

ASBURY PARK AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC HERITAGE PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee: John “JT” Bowen [JB]

Interviewers: Jennifer Souder [JS]
Charles Trott [CT]
Melissa Keeling [MK]
Yvonne Clayton [YC]
Kathleen Melgar [KM]

Date: May 29, 2018

Time: 12:30 P.M.

Place: Asbury Park, NJ

[8:40]

JB: First of all, I’d like to thank everybody for inviting me to participate in this project that you’re doing. It’s an honor for me to share what I can with this project. So, thank you. Want me to start from when I was born, and all that?

JS: All that. We can go through these questions, you can go off-track; I’ll ask you questions and you can add...

JM: You ask me questions, and I’ll do what I can to help the project.

JS: Sounds perfect. We appreciate it. Please tell us your name and when and where you were born.

JB: They call me J.T. I was born in Rochester, New York. 1947, in October.

JS: October 1947. Can you tell us a few early memories from your childhood?

JB: Early memories. I can go back to maybe four or five. I was raised in Port Norris, New Jersey. That’s near Millville and Princeton; that area. South Jersey. I was raised here until about eight, and then I moved to Brielle, New Jersey. While I was in Port Norris, what attracted me to music was, I went to a concert at a theater there, and saw the Harmonizing Four, the Dixie Hummingbirds. These are gospel singers. Mahalia – not Mahalia Jackson; but Clara Ward Singers. I was excited about the limo that they had; they had a limo with eight doors. Four doors on each side. I’m like, “That’s a cool way to get around.”
[laughter] My step-father and my step-mother – my mother was a jazz singer, and my

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step-father was a gospel singer. Saying that, I was raised in the church, and that's where I started singing.

JS: So music was around you from a very early age.

JB: From a *very* early age. Then, I moved to Brielle in about '56. I stayed in Brielle until I was thirteen.

JS: So you went [to] Rochester...

JB: Yes, to Port Norris, Brielle, and then eventually Maryland.

JS: Then to Maryland.

JB: Then New Jersey, right. New Jersey.

JS: Then back to Jersey. So how old were you when you went to Maryland?

JB: I was twelve. Crisfield. It's on the eastern shore, near Salisbury. If you go down Route 13, you'll get there. It's one way in, one way out; one of those types of towns.

JS: I was down in Cambridge this weekend, down in that area. It's beautiful down there.
[phone rings] Oh no, my phone. Excuse me.

YC: Your stepfather, did he sing with a group?

JB: Yeah, they had a group, so I would sit in and sing with them. He taught me how to [sing] with the diaphragm and everything with the voice. That's where I got that from.

JS: You said your stepmom was a jazz singer? Or your mom?

JB: My stepmom. It's a weird thing: I'm adopted. Not "adopted," but adopted. Black people – they didn't do the original adoption; they take you. The lady that raised me was a good friend of my mother's. For some reason, she couldn't keep me, so she gave me to this lady named Miss Lacy, which was my mom. She raised me. I was nine months old.

JS: Miss Lacy was a jazz singer?

JB: Yes. Miss Lacy did jazz.

JS: So you had jazz and gospel.

JB: Yes, it was my foundation.

JS: You went to high school down in Maryland?

JB: Yes.

JS: That's where you met Clarence Clemons?

JB: Yeah, I met Clarence in 1960. He was going to college at Maryland State [University of Maryland Eastern Shore] in Princess Anne, Maryland. He was in a band called The Vibratones; a big band, about four horns; about an eleven-piece band. He would come into Crisfield to play the Elks Club. We had two places in Crisfield where you could play, but there was outside Crisfield you could go; 13 miles, 14 miles away. Clarence would come into town, and he was just *amazing*. He had that King Curtis sound. He perfected that as time went on, as we all know. That's where I met him, and we became friends. I would go see him play; if he had a chance, he would come see me play. So, that's how I met Clarence.

YC: You were already playing professionally went you were in high school?

JB: Yes. I was thirteen, and there was an older band called The Rockets. I know you've probably heard of them. They were an older band. Most of the guys were in their twenties. Like I said, I was thirteen. They used to rehearse where I stayed at. I stayed at this row of houses, and their house they rehearsed at. I went in there and started singing Otis Redding stuff.

JS: So you were the youngest, the young man on the band?

JB: Yes. They used to call me "Little Johnny Redding," *[laughter]* because I could really do Otis Redding really good at that time.

JS: So you were performing really early?

JB: Yes.

JS: Is there anything else that, when you were in Maryland that you want to talk about, in terms of performing music, before we come back up to Jersey?

JB: It was called a "Chitlin' Circuit." Back then, we'd go play; we'd have a manager. It was crazy, this guy. He was real good, he'd get us booked, but he would drink a lot. One night, we were playing and he got drunk. They used to put money in the cigar box. Come to the end of the night, and the cigar box was empty! *[laughter]* So that was the end of him being manager. But, we played some places; traveled a little bit between Maryland and Delaware. I couldn't drink... they wouldn't *let me* drink. I didn't want to drink, but I had fun.

JS: I'm sure. When did you move back to New Jersey?

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JB: I moved to Jersey in '64. My stepfather was working in Point Pleasant. I quit school, because I had gotten a young lady pregnant. There was no work in Maryland, except for crabs; being that was the crab capitol of the United States – Crisfield. I wanted to do something else, I didn't want to work in the crab house. I came up and started working with my father in Point Pleasant. In the meantime, that's when I met certain people. That was in '64. '66, I went to the military in Point Pleasant. I didn't go to Vietnam, but I went to the DMZ in Korea. It still was crazy. War is war. I stayed there until '68... '66 to '68.

JS: Thank you for your service.

JB: You're welcome.

JS: When you were in Point Pleasant, did you come to Asbury Park at all?

JB: I did, but when I was staying in Brielle, we used to ride a bus from Brielle to Asbury Park. I went to the boardwalk and to Springwood Avenue. I didn't know that much about clubs, but everything was flourishing. It was a booming town. They used to call it "Little Harlem" because you could get anything you wanted in Asbury Park. They partied all the time. There was a bar on every corner, just about, at that time.

JS: That's a good bike ride up from Brielle.

JTB: Yeah, it was fun.

JS: At that point, before you went in the service... you came out in '68.

JTB: Yes.

JS: Do you remember what Springwood Avenue was like at that time? Did you come up here at all?

JB: Yes, because I met Big Ham, they called him, from Red Bank. He owned The Soul Flames, the band. I went to the Turf Club. My first night out from the service, I came to Asbury Park and went into the Turf Club. I knew some people, and I met Ham and I started singing with the Soul Flames. That's where that came from.

JS: You actually met at the Turf Club.

JB: Yes.

JS: Where did you all play?

JB: Where did we play... where *didn't* we play? *[laughter]*

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JS: Just a few examples.

JB: For example, the Officers Club, Fort Dix, Eatontown, all the clubs in Asbury – the Turf Club, then you had the Elks, then you had the Masonic Hall. We didn't go on the west side. I mean, on the east side. We played on the west side.

JS: So you had Soul Flames, then the Chosen Few came after?

JB: The Chosen Few came after. When I moved up here, I found out that Clarence was playing with The Chosen Few. What happened was, after I finished with The Soul Flames, I met George and Gilbert Davis, they were the head members of The Chosen Few. They needed a singer, and I got the job. Clarence was in the band. Then Clarence left, and went with Norman Seldin [and the Joyful Noyze?].

CT: You said you didn't play on the east side back then, in the late '60s.

JB: No, no I didn't.

CT: Any particular reason why?

JB: I guess nobody asked us to, and as far as I know, you didn't go on the east. It wasn't a thing where you thought about it. I want to go to the Stone Pony, or I want to go play some of the clubs over there; we were busy doing what we were doing in our circuit.

CT: This was primarily jazz, right?

JB: No, R&B.

CT: R&B, okay.

JB: You had a lot of clubs on the west side. You had Big Bill's, you had the Turf Club, you had the Orchid. That was the three main clubs that you could play. Jazz was at the Orchid, mostly. You heard Jimmy Griff; all the big-time stars used to come to the Orchid. Big Bill's had the offshoot, coming-up artists, so we played there sometimes. But our main place was the Turf Club. But yes, R&B.

CT: I guess R&B was more popular on the west side. Not that the white youth weren't listening to R&B, because they knew Smokey, Martha and the Vandellas, all that old stuff, because that's pretty much that period; the Impressions all those cats.

JB: My understanding is they talk about the Sound of Asbury Park. When you talk about the Sound of Asbury Park, you have to put in the R&B from the west side, because some of the white artists would come to the west side to hear what was going on. They would pick

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it up, take it back over there, and that's how Bruce became Bruce, in a sense of that "sound." He picked up what was going on in the west side, put it into what he was doing, and Southside, guys like that. Then you had Lenny...

YC: Welch?

JB: Yes, Lenny Welch. Those guys were before me, so that had a little insight into what was going on on the east side.

JS: Did you have a favorite of those three, or any on Springwood Avenue, a favorite place to play?

JB: The Turf Club. It was one of the largest venues. You had the Elks Club, which was right in back of it. When I was with the Chosen Few, we traveled outside of Asbury Park – Jersey City, Newark. The Blue Note in Newark. The Jackson's Club in Jersey City. We traveled a lot.

JS: Atlantic City?

JB: No, we didn't do Atlantic City. Weren't big enough, I guess.

YC: Did you perform outside the state of New Jersey?

JB: Yes, as a matter of fact, we took a couple of trips to Des Moines, Iowa. That's where the brothers from the Chosen Few were from. Des Moines, Iowa: that's where George and Gilbert Davis, they were from there. We would travel there quite a bit.

JS: That was end of the '60s, into the '70s.

JB: Yes.

JS: Then, of course, things changed here in 1970 on Springwood.

JB: Yes. My experience with that is: we went to Des Moines, Iowa to play. We played. When we came back – devastation. Everything was like, what is this? Everything's burned down. I could never get over the fact that people would burn down where you live. That messed my mind up, because – what are you going to do? It stopped at the railroad tracks. Didn't go any further; they blocked it off and everything else. They didn't burn nothing on the west side – I mean, on the east side. They just burned it on the west side. It was a lot of buildings, people lost jobs, everything else. It was a sad time, I think. If you look now, there's been progress, but to me, I have to think about it. You don't see any *real* progress. You build a couple buildings...

JS: You mean progress in terms of jobs?

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- JB: Progress in terms of jobs, homes. There were people's homes that were burned down; people's businesses. They're all gone. There's nothing on the west side; not on Springwood Avenue. There's no clubs that I know of, that people go.
- JS: Did you then play, when everything happened in 1970, did you play other places in Asbury Park for a while there, or was that about it?
- JB: That was about it. A bar out on [Route] 35, I can't remember the name...
- MK: The Redwood.
- JB: Redwood, yes. That was one spot you could go and play. We played there a couple times. Then we put our efforts into the Officers Clubs and military clubs.
- JS: Fort Monmouth, too?
- JB: Fort Monmouth.
- JS: I have a quick technical question, Melissa. Are those lights reflecting on Mr. Bowen's glasses? In a way that's a problem?
- MK: A little bit. Let me try something... It's about the same. We can see your face a little bit better [with the lights on].
- JS: We'd like to see your face. So, the Red Bank Rockers. How did you become involved with the Red Bank Rockers?
- JB: Like I said, Clarence and I have been friends for 50 years. He knew I was... I was in Philadelphia; I was working in Philly. I was trying to get a record deal. You go around to Gamble & Huff, and those places, you get to meet those people – Patty LaBelle, stuff like that. Teddy Pendergrass. I moved back to New Jersey – I had been in Philly, and moved back to Jersey. I met Clarence, and we get to talking. He tells me, "Johnny, I'm going to open up a club." He said, "Would you help me?" "Sure." He said, "Would you work the door for me?" "Great." So, he opened Big Man's West in Red Bank, and I went there and started working the door. About a year into that, he comes and says he's putting a band together. He asked me if I would be the vocals in his band. Sure, you know! At that time, he was really branching out with Bruce. Bruce had took a little leave from the band, and Clarence put the Red Bank Rockers together. We did that for three years.
- JS: What years around was that?
- JB: '81. We did the album in '82. Red Bank Rockers, *Rescue*. [This album included a song

titled “Savin’ Up,” which was written by Bruce Springsteen. Bruce played guitar on the song; JT Bowen was on vocals.]

JS: The club in Red Bank: what was the scene like there? Since you knew it intimately from being at the front door.

JB: Wild. We had a lot of artists, Clarence had a lot of artists out that needed a place to play. Gary Bonds and those guys would come down and play. It was good. Only problem was, I think, when you start a business, you have to know something about it and be able to help run it. If you’re not around to run a business, you have to be careful who you put in charge of your money, the operation of the business, you know. He had the “name,” Big Man, so it brought people in. But in the end, I don’t know for sure, maybe... maybe if we spent more time with it, it would have lasted a little longer. People probably didn’t want him to be there, nowhere. It’s one of those things we were talking about earlier, about how sometimes, you can be somewhere, and be not really wanted there, but they tolerate you because of *who* you are, but they still try to find things to get you out from where you’re out.

YC: Where was the club located?

JB: On the main street there. Where Count Basie [Theater]’s at.

CT: Monmouth Street.

JB: Monmouth. Yes, thank you.

YC: Front Street, that’s what I was thinking of.

JS: Anything else from up in Red Bank that you want to talk about?

JB: Red Bank is good. It’s a great town. People are nice. The club was really good, I think, for the city, too. It brought in money, revenue. I’m pretty sure that helped.

JS: I know you’re involved currently in music.

JB: Yes, I’ve been blessed. What happened was, I got out of music for a while. I had a problem. I’m not ashamed to talk about it. I had a drug problem, but God’s been good. I went to rehab, went to a Christian place called America’s Keswick. It’s in Whiting, New Jersey. It’s been there for like 110 years. Nobody knows anything about it. It’s a great place for healing and for spiritual[ity]. I need to go get some help. I was blessed to go to a Christian program, and get back connected with God. To me, without him, you’re missing something. You’ve got some people who don’t believe in God; that’s their thing. But I believe in God. If you disconnect yourself from God, you have nowhere to fall. Nothing to fall on. I was blessed, I went to the program. For 20, about 25 years I was out

of the business. I was out there. I was strung out. I was gone. I was trying to kill myself. One day I decided, I had to decide: you know what, you're better than this. So, I went to the program. It's a four-month program, and I stayed for nine months. I became a disciple to help other people that come in. Since I was the oldest one in there, all these young guys are coming in with these problems. I was blessed to be able to help them, to get them the insight that you really don't have to do this, it's really not the way to go. God is so good when you line yourself up with his purpose. We all think it's *our* purpose, but it's really God's purpose. That's what I found out. His plan for your life, before you were even born, he's got a plan for you. So, I got myself together, got out of rehab. I went in in September 2008 – September 16, 2008. I got out in January... no, July 2009. I got out, and then I had a stroke. This is telling you how good God is, not me. I had a stroke in the last part of 2009; December 1st, 2009. Got myself together, got healed again; praise God. My daughter is a promoter of gospel music, so she was taking Vickie Winans to the airport, and she runs into Clarence [Clemons]. In the meantime, everybody thinks that I'm dead – because nobody's heard anything from J.T. Bowen. He's dead, we haven't heard anything about him. Clarence said to my daughter, "I'm sorry about your father." She said, "My dad's living with me!" He said, "Really? Tell him I'm going to get in touch with him." So he had a birthday party in Orlando, Florida in 2011, for his 69th birthday party. He called me up and said he wanted me to come down and sing. I hadn't sang in what... twenty-something years? So I'm running around, I've got a record, but I don't have a record player so I'm trying to find something to play the music on. We hook something up. I learn the music. Went down and played with Clarence for his 69th birthday. He asked me, did I have my passport? I said, "no." He said, "Man, I'm working on something. Get your passport, because we're going to do some things." I said, "Great." I come home; January 11th was his birthday, 2011. I come home after being down there, get my passport. Six months later, he has a stroke. He dies. The funny thing about this... I say it's funny, because – I had a stroke, I go down to Florida for his birthday; he's had operations. I'm pushing him in a wheelchair. This is how good God is – I'm pushing him in a wheelchair, this is Big Man. I'm pushing *him* in a wheelchair, I had a stroke. Six months later, he has a stroke and he dies. So... wow, you know. It was devastating. In the meantime, I'm talking to Steve from the Soul Cruisers. We're going to do a benefit for Clarence. We were going to play before that, but since Clarence died, now we're going to change this into a benefit. That's when we did the benefit at the Wonder Bar [July 17, 2011], and Bruce showed up. We had a nice time. It was a sad thing. He was a nice guy. My thing is, how God would set you back, once you get reconnected with him to where he wants you to be. I wind up back in this limelight basically. I'm playing with Bruce. Bruce gets me to do some things at the Stone Pony with him. His son went to college, and he was doing some things for that. So, it's been a blessing.

JS: What a gift. First of all, what an enormous amount of strength to go through all that. What a gift that you *did* reconnect, though.

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JT: Yes, I'm blessed because, through all the alcohol and drugs, the crazy living, God still sustained my voice, so that I can hopefully reach people with it. It's no good if I don't use it for him. Just to *use* it, is just using it. But if I could use it to try to help somebody. I was blessed to meet Marc Ribler, he's now the musical director with the Miami *[inaudible]*, the Disciples of Soul. He wrote a CD for me, called "J.T. Bowen: Out of the Shadows." That was a blessing. This year, I'm working with Arlan Feiles. We're going to do another CD called, "Dig Deep." It's more of a spiritual – not gospel – but a spiritual context to it. I can make people shake their booty all day long, but I'm going try to shake their mind up. Charles and I were talking earlier about this country. I see some things in this country that we see as progress, but then again, I still things that we were doing in the '60s: marching for something that you already have. People marching for freedom, when you're already free. What's up with that? You have people that... the black man used to get hung; now, he's getting shot and killed. Something's wrong with the picture. Where's America going? We're supposed to be showing these people in the world about democracy, so I'm saying to myself sometimes, "Something wrong here. Something's not being taught." We have kids getting up, getting guns, go to school, and kill people. God bless America. Okay. Why do you take God out of the schools? So, I'm confused. I see this, and I got to find a way to reach the people, to tell them, we have to get people back in office that believe in God. I'm not saying anything about people's rights, but I believe in the Bible. Now some people don't believe in the Bible, that's their thing. I got to say, what's right: the Bible, or the people? What's right: God, or the people? Who am I going to follow: God, or the people? To the best of my knowledge.

JS: You see your voice as a way to reach—

JB: Yes, I do. We're writing some songs now that I'm hoping and praying that once it's released, got some things we're doing now, gofundme page, and try to get the music out there once it's done. So I try and enlighten them to some of the stuff that's dark that's going on around here. That's just my look on life. I've been here 70 years now, and I've seen some things. I've lived in segregation. I went to an all-black school – couldn't go to a white school when I moved down south to Maryland. The time I was up here, it was segregated, black and white. When I moved to Maryland, for my high school days. I couldn't go to a white school. Here it is, 2018. You're seeing some of the same stuff. You got people marching; used to have dogs biting us. Now it's some different other things. It's on the news every day. Somebody needs to do something, I believe. Got to put God back in our lives.

JS: Part of why, as we said, why we think this project is so important is because it's a[bout] history, and not losing history, and people being aware of their own history, things that happened in their own family. So, bringing it back to Springwood Avenue... If somebody were to walk down Springwood Avenue today, what would you want them to know?

JB: What would I want them to know... Take a look around, go back into the archives, see some pictures of how it used to look. Look at it now, and ask the question: what

happened? They just tore down Boston Way [apartments]. I used to walk down Springwood, recently, before they tore it down, and wondered, “How come people aren’t living in that place?” What are they going to do with it? I talked to a couple people that said they were going to rebuild it. Tear the inside out and refurbish it. I come back, and it’s gone. What happened with that idea? So what’s the next idea? Are they going to build something else? Who are they going to build it for? Asbury shouldn’t be a west side and east side. It’s not that big. They got a dividing line – the railroad tracks. Down south, they had a dividing line. *[laughter]* You wonder: okay, it’s good we’re building up; Asbury’s building up. I think they’re doing a great job. I would like to see, personally, more money being spread around. Sometimes, America’s that way. You have money here, and you don’t have money there. That’s America: home of the free, land of the brave. I would want them to walk around, look, get some archives, find out what was it like before – not that you want to go back, but sometimes, you have to go *back* to go *forward*. There has to be a foundation. I think without a foundation, nothing’s really going to happen.

CT: We are pretty much that foundation, all the way as the clock clicks – because of our age, that’s all I’m saying. Young people going “boom” like that, too. But, I’m saying, we’re the foundation that they are not, because we’ve been here X-amount of years. Not only read about it, but *lived* it.

JB: But lived it; there’s a difference.

CT: It’s like traveling. You can read about Puerto Rico, but until you go there, it’s a whole different thing.

JB: I tell people everywhere I go: I’ve been blessed to go around the world, different countries. America is the best. I’ve lived here. It’s okay to go somewhere and visit, but then you come home, and it’s just home. I think it’s important that we shine a light on – I’m so grateful that you are doing what you’re doing. I’m looking forward to seeing... the final project. It’s needed. I think if something’s needed, you shine a light on it. Don’t just do it, and put it in a bucket, cover it up. Let it shine. I think it’s going to be a great idea.

MK: Question for you. You mentioned the “Sound of Asbury Park,” and people use that term a lot. You alluded to, somewhat, how people like Bruce Springsteen and other white musicians, would go to the west side and listen to the music, and that would influence their own bands and their own sound.

JB: Yes.

MK: Can you be specific on ways that some things that “crossed,” so to speak... something that was taken back to the east side, and became part of the Sound of Asbury Park. You said R&B was one of them, but is there something specific? How would you define it?

- JB: There's a *feeling* that you have in the black community that you don't have in the white community. If I had to put it "black" and "white." Music isn't supposed to be black and white, music is *music*. But there's a feeling. There's a difference between Elvis Presley and Little Richard. Ray Charles and Elton John. There's a *feeling*. I believe if you listen to music with a feeling, and you put that into what you're doing, if you don't have that feeling – it's not that you *stole* it. Music is not to be *stolen*, it's meant to be *shared*, in my opinion. Some people do steal it! *[laughter]* To give a good example, Bruce, with his music, when he got Clarence in his band, his whole thing changed. It was a *feeling*. There was a feeling to his music. He brought a different feeling to Bruce's music. Southside Johnny and those guys, there was a feeling with the horns, the sax. They picked up a feeling. Otis Redding feel. James Brown feel. When they came over to this side, we had the Broadways, you had the Moments, so musicians pick up on certain styles. They take it back, and try to put it in their own, which is normal. I don't think there's anything wrong with it. It's a collaboration of east and west, what I think you're talking about the Asbury Park Sound. I don't think it's just to the east side, put it that way.
- MK: The misconception that many people have about Asbury Park is that they only know about the Bruce Springsteens. I hope that's one thing that our project, with your help, we can see Asbury Park as one big town, not just a one-sided thing. So, I'm curious as to how... I feel like that part of the whole history is left out.
- JB: It's left out because a lot of people that are big won't tell you about it, how they really got it. They want to claim it themselves, but when you come from it, you know. Like the Four Seasons, that's the Asbury Sound, right? You know what I'm saying? Is it? It can be classified as the Asbury Park Sound.
- YC: Frankie Valli...
- CT: Oh, Frankie... I guess it would. They from...?
- YC: Jersey Boys!
- JB: They're from Jersey.
- CT: That was the sound of the time. But so was the Beach Boys.
- MK: So, I guess the sound you're talking about it the rich vocal harmonies?
- JB: You could put that in it there.
- MK: As someone who moved to Asbury Park, I have an outsider's perspective. When I was first experiencing the Jersey Shore music scene, one thing that struck me about the rock-and-roll bands is that there's a lot of horn players in the bands. That seems to be a trademark thing that you see – Bruce, he has the E Street band. Southside Johnny has the

Asbury Jukes. My question is: do you think that seeing so many varied instrumentations – from the jazz tradition, I know there's a lot of saxophone and clarinets and horns – and people like Clarence. Do you think it that has anything to do with it, the Asbury Park Sound?

JB: Yes, that has to do with the feeling. That's part of the feeling. You could put that in there. You had the Broadways – they had something in Asbury a little while ago, with *[inaudible]*, with the Broadways, the vocal group. They used to be on the east side. Remember Leon Trent?

YC: Leon Trent, yeah.

JB: Ronald Coleman, the Moments, Billy Brown.

YC: Billy Brown's going to be here July 2.

JB: Oh yeah, where?

YC: In the Springwood Park.

JB: Speaking of that, who do I have to call to get in there?

YC: Talk to me. *[laughter]*

JB: What!?

YC: Do you have... I know you're writing music, are you currently working with a group, or a band?

JB: Yes, I have musicians that I can muster up to do something. I have a group called the Mighty Kings of Soul.

YC: Can you write that down for me?

JS: Yes, I will.

YC: Did you ever sing, appear... I've heard a lot about the Upstage?

JB: No, I've never played there in Asbury?

YC: Upstairs, on Cookman Avenue?

JB: No ma'am, I've never played there.

- CT: I thought that was more of a rehearsal space?
- MK: They did latenight jam sessions there, Bruce played there...
- YC: On the corner of Cookman and Bond. I've heard a lot of white musicians talk about the jam sessions that they had there. But I don't know anybody that's of color that ever played there, was part of it. I was just wondering, because you are a kind of "cross-over," if you ever were...
- JB: I became a cross-over due to the fact that I was involved with Clarence. He opened the door for the R&B, rock-and-roll, if you've got the sweet harmonies... So, he opened the door, and I came right up knocking! *[laughter]* I came through that door. I was blessed to be able to play at the Stone Pony, Tim McLoone's, Wonder Bar. It's a close-knit family. It's like being in Philadelphia; if you know Gamble & Huff, you're in.
- JS: Do you see any things or ideas or suggestions, that would help... for example, going forward, as music is still a huge part of the story, and has always been a part of the story of Asbury Park. Going forward, and things like what you just said – opportunities to perform – are there ways, you think, to... make a bigger view of music of Asbury Park? For example, a few years back – I'm not sure you were there, when there was a panel discussion, and they had west side musicians and east side. When it comes to actually hearing music that has this sound, are there any ways you think this story could be told better?
- JB: It makes sense, but... are you talking about a venue to put people in to play?
- JS: Not to find a venue, but ways that when music is happening in Asbury Park, it's more reflective of this history. Whether it's small shows, big shows, ways of incorporating things so that it doesn't always come across as one way or the other, because it's really a bigger story.
- JB: I think they're trying to do that now with the park.
- JS: Springwood Park? They do the concert series.
- JB: That sounds like what you're saying. They're having diverse musicians and entertainers come in there to play. They try to bring the light to the people that this... is what Asbury should look like, or should sound like. Even though it wasn't, because now over on the west side, you're bringing in different music, even from the east side, which wasn't from before. It doesn't make sense. Now you're bringing in different musicians. That's a good example right there. But they only do it in the summer. So what happens after the summer's over? Is there a place where you can do and do that? Which it's a good thing, for outside. Is there a place...? I was thinking about the Orchid—I mean, the Turf Club. It's sitting right there on the corner. It sits right there on the corner, and no one, for all

these years, has opened that spot up. Somebody with some money, and some brains business-wise, could make it work. Why don't they do [that]? Maybe because it's on the west side. Maybe it's where it's sitting at; it's right there on the corner. Then you have to find parking. *[laughter]* That's one spot, right there, that could shine a light on the east and the west side of Asbury Park. Sitting right in the middle of the black community, and right across the tracks from the white community.

JS: So, geography is important. I mean, I'm saying that myself, but—

JB: Sure! Where you open your business up is very important. You have to look at your clientele. You don't want to be afraid to bring some musicians in, and you have a problem with the blacks, because it's sitting in a black community. That's where you need to cut the community thing off, and have blacks and whites living together. You won't have that problem. *[laughter]* You know? That's going to be a problem to. You got to build in a situation where white and black can live together, Spanish [people], and whatever – they all need to come together, instead of putting a destination of who you are, and where you can live. Now you're dealing with economics, too. There's a lot there to focus on, but... if I had money, I'd open that spot up. I'd take a chance and open it up. If I had to get police to walk around the place all the time, or whatever. But the black people aren't that bad, not as bad as people think they are. They have problems on the east side too. They've got a spot over there now, people are out there all night. You know what I mean? You've got people out there all night, the police come. You see the cops out there, people standing outside to get in.

JS: This is true.

JB: It's the way you market it. It's the scene you want it to be.

MK: What was it like in there? Can you describe the Turf Club? I've never experienced it.

JB: It's around like this *[hand gestures]*. Inside, the stage is where you are [straight ahead, far back wall of the club]. That's it. It's not that big. You could get enough people in there that you'd have a good time in there. They had some great bands. Good musicians came in there, from all over. That's one thing about Asbury, too: they used to bring people in from all over the world.

JS: Why do you think Asbury could attract people from all over the world?

JB: Everything was happening everywhere, on every corner. I said earlier, they used to call it Little Harlem. You could get anything: drugs, women... whatever goes on in the big city, goes on in Asbury Park. It attracts people. The Orchid was real small, but they used to bring dynamite action in there; some of the best jazz musicians in the world came right there and played. People used to come from all over, come to the Orchid to see whoever would be there – Jimmy McGriff, Jack McDuff, people like that.

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YC: Shirley Scott.

JB: Yeah, you remember Shirley? Yeah, okay! These were well-known musicians used to come in there. People come out. People come out.

JS: We were talking to – I know you saw the video – we were talking to Cliff Johnson about an earlier era and he was describing the way people dressed, going out.

JB: Yes, they did. Have you talked to Ray Derouge (check spelling)?

JS: No.

JB: You ever heard of him?

JB: He's a well-known writer. He used to manage a group called Street People. Roy Daniels and those guys from Long Branch. Very knowledgeable writer. Ray might be good to talk to him, see how he feels. Very nice guy. Lives right around the circle. Nice guy. Knows about all the doo-wops.

CT: Doo-wop era, that was in the '50s.

JB: Yeah.

CT: Late '40s, early '50s. I guess that sort of helped to build the R&B sound, it was its foundations.

JB: Sure.

CT: Acappella's a hard thing to sing, though. It's no joke.

JB: Yeah.

CT: I mean, it's no joke making music, period. But when you start moving parts, the whole thing?

JB: You have to know where you're at.

JS: Any burning questions that we've missed? We know there's a lot that we missed...

JB: We haven't heard from you?

KM: I'm just absorbing everything. *[laughter]*

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CT: So, you're a vocalist.

JB: Yes.

CT: You play any instruments?

JB: No, I tried. When I was young, I used to see Elvis Presley with a guitar. Man, that was great to me. So, I bought the guitar, but never did learn it. *[laughter]* Someone's got a picture of me riding from Maryland to Jersey, on back of a pickup truck, with a guitar. *[laughter]* Somebody's got that, I've got to find it. It's been so long, they're probably dead and gone. But maybe that picture's still around; somebody's got it.

JS: That would be fun to find!

JB: Yeah, me on the back of a pickup truck, playing guitar! I know they took the picture, they did.

YC: Do you have any memorabilia you would share with us? We wouldn't keep it, but we can scan it, take pictures of it, and return to you.

JB: Maybe a couple pictures I have with Clarence.

JS: Of you with him?

JB: Yeah.

JS: We would love to see anything like that. What we're doing is, part of what we're trying to do, in addition to this – there's a lot of pieces of this. What we've found in trying to put these stories together is that a lot of the pictures and memorabilia are not something that are out there in an archive, because they're in people's homes. We only use things people want to share, but people want to share...

JB: Okay, I'll see what I can find.

YC: Thank you.

JS: On June 28th, a Thursday, we're having an event at the library about this project. We're putting together another little video. We're going to have an opportunity for people to get interviewed there, from Springwood Avenue. Share their memorabilia, have some food.

YC: Learn about this project.

JS: Learn more about the project.

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JB: The 28th, that's a Thursday?

JS: Yes, Thursday evening.

CT: Last Thursday.

JB: Last Thursday next month.

YC: Yes. And on June 18th –

JB: The 18th?

JS: I'll send you everything.

YC: June 18th we're doing something in Springwood Park. I'd like to talk to you about that. That may be an opportunity for you to get in front of a small audience, if you're interested.

JB: Oh, okay. Okay.

JS: You all can speak further about that. There's another event related to the project on the 18th. June is a busy month. What we've been doing is— is there anything else you'd like to share? We're not going anywhere, so if things come to mind...

JB: Did you finish with the questions? Did we get them all?

JS: I think we got them all.

JB: Did we miss one? Okay. *[laughter]* We did good, okay.

JS: We did a pretty good job. So, we take this interview; Melissa does an amazing job of transcribing it all. Exactly, it's real hard work. Then, we look through it again. We send it to you, so that you have the opportunity to look through, if there's anything you want to change or fix or take out, we do that. Then we have it in a form that's finalized that ends up going in the archives.

MK: One last thing, if you're comfortable with signing [the consent form].

JT: Something's wrong with my hand here!

MK: Oh no! *[laughter]* This is to consent that we—

JB: I get a million dollars? *[laughter]* Where do I sign? ... Am I doing it right?

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- YC: What does the “T” [in J.T. Bowen’s name] stand for?
- JB: Tantalizing.
- YC: Tantalite?
- JB: Titillating. What did you think it was, “Thomas?” *[laughter]* Most people thought it was Thomas. This guy, Doug Howarton [?], from Philly, we were doing something, he says, “We got to put this T in here. And your voice sounds real titillating.” So, that’s how we’re going to do it. Today is the 29th?
- JS: Yes.
- JB: 5-29-18.
- MK: Thank you. Here’s a copy for you.
- JB: I get a copy too?
- MK: You’re welcome.
- JS: That’s not the last thing, because we like to do a picture.
- JB: Picture?
- JS: Group picture, if that’s okay.
- JB: I have to sign for that too? *[laughter]* *[group members take photos together.]* *[JS and JB exchange contact information.]* *[Chatter.]*
- JS: We would like to thank you so much for spending time with us. It’s been a pleasure.
- KM: Thank you.
- JB: Thank you for having me. It wasn’t as painful as I thought! *[laughter]*
- JS: That’s what we like to hear!
- YC: We’re a tough group! *[laughter]*
- JS: If you have any questions or anything else, please feel free to reach out.
- JB: Okay.

[End of Interview]

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