

Brother Ah Interview by Rusty Hassan and Willard Jenkins

Part 1

BA: What was the question again?

Rusty Hassan: About the interaction between Miles and the musicians at the sessions with Gil Evans.

BA: Miles didn't have much interaction with anybody in the orchestra. Except when Trane was in the session. He would talk to Trane and the guys in this small group, but in a large ensemble he didn't have much interaction with us. He didn't speak much. You know I sat next to him, right there, so we had some interaction because I'm sitting right next to him, you know he sat there, he didn't move around much, he didn't talk much.

Willard Jenkins: Yes, yes. A little bit later, the Africa/Brass session with John Coltrane, tell us how that worked out.

BA: Well, Train called me himself. I truly didn't believe it was Trane. I said, "What you talkin' about man?" So I knew him you know, because of working with Miles and he was always around and we did Birdland, I saw him every night and I'd have a conversation with him between shows. But I didn't know, you know, he was going to call me. So he called me, and not only asked me to play but after can I help him organize this brass section for the gig and gave me that responsibility. I said, "Dang, he don't know me that well," but he did. So I told him, "Yeah man I'd love to do that. Wonderful." And, uh, I know I would see him on different occasions. Like I used to play in the symphony orchestra at the YMHA, the Hebrew one, every Sunday morning some of us would go who'd love to play jazz like Eric Dolphy would always go to those rehearsals anytime there was a composition that we were going to perform for bass clarinet, Eric would be there because Eric wanted to learn all the repertoire for bass clarinet. And I would always look out and there was Trane was sitting out there, listening to rehearsals. He never played with the band, he and his wife would sit there on Saturday mornings. So I knew him, and he knew me by sight and I said, "Yes my brother I will definitely do that." So that's how I got the personal call from Trane.

RH: Mhm. And what was it that contrasted the rehearsal sessions that he had with maybe Gil Evans or with Monk in terms of how he approached—

BA: There were no rehearsals with Trane. No rehearsals. We had no idea what we were going to play. We didn't know anything, we just got the date and the time and we did it a Rudy Van Gelder's out in Jersey. So we didn't know anything. Because Trane essentially just wanted to use just instrumentation and we got – jeez who was it? I think Freddie Hubbard was in there? I think Freddie Hubbard was on there. I can't remember all those cats that were on there. I think it was Freddy. Or Lee Morgan. Anyway, it was a wonderful group and didn't know what we were going to do.

WJ: Well, there's a certain point, in *Africa* where it's obvious that the horn, the brass section, is playing in the manner of elephants.

BA: That's what I asked him. I asked him I said, "Trane, what you want me to do?" "Be an elephant man." And I told him, at that particular time the only elephants I'd ever seen had been in the zoo. I had no idea, you know. So he told me to sound like an elephant. So that's what I would do. I was doing all these different sounds at his request to get that part of the ensemble sounding like Africa. That's how I played.

I: Who was Coltrane like as a leader for a section like that?

BA: He's a gentle spirit man. Very, very, very, very gentle spirit. He didn't run the session. Session was directed by Eric Dolphy. And, um, Cal Massey. But it was mainly Eric Dolphy that was in charge of the session and we got, the session was called a 2 o'clock in the afternoon. We were there, most of us were there with bells on man, can't wait. 2 o'clock. 5 o'clock. 7 o'clock. 9 o'clock. Trane didn't walk in until midnight. We had all been sitting around since 2 o'clock, you know. Trane walked in with Eric Dolphy, Elvin Jones... yeah I guess the three of them came in together. And literally the music, the written music was almost wet. And we were all sitting around, Cal Massey went to sleep. You know, he stretched out, went to sleep. So we were just waiting for Trane and he walked in and we all got ready to roll man and that's how it started – it essentially started at midnight. And Rudy Van Gelder's Studio had no windows – at all. So we didn't know, we didn't realize the sun come out, we took a break around 7 o'clock and looked outside and the sun was -- Oh my God, we had no idea. We got lost, totally lost in this music man. Nobody asked for a break. Nobody said, nobody complained, we all were just in another world. And it wasn't until we went out for a break at about 7 o'clock did we realize we had been there all night. It was a wonderful experience.

WJ: Eric Dolphy was, in essence, the conductor.

BA: Yeah, he conducted most of the trip. In fact, he conducted all of them except one. Cal Massey conducted one of his compositions, "The Damned Don't Cry." Cal Massey kind of did that. Otherwise, Eric conducted the whole session.

RH: In addition to doing these tremendous recording sessions, you had other work with popular jazz singers, you mentioned George Shearing already. Who were some of the more mainstream pop artists that you worked with over years?

BA: Oh many. But I don't know about – I mean I worked with many great – well I don't know if you'd call Ella Fitzgerald a pop artist, but I work with, of course I worked and performed with Ella and it was wonderful to go to work every night with Ella Fitzgerald. We worked at a place called... God... The Americana Hotel on 6th Avenue and I did recording sessions, that was one of my greatest moments too when I got a call from Benny Carter. Yeah it was something one day man, Benny Carter, asked can I come down to the Americana right away, I don't know if the French horn player they had had gotten sick or what but Snooky Young, was a trumpet player,

was in their band and Snooky still needed a horn player immediately. Snooky Young, who we worked with a lot, who I worked with a lot, told Benny Carter to call me. So I'm sitting home, Benny Carter said "Right away man, please, we need a horn player. It's a session with Ella Fitzgerald, all strings and one horn, you. Only one French horn, and only strings." I said, "What!?" So man I couldn't take it. Got down there walked in and there I was, I'm the only horn player there. Ella and a great Benny Carter man used to know I was a trumpet player, I used to be a trumpet player when I was coming up. So that was a great pop singer. I worked with Johnny Mathis. You know, on and off for five years with Peggy Lee. I was her favorite. French horn was her favorite instrument. So I was with Peggy Lee for about five years. Tony Bennett on and off for about four years. Matt Monro, I think he was a Canadian singer. Lena Horne. I mean so many man, I can't remember all of these – a lot of pop singers. Mostly night clubs and concerts.

WJ: What would you say were some of the most memorable recording sessions you made as part of the brass section?

BA: Well, the Gil Evans was one of the... To tell you the truth man, I mean, in terms of wonderful excitement was with Sun Ra. I joined at a time when he had a brass section, I think he was, uh, Dick Griffin was in it then, there was a trumpet, a couple trumpets, that was a fantastic brass section, he had trumpet players... I can't remember the guy's name man...

WJ: How did you connect with Sun Ra?

BA: Well you know, I was at Radio City Music Hall. You know, we had four shows a day, we had breaks between shows, and I was the visited by cats, you know, Eric Dolphy used to come by on my breaks and we used to talk about orchestration. He was like he always had a book with Koussevitzky stuff. Add Pat Patrick used to come by on my breaks. Every time he would come I would say, "man you gotta..." We used to work together, we did a lot with Odetta and different pop singers, I was doing a lot of work in recording studios with Pat Patrick. And he kept talking about this music called Sun Ra. And I didn't know who Sun Ra was. He would say, "Come on man every Monday night we play at a place called Slugs." I said, "Man, after four shows, five shows, I'm going home on Monday night I'm going to bed man I can't do that." He kept bugging me I said, "OK. I'll go with you." So we got in cab one Monday night and went down to Slugs.

WJ: What year we talking about?

BA: Oh God... '64. Yeah 1964. I said, "OK man I'll go down with you." We walked in this place called Slugs, I heard this band man, and I literally stood on the chair and was shouting I mean I went crazy. When I walked in there, I heard this music... it was like I heard it in my mind without ever hearing it live. You know, I've played so much music, I've played music of Stockhausen and I've played music of Bird, you know I've played music of Varèse, you know different contemporary European composers. I've played this music, I've played all kinds... and I heard this, it was like an orchestra. It wasn't like a jazz band, this was like an orchestra. And I went wild. So, after the show was over, and they take no breaks, six hours, no breaks. If you gotta go

to the bathroom, you don't go to the bathroom and come back. After six hours, Sun Ra walked past me and I grabbed him by the wrist and I said, "I got to play this, I've got to play this band." So Pat Patrick introduced me to him and he told Pat to tell me to come to the next rehearsal. I didn't know there was going to be an audition. So, in a few days, I remember that day it was pouring down rain and I was doing a recording session in Midtown Manhattan and back in the day, you went to recording sessions dressed. I mean I was in shirt and tie, I mean everybody was kind of... like you were doing a performance. So I'm dressed in my shirt and tie suit, pouring rain, I got down to his place, which is on the Lower East Side, soaking wet. Went to his apartment, he had a small, two or three bedroom apartment... three or four rooms not bedrooms, it was three or four rooms on the Lower East Side. I knocked on the door, he opened the door, and he saw me soaking wet and I introduced myself and he said, "Come on in. Sit there." He tell Marshall Allen, "turn the oven on Marshall Allen, let him dry off." He sat me in front of the oven, and he left the apartment. He came back later with all the cast was with him, I don't know where they came from, and the whole band set up and... he never wrote for the French horn before. So he was giving me trumpet parts, any parts: trumpet, saxophone parts, he was giving me all these parts, all these tunes, and because I was a very well trained classical player, I was into transposition. You know, in symphony players, Beethoven didn't always write it in the key that you played and you had to transpose it at sight, you look at one note and you play it, you know, anyway... I was able to transpose it all. So I was playing trumpet parts, so, I was playing everything. In the middle of this session he had a-- there was a contraption that he made. Did I tell you this before?

WJ: Mmm-mmm. (No)

BA: This contraption was made of copper wires and it rotated. And everybody was playing and it stopped. It stopped. So Sun Ra told us to go outside, there was a spaceship outside. Said, "what?" He said, "Yeah. You guys stop. Go outside." We all bust outside and man we looked up there was a light pulsating in the sky, man. That's when I began to believe Sun Ra. Up to that time I said, "Space, yeah, space, yeah." And we sat back down, it started to rotate again. So after that audition... He was auditioning me and a trumpet player... I can't remember his name now... very fine trumpet player, anyway. So, after the rehearsal and after the audition, he told John Gilmore to tell me to come to the next session at Slug's. He ain't tell me to my face, he tell Gilmore. So Gilmore said, "Come down to Slug's next Monday night." And when you join Sun Ra band, you sit next to him, you know, every new player has to sit next to him. So I'm sitting next to him, and we playing, between that rehearsal and the performance, he had written all these parts up. I can show you, I got my whole... I got my whole French horn book, his handwriting here, I have the whole book. He wrote me this so fast man, [mimics fast writing]. I show you the parts man I got them all. He wrote all my French horn parts just like that. He didn't ask me to play he didn't ask me what the register, he wrote a whole book by the time... between that rehearsal and the actual performance he had written a French horn book. So, I'm playing it with them, and he tells me to take a solo and I never played a solo with Sun Ra. I'm looking for chord changes and I'm saying, "I don't see no chord changes." So, next solo, he cut the whole band off

and left me out there by myself and didn't know what the changes... so I started to play what was coming through me. I had no idea I said there was no chord structure there was no form there was no... you know I'm used to ABAB form, nothing. So, I started to play. And I kept on playing what was coming through me until I couldn't keep the horn on my lip anymore. And I figured I was perspiring so much. So I looked down man and there was blood. My whole shirt was full of blood, I cut my lip. And only when he realized that I realized that I was bleeding, then he put the band in. That was my initiation to Sun Ra.

WJ: So how long did you work with Sun Ra.

BA: Ten years. Ten consecutive years. Ten consecutive years. Now I didn't do all of the years with him 'cause I was still under contract with Radio City Music Hall so I couldn't go on extended tours. I would go as far as Boston or he did D.C. several times, you know, but in terms of going to the airport... I can't go two or three weeks. So I played with him for ten consecutive years in his band. '64-'74.

WJ: Now, when and what were the circumstances behind your going into education as a... behind you becoming an educator.

BA: Well, when I started when I came back from the military again in the late 50's, my union, 802, asked brass players to work in the public school systems to teach brass instruments. They didn't ask teachers with degrees in education but they wanted professional musicians. So they called me, I don't know why again, to ask me. So I said, "Sure." So they sent me to a school in my own back... south of the Bronx, where I grew up, to teach brass instruments. So I taught trumpet, trombone... all the brass instruments to elementary... to 4th, 5th, and 6th, graders. That's how I really began to start teaching. And I had a few private students. But, however, when I was being successful now, and getting work, I was doing a Broadway show, I'd done many Broadway shows but this one's called 1776. It was a hit Broadway show and I had been doing it for two and a half years, six nights a week and matinees and all that stuff. Finally Don Cherry called me. I said, "What's up?" Don and I had been working with Charlie Haden and Don and I did a lot of stuff together. In fact he's the one who turned me on to playing bamboo flutes, was Don Cherry. Anyway, Don said, "Listen man I'm teaching at Dartmouth college and I'm going to Stockholm, Sweden to open up a school for children for one semester and the faculty chairman said I could go for a semester if I got a substitute so would you substitute for me for one semester at Dartmouth?" I said, "I'm doing a Broadway show man. I gotta find a substitute for a semester." So I did, I was able to find a French hornist who take my... play my show for a semester. And I spent a week with him in Dartmouth. I spent a week with him in Dartmouth, first of all, observing him as a teacher. So I said, "Don I think I can continue your work." And I was really continuing his work. He was doing music that was different. So I said, "I can do your work" 'cause I had been playing with Sun Ra. So I accepted his position for one semester. At the end of the semester he called me from Sweden: "Man, I'm gonna be out here for three years man." I said, "What!?! I got a hit Broadway show!" "Can you please take my show man..." So the chairman calls me and says, "Man, we would like to offer you a three year

contract to teach here at Dartmouth.” I was kind of sick of that show anyway, I mean, I’d been doing two and a half years, I said, “Well, I’ll just take a break from New York you know.” Even though I was extremely busy. But I said, “What I’ll do is bring the cats up here,” I said to the chairman, “If you give me a grant, you know to bring the musicians from New York here so I could continue my career.” He said, “Yeah!” So I brought up Max Roach I brought up M’Boom I brought up Kenny Burrell I brought up a whole bunch of cats because I wanted to play, I brought up Leon Thomas. So I kept my roots in it, but after three and a half years... But anyway that was my first real teaching position was at Dartmouth College.

WJ: Were you married with a family at the time?

BA: I was married... I was divorced.

WJ: Oh ok.

BA: Yeah I was divorced.

WJ: Did you have children?

BA: I had two kids. Two sons.

WJ: From your first marriage.

BA: Yeah.

WJ: Either of them musicians?

BA: No, the oldest boy, who is now in his fifties, he wanted to be a drummer and I got him a drum set and for some reason he wanted to go to Paris and sold his drum set to go to Paris and he never got back on drums. My youngest boy was a wonderful guitarist who was studying music in Los Angeles and he went changed there so he gave up being a musician so... My daughter is the one that’s really now and up and coming. She’s a vocalist, a composer, and an arranger. She has wonderful music out now, she’s going strong now, and so she’s the only one in my family to take on the music legacy, is my daughter.

WJ: So now how did you evolve as an educator from Dartmouth to Brown?

BA: Well, again, at the end of the years, I was anxious to get back to New York. To pick up my career, to get back with all those cats I worked with. And at one of my performances, there was a gentleman named George Bass who was very connected with Langston Hughes who was acting position secretary, he was teaching at Brown University in something called Rights and Reasons. Rights and Reasons was a project that he and the chairman of the African Studies Department, who was a historian, put together, to turn research into performance. So he came to one of my performances. I didn’t know he was out there. After the performance, he came backstage and said he’s like me to consider doing my work at Brown University. I said, “Man, I’m going back to New York man, I mean I’ve had three and a half years of Ivy League,” and that

was difficult at Dartmouth. It was very racist, my very first... It was an all-boys school when I took the job. When I first hit that campus man, there was a big Confederate flag across the Main Street, a huge Confederate flag. I said, "What!?" So I had a hard time dealing with racism at Dartmouth, very hard time. And it's an Ivy League school again, Brown University, I said, and in Rhode Island, I said, "Well man, I'm going back to New York." So he kept bugging me, so I figure the only way I can turn this cat down was to give him such a price, such a salary, that they would say, "No we can't do that." So I gave him this huge figure, and they said, "Ok." I said, "What!?" [Laughs] I didn't know I was making more than the chairman. I said, "What!?" Oh man, so that's how I ended up... So I went to Brown and stayed there nine years.

RH: Where was it, at Dartmouth or Brown, where you acquired the name "Brother Ah"?

BA: At Dartmouth. At Dartmouth I used to come into this classroom and they would say, "Ahhhhhhhh. Ahhhh. Brother Ahhhh." And I didn't know, you know, it was a nickname. I didn't know if I started every sentence with "ah" or what, you know? So it was an international setting, it's an all-boys school and they had students from all over the world. It was very international. So everyone from different parts of the world came to me and say, "'Ah' has a meaning in my culture." One guy, he was from Mauritania, he said, "We twirl in the desert and we chant 'ahhhh' for our culture." And then the guy from Egypt, he said, "You know 'Ah' is the name of the god of the moon." Ra is the name of the Sun god, Ah is the moon god. Everybody kept telling me, so it stuck. It was a nickname, it just stuck. So when I got to Brown, the Brother Ah name followed me to Brown.

WJ: So you stayed at Brown for nine years?

BA: Yeah, man, yeah.

WJ: How did you determine to study in Africa and where did you begin those studies?

BA: I just determined it, well that's a long story. Well I guess we got time. In 1971 or 2 I went to, uh, Dinni Zulu. There was an African American who became a priest of the African Ghanaian Religion that had a temple somewhere in Queens, I can't remember. I went, and I can't remember why, I went to one of his ritualistic sessions there and I can't remember why—who recommended me going there and why I went there. But anyway, I went there, and he announced there that he takes his family to Ghana to the temples ever summer. He had a big family he had many wives, many children, and he chartered a plane and had extra seats and he said, "For \$300 round trip, you can join us to take up these extra seats." He was talking to other visitors. I said, "What? \$300 round trip?" And I was already teaching at Dartmouth. Anyway, I would want to go with Dinni Zulu. I would want to go to Africa. So it was my very first chance to go to a place where I had dreamt about all my life, was to go to Africa. So in 1972, I was at Dartmouth teaching, and I was teaching music, I was teaching international... I was doing Don Cherry's work really. And I had brought instruments myself from Haiti, I brought all these instruments. I brought Haitian trumpet just for the kids, even though I hadn't ever been to Haiti. But I got all these instruments into the international thing. But I had never been to Africa,

Don had everything. So I said, "This could be a chance to get some instruments..." So I asked if I could go and he said "Yes" so 1972, the summer of '72, while I was at Dartmouth, I took my first trip to Ghana. And I went to... we got off the plane, I fell on my knees when I got off that plane. I had no idea. I fell on my... and I wept. And I almost went... I almost went unconscious. Some of the baggage handlers, the drummers, they grabbed their djembes and they surrounded me. I'm landing on the ground and they played to me 'til I came to my senses. And they said to me, "Welcome home my brother. Welcome home my brother." So from there I went up to La Te which is a head place to go for temples, that was the destination for Dinni Zulu and his family. And from there I left and went to a place called "Kumasi" and for Kumasi, I was led into the forest by a little man who saw me playing my flute looking at the flowers and took me into the village. So I started my really understanding of African culture and rhythms deep in the forest in a village behind Kumasi. Village called Gyenyasi. There I had a mud hut, no running water, no electricity, only the fires and the moon at night and that's where I lived in that hut. And I studied with those drummers—I have my first drum, I'll show you when you leave, I got my first drum right at that time in '72, it's in my living room— they gave me my drum, and they started me off understanding the language, the drumming, and all of that. The next time I went to Ghana was two years later, every year for seven consecutive summers I spent in Africa. Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, and whenever I went back, I studied. I studied at Legon at the University of Ghana, at the Legon Institute where this drum comes from. I got that drum at Legon in the 70's. And I studied at the University, I lived on the campus, I studied... You been there at the University of Ghana?

WJ: Yeah I have.

BA: You know those steps... the Legon Institute was down those steps... that's where I studied every day. All my rhythms and all those concepts came from Legon.

WJ: And the other countries that you went on summers in Africa, what were your experiences like?

BA: Well, I'll tell ya, the most profound experience was when I went to... well I went to Kenya. I went to Kenya and I spent time in Kenya and I went to Nakuru, which is where Jomo Kenyatta... I went to a big festival and I saw Jomo Kenyatta. And that was an experience, however, the biggest experiences was – I was going to visit my cousin, Babatunde Folalyemi, and sister, brother, my cousin, had moved his family to Dar es Salaam. So I spent time in Kenya but I said, "Really I got to get to Dar es Salaam to visit my cousin." So I took a bus from Nairobi to Dar es Salaam, to Tanzania and on the way there we stopped at a place where there was the Ngorongoro Crater. I don't know if you has heard of that. Where the Massai lived. This was a bus break halfway to Tanzania. I got off the bus to take a break and a brother came towards me, he had all kinds of shields and sticks and stuff but he was wearing blue jeans. And he came to me and said, "Hey my brother! My name is Brother! Brother Massai!" I said, "Yeah?" He said "Yeah you know my brother, you are from America. You are Afro American you are my brother! They call me Afro Massai." I said, "Yeah?" He said, "Yeah, you are my brother. Would you come

to my village and stay awhile with me?" I said, "Well I'm on my way to Dar es Salaam, my brother. I'm not gonna stay here." He said, "Oh you must you must visit us." So I said, "Ok ok I'll take a couple of days." I said, "Where you living?" [Massai said,] "In the village." "Where's the village?" "In the crater!" I said, "What crater?" There's an inactive crater that spans I think 110 miles in all directions, he lived down in this crater. Down in this crater there's every animal you can imagine. Leopards, lions, giraffes, hippopotamus, monkeys, you name it, gazelle, they all live in this crater, I went down to this crater and man I said, "What!?" I'm looking at lions. I'm looking at giraffes. I said, "What in the what?" He said, "Yeah, yeah. You sit here under this, I'll be back. Sit here under this tree I'm coming back." I said, "Sit under this tree?" I said, "What!?" He said, "Yeah, yeah, I'll be back." So I travel with... when I travel Africa all I travelled with was what I was wearing and a coconut bag which had several flutes, bamboo flutes, and my kit, and a change of underwear. That's all I had. So I sat under the tree, I pulled out my flute, and I'll have to show you the flute, I have all of the—I have the exact flute. I pull out my flute, just to sooth myself, because I'm looking at lions man, and I was playing my flute for my own self and I felt this presence around me. I open up one eye and these monkeys are—about 30 monkeys come out of this tree and all sitting out there in front of me and I'm playing the flute, they're grey, black faces, orange, the palms of their hands were orange, and they're all looking at me. So I played, I played, and I played and after I'd finished playing, they all ran up the tree. They took my—I had a little lunch, they took all my fruit, went up the tree—that was my first experience at looking at a live animal outside of a zoo. So I was able to study there—he gave me a hut, say, "You stay here tonight." No light, not even a kerosene lamp nothing, no bed, a map, asleep on the floor, and a hut. He says, "I'll be back in the morning." I said, "Man, you gonna leave me man? I thought you were going to take me to your village?" He said, "Nah you stay here I'm going back—I'll be back." So, in the morning I'm waking up and it was so dark in that hut, I literally could not see my hand. So I woke up in the morning and I heard barking all around me. I said, "Oh my God," I thought they were wild dogs. So I had to get my nerve up, I peeked out of the hut, and man, they were zebras barking. I didn't know zebras barked like dogs. Heck all these zebras are barking I said, "My God." And they were doing some great rhythms. So finally he came back and I said, "You know my brother, I really really really really want to learn from you the rhythms of the Massai because I'm studying, I'm a student. I teach but I have to bring back information for my students, how do you learn these rhythms?" He told me to lay down on the ground. I said, "What you mean?" "Lay down boy!" So I lay down he put his foot on my head said, "Put your ear to the ground." And he took a stone and he a threw it at all the animals and they all began to run, the wildebeests, he said "You hear that? That's where we learn our rhythms." Multiple rhythms, I was hearing it he said "That's where we learn. We play those rhythms. As children we play those rhythms." That's the way I began to understand multiple rhythms, the Massai learned by listening to the hoof beats of animals. That was a great lesson for me. So while I was there I studied, I got a little drum, and I studied the rhythms of animals. And it took me back to, believe or not, to Sun Ra. Because his band played the same type of rhythms. When I got in his band man—oh my drum's upstairs. The drum I have upstairs, the conga drum, is the drum I played with Sun Ra. I studied conga drums with a brother, I forget

is name—anyway, the rhythms I was hearing those animals and the rhythms of the Massai, those were the same rhythms Sun Ra's band played. And those are the rhythms I used in one of my recordings on my album. I used those same concepts of rhythms on one of my albums that I recorded back in the 60's. Anyway so my greatest lessons were in terms of learning rhythms were from animals. With the Massai.

WJ: So, what were the circumstances behind your relocation to Washington D.C. and what year was that?

BA: Well to tell you the truth my brother I relocated here from... To tell you the truth the reason I relocated to D.C. was... Well first of all I love D.C. When I used to go on the road, and back in the day in the 60's we went on the road by bus, I remember, that's the way we went. And on the road man, those cats were, "Man we can't wait to get to D.C.!" I said, "Man what's the bustle?" "Man you don't know man. This city is rad." Well I had never been to D.C. before. We got to D.C. man and—I loved it. We performed at the Howard Theatre in the 60's. D.C. was such a wonderful, spiritual, cultural place to be. Of course they were talking a lot about the ribs, the best ribs you can get in the country was here in D.C. the place right next to the Howard Theatre everybody used to run to get the ribs back then—I eat ribs still. So I kept up with these ribs so D.C.—I always wanted to live in D.C. If not there it was Choctaw City And that was for real, it was 100% black city so cultured, the Lincoln Theater mean Bird was playing, it was just a wonderful place to be. So one day I said to myself, said one day I'm gonna live here. But really what took me here was a woman. My wife. I met my wife in Africa, in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, she was born in America but she had moved there to try to find a job in Dar es Salaam. And I met her in Dar es Salaam and when I came back, I had to come back after summer of course because I was teaching at Brown, she came back to get her PhD at AU. She's a psychologist, and she was living here and we became friends and courtship began and really when I left Brown University, I told her I wanted to live here because I wanted to be with my future wife so she was really the one who brought me here. I've always wanted to live in D.C. since the days I used to come here on the road, and my father always used to talk about D.C., my father as a showmanship used to work in the Howard Theatre too. In the 20's he used to work in the Howard Theatre he used to ask me every time, "Robert when are you gonna look at the Howard Theatre, let's go look at the Howard Theatre." I said, "Dad I don't know." When I worked at the Howard Theatre he was delighted that I finally worked in the Howard Theatre where he used to work. So, I've always been attracted to Washington D.C.

RH: And what year was that, that you moved here?

BA: I moved here in about 1986.

RH: And what did you find here, uh, as the music scene was when you first moved here? How did that work out for you?

BA: Well I first moved here—the first place I played was a club that was on E Street, down on E street, what was the name of that club? It was a night club down there... I can't remember.... Anyway, there was a musician his name was Nas Abadey and Digo.

RH: And Digo Zaba?

BA: And Digo Zaba and Yaya. What was the name of that place, man? Anyway I walked in there and played with those cats. It wasn't the first time I'd played with... and I was just blown away, man. Just the sound, we got South African sound, Yaya and those wonderful rhythms Nasa Agah was playing, I was hooked right there. I gotta remember that club. Anyway that was the first time in Washington D.C.

RH: What did you play, the French horn?

BA: The French horn.

RH: So that was the first time, did you immediately become part of the scene you'd be playing at various places?

BA: Yeah, ...God there's so many things I can't remember. It was a theater company called... uh, it was a black theater company... do you remember what was going on back in the day with the theater companies? Back then... what was the name of the theater company? Dyson was part of—Lynn Dyson was part of it... Repertoire Theater... Black Repertory—

RH: Was Robert Hooks part of that or he had something else...

BA: No Robert Hooks was in New York. Anyway, it was called Black Repertory Theater. I became their music director. I can't remember the details how I ended up being the music director, but being there I was able to bring in musicians to play with me and I began to get known around town as a musician by composing and performing at the Black Repertory Theater which was located on Georgia Avenue. It was the theater on Georgia Avenue. But that's when I began my really regular performances with the theater company. And sessions you know, giggin' around.

RH: When we first met you had your album out, *Sound Awareness*, where did you first record that and how did that come about?

BA: Well I recorded *Sound Awareness* at the... at the insistence of Max Roach. I record *Sound Awareness*... it wasn't a recording session, I had no intention of recording it all. That music came to me in a vision. Total vision. I heard, um... I was performing.... I was doing Broadway shows back then, as you know, and every night—I lived on Madison Avenue and 94th Street on the corner. I was the only black—well I was on that corner, Sammy Davis Jr. was on 93rd Street, Eartha Kitt was on 92nd Street, we were the only three blacks in the neighborhood. Vladimir Harowitz, who I used to listen to practice, it was a really wonderful neighborhood to be. I used to take the bus home every night up Madison Avenue to my apartment, I lived right on the corner. The bus stopped right across the street from my apartment. On my way to my

apartment I felt awfully strange. I hadn't had any drugs, any alcohol came from work. I have to tell this story, it's strange. Maybe I shouldn't even tell it I don't know.

RH: Sure, tell it. This is part of your history.

BA: Ok. So I'm walking across the street, I'm walking up the steps to my apartment, and I looked up, and all of a sudden I find myself on 85th Street and York Avenue. Do you hear me? Do you know where Madison Avenue... I'm walking—my French horn, I'm walking around... "Where am I?" And I'm asking people, where am I? "You're on 86th Street." I was over there, Lexington Ave., I walked up York Avenue, and I'm lost with my horn. And I'm going, "How did I get here?" And I'm walking around and finally I looked up and I'm back in front of my apartment building about a half hour later. Just like that. So, I went upstairs, I lived on the fifth floor, I sat on the edge of my bed, and I heard this music coming to me. Just came to me out of a blue sky. It's called the Midnight Confession because... "Beyond Yourself," is the title of the Midnight Confession. I'm hearin' all this music, in my head. At dawn, the light came through the window, the sun, and woke me up, at dawn. So the final piece in this composition is called "Dawn." I ran to my piano, I played as much as I could remember, melody wise, rhythm wise, and I heard a voice in my head while I was listening to it. So the only singer I knew that could do this would be the sister that was in this musical musical, and they had two blacks, a woman and a man. Barbara Grant was in there, I called Barbara it was like dawn right, she's asleep in bed with her husband. I said "Barbara, you gotta come to my house right away." She said, "What's the matter with you, man?" "I heard some music, I hear your voice, you gotta come Barbara." She believed in me so much, she got out of bed with her husband, got in the cab, she lived on Western Avenue, drove all the way to my house and said, "What is it? What is it?" I played it. I said, "What do you hear Barbara?" She said, "Well, I hear a string instrument. I hear the cello." In her head. So I said, "I don't know any cellist." She said, "I know one." Her name was Pat Dixon, she's called Akua, she was student... I think she was a student then. So I call Pat up. Said, "What do you hear Pat?" She said, "I hear percussion." So I said, "Well who?" "Oh Barbara Burton." Barbara Burton she went on to play with... Anyway, I wrote it all out. I scored it. As much as I could, I can't score, I scored as much as I could. And that's it, and they heard it... we never rehearsed it, I just scored it I said, "Thanks, thank you, thank you so much." So, that's it. They heard it, I scored it. I said, "I'd like to put this on tape." I said, "but I can't, what am I gonna do, I don't have a recording session to myself." So I had a buddy, who was a French horn player, a white cat who played the horn who lived across the street from me, he taught at Hunter College. I said, "Man, could I record this at Hunter?" He said, "Well you know what I could do, man, you can record it in my classroom. But we'd have to do it... you can't be discovered." So one Sunday, a raining Sunday, we went down to Hunter College, all of us, met him at his class, he said because he can't be discovered by security he had to do this in candlelight. So, he put candles up, and we started to record this. And it got so strange, that the performers they kind of freaked out, they wanted to take a break, they were not in with it, they were gonna come back or not, but they came back and we finished it. So that's it, we recorded it, and put it away. ...I'm trying to remember things, there was a sister, who was a director of a theater company

again, who wanted her to be their music director, so I put this group together called Sound Awareness, this was my first band, quartet, three women and myself, these three sisters, Akua—Pat then, Pat Dixon— Barbara Grant, Barbara Burton, that was my first group. We started performing as a group for a theater company. And I got flak from the men, “Man, you got all these women man, you supposed to be a man with brothers” I said, “They all women, I’m the only brother, so what?” I got flak, we started recording. So I didn’t do anything with that music. One day, you know I used to hang out, go up to Max Roach’s house, he used to live in Central Park west. We went to school together, so, you know. Said, “Max, I want you to listen to this Max.” So he’s, “Yeah, yeah” because he used to call me to listen to his stuff he recorded before it was released. So I said, “Listen to this man.” He said, “You got to release this man.” I said, “What? Who goin’—who—who’s gonna...” He said, “You got to release this brother.” He said, “Well I’m gonna tell you how to do it. The trumpet player and the piano player in my band have a recording company it was Charles Tolliver and Stanley Cowell, called Strata-East. He said, “The only people who recorded out of there are the two of them, nobody else record on there, why don’t you be the third person that record at Strata-East?” I said, “Man I appreciate all this...” He said, “It’s already recorded. It’s no expense, just give them the master.” I said, “You sure Max?” He said, “Yeah man.” So I went down and gave them my master and you seen the album?

RH: Oh God I have it with me, we played it.

WJ: No I don’t have it, but I’ve seen it.

BA: You’ve seen it? Ok. Max wrote the liner notes. So he said, “Man, go ahead.” I said, “But Max...” He said, “I’ll do—At some point I’ll do side B.” I said, “Yeah man I don’t know nobody, I’m just a French horn player man, how are we gonna make any sales man?” And they didn’t sell any, really. So I said, “Ok Max I’ll do it.” So we recorded it. That’s how it was recorded. It was not a planned recording session, it was just music that I thought I had to get out of me and record. When Max came up to Dartmouth to do... I called Max and said, “Max, you have been rehearsing with M’Boom, an ensemble, for over a year, you’ve never played a gig, why don’t you do your first gig at Dartmouth. I’ll bring you all up, I’ll pay you all.” So I got a budget together, and brought Max and M’Boom, the first gig they had outside a rehearsal, to Dartmouth. Put them up in the best hotel in town, and we did this piece called—well, I didn’t know, he sprung a surprise on me. We just gonna do half of the concert, all of it was recorded live, was going to be my group of 95, I had 95 students, and then M’Boom. Max came to me at breakfast the day of the performance, we had a dress rehearsal at noon, at breakfast we were sitting there he said, “Brother I want to do this piece, I know I should have mentioned this to you yesterday in rehearsal, but this is the piece I wanted called “Love Piece” would you do it?” He was surprised I said “Yeah. You got a score?” “I ain’t got no score, I got a script.” So we did this piece called “Love Piece” which you said you didn’t know Max sang that poem, just like that. Had no script, I talked with the guys, my 95 students, so he said, “That should be side B of the piece.” So that’s how it came about. It wasn’t really a planned recording session at all. I would never consider myself a composer, I don’t think I should have been called a composer,

you know, it just came to me, I mean you know, in school I didn't study composition, I wasn't no composition major.

RH: But since then you've done more pieces that are composed, so what's your principle now as you compose pieces?

BA: Well it just depends. The piece that I call "The Sea" which is one of the latest things we've released, that came about the same way the first piece came about. I just heard it sittin' by the ocean in Jamaica, and all the melodies and rhythms and concepts, the waves all created this in my mind and I wrote it down and composed it that way. Some of them I'm inspired by something in life, everything I've done has a meaning. Nobody has inspired me to do it for money. Nobody has hired me to do a recording session, I've never had that experience yet. Everything I record comes straight from myself wanting to release something.

RH: And your life in D.C., you've also been involved in teaching many years ago you taught at the studio school that Marcia MacDonald had, tell us about that experience, because there was some significant students that have since gone on from learning from you there.

BA: Well my first teaching position when I came was at the Levine School of Music. I taught there for six years. They wanted to start a project, an outreach project, about world music. There was a very innovative director of the school then, she's no longer there, Joanne Hoover was her name. So I went there and I taught voice and I taught some flute and she wanted me to... well let me see let me go back. Before I taught at the Levine School of Music, I put a group together called the World Music Ensemble. When I was at Brown University, this is a long stuff, do you want to hear all this stuff?

RH: Yeah, sure.

WJ: Yeah.

BA: When I was at Brown University, I put a student group together with an international concept. The young black girl who played the Japanese instrument called a koto, she made that koto. She's on one of my recordings at Brown, and I used one of the brothers to play tabla and I played the sitar, back then I studied sitar with an Indian teacher in Boston so I was playing sitar, I had all these instruments. When I got back, when I got to D.C., I said, "I want to keep that concept going." Particularly since the Levine School of Music had inspired me to do some international stuff. I put a group together called the World Music Ensemble. I had musicians from Spain, musicians from Japan, I mean these are people who are born, who are indigenous to that country who have studied and learned and who are quite popular in that country. I went to the embassies, I said, "How am I gonna find all these international musicians?" I went to the Japanese Embassy, I said, "I want to find a musician from Japan living in D.C." I went to the Indian Embassy, I wanted to find an Indian, I went to all these embassies, I had musicians from all over, I even had a Hopi Indian. And finally, I called my first rehearsal. And, uh, it worked. I had koto, tabla, flamenco guitar, I had all these instruments. And it was Joanne Hoover at the

School of Music, Levine, that wanted me to get my first performance of this ensemble at her school. And I went to the embassies and got a flag of each person in the ensemble, I put their flag up behind us, and I gave my first performance of the World Music Ensemble at the Levine School of Music. And I did an outreach program that the ensemble became my faculty to go to public school systems to teach their particular instruments, tabla, guitar, everybody taught their instruments, Nana Freeport he taught African drums, and I taught my stuff. And that was my first experience at teaching in the public school systems was with the Levine School of Music outreach program. Then I was contacted by... I don't know who contacted me I guess somebody contacted me to start working with Marcia. I worked at her school with the flutes and the woodwinds, and all the independent black schools called me to work with them so I worked with different independent black schools. African Learning Center was my first school with Abana Walker.

RH : Wasn't Davis Bellman's daughter in one of the...

BA: Oh yeah, Toni Ann, I taught her privately right here. But she studied flute with me and oboe. They brought her to me to study flute and I taught her private lessons.

RH: And you still continue to teach right?

BA: Yeah I teach mostly children. I teach here privately, trumpet players. My private students here, all trumpet players. Kids, some in elementary school, some in high school.

WJ: So what do you find the rewards of teaching children?

BA: Keeping me young. I mean I learn so many concepts from children. I'm talking about, I'm teaching nursery school children. Toddlers as well. Different musical concepts I've learned from children, I've learned they've shared rhythms. At some point in all my classes I asked them to create their own rhythms. I've heard some unbelievable... I have on my phone something that you want to hear, you'll think it was Sun Ra. I shouldn't have said anything, I should have asked who this was and you would say Sun Ra. You would say Sun Ra. You would say Sun Ra. Anyway they shared so many philosophies with me, this one little girl said to me, "Brother Ah, you cannot touch music, but music can touch you." This is a 5-year-old coming to me. She said, "I'm so touched Brother Ah. You can't touch music, but music can touch you." One girl at MacDonald's school she said, "You know, I should take the little children on Florida Avenue." We used to walk on Florida Avenue. I said, "What?" She said, "I'm walking my class up Florida Avenue and when they come back to the classroom they have to write down or tell me all the sounds that they heard." And not only did they say the buses and the horns, they heard birds, they heard all these different natural sounds. They heard insects, I mean they were opening up my ears. So I learned so much from being around children because I started my career at 5 years old on the bugle. And I'll show you that bugle. I was a bugle player and I learned the rhythms of animals, as I said earlier, the hoof beats of the horses coming down my street, Dorcet Avenue pulling wagons, lots of animals back in my day on the street. So I know that children like I know, I was connected with sounds at five. Why aren't they—they are! These

little children are connected. And I have had the experience of guiding them, putting a form and structure to what they're doing and making full compositions. Let me show you something. (Gets up and walks around then returns.) Look at these kids. These are my little ones. What a conductor he's going to be. Look at the expressions. Look how serious. I mean, this is an ensemble. We performed. I perform with children man, I do platform performances with those little ones. So I gain a lot of inspiration from being around children. And to see them progress is unbelievable. And to hear how their parents thank me for sharing the understanding of music with their little ones, because they go home beating on drums and everything man, it's unbelievable.

RH: You recently got some recordings put together for release, how did that come about to get that material out?

BA: Let's see. (Gets up and walks away then returns.) This is just unbelievable man. Look how wonderful they have done this. This is LPs. And these are CDs. How it came about was, again you know, a phone call. I got a call from this company called Manufactured Group, who called me and asked me about... Is that open? Is that CD open?

I: Mm-mm.

BA: Let me get you one that's open.

I: It is open.

BA: It is open? You know I had released my old albums, *Move Ever Onward*, *Beyond Yourself*, *Key to Nowhere*, you never heard of those? Anyway those are the albums that had been released by... under my own label.

(Audio ends.)

Part 2

BA: I have a label called Divine Records. And they made a splash, for a while and a gentleman who's the head of the company in New York called Manufactured Records Group who liked those records, who loved those records, had called me and asked me if he could release those. So then he called me he said, "Do you have any records, anything you've never released before?" I said, "Well let me look in my file cabinet man." I looked in my file cabinet and I had all these recordings, master recordings, which were never released. He said, "Well can you send us copies of those so we can hear them?" And I sent them those copies and man they loved them. "What!? Can we release these on our label?" I said, "Yeah." They asked me, "What should we call it?" I said, "Call it Divine Music." That's my logo, Divine Music, that's the logo of my recording company. So, they just called me and asked me to send them, and they loved them, and they released them. I mean I didn't solicit this. That's how it came about. So I contacted my attorney, my attorney happens to be one of my students at Brown University

who is now my music legal attorney, he's handled Count Basie's band, you know, he's very good—he made contact with the company in Brooklyn, and they've been releasing my works that had never released before. I recorded them 40 years ago. I released them 40 years ago—I recorded them 40 years ago when I had a band, the Sound of Awareness, and just put them in my file cabinet. But God is good man, I mean this is the time. Now it's making this whole big splash all over the world. Now they want me to start going on tour again, you know what I'm going to. I gotta go to my first stop in Philadelphia, New York, New Hampshire, those are the three so far they have got. They want me to put this band together so, I called that same band, we're all gonna get together and start going on the road in the spring. But this came about by phone call, man, somebody loved my music from the past, wanted to know if I had anything that I'd never released, I said, "Yeah, but it was 40 years ago." Boom.

RH: For decades now you've been a broadcaster on WPFW with the Collectors. How did that begin? How did that start?

BA: Started in New York. I was a broadcaster on WBAI in the 60's. I had my own show, it was called Dimensions in Black Sounds. Dimensions in Black Sounds was the name of my show in WBAI. Don't ask me again how, they called me, I don't know. First of all, they called me, they wanted me to direct a live Saturday afternoon performances. And I can't remember the name that they gave it... it was a church on 60th Street. They said, "Organize it. It's free." So I would organize it every Saturday I would have all the cats come in that I knew. This is a live performance, 2-hour performance on WBAI. Then they asked me to do my own show. So I said, "Ok." So I had my own show, it was a 1-hour show, it started in the late 60's or early 70's. My first guest was Sun Ra. And I did, like I'm doing now, I played their music, and I interviewed them, and my second guest was Beaver Harris, a drummer, and then I had Ron Carter, he brought his own, he brought his bass up in the studio. Richard Davis was my guest, I brought all these cats in, who brought their instruments into the studio and we talked about the music and the movement. Back then it was the Black Arts Movement was going on, so we talked about the struggles we were going through, the so called "Avant-garde." So I had all these cats coming through. So I started for 3 and a half years I was on WBAI. That's really where I started as a broadcaster. When I came down here, Tom Porter... Well I came down here before BAI was on the air. Ed Love. He had a show on BAI. Well, before BAI went on the air, we used to have meetings at Love's place on Ripnow Street. He was then married to Lorna Love who was...

RH and WJ: Before PFW was on the air...

BA: Yeah before PFW was on the air. What did I say?

RH: You said before BAI was on the air.

BA: No, before PFW we had meetings at Ed Love's house discussing it. Maria Riviera... a whole bunch of people discussing how it gonna...

RH: About '76?

BA: Yeah, I was still at Brown University. I would come down on the weekends for these meetings. So, I used to come down anyways to come to Akala Lynch's house. Akala Lynch used to have meetings, create sessions with Max Roach, all these musicians used to come down to Akala Lynch's house. I used to come down to Akala Lynch's house and we used to talk about jazz and all that.

I: So you were hanging here, coming here before you even moved here?

BA: Yeah, oh yeah. I used to come here for meetings at Akala Lynch's house and WPFW's meetings. So finally I got this place on Florida Avenue right on the corner there, 18th and Florida Avenue, it was a little store.

RH: Right, a hardware store right.

BA: Right, that's where we started. But I wasn't a broadcaster, I was a supporter. Then finally when they moved down to China town, Tom Porter... I don't know whether he called me or I called Tom Porter, but anyway Tom Porter and I had a meeting. And he want... I guess he must have known about my broadcast on BAI cast maybe, anyway he asked me to do a show. To give me 10, write up 10 shows in advance. So I wrote up 10 shows, he liked what I had written about each...

[phone rings and there is some small talk]

BA: Yeah, yeah, so Tom, after I had written up my 10 shows, he liked them, and he said that he'd like me to start a... I had a 1-hour show down in China town there. And I did that, but it was a different format then it was, I had four guys, because I was teaching... at that time I was teaching at the Smithsonian, I taught at the Smithsonian for several years, jazz courses every Friday night. Every Friday night was a course. And everybody came down to... lots of, 90 people used to come down on Friday to hear my lectures on jazz. And I had live performances there, I had "Don't Forget the Blues" what's his name there...

RH and WJ: Nat Turner.

BA: Nat Turner came to the show and I had theater people, I had filmmakers, I had jazz musicians, I had dancers. So for about 3, 4, or 5 years I taught at the Smithsonian. Why did I mention that?

WJ: Collectors?

BA: Oh my show, yeah. But I don't know why I mentioned that. Oh yeah, I know why. I know why I did. So at the end of my tenure there, and I resigned because of something that really hurt me. I just told them, "I don't want to do this anymore." And I'll tell you something about that, but I stopped teaching there. But before I left, everybody said, "Man you can't stop this Brother Ah. We come from Arlington, we come from Baltimore, you can't—" I said, "What I'll do I'll put out a yellow pad, anybody who would like to continue this, write their name down and I'll try to get another spot but I'm not going to do it here anymore." So, 90 people ended up

signing up so I went to UDC. And I said, “Can I get a space here to do a workshop?” I don’t know what I called it back then, “And I’ll call it the Collectors and I’d like to do it by Friday night.” So they said, “Yes.” So I had the cards printed up and everything that said Friday night, and I forget how I said it, “Friday Night Jazz Collectors” something. So I gave my lectures for over a year at UDC. Got very tight—what’s her name she moved to Atlanta...

WJ: Gwen Redding?

BA: Yeah, yeah, Gwen Redding, I got tight with her and another brother up there I forget his name. Anyway, so while I was there, when I was offered to do PFW, I took some of my—I like to call them students but they knew a lot—some of my people who had my... I asked them to join me on the air. Olik Leek [9:12] who was also a jazz scholar, Maurice, who was my boyhood friend from the Bronx. I call him “”, Maurice, Ash, and Petty, Mike Petty. They were all my “students” or so called and Michael. I said, “Can you all join me on the air man? Let’s have the same discussion we’re having here on Friday night on the air?” So I had, invited them. So that’s four people called the Jazz Collectors. That’s how I started at WPFW.

RH: So you continued to do... the Collectors, sometimes more people in, a lot of phone interviews or discussions, you opened it up to community, how has that worked out for you in terms of broadcasting for PFW?

BA: Opening up to the community? Well the community began to get in touch with me because they know me because I worked...and I don’t mean by name, because I performed for all kinds of occasions, most of the time for no money, you know, I did everything you name it: weddings and funerals and parties I mean, they would call me because they liked my music so my ensemble would always be available so I became very, very much a part of the community. So many of the community people began to ask me whether or not they can come on my show, and I said, “Definitely. This is a community based radio station, it’s supported by the community, you are the community-- how can I deny you coming in? Certainly, this is about community.” So many of the community people still call me and ask can they can share something going on in the community...

WJ: Well, as you’ve continued at WPFW, what are some of the primary messages you’ve tried to convey to your listeners on WPFW?

BA: Live music. I try to tell people that you must support live music. I say it all the time. You can get a lot from going home and listening always to tapes and records, but you must experience live music—see it and hear it coming out of the musician’s instruments right in front of you. Absorb it. That’s my main message. Live music’s very important.

RH: Separate from the music, about, oh, early to mid-2000’s, we did an interview about a fire you had in your home. What were those circumstances and how was that to recuperate the things that were damaged or whatever because I see you have a wonderful collection of photographs and everything else.

BA: Well, this house burned down. Every floor, every ceiling, every wire, every pipe, everything in this house had to be... Yeah, um, what happened is that the fire was an electrical fire. And I was on my way ready to pick up my daughter, who at that time was in elementary school, from school, 3 o'clock in the afternoon and I got a phone call from a brother who has a conservatory music, Holland Jones on Kennedy Street, he called in said, "Man I hate to tell you this but your house is on fire man." So I was on my way, I turned and made a U-turn and came back here and man there were... this house was ablaze. Fire on the roof, bustin' up my whole house, I did rescue my dog, I had a dog, I got my dog out. I was staying across the street, right across the street looking at my house in flames. Standing next to me there was a fireman who was in charge of this whole thing. And I said to that little fighter, he was a short guy, I said to that man, "I have so much respect. You are a fireman." Because my son used to be a fireman. He was in the fire station right there, the 9th fire house down on Florida Avenue, my son used to be a fireman there. I said, "I have so much respect. You're so brave." He said, "What was your son's name?" I gave him my son's name, he said, "What? That used to be my roommate. Your son..." he said, "Firemen! Get off the roof! This man's a musician! Every musical instrument you see in this house, get his instruments!" They left the roof, they went through my entire house, they took every instrument I had, and laid them on the sidewalk outside and went up and finished fighting the fire. And all my buddies, particularly Holland Jones, they came and took my instruments off the sidewalk and took them away from me, that's how I didn't lose one instrument.

RH: Fantastic.

BA: Some of them needed to be repaired,—I'll show you that drum—my first drum that I played with Sun Ra so far was damaged, he repaired, anything that was repaired by Bi Allay, I didn't lose one instrument. Just by mentioning to the fireman that my son was a fire—he was my son's roommate, dang man they went through my whole house and they took every little instrument I had, nothing got destroyed. We were out two and a half years to get back. And across the street was Nassa and his wife. And then the Red Cross. The Red Cross wanted to find us a place to live, they gave us—we only had what was on us... my wife, my daughter were sitting there crying, all we had was what we were wearing. So the Red Cross gave us vouchers to go to stores to get some clothes, but they said they couldn't find us a place to live because—a hotel to go to because we have a dog. So where we gonna stay? Nassa's wife, went into my neighbor's house, got on the phone, and found a hotel that would take a dog. Up in Bethesda. After it was all over, we packed up and went to this hotel and signed in. The miracle of it... we had nothing, you understand me? In the morning, we got a call from the lobby. Says, "Mr. Northern?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "You got to come out to the lobby and do something man." I said, "What you talkin' about man?" He said, "Will you please come down to the lobby right now? We got a problem." I said, "Ok." I went down to the lobby, man the community, they was so much stuff in that lobby man. I could not believe it. We had clothes, people left shoes, they left cash money, Joe Arra left \$300, the German people brought—the Italian people brought Italian food, the German people brought German food, the sisters brought collard greens and

black-eyed peas, I could not believe what was in the lobby. From the community! I have a list I made, I have a list of people, every single person that left something, every single person that donated to us, I have a list, I have a list and I'll never forget it and I contacted each one of them. Brother Bay put on a whole performance for me at Howard University. People, everybody just kind of came to me and supported us.

WJ: What, for you, is the overall importance of your radio efforts?

BA: Well, my brother, I've got to be honest with you. I don't know how it happened but—I'd say it's my ministry. It's God's will. I mean, this is not something—even though I took it very seriously, I have a degree in radio, television, and film, from Howard University. Barlow was my teacher.

WJ: Will Barlow.

Ba: Yeah that was my teacher. I carry his picture in my brief case, he's always with me. Right now if I go to PFW and show Barlow's—he's right there in my bag. He was my teacher, I got a degree, so I took it seriously and I take it seriously. I don't write scripts anymore I mean I did script writing and all that stuff, I'd write it down spontaneous, but I went formally through it. It's my ministry. It's God's will, I mean, you know, as a youngster, as a youth, I did not intend to be a broadcaster, that wasn't in my life, I was going to be a bebop trumpet player. When WBAI called me and I got into the media, I'm wondering, "What is... What am I doing? What am I doing here man? I mean why?" So I've always been in touch with my spiritual side, I've been meditating and praying since I was a teenager, and when things happen in life I always connect it with the spiritual journey that I'm on, which I'm still on, so it's my ministry, it's a part of my journey not only as a performing musician or a composer or all of that, but as a broadcaster. That's God's mission. I'm just doing God's will. When I'm in my show when I'm stuck my music, I don't know what I'm going to do 'til it comes to me. Like for Tom Porter I wrote out 10... I'll show you where I sit, that's where I sit, my shows come to me I'm sitting in that chair meditating, not on what I'm going to do, just meditating, all of sudden ideas come, the phone calls, somebody calls me, and all of a sudden I say, "Oh man, that's the show I'm supposed to do." I don't know what I'm going to do on Monday. I have no idea what show... ain't nothing in my brain. Oh I do have a guest, who is gonna come one and talk. But in terms of the playlist, that sometimes comes to me the night before or... it's a spiritual thing man. Sometimes Max Roach wife might call me, you know I'm very close to his widow or you know and she'll start talking about Max and all of sudden I think, "You know I should do a show on Max." You know, actually I don't know, it's different ways. But it's God's will.

RH: I think that's a great way to end it. It's been a wonderful afternoon, we both appreciate you devoting so much time to talk to us.

BA: You're welcome my brother.

WJ: I did have one question that came to mind, going back to your time at the university in Ghana, was Quabana and Katilla [20:12] at the time?

BA: No, you mean in the 70's?

WJ: Yeah.

BA: No, I don't remember that name... see I would do a lot of work in Ghana, and I would come back with my money... I met Konimo you ever hear that name?

WJ: No...

BA: Konimo is the foremost scholar and the foremost musician in all of Ghana. Konimo. He a teaching also of biochemistry at the University of Cont Massi. And when I was in Ghana, I hooked up with him, and performed with his group in Ghana. He a guitarist, so we'd travel around, I mean village stuff I mean, also, he was also the president of radio and television station in Ghana. He was also president of the union. So, I got close to Konimo. When Konimo came to America, he'd go play with my band and we would do the Folklife Festival. So my whole situation in Ghana was very very deeply spiritual. He's a very spiritual man, Konimo. Look him up. [Spells his name out] Konimo. He's my friend and he's a scholar, so my whole study and my whole experience in Africa has been, for me, on my spiritual journey.

WJ: Alright well thank you very much. Much appreciated.

END