

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

Interviewee: Clifford "Cliff" Johnson [CJ]

**Interviewers: Jennifer Souder [JS]
Charles Trott [CT]
Melissa Keeling [MK]**

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Time: 12:00 P.M.

Place: Neptune, NJ

JS: So we thought first, we'll just introduce ourselves briefly and a little bit about the project.

CJ: Yeah.

JS: I know you've seen some things. And so, first of all, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us.

CJ: It's my pleasure.

JS: It's our pleasure as well. I'm Jennifer Souder, and we spoke on the phone, briefly. I've lived in Asbury Park about 10 years, been on the board of the library for a few years in Asbury Park, and have been interested in getting a project like this going for a long time. So over the past couple years, we've been working with a lot of folks in town to try to move something forward, doing some oral histories, some research, more archival research to try to shine a light on this history that we don't hear a lot about. We do – I mean – those, if you are interested in this history, you can find it, but we want it to be front and center. There's a lot of change happening in Asbury Park –

CJ: Oh yes.

JS: – there's a lot of things happening fast, and we thought this is the time to really work with everyone and try to capture some of these wonderful stories about music of Asbury Park and the west side, Springwood Avenue, so that's why we're here.

CJ: Yeah. Got you.

JS: Would you like to introduce yourself?

CJ: Charles? I know Charles. *[laughter]*

CT: He knows me, he knows me.

JS: You've met, been around... you can still introduce yourself for the record.

CT: My name's Charles Trott. I am what you would call a life-long resident of Asbury Park. Presently I am still working as an art educator, no longer in the public schools, but working on a project that has to do with history known as "DIA." I won't go into it. DIA is Diasporic Images of Africa, and that's of course, why I'm with this project, because we're talking about the Afro-, African-Americans that, of the west side. Not *only*, but for the most part, and here we are, one-to-one, fine example of 92-something years today!

CJ: Okay, okay.

JS: Thank you, Charles.

MK: My name's Melissa Keeling. I grew up in Kentucky and moved to New York about five or six years ago to get my doctorate in music. I'm a musician, I play the flute –

CJ: Oh, you are?

MK: Yes. Gotta have a musician on this project. So I'm a flutist, I just finished writing about my teacher I studied with in New York, avant-garde classical. I moved to Asbury about two years ago and I'm a music teacher now in Red Bank, elementary school.

CJ: Very good.

MK: K[indergarten] through 8 [grade]. In terms of being an Asbury Park resident, and a musician, I love music, so that's why I'm here, working on this project with you.

CJ: Okay.

JS: So that turns us to you. So just for the record, if you can please tell us your name and where you were born.

CJ: I'm Clifford Johnson. Most of my friends and music people call me Cliff. I was born in Asbury Park on Ridge Avenue, 143 Ridge Avenue. December 25th, 1925.

JS: Happy birthday. *[laughter]* Do you have any few memories that come to mind about your neighborhood when you were very young?

CJ: Yeah, I was born on Ridge Avenue, I don't know if you know where that is, over on Ridge Avenue...

JS: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Okay. I was born on a street that was part black, part Italian. Back in the 20s and 30s, there were a tremendous amount of Italian people on the west side of Asbury Park; blacks and Italians. I remember – my mother was a music teacher, by the way – she taught piano and voice. At home, in my living room, my mother would be teaching – her students would come to the home, and I'd be in the kitchen and she'd be shouting at me, "fix this, fix that," and tell me how to cook various things while she's giving lessons. But I'm paying more attention to the music than I am what she's telling me about fixing the food. But I was always around music, music. In my neighborhood – it's so different today than it was back in the 20s and 30s. Everybody knew everybody. If I did something wrong, the neighbor next door would correct me like my mother or father would, and I respected my neighbor just like I respected my mother and father. Sometimes I would get from both of them, because you'd... it was just a different vibe altogether than what has evolved, not just in Asbury Park, but all over the place. Most everywhere I went, there was music; everybody had a piano in the house. I was around music all the time. My mother, being a musician, she played, she was the organist at Second Baptist Church in Asbury Park on Atkins Avenue; she was there for many years. When I was in, when I was an early teenager, I grew up in the St. Stephen AME Zion Church, my grandfather was a pastor there when I was very little. My mother left Second Baptist Church and came over to St. Stephen, she took over what you call the Junior Choir, which, my brother and I were a part. She played there, at St. Stephen, I don't know how many years, five or six years, but I was singing all the time. I was just around music all the time. I don't know what else to say at this moment, because I'm not sure how far you want me to go, but as far as my early life is concerned... I need to tell you this: one of the reasons why I play saxophone. My mother being a music teacher, naturally she felt that I ought to be a pianist. I never thought too much of it, but anyway, she started me on the piano. Unlike her other students, if I made a mistake, she had a pointer, a baton, and if I hit the wrong note – pop! Hit my finger, and I thought, oh Lord, I can't learn like this. *[laughter]* And I didn't like it anyway. So I finally convinced my mother that I wanted to play a saxophone. And she agreed, that okay, give up piano because you're not that good at any anyway. I was so relieved, because I wasn't getting my fingers snapped anymore. I must have been around 12, I think. Around 12 – 11 or 12 – when I really got interested in the saxophone. I think it was around 13 when I got my first instrument. Want me to keep going?

JS: Well, when you started with the saxophone, were you teaching yourself, did you have a teacher?

CJ: No, I had a teacher. He was an Italian professor, Professor Maraglia. He was on Bangs Avenue on the east side of the tracks. I don't even know the address now, but he was

there for many, many years. He's been dead for many, many, many years. But he's the one who got me started.

JS: So before high school, you were playing before high school, or at the start of high school?

CJ: Yeah, yeah. In early high school, yeah. Early high school, yep, absolutely.

JS: And when you asked if, "do you want me to keep going," you're welcome to share in whatever order you like, these questions are really just to help remind us of different things.

CJ: Yeah, I mean, I can keep going.

JS: By all means.

CJ: Okay. Professor Maraglia started me out, reading the notes and learning the various key function... he started me on it. I really wanted to start playing jazz as soon as I could, I always liked swing and jazz. He was kind of, slow bringing me along. I am blessed, I guess with a good ear. Other words, I could hear certain things and that's all I needed to do. I could hear the piano, or the organ, whatever the case may be, playing their chords, and it was very easy for me to kind of figure out what I need to do on the saxophone once I learned the scale. I didn't stay with Professor Maraglia perhaps as long as I should have, but I left, I stopped going in because I started playing gigs when I was around 14.

JS: Oh wow, that's amazing.

CJ: Yeah. Played gigs when I was around 14. I was in places where I had no business being... *[laughter]* but it was a time where young people were respected, ladies were respected, much more back in the day than they are today. I can remember being still in my teens and we were playing in Cuba's. In Cuba's, they had a bar in the front and a nightclub in the back. They had Broadway-type shows back there, they had two or three showgirls, they would have a comedian, they would have a tap dancers, and all sorts of entertainment – the kinds of things you would see if you went up to New York. I was fortunate enough, when I was still a teenager, to play there in the back of Cuba's. So many of our parents – because we were all teenagers, the guys in the band – our parents came to see us perform there. And not only our parents, but back in those days, people who wanted to hear jazz music, people who wanted to have a good time and go to a nightclub, they came from the east side of Asbury Park – with their furs, pulling up with their limousines, oh yeah, big time. Going to the back of Cuba's. And there was no racial incidents whatsoever. Everyone just melded together. This is before your time, Charles. *[laughter]* It was just wonderful to see how people got along. I felt so proud because our parents were there and there we are, "boop boop boop boop," you know?

It was a great time. I think back, I don't know how many times, more times than I got fingers and toes.

CT: What amount of jazz was played on the east side of Asbury at that time?

CJ: What *amount* of jazz?

CT: Yes, yes, how many venues were open for jazz in particular?

CJ: Back in the time I'm talking about now, there wasn't as much music on Springwood Avenue at that time, as they had in the 50s and 60s. But Cuba's was the main club at that time. What other club was that... there were so many clubs, I'm trying to think of which ones were active during the time period you're talking about now, Charles...

CT: No, the time period *you* were talking about back then, where many people would come from the east side to Cuba's and some of the other places on Springwood Avenue.

CJ: They would also come, Charles, the Carver Hotel.

CT: Right, right, right.

CJ: The Carver Hotel, on Myrtle Avenue. Downstairs they had a bar, kind of like a cocktail lounge downstairs there. Played jazz down there. We played jazz right on the corner, where the liquor store is, on the corner of Myrtle and Springwood. There's a liquor store; there's a liquor store, right? In the same building was the Palm Café. If you can visualize, there's a liquor store there today.

CT: This is by Alpha's, isn't that Myrtle Avenue? Down the street from the car wash?

CJ: Right in Neptune.

CT: Right, right.

CJ: Right, right, okay. Right on the corner of Myrtle and Springwood. But in the same building, you went to the east, the very next door, they had the Palm Café. It was beautiful, it was a lovely place back in the day. Big time singers would come there. I played there. I backed up a lady named Winnie Brown there. She was pretty big back in the day. But that was another place where people used to gather, and people came there in their furs and stuff. After those early days, then music really began to get into... all the clubs on Springwood Ave. I can't exactly say, but I know when I came out the service... I came out of the service... I came out 1946. And when I came home, music was everywhere, from Drummond Avenue all the way up to Main Street.

JS: A big change.

- CJ: When I first got out of the service, there was no music venue on the corner of Drummond and Springwood... But I can't remember the exact year now, but it must have been around 19... either very late 50s or early 60s that Big Bill's opened up.
- CT: Right, right, right, I think it was the early 60s...
- CJ: I was fortunate enough to play at his grand opening. That was a quite a... that was a good gig. We stayed there and played there, I guess, about four or five weeks. But what a time, what a time when they opened up, because everybody loved Big Bill and his brother. So from that point on, all the way down to Main Street, music was everywhere. It got to be the point where a lot of visiting groups would come into Asbury Park. What kind of emanated was organ trios. So many of the bars on Springwood Avenue put organs in, and they had these organ trios that would – like an organist, saxophonist, and a drummer, that kind of group – would be all over the place. I mean, you could ride down the Avenue in the summertime, you could hear music from the right, hear music from the left. I used to live on Atkins Avenue, I could sit on my step and hear music from the Turf Club, and coming from the Elks, which was right behind the Turf Club. So... What a time.
- JS: Sounds amazing.
- CJ: What a time.
- JS: When you were talking about, you said, it was all young – now we're back before the war again – so when you were saying you were at Cuba's with the young guys, was that Squires of Rhythm at the time?
- CJ: Yeah, I was with the band; when I first played back there it was with the Squires of Rhythm. Tommy McCloud and the Squires of Rhythm. We were all high-school-age guys. We had one lady, Dolores Holland, who played with us. We all grew up together, we all grew up, we were like buddies, you know. There were various versions of the Squires of Rhythm – the Squires evolved. It was Tommy McCloud and the Squires of Rhythm. Then Tommy, after I don't know how many years, Tommy started being not as active musically, he was a trombonist. I took over the group for a while. Then it was Cliff Johnson and the Squires. We just called it the Squires. The Squires really got me started, that's for sure. That's where I started. I don't know what to say at this point.
- JS: And Dolores – sorry to cut you off there – but Dolores played with you all at that time, before the war?
- CJ: Yeah.
- JS: Okay, it was interesting because we had a chance to sit –

CJ: Of course, I played with her *after* the war, I played with Dolores a lot.

JS: Many years?

CJ: Yeah.

JS: We had an opportunity to sit with her a few weeks ago and she was sharing her experience of playing in the clubs, and saying that she was very protected, that she wasn't really hanging out, that she would go there, her father would take her there, and she would play and go home.

CJ: I remember her father. I remember her father, yeah, yeah. We looked out for her, too. I think being a lady, for her, was a real blessing to tell you the truth. Because everybody *did* look out for her. I spoke about organ trios. We had an organ trio and Dolores was a fantastic musician. I played with her at – they had two Elks: they had the Elks in Neptune, on Springwood Avenue between Fisher and Myrtle on the north side, there's a two-story building, and downstairs... Charles, do you remember this?

CT: I remember, yeah.

CJ: They had a bar downstairs, and they often, quite often on the weekends, they had music. I played there with Dolores, and a drummer by the name of Willie Sparks. He was in the Army out at, the Army Band out at Fort Monmouth, and he was our drummer there. We played there I don't know for how long, and we played various venues, I should say, various affairs, dances, fashion shows, and things of that nature. There's one, there's one gig that we had I'll never forget. It was the day that Kennedy was assassinated. We were scheduled to play a gig – I was with Dolores at the time, playing with Dolores – in Red Bank. I can't remember exactly where it was... but I remember that we had to play that night. It was like the worst experience, because we didn't feel like playing, the people didn't feel like hearing us. It was, it was one of the most difficult times of my music life, to have to had perform on that day.

MK: I can understand what you're saying.

CJ: You can understand what I'm saying? It... *[sighs]* That was the only time I remember playing and not enjoying it *at all*. It was just something I had to do. I don't know why I'm sharing this with you, but it's something that's stuck with me all these years. When I think about his assassination, and having to play that night, was a real horror show.

JS: I imagine you get so much joy, clearly, from playing, having a memory where you did not enjoy it is –

CJ: Yeah, that was the only time I can remember playing, and it was laborious. *[laughter]*

JS: You just had to do it.

CJ: Yeah. Let me tell you this. I mentioned the Elks, the one in Neptune. There's the one in Asbury Park, it was right behind the Turf Club. The Turf Club building is still there, you know that. I was playing at the Elks, the one behind the Turf Club, downstairs they have entertainment downstairs. I was playing down there, I think I was with Dolores at the time too, we had a trio, we were playing down there. On my intermission, I would walk out of the Elks, walk around the block to the corner of Avenue A and Springwood Avenue to the Capitol, listen to what the musicians were playing there in the Capitol, walk just a few steps down from the Capitol, walk into the Turf Club, check those guys out and see what they were playing. It was like a round robin. Those guys, when they were on a break, they wanted to come see how we sounded. All this was within four minutes, three venues within four minutes, and music going all the time. All the time, all the time. Charles, it was fantastic. It was, it was... what can I tell you?

JS: It sounds fantastic. So it sounds like there was a lot of exchange between musicians?

CJ: Oh yeah, oh yeah, yeah. The camaraderie between musicians and stuff. We would go – if we didn't know the musicians, we got to know them. Because oftentimes there were groups that came from out of town that played on Springwood Avenue. It wasn't all local musicians. Asbury Park had its fair share of musicians, believe me. They used to have, at the West Side Community Center, a Drum and Bugle Corps. My son was part of that. The Elks, they had their marching band, they had the parades. Music, it was just – I can remember when I was a kid before I really started playing, President Roosevelt started – you've probably heard of the CC Camps? Probably heard of that, right?

JS: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Well, they also started something called the WPA. I don't remember what WPA stood for...

CT: Work Progress Administration?

CJ: Yeah, something like that. This was to help people out of poverty and things of this nature. There was a WPA band in Asbury Park, black musicians. Those guys could *play*. I mean, they could *play*. It was, they could play. *[laughter]* That's all I can tell you, they really could play. If I call some of the names, you guys... there's some names that have never been mentioned in the various...

JS: ...exhibits...

CJ: ...sessions that we spoke about music in Asbury Park, I can name any number of people who have never been mentioned. A guy by the name of Mickey Waters, played tenor

saxophone, played beautiful tenor saxophone. John Gray played alto saxophone. Walter Richards played piano. I don't think you've ever heard these names, I don't think so. A guy named Howard, I forgot Mr. Howard's first name, but there were any number of musicians that – you know what they used to do? Before they put in organs, pianos were in most of these places. A lot of these places have a set of drums that would just be sitting there. Musicians walk in, get on a piano, start doodling-doodling, somebody at the bar knew how to play drums, got up and got on the drums. Somebody would hear them – "I'm gonna get my horn." They'd come. You'd have jam sessions two or three o'clock in the afternoon.

JS: Wow.

CJ: True. It was just that *free*. It was just... *[laughter]*

JS: You just answered my question, because I was about to ask, since you were in that scene almost your whole life, you have your perspective on it. I was wondering if it was a place that was easy to come in, like if you were just coming in town and you're a young musician coming in to kind of *join in* or if it felt like...

CJ: Yeah. All you had to do was walk into one of those bars, and you would see a musician, like I say, playing the piano. If the guy was from out of town, if he wanted to get known, whatever he played he would bring it out, start playing, and he would be one of us. It was like a camaraderie that just existed. If I just met you today, if you were playing me piano or organ, or whatever the case might be –

JS: Or Melissa on her flute. *[laughter]*

CJ: I related to her right away, maybe that's the reason why, I don't know. But it was very simple, very simple. You know something else, you ladies would appreciate. Back in that time, clubs were open two, three o'clock in the morning. Sometimes, people would have too much to drink, and they'd be stumbling down the street, get to the church, pass the church building they're trying to straighten up. Trying to straighten up because they had that kind of respect, just for the church *building*. If they were stumbling down the street, they'd still tip their hat, to *you*. You follow me? It was that kind of vibe, that kind of relationship that existed back during those times. This has nothing to do with music, necessarily, but it does, a lot this came of out nightlife, because these people would come to these various venues and sometimes you would have too much to drink.

JS: It happens.

CJ: I'm so thankful that I never did. In fact, I worked in church. For many, many, many, many years, and oftentimes, I would be out late Saturday night, but on Sunday morning, I'd be on my station on the usher board, or whatever the case may be. I'd be ushering some of the same people I saw at the club last night. I'd go, "Oh!" *[laughter]* But anyway, I

could... I don't know where else to go at this point. There used to be a club on Springwood called The Two Door. The Two Door Tavern. Have you heard of it?

JS: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Okay. They called it Two Door Tavern because it had two doors. *[laughter]* But, this was right across the street from, I mentioned the liquor on the corner of Myrtle and Ridge – this is right across the street from the Palm Gardens. So you had music in the Palm Gardens here, on the north side, and – no, on the south side – and on the north side you had the Palm Gardens, right across the street from one another. Then you go down to Ridge Avenue – I forgot the name of the place now, but there was another bar right on the right-hand side. Rainette Holimon - you've probably heard of the name Holimon in your research, she put together a drawing of all of the business –

JS: Yes, the map. That's part of what inspired –

CJ: I have one hanging up in there. Anyway, she – what was the name of that place... I can't remember; I'll have to look at the thing. But there were music venues on the east and west side of Springwood Avenue, all the way down. The Savoy Bar and Grill, which was just before you get to Sylvan Avenue, they had the bar in the front – pretty much like Cuba's – and they had a very large showroom in the back, and they had shows back there. I was telling Charlie Horner – the first time I met him, I was part of a panel – and I mentioned that I had played in every bar on Springwood Avenue. Every last one of them.

JS: Wow, that's amazing. That is amazing.

CJ: Every last one, every last one. *[laughter]*

JS: So, that covers a lot of Springwood Avenue. So... you mentioned Red Bank? So, out of town?

CJ: Yeah, you know, oh yeah, we used to... our music wasn't confined to Asbury Park. We played various towns. As a fact, when I was playing at Big Bill's, I met this white fellow, and he wanted to become our agent. We had, I had never really worked with a booking agent. We talked it over with the guys – this is when I was fronting the Squires – and we decided that we would work with this guy. He booked us at Princeton University, we played there; we played at Lehigh University; we played at Delaware State. It was, I mean, we didn't play there regularly, it was special occasions. Special occasions. He booked us; how he did it, I don't know; but we played those venues also. So, I played out of town a lot. Benny Bryant – do you have his name in your...?

JS: I don't think so.

- CJ: Benny and Max Bryant, they were... I was born on Ridge Avenue -- on 143, and they were at one-twenty-something, I don't remember exactly now, but they were right across the street from where we lived. They were two brothers, and one played saxophone, the other played piano and vibes. Benny and I joined a big band out of New Brunswick. The bandleader was named Don Linton. He was well-known throughout the state. It was about a 13-piece band; it was a full orchestra. I remember coming back with the Don Linton Orchestra, playing at the State Ballroom. What a thrill that was.
- CT: The State? The State Ballroom on Springwood Avenue?
- CJ: Yeah, yeah.
- CT: In my time, it wasn't a ballroom anymore. Was it also a vaudeville place also, and they had a little stage, and it was across the street from Henry's --
- CJ: Yeah, it had a stage.
- CT: Henry's Pool hall? You remember Henry's Pool hall, across the street?
- CJ: Yeah, yeah. Right, yeah, yeah, yeah, right there.
- CT: I know the place. Sorry. *[laughter]*
- CJ: So, we came there, as two locals, Benny Bryant and myself, so many of the local people came up to the bandstand. We were up here, and they'd come to the bandstand and they're looking up at us, and we felt like we were, "Oh boy, look at us! We're big time!" *[laughter]* We even asked, what a *[inaudible]* [36:31] some people did... To come back home, in a big band, well-known throughout New Jersey, was quite a thrill for Benny and I. So... music carried me so many places, other than Asbury Park. You know where... what was the name of the place on Springwood... Doolan's?
- JS: Doolan's...
- CJ: You know where Doolan's is? On Route 71? [Spring Lake Heights]
- JS: No, think that was part of... I read about it.
- CJ: Okay. It's called Doolan's, it's a restaurant, but they cater to weddings and all that. Back in the day, before it became Doolan's, it was called the Village Barn.
- JS: The Village Barn?
- CJ: The Village Barn. I played there with Max Bryant and Al Griffin. Al Griffin was a drummer -- a local drummer, a tremendous drummer. In fact, he was out on the road, he played

big-time; many years, he was out on the road. Anyway, we I played with him at this place called the Village Barn. We played five nights a week out there. I can remember Eydie Gorme coming out there; I can remember Steve Lawrence coming out there – any number of celebrities, I can't think of all of them now – they would come out there and check us out. It was quite a time. I say all that to say that if it hadn't been for Springwood Avenue, we would have never been able to play at the Village Barn, or New Brunswick, because it all started in Asbury Park.

JS: You had mentioned, when you had that agent for that period of time. When you weren't working with agent, how did you get gigs?

CJ: We got our gigs – word of mouth. You know, people would see us playing so-and-so at so-and-so, either get one of our phone numbers or something, they would give us a call, say, "We have an affair and so-and-so, so-and-so; we'd like for you to play at our establishment on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It was just a matter of phone calls and various organizations knew us; everybody knew everybody. They used to, they would have affairs and they would have certain places to sell tickets; maybe they would sell tickets at three or four places, where people would frequent, if there was a special affair going on. Then they would advertise with these big placards, they would have these placards they placed all over the various businesses on Springwood Avenue. Everybody knew about so-and-so on January so-and-so and so-and-so, because it was very simple. ... [laughter]

CT: You mentioned someone just now who's more of a national, international figure, at least in the history... People like Count Basie; Count Basie came out of Red Bank.

CJ: Yeah, absolutely.

CT: What other people similar to him came down relatively regularly to places on Springwood?

CJ: Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that, Charles. On the corner of Springwood and Ridge Avenue, where the Sisters have that –

CT: Across from St. Stephen's?

CJ: -- the [inaudible] [40:50]... what do they have there? Right across the street from the church. The church is over there on the north corner, this is on the south corner. There used to be a place called the Paradise Hall, right there at that spot. It was a venue that was upstairs, I mean, there was a *bunch* of stairs, it was *up stairs*. [laughter] I remember Count Basie playing right there, on the corner, with his big band, right on the corner of Ridge Avenue and Springwood Avenue.

JS: Wow.

- CJ: I can recall bands coming into the State Ballroom: Dizzy Gillespie's Orchestra came into the State Ballroom. The Savoy Sultans from New York City. There's so many, oh gosh. Andy Kirk and the Clouds of Joy.
- JS: People have made the comment that people kind of knew to stop here if they were coming from D.C. or Atlantic City, and going to New York, traveling, that they knew to stop and playing in Asbury Park for a night.
- CJ: It would be like a circuit. Musicians back then – I guess they still do – they have a circuit that they travel on. Most of them do have agents. These agents would book them for maybe a weekend or two weekends at the Turf Club, or... you just name it. I played at the Turf Club; I want to tell you this story. At the Turf Club, they had a bar, and so many of these bars, they had the bandstand in the middle of the bar.
- JS: Okay, I can picture it.
- CJ: So people are sitting around you, and boy, you're really in the spotlight. But anyway, the bandstand was raised. Well, on the Atkins Avenue side of the Turf Club, there's a window, about half the size of this one. I was playing at the Turf Club, I was living on Atkins Avenue. I was playing, and I kept seeing this head jumping up and down at this window. I said, "What the heck is this?" *[laughter]* Every time I turned, I could see this, jumping up to see, because the window's kind of high. It's still there.
- JS: I'll have to take a look.
- CJ: It was my son. It was my son. He had never really seen me performing in a club. He was just a kid, and it was him. *[laughter]* That touched me so deeply, even now. It's... Charles, that was...
- CT: A treasure.
- CJ: Yeah. Playing at the Turf, I played there with Max Bryant and Al Griffin.
- JS: You talked about the feeling or the vibe on Springwood being a lot of camaraderie. At any point did it seem to change?
- CJ: Oh yeah.
- JS: When was that?
- CJ: For many years, I worked with my father who was a pharmacist, and I worked in the pharmacy with my dad for 23 years. The pharmacy was right across from the Turf Club, that was my day gig.

CT: Bunson Carter.

CJ: West Side Drugstore.

CT: Bunson Carter?

CJ: No, not Bunson Carter. No, Bunson Carter was closer to Prospect. This was right on the corner of Atkins and Springwood, right across from the Turf Club. West Side Drug...

CT: Right, I remember... West Side, right.

CJ: Anyway, we had liquor – sold liquor on one side of the store, and got you well on the other side. *[laughter]* When I started working there, I was too young, I couldn't work on the liquor side. But anyway... what was...?

JS: When things started to, the vibe changed?

CJ: It was around 1968, '69. Music was still going at all these places. But I started seeing a lot of strange faces. I worked on Springwood Avenue during the day. After Martin Luther King was assassinated, there were a lot of racial unrest in so many cities. You already know about that. A riot happened up in Newark; it started getting closer and closer to Asbury Park. On Springwood Avenue we had everything we needed, we had every kind of business you can think of on Springwood Avenue, but it was still segregated. After Martin was killed, things just kind of started changing, the relations between the races a in Asbury Park. I could see it daily. I kept telling my dad, I said, "Dad, something's up, something's not right here. Something's gonna happen." You could just kind of *feel* it. It's hard to explain, but you could just see a change coming. When that riot hit, it was the Fourth of July weekend in 1970. I wasn't living here then, I was living a mile or so away from here. I got a phone call: "Cliff, you better come down to the drugstore..." – this was around ten o'clock or eleven at night, somebody had broken the window. I said, oh boy. I went down there right away, and I saw all these various strange people running up and down the streets. I said, "What is going on?" That started the night of July 3rd. Started the night of July 3rd.

CT: Yeah... I remember that night.

CJ: I had it boarded up that night. One thing... we used to cash checks. We had two safes – we had one of the little safes, and we had one, this big heavy steel thing you couldn't move it if you tried. You know, it's got the... what do you call it, when you open it and you have to turn...?

JS: A combination?

CJ: Right. Then we had a little small safe. We always had more money in the store around the first part of the month, because we used to cash checks around the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth of the month. So we had a lot of money that was in the small safe – plus in the big safe. When I went down there to board up, I didn't think it was going to escalate the way it did. The next morning, I went down there, people were *in* the drugstore – just all over the place, just helping themselves, taking whatever they wanted to take. Police officer standing outside, directing traffic, and people are just taking everything. I went to the police officer, I said, "What are you... [Why aren't you doing something]?" He said, "You can't do nothing." I said, "What!?" Charles, it was terrible. It was terrible. One of the first things I did, I went to see if the safe was there. The safe was gone. The smaller safe. I had a police escort. I opened up the big safe, and took everything out of there. I had to go to the bank right across from the post office, right across from the police headquarters.

CT: Yeah, right. Jersey National?

CJ: I forget what it was now – it was the New Jersey National back then I think. This has nothing to do with music, but this all had to do with the change. I can remember taking the deposit to the bank, but I had a police escort. You remember [*inaudible*]? [Enoch] Bryant?

CT: Maybe...

CJ: He was a police officer. He had a riot helmet on and a rifle, and he escorted me to the bank. It was just that bad. It was just that bad. So, I could feel the change coming, and it resulted in destroying all those venues.

JS: And the pharmacy, was it able to continue, or did it close?

CJ: No, oh no, that was the end. That was the end of that. That was the end of that. That was the *end* – you know where the building is, that new building on Springwood Avenue? Right across from Turf Club?

JS: Yeah, the Senior Center.

CJ: The drugstore was right there.

JS: Oh, on the same site?

CJ: Yeah, where they got they got the senior citizens upstairs. Right there. 1201 Springwood Avenue.

JS: Yep. That's the Kula Café now, right? When all that happened, how, in terms of music, after...?

CJ: No.

JS: Everything just changed?

CJ: There was no place to play.

CT: Not on Springwood.

CJ: They were all... all the venues were gone. That was the end of music on Springwood Avenue. That was the end.

JS: How about you? *You* kept playing?

CJ: Oh yeah, I kept playing because my music didn't confine me to Springwood Avenue. But if it hadn't been for Springwood Avenue, I would've never have been a musician, I wouldn't... thank God for Springwood Avenue. The *old* Springwood Avenue. They had an exhibit out in Freehold a few years back that...

JS: The County Museum? Yes.

CJ: ...Charlie Horner did. A friend – you know Courtney Middleton? Anyway, he's a gentleman... he's one hundred years old now. His wife is very friendly with my wife, and my wife asked me to take them out to see the exhibit. I took him out to see the exhibit in Freehold, and he saw all the various displays of what Springwood Avenue used to be. It brought tears to his eyes. Because those of us who lived before, and after, it's just a tragedy. It's just a tragedy. We had everything on Springwood Avenue. We had *everything* – clothing stores, fish stores, meat markets, vegetable markets, restaurants, ice cream places – we had everything. It bothers me to this day, Charles.

CT: I can imagine. And that multiplied itself all throughout the country in less than a decade. From the '60s to the '70s.

CJ: Yeah, yeah. So, that was the end of music on Springwood Avenue. It was...

JS: Is there anything you think in particular that you think made Springwood Avenue such a rich place for music?

CJ: Don't know... can't say that I know why. I don't know how it evolved into the music mecca that it became. I don't know how that happened.

JS: Sounds like it sort of snowballed.

CJ: It just evolved. I don't know; I can't answer that. There were a lot of Italians on the west side of Asbury Park, and when an Italian person died... My mother played at a Catholic church also, Mount Carmel. When they would have the funerals, and they would have these bands that would play these funeral dirges... [*sings low, funeral music*] They would have these touring cars, these open cars with flowers all up in the cars, they were open cars. You don't even see these kinds of cars today, I don't even know what you call them, but they were *open*, they had no roof, and the flowers all in the car. Everything was music. I remember my mother had my brother and I singing at the Catholic church, singing in Latin. We didn't understand *anything* that we were saying, the words that we were singing; we were singing in Latin. You perhaps – you never heard of the name Primo Carnera?

JS: Uh-uh.

CJ: He was an Italian; he must have been seven foot tall. He was a boxer. In fact, Joe Lewis knocked him out back in the day. He came into the service – “Primo Carnera!” – I mean, it was... [*laughter*] I'm so thankful I don't have Alzheimer's and I can remember all this stuff, because, when I reflect on it, I still get kind of emotional.

JS: Understandable; it's wonderful to hear. In fact, the map that you're talking about, the Rainette ... That's part of what... I don't know where I first saw it – maybe at the Senior Center, originally – but seeing that image of what Springwood Ave. looked like, it was what got me so interested.

CJ: She did a great job, she didn't miss a place. She really did an excellent job.

JS: That's amazing; it's such a testament. You've really sort of brought this out in a number of ways, but we want to ask this question again: if there's somebody walking down Springwood Avenue today, what would you want them to know about Springwood?

CJ: I'd wanted them to know that *that* was a place where we black people knew we were welcome. That Springwood Avenue was a place where a lady could walk down the street without fear of being molested. I can remember – I don't want to be insensitive – I can remember even prostitutes that were on Springwood Avenue. But even *those* ladies were given respect. I'd want them to know that they can be very proud of their grandparents and great-grandparents. We had a black society. We had to. Because of segregation, we had to have our own – and we had our own *everything*. Doctor Ernest Robinson, who lived on Atkins Avenue, where David Parreott lives now, he used to have what you call a tennis club. Doc Robinson had a farm out in Tinton Falls, and some of the teachers of Bangs Avenue School – black teachers formed what was called a tennis club, which my brother and I were fortunate enough to be a part. We used to play tennis. They had a tennis court on Springwood Avenue. Did you know that?

JS: No, I did not know that.

- CJ: There used to be a tennis court right across from Big Bill's. Right there on the corner of Drummond and Springwood, there was a tennis court. That's where I learned how to play tennis. They had this tennis club – the teachers – would direct us in a play once a year, at the State Ballroom or at the Bangs Avenue School, or wherever it might have been. Everybody came to see us perform. We would go out to Doctor Robinson's farm, they had the skeet shoot – you know, where people just pull and you shoot the play pigeons – we used to work the wedges. We did all that – we used to do hayrides... Our kids don't know what life was like, because we had *our own*. We had it. Charles, *we had it*, brother, we had it. And we lost it. We lost it. We just lost it.
- CT: I was here in the 50s – I got here in 1951, on the planet – so you know, I saw the tail-end of this. I've told people many times, I'm the last generation of a by-gone era. I'm the child of what you're talking about, and the grandchild.
- CJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was... I wish you could have been around at that time. I really wish *you* in particular.
- MK: I agree with you, I wish I was, too.
- CJ: You would have enjoyed it. I get to talking about this, and I get kind of emotional sometimes.
- JS: That's understandable. You've seen a lot of change.
- CJ: Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed. But I'm just so thankful – better late than never: in the last four or five years, there has been an effort to make people aware that Springwood Avenue was a heck of a place at one time. It was a cultural center. I remember when I went in the service – people from all over the country were in the service – found out I was from Asbury Park: "Well, how about Springwood Avenue?" People knew about Springwood Avenue all over the country. Springwood Avenue was a *legend*. It really was; truthfully, Charles; I'm serious, Ms. Souder. It was a legend, wherever I went. They found out I was Asbury Park, "Oh, how about Springwood Avenue?" It was *celebrated*. To see it just, overnight...
- JS: I think unfortunately, a lot of the stories – it makes sense that people bring out the story – but the story about that weekend, about the riots, are told so often, then *that's* what's focused on. Which, certainly was a huge thing, but what about all those generations before?
- CJ: Yeah. Yeah, but what went on before... Oh, my, my. What a time. What a time. I can also – I get to talking about this stuff, because my mind – they used to have, I guess you'd call it a carnival. Mount Carmel Church, which was on the corner of Springwood and Ridge Avenue, they would block off from Ridge to Dewitt. They would have booths, on

both sides of the street, people selling various [items]. It was like a carnival-type atmosphere. Fireworks. They would shoot fireworks. I can remember the guy who used to have some kind of device that was on the ground, a cylindrical device, and the fireworks would go up there, and you could see all that... This would go on for a week. This would go on for a week, on this block. You could go down and buy a soda for five cents. You could buy a hot dog for five cents. It was... all this was on Springwood Avenue! Oh, man. Yeah.

JS: That is amazing to hear; I love hearing you talk about it. Now, the Upstage. The movie came out last year – which I always say it wrong – “Just Before Dawn,” or “The Light Before Dawn?” “Just Before Dawn?” That was focused on the Upstage club? You were a part of it?

CJ: Oh yeah; yeah, yeah. You mean on Cookman Avenue?

JS: Yes.

CJ: I never went up there.

JS: You never went up there?

CJ: No, I didn't interact with them. Not because I didn't want to, I just never had the opportunity to. It just didn't happen. I don't know *why* it didn't happen. I know that Springsteen and quite a few guys like that used to go up there and rehearse in there, jam and stuff like that.

JS: Something that always comes to mind for me, and when I saw that and talk to people, is that there's all this talent and community and everything happening on Springwood Avenue, and then that happened in 1970, but people were still there. The talent and the music was still there. Did people just kind of disperse and go play other places?

CJ: Yeah, pretty much. I was playing, it was about twelve years ago now – talking about Bruce Springsteen – I was playing at the park right across from the Paramount Theater in Asbury Park. There's a park there. “Clearwater Festival” I think it was called. Think it's what it was called. They had various venues, bandstands and stuff. You know what I'm talking about?

JS: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

CJ: I was playing there with Dorian Parreott and a couple other musicians, I don't remember exactly who they were now, but anyway – we had a large number of people standing around listening to us play. All the sudden, everybody left. “What'd we do? What happened?” [*laughter*] Came to find out, Bruce – as he always does – Bruce came down and jumped on a bandstand at one of the other stages. Everybody: “Bruce!!” [*laughter*]

Everybody went. I laugh about it because it was kind of comical, to tell you the truth. He just drew a crowd, that's for sure.

JS: That's for sure. You still play?

CJ: Yeah, I've got it right over there. I've got a couple things that I'm supposed to play, and I'm praying over it. I don't play as much as I used to. I don't play as *well* as I used to. Music is something that if you don't stay with it, I don't care how good you *were*, if you don't stay with it, you lose it. I'm 92 now... I just haven't been practicing the way I should and stuff, and if I don't sound right, I really don't want to. So, I'm praying over whether I'll do this or not. But if I do, I'll have to do a lot of practicing before I go out, because I want to sound right.

MK: Oh yeah, got to go back to the shed. I've got to do it for hours, I understand.

CJ: Yeah, you have to. You *have* to.

JS: Melissa, do you have any more questions?

MK: Oh wow, you just got so *into it* on your own; that's pretty awesome.

CJ: Once you start talking about Springwood Avenue, I get animated because I lived it, and I'm so thankful. I'm so thankful, I'm so *thankful* that I lived during that time. Oh gosh. I'm blessed many, many times over. Oh yeah.

JS: It sounds like an amazing time.

MK: After the [riots], which groups – did you have your own group, post-70s?

CJ: Yeah. I fronted my own group more than anything else. It got to be kind of a headache, because you've got to book the gigs and all that sort of thing. But I fronted my own group, it was about ten, twelve years. Longer than that, don't know how long, but for quite a while.

MK: Who played with you?

CJ: Who?

MK: Who.

CJ: Sonny Seagers...William Seagers, he was a drummer. Arthur Blake, bass. What was the guy's name... from Long Branch... Irving Best. He was a piano player, played organ and piano. I played with a group called the Mod Five, a couple of musicians from out of Fort Monmouth. Trumpet player – a tremendous trumpet player. I played with this group

called the Mod Five, which was all military guys except me. Gosh... Melissa. Melissa, right?

MK: Yes.

CJ: I fronted my own group for a long time. It got to be an issue though. I played with Sam Pugh. So many names... You ever heard the name Clarence Pinckney?

MK: Mm-hmm.

CJ: Okay. I played with Dolores and Clarence. I'll tell you this about that particular group. I booked a job at a place called the Surf Lounge. If you're familiar with this area, you know where Max's Hot Dogs, on the oceanfront, going down towards Long Branch? In that area, there was this place called the Surf Lounge. We had the organ trio – Clarence played drums and sang, Dolores was on organ, and I was playing horn. We booked this job – I booked it – and it was a nice little club, but no business. It was an Italian club. Every once in a while, a few guys would come in and they would get in the corner and talk. We'd be playing, and no one would be paying any attention to us. It's like we weren't even there, it's like we were window dressing. We finally figured it out. It was a mob place. It was the mob! It was the mob! *[laughter]* Ever heard of Pussy Russo?

CT: No.

CJ: Him and his gang and stuff. We got out of there.

JS: Don't want to get on the wrong end of that.

CJ: If you're playing and nobody's listening... you're playing to get people involved emotionally in what you're doing, and it's like we weren't even there. It was just a front. Just a front.

MK: Part of the scenery. Strange. So, when you played a show, what are your favorite tunes? Cliff Johnson's calling the tunes. What are you going to play?

CJ: Say that again?

MK: What are your favorite songs to play?

CJ: Favorite songs? Oh, gosh. You know, I love the ballads. All the standards, but I like to give it my interpretation. I watched Tony Bennett, and... what's the girl's name? Wears all this very funny...?

JS: Pink? No. Who... someone just recently played with Tony Bennett recently...

CJ: No. It was just on PBS last week.

CT: Lady Gaga.

JS: Lady Gaga.

CJ: Yes. Lady Gaga. They did all of the standards, and they really... I started thinking, I got to get back... I got to get started practicing. I play jazz. If I name certain jazz musicians, I don't know if you know – Cannonball Adderley?

MK: Mm-hmm. Oh yeah.

CJ: Cannonball, he's one of my very all-time favorites. I like to try to do a lot of the things he used to do. But what it comes to, actually, I love playing the ballads because I'm kind of a sentimental kind of guy anyway. The love songs, you know. *[laughter]*

MK: Beautiful. Which ones specifically?

CJ: *[singing "When I Fall in Love" by Nat King Cole]* "When I fall in love, it will be forever..." That's it... but beautiful. "It Might as Well Be Spring" [by Frank Sinatra], that type of thing.

MK: I would love to have heard you. To hear you. Do you have any recordings?

CJ: No.

MK: No recordings of yourself playing the saxophone?

CJ: No, no. I had... My mother lost my recordings, in a move. Moving from one place to another. A lot of my memorabilia...

MK: That's too bad.

CJ: But anyway. I see you know about my aunt, too!

JS: Yes! There was just a couple things, we got lost in the stories... So, your aunt, a lot of amazing history there. Her influence – was she here geographically near you? Was she an influence on you when you were a child?

CJ: When I was a child, she was in Asbury Park; a part of my childhood. Her talent took her to New York City. She'd come back to Asbury, of course, the family's here, my grandmother's here, and her sister. My mother and her sister. Her family was here, so she would come back. When she came back, on Springwood Avenue, they'd say, "Vivian

Eley's in town!" Because she was a show-stopper. See that picture over there? Right by the window?

MK: Oh, yeah. Both of them.

CJ: She was fashionable. She out-dressed anybody. When she came down the avenue: "Vivian Eley! Vivian Eley's here!" I can remember that. I used to get embarrassed. But anyway, my aunt, she had a lot to do with my music, also. I used to visit her quite a bit up in New York, and she would take me to – before the Apollo Theatre, there was a theater there called the Lafayette Theatre, if I remember right. They had a movie, but then after the movie, they'd have big bands. The big bands would come out – I would see these fourteen-, fifteen-piece bands – and when it came time for the solo, the saxophone player would get up out of his seat and come to the microphone, and the horn – the lacquer on the horn was just *shining*, and I'm listening to this *sound*. I said, "Oh, I got to play *that!*" It was the visuals, and the audio, that got me really hooked on saxophone. I said, "Oh, yeah, ah!" Yeah, she had a lot to do with me getting into music the way I did.

JS: Were you able to go visit frequently, go up to New York to see her?

CJ: Oh yeah, I used to go up there quite a bit. I stayed with her for a while. As soon as I finished high school, I was working up in Long Island and I stayed with her at 555 Edgecombe Avenue. At that time, there were a lot of musicians that lived in that same building: Cootie Williams, Erskine Hawkins; there were so many musicians lived up on Sugar Hill.

CT: Ah yes, Sugar Hill. Speaking of New York – and you spoke of the WPA program – how did the Harlem Renaissance and what went on, musically and artistically and whatnot, affect Asbury in the period you were a young man?

CJ: I think it was all inter-related, Charles. I think as music continued to grow in Harlem, Springwood Avenue became like a little Harlem.

CT: Was there much interaction between some of the people?

CJ: I don't recall any interaction between... I remember the Savoy Ballroom – you've heard of the Savoy Ballroom?

CT: Right.

CJ: Some of the groups that played at Savoy Ballroom came and played at State Ballroom.

CT: All right, so there *was* some, then.

CJ: So, there was some. *That* happened.

CT: And then Newark, of course, was going through its own period; it wasn't the *Harlem* Renaissance, but it was the *Newark* Renaissance. Sarah, and can't think of other people from that area – Sarah Vaughn and them – but I think of the music, because she came out of the big band era. Like Basie, like Ellington, like Cab Calloway before then.

CJ: Yeah, yeah. Cab Calloway. They all came to the Apollo, they came to the Lafayette Theatre, they all did. Jimmy Lunceford, Claude Hopkins, Chick Webb... and most all of them came here! I need to tell you this, too; I told my wife this the other day, and she didn't even realize this. When I was with the original Squires of Rhythm, we were the first local black musicians to ever play in Convention Hall.

MK: Really?

JS: Oh my goodness.

CJ: That's something that, you know, it dawned on me not too long ago, Charles. I told my wife, "You know what?" What I'm telling you now, I just told my wife a few weeks ago, before I even knew we were doing this. We weren't the first *black* musicians to play there, but we were the first *local* black musicians to put our foot in there and play.

CT: What year was this? What's the year, what's the time period there? When you first did Convention Hall?

CJ: Maybe I can answer that for you. *[CJ momentarily leaves room to collect a folder of newspaper clippings and photographs pertaining to his musical career]*

MK: We got to get it right.

JS: That's amazing.

CT: All right. Sorry I keep butting in...

MK: You're not butting in, I wanted to ask the same question. I had the same question.

JS: Absolutely. We also had... we hadn't talked at all about the east side. You *did* ask the Conventional Hall question.

MK: I see that, we should.

[CJ returns to room with clippings]

CJ: I might have the answer to that in here, Charles, I'm not sure.

- JS: I wish I was that organized!
- MK: [He's] got all his records right here. Are these all the clippings and memories? Oh my goodness. He's got folders...
- CT: You've got a *book* there, the "Clifford Johnson Story" here! (*papers shuffling*)
- CJ: I think it might be in here... [*refers to photograph*] You probably can't... that's my brother and I, and another two guys, singing in a quartet. [*refers to advertisement for CJ's concert at Conventional Hall mentioned previously*] Oh gosh, it was May 23rd, but it doesn't say what year.
- CT: It doesn't say what year? It says May 23rd...
- CJ: I do know the admission was forty-four cents!
- CT: That sounds like the 40s or 30s or something. Because even in the 50s, you're not getting in to... I don't know what it cost, then.
- JS: [*reading from advertisement*] Sponsored by the governments of...
- CT: Sponsored by the governments... (*CT reads article, inaudible*)
- CJ: Might want to read a little bit of that. [*hands paper to interviewer*] [*papers shuffling*] But the years's not on there, Charles, so I can't think... it must have been around 1943?
- CT: Oh, early 40s? Early to mid-40s. Okay.
- CJ: '43, yeah.
- CT: Well, I'm a little... I don't remember much about the 50s, my time was the 60s.
- CJ: I think it was around '43. I think. (*papers shuffling*)
- JS: [*inaudible*] No, no, no... I was thinking...
- CJ: Here... [*pointing to photograph*] Benny Bryant's the one in the middle. That's me over here. This is John Shannon. This is one – we had many versions of the Squires, many different versions of the Squires. This is the one that opened up Big Bill's. In fact, that was taken *at* Big Bill's.
- JS: That's a great picture.
- MK: What is "TM"? [*referring to photograph of the Squires*]

- CJ: Tom McLeod.
- MK: Oh, of course. I'll get there eventually.
- JS: So what year was this around?
- CJ: '60... It was in the 60s, I can't... For the life of me, I can't remember what year it was, but I know it was in the 60s.
- CT: You.. *[laughter]* I'm laughing because it's a treasure to me to be able to speak to someone your age, basically my parents age – if they were still here, they'd be about your age, my mom and dad, right. Now, it's very clear to me what was going on back then when I was kid. I would hear little snippets... "beat it." As a teenager – "beat it!" Kids were seen, and not heard.
- CJ: Oh yeah, absolutely. I've heard that so many times. Children are seen and not heard.
- CT: Those rascals have to know – like me. "Oh, they're not watching." *[laughter]* I'm laughing at the story because of the progression – going through the big band era, where you were sort of cutting your teeth and beginning your career. Into the '50s and 60's, where they were downsizing – they still had big bands, but they were doing combos and smaller groups. And now, you're here, in this period... I don't know *what* to call this period, because you've got world music, jazz – well, jazz is based in pretty much all the music – *popular* music – I think. You might know it from a different perspective, but just to be able to see that. See, I grew up in the '60s. I remember the '50s, but...
- CJ: You just missed it!
- CT: That's what I'm saying! I'm the last generation of those before me, but I carry some of that with me, in memory if nothing else.
- JS: You're the bridge.
- CT: Right, right.
- CJ: Oftentimes I talk to my contemporaries, which are very few... *[laughter]* But, we talk about what the younger folks have missed. I'm talking about *our* kids, the black kids. They have missed so much. They have missed so much.
- CT: Kids in general.
- MK: I was depressed as a musician growing up. I was growing up in the '90s, so that was like, *bleak*. I remember thinking that I loved music, but I felt like there was more to what I wanted than what was available in the popular music stream. I went all the way back to classical, that's how far back I went, I was like, "I don't know what to do." So, I just

listened to classical and jazz as a kid, which was bizarre. I thought all that music was just trash; the '90s music.

CJ: Okay, okay. You know, there's so much music. Another reason I don't play much anymore is because the music people want to hear today, I don't play. I don't play it. I don't even try.

CT: What are they trying to...? Oh, you mean in terms of popular music.

CJ: I mean, I'm happy for the musicians who are making big bucks, but I don't like it.

MK: "Despacito..."

CJ: I don't like it. I wouldn't play... well, I'll leave that alone. I don't like a lot of today's music. When I mentioned Tony Bennett and Lady Gaga – I mean, a big band. They had the violin section, the reed section, the brass section, they had the whole nine yards. That's *music*. People *studied* to be musicians. They didn't just pick up a guitar and start... "boom boom." I better leave this alone.

JS: Now you tell us how you *really* feel.

CJ: I better leave that alone.

MK: Speaking of Europe, they still really do jazz.

CJ: I'm sorry, say that again?

MK: In Europe, they still do jazz to a high level.

CJ: In Europe, oh yeah. A lot of musicians back in the '30s, '40s, '50s, went to Europe – particularly Paris – Josephine Baker left here. My aunt left here, because they were much more well-received and treated better than in the United States.

CT: That continued even until the '60s and '70s. Alex Row – you remember Al?

CJ: Yeah.

CT: Al wasn't known around here.

CJ: Did Alex Row die?

CT: I'm not sure.

JS: I think he did.

CJ: He was sick for awhile.

- JS: I believe he died recently, I believe; I mean, in the past year.
- CT: Really?
- CJ: He died, yeah.
- CT: It took him going to Europe, in order to be made big here, and that's not unusual, going back in history.
- CJ: Not at all. Josephine Baker was not a star here, but she's a celebrity there, and she became a celebrity here. Good point. *[laughter]*
- JS: Yes, he did pass away this year. I was just checking that. I'm wondering now, because Charlie Horner had asked us to ask you about playing at Convention Hall with Lloyd Price.
- CJ: Yeah.
- JS: But that wasn't the same...?
- CJ: No, that was later than what I just showed you. That was a program that Ballantine Beer...
- JS: Newark?
- CJ: Three rings. Ballantine Beer. That used to be the big thing with the Yankees, but anyway... they used to put on an annual show; it was a big deal. Lady from France was there, from the Cannes Film – she was something from the Cannes Film Festival, I forget what her title was now. Lloyd Price also was there, and our orchestra was there. That was quite an honor, to play at the Ballantine [event]. I might have had something on that... That exhibit that Charlie Horner did at Monmouth University and out in Freehold, I'm pretty sure he has memorabilia on that, that I was able to find. I don't know exactly when it was.
- CT: Can you tell me, just real quick: Cuba's.
- CJ: Cuba's.
- CT: The *man*. Minnie was his wife, she was in the store in the front.
- CJ: Yeah, she was my buddy. Minnie was my friend.
- CT: Her husband – he was Cuba, right? Is that his name, or...
- CJ: Yeah. His name was Henry Lopez.
- CT: Where was he from?

- CJ: Cuba, as far as I know.
- CT: Okay, I always wanted to know that!
- CJ: His name was Henry Lopez, and I knew him. I knew both of them.
- CT: See, that's funny because Cuba... When'd he get here? '30s or '40s, maybe?
- CJ: I don't know when Cuba's got started. I think Cuba's was there when I was a little kid.
- CT: So that's going back to whenever, before. But you see how a *Cuban* from *Cuba* came over *here*. I bring that up because, it was a big thing that Dizzy Gillespie was one of the people who really popularized the Cuban musicians...
- CJ: Yeah, yeah. You're right, yeah.
- CT: ...in particular with Machito and [inaudible] [1:31:35]...
- CJ: Yeah, "Manteca" and all that.
- CT: Yeah. But see, the Cubans were already here. I was telling somebody the other day, and we probably had a little bit of this conversation... The Latino community that is so large now in Asbury, when I was a kid, there were only two Puerto Rican families, that was it for Latinos, Hispanics. There's no more of that. Now, there's not just Puerto Ricans, number one, and there's a whole bunch more than that -- even the Puerto Ricans, there's more than two families now. At any rate, just to watch things change. And this Cuba question was always bugging me. [laughter] "I wonder if that guy was from Cuba?" Why they call him Cuba, you know? They'll call somebody something in the black community in particular: a greeting, a favorite greeting -- "Hey, doctor!" That man is no more a PhD or an MD than... but, you know, it's a term of endearment. Then you get these names, "Ham Hock" or whatever... Ham Hock?! So, Cuba? I don't know if the guy is Cuban or not, you know.
- CJ: I can see him; I knew him well. Played there so many times.
- CT: And his wife, Minnie...
- CJ: Minnie, yeah. She's a little short thing.
- CT: Yeah, she was like my grand-aunt, Ivy. All wear black all the time. She wore shoes similar to that, that you have on, Jennifer -- but it was the older version, of course. [laughter] But a lot of women wore that, especially Italian women. Not so much black women that I know of. But I remember Minnie. She and my great-aunt Ivy wore the same type of shoes!
- CJ: You remember, they had that little store, too.

- CT: Yeah! That's all I knew!
- CJ: That's where Minnie was, at the store.
- CT: I didn't that there was a club in the back, until recently.
- JS: Oh, you didn't know when you were a kid?
- CT: No! I didn't know that!
- CJ: There were two separate buildings.
- CT: Right, but I didn't know there was a connection business-wise.
- CJ: Oh, okay.
- CT: When you see the picture...
- CJ: Cuba's Nightclub was here, and about four doors down was the store.
- CT: Right, but see the store... when you say "Cuba's" to someone who is my age... *[papers shuffling]* *[points to photograph]* Here it is, all right. This is a picture of somebody standing in front of the store, probably, not in front of the club. I know it's a difficult thing to see.
- JS: On the sign, it said...
- CT: On the store, it would say "Cuba's," it was directly on Springwood Avenue.
- CJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- CT: I knew the store. I didn't know that if you went down the alley, you got to the club. At that age... in '69, I turned 18. I know it from '64 on, when I was much younger; I definitely was not supposed to be in the nightclub.
- CJ: This is Sammy Pugh here. This is Andrew Fields. That's Nathan Ricks. This is Eddy... Eddy Watt.
- CT: That's the logo for the store?
- CJ: This was the club.
- CT: That's the club?
- CJ: Yeah.

- CT: Okay, well, the same lettering existed on the store. You remember – because the store had the big window, picture window, and it was the same letters.
- CJ: Yeah, yeah. They sold papers, magazines, all that stuff.
- CT: Cigarettes, cigars... you know. That type of stuff.
- CJ: You remember that?
- CT: Oh no, I remember, but I didn't know there was a club back there! Now, I knew the Turf, I knew the [*inaudible*] [VFW].
- CJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- CT: The Elks Club on Atkins. When you said the State Ballroom, in my incarnation in the '60s, it was a dusty old poolhall.
- JS: It was still open?
- CT: It was still open, but it wasn't used for any musical entertainment. It was a poolhall; they didn't use it anymore. I went in there and saw the stage – they had a small stage there –
- CJ: I had a picture of the original Squires – I don't know where it is, I can't find it – but it was taken at the State Ballroom. We were on the stage and the curtains were drawn, and all of us were standing in front of the curtain. I would pay for that picture if I could find it. Dolores Holland was in that picture. All the original Squires. I don't remember the occasion, I didn't even know the picture existed... but somehow I know I saw that picture somewhere... I can't put my hands on it, now. I would love to have it. [Cliff subsequently found the picture and shared it with us for the project archives]
- JS: That's a shame. If we come across it, we'll get it to you.
- CJ: It's a picture in the State Ballroom, the curtains are drawn, and we're standing in front of the curtain.
- CT: I'd like to see how that was.
- JS: Marcus Garvey spoke there, at that ballroom.
- CJ: Who?
- JS: Marcus Garvey, in the '20s.
- CJ: What about him?
- JS: He spoke at the ballroom.

CJ: He might have, I don't know.

JS: I saw flyers.

CJ: It wouldn't surprise me, but I can't testify to it, because I really don't know.

JS: It was before... that was early.

CJ: But I know who you're talking about, Marcus Garvey. I don't know, I can't comment on that. Asbury Park has a rich history, it really does. It truly does. I'm just so glad and thankful again – and I know I'm getting repetitious – that people like you guys are trying to make people aware.

CT: Of the *full* history. The *complete* history.

CJ: There's a lot of history that people can be proud of. Absolutely.

JS: We're hoping to have some high school students working with us too, on some of this, to really have them directly involved in some of the research and thinking about it. I find it very interesting when you talk to *really* young high school age – even younger than you...

MK: I'm not that young, I'm almost 30! *[laughter]*

JS: I'm teasing.

CJ: Did Ms. Holland – did she remember all that stuff? Because I understand that she's suffering from...

JS: A little dementia.

CJ: A little dementia issues.

JS: Her daughter, Paulette, came with her, and she helped. She was talking to us too, and they had the questions ahead of time, so they had some time to think about it and look through some pictures. We had a wonderful time with her. I mean, there were some things that were hard to remember, but she definitely... the overall vibe of her experience was there, and her passion for music.

CJ: She was – she *is* a wonderful musician.

JS: She still plays.

CJ: Oh yeah, she can play. She can play. She could probably do it right now, even with her impairment; I'm pretty sure if she got sat down at a keyboard or something. She's terrific. She was better than most of the guys. When I say that, she was more proficient on her piano than we were on our horns. She was just gifted. Really gifted.

- JS: Al Griffin – you had spoken with Keith – we were hoping to speak with him.
- CJ: Al Griffin, as far as I know, he’s in a nursing home.
- CT: Yeah, that’s what his son said.
- CJ: He’s been there for quite some time. There was a death in their family, five or six years ago... I play at funerals every once in a while, and Al asked me to do that. I played... who was it that died in Al’s family? I think it was his sister. I think it was his sister. Al was, at that time, he was in the situation he’s in now. He contacted me, and he wanted me to try to work it out to bring something out to this nursing home where he is. I never followed through on that. He’s a drummer. Oh yeah. He’s a drummer. He used to keep his drums – he worked at the cleaner’s, his father had a cleaning shop, Griffin’s Cleaners.
- JS: That was also on Springwood, right?
- CJ: On Springwood. He used to have his drums set up in there, and you’re walking in, and he’s just para-diddling. We used to play out at the Village Barn, which is now Doolan’s. A lot of people came because they wanted to see *him*. We would feature him sometimes and let him do his drum solos, and he’s fantastic. Fantastic drummer. Asbury Park is, they can be proud of its products. It’s produced a lot of solid musicians, that’s for sure.
- JS: Amazing. You played at Charles’ brother’s [Gladstone Trott] tribute in the spring.
- CJ: Yeah, yeah. I had to do that.
- JS: I saw you there. It was an amazing evening.
- CJ: That’s... I haven’t gotten over that yet.
- JS: A lot of people in town, whenever we speak of... he had a wide impact on a lot of people.
- CJ: Such a wonderful guy, tremendous musician.
- JS: That night, for me, it was an amazing evening.
- CJ: Were you there?
- JS: I was there, I was there. Just the amount of — I had not met Gladstone, I knew Charles since I lived here – but just the amount, the number of people and the things people were saying about him, it was just such an amazing evening.
- CJ: Special guy, another gifted musician too, just tremendous.
- JS: That’s why I feel like, there must be something in the water here. *[laughter]*

- CJ: Yeah, he really... he was *good*.
- JS: When I asked earlier, when we were talking about – I'm going to let you go, because we're taking a lot of your time...
- CJ: Can't you tell that I don't feel uncomfortable, or put-upon? I love talking about yesteryear. I don't get a chance to talk about it unless it's under these kind of circumstances, because most of the people I know now, don't know anything about Springwood Avenue. So, what's the point of talking about it?
- JS: Makes me sad to hear that, but makes sense. We were talking about why Springwood Avenue, or why Asbury Park? I wonder sometimes if... a lot of research I did over the years was looking at African-American communities around the country, in different eras, up to the '60s and past, but even back to the nineteenth-century, and why certain communities thrived in certain places and all of these things. When it comes to music – and music is a thread that you see in a lot of communities around, and certainly makes a lot of sense. I always think about why Asbury Park? Maybe because of the resort, the fact that it was a resort community, that attracted – that people were working in the... I can't figure. Proximity to New York?
- CJ: I don't know if I can answer that for you, I don't know.
- JS: Or the water? I said, there's something in the water; all the talent.
- CT: What did you ask?
- JS: I'm still going back to why Asbury Park and Springwood Avenue are...
- CJ: This might help. In most of the cities – Baltimore, Baltimore had Pennsylvania Avenue. Pennsylvania Avenue was Maryland's version of Springwood Avenue. Most of the cities had a certain community or certain street that was frequented by blacks. Some became prominent. Pennsylvania Avenue was one of those... have you ever heard of it?
- JS: Yeah.
- CJ: Yeah, it was pretty similar to some of the things that were going on here in Asbury Park. So a lot of towns had their areas. Newark had theirs – they didn't have a particular street, but Newark had the various neighborhoods where you could find music all the time. Harlem.
- JS: Kansas City.
- CJ: Kansas, yeah.
- JS: But Asbury Park's smaller.

- CJ: I don't know how these things happen, what started these things, I have no idea.
- CT: As I always remember overhearing, the descriptions that Asbury was Little Atlantic City. Both of them were on the shore; both of them have amusements. I don't know about Atlantic City's musical...
- CJ: Atlantic City had clubs with organ trios and they had Club Harlem.
- CT: No, I'm not familiar.
- CJ: You don't know anything about that?
- CT: No, no.
- CJ: Before the casinos, on Kentucky Avenue, it was like a mini-Springwood Avenue. You would go in one bar, there'd be organ trios here; walk out of there, two or three doors down, there's another group. Atlantic City had it.
- CT: Sounds like in the black communities, throughout America –
- CJ: In the black communities, in most of these places we're talking about – Atlantic City, Newark, New York, Asbury Park – they had music in all these places. It's something about, it's something in our DNA, I suppose. *[laughter]* I guess it's something in our DNA. Most black people have rhythm. It's just the truth! Some of us don't. Some of us don't, at all. *[laughter]*
- CT: That's true!
- CJ: But generally speaking, we're *into it*. You don't have to be a musician, you just... it's just *in us!* *[laughter]*
- JS: Makes a lot of sense. *[laughter]*
- CJ: I think that's the truth!
- CT: But see, one second, this is real quick. You know our history – when I say “our history,” African descendants. It's obvious African descent is black people, here in America. We came over here, we were stolen and brought over here, right? We have our music throughout the slavery. In Cuba, one of the things is, before they could play those drums – which were forbidden; they were slaves – they used a *cajón*. The *cajón* is nothing but a box. Well, you don't need a box. *[percussively beats on chest]*
- CJ: Yeah, yeah.
- CT: But they chose a box to represent the drum, okay. This repeated itself all around the Americas, and coming through forward, into the nineteenth... well, we're talking about

the 1600s, 1700s, 1800s. By the time you got to the 1900s, the Roaring '20s, before that, with the birth of the blues, the blues with W.C. Handy and all that.

CJ: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

CT: Coming forward, black folks needed that *music*. Think about people, period. Think about you all, anyone. Think about how music affects you. Sometimes you gotta hear some music. It may be some punk rock – you go, “I don’t want to hear” – but the point is, whatever it is, you need to hear the rhythm and those chords.

JS: It’s a connection.

CT: It carries through for *us* in particular, but humanity in general.

CJ: That’s true.

CT: Because of African music evolving into gospels, here in America, and spiritual, and church music. Out of that, very few jazz musicians are foreign to this church. They might not have gone to church, but they were influenced by the church. It’s where they cut their teeth.

CJ: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

MK: I did too. You’re right.

CT: Okay, but – there you go, in music, period. For us, knowing the history of blacks in America – and I could add on that slavery never ended, but anyway, that’s a whole other thing – you just had to carry that music, that was all the hopes you had. You had visual hopes, and I tell people about it... but it’s easier to carry a feeling than a vision. That’s why music is so universal. “You have a tin ear,” “you can’t carry a beat,” but you are drawn to that music. That’s humanity.

JS: That’s true, that’s a very universal connection. On that note –

CT: Oh, I’ve got to stop! *[laughter]*

JS: Is there anything else you’d like to share? We might have to come back. Is there anything else you feel we didn’t ask you, or you want to add? We aren’t going anywhere – we *will* leave your house...

CT: *...today! [laughter]*

CJ: I have so many memories, and sometimes to express my memories in a chronological order is difficult. I guess I get kind of, I get to talking about “A,” then I start thinking about “B,” and sometimes it’s difficult for me to bring you from one era to the next, in a sequential sort of way. So many memories are just coming back to me. There are

probably any number of things that I should have told you today, that I just haven't told you, because they just haven't occurred to me to tell you. I'm sure after you leave, I'll say, "Boy, I should have told them this, I should have told them that." [laughter] There's just so much stuff.

JS: There will be plenty of opportunity. First of all, thank you a million times over. We'll create a transcript of this interview, and then we send it back to you to look over, to see if there's things you want to add or take out or anything. You'll see it. When you see it, there might be other things you want to add. That's what we did with Dolores and Paulette, and then they had a few things –

CJ: Have you talked to anybody else? There aren't too many... Who else are you going to talk to? [laughter]

JS: We spoke to Dolores...

CJ: Who?

JS: Dolores.

CJ: Oh yeah.

JS: We plan to speak to Al Griffin, if he's willing. We do have a list, but we're hoping to get to maybe twelve people or so, there's not a lot, but not all from your era.

CJ: They're not here; they're dead! [laughter] Somebody was asking, one of my friends said, "All of my friends are dead!" That sounds cold, it's just the flat-out truth. All my friends are dead!

JS: I'm sorry to hear that... [laughter]

CJ: I have acquaintances, a *bunch* of acquaintances, and I have a few friends. But generally speaking, my musician buddies... I remember I had an operation, and Sonny Seagers, who's a drummer, he had medical problems. In spite of his medical problems, he came here to see me. He had to climb these stairs. It was a camaraderie that was priceless. The guys were my *brothers*, you know. They were my *brothers*. It was just wonderful.

[End of Interview]

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