

Interviewee: Cecil Brown
Interviewer: Alicia Sill
Transcriber: Krissy Price

AS: When and where were you born?

CB: Right here in Roanoke.

AS: And what is your birthday?

CB: March 7, 1948.

AS: Ok. And how long have you lived in Roanoke?

CB: 61 years

AS: And just briefly what neighborhoods have you lived in?

CB: I was born in northeast Roanoke and my mother lived in southwest and northeast but I stayed mostly with my grandmother, a matter of fact, she raised me and I was in the northeast most of my life.

AS: Ok. Do you have brothers and sisters?

CB: Yes.

AS: Tell me about your parents and brothers and sisters?

CB: You want to know the truth?

AS: Sure

CB: Never knew much about my dad. I was 22 when I found him. My mother had 6 kids by another man. It wasn't a pleasant experience for me. You know it was pretty rough. You know growing up with them you know and my mother and his children. Well he had 6 kids by her, and how extensive would you like this?

AS: As extensive as you like it to be.

CB: Well it was kind of rough. Well, the dad wreaked havoc on me. Drank every day. You know you come to a time when you need to speak to kids about stuff like that he wasn't one to stand. What's it like being in a family like that? And the fighting and fussing every day. Every time no food. Trying to go to school. I went to school anyway half the time I was half asleep. I would go somewhere and get to be able to lay down somewhere and go to sleep, 'cause I never slept at home. I didn't know whether or not he was going to kill mother, so I was up all night listening to them fussing and fighting. So by the time morning rolled around I was too tired and weak to even go to school. And you know high school and I would curl up in an open field somewhere or a wooded spot and lay down and go to sleep.

AS: Were you close to your other brother and sisters? Or no?

CB: I was close to them. But my mother sent me on errands a lot. You know to pay the bills or take the bills here and there. I was gone a lot. And they saw me, but as far as having a close relationship with them I guess I had about as close as any brother would. But by being the oldest boy, you know, I did a lot of errands for my mother. Back then parents didn't tell you stuff like parents do now. You knew very little about the family matters and very little secrets.

AS: So you say you were the oldest boy. Did you have older siblings or were you the oldest child of the family?

CB: I have an older sister. That was, you know, they had a different father too. My mother parent us two together from babies on up. The two of us was inseparable you didn't see one without seeing the other.

AS: What was your older sister's name?

CB: Florine Brown and my others the six are Johnsons, and she and I are Browns. Things we did so bad on a weekend my mother would always send and my sister down to our grandmother's in northeast to protect us. Because we wasn't her husband's and when he got groggy start to drinking it wasn't a very pleasant. So she would send us every weekend I don't care how deep the snow was we would go on to our grandmother's we would walk. The bus was seven miles. I don't care how much rain we would go to our grandmother's we would say "mama send us. We don't care. We just want out of there."

AS: What was your mother's name and did she work or did she stay at home with the children?

CB: Well stayed at home with the children. She had stayed at home with the kids, but he had worked. When he didn't drink it up when he got home because he did mostly day work. Laboring. I never knew too many regular jobs he had. He put a lot of fear in me. I still have dreams.

AS: Do you want to share their names?

CB: What my sisters and brothers?

AS: Well your mother and your father. Well, and your step-dad.

CB: My dad, his name was Ray. Beautiful man when I found him. I loved him. I don't understand how parents can say our kids can say when their kids meet their parents they haven't seen in years. "you know it doesn't have anything to do with me" I don't see how they can say that. When I met Bob he tried to explain to us "you know me you don't need any explanation. I'm a grown man now you know that things don't always work out." He tried explaining how much he liked mama and so forth and so forth. Well this is a long story, but I told him you don't owe me no explanation. I love you just the way you are. Just like you are. He was an alcoholic too. Leukemia of the blood. And my mother she was a beautiful lady. She didn't play didn't play. You hear me now I go to something to whop his. I can tell you. I'm going to say this, I'm going to be frank the laws and stuff they got now to protect the kids tried

it on my mother. Let the state try to tell her how to raise her kids. She would have been in jail a lot of times. But she didn't play. She loved us to death, and we knew it. She was a beautiful woman.

AS: What was her name?

CB: Lillian Brown Johnson

AS: Lillian?

CB: When I was 17, I had my first job at 15, excuse me 16. I was staying with my grandmother for a little while, and I had gotten off from work. Downtown you know caught a bus and got out at downtown you can walk to northeast. And I saw a man on the market that was a friend of the family's he said, "Cecil or Duke. That's what they call me. Your mother's sick she wants you. She's been asking for you all day. You better go on up there and see what she wants. She's got something really important to tell you." Well I didn't go I went on to my grandmother's. So when I got into my grandmother's, I saw my grandmother crying. I had never heard her cry before. I mean balling and crying. And she told me mama's dead. I said, "dead" then I got numb. So, yes somebody poisoned her killed her she laid across the bed and died in the house and I didn't get there, I should have went there. When he first told me, but I should have went. Whatever she had to tell me died with her. Terrible very terrible.

AS: So after that you lived with your grandmother?

CB: Yes me and my sister. My sisters and brother the other sisters went to a foster home, and separated. And, but they was separated before mama died. Things were so bad that the neighbors complained and the state came and took my mother's kids and put them in foster homes. Me and my sister went to my grandmother's.

AS: So did your grandma just not take care of all the eight of them?

CB: She already had eight in the house. I knew they locked them up, put them in jail. Mama's getting a check, a welfare check for me and my sister because we wasn't there. Maybe I'm getting too personal because we wasn't there we wasn't here. She was taking that little check from us and try to stretch it through the whole family. Which was \$65 a month, and it had no welfare, well it had welfare, but you couldn't get food stamps and stuff like they do now. It's always a struggle.

AS: Tell me about your grandma? What was her name?

CB: I could have brought you some stuff on her. She made the paper after we left northeast we moved onto Shenandoah right beside Coca-Cola. It was two houses on each side and the Amtrak. My sister got all the articles in the paper about how she would feed the hobos when they got off the trains. Sometimes she let them sleep in the hall. Beautiful lady, cooked every day, that's why I don't like the stuff about women "I worked all day I can't cook". Don't hand me that, 'I can't cook, I work every day'. My grandmother worked every day, come home and worked, make a fire, she wouldn't let anyone make a fire in the kitchen stove, but her. Make bread every day, biscuits, and then cook. This was every day far as I can remember. On Sunday morning she would make her rolls. She would get up at 2 o'clock she

called me 'old man' and say, "I need you to go to the store and get my yeast to cook my bread." I said, "Yes ma'am". Would have to cut wood for the stove. She would get up at 2 in the morning fix it up so that it would rise. And people would come from miles just to get one of her rolls. That was one of the most beautiful women that God could have given a grandson.

AS: What was her name?

CB: Ethel Brown, little, short woman.

AS: What did she do for a living? You said she worked.

CB: She did day work.

AS: Is that like going into people's houses?

CB: Yeah she worked for Ms. Murray. Well he owned Murray Meats. It used to be here on 24th Street moved downtown into the market. She raised them, the white family, she worked for them for about 30-35 years. Beautiful lady. She died in 1986. She was born in 1898. I used to talk to her a lot always when I talk to kids it's now, when you can reason with them, always tell them, "well who was this lady?" "Oh Mr. Brown it's my grandmother" I said get to know her, beyond the title. Talk to her. Ask her questions, ask her what she was like as a child, ask her how was growing up the things she do. I mean we take our grandparents and parents for granted. They were children once. They're people. Get to know them. I used to do it to my grandmother. "What were you like as a child?" You know, just by herself, just me and her. She'd tell me stuff like that.

AS: How did your family end up coming to Roanoke? Was your grandma from Roanoke? Was she born here?

CB: No she was born in Bedford County a place called Goode, Virginia. Far as I know one day I'm going to go down there and investigate and check around and see if I have any kin people. Because I don't know any Browns I'm kin to around Roanoke. Then she moved to Southwest before I was born where she raised my mother and my aunts and she had one son. I never knew my granddaddy. He died when her last child was born in 1926.

AS: So did they move here for... so they could have jobs? Is that probably why they moved here?

CB: He was working on the streetcars. Something like that she was telling, I think. So you know they moved here, but as far as I know...

AS: But you never went out to Bedford to visit family. She never, your grandmother, never mentioned stuff like that?

CB: Well, see we didn't ask questions like that when we were small, because you don't think about it.

AS: Describe your grandmother's house for us since the Northeast is no longer...well it's where the civic center is right? So can you describe your house for us? For instance was it brick, did you have a garden out back, and did you have a front porch?

CB: It was brick. On 10th Avenue it was a wooden house. No lights; she had a lamp. The water hiding, she called it the hiding, was out in the backyard. The faucet, we had to go out and the outhouse. It's where I grew up and 3rd Street we left there and I guess I lived there, I remember, 5 years. I guess about 5 years old when I left. Moved to 3rd Street that didn't have any electric light. Left there when I was eighteen and moved onto 7th Avenue up until the time they moved us out. But on 7th Avenue the house was brick, had five or six rooms. When you come in and she always had a table statue of Christ Jesus my Lord and Savior on the table. Sometimes my uncle, he only drank on the weekends, a beautiful man never said two words to you in a weekday, but on the weekends he was ready to play because he had a few cluckers in him. I guess it's alright to say that, but I say this in a sense they were good people. He would come in and I remember I used to lay in the bed scared that that statue would break 'cause he would stagger up against that table, and I would see the statue rock like it was going to fall. You know it was ceramic so it would break into a bunch of pieces, but it never would fall for years. Her bedroom was in the middle room; you would think she was asleep but she never slept. And sometimes I would get up and go across the hill with my boys 14 and 15. They said, "Duke, we never heard you curse man. You hang around with us but you don't curse, you don't drink, you don't smoke, you ain't a saint. You don't go to church. How you do it?." I never paid any attention to it that's why I tell the children you don't have to compromise to be recognized. Be yourself. You don't know who you can influence. I didn't know there was a ????. The best year of my life was then. Now that's how I started to get into music. But you want me to continue on about my grandmother or what?

AS: You can...sure tell me how...well how did you get the nickname Duke?

CB: I don't know, they started calling me Duke.

AS: And how did you get involved in music?

CB: I always wanted to sing, ever since I can remember, since I was about 8 or 9. I remember when I was about 8 or 9 and I would put a stick in the alley and pretend it was a microphone in, you know, my imagination. Something kids don't use anymore; their God given imagination. And act it out in my mind how I would act on stage. I had no musical knowledge didn't know music no... Back then you had to have showmanship when you hit the stage. You couldn't just sing. If you were black you had to have showmanship. By the time I was 13 or 14 I was going up to the Star City on Henry Street.

AS: The Star City Auditorium?

CB: Yes

AS: OK

CB: The Star had up on Henry Street. That's where all the singers came. Everybody that was somebody was there. How they tore it down, I don't know. It was an icon. There is where I met some of the most

famous black singers of all time. That's where I met the great James Brown. I'll tell you how I met him. I used to go up to the...Jackie Wilson was my man. His vocal range was awesome and his showmanship was awesome. And I remember meeting him twice. I was standing in front of the Star City, ain't no back door, and wait until they come, and my boys would say, "Duke I know you ain't going up to Jackie Wilson are you?" We never had money to get in there so, "you watch me". I said, "Mr. Wilson I need to study you tonight. I got to find out how you do things. I've been studying you for"...he would be on the Ed Sullivan show. I said, "but now I get to meet you in personal. I don't have any money to get in." He said, "You just grab my suits and put them on your back and you follow me. You don't need no money." It's amazing I didn't have cameras, camcorders then to record and tape all of this. You couldn't, at a kid of 13 years old meeting somebody you have admired, who had recorded. I had his record. You I have recorded and had his records just treating you like a friend. It was awesome.

AS: So he let you come into the Star City Auditorium and listen to him?

CB: Yes

AS: And he gave you his suits so you would be kind of working for him and that's how you got in?

CB: Right. Well I could have walked in with him with nobody saying anything. But he wanted to kind of honor me in a way. He didn't want to make me feel bad. It was just his way of letting me help him to feel, you know, thought of. And I'm laughing at my boys, and they're shaking their heads. How does he do it? Because I had a desire. I hadn't met James Brown then. We used to have gangs on our street in the summertime. Summertime lasted forever. It wasn't like the children today. We would never sit in the house. Our parents wouldn't let us, they would run you out. Get on outside and play. So we would use our imagination and play games. I heard these girls talking about James Brown on the street. I said James Brown we were saying. We had a game who's the best singer? I said "Jackie Wilson". They said no Duke he might be the best singer, but James Brown got him in show business. I couldn't believe it. I said no you got to be wrong. Here I am 'Mr. It'. I know more about music then anybody in this neighborhood. How come I haven't heard of a James Brown? Well a guy with my oldest cousin who came down from New York, and he had a live album of James Brown Live at the Apollo 1962. And he played it. This was the first time I heard James Brown. I heard the excitement on the album. But lo and behold a month later, he was coming to Roanoke. Back then they didn't have advertisements on TV like they do now. They put out posters in the black neighborhood of the singers coming. They'd tack them on trees and in the store windows or wherever. On the posters just had an upper torso of James Brown like this. No action shots. I told my boys I said man this guy couldn't be that tough. Let's go on by and see him. We got dressed and I was 14 years old now. We walked up behind Hotel Roanoke it was on the street behind Hotel Roanoke where the light going across 1st Street bridge, that's where the Star City was at. When I got to the block where the church is over there I said I feel like someone is fighting up there. Look at all them people. Somebody must had a wreck or something. So we walked up it was a line coming down Wells Avenue, a line going up Wells Avenue, a line coming down Gilmore, coming up. And white people didn't come across Henry Street Bridge at night because of the racism. It was a lot of whites coming from Henry Street bridge. I shook my head as to who is this guy that I have not heard about and yet everybody else had? When I got up to the Star City they had two doors before the

box office one on this side one on that side. He had his bodyguards blocking the doors, Brown, but they had the doors open cause it was summertime. There was no air conditioning they just had the windows up and fans. I guess it would hold about 3,000 people it had balconies. I looked through the doors I liked to faint. I hadn't seen, Brown hadn't come out yet. The band was playing, but I had never seen no orchestra. I had seen bands, but I never seen an orchestra. He had an 18 piece orchestra. Four piece horn section on this side and four piece horn section on that side and two drums. I said who is this guy? Still no money to get in. We always had ways to slip in. But this particular night, they had all our ways covered. We couldn't get in. I said Charles I gotta find a way to get in. He said man you crazy you can't get in there. In the front was a wall about as wide as half of this table about 5 feet high, and they had a screen about that long, but they the windows open inside for the screen. I said boost me up. He said what you gonna do. I said never mind boost me up. I'm going to kick this screen in and I'm going in. He said man you gonna get caught. You crazy. I said just get me on the wall. He got me on the wall. James Brown had a lady with a table like this the wall is behind me. She selling pictures and albums of James Brown. But they had crates stacked up against the wall. I kicked the screen in and she never looked around. So much commotion, the band's playing, a lot of people in there on the floor dancing, on the balconies talking. I jumped down on the one set of crates, she never looked. I jumped down on the second layer, she never looked. I jumped down on the floor. Once you get in they won't chase you 'cause they don't want you to leave. So I went around and mingled with the crowd. Told my boys, so long. I was in. They said, how's this guy do it. He mentioned they got in too. But when the man said show time are you ready Mr. Dynamite. He would come out, the man that gives you "Please, please, please", "I don't mind", "I'll go crazy", "Night Train", ladies and gentlemen the star of the show James Brown Famous Flames. They had two dressing rooms one on each side of the stage. The flames came on one side and James Brown came on the other. When he came on he came on like he was riding on skates, on one leg. Bam and precision to the microphone. When he raised his hand stopped. They better not make a mistake, a mistake, \$50 fine, the next, you fired. He was very strict. All his instrument players and band members had sharkskin suits and polished shoes. Your shoes weren't shine you was fired. The next time you were fired. Brown didn't play. He do a lot. I got a tape at home that took me 40 years to find that he did a show when in California he did the same show one month when he left the Star City. If you'd see this tape you would see what I'm talking about. But after he came out I went back. I shook my head I said they was right, Jackie Wilson cannot touch his showmanship. Then I took the moves of Jackie Wilson and the moves of James Brown and combined them. I kept practicing. I kept practicing. Day in and day out. Night in and night out. I would practice this thing on the streets anywhere. Till I became so good in my showmanship I would take shows up at the Star City and they would beg me do not, don't take, please singers would want to take me on the road with them to teach them showmanship between sets. Because I was that good. I was just as good as Brown if you ever see this tape. I would come back people would come from all over Virginia to challenge me. They had heard about me, was no use. I don't want to embarrass you young man. So I never tried to show off. But they all wanted to try. Back then they had duels and dancing sort of like a contest and people are around watching you and judging to see who... But they weren't no use Miss. 'Cause none of them could touch me. I stopped Brown on stage I was dancing one time at the Salem Civic Center. I got beside him and he stopped and put his hand on his hip. When I got into gospel, back then, the church didn't go for dancing. I didn't want to sing gospel for that reason. But God called me out, so I had to go.

That is something you have to do every day. Is practice your dancing, every day. But the church didn't allow dancing. My being so naive then, I was thinking it was a sin. I had to wrestle with God for years for not dancing. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't want me to dance. That was the old saying of the church that was pumping that stuff in my head. I still can do a lot at 61. But you should have seen me at 25, 24, 20, 15, 19. I would be singing through the streets and they was man, shut that noise up at night. I said you going to hear from me. I would always tell them that. One day you're going to hear from me. I formed my first group, this was in 1971. My first gig was a talent show at the YWCA on Orange Avenue. Bands were like gangs in Roanoke. No band liked another band 'cause they were rivals. There were a lot of bands here in Roanoke. We had a lot of black culture in 60s and 70s. A tremendous amount. All in the parks in the summer time you'd hear bands. This particular time was a band of some friends of mine was doing a social at the YWCA the band. I asked Joe, a friend of mine, Joe Pimp. I said, Joe I have a group me and him were starting a group at the same time. He got his before mine. I said How about playing three songs, and let me get some exposure. He said I don't know Duke. He said I'm with it, but you got to talk to the other musicians. They go for it I'm for it. So we had a little powwow. This one didn't like that one. I had one of the members from Calloway these two was from another band. The band that was playing down there that night. But me and Russ we started the group and well, they had fired these two. Well, he was still there Larry was still there. Larry didn't like Calloway, so Larry said man I ain't with it. I said why. He said because you got him in your group. I don't like him. I said well if you can't play for him you play for us 'cause one for all and all for one, three musketeers.

AS: How old were you in this picture?

CB: 24

AS: And that was your first band?

CB: Yes

AS: So you were 24 when you started your first band?

CB: Yeah. I was 24 and I didn't know music. I had danced and sung, but I had never been with a band.

AS: So you never read music, like sheet music or anything like that? You just learned it.

CB: Yeah. I just learned it by hear.

AS: Did you take music lessons ever?

CB: No

AS: Or did you...were you in the band in school?

CB: No

AS: Did they have band in school?

CB: Yeah

AS: They did?

CB: They had bands. They had music in school, but I...

AS: You didn't want to join that?

CB: I didn't know. They didn't just have music. They had band over at Addison. But the way I was living I had so much time. The way I dressed back then, you know, people think it was funny. I didn't even get in nothing. I didn't even like school. I hated it. Simply because of the people more so than the lessons. If I could...If we had...If I could go to school like people go to school now I would have finished. Get up out of bed and gone to school. I couldn't do that. You had to have clothes and shoes. I didn't have that. Shame stayed with me a long time. I was ashamed of everything. Ashamed of myself, ashamed of the way I was living, ashamed of my mother and dad, ashamed of my brothers and sisters, ashamed. The only way I didn't feel ashamed was when I was with my grandmother. It was two different worlds. But getting back to the music... He said ok Duke they agreed to do three songs for us. I said oh boy then we can move on. But I had a girl in Vinton, Lucy Brown. All the shows at Star City showed me what a stage dress, how important it was. I had a girl in Vinton telling me all our clothes all our costumes, suits. That band didn't know this. They thought they could use us a warm up group. I did three songs, but it took me one month to do these three songs, to practice them in my head. Choreography every song. Something they didn't have. I learned from Brown, Wilson, and Temptations when they came up to Star City. When they called us to do the three songs and we came on in one of the rooms in the Y dressed costumes, polished. It blew their minds. When we did the three songs words got around that there was a new group in town. But I still had no band, remember. Still trying to get the exposure. A week later word got out that there was a band in Northwest that had just graduated together they had graduated together in music from college, but they had no singers. They wanted to collaborate, so we collaborated and got together. My second gig was the Civic Center. My third gig was the Star City Auditorium. Where I met all the singers. You talking about somebody elated. All the clubs in Roanoke, the word had gotten around so fast and then I started traveling all over Virginia. After 4 years the band decided they wanted to be a boogie band. They didn't want singers anymore. I said well Spike ain't nobody gonna come out and see no band playing. The women want to see men up front and the women are going to bring the men in. I saw him seven years later. He said Duke you were so far ahead of us. I didn't even know it. You was so far ahead of the time. You said you tried to tell me. I didn't. I couldn't see your vision then. He said if we had stayed together look how popular we would have been. In the meantime well that's when i got into gospel to keep my vocals going. Until I got my band back together. But I never got them back. I was traveling and sometimes we would sing. Our vocal harmony was so tough we didn't need music. We'd take a show in a minute just walking up to clubs and tell the manager who you got coming in tonight? He said well I have some person, and I would say you're wasting your money 'cause anything you bring in here will blow off the stage. You had to talk like that to promote yourself. Who do you think you is? We would take shows, gospel as well as soul. That's how tough our vocal structure was. This is the guy that got me into gospel.

AS: What's his name?

CB: Pete Brown. And this is my cousin. He owns a recording studio.

AS: What's his name?

CB: Barry Grey. His mom and my dad is sister and brother. They rehearsed over there at night, in fact, I'm going over there tonight. This is Franky. He sung, so he was singing all of his life. This is Lawrence Harley he was born in Northeast too. He's a pastor. This is Franky he was the bass player. He's a pastor at his own church. This is Bam-Bam He plays drums. This is our dad right there. This is Sam, that's his brother. He plays bass. This is Blake and he plays keyboard. This is John. He died the next year; he plays lead guitar. And this is us standing in front of my mother's church.

AS: Do you know the name of the church?

CB: Emanuel. I think its Emanuel Church, but I'm still affiliated with these guys. We sing all the time. I don't sing with the group anymore, but I get together like this Sunday I'm going to sing up here at Forest Park Baptist Church. I'll probably bring Lewis, myself, Pete, and Franky, and do something a capella singing with them.

AS: What was the name of this first band?

CB: The Love Men

AS: The Love Men and who came up with that?

CB: Calloway. And Larry he still sings and plays, he's a minister of his own church. Russell he's still around. Russ after the group broke up he became disillusioned. He never sung again.

AS: What was it like playing at the Star City Auditorium? Was it the happiest minute of your life?

CB: Yes. 'Cause I saw the Star. I always wanted to play it before they tore it down. We played it, guys were running up and down Henry Street talking about this new group that's down in Star City. Man they thought we were the Chi-Lites. Chi-Lites! Now we wasn't the Chi-Lites. We just a local band. But I never saw I cared less about the money. I never got any of that. I just wanted to do it. I always tell children now get off the computer, get off your games. God gave you hidden talents and he wants you to discover them. You can't do that locked in something mechanical. Someone later, you ever heard of Frankenstein? He tried to create a monster. The monster took him over. That's the same thing with these mechanical technological toys. They take over the kids after a while. The kids can't do nothing. It controls the children. I said, God can tell you where your talents his young man, but when you come downstairs on Christmas and look under the tree you have to discover what toys your mother bought you and you surprised when you find out what they got you. The same way with your talents. He wants you to discover them, so you can be surprised when you find them. How can you find them locked into something like that? And not only that you lose your social skills when you're locked into stuff like that. I worked in the after school program, I would tell them put the Gameboys up young man. Oh Mr. Brown! I said put it up! We gonna do something skillful. We gonna do something creative. We going to found out what you can do or what's in you. You may have some gift to give to the world and

don't know it. And their mothers would go who is this Mr. Brown who is such an influence on my child? And I would laugh. And they said when I get home all they talk about is Mr. Brown taught me... I love the children it's something you have to do to love. Our parents didn't play with us. Now when I say this, I'm not saying it from a racist point of view because there is not a racist bone in my body. Integration came too soon for Roanoke. It was not ready for it. The white schools could not deal with the black kids. The black kids couldn't adjust. The black parents, the black neighborhoods raised them a certain way. They didn't reason with you. White kids like to reason. White people like to reason. And you start to reason one time, they tell you look I'm telling you don't do this anymore, you do it you'll pay the consequences. If they promised you a whooping you got it. There ain't no such thing as you can't reason your way out of it. That was the way we raised our children. Anybody in the neighborhood anybody's mother could whoop you in the neighborhood cause you doing wrong. But then when they start integrating schools here the black kids and the laws came out that's when they became wild. Because there was nobody to keep them in line. Even the teachers could be strict with you and hope to God they wouldn't tell your mama. Even teachers, they had their own way of dealing with the children and the children understood it. But now, you know, I look at the black kids and I love them you know I'm just saying, in the projects and stuff...like they're so wild and uncontrolled and unruly and their future is shot already. Their children can't have them future because they didn't have a head start. My mother...my last whooping when I was 15 years old. One day my mother said Happy, she called me Happy, come here. I said yes ma'am. She said you go to school today? I said yes ma'am. Ok She said truant officer had been by here. They used to look for you then. The teachers hadn't seen you. You said you went. But they said you haven't. She said I'm going to ask you one more time, did you go to school today? I said no ma'am... go on up there and break them. That's another reason I learned to dance so good. They didn't whip clothes, and you'd dance across the floor like James Brown. And they're going to tell you be still when I'm whooping you! Boy be still. I'm telling you. You're running from huh? No ma'am! They was just as tired as you were when they finished. But they got the point across and they loved us to death. It's in the scriptures. I was there reading Proverbs the other day where it says King Solomon said He that spare the rod on his child hates his child, does not love him. And then it goes on loves his child spare not the rod, because by doing so you keep the soul from hell. All this stuff about...there is a difference between a whooping and a beating. We got whoopings we didn't get beatings. After it was over, Mama sometimes was mean and I'd say, Lord, what that woman want now? Lord have mercy. Sometimes she would say was just calling you to look at your eyes. She got a lot of whooping from her stepdad because of me because he must have known she was still in love with my dad. It was...and now when rap and hip-hop came out killed everything. It killed the bands. That's the biggest that I tell them to their face too. That's the biggest ... that's the biggest illusion of what music is supposed to be about. In the Black history of music all of it was commercial in two years' time you can't remember one song they made. But I heard them all. The songs of Marvin Gaye, James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Al Greene, Percy Sledge. (interruption) I learned, Otis Redding pulled me in the dressing room on a rope, as a matter of fact. I knocked on his dressing room in the alley and got me a rope and a ladder from the boys. No money to get in. It didn't cost but \$2.50 to see this superstar. And he was drinking pint of red liquor, I'll never forget it. I said, come on man come on give me a hand. We come walking into the dressing room. Everybody now where did they come from? I met some singers princess. I met some singers.

AS: Was there an age limit for the Star City Auditorium or if you could buy the ticket then you could go in?

CB: Yeah. They had a box there like the movies do right in front.

AS: Ok so you weren't like it wasn't like you were only nine years old so you weren't allowed to go?

CB: Oh no. You can hang up on the yard and get in. You can get in nobody care 'cause see everybody look out after you. You see what I'm saying? Like now see

AS: Was the Star City Auditorium was it mostly black entertainers or would white community come to it?

CB: There was no integration it was just black. Sometimes a few whites would come out.

AS: For like the James Brown show?

CB: correct

AS: But not typically?

CB: Right. In 1963 they had this. They showed James Brown in film down at the Market Theater. There they had just start letting blacks come into the American Theater. White theater downtown. Took me 40 years to find this. The first time they see all the was called the Chitlin Circuit.

AS: What does that mean?

CB: That means they were doing one nighters.

AS:Ok

CB: You know they would leave there that night and go to Martinsville leave Martinsville, then they would hit all these little counties and places, you know, in a day's time and sometimes Brown would two shows, two places in one day it was call the Chitlin Circuit. They didn't fly from here to there or live in a hotel then plush like they do now. Man what I to see this generation with what they call entertainment. It's sickening. You hear me. It is absolutely sickening. But anyway what I'm trying to say is when Brown was at the Auditorium to film this with the Rolling Stones. I got Mick Jagger, the first time he came. Whites were signing James Brown. If you see this tape you would know everything I'm telling you is on this tape. Whites had never seen Brown. When he hit that stage they went wild. Almost all white girls. 'Cause when they sung at a white place where whites and blacks could go there they would have a rope where all the whites on this side and all the blacks on this side. They would draw the line. It was terrible. But anyway move on. What questions do you got now?

AS: You mentioned, Henry Street. I've heard a lot of people talk about Kiser's Record Shop.

CB: Oh yeah.

AS: Would you go in there sometimes?

CB: I was in there all of the time.

AS: Did you like...was it Napoleon and Louise is that their names?

CB: Mr. Kiser was always had his little white bucks on, looked like Pat Boone. Tall man. Never raised his voice, but he wouldn't let you touch his records. Sometime I go you know he would have these little boxes that he would put his records in and like pigeon holes on both sides of the shop. I would go in and I can't have you touching my records now. Then he would straighten them up and let's not touch the records now. Me not having the money to buy a record. I said Mr. Kiser I heard you got a new record by Otis Redding or something like James Brown. Can I hear just a little bit of it? I won't tell him I ain't gonna buy it, 'cause if he know you ain't going to buy it, he won't play it. But all the singers when they came to the Star City first they would go over to Kiser's record to shop. So I'd tried to catch over there and talk to them. But yes Kiser's, you had The Room down on the corner and then you had Eric's Lounge that was another club. Eric's Lounge and The Room was run by brothers, the Cabblers. They was always businessmen in the city. Beautiful family. Their father raised them that way. They never worked for anybody else. They was always a close family, business family. Then you had all your restaurants on this street and your hotels and where they stayed, Dumas Hotel right there. Everything. It was, man I'm telling you. I never thought they would I don't see how those who went to school for political science and those who claim to be a politically inclined for, what you may call black history allowed that to be tore down. It is the icon the history of Roanoke, the black Roanoke. Everything there represents what black people was like. When you hit Henry Street that and the hot dog stand, Johnny, was a white guy served, older men.

AS: Is this at the Roanoke Wiener Stand? Is that what you're talking about?

CB: Yeah

AS: Ok

CB: We go in there, and charge him nothin'. I remember him young kid next. Used to work in the in one of the restaurants on Henry Street. At Nicks. I would go in there sometimes with older people, and Nicks is some restaurant??? We hung in Charlie's cause he was down to earth. Nick was sort of like a Greek, and the key is you know they had an ABC license. So you know they didn't like kids hanging around in there. But sometimes I go on in there and Charlie would be in there. You know cooking, frying pork chops giving out pig feet and stuff like that. Which I want to go back to. My friend...My friend remember him in Nick's. He charge him nothing. He would give me two, three hot dogs every time I go in there and.

AS: That's nice

CB: Yes it is, but it's...I could talk all day long. He got to come in, so.

AS: I'm going to ask you just a couple of questions, a couple more questions and then we can finish up here. Besides singing, did you get paid to sing or did you have other jobs in addition? Did you have to work other jobs too?

CB: All of us had other jobs, but we got paid.

AS: Ok and what other kind of work did you do?

CB: I did janitorial work all my life. Worked in daycare I always worked where children were. Daycare, afterschool, Salem Prep School, Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church. I never had a birthday party in my life except at Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church Daycare. I was doing my work one day and one of the teachers said Mr. Brown would you come to room B. I went over there. All the kids said Happy Birthday Mr. Brown. I couldn't believe it. I never had a birthday party in my life, but they loved Mr. Brown, gave me gifts.

AS: How old were you? Do you remember?

CB: Yeah it was about 10 years ago.

AS: Aw that's nice.

CB: Everywhere I went worked at the YWCA. I worked with kids every day from Fort Lewis and Salem, G.W. Carver, South Salem, East Salem, West Salem, Brambleton, and none like Mr. Brown. I worked at the daycare at First Church of Nazarene Southwest, Southeast, worked down there in Vinton, and worked with the kids at after school programs.

AS: So you helped with the after school programs?

CB: Yes

AS: Do you teach the kids signing?

CB: I made a...I wrote a song for the children. Every day I would come in and Mr. Brown! Mr. Brown sing this song for us. Sing this song for us! And I would sing and in the song is...well let me sing a little bit for you.

AS: Please do.

CB: Children everywhere take a moment to share in this emergency alright that was my introduction. Some people can be cruel children don't be a fool it's reality Johnny used to play all alone everyday playing through some trees. But someone with a plan lead him home by the hand that's why Johnny's gone. Beat. Children don't go out with a stranger, there could be danger, lurking every step of the way with things like candy and money a stranger could lure you away, away the children they are still missing, still missing, still missing.

This is where I would get the kids to join and help me. I would have the boys on this side and the girls on this side, and I would give them where oh where oh where. I would have the girls sing M-I-S-S-I-N-G and I'd have the boys say find a clue to set them free. Everybody would join in together. Every day would be Mr. Brown sing this song. So Lord lead me to put it on...I'm gonna put it on a CD. I miss singing....then there is another part. Never walk alone when you are too far from home walking through some trees

someone with a plan may lead you on by the hand And so on, and so on. And when I get to the girls that's not too long ago when there's someone's daughter I know, failed to be aware. Now all that's left of her is a memory in time and ribbons from her hair. Children don't go looking for danger. There is a stranger just might turn your blue sky to grey. And so forth. I love the children. I always tell them don't think y'all can fool me. Don't think you can trick me, 'cause I know kids. Right then they go to laughing. But basically that's the song. I wrote quite a few songs.

AS: Well that's probably a good place for us to close on, but thank you for sharing your voice with us, and thank you for sharing your story with us.

CB: You're welcome princess

AS: Alright

CB: You're welcome anytime

AS: Thank you