

INTERVIEWER: We're just going to jump right into it.

Russell: I'm to talk a little louder. Mama told you that, right?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, yes, yes. So tell me about your place of birth, where you are from, and what was going on there when you were growing up. What was your childhood like?

Russell: Ha ha ha, well now. I have a, I have um, what I call um, memory, that is not really memory. Meaning by that, that I was born in El Pitas, Santo Tomas. And uh my mother tells me that the first days of my life were spent in what is now known as Choreo Bottom. The bottom part of Choreo and uh from what I remember from what she has told me over the years is that um the walls in that part of the city were very thin. And her friend uh Marques, lived next door and they could speak through the doors and through the windows and they would hear the babies cry so I don't remember that but, strangely over the years the young ladies who were born almost the same time became my good friends. And they uh one of them married a young man who was a very good friend of mine, uh José Blackburn. But the gentlemen that live in that apartment, home, room, what ever you want to call it that we live was Marques, Rene Marques, he was a jeweler, and he had a jewelry store on 21<sup>st</sup> Street. But my life at that time that I can recall, uh would be part in La Boca, part in Colón, and the greater part in Rio Bajo.

... Colón was where my father had a photo studio on 7<sup>th</sup> Street on Avenida Bolviar. Uh at that time he was considered one of the best photographers in Colón. His name was Russell Photo studio, right? On the corner between Bolivar and *Batlale*. In fact, I remember clearly around the corner of um Arena de Colón where I got involved in this sweet science of boxing. He would take the pictures of uh Chocolate, Finigan, Baby Allen. I met Tentis Hall and Woodruff. Even for a time in those early years, uh the um boxing. Colón was the capital of boxing universe in Panama. Uh San de Sadler, Tito de Spain, so many you know, because at that time.

Uh La Boca, well that's different. I went to school there briefly um one of my first teachers under a home, which was part of the Caribbean tradition were uh teacher would teach you under the

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houses, because in the canal zone at that time they were built on columns. And La Boca, as you know, the uh “Silver” quote unquote, city because that’s where black folks, and Salvadoreans, and others lived. White folks live in Balboa and Cristoból and *Subata*, but her name was Mrs. *Rantz* and that’s were I guess I learned *the doll book* and infant reader and so forth. I also spent a part of my education in um La Boca school, elementary school. My memory tells me that my teacher’s name was Mrs. Dockins. Uh I remember her.

And La Boca was perhaps one of the places I remember with a lot of affection because I remember at certain periods during the years, seasons, oh thousands of butterflies would uh fly across the lawn that existed between the school and where we lived and kids would nail cardboards on sticks and swat them they were green and black, and they still do it. Going across migrating across the Canal. I would remember that. I remember my mother perhaps, uh we also used try to be, sword fights. You know, play that and she would make the uh wooden sword fights, with the swords for us with a can to protect your hand and so forth. I remember we trying to play cricket you know with the, with the garbage can and the only thing I remember from cricket is LBW liked before wicket. I can remember one of the first movies that were, that was shown in the new, in the new theater, la Boca clubhouse theater. It was called Stage Door Canteen. But the old clubhouse, you had to climb a step to go upstairs to see the movies, so uh there were difference.

I would remember uh walking to when I, later years when I was in the ins-- yeah I was in primary school because one of the things about Panama in those days, racism was and still is rampant. And in order to get into school in Panama Proper you had to have an *acudiente*, someone who would vouch for you. And it was a lady by the name of uh Kennedy. She vouched for me and I was able to go to school in Escuela Republica de Chile Numero Uno. That was in the exposition. And uh I used to see the kids selling newspaper, La Hora, and uh I would try to say let me see if I can go sell newspapers. I went one day and I paid about 50 cents for a couple. And uh walking back to la Boca I threw them away because I knew if my, my parents saw me selling newspaper it would have been, and yes they were very poor. And uh there was always a kind of nuance of you were poor, but you were not poor. Certain things you shouldn’t do. I guess in retrospect that’s part of the Caribbean arrogance you know and uh part of the class uh in the system, that, and it still exists today.

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In fact, that reminds me as I speak, when I graduated from high school, I did not have a job. And there was a man by the name of Mr. Denton. He was an evangelist who worked with us at St. Christophers Church in Parque la Febre. And he offered me a job driving a motorcycle. I didn't take the job driving a motorcycle because I didn't want young ladies see me driving motorcycle. Again the same class nonsense that existed there. But my, my life really in terms of my youth. I said I went to, uh in Colón I went to um first grade, Escuela Republica de Chile, I think, no I don't think I know, my teacher's name was Ana de *Avila*, you know in first grade. Um I had a some of my best friends at that time, were uh Amit Francis who later became a gynecologist. Um Paul Martin who's in New York, Armando Sablo, Alfredo Heinz. These were people that we Papito Chichi.

And the key to Colón was the 7<sup>th</sup> Street Beach. Every morning you would go la playita and swim. Next to it was the stranger's club which was restricted in the sense only um waiters, if you were black you could never go to that. That was off, off limits. The Washington Hotel was also off limit. I was in Colón during the fire, I remember the red train that uh would come from Panama to, to Colón. I don't know. There's so many different things about that but uh as long as we proceed I would, you know just tell you that it was a very active life. The thing that I remember very much about Colón was lively. It was active, it was a heart with a beat. I was fortunate. I had the best of Rio Bajo, La Boca, and um and Colón. Colón was a place where a lot of black folks lived, and in fact for awhile the language, the primary language was English. And I always laugh because I remember and now in retrospect that I, I'm aware of it because in those days you took it for granted. As kids it happens you pay it no mind. But in later years the *metrolacas*, the ... who became President, if I heard him speak he was a *Colón guay* and uh *la luz*, Victor Naves, all of them spoke English.

Uh there are so many things that we as Africans of Caribbean ancestry should not forget was the, what we have done and what we have given to this country and how much of what has happened, has happened because of the introduction of the blatant racism that came from the United States plus what was learned here. It did exist prior if we remember because in 1941 the constitution of this country clearly stated that people of um Caribbean immigration not only of us, the Chinese also, but what

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was then called *una raza prohibida*. And uh that was there under at the time the president of the country was um *Arno Fuerias*. But what I'm getting at is that there was a different matisse, a different structure, a different texture, of the society. Yes, there was a division, but language also played a very important role. The fact that many of us spoke English because we were of Caribbean ancestry, uh then made us *chumbos* and that then created a degradation of a people to the extent that some people internalized that, and even today the people of name of Cooper and Smith and Johnson I'm glad, I, I'm not glad. I'm sorry many of them don't speak English because to speak English was tantamount to accepting a mediocre existence. And the distinction between *costeños* and Caribbeans was so, was and is, so prevalent.

I would argue that to some extent it is becoming less important, nonetheless the class distinctions still exist. And uh the things that one would say for instance, one would be more proud to say I am a friend of so and so, uh rather than I am black and we're taught you say *moreno*. Yo soy *trigueño*, rather than saying yo soy *negro*. Black still has the negativeness in old days in the States where I spent as you may well know, fifty years, fifty-five. Words like black magic, you know, black is back. You know, the cowboys wear white when he's a good guy and the black hat is for the black cat. So black is always black cat, see what I say? Black cat is a negative thing. So in essence, all of that was operative. In fact, there is language I remember when I was in the national institute, my fourth year, I wrote an article, a short story really in Spanish and when I gave it to the teacher she read it and she said I could not have written it. Why? Because the Spanish was, it was too. It's something that a *chungo* could not have written in other words.

But what people fail to understand, writing and speaking are two different realities. When you are writing you can stop to think and make a correction, when you are speaking you are either translating and to make to that uh simultaneous translation one then makes mistakes, but uh, the, the, the process of sitting down and writing and thinking is a process that permits you to select the proper, correct descriptive word for that which you want to um express or explain. Even as I speak with you, since it is in English, and my early days was in English and later my education, my graduates education was in English and what I've worked for is in English. Then there's no need for translation. Uh were I shift to Spanish then to be certain that so they say well you are speaking proper Spanish and I laugh because I try to tell people when you

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Speak about proper language, proper English or proper Spanish it's all a myth. I use English for example, if you're from Brooklyn you say *thoidy thoid and thoid*. If you are from Massachusetts you'd speak slowly different. You would not pronounce your R, just listen to Kennedys or any of them speak. If you are from the South, worse yet. So the question of our, better yet, if you're from Britain you would say a lift rather than elevator, uh torch rather than flashlight. You're Cockney or what. So which is the proper, which is correct? It all depends on where you are and where you sit and ultimately the key of language, the objective is to say that which you want to convey and the African in the Caribbean or here was extremely adept at internalizing the many dialects of English or Portuguese or whatever and make it into one.

So when he or she speaks and we say it's bad English, it's not. It is simply a language that he or she acquired to be able to transmit ideas. So when we say *patois* as if it is broken French, nah, it's another language that emanates because language for me at least is a um flexible; it grows. Right now, for example, when you speak about the Spanish the new language, new words in the La Real Academia, it changes every year so where are we going with that? All one has to do in my judgment is to be certain that the ideas that you want to express are clear, are precise, and are thought out. Not be afraid of saying it any way because those who say they speak proper English, proper French, proper Spanish are doing that merely to impress and not necessarily to convey what they really think. And that's where we are in terms of the youth. I hope that helps.

INTERVIEWER: So tell me about your parents and grandparents what were or are they like? Where were they from? How do they come to Panama? You know, what do you?

Russell: My grandfather, Wilfred Cartrington, is Swithern, Wilfred Swithern Cartrington, Swithern was his middle name from Barbados. I ask my mother in later years what was Swithern? I had never heard that name before. It was it the name of some saint or something like that. They came from Barbados during the time of the construction of the Canal. My grandmother was Helen Chism. Uh she was from Jamaica. Uh there's something kind of unique about what happened in Panama. For me, Panama became the wedding bed for people from the Caribbean because if you remember, not do you remember, but just historically there was a struggle generally speaking between the islands, big island vs. little

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island. Uh, Barbados little island, conservative Jamaica thought it controlled everything. So at those times I never really interacted but coming to Panama there were no women per se. So here is where a lot of things occurred and my grandfather and my grandmother got together. But for instance, my uncles, my uh grandfather's brother I don't know his first name but they couldn't pronounce his name here so they called him Tom. So I knew him as Uncle Tom. See? How they destroyed and distressed our names when we came and uh destroyed a lot of connections. Uh my um mother in later years would tell me how um poor they really were. And one of the things happened that one of her brothers had asthma. Uh so they sent him to Jamaica and he grew up in Jamaica. So growing up in Jamaica there was another large branch of the Cartrington trees. I did not meet him until many, many -- *Oret*. Cartrington and his father, Herbert. I did not meet them until till uh Brooklyn, in Brooklyn. And now he is in Long Island and they're very good. We have become close. But I don't think that those of us today really recognize the struggle and what our brothers, our grandfathers did. I, many of my friends were sent to Jamaica to school you know, and they came back. Paul Martin is one of them I can remember who um went to school in Jamaica. My father also he tells me he went to school in Jamaica. But the interaction, the reality in a sense was that many of the people that came from the Caribbean islands came according to them only to stay a little while and go back. But many did not go back and, and because of that, they also thought that they were quasi superior to the local populous. Now their language was, as you know, English, French, and uh whatever. And their, could I call it, commitment, the political and emotional and social commitment was to Great Britain. In fact, they looked down on the United States and if you had an edu-- if they, they preferred an education from jolly old England rather than New York or Washington. But I say that to kind of uh express a view of the turbulent of the times and it is at that time also that many began to get involved with the local women. You know, there's so many different stories about that time. That's for another story and a different time. But in truth, the Panama, as my grandfather tells me. He never really learned to speak Spanish, we only had one word Cuba, Cuba. What he would say, my mother on the other hand, my mother in later years, went to school to learn to speak Spanish, okay. At today sometimes she uses words that when, well, when it was a surprise because those were school languages that she learned. Not on the street but in a school so in a sense she speaks the proper Spanish when she so decides. In essence, the, my, my, my parents then are from

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Barbados and Jamaica that I know. My father's family I think, I am not sure, could from Martinique or Guadalupe okay? Again see as I said earlier Panama was a nuptial bed for everyone that brought the um, the um Caribbean folks together right here in Panama. It has always been.

INTERVIEWER: So tell us one of those stories about those, those gentleman.

Russell: Well, in one of my uh books, An Old Woman Remembers, I give or relate the story of um these women who um whose brother and lover left Barbados to come to Panama. Once in Panama, one of the men, no women, has a child over here. And um when in later years when he asks his woman to come to Panama, she recognizes that there's a difference in culture that the woman brought the baby and she say when she bring picture and show me. It was a spitting image. He could not lie no more. And uh she said I later walked up on the truth in Panama. Them have a different reality. She was his *querida* and I am wife. She didn't mind being a *querida* but when I went home I lick him cross, lick with a broom stick. In other words, you see, being a *querida*, did not carry the same connotations that it would have perhaps in the British Isles or the French Isles. Also uh the other thing that she speaks about is about good here and bad here. And *piojo*, lice you know them kind of thing in them hair, and she found out that the men who came here were attracted to the light skin Spanish woman, okay. Again a same sickness that over the years many black woman complain about and uh she would say about the *piojos* and the good thing that she had bad hair and the other good hair they couldn't get any lice. Which is not necessarily true over the years we learn that uh lice is in anybody's hair but the, the, the cultural difference was there in so many different ways. But guess what. There's also an interaction on Sundays I would remember that people would change, share a *paila* waiting for the lottery to play, you know. Nobody have any money and they wait and cook, whose ever win then, there was much more a communal spirit. A communal reality when you live in those tenements and uh I when I think about my memories primarily about those days. You know, when you ask me earlier about my youth, there was and I lived in la Boca, I should have mentioned another reality of the uh the division of racism that the Canal, that the United States brought to Panama. As you know, there were uh gold commissaries and sliver commissaries. Uh my mother, for example, sold shoes in a gold commissary. And uh I always remember the story of the little lady, little black lady who

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went at the water fountain and it had a spigot that says silver, and the next one that says gold. And she walked over and was drinking water from the gold one and someone came and asked her. The police man said woman why are you drinking? Say I just, mister, I just want to know what gold water tastes like, you know. Things like that or in la Boca they also had um, I remember you would take the ferry. There were at that time the ferry was the Amador and the uh Teddy Roosevelt I think it was and you take that to go to the beach, but the beach was also segregated. Uh on one side was the Hideaway beach and the other side was for *afan*. We would have to go to Hideaway and to go to Hideaway you would have, they had some wooden steps that you had to climb to get to the beach. We couldn't go to the white beach on the other side and one thing, one would always remember that when you are climbing the staircase, the wooden steps, there were a lot of sand flies they would bite you and things like that.

In fact, I would also remember in la Boca there was a little part of the Canal. We were really crazy. You would swim in the Canal and did not know you were swimming the Canal. But it was called *Calameto*. *Calameto* was uh, perhaps the local, the local swimming pool but it really wasn't a swimming pool. If I, to be truthful, that's where the toilets came into the sea but we would swim. You know? And cut school and swim and go there. I remember I swam across the Canal without even thinking about what could happen. When I look, I say we got to be crazy, you know, to do, to do that. But there was not that much, and, and, and the reality of a living was extremely important. The other thing that was curious about that time, we called each other different names, you know. You call Double Ugly and Twist Up and, I don't know. There were so many things. You would see the Salvadorans used to make kites. You know. They were here and they were based around ... city and you would see the China man. They would have their *hortalizas* and the *hortalizas* are gardens where you grow vegetables and they use cow dung a lot and they'd roll up their, their pants up to there and walk there. Uh, they, the men, my grandfather and his friend would walk all the way, perhaps further down the road to *Arahan* they would say and plant and then come back and try to sell things, fruits, to make. They did every single thing that they could to survive in, in this system and I don't really think that we give them enough credit. Now I'm telling about mine. I'm certain that for others it's much more in-depth and much more, they can have better stories about, they know what their, what their fathers and grandfathers did in La Boca. I

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remember there was, as I speak it keeps coming back. There was somebody's apartment, Mr. Graham. We called him Mr. Graham Drug Store. You could go there and buy anything. Benjamin, heating oil and go there and buy it. You know. People survived. It is, it is strange that we were so strong and we don't even. We should never deny or or put down our grandparents because if it weren't for them, I think that we would never have known or have the strength that we have today. I, I give credit. That's why I say I always say to people I'm an African man. Born, whose grandparents were born in the Caribbean. I was born in Panama and raised in Panama but I became a man on the streets of Brooklyn and Chicago. Again, we talk about the diaspora, that's who we are and there's a tendency to lose sight of that reality and I don't think we ever should.

[chatter... 3,2,1]

INTERVIEWER: So tell me what kind of music you grew up hearing. What were your favorite songs?

Russell: You know, that, that's really interesting. When I was a young man in the late 40's, early 50's, the basic music in Panama I remember was the, the musicians were West Indian. People of Caribbean ancestry. Victor McDonald, uh Victor Boa, Clarence Martin. They were all those. Marcelino Alvarez and Armando Bosas but these people were the ones who created the music. In fact, it is said that uh that Victor McDonald from Colón is the one who created the rhythm, the rhythm you know as the mambo which *damas* is proud of came to Colón to get and made it popular. In those days, the carnivals, *toldos* were open and you went to dance and orchestras came and you played but among the kind of music that my time, you know, there was a young man by the name of Alonzo Wilson and Alonzo came up with a very melodic rhythm. He called it, *song winsor* and most of the songs that we did at that time were *song winsor* and you would, and coming up we had social clubs. You'd have *Rio Mar*, *Winsur*. You'd have románticos, you would have all of this and each club, social club, would have a song. And these songs were very popular and you would dance at them. In fact, again, remember now these are teenage years and one's hormones are bursting and both men and women, young men and women are looking at each other and in those days some of the clubs would take names from the church. While you'd have McGregor, you'd have, all, the United States was ever present in one's life but in truth we live differently. Still, you would see the

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young men buy Florsheim shoes you know and put the little dots in it and walk or you'd have your gold buckle and stand up on your toe. There were different things. But the music really, the music was one of the things. And the Calypsos were always there. You had the Pana-Trinidad and you had a number of the songs that were sang so much that. It, it was reflected for me, in my view, much more of a communal spirit, much more of a sense of social connection. I believe that it was a healthier society. I use the word believe because I'm sure that there were those who live there may disagree but um I thought we shared more. Colón again. There was Antoine, Lord Kester *de* Antoine. And my club was called Lord Frederick. Okay? And I remember Alberto Smith and myself writing the words and putting the early part of the music and Leroy Giddens singing it then the singers at those days were people like Edmund Vergara and Manny Bolanos and we would say that his name was Manny Bolans but it became Manny Bolanos, we changed it. And as I said, as I said with changing names something comes to mind in which I think I need to mention because sometimes we forget. And this is a slight digression but you would see where I'm coming from.

When they were building the railroad, the United States had a number of Jamaicans to build the railroad and when the contract was over, they did not honor many contracts so many of the Jamaicans were forced to stay in Panama and let's say their name was Smith. But you know in Spanish it is hard to pronounce the first S so they became Esmith and they would live, they would move to the interior and you know in those days, the, they affection and we just say Smitty. Well they can't say Smitty. It's Esmítí and they would live and move to the interior of the country and I tell you. If you go today and look in the telephone book, you will see a lot of new names. Esmíti, spelled e-s-m-i-t-i and if you check where they come from, that's what it is. But I said that because when I said Manny Bolanos I, I remember we used to say Manny Bolan and in the same thing as I, as I also saying something earlier, that language and culture, what did happen was that because we felt that it was not proper, right, acceptable. Any language you want to choose to be a chumbo or to speak English. There were a lot of folks whose names were in English that they changed it. Their name was Hall. They would change it to Salas, you know? And things like that so nobody would even do that and it, it was part of the insidious inter, or, insidious systemic racism of the country that forced people to deny who they were and uh it is something that I don't think that we've given enough attention to

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recognizing how, what effect, what Joy Leary calls post enslavement traumatic syndrome is all about. Because when Bob Marley says emancipate yourself from mental slavery, he is talking about psychological things that hooked us up and that, that, those change are still there. So the question of language, who we are and where we go and why we keep saying that you can't trust a black person or they can't do this or, or they can't do, it's nothing more than reflection of the, of the social order.

INTERVIEWER: So tell me about your favorite Calypso song. Can you sing or recite?

Russell: No, no.

INTERVIEWER: Just recite some of the songs.

Russell: No, no. I tell you this. One of the, for me, one of the things that I'm really sorry, I could never sing. In fact, when I was in, in *parque la febre*, Río Bajo, we used to belong to a choir headed by Hugh Adams and I used to sing in the bass section but I used to say I sing short stop because my voice was so bad. But two basses, Edwin Seals and Raymond Jamison, they could really sing. No. But the songs that I really liked in terms of the Calypso in those days, *Combination* was one was because it combined a lot of the things, the music. Then there was the *Crooked Salesmen* which it's just extremely funny and I also liked *Baptism*. There were, there were so many. But the thing about the Calypso, as I said, that they tell stories. For instance, we always "brown skin girls stay home on mine baby, brown skin girls stay home on mine baby. I'm going away in a sailing boat and if I don't come back, throw away the ... baby." See you all don't hear that. You all, you "stay home on *mine baby*" and they you would have *Chuck Doss* a Trinidadian Calypsonian who says nationality don't count for blacks. The only difference is we came in different slave ships. Now *Chuck Doss* is now a Ph.D. from the West Indies and this story I think you would find rather interesting about Calypso. Again, I was in Uganda in the back of a truck one morning. We had gone to visit Idi Amin and so forth and we were there and they were taking us around the country and in the back of the bus next to me was sitting Minister Farrakhan. Minister Farrakhan at that time just separated himself temporarily from the Nation of Islam because if when the, the, the messenger died there was a struggle whether or not to make Wallace Mohamed or *Eli, uh*, Farrakhan the leader. At that time, I

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happened also to be working as the associate editor of The Liberator, of the, well I was the associate editor of The Liberator magazine but I was also the editor of the Brooklyn Amsterdam News so I went to Uganda. In the back of the bus I began to sing “Back to back, belly to belly. I don’t give a damn. I don’t *get a ready*. Back to back, belly to belly, it’s a zombie jamboree.” Then Farrakhan hits me and says “Carlos, do you know who wrote that?” I said no. He said “I did” and then he started to sing. I said no, you’re telling me a lie Mr. Farrakhan. He started to sing and sang “was a zombie jamboree” and he started to sing and he is, in fact, the author of “Back to Back.” Now what many people forget, that Farrakhan, before he became a member of the Nation of Islam was a Calypsonian and his name was Lord *Charmer*. You see? He grew up, his family was Jamaicans. He grew up in Roxbury, Massachusetts. When he became a member of the Nation of Islam, there is a song that a lot of folks fail to uh, to, to, don’t know that he did it. It is called “A White Man’s Heaven is a Black Man’s Hell.” Okay? And it’s, it was a very popular song in the 60’s and the 70’s.

See again, earlier I was saying about leaving, by leaving this country and going abroad and studying, I had the opportunity to meet Malcolm X. To interview Malcolm. Now at the same time the opportunity to work with Dr. King helped to plan the, the, the march, the poor people’s march and at the same time being able to go to Lebanon and meet with um, Yassir Arafat; go to Uganda travel, that’s all because I was able to leave. I’m not certain the same thing would have occurred if I had stayed here. So when I say to you that Farrakhan is in fact the author of “Back to Back, Belly to Belly” and again the role of music. See we don’t, we fail to deprecate the arts – I mean I’m sorry, not fail to, we deprecate the arts, uh we, we put it down. And I, I really believe that it is the artist that is the sage of the future. One of the members of the Harlem Writers Guild, because at the time I was a member of the Harlem Writers Guild, uh in New York. His name was John Oliver Killens. And John Oliver Killens as you may know is a, let’s call him an icon in black literature. And, uh, he was my neighbor. And once we were talking, and he said, Carlos, if you want to know where a people are going, look at the artists. You see, because the artists are generally given a vision, as if they were born with it. They see things that most of us don’t see. So again when you talk about music and calypso, if you listen, to the, if you really, really listen to the calypso, you get the, you understand. There was one from Jamaica, uh, I’ll see if I remember, I think his name, not Lord

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Kitchen, Gordon ... about a mother and daughter working for the Yankee dollar, again, “Drinking rum and Coca Cola, go don’t point Kumana. Both mother and daughter working for the Yankee dollar. Money in the land.”

So again, they were social critics. And coming up in Panama during the time, many of the Calypsonians were social critics. In fact, one comes to mind like a, “Viva Don Ramon Panameña, Viva Don Ramon para Presidente. Viva Don Ramon.” And then you find that within the culture people begin to, to, to bring in different things that were happening. I, I believe I’ve been extremely fortunate. God has been good to me in terms of exposing me to so many different things. And it is perhaps for that reason I can share some of these, uh, these information. I wouldn’t say good information, Some people would not say good is with you.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. Three, two, Every time I call, “Where’s Carlos? So it gives here an opportunity to hide in the corner and uh...

: She would never, she would she, she’s very uh, she’s one person I believe that ...should honor.

INTERVIEWER: I agree.

Russell: Cause she, I can’t say because of my sisters, say look, you know because she’s the backbone for, do you? Uh, I’m surprised, I, She’s one of the unsung people that they really need to give some accolades to. But I...

INTERVIEWER: I agree. That’s why I would like her to uh, ...

Russell: Yeah, but she’s not going to do that. She, no, her personality would not permit her to do that.

INTERVIEWER: So, tell me about your favorite foods. Do you like to eat?

Russell: [Laughs] Oh man, food, food is something strange. I really like ground food. You, you. I like dumplings a lot. My grandfather used to make some bakes and called them *bagadots*. Uh, the food that – [laughs] this is strange. You reminding, when we were kids in La Boca again, the canal zone school had a garden next to where we lived. And us kids we would sneak into the garden at night, take out some food and the next day try to cook it. And uh, we

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couldn't cook, but it ended up being pop. Just the fact of doing that. But the food was here in Panama for me, okay, is Caribbean food. I like cod fish a lot, you know. I can't eat any more, but, um my um. I did not like, I never eat iguana, okay. Again, crazy, we used to go and catch them, but I never, I don't know why. Um, there is a story of food that is interesting. When I left here and go, went to Chicago, and this was sure also that there is a connection between culture and food that we eat. Uh, when I went to Chicago, I had to live in a very, it was an old, uh, garage. There's a Jamaican man by the name of Mr., Mr. Fox, uh, rented it to us and we transformed it into a kitchenette. – we did, it was a kitchenette. And a friend of Archibald, he was the one that was responsible for me leaving here on a student visa and going to DePaul University in Chicago. Mr. Fox was a, used to sharpen knives and things on his bicycle to, through, uh, Chicago. But in that uh, kitchenette, in that three or four room place, there was a family. A Southern family from Mississippi, I think it was, and one day I left my thing, and I went, it was something was smelling, was funny smell, I didn't really know what it was. But I knocked on his door because I was very friendly, and he said, "Do you want some?" and I said, "What was it?" He was eating chitterlings. You know, and I had never eaten chitterlings, but the smell, you know, was totally different, but I learned two things. I said no, it's a good thing, I said no, because he didn't have enough to share. You know, had I said, "Yes." It would have created a problem.

But what I later learned, that chitterlings, is equivalent, equivalent, not the same, to tripe over here. You see, so once again, the concept of what the master used to throw away. The slave took it, and made it a delicacy. So chitterlings, becomes equivalent, as I said to tripe over here and mondongo, you know, okay. So you see, you see how the slave had to survive, and over here, how the poor people had to survive. While the rich throw away the food and we made it a delicacy. Again, survival, culture. Uh, culture and, and you, I'm staying with it because for me it tells us why we can't give it up. You know. That's the, that's the foundation of who we are. And true, I've never eaten chitterlings in that sense, but I know what it is. I've never eaten iguana either, you know. I like tripe, you know, but I don't know why, I guess it has something to do with the smell. And if I got, like, uh, tripe and lima beans, you know, or in those days I used to eat every, in Brooklyn where I lived every Wednesday, I'd go and have, uh, pig feet, you know and I loved that and souse, those are things that, in fact, uh.

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Food is such important things because one of the things I am finding now is that I'm gaining weight in Panama, because they see to it that I eat three meals. In the States, I don't eat three meals, you know, if I eat two that's good, but more than that. I eat breakfast, or one, but here, it's three. And I think that we have to look at the role that food plays culturally in one's life. Now what do I mean? I think, and this is a thought, I am not offering it as a conclusion. I think food serves as a way, not only as a way of replenishing strength. More important it relaxes, it give us, it gives a sense of, if you don't have food, you are nothing. So you strive for food. Not just an animal killing another, but that's why sometimes we eat so much, you know, to fill a vacuum that we have. You have nothing else in the real world, so it's food. We do not as a people collectively are devoid of power, real power in the system. You see, people talk about the system as if it was simply black and white. It's more that that, it's about power. Controlling of the resources, controlling of the planet, you see. And we are on the periphery. That's why I keep saying, that's why we have to change. And then when, when. Jose Marti writes "con los pobres de la tierra quiero mi suerte echar," with the poor people of the world, I want to cast my lot. Again, it's the same sense, and we have to understand culture, food, poor people and the need for social transformation and I'm saying to you that I am very fortunate because I had a grandfather who worked as an ice, a watchman at the ice plants at La Boca. I had a father who was a photographer who never wanted to work for the Canal Zone and never did. I have a mother who worked for, selling shoes, okay. In fact, when I was young, I never, I have no corns, okay, because she made sure my shoes fit. And all of these things. And then I go to the States and I meet professors that embrace me. Now, here's something strange. In Panama, I was never a good student. I would say that. I was always a, uh, alwould say a tres, tres con dos, tres con tres, ver la media rapando you know making it up. I go to the States and all of a sudden I find that I am doing things that I never did here and what it told me in later years that the education that I got here was a tremendous base. So when in a philosophy class I'm talking about lightness and Schopenhauer, I learn that here with a tres, you know, now imagine a guy that was getting a cinco.

So all of a sudden I learn that these things. And I had teachers then embrace me. Like I had two good teachers, that I, one was Sandy Jados in political science. Another one by the Martin Lowery and

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he was history. And they began to show me the disparities and the dichotomies that existed between those who have and those who have not. So in a sense, Panama is the foundation, you see. And the history, the tradition, the trayectoria is something that ultimately makes one who's one is. And bring it back it tells me when I am in the right place, you know, that place reflects all of the things that I'm saying to you.

I've been fortunate. Another story, I have written ten plays. My first play was called *Nat* about Nat Turner, the, the fugitive slave. And that was done at the Billy Holiday Theater. Now one of the actors in the play, today is a mega star. But in those days we paid him seventy dollars a week. Today, he makes, multi, multi, multi, multi, millions. His name is Samuel Jackson, okay. And I'm saying to myself, "wow, look at that," But we write, and we, we, we, we, try to keep culture as an integral part of the process of social transformation. And as you know the plays, *Mama's Baby*, uh, *A Dress Rehearsal for a Funeral*, *Papi Show* and *Monkey Shine*. All of those are things that. I've been blessed, put it that way.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And then last night when we were meeting with a leadership group they were talking about a group.

[Recording 3,2,1]

INTERVIEWER: So have you ever heard of Louise Bennett? Tell me what you know or what you remember about her.

Earlier, we spoke about language and how there was no such thing as good English, bad English, French, Spanish, and all that. Louise Bennett, in my judgment, is the epitome of the writer who captures the essence of her people and expresses it in the language that is true to the soil. Her soil. Louise Bennett, again, in my judgment, denudes the notion of good English and bad English. Because she expresses, as I said, what her people feels, humorously, pain, criticizes, tells stories, produces a moral perspective of her world, is able to capture the Caribbean, and in this instance, the Jamaican. And when you read, not so much read, but when you hear it read. When you hear her work read, you have no other choice, but to sit and say, I have listened to the voice that comes from the soil of Jamaica.

So for me, um, Louise Bennett, Miss Lou, now that she has left us, will always be, I use the word, I don't, I use icon, but she is more than that. She is a pillar, uh, a soul, a spirit, a *force* that we should

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never forget. Now I'm a believer in the African tradition that one never really dies, that the body separates, but the spirit is always, there. And it is for that reason that I think her spirit will always be with us. The Africans will say to you, or to us, or to me, that as long as someone can remember your name, you're always alive. And I believe that with the more and more we think of Louise Bennett, and the things that she has done, makes you recognize that there is what I call an integrative force in the universe and that integrative force in the universe is the spirit. And the spirit is the thread that ties every single living being together. And there's something that we tend to forget that both the African and the Native American never forgot, that the universe is not hierarchical. It is circular and that there is life in everything. So there's a connection between human beings, plants, rivers, trees, and what have you, and, but the tread that keeps that is, is, is the spirit, this spiritual force. And uh, somewhere along the line after one passes, it may well be that one enters into that stream of, of, of, I want to say consciousness, but that is the stream of spirituality. We don't pay or give it enough attention. We have found it fit to accept much more secular structure and calling it religion and finding answers to um, questions, that we have none, by saying, "When you die, you go to heaven," or you go to Valhalla, you know, or you go to somewhere else, because the mind does not necessarily find that, uh, have an answer to the questions that we uh, ask ourselves each day.

My sense, however, as I grow older, and I have to say, that without disparaging any religion or anything, I am finding that there's much more value in the sense of accepting that all life, all life is sacred. If you believe that there's a creator that the creator gives this, then he would not create something that is negative and life is important, so rather than destroy, we should build. And Dr. King talks about that when he talks about, agape, the love that you give that doesn't ask for something in return. And so, these are the things, that for me, so when you go back to Louise Bennett, Louise Bennett's portrait, her entire life is reflective of that love for her people. You see, it's unrequited love, she asks for nothing in return. She gives, uh, I sidestep sadly, I think she did speak once about a poem that related to Colón, you know. When you had asked me the question earlier about calypsos and so forth, I remembered that when I went to Jamaica one year, they were talking about "Colón A Come" and I didn't understand what that meant. What that really meant was that Jamaicans came to Colón, they worked, they sent their money back, and that helped. They were very happy

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when the “Colón boy a come” because he come back with the money and his gold chain and his gold buckle. But it took me time to understand that, but I had to go there. So again, Louise Bennett would have understood that, would have sung about it, would have written about it, and you see this connection. And those of us who fail to understand that there’s an African diaspora, that irrespective of where we are, Marcus Garvey said it, we are one people, one destiny. And we have to keep moving in that way. Again, not anti-anyone, not anti-anyone, but pro-us. It’s in terms of saying that we have been left out, we have been marginalized, we have to take control and reoccupy center stage as we once did.

[3,2, Recording, 3,2 ]

INTERVIEWER: Would you mind telling me your year of birth?

Russell: Why not? Unfortunate, August 6, 1934.

INTERVIEWER: And what was the last grade of school that you completed?

Russell: The last, PhD, Union Graduate School, 1978.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, and what is your current or past profession or job?

Russell: I am a retired professor. Let me give you the right title. Professor Emeritus. Ha, ha, ha, Brooklyn College City University of New York.

INTERVIEWER: And what city and state in Panama or the United States do you live in?

Russell: I live in Brooklyn, Brooklyn, New York. Yeah. Do you know that Brooklyn has more than three million people? You can take all of Panama and put it there. [Laughs]

INTERVIEWER: How many months a year do you spend in Brooklyn?

Russell: Hmm, recently, I would say, I spend most of my time there, in Brooklyn, but I am really planning to return to Panama. If I am fortunate, by the end of 2007, I will be residing here again.

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INTERVIEWER: And what is the name of your neighborhood in Brooklyn?

Russell: In Brooklyn?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

Russell: Hmm, where I live now, you see I've lived in Ford Green, I've lived in um, Bedstide. Right now, I think it's called Kensington. I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any other information you want to include that we haven't yet touched upon?

Russell: Oh, I was fortunate to receive from Panama one of its highest honors, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, in May of 2005. You know and I uh, value that because there are not many Africans who have received that in Panama, recently, there have been many more. But, uh, I also, I don't know if you know, I served as ambassador to Panama, for Panama to the United Nations and to the Organization of the American States. I view that as um, in my life as very important, uh, moments. In fact, I happened to be in the UN the day that China was admitted into the, into the United Nation. That reminds me, the day that China was inva-- accepted, Mainland China replacing Taiwan, I happened to be there. The ambassador was Aquilino Boyd, *Dina Morios*, and myself. And I had a friend from Jamaica, his name was John Bonic. He told me that the voting was coming to the floor that day. I said, "Are you sure?" Well, he said, "Yeah. Yes, Carlos," because I knew him from Chicago, that's where I went to school. And his brother had married a Panamanian woman named. Eunice Frayers, here name was Eunice Bonic. So we were good friends, so when I told the ambassador my good friend, he's really, because it's owing to him that I got there, that it was, that the election was going to be that day, he said, "Nah, it couldn't be."

Anyway, I don't know. I am the founder of what is called Black Solidarity Day. In New York, I founded it in 1969 with a whole host of folks. When I say founded, it was originally my idea. But, the second Black Solidarity Day was held on the second of November, okay? The first, no, the second, the second was on the third of November. So everybody think that the third November made it but it is the first Monday in the month of November, prior to election. And we created as a means of saying that racism in the

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United States, we have to organize against it. Because, at that time, at that time, young black men and black women were killed all over and there was no reaction. We decided, the middle class students, professionals, etc. that we could not do what was being said at that time. Because in those days we would read the *Battle of Algiers*, we would read, uh, um, Fanan's, the *Wretched of the Earth* and we saw ourselves as revolutionaries, but we were not prepared to do what a revolution would do. So we said, if we stayed home one day following a play by Douglas Turner Ward, again culture, called *A Day of Action*, in which all of the blacks in the South disappeared and paralyzed that, that country, that city, and the Europeans came asking please come back to make it work again. We said by your absence make your presence felt. If you do it the day before election, then white America would have to deal with the presence of black.

So, now, at the UN, I had to leave to speak on Black Solidarity Day, because that is the day that it was. When I got back, the, the um, voting was taking place, the voting was taking place. And in the UN, there are three buttons: green, yellow, and red. Red, is against. Green is yes. And yellow is when you don't vote, you know, abstention. And when it came to Panama, there were no instructions so the Ambassador said, "What do we do?" And I said, "Press the yellow one." You know. And he looked at the Didimo and Didimo said "Press the yellow one." So when they said Panama, the ambassador pressed the yellow one. So Panama abstained. Now that was so like, unimportant, but as soon as the election was over, the, the floor of the UN erupted in joy. Everyone got up and clapped because only the United States and other countries, a few other countries wanted to keep China out. So Sallim Sallim, who was ambassador from Tanzania lead a, just, just, pandemonium. Now we're walking through a – you also have to remember, that at that time Panama was in the process of struggling with the United States for the Tario/Carter Treaties. So that is happening simultaneously. As we come walking through the aisle, the Russian ambassador comes over and meets our ambassador and shakes his hand and says that was a very courageous vote you took, because and, he vote, he expected that he would vote against no because he wanted to ingratiate himself with the United States to be able to deal with the, with the American treaty. But no he didn't. And the reason I said I wanted to mention that because I wanted to show that things in life also, historically, sometimes you don't plan them. And, and, and, they turn out to be the best things that you have ever done. And I would

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never forget that day in the UN, I would never forget the, the, reaction of the people. And I would never forget how the Russian came over and, and shook the hand of the ambassador thanking him for a courageous act that was the result on the moment because no one expected the, the, at least our country did not expect, the voting to come that day.

**[End of Audio]**

**Duration: 66:17 Minutes**

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