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Interview with Bob Blackburn

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**INTERVIEW WITH BOB BLACKBURN
JUNE 8, 1988
INTERVIEWER: PATRICIA HILLS**

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PH: PATRICIA HILLS
BB: BOB BLACKBURN

PH: I'm interviewing Bob Blackburn on June 8, 1988. Pat Hills. Sounds pretty good. So I'll ask you the important things first.

BB: Yeah, because I will have to stop [inaudible] unfortunately.

PH: Yeah. Yeah.

BB: Here is the [inaudible]. These are the slides of Ronald Joseph's, and this is the transcript, which Miss Gibson has.

PH: I see.

BB: And that would be very helpful to you, I'm sure. Now, the next thing is that you have to get it from her because she's editing it. There are certain things that he said that are not wrong, but [inaudible] you know, off-the-cuff statements. So she's going to do that, and then you can have this.

PH: Really?

BB: Well, as far as I'm concerned. I can't give it to you, this is not the edited [inaudible] I haven't found anything in there that's bad, but she should, as a matter of course, do that and have him OK it. [inaudible] Basically because he was ...

PH: So you're not going to give that to me.

BB: I can't.

PH: Right.

BB: See, because ... unless she says I can do it.

PH: No, no, I understand. But, and these?

BB: You can look at it, but, I mean, you don't have time to look at it. You can look at those, quick, and see what his work is like. He's a very fine painter.

PH: But she's, you know, she's, I think, I trust her, I think she's a good person, you know?

BB: I'm sure she'll let you have the tapes, but as I said, since it's a question of I don't have the authority to give them to you ...

PH: Right, I understand.

BB: And, uh ...

PH: Well, let me just ask you, though, questions since you're going to have to run in a few minutes, let me just ask you some, ask you questions about, what I'm interested in, is the Harlem Art Center, intellectual life in Harlem, black nationalism versus Communism, and community life. All in the 1930s, as you sort of remembered it and recalled it. What kinds of influences were there to really, sort of, encourage young artists to do a kind of art of social content?

BB: Well, that's a difficult point. It's not difficult, it's just a question of getting into it. And I feel a little pressure so I'm going to have to kind of go quickly. But basically, I was born in December 1920, so that means in 1930 I was 10 years old.

PH: Right.

BB: And so 1935 I was 15. OK. So therefore, some of my and my beginnings with the Uptown Community Art Center were at the age of 13 when I went to work with Henry

Bannarn and Charles Spinky Alston. So I was 13 went he invited me into [inaudible] along with, when Jake Lawrence was there and a few other people and Sara Murrell. And Mike Henry Bannarn who passed, was a very good teacher, very generous man and Charles Spinky Alston was also teaching. They jointly taught a WPA class in Mike Bannarn's studio. And at the same time, there was an artist upstairs, not an artist but a dancer, Add Bates, who was very active. Add Bates played a very important part because he was very active, a dynamic person ...

PH: What was his name?

BB: ... a boxer. Add Bates. A-D-D B-A-T-E-S.

PH: A-D-D? Add Bates?

BB: Add Bates. And he was a dancer, and he was in the theater, and he took me to my first theater performance, which he danced [inaudible] I remember it specifically. And he talked a lot about Ben Davis, he talked a lot about the theater, he talked about things like that. And he was a very learned man, he was a carpenter, cabinetmaker [inaudible] and so on. Charles Alston was the one who ran the school and was the titular head of the operation, although he and Henry Bannarn, Mike Henry Bannarn from Minneapolis, shared the honors of teaching us. I responded more to Henry Bannarn because he was more the painter, more the artist, and closer to my feelings, although Charles Alston came down and criticized our work and so on. So that was a very important part and that was the beginning. So, starting with that, I think that from there, that's where I met people like Claude McKay, and, oh God [inaudible] names ...

PH: Alain Locke?

BB: Alain Locke, no, I met Alain Locke in a different context, but I did meet him up there on one occasion, 'cause he was not part of that group. I met him in relation to a book he was doing, and I can't remember where I first met Alain Locke, but I remember him as being a very learned man. And I also worked with Countee Cullen, who was a poet, young guy, very important black poet. At that time, the word was "Negro," you didn't say "black." You'd get punched in the eye, you said "black." You said "Negro." But, in any case, it's changed and now if you say "Negro," you get punched in the eye. But it shows words have very little significance, it's the context that's important. So that, and about that time, I also went to work with Augusta Savage who had a workshop and school on 136th Street, and Selma Burke. I think they weren't that close as sculptors, but they were, they knew each other, and a little rivalry between them, I guess, but that's beside the point. Age sort of levels all things. Now, as far as the intellectual activity and the progressive activity, there was a lot of progressive activity because this was the period of lynchings, and all kinds of discrimination, and so on. And Harlem was a ghetto and I was a ghetto child and I grew up in that [inaudible] with all of the negativism that goes with that. But it was positive because there was an active Communist Party during that period. And I wasn't a member of the Young Communist League, but I was close to a lot of people who were involved with it without even knowing it, because these were some of my feelings, and ...

PH: Do you think that they took a positive role in the ...

BB: Oh, they played a very positive role. Because you see, one of the things that I remember reading at that time was *Indigo*, which is a book about the indigo workers in India, and I was very impressed [inaudible] very much, but I also had read Frederick

Douglass and [inaudible] Frederick Douglass and I was interested in Nehru and Gandhi, and these books had played a very big part in my life in that they gave me an awareness of certain things that I would not have been aware of, and although I wasn't a ribald, active Communist, I knew that some of the ideas were important to black people because this was the way the world had to go, we had learn to live together. And mine was not Communistic so much as it was a sense that the world is a place that was getting smaller and smaller and smaller. And this was before the African Liberation Movement, as you well know, so therefore, it was important for me as a black, young black artist, I was an artist and a black student, to be aware of, or Negro student [inaudible] [PH and BB laugh], to be aware that something had to be done to change conditions, and as a part of it, I embraced the ideas of the Communist Party or the Communist movement, or the progressive movement, because it went under various names, and some people were progressive without being Communism, or Communist, and some people were Socialist, but I knew that within that context there was something that had to be done. So, that made me very much a part of that.

Now, I think that at that time you had, I knew Jake pretty well, and he was not a Communist, he never was. As far as I knew, never was. Mike Bannarn never was a Communist. But they, the things they taught, leaned in that direction, and they leaned in that direction because we were thinking collectively, which is not the case today. There's no collectivism among the artists — it's all "me, me, me," "I, I, I," star [inaudible] throughout. And I sense that this is a basic difference between that period and the period in which we are now.

Now, my association with Ronald Josephs [sic] came a little later, but indirectly through the Harlem Community Art Center. And there I met Riva Helfond, who herself was a very progressive-thinking person. The mere fact that she came to Harlem and spent that much time with black people to help them and to, to give us something, give me something, and she came from Odessa, Soviet Union, or Russia as it was called at that time, the mere fact that she was doing that indicated that she was a very special kind of person who thought in terms of the collective concept. Another person who I worked with at that time who was a very important influence on me was Vaclav Vytlacil. He was a Czech artist who came out of the ...

PH: He was an abstract artist.

BB: Abstract artist, definitely very abstract. He came out of the school of Hans Hofmann, and that sort of thing, and he'd come from Europe. And I found that he was not only a very positive person, he was without bias, without prejudice, and that was [inaudible] very important to me and to all young black people. If you were without prejudice, then you were on their side. But being without prejudice meant a lot of things had to be operative, because during those times it was very difficult. I mean, you didn't go visiting white people in their houses, you didn't have that many white friends, and the fact that there were certain people who came to Harlem who were trying to, well, you might say, win the black people over, but they also came because they believed in it, and they believed in this kind of interrelation, and history has proven these ideas to be correct, because now we realize that the fact that many people are learning to live together is a part of what Communism was about. Now, as I said, I don't think it's Communism because it goes back centuries before, when these ideas were prevalent ...

PH: The idea of collectivism.

BB: Sure. We live together. We've got to learn to live together. And I think that this is one of the things that motivated me and in my work, and in the work of these artists, we were in a social realist period in America. It was very heavy, very strong. And I think people like George Grosz, people like [inaudible] Orozco, Rivera, all these people were people we revered, and ...

PH: Käthe Kollwitz.

BB: Käthe Kollwitz, oh, Käthe Kollwitz, of course, a number of people in that school and I can think of others, I just can't think of their names at the moment. But that was the tone of the times. And the tone of the times was no discrimination, and, you know, give, people live together. Because we lived in a situation, I went to a school in Harlem, P.S. 139, where we were all black, although I had some very wonderful teachers who were not black. One of them would be Miss Hemstry [phonetic], tough Irish lady, and she was really, really a dynamite teacher because she loved us black kids, the way she put it, as Negro kids or whatever, but she came down on us if we didn't study, and I think that was important. And I now know how important she was, because she really cared about us, there were some who didn't care ...

PH: She held you to high standards.

BB: Yeah, she had high standards, and she was a strong influence on me. She proved to me that you didn't have to be black to be supportive of what black people were about. Some of the students [inaudible] said she was too hard on them, too tough, but those same students, later on I saw them, [inaudible] said "Yeah, we learned a lot from Miss

Hemstry [phonetic].” I think that’s the kind of thing we have to learn to accept. In order to grow, we have to learn to discipline ourselves, and she taught us a kind of discipline.

Countee Cullen, of course, was there, and I think Ilya Bolotowsky and Witonski came in as WPA teachers, so we knew about this [inaudible]. They came to the P.S. 139, they taught us as part of the WPA Federal Artist [sic] ...

PH: Bolotowsky, you said?

BB: Ilya Bolotowsky and Witonski, there were two of them, I remember the names together, and that was before he was “the” Ilya Bolotowsky ...

PH: Right. Well, he did sort of social, he did realism ...

BB: Everybody did.

PH: Everybody did.

BB: We all grew out of that. Richard Wright was coming up at that time, I don’t remember, he was, he was already coming up. I remember Uncle Tom’s Children, I read that early, as I said I had read Gandhi’s thing, and Nehru, I knew about him, and I knew Krishna — not Krishna Reddy — Krishna...Menon, I admired him because he was a fighter for Indian, Indian, this comes a little later, you see, [inaudible] confused.

The Harlem Art Center was the main focus of a kind of collective learning for the artists during that period, there are a number of artists who were associated: Ernie Crichlow, Norman Lewis, [inaudible - “as I said”?] Riva Helfond taught all of us lithography. Then there was a day workshop which I couldn’t come to, because I usually went there after school, ran errands and so on. As I said, this was, I would be there at about 16 years old, or 15, and so it was a kind of learning ground because here I had

mentors and people who I looked up to. And you had the Garvey movement was, I was not much involved with the Garvey movement, although ...

PH: You were, or you ...

BB: No, I was not personally involved in it, because I was more involved in the Socialism, or Communism, I'd [inaudible - "be able to"?] take Marxist classes, I read ...

PH: You did take them?

BB: Oh, I took classes, yes, because it was very important that I learn. I also was very involved in ...

PH: Now, was it the Communist Party that organized these classes, or members of the Communist Party, or artists?

BB: Well, they sometimes would call(?) issues, Communist and non-Communist, it was a very difficult period. To be a Communist was also to stick your neck out. And I did go up to Peekskill. I heard Paul Robeson sing, and I, we were chased out and rocks were thrown, and people were blinded, I remember that very vividly ...

PH: What year was that? That was...

BB: I don't remember the exact year, but it's easy to ...

PH: Wasn't that after the war?

BB: It was after the war, yeah, I think so. But the thing is that, I remember that vividly, because I remember when Marian Anderson could not sing, and [inaudible - "many of them"?] Roland Hayes could not sing. And I remember all these things, I remember Joe Lewis; I mean, for him, his victory was our victory, you see, and it had to take that turn. And this was before we had blacks or Negroes in baseball, and I remember having violent arguments on my job, this was a little after the war, with some of the people I worked

with, who I liked, Catholic and otherwise, about the question of whether there'd ever be any blacks in baseball. Of course, I supported, along with many other people, that there would be eventually, and this fella has been proven wrong, but he said, "There'll never be." And he was, the most interesting thing about all that, is that the person who I talked to was a good, solid Italian Catholic and he really was without personal prejudice, but he'd been so imbued with the idea you are never going to have any blacks in baseball in America.

PH: At least not in the Major Leagues, no.

BB: Not in the Major Leagues, that's right. And of course, he was ...

PH: Is this working? Yeah.

BB: ... when Jackie Robinson became the first, and we all know what Jackie Robinson went through to get to that. And since then we've proven that blacks can play baseball, they can compete ...

PH: There are even blacks who are reportedly Celtics.

BB: Yeah, sure, they're part of all teams, and a major part of many teams.

PH: Let me ask you about Gwendolyn Bennett. She ran the Harlem Art Center and I've been up to the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] and sort of their papers of hers up there ...

BB: Oh really?

PH: Yeah, and it seems to me I have to go back, because there's a lot more things that I have to look at. But it seems to me that she lost her job, that she was sort of red-baited out of the Harlem Art Center.

BB: That's right, that's right.

PH: Can you tell me a little bit more about her? Because I'm interested in her and her role in the community and with other artists.

BB: Gwendolyn Bennett came in, I think she came in after Gus(?) Savage, if I remember correctly. And she was a very dynamic woman, a very strong woman, and she was a writer. I don't know her writing so well, but I know she was a writer, poet. And she administrated, administered the Center, so I knew her in that context, as the administrator of the Center. I didn't know her outside the Center, I didn't know what her political activities were, because remember, I told you, I was only 16 ...

PH: You were young, right.

BB: ... and although I knew about the Young Communist League, I was never a YCL kid, but I knew people who were, and I found that they were the ones who were out there at the battlefronts for Negro rights, and Du Bois and all these people, Du-Bwahz [phonetic] or Du-Bwahz [phonetic], whatever you call him, and what's his name, Paul Robeson, all these people I knew of as champions, and I read some of the books by [Herbert] Aptheker and so on, so these things were not unknown to me, but I was not old enough to be in that circle. See, I was just a little too young, so I didn't get on the WPA, I was too young. Jake barely got on, he was ...

PH: Right, he was young.

BB: ... he was young too, so, in some of these things, I related through, related to through, the people I knew as artists like Jimmy Yeargans who was a firebrand and definitely a strong Communist supporter.

PH: Who was that? Jim?

BB: James Yeargans.

PH: Yeargans?

BB: Yeah. There's some, a lot of his papers are available. His son brought them down from Montreal, and Camille Billops, Hatch-Billops Collection, has taken over all of his papers and all of his paintings.

PH: Where are these ... ?

BB: Hatch-Billops Foundation.

PH: Hatch-Billops?

BB: Camille Billops runs it.

PH: Where is that?

BB: That's, I think it's 490 Broadway. It's an archival situation.

PH: What kind of archives?

BB: Oh, she has tapes of artists, pictures of artists, memorabilia.

PH: Are these black artists, is this ... ?

BB: Black artists, black writers, black theater people.

PH: But it focuses on black ...

BB: It focuses, that doesn't ...

PH: ... black Americans ...

BB: ... [inaudible] non-black, but it focuses on that ...

PH: OK, good, thanks for telling me about that.

BB: ... because there was a need for that, and I know how, I mean, I know Camille, and when she started it [inaudible], and she's been doing this now for the past almost 15 years.

PH: What's her name?

BB: Camille Billops. She's from California.

PH: Camille ...

BB: She herself is an artist. She's a ...

PH: ... Billops.

BB: ... ceramist, sculpture, sculptor, she makes prints, ceramist, and what else does she do? I think that's mainly her. She's from California, so she would not be a part of that, of the New York scene.

PH: Right.

BB: 'Cause she came out ...

PH: She's an older woman?

BB: No, she's not older, I'm older than she is, but she came out of the California scene and I didn't know much about California because I had never gone to California, see. We weren't traveling, I never traveled anywhere until I went to Europe in 1953 with a Whitney Foundation Opportunity Fellowship, and that gave me a chance to go to Europe. Before that, I had never been any—hadn't even been to Washington.

PH: How long were you in Europe, then?

BB: I was there for two years.

PH: Oh, great. Where did you go, France?

BB: I primarily went to France to study printmaking and painting and so on, and I stayed there two years, and ...

PH: Did you study with anybody?

BB: I studied with André Lhote, and I went to the, what do you call it, Desjoubert, Atelier Desjoubert for lithography, but most of my learning took place opening my eyes.

'Cause, see, I had been running the workshop for a number of years up until then, because the workshop was already two years old. This was 1953 when I left, and so I didn't have much time to do my own work and going to Europe was like a complete release, because that was then the explosion of freedom, because France represented a dream for all of the black artists, see, 'cause that was the place that musicians went, that was the place that ...

PH: Well, I know a lot of artists, May Stevens and Rudolf Baranik, do you know them?

BB: Yeah, sure, I know them both, yeah.

PH: They're good friends of mine ...

BB: Oh, good.

PH: ... and also Nancy Spero and Leon Golub, they all went to Europe in the early 1950s.

BB: Oh, yeah, well, for any black [inaudible, "art" or "uh"?] black person, Europe was a mecca, France especially, because it was before African Liberation ...

PH: Right, and there wasn't the kind of prejudice there.

BB: ... and there was less prejudice there, although there is racism in France [inaudible] ...

PH: Listen, there's racism in every country.

BB: In every country. And racism has to do with certain people and certain ideas, but there was a lot more freedom to move around, and I think that that's what opened me up to [inaudible, "a number of things"?].

PH: See, that's what Ann Gibson is interested in. She's interested in how somebody like ...

BB: [inaudible, a name]?

PH: No ...

BB: Ronald Joseph?

PH: Yeah, Ronald Joseph, how he went to Europe ...

BB: Oh, God ...

PH: ... rather than staying in this country.

BB: Yes, I know Ronald, we were very close.

PH: She interested in those kinds of issues.

BB: She is. Yeah. Well, I think it's wonderful that she finally was able to get Ronald to come back. Because I was very close to him for many years, Riva knew him very well, Jake knew him very well, Romare Bearden knew him very well, he was a very bright person who also was pitiful in that he was head of the Artists' Guild, and Harlem Artists' Guild is an organization which was formed as a result of the fact that the Artists' Union did not serve the interests of the black artists.

PH: That's interesting to know, because I was, you know, connecting it, because I've done a certain amount of work with the Artists' Union.

BB: Oh, really?

PH: Yeah. I mean, it's all part of this research that I've been doing.

BB: Oh, good, then you know ...

PH: You know, I mean I've already done a certain amount of writing on this, and what I want to do is to put together a, is to really work on my book, and what I'm doing in the book is trying to do a social and political history of artists in the 1930s ...

BB: Very important.

PH: ... and I want to deal a lot with the situation in Harlem. And so ...

BB: I'm glad you're picking up on it because ...

PH: I mean, nobody, even though you mentioned that there are a lot of, well, actually it was Riva who was mentioning that there's a lot of activity. Well, there are a certain number of exhibitions that have been going, in fact a lot of exhibitions on the 1930s, I've done them myself.

BB: Yes.

PH: I did one on 1199 ...

BB: Oh, at the little ...

PH: ... that was at the 1199 Gallery a couple of years ago, called *Social Concern and Urban Realism*.

BB: That's 23rd Street?

PH: Yeah.

BB: Yeah, I know the gallery.

PH: And Moe Foner, when he was there.

BB: But this is recent, isn't it, or ... ?

PH: This was in '83.

BB: Yeah, that was the reason I was over there, [inaudible] some of those exhibitions.

PH: And Joseph Delaney was in there, and I had Jake Lawrence, but there have been exhibitions, but what needs to be done is a more thorough in-depth study.

BB: Sure.

PH: You know. And the Harlem situation, it seems to me, I know very little. People will talk about the writers, and I've done a lot of reading about the writers, you know, Claude McKay and Richard Wright and all of that, but they don't deal with the artists. There isn't a good history of the artists. And Gwendolyn Bennett is one of the people that interests me, and it seems to me it's kind of key for me to know a lot more about her.

BB: Yes. Well, the thing is ...

PH: But the idea behind ...

BB: Ronald Josephs [sic] knows more about her in some ways, and Gwen [inaudible], Gwen Lawrence, they might talk about it and they might not. And Jake does too, but it depends on how much they want to talk about it.

PH: [Inaudible] sometimes ...

BB: Romare Bearden would know something, but Romare ...

PH: He died.

BB: Right. He died. But the thing is, Romare Bearden was not a part of the political movement. He was not in that kind of, in that area.

PH: Well, that's what I'm interested in.

BB: Neither was Spinky Alston.

PH: I'm interested in the intersection of the politics and the art. Because I mean, really, that's ...

BB: Norman Lewis. But get, Elton Fax can be helpful ...

PH: He was in the video, right?

BB: Elton Fax was a painter(?).

PH: Elton ... he's a painter. No ...

PH: And Richmond Barthe, he was not part of the progressive wing as I understand it, now that I think of it. Sara Murrell, who I think, I think she's ...

PH: Doesn't Elton Fax, does he live on the West Coast?

BB: No, no, Elton Fax lives over here. In Brooklyn.(?)

PH: Oh, OK, OK.

BB: You should get a hold of him.

PH: All right.

BB: He was a part of that movement. But please, talk to Ronald, because Ronald will give you a lot interesting insight, and it would be good if you could ...

PH: He lives in Belgium, though.

BB: He's in Belgium. So if you can possibly work that out. He's a valuable link.

Because ...

Female voice: Bob, it's Irene [inaudible - Clark?]?

BB: I'll be with her in a minute. Can you, have her take a message out there.

PH: Getting back to the Harlem Artists' Guild, you say that it was formed because the Artists' Union wasn't ...

BB: Did not serve the needs of the black artists.

PH: Did not, OK.

BB: The specific needs of the black artists. It served the general needs of all artists, but there were specific things that ...

Female voice: Bob, excuse me, she wants to call you back. When should I tell her to do that?

BB: Well, I'll be here ...

Female voice: In an hour, in a half an hour?

BB: Half an hour, I think. Thank you very much.

PH: But they did do exhibitions, you know, there were ...

BB: Oh, yeah, there were things, and I didn't know much about it because I was not a member of the Artists' Union, nor was I a member of the Harlem Artists' Guild.

PH: Right. Because you were still young. Right.

BB: Yeah. But Ronald would know about that, so you could pick his brains on that because he was president of the Harlem Artists' Guild, and Ronald was not a Communist. Not because he didn't believe in some of the things, but Ronald was an individualist, and we related on that level, because he was more cosmopolitan, and being an artist who thought in terms of—what's the word for it—internationalism, and cosmic ideas, he didn't tend to think locally, even though he was aware of what discrimination was, and when he left America, one of the things was disillusionment with certain things, because he was a very exceptional mind who had grown up as a child prodigy in Ethical Culture. So he had seen how the wealthy lived, and had a chance to hobnob with them, and matched them in terms of brain, outmatched them, in terms of brains and intelligence, but because he was black, he was always put down, and he was [inaudible] corner, and wound up pushing a truck on Seventh Avenue, one of the garment trucks, and that is the thing that broke his back, and that's when he ended up standing on 14th Street with me

and crying big tears and saying he's gonna, he's gotta get out of here. And this was the way many of us felt.

PH: And when did he leave, then?

BB: He would have had to have left in 1956 or -7, I think, 'cause I'd just come back from Europe.

PH: Let me ask you, was McCarthyism, or anti-Communism ...

BB: McCarthyism was very much a part of that era ...

PH: ... did that affect ...

BB: Yes.

PH: ... Harlem artists a lot, because although maybe ...

BB: Oh, yeah.

PH: ... you and others weren't involved ...

BB: Oh, yes.

PH: ... with the Communist Party, there might have been some background.

BB: There were a lot of people who were affected by that, and I was not, as I said, see, I was just at that age where I had not, I was still in school I think at that point, and I had not at that point become involved in the political arena of grown-ups. I was around, I'd hear people talking and I'd hear it come down(?), and I was not reading those kind of books, I was so busy trying to escape from being a black, a Negro. That was my problem, I was trying to escape from being a Negro, although I knew it was very important, and I went to a school, DeWitt Clinton High School, where we were all together, and I was head of the Frederick Douglass Society and we had some things, as a matter of fact I met

Stanley Diamond, primarily because they had some racist(?) situation and we had to keep the black kids from beating up(?) Stanley Diamond.

PH: Who's Stanley Diamond?

BB: Stanley Diamond is a writer and anthropologist. We went to high school together, along with Richard Avedon and Seymour Krim and ...

PH: Oh, you were all in the same high school?

BB: ... Paddy Chayefsky. Oh yes. Paddy Chayefsky. But you see, there was a liberal element there, but at the same time, and Paddy Chayefsky and Seymour Krim, and they would be that, but they were not Communists. That was [inaudible] problems. They were more Socialists and there was a big schism. And so therefore, I was not involved in the active participation of these things because I was so busy [inaudible - verb ending in "ing"] on another level and just to get out of this whole thing, so I missed the precise, clear understanding of what was happening. See, it was that difference between, two more years later, I would have been able to be cognizant, but I was pulling away from a lot of things. But some of the other people who were more mature, like James Yeargans, it would come up in his papers, if you ever read his papers. Ronald had some problems with the Communist Party problems at that time, very specific problems, because he was an individualist, he was black. And so therefore things hit him differently, the same way Marian Anderson had problems with being a Communist. Or Paul Robeson was a strong person, who most blacks admired, some people didn't like him but I thought he was a great man. Garvey was also. But you see, I didn't know Garveys [sic], 'cause that was back to Africa, in a way that we were running ...

PH: Black nationalism.

BB: ... we were running towards America, and America was closing the door in our faces, and that's the big contradiction. We were trying to be more American, and America was saying, "You can't get in." And because of that, 'cause that was the time when we had the black army, separate army, and this, boys were being sent over to be killed, and they were not, and then this was a point where you couldn't drink at the same fountain, all these things were rankling in our heads, so we were trying to get in, pushing at the doors, and the Communists knew this and they could take advantage of it. But I don't think they were taking advantage of anything, what they were really doing was saying, "Look to what you ultimately have to do." And history has proven us right. Unfortunately it's true. I mean, it can happen under capitalism. But I don't know what's going to happen under Communism(?), but I think these are things that happened historically. The more I read history, the more I go back into the Sumerians and the Hittites, and you go back into the Persians, you see these are battles that have taken place for centuries. That's the thing that makes you, and that's why I related at that time, not now, [inaudible] talking about now is more recent, but I related very much to the Indian struggle, because I felt very much a part of that Indian struggle, because they were struggling against the British Crown and being a British subject, but being West Indian, I knew the pressure of the British crown. Now, I [inaudible] meet a lot of English people who feel the same way I do. But I think that it was a fertile period, because it generated a lot of growth and a lot of discovery, and you have to also remember that this was the period when we couldn't teach, I couldn't get into a black school to teach ...

PH: Why couldn't you get into a black school?

BB: Because they wouldn't have you. [Inaudible] discrimination.

PH: They would just hire white teachers.

BB: Yeah. They didn't want you. I mean, you could get into the Board of Education, but being a teacher at that time in the public school system was like, that was the, one of the, pinnacles, and being a ballplayer was important, but you couldn't make as much money as the white players. But all of this has changed, so now we are sort of equal in terms of that. We've, Americans recognize some of this latent talent. Being a jazz musician was like you were down in the lower decks. All those musicians had to push, push, and push, and push. And I go back to the period of the Charles Parker, Bud Powells, and the, Jimmie Luncefords, and when they had the Ink Spots paint their faces white to sing in Washington, they'd white out their faces and then they could sing, because see, things like that. So, this was a transition period, so it's very important to get information, because it kind of gives the American, well, the American white a realization that they have a tremendous cultural history they should take advantage of. Just last week, Sunday, there was an interesting article in *The Times* about books and education, maybe you read it, did you read it? Read it, it's ...

PH: I've got it in my suitcase, I was going to read it on the train. [laughs]

BB: OK, I don't know what happened to mine, maybe I lost it. But it pointed up what has happened in terms of who the classics are, and why the classics are.

PH: Oh, yeah, well, we're arguing over the kind of core curriculum, and what should be included, and what should not, and the conservatives like William Bennett just want to keep the standard white male Western European texts, you know. But there's a lot of resistance.

BB: Underneath this, we're denying white America the understanding it needs to have for its own growth.

PH: Right.

BB: And that's why Tennessee is like it is, that's why Georgia's like it is, that's why Alabama's like it is, because we have denied those white kids a true picture of what is going on in the world.

PH: Well, there's very little understanding among students of what slavery meant ...

BB: Oh, of course.

PH: ... and what the Civil War meant, and what Reconstruction meant, and the failures of Reconstruction. There's no sense of that kind of history. I've been doing investigations about white artists, and there are a great number, and I've, and nobody ever talks about the Civil War Reconstruction when they're talking about American painting in the 19th century, and I have come up with a lot of pictures that white artists did of black emancipation in the 1860s, and then in the pictures that I've discovered, they disappear in the 1870s, because they already indicate some of the failures of Reconstruction, you know. It's very, you know, but students have no idea of this, they have no idea of what this history is about.

BB: What would change our thinking? Because America could be so much richer, and I've been richer by learning more about Europe and more about Africa as I find out that I'm not African. I mean, that's an interesting discovery.

PH: What are you, then?

BB: I'm an American.

PH: That's right.

BB: But I have African roots, and they're very important roots. I have Caribbean roots, and I have roots to South America. You see, because as you read about the conquest of Hispaniola, or South America, you realize it's repeating(?).

PH: But you must have European roots too.

BB: Yeah, of course, we all have European roots. We have world roots. This is a new [inaudible - "truth"?]. I think I'm going to have to get back, because ...

PH: You know, it's been very nice of you to talk to me, sort of, without ...

BB: I'm delighted to ...

PH: ... you don't know anything about me, but, you know, I'm trying to ...

BB: What can you, what can you hurt?

PH: Well, you see, a lot of people are very hesitant. I'm interested in the Communist Party. I'm not an anti-Communist, you know, and on the other hand, I don't want to whitewash what they did, because I feel that the Communist Party obviously made mistakes, you know.

BB: Of course.

PH: But I want to sort of talk about what was really going on, what were the real influences.

BB: It's only through understanding that you come to an approximation of the truth. There is no such thing as absolute truth.

PH: Right.

BB: It becomes an approximation of the truth.

PH: Well, I talk to enough people and get different points of view. And some people don't want to talk about it and they clam up, you know, and other people are much more open.

BB: As I was telling my assistant yesterday, I refuse to be frightened anymore, because the worst thing to be afraid of is fear, and Roosevelt said that [inaudible] and other people said the same thing, so therefore [inaudible]. [Coughs] So I think [cough], I mean, the most important thing to ... [To someone other than PH] I'm coming, [inaudible].

Male voice: Hi, Bob.

BB: I'm just being interviewed for something, but I'm coming right out. [To PH] So, I just wanted to say that I feel that for black people who are Americans to be afraid is their worst enemy. White people have to be not afraid of black people, they have to be willing to go and face them, look them in the eye and talk with them. Now, black people will respect that. It's true, you might get hit in the head. But that's, that's [inaudible - "the problem"?]. The Native American is in the same, we're in the same situation as the Native Americans. We are afraid of them, we put them on the reservation, we degrade them, we beat them, and then we wonder why they come out and drink and do all kinds of crazy things, because we have done that to them, so, as soon as we change ...

PH: Of course, not according to Ronald Reagan.

BB: Well, Ronald Reagan, he doesn't count, because he's forgotten the history. Unfortunately, I think he's doing a lot of damage, but it's not only Reagan. Reagan's just a symbol. People like to use his name. I tend not to want to use Reagan's name as a

reality, it's just a symbol. Because the real forces are behind Reagan. And, so that's. OK,

I think I really have to ...

PH: Well, listen, thanks a lot.

BB: It's a pleasure meeting you.

PH: This is the end of the interview with Bob Blackburn.