

Interview with Rudy Lawless September 4th, 2009 (Complete Transcription)

By Todd Bryant Weeks

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Todd Bryant Weeks: Today I'm interviewing the great NY City drummer, Rudy Lawless—full name Rudolph Sherriff Lawless. Do you know the names of your grandparents and when they were born?

RL: I might be able to remember the birthdays, but the years have moved on from me...

TBW: Where were your people from?

RL: My father's family was from Trinidad, and other Dutch colonies in the Caribbean.

TBW: Did your father parents meet there or in New York City?

RL: I don't know where my grandparents met, but it all comes through the Caribbean.

TBW: And do you know when your father came to the US?

RL: Dad was in the 1910s, as a youngster.

TBW: To New York?

RL: To New York. Everybody in the family was doing everything they could do to come through—to get more for their families as their families grew.

TBW: What was your father's father's first name?

RL: Well, I can't recall—he's been dead for so many years, but he was a Lawless.

TBW: It's an interesting last name.

RL: Well, I know there was another brother involved—and you see I think my father may have been a junior. You see they used similar names—or there were brothers with similar names. My father was Lionel Oliver, and in the mixture he became Sidney Lionel Oliver Lawless; and his

brother's name was somewhere in there with the Lionel and Oliver mixed in as well. And, frankly, they used different names for different purposes. One minute, dad was Sidney Lionel, and the next minute he was Lionel Oliver.

TBW: Was your father in show business?

RL: No. He was just in business. And at that time they would use all the names from the family in different combinations—like I do. I often will use different combinations of my family name—intertwining them together. This is a way of making sure that people are accounted for in the family tree. So they kept these different names they had that were meaningful to them. And I'm doing the same thing. If you had asked me years ago if I would be using "Wentworth" at times, I wouldn't have thought that—but it's as if they are pinching me—my ancestors, and saying, "Yeah, we did it, you do it too." Wentworth was my grandfather on my mother's side.

TBW: Where does the "Sherriff" come from?

RL: It's a family name. I became a Sherriff through using my grandfather's name on my mother's side. That was my mother's maiden name.

TBW: Sherriff. That's the family name—your mother's maiden name.

RL: Yeah.

TBW: OK, I want to sort this out. What were you parents' names?

RL: My father was Lionel Oliver Lawless. My mother was Lucia Louise Sherriff.

TBW: OK. What about birthdays for your parents?

RL: My father's birthday was August 31, 1894. My mother was born March 6, 1897. He died in 1967.

TBW: And when did she die?

RL: 1975.

TBW: You often talk about your mother in such glowing terms; it's almost as if she were still here.

RL: Well, that's what they left me with—so much love and so much beauty, man. I never needed to stray far from them. All that was there for me to do was to just try and absorb it and try to pass it on to anyone who could use the stuff.

TBW: You do speak about your family quite warmly and openly.

RL: Well, you know it was a big family. I had three sisters and three brothers. Seven of us kids. And I'm the baby. Hot diggity.

TBW: Well, that very interesting to contemplate, because you who are now in your late 70's, you've seen a lot in your time—and being the youngest, you were connected with people who had already lived through some stuff by the time you came around. What year were you born?

RL: 1931.

TBW: And that was a hard year to come into the world.

RL: Oh, yeah. The Great Depression, man.

TBW: But your family performed together, and I right?

RL: Yeah. And I started dancing with my brothers and sisters when I was quite young, two and a half, three years old. And in my family, as in most families at that time, everybody was expected to do something. The older ones would care for the younger ones, so the parents could go out and look for work. Everybody took care of everybody, when they had to. And times were hard, and unlike today, there were no safety nets—nothing for people to do who were really in need. Today there are things to prop people up, and even if you're among the brightest of people, and you can't find work, you can still go out and get yourself involved in any number of things. When we were coming up I had a friend who worked as a stock boy in a clothing store, Martin and Burns,

right here on Columbus Circle. And he didn't want to make deliveries. And I told him that that was part of his job, but he didn't get it. So I ended up helping him out with that; catching people who were expecting deliveries and getting them the clothes on time. My thing was I tried to explain to him that he had to accept that work because he wasn't qualified to do anything else.

TBW: Well, even allowing for race discrimination it stands to reason that without the experience, people wouldn't be rising through the ranks. Problem was, I guess to get the experience in the first place. But tell me about the dancing.

RL: Well, like I said, is started out very young and I danced with my brothers and sisters. And we danced to different kind of music, mostly uptown music like Eubie Blake's compositions and later boogie woogie tunes. We ended up doing the jitterbug and the swing and ballroom steps that were popular, "Stairway to the Stars," and those kind of compositions. And I learned to do twirls and different types of steps of that nature. And my major partner was a young girl named Streemy Webb. She and I worked together until we were eight or nine years old, and the routine grew larger as we went on, and as we developed a little bit more understanding of what we were doing. One of the numbers was "Oh, Johnny, oh Johnny, how you could love..." and if you can imagine a four or five year old kid doing this kind of number, and my eyes would be bubbling and I'd be doing my little dance, and she would walk by coquettishly as a little young lady, and as we grew older our costumes got more sophisticated until by the time I was nine years old I was wearing a tuxedo. And I used to do dips—you know dip Streemy, and the audience loved it.

TBW: And you were part of a troupe or company?

RL: Oh, yes. It was organized. Our pianist at the dancing school where we all studied was Eddie Bonamere. He became very famous later on with his recordings on tunes like "Five O'clock

Whistle” with Rudy Collins and some other cats. A lot of people recorded it, but he had the big hit with that tune.

TBW: And you were from uptown—that’s where you hung your hat?

RL: Yeah, most of my life I’ve been in Harlem. And I know the five boroughs enough that I’m not gonna get too lost.

TBW: Did you go to school in Harlem?

RL: Yeah. My major education was all in Manhattan. From grammar school—PS 119; and then PS 46; Edward W. Stitt—PS 5, further uptown; and then High School was Textile—that brought me downtown, 18th between 8th and 9th.

TBW: In Chelsea?

RL: Yeah.

TBW: Did they call it Chelsea then?

RL: I don’t know. Maybe I wasn’t really aware of that at the time. I know it became a marine school at one time too.

TBW: Were you involved in the performing arts when you were in High School?

RL: No. not at all. No dancing, no playing in the school band. That all happened at home—it was just at home so that I had something to do when I got back from school. [Jazz drummer] Denzel Best had something at PS 46 later on, but I was too old at that point.

TBW: So when did the drums come along for you?

RL: It was during the summer when I was about 16. It came in before that but when I was 16, I suddenly thought, “Oooh, what is this? Maybe this is my groove.” Well, I didn’t necessarily think that way, but due to [Count Basie trombonist guitarist and arranger] Eddie Durham living next to me, and Jimmy Crawford living across the street.

TBW: Tell me about Jimmy Crawford.

RL: He was a jazz and show drummer—he did big shows and played on TV in the earliest days.

TBW: 1947—yeah, well that’s some early TV.

RL: Yeah, when there were like three or four channels to choose from.

TBW: You want to play like these guys—do what they were doing?

RL: Even before that, at dancing school, during the intermission, the curtain would come down and I would run up there and get on the drums. I remember the first drums that I sat behind was a green sparkle. And I was so small I couldn’t reach anything. But the guy left his sticks on the seat. And I just took them and I was “washing” [“bashing”] stuff, and they come up there and they, they didn’t bother me, but they just quieted me down, because other things was going on. I was backstage after all. That was my first encounter that I really wanted to see what this was. The guy’s name was Jimmy Parker...that was whose drums it was.

RL: Right.

TBW: Where was that dancing school, by the way?

RL: The dancing school was 132nd Street between 7th and Lenox, right off of 7th Avenue. There was a hall up there and rooms for different things that people may be learning—arts and crafts and stuff like that. And they used to move back the tables to make the room larger for the dancing class, and that was basically a Friday after school thing, or Saturday mornings from about 10 until about 4PM.

TBW: You’d go in on a Saturday

RL: Mine was a Saturday when I first started.

TBW: Were your family churchgoers?

RL: Somewhat. Not heavy heavy. You didn't have to go. But you were in that pocket, living in that neighborhood and you had to get in there once and a while. You had to know your bible and you had to know your catechism, and you had to know all these things you really had to know. If anyone questioned you about it, you better come up with the goods. Granny took me to all the stuff, but we weren't in church for twelve hours at a stretch.

TBW: Which church?

RL: All churches—whatever church—we tried them all. She just took me and when I questioned it as I got a little older, she'd say, "Oh, now you're talking about it now, boy, are you?" It might have been something out of the blue I said, but it was true that I was getting to the point where I was thinking, "I don't really want to go anymore," you know? And then she'd say, "Oh. Well, you know, the buildings we go to...they call them churches, but what they are...they are exactly like the building that we live in. And in our building we pray at night before we go to bed, we pray in the morning, we pray for our food that we are about to eat, and so this is just like that, but in another place." Like that. And everything. The prayers were brief, but they were there. You could count on it, you know, that you were going to get it.

TBW: Back to the music. You said you began to play professionally when you were 16, so that would have been 1947 or 1948—somewhere in there? Does that sound right?

RL: Spring and summer of 1947.

TBW: Were you aware of Max Roach or Kenny Clarke at that time? Or Chick Webb?

RL: Well, everybody knew Chick Webb; he'd died when I was very young. Yes, I was aware of Max and Kenny Clarke. But it didn't mean that much to me at that moment in my life. I wasn't yet into it fully, you know, like but I *was* going and standing around outside the clubs when I

couldn't get in, which was most of the time. You know. Minton's [Playhouse] I was standing outside, watching the guys come through and all. The car fare was only a nickel to get over there.

TBW: So the drumming didn't necessarily mean that much to you at that time, but the music grabbed you.

RL: Right. The drums appealed because of the movement that happened when you played them. It was central to all of it. You could move your body as if you were dancing. You see the horns and the other instruments provided the melodies—which I had learned on account of my dancing—and the rhythmic part of it came along almost without my noticing—it was sitting there underneath, but it was there all the time.

TBW: When did you suddenly find yourself making money as a musician? What were the circumstances? Even if you were sitting in, before you were being paid.

RL: When I went out with Eddie Durham's big band I was sixteen, so it happened quickly. That was before my grandmother passed.

TBW: You went out with Eddie Durham? On tour?

RL: Yes, well I wasn't the band's actual drummer. I went along to help set up the drums, and to learn to play. Not knowing that that was what it was about. We went cross country. It was about a month—thirty two days, something like that. But I wasn't just a valet—I ended up playing with the band, also. I think Eddie wanted to see what I was made of—as far as being a drummer or a person or...did I have the strength and the concept of all these things. And then within a year, I was actually playing with them up in Goshen, New York. Because Slick Jones was the drummer, and he took sick, and I took over for him. Figuring that he would be back, because everybody takes sick, but he didn't come right back and there I was. And we worked a place in Goshen. And we were in a place where the people would come after work and dance—and we were right

on the dance floor with the dancers. And there I am sitting behind Slick Jones's drums, and I didn't know—and there was no bass player. I didn't know anything about working with a bass player until way later. We had a piano player...

TBW: The piano player was playing the bass lines...

RL: Playing the bass lines.... And then Eddie would come back at us with the guitar, and play rhythm. And then he'd go up front with the trombone, and play with the other two horns. And then he would come back. So he was interchanging with us [and the horns]. And, so one day I said to him, "I'm gonna fall off the seat here, and they're gonna make me miss things...and you gonna look at me and tell me—"What you doin'?" or "What's the matter?"" You see, they were accustomed to people bumping them and dancing right around....

TBW: I see. Because it was such a tight space? And the band was on the floor? The dancers were right on top of you?

RL: Yeah. And here I am, trying to play [makes gesture of playing the drums] and tryin' to learn something and...everything was sitting right there. I mean, it was happiness; it was beautiful...'cause they would talk to you. That was another thing But I wasn't able to respond because I was still learning. Everybody else could. But what did I know? I didn't know nothing about that kind of stuff.

TBW: So was this a summer job?

RL: It was after the summer. Just after the summer.

TBW: And this was like a hotel in the Catskills?

RL: No. It wasn't a hotel.

TBW: I know Goshen is upstate [NY], but it's not too far upstate. Was it a resort or a country club or a restaurant?

RL: It was like a restaurant. But it was a mixture of all those things. What I was comin' to was that one day a guy called me at the house and said, "When could I come up?" Or he would send a man down for me—he wanted me to show him what kind of band stand he could do for me, [so] that the people wouldn't be involved, you know, right there, bumpin' on me.

TBW: You mean to extend the stage in some way...

RL: There was no stage. We were just there.

TBW: But to find a way to keep the dancers off you?

RL: Yeah 'cause once the musicians moved their stuff out of the way, they put tables there, for the next morning, for something else...

TBW: For breakfast or whatever.

RL: Yeah.

TBW: OK. So you're saying that the management of the restaurant contacted you and they wanted you to help them design some kind of a platform to keep the dancers off of you?

RL: Yeah.

TBW: So that means that you were there for a fair amount of time—more than a couple of weeks?

RL: Yeah, like eight or ten months.

TBW: Now-on to Eddie Durham. He's so important as an innovative musician on both guitar and trombone—but really to this day is still unsung. And more important, his arrangements for both the Bennie Moten band in the early to mid 1930s and then for the Old Testament Basie band in the mid to late '30s—and into the 1940's, I believe—they really helped to codify what we think of as swing.

RL: A great arranger and composer too. And mother let me go out with him because all she used to say was, “He plays music and he writes music,” and she loved this part the most . . . “and he makes children.”

TBW: He was a family man?

RL: Right. And he didn’t drink or smoke. So all this was a plus. It wasn’t until a year later or more that I was making gigs with other people, and she was always under the impression that he was on the gig, you dig, so I was OK...

TBW: She thought you were playing with Eddie, but you weren’t always playing with Eddie, so that was like your cover.

RL: Right. ‘Cause I didn’t say anything, because there was no reason to say anything. I said sometime way later and she said, “You didn’t tell me, boy?” And I said, “Well, it didn’t have to happen that way.”

TBW: It didn’t come up.

RL: Yeah. And she said, “Well, you OK now, you all right, boy.” So, this is one of the things that got me started in the business.

TBW: So the Eddie Durham gig—originally you went with the band to help out on the road, then you became a sub, then you got the chair.

RL: Right.

TBW: You were doing other work outside of music at this time right?

RL: Yeah, I was doing all sorts of things trying to find my way—cabinet making as a youngster...

TBW: What kind of stuff?

RL: I started that in high school. Mostly textiles stuff, because I went to textile classes to be a cabinet maker and learned how build things—making a table, things like that.

TBW: So you might have been working in a shop somewhere?

RL: Yeah. And then it became very apparent to me that I couldn't do all of this kind of stuff...because of my hands....

TBW: Oh. Of course—you might injure your hands and then be unable to play.

RL: And I just sorta moved away from that. Even though I still love it up to now.

TBW: But you were very active in your community if I recall. You had a lot of family and friends in the neighborhood. You told me that sometimes you ran numbers as a kid.

RL: Yeah, oh yeah, every kid did that at one time or another.

TBW: Tell me about that.

RL: I had on my knickers, man. And I'd have the money in one side [of the pants] and the slips in the other.

TBW: So that means you probably got around and probably ended up sticking your head into a lot of places...

RL: Yeah.

TBW: Not only into people's apartments but also into public places—where you might find people gathering during the daytime.

RL: Yeah, a lot of places. But you recognized that it was like a 'mind you own business' type of thing, no matter what happens, and you just did your thing, and didn't mind anybody else's thing.

TBW: Right. There was a kind of a code there.

RL: 'Cause stuff that goes on today that's loose on the street, I saw that as a little kid, but they didn't expose it like they do today. And the authorities didn't let it sit in your face. They knew what was going on, but they were part of the action, always part of the action.

TBW: Everybody took a taste.

RL: Yeah, but everybody respected the grown-ups, respected the kids. They didn't push it right on you even though you were in it, but you're not gonna see it on the street; you're not going to see it openly, walking up and down. You know, the street scene. And that's good that way. But now they've made it so much more of a business, that it's in the government ['s] business; the government makes money at it.

TBW: Well, how did the numbers game work?

RL: Well, I would take people's numbers—they would write them down—and then I would take their money, and I would take it to the house, along with the sheet with the numbers listed on it.

TBW: And then you would go back and do it again.

RL: Right.

TBW: And were there other young people doing the same thing at that time?

RL: Oh, yes. Everybody was hustling for themselves. But half of the time you didn't know who it was, 'cause you didn't pay no attention, you were going about your own business, period. And that's it.

TBW: And were you aware of when somebody would hit a number and win?

RL: Oh, yeah. You'd hear it through the grapevine.

TBW: I've heard stories about someone hitting and going out and buying a new car or setting up all their friends in a restaurant something like that.

RL: Oh, yeah, it's good thing when someone hits, definitely.

TBW: Not enough to retire on, necessarily.

RL: No, it's not like if you hit the mega.

TBW: No.

RL: It's a little more like Christmas.

TBW: That sounds pretty good.

RL: Oh, yeah. It's something that you wouldn't have had, but at the same time you never recognized how much you spent to get that one good ticket in the first place.

TBW: [laughs]

RL: You don't think of that. You think of the lump sum.

TBW: I remember one time I was in a fish market on 8th avenue below 42nd Street and I heard the guys behind the counter talking about the New York Lottery. And I said to the guy, big Italian guy, I said, "I don't play the lottery," and the guy said, "Oh, yeah? Why not?" and I said, "Well, to me, it's an idiot tax." And the guy started yelling at me, I thought he was gonna take my head off. "Idiot tax! What are you calling me an idiot? I just hit forty dollars yesterday!"

RL: Yeah, well that's just it—they're not thinking of the money they spend every day—just that lump sum.

TBW: Right. So you told me that in the early 1950s, you did more and more travelling as a musician. Didn't you front for the Ray Charles band?

RL: No—it was a [booking] office and there were two fellows, a piano player and a bass player. They were working as a two piece unit and it just so happened that they were both named Jonathan Johnson. And it just ended up as Jonathan and Jonathan.

TBW: The Johnsons.

RL: Right, you know that type of thing. And they put drums with it and saxophone—and it was Johnny Austin on saxophone and me on drums. And it was a whole show thing. And we would be on the road in front of various bands—in this case, Ray Charles—and our signs on our car were saying about the review coming through and all that kind of stuff. And you would be playing their music and our music as a mixture.

TBW: And would set up at an engagement somewhere that would be booked for you?

RL: Yeah, one or two times we had our own engagements, but our main thing was running ahead and giving them the advertisements that Ray Charles was comin' to town.

TBW: And when they came through, were you already on to the next town?

RL: Usually. Usually we were on to the next town—very seldom were we in town when Ray came through. And Johnny, the saxophone player, he was a mechanic. He loved tinkering with cars, just like Eddie Durham. Always fixin' cars.

TBW: Really.

RL: Oh, they loved it and they could do it. Even though it broke down a little later though and it was the same thing but they could do it. And Johnny Austin kept the car goin'. Kept it goin' beautifully.

TBW: You had said to me that it was like a station wagon, right?

RL: It was a station wagon. It was a big station wagon...it was one of those big Fords—I can't remember exactly.

TBW: Sure. And you could fit everything in the back, or on top if you needed it?

RL: Yeah. We had a rack for the drums.

TBW: With the Durham band, do you remember any of the other musicians that you were playing with at that time?

RL: At that time when we started out, Eddie's brother Roosevelt was playing piano.

TBW: Right—because didn't Eddie Durham come from a family band? Out of Texas?

RL: Right. Family band. The whole situation. And there was another guy named Paul...was he a Durham, too? Maybe I'm getting the families mixed up because Doug Bascombe's brother was named Paul. Maybe Paul worked with him? In all the different bands there was different personnel. Dee [T?] Roister was an alto player. Big Eddie Williams playing trumpet. He was one of the major fellows who after a while that was there. Cherokee was playing baritone. He was a little hunch-backed cat that played the hell out of a baritone, man. Lot of show business goin' on. So that's what I learned. And one of my things with Eddie was that when I was playing, he come back to where I was and say, "Rudy, don't play that." And I'd say, "Oh. OK." So, "don't play that" OK, and I'd go into something else, and he would be very happy and then go back up front. And then, maybe three to five minutes later, Eddie'd be back and he'd say, "Remember that thing I told you not to play?" And I'd nod my head from behind the drums, and he'd say: "Play it now!"

TBW: [laughs] On the job training.

RL: He'd tell me not to do something, and I'd cut it out of my brain, and then I had to put it back in three or four minutes later!

TBW: Well, I guess you weren't gonna say no to Eddie Durham.

RL: Oh, no. But he was right, but he was so right. He knew how to teach you without having any problem. And this was the whole thing with the body, he'd say, "You have to watch. Listen. You have to keep holding together the band. You are the band. You hold the band together. Because wherever you move to, that's where they're moving. And that's what he was trying to tell me. I

did something that wasn't correct for that moment in the arrangement, and if they had moved with me, it would have been a mess up.

TBW: That's right.

RL: You dig?

TBW: But that little flourish or whatever it was that you would have been adding would have worked in a different situation.

RL: And it came about that it worked three minutes later. And that was it. So after a while I started studying that kind of situation and it worked. And it works up to today.

TBW: Did you ever hear a Harlem drummer by the name of the Jack "The Bear" Parker?

RL: Yeah, I heard him play. Bad boy. He was a late 1940s early 1950s cat—maybe he came on earlier. By the time 1947 came, I was really into the music. Because I got my first drum set in 1948. April of 1948, for my birthday.

TBW: Oh, really? Your family bought you a drum set?

RL: No, I bought it. I saved up my pennies and dollars and put them aside. It was a funny thing about that. I was working a tailor shop. They had one between St. Nicholas and Amsterdam on 160th Street, and another one on Fort Washington and Audubon Avenue. And when I would travel between the stores and make deliveries, people would tip me. Up my way, they didn't tip me, because they felt if they knew you they shouldn't have to tip. They'd say, "Hey!" and take the clothes but there'd be no tip, ya dig?

TBW: [laughs] There not gonna tip you 'cause they know you. Well, whatever. You were a kid from the neighborhood.

RL: Yeah, I guess that was what it was. Not a real tip, anyway, you know. So each time I got a tip, I used to put it under my shirt and in my drawer, and each time I'd end up with a little change

or whatever it was. And when I got paid, and I'm making \$15.00 a week. So, I would give my mother \$10.00, and I would keep \$5.00. But \$10.00 would go for the family stuff—you know, anything, whatever they would have to do.

TBW: Did you buy the drums on time?

RL: I bought them on time, yeah. And so, after the third time I gave my mother the \$10.00, she said to me, "Oh, I'll have this money saved for you boy when you need it." I said, "But Mom, that's for the family pot; whatever you need in the kitchen and stuff like that." So, when my birthday came along—you know 'cause I've always tried to do something for my birthday, because that's a big thing for me—that goes for the whole family, by the way, that birthday business is real real.

TBW: And when is your birthday, by the way?

RL: April 3, 1931. So, in 1948, I said, "I'm going downtown to see about putting down on the drum set." And she said, "Wait a minute, boy." And she went in the room, and she came back. But before that, she said she was gonna have this saved money for me. After that, I used to put on the \$10 bill, "R.L.X." I don't know why. I just wanted to see if I was going to get the same \$10 bill back again.

TBW: You were wondering would it ever come back to you.

RL: Right. And when I counted the money she gave it back there was \$300 there, and \$270 had R.L.X. on it. Same money. And I had raised that \$300 myself.

TBW: And that money was your contribution—that was for the family.

RL: That was for the family. But she said, you know.... And so I took my \$300, and Rose De la Cruz, the girl that was one of the twins, she came with me down to 42nd Street with me. We went

down, and put down on the drums. And they told me that they had to order it, and when it would be coming in, because they didn't want to give me the one that was in the window.

TBW: They wanted to give you a new one.

RL: Right.

TBW: Do you remember what kind of drum kit it was?

RL: It was a Slingerland, and it was painted silver and black and it had a twenty-four inch bass drum. A bass, snare, one modern tom-tom, a cymbal that was as big as my hand. Back in those days they figured you could augment with a cowbell, a glockenspiel, and it all hung off the kit.

TBW: Really?

RL: Yeah. And all that kind of stuff.

TBW: That sounds like a bit of a throwback to the 1920s or at least the 1930s. I mean there wasn't much call for a cowbell in the modern music of the latter 1940s, was there?

RL: Well, yes and no. But if you don't know what you're after—

TBW: You just get everything.

RL: And they sold it to you because they're just trying to make sales, they don't care.

TBW: So that stuff was part of the kit?

RL: Yeah—but there were extras you could get.

TBW: OK.

RL: So. Rosie and I went back about three weeks later and picked it up—and boxed it and brought it uptown. And the weirdest thing about it—out of the woodwork comes all of these people. And there was Jackie McLean. There was a knock at the door—“Hey, Rudy, I heard you got a drum set.” I didn't even know how to put the foot pedal on. I had to do that.

TBW: Now, Jackie McLean was your contemporary—maybe a little bit older than you?

RL: No, we were about the same age. Actually I am a month older than he was, because his birthday was in May.

TBW: And you knew Jackie from the neighborhood?

RL: Yeah.

TBW: And wasn't Sonny Rollins from uptown somewhere?

RL: Yeah, he was a few blocks down.

TBW: And I think that Sonny Rollins is about the same age as well—around 79.

RL: Yeah, I think he just a couple of months older than I am. Yeah—no there were a lot of musicians around at that time: Gilly Coggins [sp]; Arthur Taylor; all those cats comin' up. Andy Kirk, Jr. So much talent.

TBW: Everywhere you looked, pretty much.

RL: Everywhere. You know, Nat King Cole and Freddie Cole.

TBW: Weren't they from the west coast originally?

RL: When they came in town. You see I'm related to Benny Carter's family also. My god daughter is the oldest [child?] from Jimmy. And I grew up with the three Burns—the Burns family.

TBW: The Burns family.

RL: Their mother was Benny Carter's sister.

TBW: Oh, I see. And isn't that family originally from the West Sixties over where Thelonious Monk lived?

RL: Yeah. San Juan Hill. My family too—we came uptown from there—originally started in Battery Park. You know, it was like the tribe, and people would spread out and have their own little pads and all that kind of stuff. And eventually they started movin' up and movin' up. Until

everybody was just about in Harlem. 116th Street; 110th Street; 123rd Street; 133rd Street; 134th; 141st. Then all of a sudden you find yourself in Sugar Hill. Now people mistake Sugar Hill as a whole big area. Sugar Hill is 145th Street coming up the hill from 8th Avenue, and you get to Amsterdam Avenue. That's it. That's why it's called Sugar Hill. Now as far as other places being called Sugar Hill—it's all politics.

TBW: I guess the realtors have something to do with it as well.

RL: Right. Hamilton area was just Hamilton Terrace, and you come out of the Terrace and that was it.

TBW: I know within the last couple of years there was an attempt by realtors to rename Marcus Garvey Park—or at least they were referring to it by another name.

RL: Yeah, well they did the same thing with that square with the hotel where Bird stayed. And he named a composition for it. And now they've changed it as well. Dewey Square.

TBW: It's no longer Dewey Square?

RL: Nope.

TBW: Now, with regard to that group of musicians you were mentioning—Jackie McLean and Gil Coggins and Arthur Taylor. I'm told there were a lot of places to play uptown—and downtown, in Midtown, etc. But I imagine there must have been different types of levels of venues. There were your neighborhood places that had music; then maybe there were nightclubs and theaters uptown. Can you remember some of those places?

RL: Well, the bars were basically our nightclubs.

TBW: Right.

RL: Then we had the dancehalls.

TBW: OK. Nightclubs and dancehalls. Right.

RL: Dining was done as a secondary situation. You had the bar—and all the diners tinkling around with the booths and what have you. And just about every bar, or every other bar—say there were 500 bars from 110th Street all the way up. Now at least three quarters of those bars had music in them all the time.

TBW: Incredible.

RL: Now, you had your clubs which had the same thing but were bigger. You might go the Bronx 845 or something like that—your dancehalls. And you also had breakfast dances and all that kind of stuff. Now the Paradise was on 110th Street; then you go up 8th Avenue and you'd have the Hideout; and then you had the halls and places where they showed movies.

TBW: A lot of dance halls seemed to have been situated on the second floor for some reason.

RL: Second floor. And on 125th Street there was the Baby Grand, and on the same block as the Baby Grand from 8th Avenue to St. Nicholas Avenue there was two halls across the street from one another—one of the was the Central Ballroom something like that. And then you go down towards Lenox and you had Club Savannah—not Savannah—it was downstairs, and there was another ballroom above it. There was just so much. Everywhere. And if you went up 7th Avenue you had the Theresa Hotel. The Theresa Bar was in it. You had the Shalamar across the street, which, I was one of the last [that worked there] before it closed. I worked with Rex Stewart. I went on tour with him.

TBW: What was he like?

RL: Crazy. Nice, but crazy. But cunning. He kidnapped a lot of bread from us while we were working for him.

TBW: Really?

RL: Unbeknownst to us at that time. It was Jerome Dar [ph], guitar player. And we went out with Thade [?]. But Thade forgot his medicine which he needed for a mind thing...

TBW: He forgot his medication.

RL: Medication. And so we had to pick up Joe Cooper, in there, and Broads Townsend [ph] played piano. We brought them back with us. We were in Cleveland at the Theatrical Grill. We first made the Town Tavern; we hit that Town Tavern in Toronto, and went up that way...

TBW: Toronto. That was a common leg on an east coast tour. And Buffalo.

RL: Right. We were in Buffalo first, and then we went to Toronto and then Cleveland.

TBW: This was a small group, right?

RL: Right.

TBW: And what type of music is Rex Stewart playing at this time in his career?

RL: Swing. Small group swing. Standards.

TBW: Was he the only soloist?

RL: Apart from Jerome Darr, yeah. And when we rehearsed he could take rhythm patterns from anywhere, and you rehearsed those rhythm patterns. Now, he had about six or eight of them—but you never knew what tunes they were gonna come into—and he ended up making it [sound like] a big band. [Demonstrates] Bot dip dot ditta bang. Budo bang. Bang, bang, bang. Bang. Dop dit dot didot....He had the song “Pick Yourself Up” [scats melody] ‘Bop doo ba doo bad a boop doo daah, doot dee dah doo dip dee dah.’ He’d take a rhythm pattern like that and put it in every tune, but make it big.

TBW: So he would insert these passages, these rhythmic patterns into the middle of a tune?

RL: Right. And they were groovy. And he gave me the shot just at the end of his solo—he would be playing two horns...

TBW: Two trumpets at the same time?

RL: Yeah. And he would play two solos [simultaneously].

TBW: Wow.

RL: And at the end of the solo he would be coming into the big band thing, the riffs, whatever it was, you would know it.

TBW: So he would set you up, and he would play the pattern first on his instrument, and then the band would hit the next time around.

RL: Or just with a pick up, and we'd know to come in. And everything was real quiet in a given tune, and then all of a sudden it'd be big. And it was beautiful. It was quite beautiful.

TBW: He sounds like he was an interesting person. He had a big personality?

RL: Yeah.

TBW: Would you call him a showman?

RL: Showcat. Oh, very much. He knew the business.

TBW: Did he have women around him? Was he that type of guy?

RL: Yeah, yeah. Only thing I didn't like about him we traveled by train. Oh, man, it was horrible, with the drums and my bag and stuff. Tuxedo and all that kind of stuff, in my bag.

TBW: Either to go by bus or car.

RL: When we were moving around, people were coming to Jerome Darr and me, because Jerome and I would hang and people would give us money—\$10, \$20—as tips for him to play a request.

Well, one night, we ended up having just about \$800 between us, and we went to him about it.

We didn't let him know what we had, people would tip us and we'd show him \$140, something like that, and, this night we showed him it all, and he said well, we weren't going to get any

piece of it. And when we complained he said, “I’m paying your taxes, aren’t I?” What taxes was he paying? He was talking about the 1% traveling tax.

TBW: And I’m sure he wasn’t gonna declare those tips as income.

RL: There you go again. So, Jerome and I said, from now on we were gonna keep the money back.

TBW: Hang on to it, sure.

RL: When we came off the road after we hit—we did Baker’s Keepaway [ph] [?]. We did Cleveland and we did Detroit. We came home, and were out about six or eight weeks. We had so much money—maybe about \$3,000-\$4,000 apiece. This was the money he had been getting in tips.

TBW: That was big money at that time. And Rex Stewart was a drawing card because he was making records?

RL: Making records and he had played with all the biggies.

TBW: He had played with everybody.

RL: He was a good cat, though, in the end. He knew what was supposed to happen.

TBW: Right.

RL: We were together a while, you know, so we had to bring back...we had to ship the bass player back. And we brought Joe Cooper and Broads Townsend. That’s when we did the circuit in New York. We did the Shalamar, and we did the Fantasy East...What was it Birdland East or Fantasy East? It was 54th or fifty-something street there. I can’t remember, and who was on the show was...remember Mickey and Sylvia?

TBW: Yeah. Oh, no kidding?

RL: Well, Sylvia had just started doing a single, and she could sing her buns off...

TBW: Did you know that she appeared with Lips Page? And that she made some records with him?

RL: Yes. Yes.

TBW: In '53 or something like that...'51, maybe. And she the one that went on to found that...Sylvia Robinson...she went on to found that hip hop label, Sugar Hill Records, out in New Jersey.

RL: Well, her husband was a numbers banker up in the Bronx.

TBW: [laughs] She's still alive. She's still around.

RL: I think she is.

TBW: I couldn't find her when I was interviewing people for the [Hot Lips Page] book. Little Sylvia.

RL: Little Sylvia. And she was doing a single, and we had to play behind her. And we also played behind...I'm trying to remember if it was the Hi-Lo's or the Four Freshmen. Either one. And we did...they used to book you like ten days...

TBW: Those were white a capela groups, right? Well, vocal groups, anyway.

RL: Right. We did little things behind them.

TBW: But the Hi-Los they were pretty hip, they had some good arrangements...

RL: Oh, yeah they were very hip. Very hip. Very hip.

TBW: That whole Mel Torme kinda thing.

RL: And my eyesight, my reading wasn't so swift, but they had charts written so that they could cue you behind them. And I got with Jerry...was it Jerry...Oh, God, I can't remember his name, but he said, "Don't worry about...watch his hand, and he'd go 'bip'...and I'd know to come in.

TBW: And what instrument was he playing?

RL: He was one of the singers.

TBW: He was a singer and he'd cue you with his hand while he was singing...

RL: Yeah, while he was singing because for certain things I might have to go 'bap!'

TBW: And he'd be standing at the microphone and what, he'd have his hand behind his back or...?

RL: Yeah. He got down and he'd...

TBW: What? Sort of snap his fingers?

RL: [demonstrates] No he's just sort of...

TBW: [laughing] Move his shoulder and his arm...

RL: Actually it was more like prepping you...but actually the thing was more with his hand when he gave it to you. And he'd be letting you know that you had to be... 'bap bap' like that. Jerry...Jerry someone, trying to remember that.

TBW: So it sounds to me like you were doing swing, you were doing more modern stuff, and that was probably where your heart was given your age...I mean that was the sound that was happening when you were coming up...but what about R & B? Were you playing R & B at that time? I mean, wasn't Little Sylvia doing R & B at that time?

JL: No, she was doing standards. She got away from that later, but she was doing standards at that time. She got away from that R & B.

TBW: Did you end up doing any of that yakety sax, honking on the bar type stuff?

RL: I did a little if that, yeah.

TBW: It seems like everybody did a little of that at one time or another?

RL: I did that Floor Show Cully thing, the one that used to run bar.

TBW: Yeah, you were mentioning that the other day. Floor Show Cully. He was a saxophonist?

RL: Yeah. He used to say, “Charlie Parker says I’m a *genius!*”

TBW: [laughs] You told me that there was some bit that Floor Show Cully used to do where he froze in position?

RL: Yeah he froze in position...

TBW: Like a statue?

RL: Yeah.

TBW: And you were all supposed to stop moving when you played, was that it?

RL: Yeah. Where everybody would freeze...and it was almost like he was watching to see who didn’t freeze, so he could talk about you.

TBW: That’s great.

RL: Yeah. We had a lot of fun.

TBW: Tell me about that “Spider Man” recording that you did. I love that record.

RL: Freddie McCoy. You heard it?

TBW: Yeah, I heard it online. It was on YouTube.

RL: Yeah.

TBW: If you punch in Spiderman and Freddie McCoy, your performance comes up. That’s from when exactly?

RL: That’s from the mid 1960s—1966 or 1967.

TBW: The drum sound that you got for that recording is really great.

RL: Rudy Van Gelder. That’s his work.

TBW: Oh, OK. That’s the studio—so he knew how to mic you right.

RL: I remember I had a black sparkle set there—a Slingerland. Oh, yeah.

TBW: But it's not just the way it's miked, it's the rhythmic pattern that you're playing. It's really funky. Really engaging sound.

RL: Well, Freddie knew how to get all the things that he wanted out of the drums because he was also a drummer. He played vibes, piano and I think he played something else.

TBW: Was that just a onetime outing with him?

RL: No. We worked together about a year and a half—about two years. When he broke up with his family, the thing sort of disappeared and then he disappeared. I don't know what became of him.

TBW: Really.

RL: Nope.

TBW: We should look him up and see if we can find out what happened to him.

RL: Oh, I would love that. I went to everybody in the world...

TBW: Did you ever ask anybody about that? Did you ever ask Phil Schapp or anybody like that?

RL: No, I never did. I questioned some people. It was ten or twelve years ago maybe that Joanne Brackeen mentioned that she was in Japan, in Kobe, actually and he came in the club. He was supposed to come back, and he never showed back. And that was it. And she used to work with him.

TBW: Do you think he was there on tour? Do you think he was living there?

RL: I don't know.

TBW: Maybe he moved to California and then to Japan.

RL: I don't know. He was a flyer. I flew with him.

TBW: You mean a pilot?

RL: Yeah. A pilot. I flew out of Teterborough with him in this little plane. Never again.

TBW: [laughs]

RL: I never knew that those small planes could lift off and do the things that he could do in them.

I just wanted to go because I had never gone in a small plane. No more.

TBW: Did you ever take part in any of the Latin Craze stuff that was happening in the 1950s?

Was that your bag?

RL: Yes and no. In 1975-76 when my family broke up, we broke up, and the mother took the children. I always say, 'She raped me for [of] my children...'

TBW: Ohhh...

RL: Yeah. Because I'm into children—especially if their mine.

TBW: Yeah.

RL: Yeah. And I started playing with a pan group [ph]—timbales—and I had to carry the bass drum, and I didn't have no car, you know, and I was just messed up. And I used to take her down on the dolly, come down 155th Street Viaduct to 144th Street...

TBW: Down on the dolly?

RL: Yeah.

TBW: You used to drag your kit downtown on a dolly behind you? Downtown?

RL: Yeah, and walk it up the hill later in, two o'clock in the morning the same way.

TBW: Wow. 'Cause you can't take that on the subway.

RL: Right, and I couldn't afford a car. I was just shot to pieces mentally. Actually, a lady now that I'm with, when I told her about how I was and what I was doing—I couldn't drive my car, how they had taken the van for the family thing up in New Jersey, and how I wasn't paying my bills, I was just shot to pieces...around that time when the family broke up, I understand it more so as I went on and now,...the family broke up like in October, and my mother died, in

December, so I was just really knocked out of the box, just staring in the world, like walking around. I'd get showered down and get dressed and come out, but I was just...

TBW: It was like your knees had been cut out from under you.

RL: Yeah. So when I met the lady that I'm with now, and told her about how I was reacting to all of that, she said, "You had a nervous breakdown, and didn't even know it." She said when a person is after you in that fashion, that's what it is.

TBW: Right. Everything kind of shut down on you.

RL: Yeah.

TBW: Like a short circuit.

RL: So this one day, goin' back to the numbers, one day, I saw one of the numbers guys uptown and I said, he had his number business and I flagged him down and I said... 'cause the guy had a number business in the next building [over] from me, but I could come out of my door and there it was, and I said, "Hey, Gene, I need a job." He said, "Oh, you don't want no job running numbers." And I had played for his wedding, his first wedding, you see so, that's why he was talking to me this way, so I said, "I need a job, you know, I'm in trouble. And I need a loan." And he said, "Well, meet me downstairs, we'll open up the place, six o'clock in the morning, you meet me down there, and we'll see about it." So they trained me into the cage, we called it.

TBW: This was a pawn shop?

RL: [laughs] No.

TBW: Oh, because you said go downstairs to get a loan so...

RL: No, this was a numbers place as a business and I'd be behind the cage. Like any other business.

TBW: It was an actual business.

RL: And I had to call him up about four weeks later at the office and say, “Hey, you didn’t send up my loan.” He said, “I didn’t know you were gonna keep the job that long.” I said, “I want my money, man. I need it.” Because I needed to pay the bills, smooth out some stuff. I think he was paying me \$150, and I was giving the wife, on Saturdays, \$75.

TBW: Yeah.

RS: And I was playing \$25 a week worth of numbers, which was money I didn’t really have.

TBW: Right. Trying to turn it around.

RL: Yeah. And then when he sent the money up he sent more than I needed, and that I had asked for, and then I had to and that I had asked for, and then I had to pay him back. And one day...did I tell you about this? One day, she came in demanding her money on Saturday, and—‘cause I gave it to her on a Saturday, but I gave it to her out of my—my pay didn’t come in yet—so, I.... She come in demanding her money, and I took the baby from her, a little baby. The baby’s now thirty four years old...

TBW: [laughs]

RL: And was her own baby, and so I said, I had to give the baby to the guy that was in the place with me, and this was an illegal spot, now, call up the police station and tell ‘em to send somebody here to this place and get this woman of here, because my wife’s demanding money from me. And all they wanted to know when they came, was, was I in court. They had to get her out of the place, the numbers place, which they were supposed to be raiding, if they came actually, and gave the baby back to her.

TBW: That sound like it was a rough time.

RL: Yeah. It was a rough time. So, I started getting out of it by having something to do. See, this is so important [in] people’s lives. I don’t care who it is, like, in today’s situation [current

financial crisis] people have to have something to do, and they know at the end of the week they have a piece of money to do what they have to do. This is so important. Now, coming back, just a little short thing on the same subject.

In this country right now or any country, if you don't give people something to do where they can make a little money, earning something, something where they can keep their mind together, their physical thing together, and at the end of the week they have a piece of money to go to the grocery store, we're in bigger trouble than we ever have been.

TBW: Right.

RL: That's that.

TBW: Let me ask you. You've traveled to Japan many times, and I know that you've worked with Keisha St. Joan a lot. Are there other people in town that you've work with on occasion or regularly for that matter?

RL: Oh, well, I've been working, recently with Valerie Capers and John _____, a major bass player. And I've been working with Lenore Raphael, I've recorded with her and I'm her main drummer, I've worked a lot with Hill [Hilliard] Green, I'm his major bass player. And I do the Jazz Foundation of America jam session every Monday night here at Local 802.

TBW; So you're pretty busy these days, when all is said and done.

RL: Well, I love being busy.

TBW: I know. It's amazing. You're just out and about every day.

RL: It's groovy, it's so groovy. This music and playing drums has really saved my life. Todd, listen, you know as we have talked many times. And I can't see myself doing anything else. I don't want to do anything else, I will not do anything else, you dig? I mean, "retire to what?"

Like Art Blakey said, when Evelyn Blakey asked him, "Dad, when you gonna retire?" because

he wasn't well at that particular time, he said, "What do you want me to do, die?" Well, I had to tell my oldest daughter that. She said, "Dad, when you gonna retire?" maybe about six or seven years ago. I said, "And do what?" I said, like Art Blakey said, "And do what? Die?" So that's what it is. Every day we do this, whether we have a gig or not. Our minds are there. Our hearts are there. We're singing music. We're dancing music. And all the people in the world would like to be doing what we're doing.

TBW: Did you ever have a period in your life, perhaps like in 1975 when you were going through those troubles, where the music stopped for you? I mean, inside of you, where you felt like you could walk away from it?

RL: No, no. With all the problems I've had, even before that period. Between my animals—I love my animals—I have cats—I've had Jordu, Dahoud [sp] and Sandu, all jazz dudes.

TBW: [laughs]

RL: They were jazz! And they knew it. And the music. The people around the music. And the drums. I have to say, *this* music, because I'm not a rock dude or a hillbilly dude.

TBW: Although you could play those styles if you had to.

RL: I could play it if I needed to. But that's not where my mojo's at. That's not my mojo. Bebop is my mojo, and that's the major. You have a major. That's my major. The minor would be swing, standards, you know.

TBW: And so you think that young people can learn about life from studying music? Like, you know, they can learn about other things through music?

RL: Without a shadow of a doubt.

TBW: And what kind of things do you think that young people can take away from studying music or experiencing music? How might it help them.

RL: Well, it'll help them because they'll learn immediately if...like myself as a youngster, they tried to have me play the violin...no. The piano? No. So on and so forth, no. But once you take an interest and [keep an] open mind and open heart, and you can get the kids to do that, give them something to do...it'll never be the same [for them], they'll never let go, because there's something in the arts itself—just about part any of the arts, but we're talking about music, you end up dedicating your entire day and night and week and whole months go by. You know? And this is what happens. And you feel that you can't do anything else in life. Of course, you can't do this 24-7. You have to do other things, you have to read other books. But you always come back to the music. And discipline is a major part of it. You have to develop discipline, because without the discipline, you're in trouble. In anything, but in music, you know, [its essential]. But in music, it grabs you so that with the discipline part of it, you don't even know you're being disciplined. You're floating on a cloud that's not even come down from the sky, man. Shhwwwt! There you are. That's how it grabbed me, I'm talking about it grabbed me when I'm saying this—I didn't even realize it, but that's what I talking about when I'm saying this, this is how the music grabbed me.

TBW: That's kind of like an unconscious discipline, like a discipline from the soul, right?

RL: Yeah, it's soulful.

TBW: Like God touching you and touching you through the music but also bringing you forward and developing you as a human being at the same time.

RL: Yes, oh yes.

TBW: That's very interesting.

RL: And when you turn around and found that you've worked with all these genius people, these great people, and you've met all these people, and the places you've been and the people that

you've met and the people that you've worked with. It's just like a painter, when he or she starts painting, he or she ends up meeting people and going places that he or she never would have gone. And it gives you that opportunity to find other things other than what you're doing.

TBW: I see. So you mean like interacting with people outside of your circle, or interacting with musicians who are interacting with other artists—opens up your mind and your experience [of yourself]. [And this is often done through the creative process, which is largely unconscious-TBW].

RL: And you find that you want to do other things. You want to learn other things. I'm not a great reader, but, I scan, but, what I've been doing recently, I've been trying to find book that are on tape or on CD and listen to 'em like mad. And I try to get my lady to... I used to get my baby sister, Ramona, to read to me, and now I tried to get my lady, I say, "Glo, read to me," and she'll say, "Ramona's not here, you want me to take on Ramona's job...."

TBW: [laughs] So she sometimes will read to you. That's great.

RL: Yeah, she'll read to me. And I like that. And I enjoy it a lot, if someone reads to me it's better...because struggle with it...and then check back to see if I got it...because that's the kind of thing.

TBW: Well you're an aural person. A-u-r-a-l. Your ears or your most important sense.

RL: That's probably what it is. And I catch a lot through that. But I want to get more books on tape, because I love English mysteries.

TBW: Oh, that's great.

RL: I adore them.

TBW: Sure. Agatha Christie and all that stuff.

RL: Oh, yeah.

TBW: My wife and my mother in law are heavy into that stuff.

RL: Oh, yeah.

TBW: And then there's that Sunday night program on PBS, "Mystery" that's fun.

RL: Oh, yeah.

TBW: I forgot to ask you, concerning different venues uptown, did you ever get a chance to attend shows at the Lincoln Theater or the Lafayette as a child?

RL: Oh, yeah.

TBW: What kind of shows did you go to? Did you go there mainly to see movies?

RL: Oh, I was a movie buff. As a kid we could go to see two or three movies a day.

TBW: I know it was traditional to have bands that played between the screenings of films. Was that still going on when you were a teenager?

RL: Oh, yeah. At the Apollo, you would see a picture, the news, coming attractions, then there'd be a band—and they had about 4-6 shows a day.

TBW: Wow. But did you have to pay again if you wanted to see a show, or could you just stay?

RL: Well, you could stay if you knew some of the people there.

TBW: [laughs] Right. Were you a sports fan growing up, did you ever go see baseball games?

RL: Yes and no. I wasn't really big into it. I played a little bit when I was a child but...

TBW: It's funny because so many musicians, when you talk to them about sports, they say, "I really didn't have time for sports."

RL: Yeah. And I can't remember what year they moved the Giants and the Dodgers from New York, but after that it was like "shweet!"

TBW: That was the end.

RL: Sports went right out of my bag.

TBW: It was in the mid 1950s...Dodgers left in '55, I think the Giants left before that. Like maybe in '53...

RL: Might have been before that. We used to go over the Polo Grounds, because from 555 Edgecombe Avenue you could see one part of the field. But we used to wait for the games to be over so we could go and get the Coca Cola bottles. And pack them up and return them to the store for the deposit money. And there was a man by the name of Clearbrook [ph] who caught us downstairs stealing his used Coca Cola bottles. He came to us in the family and grabbed a couple of us kids out of the family, because everybody knew him, I mean he was right there on the corner, in the neighborhood, and this [redeeming the bottles] gave him a lot of credit that he couldn't get nowhere else, you know. And after all. You know, I boxed for a while. I wasn't bad...

TBW: What division?

RL: 108.

TBW: Was that feather or lightweight?

RL: I can't recall.

TBW: I think its featherweight. Lightweight is like 125, isn't it?

RL: I was way under that.

TBW: And you participated in Golden Gloves?

RL: The tournaments leading to the Golden Gloves.

TBW: Yeah, right.

RL: And I was PAL. [laughs] And I had eight nice fights that I took care of business on...

TBW: Oh, that's great...

RL: And my ninth fight, the guy was my weight, and he was taller than me...and he was uh,

TBW: That reach, man.

RL: The reach. And every time I tried to go inside on him, I was one of those mean guys, but I couldn't get in [demonstrates boxing and getting hit successive times in the face] –‘Pop!’ ‘Biff!’ ‘Bish!’ I was so mad, I wanted to bite him [laughs].

TBW: Did you have a boxing hero at that time?

RL: Sugar Ray was always the one in Harlem. Kid Gavelon [ph]. Kid Chocolate. Beau Jack was another.

TBW: That's great, we haven't talked about this....

RL: Yeah. Beau Jack lived uptown with us. Beau Jack was gonna beat up Illinois Jacquet and Russell Jacquet because they were always fighting in front of the kids. So he grabbed 'em and said, “Y'all stop cussing in front of these kids!” Because they were cussing guys, man. I remember that. And when he finished talking they were mad, and he turned around and said, “And I mean it. Not bullshittin' either.” And he was whippin' buns at that time, too.

TBW: And that was Beau Jack?

RL: Right.

TBW: I'll have to look him up. You and I will have to talk more about that stuff because I'm trying to put together a proposal for a book that covers baseball, jazz and boxing, and the connections between them. It's all a lot to cover starting with Negro Leagues players like Andrew “Rube” Walker in the 1920s and run up through Satchel Paige and all of those people in Kansas City and Pittsburgh—there's a lot to learn. But the boxing thing is fascinating to because those people were heroes.

RL: Yeah.

TBW: They were known in their communities and they came up out of those communities—and it would be one guy that people would hang their hopes and dreams on. It wasn't like they were part of a team. You had to make it on your own.

RL: And I think they all would have died of a heart attack at the same time to see what the fighters made after them. And what the ballplayers made after them...

TBW: Right.

RL: But times tend to change the playing field until it becomes almost like an entirely different phenomenon.

TBW: Right.

RL: The composition of it all changed, but speaking for New York—at least as far as the boxing thing was concerned—it was just gorgeous. There was a lot to check out and to follow.

TBW: Your old enough to remember when Joe Louis won the title—what do you remember about that?

RL: The building nearly caved in. Because everybody was stompin' and carryin' on, oh yeah.

TBW: And then people took to the streets. But it seems like every time Joe Louis did something, at least for several years there in the late 1930s, people would come out to celebrate his victories. And he was popular during the war.

RL: Yeah, they had him in service and he fought and did special service—boxed mostly, I guess. And when he fought he gave up his money for the war effort.

TBW: Right.

RL: The only bad thing about it was that they turned around and bit him in the butt later on.

TBW: The IRS, yeah.

RL: Who's that that always used to say, "No respect"?

TBW: Rodney Dangerfield.

RL: No respect, no respect.

TBW: They found ways to get to him. The media treated him relatively respectfully given the times and the way blacks were generally portrayed, but the government hounded him.

RL: And the irony of it—if you think of a little thing like that compared to the Bernie Madoff case today, and the millions of people he duped. And the regulatory people looked the other way for years—and now don't tell me that the wife and his sons don't know where the bread is at.

TBW: She was his accountant, wasn't she?

RL: Yeah. Exactly. And then he got cancer all of a sudden. Hey, they ought to take him to Times Square and hang him up by his toes, man. I mean look at all the stuff he did to people.

TBW: He hurt hundreds of thousands of people, I think. Certainly tens of thousands.

RL: And then you think about that they did to Joe Louis, who really didn't mean to hurt anyone.

Louis really just tried to earn an honest living. Madoff didn't earn an honest living. But they don't really bring the full weight of the law against him or his people. They're talking about putting him away for 150 years. They know he can't live 150 years, what kind of talk is that?

Listen, I had a case in court and I know this court business is full of garbage. And they know it, and they know we know it but we still on the fire and we don't have the weight to turn it around.

TBW: Right.

RL: You can vote from now till doomsday, you can't turn it around.

TBW: Right. And the people who can afford the highest powered lawyers are the ones who most usually win.

RL: In my situation, I was shot with a gun, the bullet was in me, but when the case went to court, the charges were lowered to assault. And I fought to get the bullet out of me, and when the bullet

came out of me, I couldn't keep the bullet. And then of course, the bullet disappeared because it was a court case.

TBW: It was evidence, and then the evidence disappeared.

RL: Yeah. It became assault with a deadly weapon—and it should have been attempted murder. The shooter got with somebody to deal with that business [of the bullet] and then got the judge. Got the judge, no question about it. Because the judge is the first one you get! Now, I've had judges in my family so I know what I'm talking about. And they told the story afterwards. "Oh, yeah. We one salary and we get money every case." And sell out under the table. The judges attitude is "I paid a lot of money to go to college and get this degree, so I'm gonna make it back—make it worth my while." Makes you back up. But at the same time, they're supposed to be there on behalf of the people. This is one of the reasons this guy keeps sending me letters [unintelligible] I take them and shred them. I've already sent, three four five years ago, my medical history and he sending me these letters? Only thing he can do is come and get the sheriff and come and get me.

TBW: Right. But he's not doing that.

RL: Right. I'm not going to no court and run shot gun over nobody, when I know I don't have a...

TBW: This is a different case you're talking about.

RL: If it was up to me, I'd just go and let all of the criminals out of jail now.

TBW: Because of the corruption. There are just layers and layers of corruption.

RL: You know. But getting back to the music, there's nothing like this music. [Sings] "If you don't know how to bop, lookee doo, lookee blue, lookee doo...people say it's crazy, use your voice instead of a horn, doo bay you ba doo bay you...bop doop ba boop dop da doobie you, dop

doo ba you, but doop ab dob boo dop eee dootle uh dop a boo dah, bud a yee boo dee a boo
dottle ooo bop dee ya oooo....Charlie Parker, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Roy Haines

[unintelligible] Bud Powell, you know, on and on and on....” Hey, you know, wouldn’t trade it
for anything it’s just, you know, it’s the kind of thing where you would like to live your life all
over again so you could appreciate it even more.

TBW: Well, you said to me in the past that you’re very happy having lived during the time that
you lived. It sounds like it been a very rich experience.

RL: Oh, yeah. Wouldn’t trade it for anything.

TBW: You did come up in an amazing period in an amazing city, even with all of its
shortcomings. There are problems everywhere, especially here, but there was also greatness.

RL: Like I said, of all the places I’ve been and lived—I went to Turkey and lived there for half a
year—and I been to Japan, but I’m always coming back to New York, and I’m always coming
back to today’s thing—“Manhaa’an,” they way they say it today.

TBW: “Manhaa’an.”

RL: I’ve tried to say it that way and I still can’t do it.

TBW: “Manhaa’an.” “Manhaa’an.” There’s just no “t”, “Manhaa’...an.”

RL: Born on between 17th and 18th Street on 2nd Avenue, it’s a condominium now and it’ll cost
you two million dollars to get a bathroom in there now, uh, you know, lyin’ in the hospital [?],
went to school in Manhattan, educated in Manhattan, other than when I went to Kingsborough
[Community College, in Brooklyn] and Bronx Community [College] for different subjects, City
College for some subjects, you know, and Lehman, I have master’s credits up there, some from
Kingsborough, from the 802 program in performance...

TBW: Oh, right, that program is a good one. Remind me, you said you've been to Turkey and Japan, have been other places around the world?

RL: I've been to Germany and Austria. I've been to Africa—Kenya.

TBW: And you've performed and toured in all of those places?

RL: Oh, yeah. It's beautiful, man.

TBW: 'Cause you're not really a name dropper, you know? Unless I ask, I'm not gonna know.

You tend to talk more about your family and your life in New York City. You seem more interested in those types of things rather than telling people how many times you've been to Japan or that you've toured Turkey or Africa. A lot of people would give their eye teeth to go to Turkey. Who'd you play with there—what was the occasion?

RL: Well, I'd rather not speak of this person, because this person has ripped me off of a lot of money. And he's not worthy of his name being mentioned in print. But the saxophone player was the one that kept me cool...

TBW: Didn't you once mention to me that the employer on that job asked you to stay without the leader?

RL: That was in Africa.

TBW: Did you ever work any cruises?

RL: Oh, cruises. Yeah, I've worked a lot of them and I've had a ball doing it. That's when I got sick with my heart thing because I was eating up all that chocolate while I was on the ship...and all that food.

TBW: From the buffet?

RL: Yeah...and forgetting about you gotta watch what you eat and your cholesterol this and that, and oh, dear...

TBW: Well, you were on a ship.

RL: I was on a ship.

TBW: I would have done the same thing.

RL: I know, everybody does. You see them eating and you think, oh man. And at that time we were the entertainment...and we could eat with the crew and the participants, the people on the ship.

TBW: Right.

RL: And we could eat as much as we wanted.

TBW: Bottomless supply of chocolate.

RL: Oh, yeah. One of the things on the cruises is that there'd be five Caribbean guys, man. Five pieces in the band, and three thousand people on the ship, but everybody, black and white, would be saying,[Caribbean dialect] "Yeah, mon. No problem, mon!"

TBW: Five Caribe guys on the boat and everyone talked like there were from Barbados?

RL: Right. The workers, and the guests!

TBW: It's infectious. My father did it too, when he when to the Caribbean. I said to him, "Why are you talking that way?" He was like, "What you talking about, mon?"

RL: That's because that Caribe language sings, it dances, and you feel like you have to have some of it for your own.

TBW: That's true, it's very musical.

RL: It bubbles. You dig? Now, the weirdest thing with my family—even though on my mother's side, with my great grandmother coming from Ethiopia, with the Caribbean thing, they didn't call it the Caribbean, it was the West Indies.

TBW: Right.

RL: Right? They could speak that way. Bu the amazing thing to me was in the end, even with the heavy accent, they spoke closer to the king's English. And the only time you ever heard anybody in my family use that accent, was when they got angry.

TBW: Oh, no kidding? And then they'd break into a patois, a more Caribbean kind of sound?

RL: Yeah. They'd frighten you to death if you heard that accent start up. Now you knew, you better get out the way. If it was directed at you, and you weren't doing something right, you said to yourself, "Oh, now I'm really in trouble." As long as they didn't use the accent, you knew you were cool. But if things were the other way, that's the only time I ever really heard them speak that way.