking because I wanted to climb up and I wanted to see the record going around. And, uh, growing up, my mother was pretty eclectic when it came down to music. [clears throat] You have to excuse, excuse if my voice cracks a little bit, I have a slight, [clears throat] slight cold. But, uh, my mother listened to the average. She listened to, to Sammy Davis, Sam Cook, uh, Aretha Franklin, Eartha Kitt, uh, and as well she listened to Dean Martin. Uh, she listened to, uh, Perry Como and, uh, she listened to just about everybody that was current at that time. But she also liked the classics.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Al Holmes:

So, uh, I was exposed at a young age to Bach, Beethoven, Heif... Heifetz, and Shostakovich, you know, because uh, whenever she cleaned the house, she used to put on classical music because it would help her concentrate. But, uh, that was my first introduction to music. And, uh, I have one person, uh, amongst many to thank for my love, not only my instrument, but music period. My, uh, cousin, which was much older than me, she used to babysit me and when she would babysit me, she would let me, you know, in the living room and she had a big fish tank that was over top of an upright piano. And I would come over and I climb, I look at the fish tank and one day I went to climb up and I hit the cover and it made noise.

Al Holmes:

When it made noise, I opened it up and I touched the note and I could hear her coming down the hall and then like, Oh, I closed it real quick. And she said, "no, no, you can, listen." She opened it up, she said, "you can play if you want to." And uh, she, uh, you know, fiddled around a little bit and then uh, she started playing Chopsticks. And, uh, after she played Chopsticks, she said, "how about it, kid?" She, uh, went off doing whatever she was doing and from then on until, Oh my goodness, it had to be about four months. I would come over every day I was there and just bang on it and bang.

Al Holmes:

And God bless her, she, uh, would let me bang as long as I wanted to. She would give me my lunch, put me down for a nap. Then when I wake up, she will let me bang until my mother came to pick me up. But lo and behold, one day I was banging and I'm like, "ah, I'm not satisfied with this." So I tried to find that first note that I heard from Chopsticks and when I found that first note, so let me find the second note. And I remembered how the fingers moved. And uh, I started playing Chopsticks and I got to a point where I made a mistake. I'm like, "Oh goodness." And I tried it again and I made the same mistake, I

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could hear her literally running down the hall and she picked me up and she hugged me. She said, "Oh, that was beautiful." And that, she was one of the people that were instrumental in me wanting to learn to play music.

Al Holmes:

I also had an uncle, uh, that used to live out in Canarsie. He had a big arm chair and he had an acoustic guitar and he would sit me in a chair and sit the guitar on the arms and just let me pluck. And Oh goodness, the stories, stories of me just coming down through the years wanting to have a guitar, but uh, not till later on did I get one.

Al Holmes:

But, uh, one of the good things and one of the bad things, I grew up in an age where, uh, school was basically segregated. So we weren't introduced to the music program, but we had a music teacher come in to substitute for us. And I was in second grade and she said, "Oh, children, I'm going to introduce you to something you probably never heard, and this is Beethoven." I said, "I know Beethoven." She said, "you've probably heard of the name, but I'm gonna let you listen to the mu-" I said, "no, I know Beethoven." And she says, "what do you know about Beethoven?" I said, "I know about Beethoven's 5th Symphony." And she said, "can you play it?" I said, "no." I said, "but I can hum it." She said, "no, you can't." I said, "yes I can."

Al Holmes:

She put the record on and I started humming Beethoven's 5th from beginning to end because my mother used to listen to this when she cleaned the house. And what she did, she said, "wait right here." She went to get the vice principal and she had him come in and she said, "you have to listen to this." She said, "now", she says, "I'm going to put the record on, but if I take it off", she said, "can you keep going?" I said, "sure." She put the record on and uh, I hummed Beethoven's 5th Symphony from beginning to end and he went and got the principal. And principal came in and uh, she told him, "watch." I got through the first two stanzas, he took the needle off the, he took the needle off the record and he saw me that I could keep going and he said, "okay, that's fine."

Al Holmes:

He took the vice principal and the music teacher out of the class and when she came back in, she had a very distraught look on her face. And she took the record off, off, excuse me. Oh goodness, don't tell me I've got the hiccups. She took the record off, closed up the [inaudible 00:10:43] as we called it at that time, and uh, she said, "pull out your reading books." And uh, I can only estimate and guess why he didn't want me to continue because it was too much to a sensibility that there was a seven year old black kid that could hum Beethoven acapella from beginning to end and he couldn't. But it wasn't a stumbling block for me, you know, I just, kept on moving and I'm like, "well, that was strange, I thought he liked it." But down through the years, you know, I did plenty things in school, in grade school.

Melissa Keeling:

How old were you when that happened [the Beethoven story]?

Al Holmes:

Uh, I think I was seven, I was in the second grade.

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Melissa Keeling:

Second grade.

Al Holmes:

I was in the second grade.

Melissa Keeling:

And can I back you up again a second?

Al Holmes:

Sure you can.

Melissa Keeling:

If you mind sharing when your birthday was?

Al Holmes:

My birthday is August the 26, 1954. This past August 26th, I made 65.

Melissa Keeling:

Congratulations.

Al Holmes:

And I'm getting younger every day.

Melissa Keeling:

Happy birthday.

Al Holmes:

Why, thank you. Thank you. I'm still celebrating by the way.

Melissa Keeling:

That's good. You should be.

Jennifer Souder:

As you should.

Al Holmes:

Uh, as of now and celebrating with... for those of you who don't know apple juice, [laughter] but uh-

Melissa Keeling:

So you didn't say this just now, but I remember when we were talking earlier, you said, you said you were born in New York City.

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Al Holmes:

Yes.

Melissa Keeling:

So this was your childhood in Harlem, right?

Al Holmes:

This is my childhood in Harlem

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Al Holmes:

And uh, when I was in third grade, I was left back because I refused to do homework because I didn't need to, I felt I didn't need to. I got hundreds on my tests, uh, all the school works, I got 98, uh, or I was, I would get a B+ or an A, I felt I didn't have to do any homework. And the teacher, uh, brought my mother in at the end of the year (laughs) and said, "well, we can pass him cause I mean, listen, he knows it all, but he just hasn't done any homework." My mother, without missing a beat, she said, "leave him back." I was crushed-

Jennifer Souder:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Al Holmes:

...crushed.

Melissa Keeling:

I know.

Al Holmes:

But then I met the love of my life. My next third grade teacher, Mrs. Cooper, was, was almost just as tall as I was. She was a sweet woman, she encouraged creativity and, uh, she decided in the middle of the year that she was going to put on the play The Wizard of Oz and which I, I loved cause I watched The Wizard of Oz from when I was little. My mother loved it cause she loved Judy Garland. And, uh, I got a chance to play the scarecrow.

Melissa Keeling:

[laughs]

Al Holmes:

And I can remember it like it was yesterday, uh, somewhere, uh, in my archives, if this still survived all the moves, uh, I have a letter to my mother from my teacher, Mrs. Cooper and said, "uh, this young man is very talented and you need to cultivate it." And, uh, that's what my mother did. You know, whatever I

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wanted to do musically. I did. I had an aunt that lived out here, my, I had a aunt and two uncles. They all live in the same house, uh, and, uh, it was a rooming house and, uh, I used to come down and, you know, do different things. And, uh, the musicians that would come down for the season, they would, uh, get a room in the rooming house because they needed some place to stay while they were working the circuit.

Al Holmes:

And Oh, at that time Asbury Park was up, it was jumping, it was beautiful, it was alive when the West Side. It was a culture that had no boundaries because all the musicians that played on the East Side, or that played in Red Bank, played in Belmar, at nighttime on the weekend in Asbury Park, when they got done working, they used to come down and they used to, to sit in, they used to come down and enjoy the music. And a lot of times they weren't making that much money. Uh, and we're still not, but we had one gentleman, which I'd never met. He had pawned a guitar to her years and years and he'd pawned it to her to get home, and he never came back. But her, that guitar was in her closet. She had a big ship road that you open up, you know, had drawers on one side and you could hang clothes in, and that guitar was in the corner.

Al Holmes:

Whenever she would open it up, I would see that guitar and (coughs) excuse me, I'd remember my uncle's guitar and I would ask my aunt, "can I have that guitar?" Because I wanted that guitar. And uh, she said, "nah, [inaudible 00:16:32] what are you going to do with it?" Eventually she softened up one year, she said, "listen, I'm going to give you this guitar, but in a couple of weeks I'm coming up for your brother's graduation", he was graduating from junior high school. And she says, "if you haven't learned how to play anything in that time", she said, "I'm taking it back." I, from the time I got out of school, I sat at that guitar and my record player and I learned and learned, only knew one chord, but I learned how to play two songs that I know I had them, but I had to play em with the record.

Al Holmes:

Finally it's D day.

Melissa Keeling:

[laughs]

Al Holmes:

She came down and the graduation was over. I said, "Aunt Annie, Aunt Annie, come, come hear me play." She says, "okay. Okay." I started playing the song and uh, I remember my first song, it was [inaudible 00:17:38] and I started playing the song and I, I got into the middle of the song at, well, not like I didn't get to the middle of the song, got to the first part of it. And then she said, "okay, that's fine." And she turned and left. I'm like, "you're not, I didn't even play the other one."

Melissa Keeling:

(laughs)

Al Holmes:

But what she wanted to do was encourage me.

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Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Al Holmes:

And she did. And I played with it, played with it until I got bored because I felt I couldn't go any further. We're going to fast forward to my teen years. When I was 12, I had my first girlfriend. Oh goodness gracious, I was head over heels in love and there was nothing better on that earth. And notice I say that earth because I was in a different world by then.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Al Holmes:

And uh, I got punished because of something and my mother put me on punishment for a week and we didn't see each other. We used to all go to a community center and, uh, they would have parties at the community center, you know, you pay a quarter to get in, you know, you come in. And I, I was off punishment, I'm going to the party. I know she's going to be there. They had a little, uh, like community room there where you can go and you can sit down and eat your hot dogs, you drink your soda, you can talk while the band is playing in the gym or whatever's going on. And she came to me, she said, "Oh, I haven't seen you in a week, uh, I've not even talked to you, it's, it's like we're not even going together." I said, "well, you know, I was on a punishment, but [inaudible 00:19:27] she didn't, but it just is not, it's not like we will even go in together. I mean, you know, it's like I know you have a boyfriend and all."

Al Holmes:

And she kept pressing and kept pressing it and I'm like, "Oh, am I man up? Well, I guess we're not going together", you know? And I'm like, "she'll be back." [laughs]

Melissa Keeling:

(laughs)

Al Holmes:

After I got my little feelings hurt, and, uh, I said, "well, I'm a walk in, I'm good and find another girlfriend." I walk in and the band is on a break and who should I see sitting on stage on the bass player's lap, but my ex girlfriend and she looked like she's trying to swallow his whole face. And I was crushed. I could have laid down and you could have sopped me up with a mop. And I decided at that time, I'm going to be a musician. I'm going to show you. You think you, you like him because he's a musician, you'll like me better. And I decided to become a musician. And for years and years I worked and I practiced and I practiced, playing by ear. I couldn't read music [inaudible 00:20:49]

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Al Holmes:

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Uh, and uh, I joined my first band, which was one of my little friends downstairs. He had a bass guitar that his mother got him because I had a guitar, he wanted to play with me. And I used to play with him, he was younger than me, but I liked the sister. [laughs] So we were friends. But anyway, uh, I was lucky enough that through his mother, she got a drummer for us and our drummer was named Woody Holmes. My oldest brother was named Woody. So I mean, that's the only, uh, association I thought at the time until I found out that the Woody Holmes that I was playing with was James Brown's road manager's son, which was named Woody Holmes.

Melissa Keeling:

Wow.

Al Holmes:

And, uh, we practice and we practice. Finally, his mother comes up to us one day, we only knew two songs. She comes up to us one day, "you guys want to play, uh, during the show? You can, you can play, uh, in, in, intermission between when this band is playing." We're like, "great." We walked every bit of equipment that we had from a 104th Street all the way up to a 116th Street. And when we walked in, we came in the side, you know, she let us in and everything. And uh, they said, "well, listen, we're gonna set you up and everything and we're going to set you up and listen, you can use our, our drummer's drums and you know, uh, you guys will set your amps on the side and when it's your time for you to come up, the musicians will pull your amps out."

Al Holmes:

So we're dress, uh, jeans, tee shirt, I got a red bandana on cause I, I wasn't, well, I'm not gonna say was a hippie, (laughs) I'm still a hippie. (laughs) But, um, it's time for us to play. We get up, we are nervous as all heck but we're ready. The curtain opens up and we're in a ballroom with tables set up and it's black tie and we're like, "Holy Christ." So, uh, uh, the first song that, uh, we learned how to play was Ain't No Sunshine by Bill, by Bill Withers. And we started off, you know, I didn't test the mic or anything, they said, "the, your mic is on." So we were like... [guitar playing] and we're just ready to go and I can get through the introduction, it's time for me to sing, and I sang, and during this time by voice was beginning to change.

Al Holmes:

And I say, "ain't no sunshine..." [clears throat] I said, "damn." And when I said, damn, they had an echo on it and it said, "damn damn damn damn damn", all through the hall. And the people applauded because I, we didn't stop playing. But, uh, after we got finished with that song, we got a standing ovation. And we played the next song, I don't even remember what the next song was. We played the next song and then it's time for the other band, the, the band come back on. After they played it's time for us to come on again, so what did we do? Play the same two songs cause that's all we had in the bag. But that was my very first show.

Al Holmes:

And rewinding for a moment, I had an uncle that lived in Philly, I was about eight years old. My uncle had a little reel to reel tape player and he taught me how to load it, and he taught me out to turn it on and record, and he taught me how to rewind if I wanted to erase it. And you know, I, when I, you let me go up front to play with while there in the back, in the kitchen, drinking and having a good old time. So during my time there, uh, I would always watch the Andy Williams Show, and he used to always lead off

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with the song Moon River. And simple song, so I learned how to sing it. I, and uh, I listened to the show come on again and I got made sure I had the words right and I sang it through one time, I didn't like the way it sounded when I played it back. So I went and played it again.

Al Holmes:

And, uh, after I recorded it again, I went to him and, uh, I said, "Uncle Dell, I recorded a song." And everybody's still having a good old time. And uh, he put the song on, and he listened for a minute, and he stopped it, he rewound it, (coughs) made all my aunts and uncles... [coughs] excuse me, and my friends, "hush, you have to listen to this." And they listened and he was so impressed. They were so impressed like, "where did you learn this?" And when I told them, uh, my vehicle for learning the song, they said, "you learned it off the TV?" And I said, "yes."

Al Holmes:

They knew before I knew that I was going to be somebody. And I'm still trying to get to that somebody but you know, when I finally get there, I'll let you know who I became. But, uh, music and Asbury Park has always been special because I lived on Ridge Avenue. I could sit on my aunt's porch and I can hear the faint music from one of the closest clubs, uh, which was a [inaudible 00:27:32] uh, which was only about, Ooh, half a block away. And when they had music upstairs, it used to come through the neighborhoods because it was very quiet.

Al Holmes:

And, uh, holidays we used to ride down, and Sundays, my uncle used to ride us down, uh, Springwood Avenue because it was a big deal. You could see everybody getting dressed up just to walk down Springwood because it was happening from one end where 35 was all the way down to Main Street. It was nothing but music when you walk down from 35, you would come to the first club... [clears throat] and you would get to the second club. And, but before you get to the second club. As the first club is fading out, the second club is fading in and that's how I went all the way down Springwood Avenue. And people would dance out on the street if they felt like it. And it was a different world then, uh, during that time you can go to sleep and leave your door unlocked and it was no problem.

Al Holmes:

Can I get a time out for a second?

Melissa Keeling:

Of course.

Al Holmes:

(coughs) Cause I don't think that's a frog, it feel like a giraffe? [crosstalk 00:29:01] Hello? How are you?

Yvonne Clayton:

I'm Yvonne Clayton. How are you.

Al Holmes:

Yvonne, how are you? Al Holmes.

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Yvonne Clayton:

It's very nice to meet you.

Al Holmes:

Nice to meet you.

Yvonne Clayton:

And you're talking of the Springwood Avenue I remember, so-

Al Holmes:

(clears throat) Me, me, me. You, you, you.

Melissa Keeling:

(laughs) La, la.

Al Holmes:

Okay. I'm ready now. And the world was so different then, that if you were walking home and you left the club, you're on your way home and you had to park your car and you can't make it home, you could sit on anybody's porch and fall asleep and they wouldn't say anything to you, they wouldn't wake you up. The next morning when you woke up, whoever lived in the home would bring you out a cup of coffee and they wouldn't just make it for you, they would bring the cup, they would bring the pot and they would have the sugar and the cream so that you can make your own, they would pour it for you.

Al Holmes:

And after you were done, if you were still there, they would ask you if you wanted another cup, if you, if you were fine, you left and there was never anything said. But it was a beautiful, beautiful town. Uh, there was almost fruit trees everywhere. And just like the fruit trees, they were musicians. Uh, they were musicians, they were parades. There was nothing but music in Asbury Park. You can hear people doing the week practicing because they're going to play on the weekend and you can hear them practicing in the windows, you can hear them singing. And it was, uh, a wonderful experience and it drove me to want to do better.

Melissa Keeling:

So your aunts and your uncle, your aunt and your uncles lived here.

Al Holmes:

Yes they did.

Melissa Keeling:

And you would come into visit on the holidays in the summer.

Al Holmes:

Yes-

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Melissa Keeling:

So, when did you move here?

Al Holmes:

I moved down here in 1969, Summer of 69. Uh, during that time in school, uh, I was going to high school, my first year in high school and it was very violent. There was a lot of racial tension between all, uh, ethnic groups. Uh, and kids were getting hurt, uh, kids were being killed. Uh, it wasn't safe to be out in the playground in front of your own house if you had a playground. And, uh, I hadn't made a conscious decision that I was going to drop out of school. And, uh, my mother said, "I'm very disappointed, but you know what you want to do."

Al Holmes:

And I thought about, "well, I gotta get away for a while." So I decided to come down and spend the summer with my aunt, uh, who lived in Neptune. And, uh, eventually they would keep talking to me about, "um, why don't you go to school down here, you know, you like around here, you know, [inaudible 00:32:31]." And I'm like, "ah, I don't know. I don't know." And then I started thinking about, you know, I better go back to school because I don't want to my mother. And at the end of the year I made my decision before the school year started and I really don't know whether it was the water or the women, but I never left. (laughs)

Al Holmes:

But music has always been a part of my life in every aspect. I remember the first guitar I bought with my own money was a dark green, a dark Emerald green, no name guitar, had no name on it. And I played that guitar till it fell apart and begged for mercy.

Melissa Keeling:

(laughs)

Al Holmes:

And I, I was hooked from then on. And, uh, I had quite a musical career, uh, when I started because, you know, school didn't really work out for me. Uh, trying to get my transcripts from New York to here wasn't working out and it's, which incidentally, excuse me, Francis Asbury, but I decided to go to Neptune High School cause all my cousins that lived in Neptune, that's where they went, I wanted to go. The truant officer was wondering why I was going to Neptune but I was having my mail forwarded to Asbury Park.

Al Holmes:

So, uh, I would come home from school, ride the bus up the hill. Sometimes I wouldn't even get on the bus, I would just, uh, go to, you know, my aunt's house, to visit my aunt and my uncle, then I hitch hike up the hill like everybody else. And then I would ride the bus to go to school. Truant officer, the disciplinarian, he thought it was odd and he decided, "I'm going to find out where this kid lives." And I noticed that he would be sitting in the parking lot in his car, and I knew who he was. So when I would go up the Hill, I would go into my cousin's house, when I go into my cousin's house, he would sit outside the house waiting for me to come out and go down the hill. What I would do was go out the back door, go through-

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PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:35:04]

Al Holmes:

What I would do was go out the back door, go through the back yard, go to West Avenue, and hitchhike a ride, and go down the hill, and hang out there in my aunt's house. Go see my friends down there. Then hitchhike up the hill so I can go to school. Well, you could never catch me but during that time, Neptune had what was called a two family code. You couldn't have two families live in the same house and because I wasn't an immediate member of the family, what they were going to do, uh, he was going to try to have my aunt evicted because she wasn't applying to the code.

Speaker 1:

Wow.

Al Holmes:

So, before was up, okay, next year I'll go to Asbury High School. In the meantime, I was still in the 10th grade. I left New York in the 10th grade. I didn't complete the 10th grade, so I had to start the 10th grade all over again in Neptune High School. I went to Ashbury High School. Well, uh, you got to start 10th grade all over again. And I was like, this is some crap. I'm not going through this again. I decided to join Job Corps and uh, which was another experience, but my music still carried with me. I took my guitar with me and I locked it in my locker every day. Didn't have an amp with me but I would play every time I got off work. Still playing by ear.

Al Holmes:

A year after I graduated, I ran into a gentleman that knew I played guitar, uh, and, uh, he said, "Listen. There's a band I'm with, they're looking for a guitar player or a keyboard player." I said, well, I'm bad keyboard. He said, "Oh great. We need a keyboard player." Couldn't play keyboards worth a booger. You know.

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

And I took the keyboard now and he'd say, "We're working on this song and like, you know, I kind of got a little bit of the song. He said, "You know. Y-You're"... the leader of the band said, "You're, you did okay but you got to practice that, you know. You don't seem like you're too good." I said, "Well, I'm really better at guitar." And he said, "Oh, go home and get your guitar." That's when I met my arch nemesis, Andy Thompson. God bless him that he's passed away. But we were like this. First thing he said, "Oh, we don't need another guitar player. You know. I'm a guitar player. I don't need another guitar player." Uh. You know. "He'd just be dead weight. Plus we got us a show coming up in two weeks and he's not going to be able to learn it."

Al Holmes:

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And, uh, the leader of the band, Melvin, said, "If you can learn the show in two weeks, before the rehearsal before the show, if you've got the whole show, you can play the show." I learned the show by putting the cassette in and sitting there hours and hours a day for two weeks, going to rehearsal and coming home and sitting hours and hours in front of the cassette and low and behold, I learned the whole show. Oh man. When we got on stage, Andy was as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. He was afraid I'm going to take his job and he started telling me, "All right, listen. I'm going to play the inside chords... No, I'll tell you what. You play the inside chords, I'm going to play the outside chords." And I'm shaking my head yes and in my mind, I'm going bah. (laughs).

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

But, we got through the show and it's time to do another show. We did another show. The third show, he's had enough which incidentally, he's the man who brought the PA. You know. At that time, we had a big PA tower speakers, you know. He said, when the next rehearsal before the third show, he said, "Listen. There's only room for one guitar player. Either he goes, or I go and if I go, I'm taking my PA with me." Melvin said, "You want us to help you carry it outside?"

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

Because they had gotten tired of his BS anyway because he, he was very shallow at the time. But, uh, after that band, which incidentally that band became, uh, my first secondary family. Uh. We did everything together. We went to the clubs. We went to the Orchid Lounge together. We went to the Turf. We went to Madonna's. We went to the Elks. Oh, we even hung out, we.... One night we figured... Oh, what's this club Ray Fields upstairs? Let's go, let's all go up in there. We went up in Ray Fields and come to find out, it was a gambling joint. (laughs).

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

Say, "You guys here to gamble? No sir." And we left there, but we did everything together. We went everywhere.

Speaker 1:

What was this band called?

Al Holmes:

The band was called the Unity Band.

Speaker 1:

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The Unity Band and you were still a teenager then?

Al Holmes:

I was, at that time, I was 19. As a matter of fact, no, I wasn't 19 at the time. I was in actuality, I was, uh, 22-years old.

Speaker 1:

Okay.

Al Holmes:

22-years old.

Speaker 1:

Where was that first gig that you guys did together?

Al Holmes:

The first gig that we did together, oh my goodness gracious. We got a gig at the Freehold Elks and it was got by another guitar player who needed a band. But he was a member of the Elks. He wanted to do a show. He knew, uh, the lead singer Melvin and Melvin said, "Sure. You know. Come down to rehearsal." He came down to rehearsal, everything was great, everything was cool. So, uh, we packed everything that we owned... Incidentally, there's 10 members in the band, including singers. We had a full horn section, drums, bass, guitar, then saxophone, trumpet and, uh, trombone. We packed everything that we owned in three cars and we caravanned following the guitar player that hired us.

Al Holmes:

When we got just about there, the guitar player pulled over to the side of the road. We pulled over to the side of the road with him. We figured maybe he's going to ask for directions. Maybe he forgot which way to go. He missed his turn. He got out. We figured he's going to come back to talk to us. He got out and he opened a pint of Jack Daniels and he turned it up til it was gone and threw the bottle down, got in and made a U-turn and we're following him. We knew what kind of gig this was going to be.

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

But, uh, it so happens, it's Halloween and, uh, when we get there, uh, we get set up and everything and, uh, they waiting for everybody to come in. Everybody came in. We're still in the back, so we're going to make a grand entrance and when the maitre d introduced us, we came out from the back clapping and stepping. UT is number one. UT is number one. And we're dancing, right? Now, this is Halloween.

Al Holmes:

The female vocalist, she's got cat ears, cat ears on and, you know, makeup and you know, a couple of the guys had different kinds of hats. One cat had a clown mask. And they're looking at me. You know. I'm dressed in nines, you know. Nice shirt, vest and pants to match. And they're like, you know, of course, my

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hat. They're like, where is his costume? I had a coonskin cap that I had gotten from one of my uncles that had a tail that snapped off. What I did, I tucked it in my pants underneath the vest and as I'm coming down, the only thing they can see is the tail in the back swinging and that was my, that was my costume.

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

But, uh, doing that show was a nightmare. He was good guitar player, but all of a sudden, he wanted to be Jimi Hendrix. He wanted to be loud and he was drowning everybody out so we took turns while he wasn't looking. We were either unplugging him from the head. Unplugged him the head from the speaker, turning it down. Uh. Unplugging it from the wall. And we got through the show and at the end of the night, he was just ossified. "I'm not a part of the band. All I want is a set of drinks. You don't have to pay me. All I want is a set of drinks." We paid him. He said, "No, man. All you got to do is give me a set of...". No. Take the money. See you later.

Speaker 1:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

But, uh, the Unity Band, we were together for about two years, uh, my estimate and, uh, as I said, we went out everywhere. And, uh, this particular night, everybody's going to this club in Neptune that was on Atkins Avenue, um, the Neptune Tavern. Everybody's going to call me and said, "Listen. We'll come and pick you up." I had a tremendous headache. I said, "Guys. I can't make it." And, uh, I'm home and you know, everything is cool, a couple of aspirin. You know. Radio, watching TV. I figured, well, they're having a good time and, you know, the whole nine yards. And, uh, I get a call, 10 o'clock next morning and, uh, I got a call from Dolores, which was our female vocalist. And she told me that Melvin had a heart attack on the dance floor.

Speaker 1:

Wow.

Al Holmes:

He was on the dance floor. They were listening to the band and he was singing with a song and he dropped dead on the spot.

Speaker 1:

Wow.

Al Holmes:

And I always thought, it was not meant for me to see him pass away. So as I say, my musical career, I've been blessed, uh. I've been in a few bands. Uh. I auditioned for one at the time was Timmy and the Gang

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and, uh, I was brought down by a friend of mine... His nickname was Chipper. He was a horn player. He says, "Well, now listen. You going to come and audition but, you know. You got to be good and you're not really good." I said, "Oh, I can make it." Uh, I bombed.

Speaker 1:

Hm.

Al Holmes:

And like, I thought I would be crushed because I didn't make it. That only made me practice harder. From there, oh goodness. I went to the Awesome Band. From the Awesome Band, which da, da, da, da, my arch nemesis was there and, uh, he didn't want me in the band, but he didn't argue because he didn't want to get put out of another band. We played and we played, you know, and, uh, he didn't want to share any information with me or anything. And I'm still playing by ear. Eventually, uh, we went out as a band and he couldn't pick a fight with me because he knew he couldn't whip me. (laughs).

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

But, uh, he picked a fight with one of the other folks and, uh, he was thrown out of the band from then, because you know, he wanted to pick a fight with everybody. He told me, "Ah, listen. I'm just going to leave." And he was drunk. Eventually he had to call his father and his father came and pulled him out of the bar. And okay. We better sit down, we're going to drink like manly men. You know. We're drinking 151. We're going to light it on fire. I'm like, okay. I get a shot of 151 and I light it on fire. And you're supposed to blow it out. I went and blew it and when I blew it, fire shot across the bar and lit the bar on fire and the bartender, he was nice. He came and put it out and he said, "Okay. You guys can drink 151 all night but you're not lighting them any more." (laughs).

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

I'm like, okay. You know. I mean, it was strange too because like I had my hand on it and when I blew it, I saw the fire shoot across the bar and I lit my hands on fire and, uh, but, oh. We had such fun because everybody in the band was a character. And we played everywhere. The normal circuit that all bands played when they came down here to the west side. We played behind such names, uh, as, uh, in the Turf Club.

Al Holmes:

The Ohio Players came down one year. And, uh, we had practiced the day before, so we asked Homer, listen, I know it's going to cost to get in. He said, "Well listen. What you guys do. You come the night they're supposed to play. You come early." Because, uh, the Ohio Players had their manager on the door, so we came early to take the equipment off the stage and as the crowds were coming in, we just melted in with the crowd.

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Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

But, oh, goodness gracious. That's the first time I ever saw, uh, Sugarfoot, bass player. That's the first time I ever saw a bass player sing and dance while he played. I was lucky that, uh, I can play and maybe sing some background because, uh, my concentration wasn't that good at that time. But time went on. I joined other bands and you know, little sideline bands. I'd join for a little while and then quit. Some of them too numerous to name. But, I happened to meet a gentleman. He was a drummer and his name was Pancho Donato. Very smooth cat. Very smooth.

Al Holmes:

But you couldn't trust him behind a nickel and, uh, God rest the dead. Uh. But, uh, I would, I told him to his face I couldn't trust him because, uh, we, uh, had a gig New Years Eve, uh, with a band that we were with. Uh. Which happened to, uh, be an offshoot from the Unity Band. A lot of guys we were in the band as well and Pancho was the manager and percussionist. We played at the Turf a few times and, uh, this New Years Eve, we playing at the Little Elks. He gave us a couple of dollars so that, uh, we could, uh, you know, buy a few drinks. He said, "You'll get your pay later on that night," because we played the Little Elks.

Al Holmes:

Oh, after midnight, we're looking for him. He's gone. So we go to see, uh, if we can, uh, get paid. Did he get paid or not we asked? And they said, "Oh, we paid him and he left." And, uh, I saw him once a couple of days later and when I saw him, I saw him, his back, and he was getting into a cab. I said, "Pancho." He waved and got into his cab, didn't see him no more for four years.

Al Holmes:

In that time, I was so frustrated. Uh. I joined another band and the first two months, I was happy, but then I became frustrated because I felt like I couldn't go any further and at this time, I didn't have my own guitar, I didn't have my own amp and, uh, the leader of the band, which happened to have been Timmy of Timmy and the Gang. Before I joined the band, he sent word that he would like me to come down and audition with everybody else. When we came down to supposedly the audition, he gave everybody a cassette tape, played it for us, this is what we're going to learn. You know. I want to learn these four songs and after we learn this four songs, then we'll learn the show. You've got one week. I'm like, piece of cake.

Al Holmes:

We all got there, we, none of us had never played together. We was just musicians that we got the tape and we were coming to play. He counted off the first song. He said, "One, two, three, four," and the band fell in like we lived together to the point where he had to stop before we sang. He said, "Wait a minute. You guys caught me off guard because that was perfect." And to me it was ironic that, uh, he would come back and he would ask me to join the band and I felt that I had put in enough work that he would seek me out. I still didn't know my rear from my elbow, but he sought me out.

Al Holmes:

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After three months being with the band, I was just disheartened. He hired another guitar player and I found myself in the same position as Andy Thompson was in. We don't need another guitar player. But the other guitar player, he had an ulterior motive. He wanted to get rid of me, and he did. So I said, "I'm tired of this mess. I'm putting this guitar down and I'm not going to touch it ever again. I don't want to play." In four years, I may have picked up my guitar maybe twice, maybe three times because I wasn't going to play any more. I just left it sitting in the corner gathering dust.

Al Holmes:

By this time, I was with, uh, which was soon to be my wife, uh, Clevon Smith and, uh, the first year was okay. Second year, she said, "Uh, do you ever think about joining another band?" I said, "Ah, I'm not joining a band. I don't want this crap. No, not me." And, uh, by the third year, she said, "You really need to join another band." I said, "Nah, I'm not joining another band." About two months later, she said, "If you don't join another band or do something, you're going, we're going to build another room onto this house and that's where you're going to stay, because you're one of the most miserable SOBs since you've been without that guitar." And my son, which was nine years old at the time, said, "Yeah, daddy."

Speaker 1:

Oh. (laughs).

Al Holmes:

And I'm like, oh well. Maybe I will, but I don't know. Four years, not quite to the day, but four years exactly, the phone rang. Who is it but Pancho Donato. He said, "Hey man. Uh. Listen. You with anybody?" No. No. I'm not with anybody. "Well listen. I got a gig out at Seaview Mall. We'll open up a new music store and, uh, I would, uh, like to have you play. You know. I'm putting some musicians together." I said, no man. All right. Listen. I ain't touched my guitar in four years. And he said... Which, uh, for those of you who don't know, that news clutched the pearls.

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

Al Holmes:

He said, "Yeah. Well, your arch nemesis said you were probably washed up." And I said, "You mean, Andy Thompson?" He said, "Yes." I said, "How many days do I have to prepare?" He said, "Uh, three." I said, "I'll be ready." And I wasn't, but I went any way. He's not going to tell me I'm washed up. But, uh, I forgave him for that, you know, and we started up a band, um, which I met a good friend of mine, Bill Humphrey, excellent bass player. And, uh, we sort of swapped other musicians out and I met at that time, an individual I'd been seeing around town for years.

Al Holmes:

All the bands I was with in the circuit, if you're playing some place, you know, not a stage setting but you're playing some place like the Little Elks and it's not a special gig, if there's another band coming, let them play. And they have battles and bands and you know, we would, uh, use each other's equipment and, uh, from that, I saw this gentleman, that was guitar playing and I'm like, wow, who is that? You know. Nobody really told me because I never really asked anybody.

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Al Holmes:

When I got together with Pancho's band which he named Smooth Touch, no, not Smooth Touch... What the heck did he name that band? Oh, goodness gracious. I, you know, etched that band out of my mind because he ended up stealing from us again.

Speaker 1:

Oh no.

Al Holmes:

But before he did, he, we had to get a substitute guitar player because we had two guitar players that really, uh, they didn't want to play any more because they didn't want to be involved with Pancho's nonsense. But who should come on the scene as a fill in but Mr. Willie Mitchell. And we played two gigs together and after the second gig, which is over at the Howard Johnson's on the Boardwalk, upstairs on the band shell. We played a gig and, uh, during the intermission, I said to him, I said, "Man, I sure would love to play the blues like you do."

Al Holmes:

And Willie was from Gainesville, Florida. He came up as Bobby Blues Band's bass player and, uh, he said, "Well," in his country drawl. He said, "Well if that's all you need. If you got an hour two times a week or maybe twice a week, you know. We spend two hours at a time, uh, I can show you what I know." Because he was a bass player, but he taught himself to play guitar by reading a book.

Speaker 1:

Hm.

Al Holmes:

And, uh, fast forward a year, I never thought that a man 20 years my senior, well just about 20 years my senior. He's been gone, rest in day. He'd slap me if he heard me say that. Uh. Just about 20 years my senior would, uh, become more than my best friend because, uh, he would come down to my house and then he would come down and pick me up and take me to this house. And, uh, two hours would turn into three. Three hours would turn into four. Two days a week would turn into three days a week. Three days a week would turn into four days a week and that turned into, "Hey, man, you busy? I'm coming down. I got something to, to show you. I want you to get this under your fingers."

Al Holmes:

He would never say, "I want you to learn how to do this, get it under your fingers." Because once you have it, you'll never forget it. And, uh, this man taught me not only where the keys were on the guitar, because I knew A and I knew E. Everything else was, uh, foreign to me. He taught me every chord from starting E, every chord of the neck for every key and he wouldn't teach me the next one til I got to the top of the board. And God bless him, when he was trying to show me something, if I was doing it wrong, he wouldn't say, huh-uh (negative). He would just reach over and just snatch my fingers off the guitar and I'd put them back up there. If I was wrong, he'd snatch them off again. Like, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Speaker 1:

(laughs).

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Al Holmes:

And, uh, he gave me everything that he could possibly give me according to what he knew. And, uh, he taught me my first basic blues pattern which, uh, all blues players play which is a standard 1, 4, 5. Uh. Of course, in every key, which is A, D, and E. Little did I know, he was teaching me a pattern. That particular pattern can be used in, uh, just about every song you can name in one way or the other because he told me, every song that you play, you can play it within six frets and he gave me everything that he can possibly give me, uh.

Al Holmes:

Never asked for a dime. And, uh, we became a band. We, uh, started playing with our bass player from, uh, playing with Pancho. Uh. Then, uh, it was just the three of us and we got a drummer, auditioned drummers. And we were playing down at a club on Banks Avenue which was in an art gallery. It was called El Lobo Negro-

Speaker 1:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

... by, uh, John Brown and Dolores Brown. And, uh, we came in the first time and, uh, we played. We still were trying to fish out a name. We're keeping Pancho's band's name, but, uh, the next time we came in, we had a different drummer and we had a keyboard player. And John Brown said, "Wow, you guys are totally different than what you were the last time." And we said, "Yeah, well we sort of switch around a little bit." And he said, "Uh, you've got a nice collaboration going here. The Willie Mitchell Collaboration." He is the one that named our band. The Willie Mitchell Collaboration.

Al Holmes:

And we played for years. We played the Turf before it closed. Uh. We played the Orchid before they tore it down. But, uh, we played Big Bill's. We did festivals. Uh. Just about everywhere you can name, we went. And, uh, I asked Willie one time, "What and how do you know whether you've made it or not?" And Willie said, "That's up to you." I never understood it until one day, Willie and I were riding up to New York and, uh, you know, the riots in Asbury were 1970. Uh. July 3rd, right before the 4th of July. Uh. Springwood Avenue was tore up. Uh. And at that time, I wanted to see everything that was happening so me and my friends, we decided not to go all the way down Springwood because I lived on Ridge Avenue but we're going to go up Springwood towards Highway 35. And, uh, the National Guard had it cordoned off where you couldn't go past a certain point because they didn't want us to get past the county line in Neptune.

Al Holmes:

And, uh, we had heard by other passersby, listen, if we don't clear the area, they're going to start shooting rubber bullets at us because that's what they were doing. And some places, they shot real bullets. But, uh, oh, Asbury Park, I miss so much about how Springwood used to be but even though a lot of the places were on Springwood were gone, there was the musicians that fanned out to different areas and we still were the same family. And, uh, the Willie Mitchell Collaboration, we must have played more than 10, 11 years. And, uh, Willie Mitchell, he was about, he was 78-

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Speaker 1:

Wow.

Al Holmes:

... when he decided he was going to actually retire because his hands couldn't make, his hands couldn't keep up. Uh. He had emphysema and, uh, he had another lung disease. He couldn't sing any more. But before he retired, we, uh, were supposed to do a gig for a retirement party for one of our friends. And, uh, the friend, it was his retirement party, but he was paying all the musicians out of his pocket.

Al Holmes:

And he said to me, he said, "Listen. If Willie wants to come, tell Willie to come. Tell him I have an amp for him. Tell him all you got to do is bring his bass and, uh, if he doesn't want to play, he doesn't have to play but he'll still get paid." And, uh, when we got to the gig, Willie, he got up being the musician/performer that he is, Willie got up and he played, played bass and, uh, I was doing all the same. And Willie reached out and tapped me on the shoulder. Whew. Ha. Let me catch a breath because I don't want to cry on camera. (laughs). But, uh, Willie tapped me on the shoulder. When he tapped me on the shoulder, I looked back and he started playing, "For the Good Times." And that was one of the duets-

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [01:10:04]

Al Holmes:

And that was one of the duets that him and I did. We, uh... I took a verse, he took a verse and we did a harmony at a certain point. And, uh, that was the last song I ever sang with him.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

And big bad me big strong me, after we sang that song, I broke out into tears because I knew he was letting me know this is the last time we're ever gonna play together, this is the last time we're ever gonna to sing together. And he didn't have to say a word 'cause I knew my partner. And to this day I refuse to play that song-

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

...'cause that was ours. But, uh, from then I decided it's time for me to start my own band, which, uh, I started it as Al Holmes and The Tribe. And, uh, I never wanted to be... my band and be a dictatorship. Just like Willy, if you had any ideas, you know, bring them to the group and we all decide whether we're gonna do it or not. And I felt that, uh, not only me putting my name out front, it's like putting them in the back. And I can't see putting the band I'm working with and notice I don't see my band. The band I'm

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working with putting them in the back and they're working just as hard as I am. So I dropped the name Al Holmes and just called the band The Tribe.

Al Holmes:

And the reason why I named the band, The Tribe musicians we... I don't care if you're a guitar player, keyboard player, drummer or you play harp, if you sing, we are all a part of what is called the same race. We all speak the same language. And if you are in one particular band, you are a part of that tribe. But since we are all a part of the same race, the same family, we should all behave like it. We should all be able to play with one another. If this band needs a guitar player or a drummer, uh, if we're not playing that we can use our drummer. If this band, band needs, uh, a horn player, if, uh, we don't have enough space for a horn player or we're not playing, let them use our horn player. If we need a keyboard player, we should be able to use their keyboard player.

Al Holmes:

And the more unity that I believe that is promoted between musicians, the tighter this big wide world of musicians gets. Because it becomes closer and closer and closer and closer and it becomes what it should be as one. (Laughs).

Melissa Keeling:

Can I ask-

Al Holmes:

Yes you may.

Melissa Keeling:

... about, uh, specifically the Turf club, which is the [the last remaining structure on Springwood Avenue that was once a music venue]? And we're really interested in what it looked like. Could you describe the layout as clearly as you can?

Al Holmes:

I can describe the layout like the back of my hand. Not only, uh, that I frequented the Turf Club before I was an active musician. Before I was old enough to get in the bar, I was in the Turf Club. Uh, when I used to follow musicians around, uh, which before I was in an actual musician. Uh, while I was in job corps, I learned to be a roadie. I learned to set up, you know, different musicians' instruments and plugged in and seen and knew how to fix their equipment, you know. Tune their guitars and, and I learned how to set the drums up. So I became pretty well rounded. I could set up the PA if necessary.

Al Holmes:

It also got me into clubs without paying for it and got me a drink or two because they didn't give me pay. Once I learned how to tune the instruments so then I got paid. But, uh, the Turf Club was a very unique club. The Turf Club was one of the few clubs that didn't, didn't have the front door on the side. There wasn't a front, uh, regulation front in either side of the building. The front was on the corner of the building. When you walk in, you have to walk through , uh, the front door. And there's a little vestibule there, which, uh, they would take your money if they, if it cost to get in or they would, you know, ask for

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your ID. And before you get in, this is the corner where the front is. On the left side [the Atkins Avenue entrance], that's where the door that went into the package goods.

Al Holmes:

On the right side of the building on Springwood, that's the door that musicians brought their equipment in or if they wanted to get everybody out in a hurry, they would open that door as well. And, uh, when you come in, if you go to the left, there's a straight wall with, uh, windows up top, you know all windows up . And you would follow the wall and the bar skirted the wall and you could look into where the package goods were. And they had like a, a farmhouse door. And, uh, you couldn't get in there, it was locked. But if you had to get in back to go to where the supply room is, you can walk into that way and go back behind the stage.

Al Holmes:

As I said, the bar was made, and not exactly a "horseshoe" ... it wasn't rounded but it was square like a, more like a rectangle. And when you walk in, you're walking at the left hand corner of the rectangle if you're facing the stage. The stage was elevated behind the bar. And right in front of where the stage was, that's where they stack all the top shelf liquor. So you couldn't get too excited because if you kick over a bottle, you have to pay for it.

Melissa Keeling:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

But if you come into the door where the packaged goods are, if you go the opposite way do- down the bar, there's steps that you can go to a platform where they had tables and chairs and a railing that came across so that when you walked down the end of the bar, you'd walk by the tables and chairs. And if you make a left at the end of the bar, there's the men's bathroom and then there's the ladies' bathroom, which the ladies' bathroom had a partition that came out from the door and came across so when the ladies opened the door, you couldn't look directly into the bathroom. Uh, but the men, they didn't care.

Melissa Keeling:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

Swing the door open, hey, you just better be prepared when that door opens. But, uh, if you go down past the bathrooms, there was another door that you went through that went to where the supply area was. And you can also walk up the steps going to the stage

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

And there was a big disco ball in the middle-

Melissa Keeling:

# ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... uh, right in the middle of the bar. Uh, they had stage lights, professional lighting. And it was abs- it was a wonderful place to play. The bands could see you from the stage and from wherever you were in the Turf Club, you could see the bands. And the way it was made, you can hear the music outside but you couldn't hear the outside noise. A fire engine could ride by while the band's playing and you couldn't hear them. And it was a very unique place. Uh, of course the bar where the liquor, uh, was stacked, uh, went straight from what I call stage front, looking at the stage, it ran all the way just about to the stage. And underneath [inaudible 01:20:06], that's where they would store the liquor and the beer boxes were all along the sides.

Melissa Keeling:

So you could walk behind the bar... you could walk between the bar and the stage?

Al Holmes:

No, you c- you... The only way you can walk behind the bar to get there to work, you had to go down towards where the store room is. And the bar flipped up on end so the bartenders could walk back.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

And oh, beautiful place, beautiful place. Uh, and, uh, before it closed down, it changed hands. And, uh, the last owner that, uh, had it, uh, he called me, he was, uh, a, detective [inaudible 01:20:57]. He's called Big Shot. And Big Shot drank more than he sold, but he was a very giving individual. And if you're a part, uh, of the organization such as the house man, bartender or even a regular that comes every day at a certain hour, he would lock the door and you drink till you pass out.

Melissa Keeling:

What was behind the stage? Like if you're standing on the stage what was the background?

Al Holmes:

Behind the stage, behind the stage, uh, the backstore. When you're on the stage, there's a curtain-

Melissa Keeling:

Okay.

Al Holmes:

... that's, uh, in the back of the stage and there's a wall behind the curtain. And behind that wall was a walkway that you can go from the package goods to the supply room.

Melissa Keeling:

# ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Wow. What color was the curtain?

Al Holmes:

The curtain, the curtains were tough colors. They were a burnt, top burnt orange or a dark Sienna with sequins. And if you had, uh, a banner for your band and y- you put it up, you can pin it up to, to the curtain. And when it was a warmer, or when the heat was on, the [air from the] air conditioner [hit] the curtain and it used to shimmer.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

And the sequins used to... It sounds like you've been there.

Melissa Keeling:

I could only walk by and look in the window.

Al Holmes:

What?

Melissa Keeling:

(Laughs). I wa- what color were the chairs and uh-

Al Holmes:

The chairs were, were black wrought iron. Uh, and uh, they were wrought iron back, but the base was made out of wood. And uh, the seat part of the chair was, uh, they had black and uh, they had sometimes dark brown. It would all depend. The bars themselves, they had a high top chairs around the bar and uh, they were all wooden and they were all black and they ks- covered all the circumference of the bar area itself. And between the bathrooms and the bar, there was a meager dance area, which we kept for-

Melissa Keeling:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... absolutely. Say, if you had to go to the bathroom, you better go before a record comes on that everybody likes, or she might not make it.

Melissa Keeling:

(Laughs.) If, if, you're at the side door, the, the side door [on the Springwood Avenue side], there was a room right there. What was that?

# ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Al Holmes:

That was the owners' and manager's office.

Melissa Keeling:

Okay.

Al Holmes:

That's where we went to get paid.

Melissa Keeling:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

Funny story about that. One time we were in there and the only edge I was, I'm trying to remember why I was I with to you- I was with Smooth Church. The owner, had said, well, I'll pay you at the end of the night. At the end of the night, the owner was gone. He wasn't there. What we did, we all act like we were leaving the bartender. He's filling up the bar box and everything. We all went in the men's bathroom, excuse me, and we stood there because we knew he wasn't going because the light was on and we're on stage most of the time. We didn't see him walk out the door... We waited and waited and waited. We had the door open. When the door opened, we all came out and, uh, the leader of the band, Tony said, he said, "Oh yes, uh, it's a time for us to get paid?" And the owner was like, "Oh, oh, oh yeah." And walked back in the office to get us our check.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

And at that time, you know, we were always paid by check. There's no such thing as cash. Next question.

Melissa Keeling:

That was pretty incredible, Mr Al. No one has been able to describe the interior and definitely these orange sequins are exciting.

Al Holmes:

I remember not orange... burnt sienna.

Melissa Keeling:

Sienna. Okay, [inaudible 01:25:49] burnt?

Speaker 2:

And the floor?

# ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Al Holmes:

And the floor was checkerboard pattern.

Speaker 2:

Okay, it was the same Sienna and-

Al Holmes:

It was a checkerboard pattern from uh, the door by the office all the way back to uh, where the, the storeroom is. But along the edge of the bar on that side was carpet, just like where the tables and chairs were and the carpet ran all the way around the other side of the bar.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

That was the only place that wasn't carpeted.

Speaker 2:

Um, so you did such that your description is amazing. And I'm just trying to orient myself. A quick question about the raised area. So when you walk in the, the corner of the main entrance...

Al Holmes:

when you walk into the main entrance-

Speaker 2:

To your right.

Al Holmes:

... When you walk into the door 'cause the doors open outside-

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

... they didn't open inside but they opened outside. The inner door opened outside-

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

... and the outside door opened inside. This way, if there was any chance, which I didn't realize this but my father explained this to me because my father, uh, uh, grew to be a bar owner and I used to work for him. He said, usually in the old days they used to make doors like that because if the stickup man sticks

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the bar up and he's trying to get out, he has to take the door and push it and then pull the other one. He can't get out in a hurry because the doors would meet, he would have to shut this one in order to open this one. And by the time he shut this one and tries to open this one, somebody is right behind him and they catch him between the doors.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

But, uh, I, you know, I've always, always, uh, been in bars and clubs because, uh, my father, uh, he was a Jack of all trades and taught me how to survive. I know a little bit, bit of plumbing, electrical, carpentry, uh, groundskeeping you name it. And uh, my father taught me this. He taught me how to work a bar. And uh, at a very young age — which, just in case the ABC i- is watching, there's going to be a disclaimer. So, uh-

Melissa Keeling:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... you can't prosecute me because I'm too old and can't prosecute him. But [inaudible 01:28:39] he's gone. But, uh, he had me in the bar helping him since I was 10 years old. I first I started sweeping the bar up, sweeping the bathroom down, mopping the bathroom. Uh, when I got a little older, he had me, uh, loading up the beer boxes. He, he taught me how to take the cold ones out, that were [inaudible 01:29:04], put the new ones in that were warm and put the cold ones on top of them. I used to box down. So, uh, I spent a lot of time behind the bar. But, uh, what I always wanted to do was be the manager of a club that, uh, that sponsored and then had live music who was detrimental in that particular fashion was Mr. Stewie Mills and Odyssey Moore from the Orchid lounge. Stewie would come to work dressed this three piece every time he came, he was smooth as butter and clean as a Tennessee children every time he walked through that door and I watched how he ran the club. I watched how he interacts with people and I said, I would love to be able to do that.

Al Holmes:

And fortunately, uh, later in the years, uh, about maybe four years ago, I was offered a job being the musical coordinator at [Hoovers] [01:30:23] in Bradley Beach. And, uh, I would hear the bands. And I knew all the musicians so I knew the bands again. I knew even bands that you know, really wouldn't go well on that area. And I also, uh, knew the bands that, uh, what if I say, "Listen g- guys, I'm doing this. I need you guys to pay, to play for me. This is what I'm g, I'm getting to spend on a band. Would you play?" And they would come if I whisper their name in the wind. And from just hiring the bands, my basic job was just to make out the lineup for the week and, uh, then make sure at the end of the night the band gets their checks. I went a little further, I wanted to become the Stewie Mills of Hoovers. I would greet the people and uh, as the people came in, they knew who I were. I would start the show and I had a catch phrase to start the show. I would always ask everybody, you know, when I asked for the house music, I say, is everybody ready to party? And you know, a few people would say, "Yeah." I say, "Oh no, I can't hear you. Is everybody ready to party?"

# ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Al Holmes:

And everybody would start screaming and I would introduce the band. And as the band is playing as the customers are coming in, I'm greeting the customers. Uh, and I made friends with the staff because if you're friends with the staff you can get things done.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

Uh, I would ask him, like, people would call me on my personal phone, "Listen, we're coming down. You think you can reserve a table for me?" "Sure." I would ask us, you know, some of the waitresses, "Listen can you reserve that table there 'cause you observe high top?" And I had a VIP section, which, uh, they had a staircase that went upstairs and went up to the upstairs, which they had a small ballroom, but up there they set a table and chairs, uh, new customers that would come in, I would tell them, "Well let me set you up in the VIP table."

Al Holmes:

They said, "VIP table? I said, "Yes, this is my table." (Laughs) And I would set them there. Now I've got a customer that's gonna constantly come back because they were treated royally.

Melissa Keeling:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

A- as they sat out, one of the waitress would come by and I would call them by name. I said, and Jack they couldn't hear me, but they knew by my sign language, uh, could you take care of my friends up at the VIP table and they would go right there. 'Cause I made friends with the staff. When it's time to move the table so people can dance after the first set, I'd have to ask the staff, they would move the tables from me that were out in front. And I was good friends with the owner. At the beginning, uh, he had a house man there that, eh... the drummer wasn't a drummer.

Al Holmes:

The drummer, it was, first of all, it's a female drummer, present company excepted. Female drummer, female guitar player, uh, female bass player, and, uh, they had a male keyboard player. The drummer played with one hand and hitting the snare and that's all she did. But that's all Anthony knew. He was so frustrated because we have more people sitting here. Then they had a music night. And I mean, listen, he was going into the bathroom, he was punching holes in the walls. There's still a hole in the wa- a dent in the walking freezer in the back where he put his knuckles through. And I told him, I said, "Anthony,

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

before it's all over, this place is going to be packed, every night there's going to be music there." And praise God. Thanks Stewie Mills for showing me the way, unbeknownst to himself, but, uh, before I was done, every time they had music, it was packed, packed to the point it was standing room on me.

Al Holmes:

And, uh, I was very thankful for that because it gave me an opportunity to do something that I think I would never be able to do, but, uh, if I had the opportunity I would do it again. But, uh, it's busy work. I would have to be there Friday and Saturday from opening until well, time for me to start the closing. And, uh, as of now, uh, since I'm legally blind, I don't drive anymore and, uh, I still have my license, but I'm blin- um, completely blind in one eye and can't see out there. It ain't he old joke. But, uh, a guy asked me jokingly, he said, "Do you still drive." I said, "I can." He said, "You can? How can you drive?" I said, "Easy I just put my cane out the window and feel for the curve." (Laughs) But uh, if I had the opportunity to do it again, I would love to but I wouldn't put anybody through the hardship of having to take me back and forward.

Speaker 2:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

You know, I, the money was pretty good, but the experience of the music. And if they ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever open the Turf again for music, I would canvas to be the maitre D (Laughs) because I know my job, I love people. And it's not all about being a musician, it's about the audience. It's about the performance.

Melissa Keeling:

(Laughs).

Speaker 2:

It's not hard to see, it's very easy to picture you sir.

Al Holmes:

Oh-

Speaker 2:

Just one type of job. (Laughs).

Al Holmes:

I would love to have one. And plus if I wanted to, I could walk there because I'm 65 years old and, uh, I can probably still outrun most of my grandkids (Laughs) even though I still smoke a little bit and, uh, I really don't drink no more. I don't drink no less but I don't drink no more.

Speaker 2:

(Laughs)

# ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Al Holmes:

But, uh, at someplace I know I can get to and I can get to on my own. And I've been living in Asbury, I've been walking Asbury streets, uh, so long that I can go from Sixth Avenue to, uh, , uh, Sixth Avenue, on the beach to Dunkin Donuts on Corlies Avenue and wouldn't bat an eye. I can find my way in the dark. 'Cause I know this town. I love this town. Every street in this town has a part of me left in it and has a part of me in his heart, in my heart because, uh, this town has raised me from infancy to adult.

Al Holmes:

I've seen it change so many times, uh, before the riot, after the riot, before, uh, drug started reeling the inner city, uh, to the point where the community started fighting back. Uh, and the upheaval and the gentrification is such a beautiful sight to see because a lot of the young people think this is new. This isn't new, this is Asbury park. This is the way it used to be. And myself, I grew up in the projects. I'm a project kid. Everybody was in the projects according to economics. We all made the, made the same amount of money because if you made more than a certain amount of money, you couldn't live there but you could make so little money, you couldn't afford to live there, but public assistance would help you. And even though, uh, we all made the same amount of money and everybody fell short towards the end of the month, whatever happens, uh, if there's a catastrophe or something, everybody would fall short.

Al Holmes:

There was never a child that went without a Christmas, ever went without us Thanksgiving, uh, everyone went without school clothes at the beginning of the ch- of the year. Never went without shoes. And that same self, same camaraderie that we had in the projects I found it down here in Asbury park. When I first got here, I could walk a block down and knock on the neig- the neighbor, not my next door neighbor, not my across the street neighbor, but my neighbor down the block, I can knock on their door with a cup and says, "My mom wouldn't like to know if you could loan us, uh, a cup of sugar." And get it. I mean, I've sat at tables where I couldn't understand the language that they spoke to each other, but I knew I was welcomed and I was fed very well. And in turn there were children that s- stayed at my table.

Al Holmes:

My best friend going back, my best friend in the projects spoke no English. He was Spanish, he was Puerto Rican before they moved out, they moved out because his father got a real good job and they made too much money, so they had to leave the projects. But, uh, we played together for two years, never understood a word each other said, but we had a ball. And from that experience, uh, I kind of brought that with me when I came here because, uh, my mother had the same attitude. She would never cook for just us in the house. She would cook enough. She always told me, "You always cook enough so that there's somebody knocks on your door hungry that you be able to offer them something to eat." And speaking of my, my dear mother, there's a story I'm gonna share with you. When I was young, all around, whew, somewhere between 7 and 10, somewhere in there, my mother, [inaudible 01:42:18] 'cause she was always doing this, she brought this guy to the house.

Al Holmes:

He was a j- he looked like he was, you know, might've been a drinker. He was kind of scruffy and down on his luck, ...his clothes were dirty. Uh, she let him take a shower. She gave him a razor, one of my father's razors, uh, and a set of my father's old clothes and send out the table and fed him. After she fed him on his way out the door, she handed him \$3 and he said, "I can't." And she [inaudible 01:42:55] hand up and said, "Take it. You never know what you might need along the way." Two and a half years later, there was a knock on the door. My mother opened the door of course I'm, I gotta a nose like Pinocchio. I'm ... Let

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

me see who's at the door. There was a gentleman standing there clean cut. And he said to her, "Do you remember me?" She says, "No, I don't remember you." He handed her \$3 and she looked at it. And then she looked and remembered it was the guy that she brought home.

Al Holmes:

He told her, because she cleaned him up, he was able to get a job at the corner grocery store. And he told the guy at the grocery store, uh, he didn't have any place to stay, the guy let him stay in the basement. He worked and saved his money till he was able to get a room. He ended up getting a better job. From, then he got himself an apartment, uh, and he was doing pretty good. And he never forgot the kindness that my mother gave her, gave him. And uh, he said, "I wanted to bring you this \$3 back because you gave it to me out of your heart, out of the kindness of your heart and I wanna make sure that you have something in your heart that you can offer someone else." And that's what I brought with me.

Speaker 2:

The last one was amazing.

Al Holmes:

That's what I brought with me. And when my mother eventually moved down here with me and, um, we, uh, we inherited the Roman house, uh, we treated everyone, uh, excuse me, everyone like family. Uh, we had her apartment, we had an apartment next door, we had multiple rooms upstairs. I started out with a new room back off her apartment.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:45:04]

Al Holmes:

[inaudible 01:45:00]. I started out with a little room back off her apartment, and uh, eventually one of the guys upstairs moved out and I begged and begged for that room. She let me have it. Say, "Well, Uh, I'm never going to get rent for the room." I said, "I'll pay you rent." She was every [inaudible 01:45:15] dollar from me. But, uh, we used to have oil heat like a lot of people had during that time, and, uh, when I- it would snow real bad and uh the oil man couldn't get through what my friends and I would do ... My mother always kept Duraf- flame logs, you know, so you know we could just burn logs 'cause they smell good.

Al Holmes:

But, when the oil went out my friends and I used to bring wood home. When we would find wood, uh, we would burn a Duraflame log and leave the wood next to it so the wood would dry out because of the snow. And after it dried we would open up our doors to our apartment, open up the door next door because next door was just a room, uh, with a bedroom and a kitchen. It was an efficiency. But they had a sitting area that goes upstairs on the other side of the house. You can go from one side of the house all the way over. So we had everybody open their doors and we'd light both fire places and keep them running all night so everybody would be warm.

Speaker 3:

Wow. And where was the rooming house? I- I know it was on Ridge [crosstalk 01:46:30]-

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Al Holmes:

On Ridge Avenue between Springwood and Bangs Avenue, right c- if you're coming from Springwood, it's right before you get to Stratford Avenue-

Speaker 3:

Okay.

Al Holmes:

... because you know, Stratford ran into Ridge-

Speaker 3:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

... and then goes all the way to Highway 35. And, uh, I th- ... That was, I loved that place. We used to give parties and, oh, goodness gracious. I j- just have so many different memories. Uh, that's one of the places I grew up. I became an a- ... I became an adult in that house. Theoretically. But, uh, personally, I got Peter Pan syndrome.

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

I refuse to grow up (laughs).

Speaker 3:

Hasn't happened yet, huh?

Al Holmes:

No, it hasn't completely happened

Speaker 3:

Not yet. I- I have two questions that are right, just going way back. Your mo- your mother's from New York?

Al Holmes:

My mother, in actuality, is from Durham, North Carolina. My mother's from Durham, uh, my aunts and uncles, they, they were born in, in Durham. Uh, and they moved to the surrounding areas. To Raleigh and Winston-Salem, and they worked there. Uh, my father was from Georgia and, uh, my father was a [inaudible 01:47:51], gentleman's gentleman. I learned my class, my savoir faire from my dad because m- m- my dad believed in respect. He says, "Respect is due to everyone until they don't respect you. And if they don't respect you, you have an opportunity to walk away. But if you can't, you stand up for yourself and if at all possible, if you have to demand respect for someone else, you do that."

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Al Holmes:

He believed in respecting women. He believed in it hands-down. He never, ever would think about using the B word. Not even talking to his male friends. He would never use the B word. And me, I wouldn't call a woman the B word even if she was one.

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

Not to her face at least. (Laughs). But no. Uh, that's how I was raised. I was raised by this man and uh, I'm very comfortable in my skin. I mean I believe that uh, I can go down to skid row, I can walk into The White House and not be afraid, not be ashamed, and can talk to anyone. Because as long as you carry yourself with respect you get respect and that's one of the things that uh, being from uh, a family that is part African American, part Cherokee, and part Irish American. Uh, all of it clumped together, it gives you more acceptance than most. And unfortunately, part of my uh, heritage are people that were outlawed from drinking, part of my heritage are people that they say shouldn't drink, and the other part are people that uh, are gonna drink anyway (laughs). So you know I come from a family that weren't strangers to alcohol. But drunk, sick or sober, they were always respectful.

Speaker 3:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

And uh, I try to carry that with me wherever I go and, uh, well that's basically me in the nutshell.

Speaker 3:

(Laughs). Well, I'm going to ask about this thing [inaudible 01:50:39] is that okay?

Speaker 4:

Uh, yeah.

Al Holmes:

Yeah, ask away.

Speaker 5:

[crosstalk 01:50:39]-

Speaker 3:

[crosstalk 01:50:39], uh, so, wh- what is something you would like someone walking down Springwood Avenue today to know about the music or the history about Springwood Avenue?

Al Holmes:

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Someone to ... What I would like them to know is there are so many landmarks that aren't visible. People that walk by Springwood and Memorial Drive, they don't know that The Orchid was on that corner. When they go down further, they don't know Madonna's was across the street. They don't know a little ways further there was Pat's Bar. They don't know what The Turf even was. They see The Turf, they see the fancy sign, they figure, "Well, it must have been a club." And it was more than a club. It was all these clubs, even all the way down to The Little Elks, to Big Bill's.

Al Holmes:

All of these clubs were meeting places not only for musicians, for families. Uh, during holidays people used to go from club to club. It was a place where people made a living, it was a place where people could enjoy themselves, it was a place where people could go if they needed someone to talk to. It was a place to go if you just wanted to be by your self! You go in there, two o'clock in the afternoon, there's nobody but you and the bartender. If you just wanted to be by yourself, you can go there.

Al Holmes:

Funny story about The Turf Club, speaking of The Turf. As I say, I've always been a gentleman and one thing, since I've grown up and realized it's not the thing to do, I haven't put my hands on a woman since I was 16 years old because uh, one day, older gentleman he said to me, he said uh, "Would you like somebody to hit your mother?" I said no. I- he said, "That woman that you hit is eventually gonna be somebody's mother and is also somebody's daughter. See, if somebody hit your mother, would you be upset?" I said, "I'd put them in the ground." And from then on, I never put my hands on a woman.

Al Holmes:

But every woman that I was with if for the exception of my wife, which I was uh, together with for 29 years, every woman I was with I taught them how to box. Taught 'em how to fight. Some of them were v-involved in a martial art, and I've been a martial artist since I was uh, 13 officially. I've been studying the martial arts since I was a- about, oh I'd say about 11 or 12 because my brother was involved, and uh, he needed somebody to practice on. So he had to teach me what he was learning. So uh, he had to teach me how to defend myself so he could beat me up (laughing)-

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... so what can I say?

Al Holmes:

But, I'm in The Turf Club one night with uh, the band called Expressions. We're in there and uh, we play gigs there so we just kind of come and hang out. There's a woman, she comes in. Excuse me. She was in there pretty early and uh, she's dressed pretty good, you know? Very nice looking, hair done nice, nails done nice. She's having a drink. Oh, this was about 11:30, 20 minutes to 12. This guy comes through the door. Jeans and sneakers, which was a no-no back then. Jeans and sneakers and a pajama top on. Walks past the doorman, says, "I'm coming to get my woman. I'm not staying."

Al Holmes:

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

He comes up to the bar, she had a drink there and he said, "[01:55:35] Bea, didn't I tell you to come home before 12 o'clock?" She says, "It's just quarter of, I'll be home at 12 o'clock." "You'll never make it there in time. I told you to be there at 12 o'clock." She says, "A- all right. I'm gonna be there, just let me finish my drink." He hauls off and pow! Slaps her, and I'm like, "Oh, no."

Al Holmes:

I slide my chair back, okay? I look at the fellas, they said, "Okay, we're with you." She says, "All right, I'm going." She gets up, she walks out the door. We as a band, we go out behind her. You're not going to do it, 'cause like we know if you slap her in public, when you get her out in the street, you're going to beat the stew out of her all the way home and we're not going to have it.

Al Holmes:

She says ... After you know, we get out there and they're, they're k- arguing, she said, "What are you mad about? I told you I was coming home, I was going to finish my drink and I left my drink on the bar and you, you're still angry. You're still yelling at me. And, and I told you not to hit me," and he says, "Bea, I'll hit you when I want to." Pow! And hit her again.

Al Holmes:

I started to move, my man Brian [Peak 01:56:48] said, "Just wait a minute. If he jumps on her and grab her, we'll all get him." She said to him, "I told you not to put your hands on me ever again." She kicked off her heels. She had a nice dress on. She put her dukes up and I said (laughing)-

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... he said, "Oh, you want to fight?" He swung again. She dipped. He said, "Bea, I'll kick your ..." and he went to grab for her, she caught him with a two-piece in the gut and an upper-cut to the chin, and knocked him on his A squared S.

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Speaker 4:

(Laughs).

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

I said, "Go, girly, go!" He got up, "Oh, you really wanna fight!" He put his hands up. She was beating the stew out of this cat. This cat reached down in the curb and grabbed a bottle. We took the bottle from

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him, "No, you got to wear this one, number one because you put your hands on her. Number two, 'cause I just wanna see it!" (Laughs). She ended up chasing him around the car. After he wouldn't stop, she went and put her shoes on. She says, "I'm going in the bar to finish my drink. I might have another, and I'll be on my way home. And when I get home you better not be there."

Al Holmes:

When she got ready to leave, I said uh, "Dear, would you like us to walk you home?" She said, "No I'm all right." I said (laughing), "I know you are."

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Speaker 4:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

That was the prettiest butt whipping I ever saw.

Speaker 4:

(Laughs).

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

I'd ... Listen. I, w- and I've seen Ali fight. A- but that was pretty because it was a woman and I am against women being abused.

Speaker 3:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Al Holmes:

So, uh, that's just one of my (Laughs)-

Speaker 3:

That's great.

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Al Holmes:  
FYI stories.

Speaker 4:  
(Laughs).

Al Holmes:  
I have a million of them.

Speaker 4:  
(Laughs).

Speaker 3:  
(Laughs).

Speaker 5:  
(Laughs).

Speaker 4:  
I would love to hear you play something.

Al Holmes:  
You would love to hear me play something?

Speaker 4:  
Do you guys have any other questions?

Speaker 5:  
We would love to hear you play.

Al Holmes:  
Okay. Alrighty. I, you know, when I first got down here, uh, I wasn't a blues man. I was an R&E, R&B wannabe. And then, I don't know whether you understand this, but the mothership landed. (Laughs). Funkadelic hit the scene-

Speaker 3:  
(Laughs).

Al Holmes:  
... and I've been a F- Funkateer since th- since then. But that's when I started, you know, playing funk and-

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Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... Willie, because of what he taught me, it's like I- I'm able to play just about anything I want, uh, because he taught me the patterns. Uh, let's see. See if you know this one. (Singing).

Al Holmes:

You know, that's (Laughs), that's that, that's my, my, my uh, my funk vein. I love f- ... I love-

Speaker 3:

Amazing.

Al Holmes:

... funk. I love funk-

[Al sings a few songs and accompanies himself on electric guitar.]

Speaker 4:

Yay! Thank you, Mr. Al!

Al Holmes:

... I love, uh, I love blues. (Singing).

Al Holmes:

Listen to that. I wrote that one.

Speaker 5:

Yeah. (Laughs).

Al Holmes:

But, uh, yeah that ... You know, if it was possible that I can put this thing on my back, uh, I would take it with me everywhere I go. But sometimes you know, you j- just can't. You know, it's just like, uh, having a significant other, you know.

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

They got things to do, too. You know?

Speaker 5:

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## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

But, uh, I love this instrument because, uh, it ... It feeds my soul. I could have a rough day, ah ... I could pick up this guitar, the day fades away. Someone could make me angry enough to spit fire. I can go home, pick up this thing, and, uh ... I'm transposed into another world. Uh, I could be sad and no one knows it but me. But, this guitar will let the world know how I feel. And uh, I like all kinds of music, of course, because of my eclectic background. Uh, but there are certain guitar players that uh, I love uh, unconditionally. Uh, Carlos Santana has always been one of my favorites. (Singing).

Al Holmes:

You know, funny thing. Uh, I've been asked about this guitar a lot uh, in my years and uh, years ago you know you were either a lead guitar player or you were rhythm guitar player. And uh, people asked me since I became aware, aware of really what this thing can do and how to play it right uh, people asked me, "What do you play? Lead or rhythm?" I would say, "I play guitar," because there's no significant difference. Uh, you either play lead or rhythm because you don't have the ability to do both, and uh, (laughing) just recently I was playing and a gentleman asked me, he says, "[inaudible 02:05:48], hey man. Can you play like Ernie Isley?" I said, "No, and he can't play like me." (Laughs).

Speaker 3:

So true.

Al Holmes:

Because, you know we are all individuals. You know, I j- ... I don't care what you, you played, where your skill level, skill level is at. You can always teach somebody something or you can always learn something from him. Uh, my mentor Willie he started off by telling me, he said, "Listen. If you can only play on two strings, you play the best and learn those two strings you bet ... You possibly can and then add another string and learn that one. And eventually you'll be able to play with anybody on this Earth." And uh, years later I sit here and I think to myself, "Who would I be afraid to get on stage with?" And uh, the profound answer is no one. (Laughs). Because I can only do what I can do, but I can do what I do because I understand what I'm doing and I may not be as good as that individual but I can keep up, you know? Because, uh, I've had so many instances where uh, different musicians would just chop my head off.

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

When Mel's ... Or, when Jason was opening, Mel had Jason's in Belmar. A gentleman named Filthy Rich and the Poor Boy Band used to be the house band. When I was first getting back into the swing, Willie uh, took me down there and, "All right, we gonna go down to the jam session." Okay. I'ma get up there. I had a little bit in my toolbox but not much. Filthy Rich's guitar player, I'm getting up there with, with Filthy Rich and Filthy Rich was doing ... You know, doing a blues hit and uh, he looked at me and I started playing-

Speaker 3:

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(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... and before I knew it he pulled out his razor. And I'm like, "Damn, ouch! He cut me!"

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Speaker 4:

(Laughs).

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

So next week I went down there and I'm like-

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... he pulled out that razor again. And I'm like, "God dog it, he done sliced me again." I stayed away for two weeks. Willie said the next week, "You wanna go back?" "No, man." I wasn't. "I gotta woodshed a little bit." Came back two weeks later. We're up there and we're playing. Still practicing with Willie. We're playing. Rich said, "Go head, get yours." And you know, I'm doing pretty good. He pulled out that razor-

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... and when he pulled out that razor, I was like ting! Ting! Ting! Ting! "No, you're not getting it this time, buddy."

Speaker 4:

(Laughs).

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

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Got my own razor. The next week, another gentleman that I knew wasn't as accom- accomplished as I. Uh, he wanted to go up but there was no bass player, and Filthy Rich said, "Listen, could you back this guy up because we don't have a bass player, I'm going to play bass." Okay. I backed him up and uh, the guy you know, he was uh, playing his whatever song he wanted to play and when it's time for him to ...

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... when it's my time, like ... I'm just said, "Listen, this is dog-eat-dog."

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Speaker 4:

(Laughs).

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

Filthy Rich came down, I w- ... After it was over, I'm sitting at the bar. He said, "Listen. If you come down and it's just me and you and there's no bass player," he said, "I'll play bass for you anytime."

Speaker 3:

Aw.

Al Holmes:

So that's where I cut my teeth, but I'd figured well, I want to get better and better and better not just so, uh, I can slice somebody's head, but so I could survive-

Speaker 3:

Mm.

Al Holmes:

And uh, I told this story uh, at um, my mentor's funeral. Ah, the whole, just about all the music family that we had came out and his fam- ... Willie's family was there. Everybody got an opportunity to speak, and they couldn't wait for me to speak because they knew I'm Willie's partner. "I know he's got something to say." And uh, I spoke about the love of my partner you know, because not only was he my partner, he was my brother, he was my friend, uh, he was my mentor, he was my father. You know? He treated me like a son and he shared with me like I was a son.

Al Holmes:

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And I said to, to them, I said uh, "One day I was down at The Crossroads and um, I'm sitting out there watching the band play and a guy walks in. It wasn't even a jam session night. Regular band night. He walks in, he's got a Fender guitar strapped to his back. And uh, as he comes in, he's standing there and I turn around, I said, "Hey, man." I said uh, "Probably ... Probably a nice Fender you got there, huh?" "How you know it's a Fender?" I said, "Well uh, 'cause you got Fender on the bag. I just," (laughs)-

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

"... took for granted it was a Fender." He said uh, "Well, yeah, you know. I try to p- carry the best 'cause uh, you know, I've ... I've, you know, done some uh, some fill-in work uh, uh, I've done some track work, you know, I've, I've done some, some uh, tours, you know, with this band, with that band and uh, you know, uh, I'm very much sought-after. You know, I figured I'll come down you know, get every ... Let everybody get a look at my wares, you know. Uh, I'm this, that ..." he just kept going on and kept going on and, and uh, I'm listening to him and uh, I said when he got a break and took a breath, I said, "You played with all these people?" He said, "Yeah."

Al Holmes:

I said, "Do you like apples?" He said, "What?" I said, "Do you like apples?" He said, "Yeah, I like apples." I said, "Well, I played with Willie Mitchell. How you like them apples?"

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Speaker 4:

(Laughs).

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

And turned my back on him (laughing). Because, y- you know, all those names you're dropping, it don't mean diddly, because at the end of the day, there's always somebody better, there's always somebody younger, and there's only so much you can do with this because it only has six strings. It has the same amount of frets from the head to the body. You may configure it different, but it's nothing really new under the sun other than personal interpretation. And uh, I saw on Ripley's Believe It Or Not, guy was a guitar player. He was in a horrible accident, got his arms cut off to his elbow. He learned how to play guitar with his feet, an acoustic guitar, and he played better with his feet than I did with both hands.

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

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And I thought I had seen everything, and I done been to two door kicks and an all night county fair, and I never seen no mess like that.

Speaker 4:

Wow.

Al Holmes:

You know? I took, uh, I put my guitar on the floor and I took my shoes off and I looked at it and I said, "Nah." (Laughing).

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Speaker 4:

(Laughs).

Speaker 5:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

N- only if necessary. 'Cause it makes no sense. But, uh, anything else you'd like to know? I'm an open book.

Speaker 3:

Well, what we'd like to say is that we owe it ... So we're not going anywhere.

Al Holmes:

Okay.

Speaker 3:

Um, and we would um, first of all if there's anything that you want to tell us any time I- let Melissa know, let us know.

Al Holmes:

Okay.

Speaker 3:

We can sit with you again anytime. We love your stories. Um-

Al Holmes:

Alrighty.

Speaker 3:

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... and we can not thank you enough for sharing so much time. And, I mean, every story (laughs)-

Speaker 4:

Yes.

Speaker 3:

... is a story on it's own. I mean, every story you shared is a, just a gem, so-

Al Holmes:

Well, you know, that's just a part of my life. Uh, if it's a gem it's only because I picked them up along the way, and most of 'em were given to me by people who cared. Uh, they were given to me by people who figured well, they're going to throw me a bone. They were given to me by happenstance, circumstance, but mostly they were given to me because I refused to change from the person that I am. I am gonna be me until the day I pass or, as they say, shuffle off this mortal coil. And even after that, who knows?

Speaker 3:

(Laughs), okay.

Al Holmes:

You know, I believe in being a musician and I've always believed in how can you call another man your brother if you can't speak a word of their language? You know, I can speak a little bit of ... Little French at the time, just a little now, but trying to expand. And, uh, [Foreign language 02:16:35] and you know, I ... They teach me Spanish and I teach them English. You know, and uh, if you're going to say that you're living in this world uh, being someone's brother, learn about their language and their culture and that is me!

Speaker 3:

Thank you.

Al Holmes:

And for those of you-

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

Al Holmes:

... who are watching and listening, thank you very much for indulging me, and uh, just wanna let you know I am not bald, it's just a bald ... Uh, a birthmark that just keeps getting bigger every year.

Speaker 3:

(Laughs).

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Speaker 4:  
(Laughs).

Speaker 5:  
(Laughs).

Speaker 3:  
Thank you, sir.

Al Holmes:  
You very welcome.

Speaker 4:  
Thank you.

Speaker 5:  
Thank you, Al.

Al Holmes:  
You're welcome. I enjoyed it so much.

Speaker 4:  
Oh, uh, me as well!

Al Holmes:  
Because, you know, there's so many stories uh, to be told. So many stories not just of my life, but people I've been involved with. Uh, got a chance to open up for Clarence Carter. I played in the Paramount, you know? I, j- j- all of that. But it all started with that first time that I wanted to see that record player, that record turn on the record, and uh, that's where (laughing) Frankenstein was created.

Speaker 3:  
That's the start of it-

Speaker 4:  
(Laughs).

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [02:18:05]

Transcribed by: Rev.com, 4-17-20  
Reviewed by Melissa Keeling (on behalf of Al Holmes), 11-8-20

**ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT  
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Final edit by: Jennifer Souder, 11-9-20