

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH BIRISH

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

MOLLY GRAHAM AND MOHAMMED ATHAR

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

MAY 30, 2015

TRANSCRIPT BY

JULI MCDONALD

Mohammed Athar: This begins an interview with Joseph Birish on Sunday, May 30th, 2015.

Joseph Birish: Saturday. [laughter]

MA: Saturday, sorry, Saturday, May 30th, 2015 in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Mohammad Athar.

Molly Graham: Molly Graham.

MA: I guess to begin, could you tell us where and when you were born?

JB: I was born October, 26 1953 in Passaic, New Jersey, St. Mary's Hospital, even though I don't remember the actual birth. [laughter]

MA: I just was interested a little bit in your family history, where your grandparents came from and, if your parents immigrated, where they came from?

JB: Yes. Okay, on my father's side, my grandfather was born in the United States. His wife actually emigrated from, I guess it's Slovakia now. On my mom's side, both her parents emigrated from Poland, I believe. Obviously, they were both born and raised in the United States. My mom was born, I think, in Ami Pennsylvania. It's a small mining town. My father was born in Upstate New York, Tuxedo Park. I don't know if you want any other historical facts, but...

MG: If you know any.

JB: Yes, well both of them obviously grew up during the [Great] Depression so it was very, very tough back then. My dad, he had like seven sisters and one brother, so big family. I think when he was seventeen he joined the US Army in 1939, so that was prior to World War II. He served a couple years. Actually, he was in Hawaii, I guess, through 1940 and early '41, but he left before the attack. He actually was out of the Army before World War II started, but then during World War II, because he had that experience--three years in the Army--he was called up again and served from 1943 to 1945 in the Pacific Theater in World War II. He also was a master sergeant and also did a lot of training of new recruits before he was shipped out to the Pacific. On my mother's side, she grew up in a small mining town, but I think when she was, I think, eleven or twelve they moved to New Jersey. I think she only got through the tenth grade. She also had, I think, three real sisters and three stepsisters. Her mom lost her first husband, and then there was another, I guess. Her stepfather lost his first wife, so they married and that's when my mom was born and she had all these stepsisters as well, only one stepbrother. [laughter] Since money was so scarce she worked a lot of terrible jobs when she was young. I know she picked vegetables on farms in New Jersey and stuff like that. She ended up getting a job, I think, in a hospital as just like a, what were they called then, aids, a hospital aid. During the war actually, she got a very, very good job working in an airplane factory. She started making some much better money. After the war, she met my father in 1946, early '46, and they were married in November of '46, November 16th. I have one older sister who was born in 1951 and then I came along in '53.

MA: I had just one or two follow-up questions about your father's experience in World War II.

JB: Yes.

MA: Did he ever tell you why he enlisted? Was it because he couldn't find a job or was it because he felt patriotic?

JB: Yes, I think it was more the job market than anything else. Plus, coming from such a big family--he was one of the youngest of the family, I think he might have one or two younger sisters, but I think he just wanted to do something to be out on his own, to sort of get away from, you know. Actually, he was born in Upstate New York. They moved to Clifton, New Jersey, so I think he just wanted to do something on his own and the Army, at that time, seemed like a good option for him.

MA: Did he share any of his stories from the war?

JB: Yes, he was always a little reluctant to talk a lot about it, but some of the stories were kind of humorous. He was stationed in the Philippines during the Second World War and that was, I guess, the worst fighting he experienced because he was in the Army; usually, the Marines were always the first ones to land on the islands and they took the heavy casualties, then the Army--he was in the 77th Division, I think--they came in and they reinforced everybody. He did say that he was popular. Since he was like a master sergeant he was a lot of times in charge of supplying all of our troops and stuff like that, so that made him popular, that he could sometimes sneak in extra rations or extra beer to his, I guess, his people. That was one thing he always talked about. I guess the local Filipino people really appreciated what the US Army was doing, trying to liberate the Philippines, so I know one of the souvenirs he brought back from the Second World War was something called the bolo knife, which is just a long knife for chopping through the jungle, and the local Filipino guys, I guess, that he was friends with had given him that as kind of a thanks, so that was one of the funny stories he told about his experiences there.

MA: You listed in your survey that your family was Republican.

JB: Yes.

MA: Were they against Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

JB: You know, I don't think they were. [Cell phone rings] Sorry about that.

MG: That's alright.

JB: I think that evolved more after the war. I don't even know if they were really that associated with anything prior to that.

MG: Do you need to take a break?

JB: Just for one minute.

MG: Sure.

[TAPE PAUSED]

JB: Sorry.

MA: I had some questions about your mother during the war.

JB: Sure.

MA: She was working in this airplane factory.

JB: Correct.

MA: Did she tell you any stories about working there, just her experience, what was it like?

JB: Well, the main thing she said about it was it was really a step up from all the crappy jobs she had and she got paid a very good salary. I think it was the Curtiss-Wright Airplane Factory. I actually grew up in Fairfield and Curtiss-Wright Airport was there, so I think it was very close to where I grew up. But she was commuting, somehow, from Passaic at that point, which [was] probably less than a half an hour commute. I'm not sure if they had buses back then. I don't think she was driving very much back then, so I assume they had buses to take them back and forth to the airplane factory.

MG: Did she tell you about that experience there? Did she stay working there after the war?

JB: No, I think she said after the war they, obviously, didn't need to build as many bombers. She was working, I think she said it was B-24 bombers during the war or B-25s, whatever, but after the war, obviously, they laid off most of the female workers and she went back to Passaic and I know after that I think she was working as a seamstress in what they used to call sweatshops back then, so that wasn't very nice. But after she got married and everything my dad became the breadwinner and she quit her jobs until later, when she became a school bus driver and she had some odd jobs in-between when I was very young.

MG: Do you know how your parents met each other?

JB: Yes, the story goes my mom was in Passaic, my dad was in Clifton, so the towns were very close by and apparently they were both at the same New Year's Eve party in December of 1945 and they started dancing and the story goes they had stayed out very, very late until like five or six in the morning and they were both Catholic, so then they went to mass together the next morning and I guess the romance started after that somehow. [laughter]

MA: What are your earliest memories of Passaic?

JB: Well, I grew up in Clifton. My mom still has several of her sisters in Passaic. We had our own little house that was only about probably three or four blocks from where my grandparents lived. Vague memories, we had a collie dog when I was growing up. They wanted to get out of the Clifton area, so I know when I was like three, I believe, we moved back in--my grandparents had a two family house, so we lived on the second story for about a year or maybe six months and that's when they were building new houses where I grew up. Most of my youth was in Fairfield, New Jersey. When I was four we moved to Fairfield and I spent pretty much my entire youth there until I got to college in Piscataway. Obviously, I'd been on vacations to Florida and different things like that, but my first real, real experience staying away from home for a long time was coming to college, so that was a different experience.

MA: How old were you when you moved?

JB: Four.

MA: Okay.

JB: Yes, I was four when I moved to Fairfield, New Jersey, which was a little bit suburban, kind of rural. We lived on a small street with only like ten houses, I guess, and there was a big farm in back of us. Across the street there was like probably at least a couple acres of forest or woods. It was very nice growing up to have that sort of country-ish atmosphere to play in with my friends and stuff, play Army and all types of activities and growing up in that area. Very safe, everybody felt very safe back then, I guess, compared to growing up with my daughters today; everybody's always a little more paranoid about everything, about letting kids go out on their own. We used to go out on our own pretty much seven or eight hours a day when we weren't in school. [laughter]

MG: Tell us a little about going to school when you were younger.

JB: Well, I went to just the normal elementary school. I don't think there's any highlights of that. It was just a fun time to be a student. The elementary school was local, so it was in the town of Fairfield. Once I got to middle school, there was a regional high school and basically, we had to take buses and everything, but the regional school was actually North Caldwell. It was called West Essex Regional. My town was Fairfield. There were three other towns that all went to that regional high school. The other towns were actually probably a little bit more well to do than Fairfield. Fairfield was more of the middle class, working town. The other towns were North Caldwell, Roseland, and Essex Fells, which had a lot more wealthy people, I guess, but we all got along in high school. In high school, that's when I really became very, very interesting in music, started playing the drums. What really started me into music, when I first saw the Beatles on TV. I saw them on Ed Sullivan when I was very, very young and I thought they were good, but then, three years later, they premiered *A Hard Day's Night*, which was the Beatles' first movie on television. I never saw it in the movie theaters. After I saw that I really became a huge Beatles fan and that really sparked my interest in music. My sister, who was older, was also into music, but not as much as the new stuff. She liked some of the older singers, like Paul Anka and things like that. She was almost three years older than me. She met her future husband when she was fifteen down in Seaside Heights and they started dating. At the time--he was like four or

five years older--he was actually a private in the Army and at the time they met, the Vietnam War was going on, so they started dating and sure enough, a year later, either late '67 or '68 he was deployed to Vietnam, so that was pretty traumatic. They were engaged at the time, but my parents kept thinking, "Oh, maybe they'll break up," because she was still very, very young and everything, but they stayed in touch. My sister's fiancé, his name is Rick, I stayed in touch with him as well because I really kind of liked him. I wrote him letters at least once every week or so, just to try to keep his spirits up. I was in high school at the time, so we all became very... Even though he was over there, he was basically, usually in a pretty safe spot because he was a typist and he worked in Da Nang, I guess, in a big Army typing pool. But one of the things that happened when he was over there in '68 was the Tet Offensive, so the Viet Cong did actually attack all those cities in South Vietnam and pretty gruesome. [Editor's Note: The Tet Offensive, a series of offensives conducted from January 30, 1968, to September 30, 1968, by the Viet Cong against every major city in South Vietnam, is seen as the point when American public opinion began turning against the war.] He actually sent back pictures to me and my sister of some of the casualties and stuff, of people that were killed right around where he was in Da Nang, so that made a big impression on me as well as a lot of other people. We were all very anti-war because of what was going on over in Vietnam there.

MA: Would you say you were more aware of what was going on than other people your age?

JB: Probably because of having my sister's fiancé over there. Here's a funny story. Some of these pictures that he sent--he knew I was younger and obviously, he didn't want us to worry, but he said he wanted to just show us what it was really like over there and I brought some of those pictures into high school to show some of my friends and I remember one of my high school teachers saw me passing these things around and he confiscated them and he gave them back to me at the end of the school day, but he said, "This is not appropriate to show this type of stuff to students in tenth or eleventh grade," whatever it was at the time. That was kind of weird. [laughter]

MG: As a high school student were you involved in any demonstrations or did you witness any anti-war protests?

JB: Not so much in high school because it was a very sort of well-to-do high school. The one thing I do remember when I was a senior--this was in 1971--there were, at least in my senior year, at least two or three bomb scares that were called into the high school. We'd have to evacuate and everything. A lot of times people say that's typical of the era because people were so anti-government. It also could have been people just wanting to get out of class. But I do remember a couple bomb scares in high school, but there were no bombs.

MA: I wanted to backtrack to your early childhood. Was there a local church that your family attended?

JB: Yes. When we were in Fairfield we did attend the St. Thomas Moore Roman Catholic Church. I, basically, even from an early teenage years, was not very impressed with what they were preaching and, in fact, one of the things that really got me very disenchanted with the Roman Catholic Church is the head priest there was actually a big advocate of the Vietnam War

and sometimes he'd preach about how we have to be supporting our troops and everything, and of course, I have, at this time, my sister's fiancé there saying how horrible it is and we shouldn't even be there, but he was stuck there. He actually volunteered because he also wanted to get out of--he like grew up in Upstate New York and wanted to do something different, so he was a volunteer, but after he was in the Army he wasn't very supportive of it, which is kind of funny.

MA: Was your family very religious? Were they devout Catholics or more laidback?

JB: Well, I'd say they were pretty religious up until I guess when I became disenchanted and my sister got married pretty young. She got married actually when she was eighteen, after high school. I stopped going on a regular basis probably when I was, I don't know, fifteen or sixteen. But my folks still try to go every Sunday to Sunday mass, but I kind of became more agnostic than anything else at that point. I guess I'm still in that mode.

MA: What were some of the activities that you were involved in during high school and your childhood years?

JB: Well, as I said, I really became a big music fan. My future brother-in-law actually played drums as well, so when he was in Vietnam--he didn't trust his family that much with his drum set--he left his drum set at my parent's house. He gave me some lessons on how to do basic drumming. Then in high school I ran into somebody that was also a big music fan--I think we were biology partners or something--so he said we got to form a band and I think in ninth grade we formed our first band and had various members throughout high school and that took up a lot of my high school time playing in a rock band in high school. [Those are] very good memories from back then.

MG: Who were some of your early influences?

JB: Well, we were big Beatles fans, of course, and then by '67 there was an explosion of music, so we became big fans of all of the sort of progressive bands, Jimi Hendrix, Cream. The first big rock concert I saw back then was a band called Mountain, that was also very influenced by Cream. The bass player was named Felix Pappalardi. He actually had produced all of the Cream records. We played a lot of cover songs by those bands, as well as Johnny Winter. Grand Funk Railroad was another band that was very popular back in '70, '71 era, so we played a lot of those songs as well. Those were some of my bigger influences from a music perspective.

MA: In your high school years, did you have a favorite subject or favorite teacher?

JB: High school, I was always good in math, so I did remember some of my math teachers were very good. Actually, when I was, I think, a junior, they actually started doing the first programming, very basic programming at my high school, and it was all done via dial-up terminals and stuff, so it was all time sharing, so it was very primitive. But yes, the same teachers that taught math--or I had like advanced math and geometry, all that kind of stuff--they started teaching intro to computer courses, so I was able to actually benefit by that in 1970, taking some very early, basic programming courses, so that was memorable. I do remember there was an English teacher that was really into Shakespeare and he was so good at it that he

actually got the class into like reading passages from Macbeth and stuff. Before that I probably didn't like Shakespeare at all, just the experience of having him read it with members of the class and stuff, he was a good teacher. Mr. Spears was his name. [laughter]

MG: It's interesting that you're good at both music and math. I feel like those are different hemispheres of the brain.

JB: Yes, but they always say it's good to have that balance, that it really balances out and I know that there's a lot of, emphasis today where, music programs are cut, but they try to emphasize that high schools in particular should bring all that stuff back because it really helps with the other side of the brain, if you could exercise both sides of the brain, I guess.

MG: I'm going to move this closer to you and turn the air conditioning on.

JB: Oh, sure.

MG: It's a little stuffy in here. Hopefully that won't be too disturbing.

JB: No.

MA: Major historical events that run through the '60s.

JB: Yes.

MA: You already mentioned Vietnam.

JB: Yes.

MA: I just wanted to know if you had any recollection, any opinions starting from the Cuban Missile Crisis and then we can move on to a few more.

JB: Yes, well I know with the Cuban Missile Crisis, I was in grammar school at the time, and one of the experiences that everybody had to go through back then was we had these exercises where they would have all of the students go into the hallway and hunker down because the hallway was supposedly safer if there was going to be an atomic attack, not that we'd ever survive. But that was a little bit scary, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, that they would have us do those type of exercises where we would try to prepare for something like that. [Editor's Note: In October 1962, the United States demanded that the Soviet Union remove its nuclear missiles from Cuba. The United States placed a naval blockade around the island nation, creating a tense standoff between the superpowers that many feared would lead to nuclear war. The crisis was averted when the Soviet Union agreed to remove their nuclear missiles from Cuba in exchange for the United States removing its nuclear missiles from Turkey.]

MA: During that time you probably wouldn't have followed as much of the news being so young, but your parents, were they following these events?

JB: Yes, somewhat. My dad being former Army guy, I don't think he was overly frightened by that. My impression was that we had confidence that they would find a way to avoid a nuclear war, which they did. I've seen lots of TV shows, I guess afterwards, about the backroom dealings between the Kennedy administration and I guess some of the Soviet diplomats and everything, so it's good to know that there was that type of dialogue available via these not as well publicized until many, many years afterwards. Then of course growing up, one of the movies I saw back then which was directly about that was the Stanley Kubrick film.

MG: *Full Metal Jacket*.

JB: No, no, no. The one about the potential...

MG: *Dr. Strangelove*.

JB: *Dr. Strangelove*. That was a big influence, because seeing a movie like that about something really going wrong and nuclear war taking place at the end, even though it was a black comedy, it kind of made you think. Like, "Yes, we got to get a handle on all of this technology because we don't want the world to end." That was a great, great movie growing up. I mean, I saw it was when I was a little bit older, probably thirteen or fourteen, but it made a good impression on me.

MA: What do you remember of the Kennedy assassination?

JB: Kennedy assassination, I do remember. I think I was in fourth grade. I do remember my fourth grade teacher coming into the class with tears in her eyes and saying, she had some sad news, that Kennedy had been assassinated, and it was quite a shock. Nobody, obviously, expected anything like. I was still pretty young at the time. It didn't have as big of an impact on me only being in fourth grade, you know. My parents, at that point, they were obviously shook up by it, but they didn't dwell on it as much, I guess, since they were republicans as well, but it was a bit of a shock. You don't expect that when you're that young to have a president be killed in that manner.

MA: This is my last question relating to the subject. Do you have any memories of the race protests going on with Martin Luther King and his marches?

JB: You know, growing up in Fairfield, we were very, very removed from the inner city type stuff; although, the city of Newark was probably less than forty-five minutes from where I grew up, so when there were race riots going on in Newark that was obviously something I saw on the local news. It was, again, one of those things that's like it's difficult to imagine it happening in my suburban community and yet Newark is only like forty, forty-five minutes away from me. It's just shocking, I guess. [Editor's Note: The Newark rebellion/riots, which lasted from July 12 to July 17, 1967, were the result of longstanding tensions between the city's African-American residents, the local government, and law enforcement. These tensions came to a head after police arrested an African-American cab driver and rumors spread that he had been killed in custody.]

MG: Did you witness any racial tension in New Jersey at this time?

JB: Not really. My high school at the time, there was only one black student in the whole high school and so there really wasn't, where I grew up, there really wasn't any racial tension at all. Which brings me to when I go to Livingston College; it was a shock, because as you know, Livingston College was probably more than one quarter minority. There was a huge black presence on Livingston College. Coming from a somewhat conservative like high school, I was very idealistic, thinking it should be easy in a college environment for blacks and different races to get along with the white students and when I got to Livingston College I was very surprised because a lot of the black students were very militant, okay. I know they had their own all black dorm in Quad 2 and there was at least one and there might have been another one that was mostly all black students and they really didn't want to socialize with any white students. In fact, they'd say, "You're not allowed in this dorm." It was kind of like, I'm coming from this sort of idealistic atmosphere like we should all be getting along, and then you get to college and it's like they wanted to be separate. Well, not all blacks, but obviously the ones that were part of this fraternity and all black dorms. It was very surprising to me at the time.

MG: Before we talk about Livingston College, I wanted to ask a few more questions about high school.

JB: Sure.

MG: I'm wondering if the culture of the '60s, the music, rock and roll and drug use, impacted your high school years?

JB: The music definitely did. As far as drug use, I was pretty naive back then. I knew that there were some hippie types in my senior class that were experimenting with marijuana and probably LSD and I knew some of these people, but at the time I was a little bit more weary of that, so I didn't really experiment until I got to college, but yes, there was definitely that type of...

MA: Rebellion?

JB: Yes, there was a rebellious atmosphere, especially my senior year with the Vietnam War still continuing and the draft going on as well. There was definitely a big, anti-establishment type of feeling at my high school by the time I was a senior and of course the music emphasized that as well.

MA: Were you afraid you would possibly be drafted?

JB: Yes. At the time, okay, the student deferments were over and there was a draft lottery going on. When I was seventeen--there were 365 days--my lottery number for my birthday came up, I think it was number eighty-two or eighty-three. Then, I think it was right before I started college, they would give you the announcements of, "Well, we're definitely going to be drafting everybody from number seventy or under," something like that. I think they got close to my number, but they never picked it. I just avoided it by less than ten birthdays, I guess. It was a little frightening and I kept on thinking if my number came up and I was going to be definitely

drafted, I was thinking I'd probably, instead of going into the Army, I might volunteer for the Navy because I felt that would probably be safer and I had an older cousin that was actually in the Navy that served on a destroyer in Vietnam as well. But I lucked out, my number was in the eighties and they stopped at seventy-nine or in the high seventies and so I didn't have to worry about that. That was the last year of the draft, was in '71. They ended it after that.

MA: Did you know of anyone who did what you just said, enlist in the Navy or another service branch?

JB: One of my best friends from early grammar school had a low draft number and he signed up for the Navy. That's right, he signed up for the Navy and he was very, very ambitious. He actually became a Navy seal, which is the elite of the Navy and I didn't see too much of him. You know, that was right after high school. I didn't see very much of him until I think '73. Around winter break of '73 I think he visited me and some of my friends and he was sworn to secrecy, so he couldn't tell any details about secret missions he'd been on, but he alluded to that he was sent behind enemy lines in Vietnam to do probably, very dangerous missions, but he couldn't talk about them at the time.

MA: What did you see yourself doing after high school?

JB: What's that?

MA: Where did you see yourself going after high school?

JB: After high school? My folks had never been to college and my sister got married and didn't go to college either, so they were really pushing me to go to college. You know, I really wanted to experience college. There was a girl I met, I guess in the summer of 1970 at a summer job, that was actually two years older than me and she was a student at Douglass here and I idolized her, I kind of felt puppy love, whatever. It was my first love. She told me lots of good stories about her college experiences at Douglass and she actually also mentioned that Livingston was this, really cool college that was sort of trying to do stuff a lot of different. At the time, in the early '70s, they didn't have real grades. It was pass, fail, honors and it was considered very, very progressive and radical, so she made it seem like, yes, this is a great place for you, Joe, and I ended up there.

MG: I had a quick question about the Vietnam War.

JB: Yes.

MG: I was curious what it was like to watch people in your peer group go to Vietnam and maybe not come back.

JB: Yes, well, besides, this one friend Steve, Steve Mocsarri, who volunteered and became a SEAL, there weren't that many other people I know that volunteered. I'm trying to remember. In my peer group, because it was the end of the draft, I can't remember anybody that actually was

drafted from my senior high school class, so that's a good thing, but I'm sure there probably were a few.

MG: How about people from your community or your town?

JB: I don't recall any casualties of people that I knew personally. I'm sure that there probably were a few from the Fairfield area, but I don't remember any.

MG: Did you witness people coming back from the Vietnam War to go to college? Did they end up at Livingston?

JB: I think there was one student in one of my computer classes that was a former Vietnam veteran, but there weren't that many that I was exposed to. After college it was funny, because my first job, when I was working at AT&T, they actually hired somebody that was a little bit older, maybe four or five years older than me that had been a B-52 bomber pilot in Vietnam. It was kind of interesting talking to him about his experiences, but that wasn't until like way after the war. That was like '77, '76 or '77 probably and just my brother-in-law told me lots of stories about his experience, but of course, the most frightening stuff for him was that Tet Offensive because he wasn't involved in the real, jungle warfare like some of the other people who were over there.

MA: I was wondering if your decision to go to college was partly due to this threat of being drafted, that maybe you wanted to go to college to avoid that partly?

JB: No, there was no draft deferment, but my parents definitely were pushing me to go to college and I wanted to experience it. Back then I was so idealistic I was thinking, "Well, maybe after college we'd get the old high school band back together and we could just play music and stuff," but that didn't work out. But some of my friends that I played in high school bands with, after some of them dropped out of college and did play in bands for years afterwards, but they couldn't make a good living out of it, unfortunately, but some of them are still doing that, even in their sixties still playing. I keep it more as a hobby at this point than anything else. But it's nice to stay in touch with some of those old friends.

MA: Did you apply to just Livingston or also Rutgers College?

JB: I only applied to Livingston as part of Rutgers. I was very good in high school. I was part of the National Honor Society. I was also interested in science stuff. I think I applied to and was accepted to University of Missouri at Rolla [Missouri University of Science and Technology] and I don't why, but I was looking at colleges that had like astrophysics. I was very interested in astronomy and that college had a reputation, but then I thought about it later. It's like, "I don't want to go to Missouri," and even some of my high school teachers were joking with me. "You got accepted to Missouri?" They were saying, "I don't know, Joe. You probably want to think about staying closer to New Jersey." Because they thought it wouldn't be a good fit for me, I guess. I think I was also accepted to Newark College of Engineering, but I didn't take calculus and they wanted me to make up calculus or something. Livingston was kind of my top choice at the time.

MG: Besides the recommendation from this woman you knew, what else went into your decision making process?

JB: One of my other high school band mates, he applied to Rutgers and he actually was accepted to the engineering school at the Busch Campus, so that was another big factor that I had a good friend from the band that was going to be at the Busch Campus. After his freshman year [laughter], he decided that he didn't like the campus life and he ended up transferring to Newark College of Engineering and becoming a commuter student, so I was kind of disappointed that after that I didn't have any real, real close friends. But there was another high school friend, not a real good friend, but acquaintance of mine from high school, that also got accepted to Livingston, so there was another high school friend of mine that was actually in Quad 2 that actually became a roommate in the future, in my junior year, so this was somebody else I knew from high school.

MA: Tell us about first getting to Livingston and that first year.

JB: [laughter] Ok, first year at Livingston. At the time, I was in House 11, it was just at random, and my first roommate was somebody that was very, very conservative and he was from Jersey City, so we didn't really get along that well. But because I had my good band high school friend in Busch campus, I spent a lot of time just hanging out with him over there. I didn't have a car, but he had a van, so he was able to drive pretty much anywhere. That first semester I didn't socialize that much with the people around me in House 11, but I had this other, good friend so I spent a lot of time there. Second semester, kind of hazy, but I did, I was friends again with this other high school friend that was in Quad 2, so I started hanging out with him and his friends a lot more and I guess that's when I first experimented with marijuana, drinking as well, so yes, that was a good experience. That was a safe environment to do it in at least. Livingston was very, very liberal as far as drug use goes and it seemed to me like at least half the people, and the people that I knew there, were all advocates of legalizing marijuana and everybody was smoking marijuana at the time, so that was a mind expanding experience, I guess you'd say. Since my good band friend was back living with his parents, a lot of times my parents would pick me up on weekends if I wanted to just hang out with my friends back in North Caldwell and Fairfield, so I did spend some weekends back at home with my parents and hanging out with my high school friends. [laughter] That was my freshman year. My sophomore year, at random, again, I was assigned to Quad 1, House 15 and that's where I really developed some very, very strong bonds and friendships with the people in that particular dorm which I wrote the song about. I think I wrote the song in the spring of '73. I started some of the lyrics and I had my home recording, with just a reel-to-reel tape recorder, where I came up with the guitar part and melody and sang that, wrote the full song back in May or June of '73. Yes, I developed a lot of really, really good friends at that particular dorm. That dorm in particular, I guess, there was a lot of people, I guess, you'd say that were advocates of mind expanding drugs and there were quite a few people dealing pot from that particular dorm, which is referenced in some of the lyrics there. Unfortunately, there were some arrests--two people in particular I knew from my dorm that were arrested back then. The funny thing is one was arrested for selling marijuana to an undercover agent somewhere on the Livingston campus. The second person was arrested actually in the dorm, because there were storage closets and the pot dealers had keys to the storage closets and

they'd lock their stashes in the storage closets because it was safer there because there were people that were also getting ripped off. Apparently, I think one of the cleaning people had tipped off the local police about this activity and the police I guess somehow, they probably went to the housing authority, got keys to this closet. An undercover agent went in there in the middle of the night or three or four in the morning and one of my friends was bringing in a pound of marijuana to put back in the closet the next morning and was arrested right there, taken off and booked. But the good news is that even though these two friends of mine from House 15 were arrested, they actually had very good lawyers. All of them got off without any jail time. I think the charges were actually completely dropped because they had good lawyers, [laughter] so that's pretty amazing.

MA: I had a few more questions about your time at House 15, but before that, I was wondering if you could speak about your classes at Livingston and some of your professors.

JB: Oh, yes, yes. I took some notes, but let me do a few from memory. Since I became a computer science major in I guess, my second semester because I was very, very good at that, but I was very, very interested, obviously, in music and I really liked some of the philosophy type of courses as well. One of the courses I remember that made a good impression on me my freshman year, there was a music course called Sounds as an Expression in Time by a professor Dan Good and it was a fantastic course because it just explored a lot of avant-garde type of music. It was very freeform, you know, he would just encourage the class to come up with their own projects, to do sound collages and stuff, almost similar to what the Beatles did with *Revolution 9*, I don't know if you're familiar with that, but just sound collages and treat that as music, so that was very, very good. The other thing I remember about that course, Dan Good, the professor, was an advocate of something called Sonic Meditation, so he asked for volunteers, and he kind of taught us the basics of Sonic Meditation and I loved that. I was one of the volunteers. On the Douglass Campus they have that big chapel and stuff. He arranged for us to give a demonstration of that to just anybody that wanted to come and we sat there and there was about maybe a group of seven or eight of us that were just doing those like "Om" type of things. [Editor's Note: Here Mr. Birish refers to the sound "Om," a sacred vibration in several Eastern belief systems and a common mantra in schools of meditation rooted in those systems.] That was very experimental back then. That was a really cool class. That's one highlight I remember from my first semester. Philosophy classes, I took, I think, Introduction to Philosophy and Literature. My first professor there was Bob Martin who was very, very progressive. It was a smaller class, probably only had ten or twelve people, but rather than have all the classes at Tillett Hall, he would sometimes teach a class in the lounge of one of the dorms, like in Quad 1 or Quad 2. It was kind of cool that he was open to that type of thing, to just have his classes move around to make things feel more comfortable. Other things, I think I took a literature course called Science and Literature or something like that. I don't remember the professor's name, but that course was memorable in that we read a lot of different authors and stuff and I read my first Kurt Vonnegut novel, which was *Cat's Cradle*. Kurt Vonnegut's still my favorite author. I was exposed to that for the first time in a science and literature course at Livingston, so that was memorable. As far as the computer courses go, they were a little bit more routine, but at the time Livingston was the only branch of Rutgers that offered a computer science degree, so there were some courses at Beck Hall and then eventually, there were some on the Busch Campus as well that I had to take the buses back and forth for those courses, but those were bigger lecture halls usually, with at

least forty or fifty students in some of those courses. But the professors were very good, you know. There was one that I didn't care for, but the all the other ones were very, very good.

MA: In one of the previous interviews we've done, the interviewee said that professors used to live on campus with students. Did you find that?

JB: I don't think any of mine were living on campus. I do know. Like that course I mentioned, Sounds as an Expression in Time, that was one of the music courses they held in the old Army barracks, because they didn't have enough classroom space. Livingston was still expanding at the time. They didn't enough classroom space in Tillett Hall for all these courses, so they had these old Army barracks in the back of the main campus. I think they're all gone now.

MA: That was Camp Kilmer?

JB: Yes, Camp Kilmer, right. Some of my music courses, well, that in particular, was held there. There might have been another one or two that I attended back. It was very Spartan, but they were fine for just that type of thing.

MG: Can you talk more about your computer classes? Computer technology has changed very rapidly in the last forty years, so, if you could, paint the picture a little bit of what it was like then.

JB: Yes. I'm trying to remember. Well, it was basically, the computer courses there were very focused on programming, just learning the basics of programming. I remember I liked the courses that talked about programming in FORTRAN, which was a scientific language, more than the classes that taught basics of COBOL, which was a business language. I know back in ancient days it was all mainframe computers. It was obviously before the internet, before they had personal computers, so to do some of the basic stuff in my freshman year you had to go and take punch cards and you'd actually program these early programs on these punch cards, and then you'd have to take them over to the Busch Campus and you'd put them in card readers and try to make sure that you got the correct results. You'd get print outs after your program ran. You know, there was print out bins, kind of like cubbyholes at Busch Campus, so it was kind of the ancient days of programming. I think in my sophomore year they did get some teletype terminals over in Tillett Hall, and then instead of doing the card reading stuff--it was a little bit more advanced, but these were teletypes with paper and you could type in your programs. You could see what you were typing on the paper, and then there was a phone coupler, again, connected to the Rutgers mainframe, and you could save and send your programs that you had to do for these class exercises to the mainframe, and then the stuff would run on the mainframe and you'd get the results sent back and you'd get the prints right on your terminal as opposed to the Busch center where the prints would be put in these cubbyholes and you'd have to retrieve them, so this was the primitive days of computer science, but that's all we had back then. [laughter]

MG: Was there any talk about an information super highway or a world wide web?

JB: No, but interestingly enough, my senior year I asked my advisor if I could do an independent study in computer science, just so I didn't have to go to an extra course and he said,

"Fine, fine." Because, back then one of the things other to mention about the computer science program, I graduated in four years, I think every year that I was there they changed the requirements for which courses you need to get a bachelor's of science, but the good news was because I started in '71, they basically said everything is grandfathered. If you met the requirements for the BS, for the bachelor of science for the ten or twelve courses that were originally scheduled for '71 and '72, you could use those to graduate in '75, which worked to my advantage because by the time I graduated, I think the required computer science courses had increased from twelve to like fifteen, so I got off easy. When I did that independent study, my advisor said, "You could do anything you want." I said, "I'm still doing all this programming in all these other courses. Can I just write a couple papers?" He said, "Well, yes, I guess, what topic." I said, "Well, I'd like to do one on the effects of technology and computers on just job market and society." He said, "Yes. That's a good topic." The second one I said, "I'll just try to, find some sort of research thing about what's the future of computers." That second paper, I just started researching stuff at random and I found some early stuff about a future of the World Wide Web, so my second paper I feel like I can say I invented the World Wide Web. No, all I did was I found some, I think they were primarily military research papers and I just kind of gathered information and said here's some possibilities of the future and I had to quote some of the authors, their stuff, so that was my independent study. But the other paper was really interesting too. Again, I talked about how I was a big Kurt Vonnegut fan. One of his early books was called *Player Piano* even though that was written back in the late '50s, I think '58 or '59, there were a lot of scenes about the changing of society back then, just from people that were very, very intelligent. It was almost like two classes of people which we're seeing more of now, but only because of economic stuff. Back then in *Player Piano* it was like there's going to be this intelligent class, and then this people just doing all the manual labor and I related that to the computer type stuff too, you know. Technology was driving that type of division as well, where you get very intelligent people that got all the good jobs and less intelligent people that were stuck with the manual labor, fixing the roads, all the boring stuff. Of course, now it turns out to be more of an economic divide than a technology divide, so that's frustrating. Back from my college experience, you got to do something to redistribute the wealth here.

MG: It sounds like you were taking a number of different kinds of classes. Were you just interested in some many different things or had Livingston designed their curriculum to be interdisciplinary?

JB: Yes, Livingston, basically, once you picked your major and I picked my major in my second semester and really, even though I liked a lot of the other stuff, I knew that I was very good at computers and math and stuff, so to me it was the path of least resistance. That that was an easy major for me and Livingston still allowed you to take pretty much anything else outside your major. So, I was able to take music courses, film courses. Livingston had a great film department so that was another highlight of some of my courses there.

MA: Coming into Livingston you always wanted to be a computer science major. Did you ever think about switching to music?

JB: You know, again, my preference was to become a professional musician, but I knew that that was a very difficult. Career wise, that was a difficult career. So, I kind of always kept that

in my back pocket as something I'd like to do but my parents were very practical as well and they always encouraged me to stick to something that was going to be good in the job market, which it turned out it was. [laughter] Even though when I graduated it was a little rough. I didn't have a job until later. I graduated in early June. I got my first computer programming job in mid-August, so it was like two months without any real job there.

MG: Did you form a band at Livingston?

JB: Well, there was a couple guys that I started jamming with. In my dorm, one of the guys was a bass player. I was a drummer. I played other things as well, but I was best at drums. His name was Brian Epstein, no relation to the Beatles manager, but he knew some other guys in Quad 2 that were guitarists, so we formed a little jam band, again this was in the spring of '73, and we practiced. At the time, this was another good thing about the music department, you know, I couldn't really keep my drums in my dorm room. There wasn't a lot of room, but Dan Good, who's the professor from that Sounds as an Expression in Time, he did allow me to keep my drums locked up in one of those classes at Camp Kilmer, so that was good. So, we only played together for maybe two months, but we practiced in one of the dorms, I guess the lounge in Quad 2. I don't remember which dorm it was and we played a couple parties where, we just did some old rock n' roll songs. These guys were more into The Band and the Grateful Dead, so I learned some of those songs and we played some of those songs as well and just did some instrumental type jams, so that was fun.

MG: Would you play out in bars or clubs?

JB: Not with that jam band. In high school, we just played like local high school dances and things like that. After college I formed another band with again, some of my high school friends, and then we played at a few bars back in early '70s. My best friend, this other guy, Kurt, that went to college, I was in a high school band with him. He formed bands. He dropped out of college and formed bands in like '75 and he continued playing bands as his primary source of income for about five or six years.

MA: Were all the members of your college band from House 15?

JB: No, there was just myself and Bryan Epstein were house House 15. The other two guys were someplace in Quad 2, but I don't remember where. But again, we only played together for about two months, but it was a lot of fun just doing that and I did record a couple songs that we played, on an old reel-to-reel recorder from back then, so it's nice to listen to that stuff that I recorded actually some place in Quad 2, one of the lounges in Quad 2.

MG: Is this a good time to play the song you brought?

JB: Yes, we could go to that. Let's see.

MG: This is a song you wrote in House 15.

JB: Yes, about experiences. Like I said, there are some drug references, but...

MG: Maybe you could set it up a little bit for us.

JB: Sure, let's see. This song, because House 15, felt like a real commune, pretty much everybody in there--I shouldn't say everybody, but three-quarters of the people were really into the alternate lifestyle and legalization of marijuana and that type of stuff. One of the drugs that I tried for the first time was something called hash oil which is, basically just marijuana extract, but it's a lot more potent. After that first experience I did write some lyrics about how wonderful it was, and I was inspired obviously by Beatles and stuff. I was trying to maybe go at least some of the lyrics be similar to *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*, even though that was completely separate, John Lennon's experience, but because I'd also experience people being arrested in my dorm, there are some lyrics about that topic, like sort of us against society. [laughter] So, I mean, it's just a fictional song, but it's based on some real life experiences, obviously. Let's see if I can bring it up here. The lyrics come in, it's pretty straight forward.

[Music Plays: I must be out-spaced, or is it spaced out? That has oil savor has confused all my doubts. The stairs are now cushioned, as I glide smoothly down. The lights are much cooler, as my mind spins around. All in 15, we came to know, some quite nice times, belong and close. We were together, partners in crime, parties and ludes, oh what good times. Where are they now, in how many jails, who's behind bars and who's out on bail? I need some sleep, I need a rest. I want to love you, but I'm such a mess. Been partying all night, I've got classes to miss. Here comes the daylight, and we've just finished Risk.

JB: Very idealistic, obviously. The ironic thing about that too is that, even though I have these lyrics, "Who's behind bars? Who's out on bail?" the good news is my friends, even though they were arrested, didn't serve any time and they were all let go, so that had a happy ending, but at the time, when I wrote the song, we thought that there could be the possibility that one or two of those guys might end up serving some time. We were very, very glad that they didn't.

MG: That's a great song. It's very Beatlesque.

JB: Yes, well, I [was] obviously influenced by that.

MA: What other memorable stories do you have from your time at House 15?

JB: Ah, yes, yes, good times, good times. One of the other things like I mentioned, there's a lyric about--we just finished playing the game of Risk. We were big on playing games in the lounge. People liked board games, like Risk and we were kind of competitive about it. Chess was popular. I was not that good, but some of these people I played chess with were so good. In fact, one of the guys that was arrested for selling pot was an excellent, excellent chess player. I could never beat him. The other thing that was very, very bonding, we had very organized poker games every Thursday night. So, they'd start 9, 9:30 pm and sometimes last until two or three in the morning. They were small stakes. We'd bet penny, nickel, dimes. Occasionally, we'd be betting quarters. So, at the end of the night, if you were doing good, you might be up five or six dollars, but back then that was fun. The other good thing about, well, just that era, I'm sure everybody knows because of the Vietnam War they reduced the drinking age to eighteen and that

started January of '72, good timing for me. Our dorm in particular was very, very big on throwing keg parties. Quad 1 threw keg parties. Having the drinking age at eighteen I think was very, very appropriate at the time because obviously, if you're old enough to be shipped off to Vietnam, you should be old enough to enjoy some alcohol, beer, wine, whatever. So, yes, those Thursday night card games, they'd start off and people were just usually drinking beer or something, but at the end they'd get into this routine of just doing shots of bourbon or whiskey, so people were pretty far gone by the end. People were really into this sort friendly competition of playing poker. What else about House 15? You know, my sophomore year was probably the most fun, but some of the folks, there were people older than me there that obviously moved off campus, so some of my older friends weren't there in my junior and senior years, but we always got a good mix of people that came in to replace the people that were graduating or moving off campus. I still think it was probably one of the most popular dorms at Livingston at the time because, we did have that reputation of being, it wasn't just a party place, but also people that looked out for each other, I guess, and it was co-ed too, so I mean we had a good mix of women as well as men. At the time, I didn't have a serious girlfriend, but they did allow, unofficially, a couple to sort of move in together. I think officially, you're supposed to just have--we had all men on one, all women on the next floor, etcetera, but then after they moved in, if there was a couple who wanted to live together then they'd just switch roommates. That was another thing that was very progressive at the time, I guess.

MG: Can you describe House 15? Was it a house? How many people lived there?

JB: Ok, it was a Quad 1 dorm. I'm trying to think. The floors were staggered, so it had on each floor there was at least four or five double rooms and then at the end there'd be a single room. That would be at least twelve times five or six, yes, so, I don't know, forty, fifty people. Yes, maybe a little bit more, forty or fifty people that were a part of each house. It was part of a quad and they're still there. What else about it? It was very Spartan, you know. The whole Livingston campus back then had that reputation of being "The Rock." It was Spartan. They tried to grow lawns there. They were partially successful. I think inside the quads they were able to get somewhat of a lawn to grow, but then outside the quads there was still a lot of red clay from I guess the old Army base and they would always try to plant grass and it would never grow there very well, but I think, over the years they've improved. They probably brought in a lot more top soil and made it a lot nicer than what it was back in the early '70s.

MA: Can you speak about some of the friends you made?

JB: Yes, there's still a couple of friends that I'm still in touch with. Mark Porter was one of the other friends that, you know. He transferred in, I think, from Rochester University when I was a sophomore and he became probably one of my closest friends. We stayed in touch. Actually, after college we stayed in touch. We were actually roommates in an apartment for about three years. He ended up being the best man at my wedding, which I didn't get married until very late in life when I was thirty-eight or so, but Mark Porter was my best man and he still lives in Northern New Jersey in Montclair. He's the editor of the local Montclair Times, which is a weekly newspaper. One of the other friends I made there, his name was Robert Talbot. He was a year older than me. He graduated I think in '74. Afterwards, he moved out to the West Coast. He lived in San Francisco for quite some time, for at least ten or fifteen years out in San

Francisco. I stayed in touch with him and he was always happy to host me and some of my friends when we were visiting the West Coast and California, so that was nice. He ended up getting married, I think in, probably the mid-80s. I did fly out there for his wedding, which was nice. He actually got married in Golden Gate Park, very progressive type of thing. I'm still in touch with him. One other friend, his name was Chris Preuss. I met him when I was a freshman through this other person that went to my high school. He's married, lives in Morristown, but we still get together occasionally. So, those are the three closest friends I have from the old House 15 days. I'm trying to remember if there's anybody else. [laughter] Yes, I mean I got good memories. I mean, I've heard about, some of the guys or some of the people that have passed on since then, so that's tragic, but you know, I'm sixty-one, so hopefully I'll be around a lot longer.

MA: Was there any competition between the different houses?

JB: Hmm, not that I can recall. I mean, there was competition in that, who would host the most parties maybe, or something like that. People from some of the other houses would like to hang out at House 15 because of the sort of communal atmosphere, so we did have some friends, I think. I'm trying to remember. There was a couple friends from like House 14 that always like to hang out at House 15, things like that, but not too much competition otherwise.

MG: I was wondering if you ever reunited with the woman who went to Douglass.

JB: Well, we stayed friends for a long time. She graduated two years ahead of me, so I did stay in touch with her throughout my college years until she graduated. After she graduated, she actually lived in Greece for about six months and Amsterdam for over a year or so. We got back together, because we stayed friends and I'd write to her when she was in Europe and stuff, and we got back together after I graduated. I'm thinking probably, yes, early '76 and we were platonic friends. She always had other boyfriends, but we stayed in touch, yes. It was somebody I always admired, because she was two years older than me and she was sort of like this hippie chick I guess you'd call her, and she always was very progressive and everything. Her name was Karen, Karen Baginski, yes.

MA: Was there any divide that you felt between Livingston College and Rutgers College?

JB: I think at Livingston we kind of felt we were the more radical, progressive college. I don't think I had any courses on the main campus. I had a lot of courses at Busch Campus because the computer science stuff. But I think we always had the impression that there were more sort of jocks and conservative students on the main campus. We didn't really have any sort of rivalry or anything like that. I remember one of the good things about the main campus. When Livingston first started they didn't even have the gym, until--I think they built the Livingston gym in '73, so we didn't have a facility for like, the bigger concerts, but the main campus had the bigger concerts and we'd always go over for the concerts at the Rutgers Barn, as well as they had in the student center, the smaller acoustic concerts. We'd always go over to see stuff at the Rutgers Student Center, concerts, comedians. I remember seeing George Carlin do a show at the student center. He was hysterical. He was great. Yes, that was phenomenal seeing people like George Carlin. I remember, this was during the Vietnam War, Jane Fonda came over and did a big lecture at the Rutgers Barn and I know I went over to hear her and some of my friends from

Livingston as well. That was kind of a cool experience, seeing her talk about the Vietnam War and everything.

MG: I've heard there were a lot of concerts on Livingston Campus too I've heard.

JB: Yes, later after we got the gym. I mean, they'd have the smaller ones in the auditorium in Tillett Hall. I remember seeing somebody that was really, big, never made it really big, but his name was Buzzy Linhart, played at Livingston inside the auditorium at Tillett Hall. Then, when they got the Livingston gym, there were a lot of bigger concerts that they held there. I remember Renaissance being one of the great English bands that came over. There were a few others. I actually wrote them all down, but I should have brought the list of all the concerts I saw there, but there were some memorable ones.

MG: I heard Parliament-Funkadelic came and Earth, Wind and Fire.

JB: Yes, that was, yes, more of the funky stuff. I was always more into sort of, like the English rock, but yes, they had a lot of good stuff. One really vivid memory I have, I believe it was the spring of '73, Rutgers had a big free concert at the football stadium and it was headlined, I think it was spring of '73, headlined by the Doobie Brothers and a great blues guitarist, Albert King, opened for the Doobie Brothers and that was free, free to all students. You know, that was like so progressive that they, Rutgers, was doing free concerts just for the students back then. That was amazing.

MA: Did the Livingston campus participant in Vietnam War protests?

JB: Yes, there were some protests. I remember I think there were some, like outside of Tillett Hall they had some protests and things like that. I didn't particularly participate in any back then, but I do remember there were protests. There was something, I'm trying to remember what year. There was, mostly, I think it was a coalition of black students that took over the administration building for three or four days. The purpose was not as clear. I know it was to protest a lot of different things, but some of the demands that came out of that were pretty ridiculous. I remember hearing things like they wanted free pool halls and things like [that], some ridiculous demands, but it was not very confrontational. I think the Livingston administration let them occupy the administration buildings for two or three days, and then they kind of, everybody just sort of dissipated. It was over without any arrests that I'm aware of. That was kind of a weird thing. I can't remember it might have been '74. I don't remember exactly when, but it was odd that that took place.

MA: Was this a divide between some of these black students and other students? Was it a big divide?

JB: Yes, there was problems with crime on the Livingston campus. So, that was one of the things that we were always wary about and being that there was a lot of marijuana and stuff in the House 15 dorm, I think most of my friends were a lot more security conscious. They were very adamant about keeping the door locked, the main entrance locked and not letting anybody in unless they knew them or they had a good reason for going there. Here's something funny

from back in those days. We actually had a very good relationship with campus police, because you would think it would be the opposite, but they were basically, not enforcing any type of marijuana laws. They would come in, if there was a party going on, like a keg party or something, campus patrol would just come through, walk through, make sure everything was ok and people would be passing joints in front of them and that was basically allowed, you know. They weren't into trying to bust people for marijuana use, let's put it that way. Because people were concerned about security we were very friendly with the campus patrols and we were happy that they were there to try protect us somewhat from people that were looking to rob anybody that was participating in that type of activity.

MG: Thinking about the student body a little bit more, it was a place where people who previously did not have the opportunity to go to college could go to college. It had a very diverse population. I'm also curious if there was a presence and support for gay and lesbian students on campus?

JB: I don't really remember very much of that. I do remember in the Livingston cafeteria there was a cafeteria worker who was I think you'd call him transsexual. He was a man that wanted to become a woman and he dressed. He was very effeminate and he dressed as a woman and everybody accepted him for what he was at the time. That was a memory that was sort of vivid. He had a good sense of humor about it because he knew he was flaming, you know. He was trying to, I guess, change his sex. You'd ask him about it while he was serving food and he said, "Yes, I'm saving up money for this operation." I don't know if he ever actually got the operation, but he was definitely, or she, I don't know the correct terminology, was very, very flagrant about that and I never saw any prejudice or anything. Again, I think people, at least that I was with were always trying to be very liberal minded about that, so there was no homophobia that I was exposed to back then, but I'm sure there were still pockets of it someplace.

MG: What do you know about the history of Livingston College?

JB: Well, hmmm, I think it first opened in, was it '68 or '69.

MG: '69.

JB: So, since I was there, as a freshman in '71, it had only been open for like two years prior to that, so it was still considered an open book, more or less. It's funny because I was trying to like look online at the '74 yearbook just to jog my memory, which is available online and they had a '76 or '77 yearbook, so I was able to recognize a few of my professors, you know. There weren't that many pictures in the '74 yearbook. One of the interesting things was in the introduction to the '76 yearbook, the dean, acting dean was Robert Jenkins. I'd actually had him in my freshman year for a biology class that was called Problems in Population and Environment and I thought that very, very insightful class, you know. Professor Jenkins was very, very easygoing, but he really was trying to talk about the future of the Earth and the problems with pollution and stuff like that. I think it was very appropriate that, again, he was a professor. I guess he might have been the head of the biology department, maybe he got promoted or whatever to be dean of Livingston. I thought that was a good choice. I forget. I think there was a Dean Lynton before him. He seemed pretty progressive as well. Professor Jenkins had written an introduction to the

'76 or '77 yearbook that I thought was very insightful. I didn't print it out or anything. But he talked about how Livingston was this experiment and they really were trying to bring in diverse populations to see how they could function and live together and that, he hoped that all the students being in that type of environment would benefit from exposure to a lot of different cultures and things like that. But yes, Livingston was still growing when I was there, like I said. I think they finished the Livingston gym in '74, maybe early '74 and that was nice. Not that I did any athletics there, but it was nice for the concerts and other activities that they'd have at the gym. Don't know too much else after that about the history, other than I visited a few times after that and I know they finally got a bigger student center, probably in the '80s and things like that.

MA: Could you speak more about the diversity and the different kinds of people that were at Livingston with you?

JB: I'm trying to think. That's a tough one because like I said, the dorm I was in wasn't as diverse. It was pretty much mostly all white, Caucasian students for the most part, but we did have black friends that would come and hang out at House 15, but that was kind of the exception. There was only like two or three that I kind of was exposed to. As far as other cultures go, I don't think that there was anybody from other countries that I was exposed to living in House 15, but in some of the classes I did notice we'd have people from different countries that were attending Livingston as well.

MG: More so in Newark at the time, Puerto Rican students were fighting to be admitted to Rutgers.

JB: That's true, yes. I do remember, yes, there was a Puerto Rican presence and I do remember they had these handball courts that were in back of the dorms and there had been paintings about independent Puerto Rico that were done on those handball courts. I do remember there were some people that were involved. Of course I didn't know them personally, but I know that was going on.

MG: Did you get the sense while you were at Livingston College that they were still working out the kinks of being a new school?

JB: Yes, yes. Well, one of the big things that changed was the whole grading system because up through, I guess, everything was credit, no credit or honors for Livingston grades up until about spring of '74, and then I think it was first my computer science courses, they started going to a limited number grade. I think they were giving you 1, 2, 3, or 4. Then, by my senior year, I think most of the computer science courses had gone to like the full 1 through 5 grades. That was a big cultural change that they were going through that. I remember there was stuff being written about Livingston too, part of this idealistic theme of having no grades and having people be more independent, that that wasn't producing the best results and that they needed more discipline I guess around some of the courses and the grades because people when went out into the job market, you know, they didn't have a GPA. They could have, I guess, maybe some nice writes ups about what they did in classes, especially if you were an honor student but, you know, that was ending by '75. I think by '75 they had most of the departments had gone over to the more normal type of grading system. There was resistance to that. We felt we're losing some of

that idealistic magic that we really wanted. That's why we went to Livingston, because we were idealistic at the time about that.

MG: It seems like there are a number of factors at play, figuring out that some of the ideals were not being applied to the real world.

JB: Right.

MG: Also after Dean Lynton there's a new dean, who seemed a little more traditional or conservative. His name's Mesthene.

JB: Oh, yes. He was in between, and then Jenkins came in as the assistant dean, right.

MG: I think he steered the school more towards a traditional curriculum.

JB: Yes, yes, and there was resistance to that. I do believe some of the Livingston professors ended up leaving because of that. You know, some of the professors that didn't want Livingston to go in that direction. So, yes, that was, you got to be practical, I guess, because after your students graduate there is the real world out there, but we were so idealistic, like even in my song, it was us against the system. We wanted to make our own utopia. On a (brief?), smaller scale, our dorm was kind of like that for two or three years, but then everybody graduated.

MG: Did the economic downturn of the '70s impact that at all?

JB: Yes, somewhat. I know I graduated in spring of '75. I had been on a couple interviews, didn't get any job offers right away. My parents were a little bit worried that I wasn't going to, find a good job. But I lucked out because post college, August of '75, I was just answering ads in the local paper for programmers and ended up getting a job at AT&T as a temp programmer for four years. But that paid well and it led to my other illustrious, other programming jobs and all of my ongoing career I guess you'd say.

MA: Could you speak a little bit about the early days of programming in the '70s and onward?

JB: Yes, sure. When I first started working, again, I got hired as a PL/I programmer, which was considered one of the best programming languages in 1975, by AT&T. At the time I was working at Bell Labs facility in Whippany, New Jersey. The funny thing was AT&T was hiring temp programmers because at the time they were a monopoly, but they knew that they were heading in this divestiture direction, so they wanted to start setting up marketing. The traditional AT&T didn't have a marketing department, so these, I guess, more adventurous, whatever, executives said, "We'll form our own marketing department. We'll hire temporary programmers, so that we can start preparing for marketing our phone services in the future," so, again, we got hired. At the time, this is kind of interesting; I didn't have that many friends in the computer science department. I knew people from classes, but I didn't have that many friends, close friends, that were computer science majors. There was one other person in my dorm that was a computer science major. But when I got hired there were like three guys that I knew from classes at Livingston that were computer science majors, so that was kind of a nice transition to

have, "Oh yes, I know this guy, Alan. Yes, I'd seen him in my classes." There was this older guy, his nickname was Tex, who was also in a bunch of my classes and they were both working at AT&T, so that really helped the transition because I'd had factory jobs before, but this was my first white collar job and those guys, it was almost like an extension of Livingston College in a sense because we were all temps and even though we were working in an office building, because we were PL/I programmers they kind of gave us a lot of latitude. They didn't enforce the hours, you know. They wanted us to work overtime because so that the hours were a little bit more flexible there. For about three years, we worked on creating something called a marketing database for AT&T and it was, the early days of programming. So they'd get these big computer tapes sent it from the various Bell companies. Sometimes we'd have to actually take the tapes down to an AT&T building in Holmdel, where the mainframes were. It was all mainframe programming back then. For the first four or five years, it was similar to the Tillett Hall stuff where we had to work on teletype machines that had the paper in them and we programmed PL/I programs, type them into that thing, and there was a phone coupler that sent the information to the AT&T mainframe database, we could run the programs, etcetera. That was the early programming atmosphere for the first four or five years I was exposed to. Then, that job was kind of winding down and the executives said, "Well, we want to offer you guys"--there was at least thirty of us or so--"We want to offer you real AT&T programming jobs." So have to go down to Piscataway, which is where Livingston was, take aptitude tests and then I got hired as an official AT&T employee in I think March of 1980. That atmosphere was a little more advanced, because instead of the paper terminals they actually had what they called CRT terminals where you could see the stuff. Instead of on paper, you could actually see the stuff typed on the screen. But it was still small batch programming primarily that we were doing. There was some online stuff, but it was very, very primitive. Mainframe online screens that weren't very user friendly, but it was for the AT&T techs to use, that kind of stuff. That evolved over many, many years. Then they invented the internet, all that new technology and e-mail. E-mail was, I guess, very, very big at AT&T back in the '80s. They had their own e-mail system before more of the other companies and then, of course, they got rid of it after a couple years and just went to Microsoft.

MA: How did these new advances like the internet and e-mail change your job?

JB: The e-mail really was a huge, huge change because prior to e-mail all the documentation was basically done with typewriters, primarily. You could also enter stuff on the mainframe computers and you could save your programs there, but the real documentation was pretty much a lot of old-fashioned word processing type stuff. Once we got e-mail, then probably ninety percent of the documentation, maybe not, maybe it was sort of like fifty percent, you know, well, everything was done, you know, people were documenting requirements and stuff in e-mail and you had to send it off to all these different users and things like that. It got a lot more automated I guess you'd say, and then, of course once we got the internet and all the internal AT&T lans, that was a whole other, explosion of technology I guess you'd say.

MA: It sounds like you were with AT&T at a time when they were expanding their reach.

JB: Yes, yes, well, they divested. I was there as a temp in the 70s, for '75 through March of 1980. I think they divested the Bell companies. They split everything up and that was in '79, I believe. After that there was still, there was still some coordination. They had certain stuff that

was still centralized under AT&T versus the Bell companies. AT&T had all the long distance stuff back then, so there was still a lot of interplay between all those various companies for the first couple years after divestiture, yes. It was a different environment. Then, eventually, the PL/I programming got phased out and I became more of a COBOL programmer, which I didn't like as much, but I got used to it. Then by, I'm trying to think, I got offered different positions to just become a manager for production support. That was probably in the mid-80s. I went on from programming to just become management in like, I think it was '87, something like that.

MG: Would you periodically have to go back for training as technology was changing so fast?

JB: Yes, AT&T was actually pretty good about that. They did have, because Bell Labs was also associated with AT&T, so back in early '80s, besides a lot of classroom training, they were also pioneers with doing training on, the big videotapes, so you could take some certain, like technology courses and watch it on the big screen, but yes, they had a lot of, courses for, learning different things, different programming type stuff as well as database technology. So, they'd have like week-long courses where you'd go off to the AT&T learning center where you could learn, stay abreast of all the latest developments, things like that. They were pretty good about that.

MA: What would a manager position entail?

JB: Well, when I was a manger, again in the early '80s, it was for a production support team which was probably, it varied from about ten to fifteen people. Again, I was supporting mainframe AT&T applications. The main thing was AT&T would have to do like new releases for their billing systems on a periodic basis, like every quarter or something, as well as some other internal system that they were using. After the development was complete, it would get turned over so that these new applications could run in a production environment with the AT&T users being supported. If something went wrong because it wasn't tested properly, my team would be on call twenty-four by seven. If there was something major that went wrong, they would kind of be the liaisons to contact the AT&T programmers that had turned over these programs, bring them in and try to get stuff to work properly. If it was just more like simple mainframe stuff, there were people trained to do that type of support--fix if they ran out of space, or volume type of things. They could handle the simple things as opposed to an application that had defects and was malfunctioning and was not working properly.

MA: On your survey it says you joined IBM in 1999?

JB: Yes. What happened was AT&T was going through a lot of changes and they were divesting a lot of their data processing stuff and IBM, at the time, was basically doing a lot of that stuff, so it was a big outsourcing deal in June of '99. My production support team, we were all transferred from AT&T to become IBM employees, but our job function really stayed the same for a year or so. We were still doing the same type of production support activities for the AT&T customer. We were just IBM contractors doing the same type of work and with similar pay and similar benefits, but not quite as good. [laughter]

MG: Can you talk about the camaraderie? It sounds like when you first graduated Livingston you had some other Livingston folks with you.

JB: Alumni, yes.

MG: I can't imagine in the computer world there were a lot of other people with an ear piercing or the rock n' roll background you did.

JB: Yes, well, a lot of the people I worked with right, my first job there we were all big music fans. In fact, Alan Levy was the guy that was hired there, helped interview me and bring me in. We, because we were both huge music fans, we would try to get tickets to see some of the same concerts, like we were both fans of the Who. We saw Bob Dylan play back then in '76. Rolling Thunder Revue, which was fantastic. So, yes, you know the atmosphere was like work hard, play hard, right, so we'd always go out. There was a cafeteria obviously, where we worked at Bell Labs, but we usually would like to go out for lunch and there was a lot of bars close by where, people could actually, you know, back then it was very acceptable to have a beer or two at lunch and come back to work, you know. Now, I guess, that's more frowned upon, but that was a very bonding experience back then too, that we'd have, go out for lunch as a team with, you know, at least five or six of us together, sometimes more. Even our managers back then sometimes would take the whole team out to celebrate something. You know, you get treated for lunch or after some big release or something sometimes they'd have parties, a couple big release parties after work, which was nice because AT&T picked up the tab for all the stuff. You don't see that very much in the big corporations now. I mean, back then it was really, AT&T was a great place to work at because of that atmosphere. They were a monopoly at the time. So, there wasn't a lot of danger of people getting laid off or jobs going overseas, which is a big problem or issue I think today with a lot of the big American companies.

MA: You said you were married in '98?

JB: '92.

MA: '92, sorry. Can you talk about that a little bit? How did you meet your wife?

JB: Yes, actually yes, we met in June of 1990. It was through mutual friends at AT&T. I had somebody I worked with at AT&T that was, I guess, having a weekend party or something and my wife's best friend also worked in Piscataway with this other girl who was having the party. We were both invited to the same party and we met and it was one of those sort of drinking parties and we were drinking a lot of beer and stuff and we just kind of hit it off. So, it was one of those things where I guess she was kind of looking for somebody and at the time I was not involved in any serious relationships, so it kind of clicked, it worked out. Yes, we just started dating probably within a week or so of that first meeting. We exchanged telephone numbers. Back then before cellphones and everything had to write things down. We started dating and things worked out good. She was actually much younger than me. She was twelve years younger than me, still living with her parents, but I had my own house at the time, so that was a big draw. I had still a lot of friends that were playing out in bar bands, so we'd go out and see my friends play. At the time, she really liked doing that type of stuff, so that worked out well

and we got engaged less than a year later. I had a whole bunch of friends that were big at going to the New Orleans Jazz Fest, so I dragged her out and she actually, that was May of '91, because we got married '92, so we, because there were so many of my friends and a lot of stuff going on, we actually had some big fights down there, but in the end we kind of worked everything out and at the end, the last day or something, I took her out to a nice restaurant and proposed to her and she accepted. That was May of '91 and then we took our time and organized, wanted to make sure we had everything set up for our wedding, and we got married in August of '92, about a year and three months later. One of the tragic things that happened though was her father had contracted stomach cancer; so, unfortunately, he passed away before we got married. He passed away. I guess it was July of '91, so about a year before we got married. That was kind of tragic, but her mom still survived, at least until, she passed away. I lost both my parents as well in the past ten years or so. But yes, that was fun times back then, I guess you would say. We had a great time and it was a memorable wedding and everything and went on a nice honeymoon to Paris for a couple days and then we took a tour of England with a bunch of other people. But we started in London and we were in England for about two-and-a-half weeks. She had also worked at AT&T. Not in the buildings or anything that I worked and her father also worked at AT&T for most of his life, so.

MG: Tell us a little about your family life.

JB: Ok, yes.

MG: And then we'll let you go. [laughter]

JB: Family life, yes. Well, we were married for a couple years and then we had our first child, Lauren, who was born in October of '94. That was a big change, having a child because prior to that we pretty much didn't have a lot of responsibilities and we both had pretty good jobs at the time, so we didn't have a whole lot of serious responsibilities until after Lauren was born, but Lauren was actually a very good baby. Caryn took, I think, at least six months off or no, probably a full year off, and then went back to AT&T after that. But we were living in the house I owned in Highland Park at the time, which was a small Cape Cod, but it was fine for just the three of us. Then we ended up thinking, "Well, if we're going to have a bigger family and stuff we need a bigger house," and we ended up moving to North Brunswick and got a brand new house. That was around '96 I believe. Then our second child, Emily, was born around '98, February of '98. At the time, Lauren was about three, three and half, so she was a good big sister, able to help out with her little sister. Emily was a little more difficult as far as sleeping through the night and stuff like that, so that was a challenge, getting a lot less sleep with her. But after the first six months or so, Emily turned out to be a pretty good sleeper. They're both great kids, you know. Can't believe it's like Lauren is going to be a senior in college. Emily's going to be a senior in high school. Now that they're much older they tend to have a little bit of sibling rivalry, butt heads a lot more. Me being older than my wife, they like to tease me about being the old man. [laughter] In fact, when I told them I'm coming here to do this oral history of my college experiences, they're saying, "Nobody's going to want to hear about that stuff." You know, they're busting me about that, but I'm saying, "Well, I still think it's kind of a fun thing to do." [laughter]

MG: As they approach college age and as Lauren is in college, what about your college experience have you told them in the form of advice?

JB: Lauren's going to be a senior and Madison is kind of a very good school. I think it was a good fit for her. Even though she's twenty, it's still one of the schools where she gets to drink at parties like I did even though she's not legal, so she understands that that was a big part of my college thing, and of course it was legal when I was eighteen. But she's more easygoing, I think. Maybe some of that's rubbed off. My wife's a little bit more strict, I guess. I'm kind of the pushover and that's probably from my college experience too. I was very easygoing and everything like that. My younger daughter is a little bit more straight-laced. She doesn't approve of her older sister drinking or going to parties, but she's seventeen. She's at that age too where, she's still kind of learning, you know. It's a growing experience becoming a senior and stuff. I think she always kind of feels like she's in competition with her older sister. She's also an A student and very, very good, but she struggles. She has to work a lot harder. Everything kind of came easy to Lauren as far as academics go, but Emily was just inducted into the National Honor Society in high school, about a month ago, so that was a nice thing for her. She's still thinking about different colleges and stuff, you know. I'm always working. My wife's not employed now, so she always takes the girls on the college trips and stuff to visit different campuses. She's taken Emily to several college visits so far. I don't think she's made up her mind, but we'll see where she ends up, you know. She definitely wants to go to college, but she's not sure of a major or anything like that. Lauren starts her internship next week. My wife and her are driving back to Madison on Tuesday and I believe she starts probably a week from Monday. She starts her internship. She's a little nervous about it, but she's also pretty confident, so I think she's going to do well. Her internship is at a bank, so she's not that thrilled about working at a bank, but it's experience, you know. It's good to have experience, as I'm sure you can attest to.

MG: Everybody I have interviewed for this project has said that Livingston was the pivotal moment in their life, set the direction for their life or has stood out as one of their most important moments. What about Livingston makes it so special?

JB: Well, I guess, the idealism of going to a school like that from my experience '71, '75, where the professors did have that attitude that we want to break the mold. We want to do something different. Most of them were on board with the whole thing about there shouldn't be as much focus on grades. People need to focus on learning, and learning all types of different skills, not just to be focused primarily just on getting a skill for a job, you know. You should be going to college to expand your horizons, learn. Learn about life. I think that was something that I kind of got out of Livingston. Again, I was very idealistic and very naive at the time and being in a fun dorm like House 15 really gave me that feeling of community, that we were all in it together--it was kind of like I put in the song--and that we could make a better world. Obviously, the whole Timothy Leary philosophy of improving the world through the use of LSD and mind expanding drugs didn't pan out, but at the time people kind of still, in the '70s, were still kind of thinking that might be something that could help and I know now there is, obviously, a lot of legalized marijuana. Not that I indulge in it anymore, but back then it was a very positive experience for me.

MA: Have you been back to Livingston since you went there and have you noted any changes?

JB: Been back a few times. Actually, in '84, I guess it was, before I met Caryn I was dating a girl that was a Douglass student. She had friends that were also, I guess, at Livingston, so back in '84 I do remember going back. Another, it was like another Springfest and I think it was we saw a big, free outdoor concert right outside of actually Quad 1 with the Ramones headlining, so that was a very cool experience going back to see the Ramones. That was in '84. I'd also been back several times in the '80s to see concerts at Livingston Gym and even the big athletic center at Livingston Campus. I saw REM back there, as well as Eddie Murphy, the comedian did a big concert and I took, at the time, my girlfriend. She got tickets and we saw like Eddie Murphy at the Livingston Athletic Center, so that was kind of fun. Talk about recent stuff, not Livingston, but my daughter's at The University of Madison and Rutgers just joined the Big Ten, so she flew back to see the Madison Badgers play Rutgers back in October, and they killed them. They shut them out forty to nothing or forty-two to nothing, so that was a recent experience where we went back to see--of course we were routing for the Badgers, but we saw Rutgers lose to the Badgers in that last October. But I haven't been back to Livingston as much, but it's fun seeing the game. I know that the big Rutgers football stadium is gigantic now. They really expanded the past ten years, I guess. That's it.

MG: Alright. Well, you've been so generous with your time. Thank you so much. If we have any follow-up questions we'll let but we covered a lot.

JB: Sure.

MA: I think we got everything we needed to get to you.

JB: Yes, and if you wanted to make a copy of those funny, fake quiz from one of the assistant professors you're more than welcome to do that.

MG: I do. I think I'll take a photo with my phone.

JB: Sure, yes.

MG: Well, thank you. I'll turn this off now.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Transcribed by Juli McDonald 01/05/16

Reviewed by William Buie 10/21/16

Reviewed by Joseph Birish 11/25/2016