

DISCLAIMER: Some names in this book have been changed for protection of individual privacy. I understand that these are my recollections but I have strived painfully to put down both sides regardless of how I fared.

A MUSICAL LIFE

(The Gift)

(By) Andre' Saunders

My name is Andre' Saunders and I am a musician. I have not been active in the music business for many years. However, there was a time when all I did was music. At one time, I was a professional singer, songwriter and wrote using the piano, electric/acoustic and bass guitars. From nineteen sixty-four until nineteen eighty-nine, I worked as a singer, songwriter, musical arranger, audio engineer, record producer and music publisher. This is my story.

I now live quietly in Ellenwood, Georgia after abruptly leaving the record business in 1989 and now very seldom do anything musical.

I had come to the attic to see if I could find some old songs, I had written. Dee Coley, a friend from New York called a few days ago to say the trend in music was reverting to old school type songs and he was doing a couple of my tunes. He wanted to know if I was still writing. Dee explained he was doing an album on himself and recalled the many evenings he sat and listened to new songs I had written. He said, he had wished then he could to do some of my songs and now this was his chance.

Now old reel-to-reel tapes and cassettes surround me, representing a time in my life when I lived in the blessings of God. As a child, no one told me that I was special so I never thought of myself that way. I did not understand then or realize that I was special and it was not until reading P.D. Ouspensky's, "The Fourth Way", that I was exposed to the concept of artisans being special. Now I see the fruits of my creations, ideas produced from my thoughts, from thin air, real magic. Here are songs, arrangements, both unfinished and finished, studio produced recordings I made between nineteen sixty-four and nineteen eighty-nine.

I write primarily of those years, and in my recollections for this book, I now understand that until I walked away, renouncing my talent, I had been blessed by God. HE had provided me all, and more than I ever needed. However, a troubled childhood seems to have left me without the best ego. For me, I knew I was good at what I did, but I only really felt special, when I was

sharing what I had with others, like a group. You see, I never really thought of myself as blessed nor special but others did and took advantage.

I located my old Akai four track reel to reel and put on the first tape. Right away, I had a problem; the oxide was coming off the tape and clogging the playback heads on my tape machine. I discovered that after clogging the tape heads repeatedly, I had to clean the heads after each song I played so I decided to record the songs using my laptop computer. This way I would have a good copy before a loss of oxide made some tapes unplayable.

First, I was amazed at how much product I had from a period representing a lead up to why I left the music industry. Every song brought an avalanche of memories. Memories of when everyone around expected me to be the next superstar. Included in tapes at my feet are copies of masters for a self-produced, but never released album on myself.

My daughter, after all these years, still cannot understand why I gave up my career. Why I walked away from the business at a time when I had just produced a hit record that still sells today. The record was still on the charts when I packed up and left.

I sit now in the soft-lights of my attic and listen to my other life. I listen to songs I wrote over the years and wonder at music that came out of me. The first song I put on is "How Can I Make You Mine for an Evening". I listened to the background singers and recalled this peculiar session because it was the first time I hired Luther Vandross.

One of my regular background singers was Jocelyn Brown. "Josh" later went on to create a career of her own when she recorded the 70's hit, "Somebody Else's Guy". (Later, I'll tell you about the project she and I had going when the song hit) I developed a crew of musicians I used regularly, not only for their musical abilities, that's what got them in the door. Vocalists and musicians had to learn their parts quickly and almost most important, be on time. Although the final equation for my hiring any musician was the flavor they brought to the table. How vocalists sang or how instrumentalists played their instrument.

When I needed backup singers for a session my list was: Josh Brown, Don Hamilton, Angie Bofield, Luther Vandross, and Connie Harvey or Chrystal Davis. If I needed to cut rhythm tracks, I called my bud, Ray Chew, my regular keyboard player. Ray is now famous, not for all the hit records he has played on but for his leadership of the American Idol band... amazing. I recalled a number of the sessions we had as I listened and some of the incredible music we made.

After watching me play the piano or guitar describing the other parts I was hearing, Ray could deliver all the incredible things I was hearing but could not play. Or, I would give him charts I did which always needed corrections to play and Ray would sit there smiling with that sort of inner smile, while he made the changes. Then he would turn to the other musicians and explain what I wanted. In almost every case, it took only a few of my corrections to get it right.

This particular session needed background singers so I called Josh Brown knowing she usually knew who was available. Now getting singers who learned their parts quickly and had the sound I needed could be a problem and on this occasion Don Harris, the male singer I

usually used was not available so Jocelyn suggested she bring another guy. It was last minute but was a Josh recommendation so I said cool, come on.

The recording session was at Power Station, a then top recording studio on New York's Westside. I could recall being in the studio's control booth, doing something at the sound control board when I was first introduced to Luther Vandross. Luther had just come from doing a commercial and wanted to know how soon the session was to start. No hello just when is he to start earning his money.

The session began; I taught the singers their parts and recorded. I recorded the first set of vocals for the track and proceeded to tell the singers that I was now going to double the parts and Luther freaked. Right there in the sound booth, I guess not caring he could be heard over the mikes. Luther started saying he was not going to double the background parts for what he was being paid. I heard him say, he thought this was a union session and he needed more than what he was being paid.

I listened, realizing Jocelyn had failed to tell Luther this was a non-union session and the amount she told him included doing the vocals twice. Now, there I was in the midst of a recording session, studio time ticking at one hundred seventy-five dollars per hour. I had already laid the rhythm tracks so had only background voices in the studio. I had already an approved budget and to pay Luther scale would cause me to pay everyone the same. I thought about calling someone else or doing the part myself. So Luther and I "face danced", we talked.

The memories just came flooding back, and I recalled thinking as I listened to Luther rant, this dude seemed a little soft. I thought as he talked and that Jocelyn had really put me in a bind. I was thinking, damn what must I do to get this dude to stop talking? How do I get him back in the booth, singing?

When Luther abruptly turned and said to Josh, "Let's just get it over with" and returned to the sound booth. It turned out to be a good session. I was listening to that session now and recalled how pleased I had been with Luther's sound. How good it sounds now. Luther is also one of the background singers on West-End Record's disco classic, "Give Your Body up To the Music" I produced on Billy Nichols.

When I left the business, I had "Give Your Body up To the Music" still on the New York charts. I had just produced a record on Darnell Williams one of the stars of the nineteen-eighty TV soap opera, All My Children. Darnell played the part of Jessie and was the young "dark" heartthrob at that time.

I had a record production company "Black Ice Productions" with a hit record, a publishing company "Love's Shadow Music" backed by Belwin-Mills Music Corp., one of the major players in the music publishing game. West-End Records was awaiting the completion of an album I was producing on myself.

Mean time I was now hanging out and starting to live in Long Island, East Hampton then Bridge Hampton New York off Montauk Highway. I started a record label, Sleazy Records and

released a remake of Billy Nichol's, "Do It Till You're Satisfied" on myself and the DJ's loved it. The New York Sleaze concept was based on the lifestyles I saw developing between the super-rich and ordinary people like me. Why did I walk way you ask? Why?

GRANNY'S HOUSE

As a child, I never thought of myself as a musician, but music was all around me. You could say that music took the form of my grandmother, Mrs. Erma Bell, matriarch of the Bell family. In the late nineteen thirties, Grandfather Calvin Bell's wife Gertrude my fraternal grandmother died leaving my grandfather with nine children. Not long after this death, my grandfather went to visit a female friend and there met Ms. Erma Givens, a small, dark-skinned women in her early thirties and struck up a friendship. My grandfather continued visiting the two women and after a couple of months built more than a casual friendship with the then single Ms. Givens. By the time I was born in 1946 my grandmother had been Mrs. Bell for many years.

Granny worked as a maid for white families during the day but at home, any time not spent caring for my grandfather or her adopted grandchildren, Granny spent doing something musical like rehearsing choirs or preparing to leave on a Gospel Caravan. These Gospel Caravans took Granny all over the country singing in churches. Sometimes famous gospel singers, soloist or choirs of the day would visit Granny. Sometimes they would jam gospel style and Granny's house rocked.

Granny always cooked on Saturday mornings because her choir or band members would start coming in the afternoon for practice. The doorbell would ring and musicians would start coming in. There would be some little old man with a tambourine, my Aunt Sis (the Isley Brothers mother) or my Aunt Van who would play the piano usually brought the choir members. After the bass player and guitar players arrived, you would start to hear the piano with the choir voices harmonizing in resonate tones then after a while, the guitar and bass player would start to play their parts softly to the timing of the tambourine. As they rehearsed, it seemed that from any part of the house music could be heard. Sometimes, I felt like Granny's house would burst with sound and then, then that voice, that one incredible voice, often a little old lady would do a riff that sent chills down my body. This was the flavor of my Granny's house.

Granny was the choir leader for Union Baptist Church and was known as a hard taskmaster, when it came to her music. Granny created musical programs or recitals she would rehearse for Sunday services and I grew up watching my grandmother select songs for choirs, then teach them the vocal arrangements. I had the joy of watching how musicians and voices fit together in foot stomping, hand clapping, get up and shout hallelujah music! So, so much music.... and I loved it.

With all the kids around Granny felt that if you could talk you could sing so, she started all her grandchildren singing at early ages. My first cousin, Gwendolyn Berry is one of the originally backup singers for Ray Charles, the Raylettes. Wes Montgomery asked my Grandmother to allow my cousin Jerry a guitar player, to come on the road with his band when he was twelve years old, as his guitarist.

The Isley Brothers are also my first cousins and we all started singing under the direction of my granny at Union Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. My first experience singing was as a part of a group simply called Mrs. Bell's Boys with my cousins, the Isley's. With upturned faces and hands cupped to keep from fidgeting, we would watch Granny and sing. I started performing in church at about four or five years old.

By the age of fifteen, I was no longer in Cincinnati but New York. No longer being raised by my mother but another Granny, my father's mother, Lila. My four cousins, Dannyboy, Scrappy, Jerry and Johnny, no longer surrounded me. We had been like stair-steps, always together, with only a year or two in age separation. Their mother, my Aunt Clare the story goes; one day went for some cigarettes and somehow wound up in Chicago. Her four children wound up with Granny.

Now, my mother also did not heed granny's teachings, of church and good works. Mom was seventeen when she had me. However, my Mom did not head for Chicago she just gave me to an older Cincinnati couple who wanted children when I was a baby. When Granny got word of what Mom did, she was outraged, went to the couple and got me back. However, when I was eight I had an incident involving a group of white boys that resulted in my being sent to my Grandmother in New York. That's a bit of my family background and a bit of music too but you could say that I broke into the business of music selling pussy I didn't have.

NEW YORK

My first years in New York were spent in Jamaica, New York, a suburb of Queens. In nineteen fifty-four, this was an area where mid-class working African-Americans flocked. Only minutes to a bus line that took you to the Jamaica Avenue train stations. The area offered plenty of trees, schools, and places for kids to play. I loved it. The surroundings were much different in contrast to how I lived in Cincinnati. Here, my Grandmother and Grandfather owned their home and I had a back yard with a dog. Along with my cousins Eddie (three years older and Doris (five years older), my Grandfather Uncle Alec, Grandmother Lila, my Father who rented the second floor and I, spent many idyllic days until my living arrangements changed.

One day, my grandmother told me I would be staying upstairs with my father from now on. She told me my father would be a better influence on me and I moved upstairs. Never having a male figure other than my grandfather, my father was different in the extreme. Discipline from my grandparents usually begins with my understanding what I did.

Pop whipped or punished while trying to get me...to understand what I did. "Boy, whip, I, whip, told, whip, you, whip, not, whip, to, whip, go, whip, out, whip, of, whip, the, whip, house, whip. This was how Pop did his thing and we clashed. It was during this period that I started making up songs to keep me occupied. Pop didn't understand me and I certainly didn't understand Pop...then.

When I was nineteen, my father had his own home in St. Albans, Queens. That year I got my first real job at Lafayette Radio and Electronics Company as a defective materials inspector. It

was my duty to inspect items for the reported defect, when purchasers returned electrical appliances. At this company, you had to work 2 weeks before being paid and then you only received a paycheck for one-week. When I got my first paycheck, I bought clothes for work and a pair of steel-toed shoes required by the job which left me only enough to last until next payday.

My father came home that evening and called me into the kitchen. Pop wanted to know how much I was going to give for rent. Now, we had never discussed my paying rent so I didn't know what to say but there was no need, Pop said it all. He told me how irresponsible I was not to consider paying rent since I could now afford to pay. I had only saved enough to keep me in carfare and lunch until next payday so there was not much I could say other than, 'You never asked me'.

Pop ranted and raved, finally telling me this was a mistake. He told me in his raving that my birth had been an accident and he wanted me out of his house. My Grandmother Lila tried to stop our argument but there was no stopping my father from talking. I recall if I had had a gun that evening I would have killed my father but my grandmother intervened and told me to go stay at the YMCA in Manhattan. At that time, I didn't know much about the City so she gave me instructions how to get there. And I left with only the work clothes and steel toe shoes I had just bought.

The YMCA my grandmother steered me to was located in the West 42nd Street district of Manhattan. I arrived at the Y about 11:30 pm, checked in and it was cheap, I think about five dollars. My room was not very clean and had an unusual smell. When I went to the public shower, I was propositioned by a homosexual and then I knew what the smell was and left that night. By now, it was in the early hours of the morning so I just walked around Manhattan with my clothes in a small bag.

I found a hotel in mid-town, walked up to the top floor and spent the night, sitting back against the fire door. The next morning I took the subway back to St. Albans and got in contact with my girlfriend Verdell. She told me I could sleep in an old car parked in the back of her driveway. No one bothered with it because it needed to be repaired and she would bring a blanket that I could keep under the seat, 'No one will know' she said. For the next two nights I slept in the car and in the morning before any one got up, I would leave for Manhattan.

FAT DADDY WALKER AND I DISCOVER HARLEQUINE'S

One evening I was walking around 42nd Street just looking in store windows when this guy started talking to me. He asked what I was up to, and did I want to make some money. I said sure and thought to myself, if he's a faggot I'm going to kick his ass. But he told me, he was hustling and needed a look out. The guy told me that he would pay me fifty dollars up front if I watched out for someone for him. He said it would only take an hour.

So I agreed, he gave me the fifty dollars and we walked down to 47th Street and Broadway. As we walked, he told me he had just played the pussy game on someone he wanted me to

watch out for them. He described the person a few times I needed to look out for and left. The guy would come back regularly and ask me if I spotted the person but I never did.

The guy I was working with turned out to be Fat Daddy Walker from Chicago, IL. A large, overweight, coco colored brother with a scam for everything. Later that night, Fat Daddy told me the reason he asked me to work with him was he had noted the “I need to make some money” look on my face. Fat Daddy told me that he would teach me the game, if I gave him back his fifty dollars. I thought about his offer and knew that I should say no but I took the chance and gave him the money. Fat Daddy told me that he was selling pussy he didn’t have to tourists and the tourists were buying. He told me what to say to the many passing male tourists and how to spot which were looking for a good time.

‘Yo, you looking for the girls”

I would ask and if they answered yes, I would tell them I had girls. Fat Daddy told me, this scam worked because foreign tourists didn’t know how prostitution worked in the US. The tourists think all American prostitutes have pimps and tourists would rather have a hotel environment because it was safer. I listened and learned. I made about one hundred and fifty dollars that first night even after paying Fat Daddy his fifty dollars back.

After that, my world changed. I could now afford a hotel room in the evening instead of going back to Jamaica each night. I found the Belvedere Hotel on the East side, booked a room and started to pay the bill a week in advance. I bought new clothes and started to explore the area from 42nd Street to Central Park. Daytime in Manhattan was a learning experience, especially with my not having to watch over my shoulder for someone who might have fallen for my game. I would wander in and out of stores just looking.

One day walking down Seventh Avenue in the Forties, I turned the corner and found myself in front of a sign that advertised piano rooms for rent. While standing there thinking about going in, a person came out, I asked what kind of place this was and he explained. He told me it was a rehearsal hall for dancers and musicians and you could rent a room with a piano by the hour or half hour, for a couple of dollars. So I went on up and had my first taste of Harlequin’s Rehearsal Hall.

Harlequin’s turned out to be a dimly lit music/dance rehearsal hall. There was a front desk where you paid to rent a room. The rooms rented by the hourly rate of a dollar fifty to two fifty for small piano rooms and I think, two fifty to about seven dollars for the larger rooms. Harlequin’s rented rooms with a piano for singers or singing groups and larger rooms for dancers or dance troupes. This rate made it affordable for most broke yet hopeful stars.

There was a long hallway off to the side as you entered the room with shut or opened doors. An opened door meant the room was available a shut door meant it was being used and each had a number. The doors opened into small rooms with old upright pianos usually brown in color and stained by cigarette burns. All the pianos were well-used scared and battered but kept in tune. Harlequin’s was always busy with singing groups who could not rehearse at home

because they had no piano. Or, dancers learning their parts for some on or off Broadway show. They all came to rehearsal studios or halls and day or night, Harlequin's was always 'kinda' busy.

I soon came to realize that you never knew whom you might meet at a rehearsal hall. One day I was at Harlequin's, standing in line waiting to rent a room, I recall the person in front of me was from a Broadway show. She needed a room to rehearse. I remember because she was a cute little, heavily tanned, white girl who, while in line, talked my ear off. She told me she was in theatre, from California and a lot of other stuff.

At points in the conversation, I thought she must be "hitting" on me. But she was just a nice person. I don't recall all we talked about but I do remember she talked about a hangout for the theatre crowd called Tony Roma's, a couple of blocks over. A year or two later I was watching television and realized the girl I had been talking to had really made it. I had been talking to Goldie Hawn.

My routine became Harlequin's during the day then hook up with Fat Daddy about 6:00 in the evening. I now started my days with breakfast, stopping at one of the many restaurants as I walked along the now familiar streets of mid-town Manhattan. And soon discovered Choc-Full-Of-Nuts restaurant offered me more than just coffee.

One day I decided to stop in Choc-Full-Of-Nuts for a coffee and donut, which they were famous for and found myself in conversation with another very talkative young lady. This time it was a yellow-skinned sister with "try this" eyes. I don't remember what the hell she said that day, I just remember after all these years, the way she felt when we were about to make love and what she said to me.

After meeting, and I really don't recall her name, my "Choc-Full-Of-Nuts" girl, but the restaurant became a daily stop. I would always sit at the counter by the cash register, her station, and order breakfast. I would eat while in between customers she would flirt and talk with me.

One day I told her that I had spilt something on the counter, and then as she leaned over to wipe it up, I whispered in her ear, 'I would love to suck your pussy' and she exploded with laughter. She started to say something but hesitated as a customer stepped up to pay the bill. Once the customer left, my "Choc-Full-Of-Nuts" girl simply asked if I had a room. I told her that I was hooked up and we met after she got off from work that evening.

I had moved from the Belvedere Hotel to the Hotel America on 46th Street and Seventh Avenue in a small single-bed room that cost me \$250.00 a week. However, I was making almost that much on most nights when I worked with Fat Daddy. I straightened up my little room and waited for my "candy". And she came, right on time. She knocked, rushed in nervously and sat on the nearest surface, the bed.

I asked her if she was OK with being here with me and she told me that she didn't often go out with guys she met at the restaurant. So we talked some more and I soon had her in my

arms. Touching me, kissing me, with lips parted and tongues fighting for deeper and deeper penetration; I thought as I touched her skin, touching her softness was the most erotic thing I had ever touched.

I can still recall the softness of her skin, how excited it made me touching her, when she started to talk. She asked if I could tell by her accent where she was born and I told her no. She told me that she was from Haiti and in her country, when a woman makes love to a man, they are committed. All the time she was talking, she was rubbing my dick.

Talk about conflicted! Let a woman rub your 'Jim Johnson' while she's talking crazy and it almost makes sense. She left me no doubt, if I 'hit that ass' I would be seeing her every day; I pictured her moving in and cringed. So, I told her I didn't have any condoms and didn't want to take a chance on getting her pregnant. She was disappointed, but she left. I took a month before I went to that restaurant again. However, my "Choc-Full-Of-Nuts" girl was no longer employed there.

EDDIE JONES

On most days, at about 11:00 I would head up to Harlequin's where I was starting to be recognized by the front desk people. After my first visit, I was stuck on Harlequin's. I loved it. The people it drew were all into the entertainment industry on some level. Although I would occasionally meet someone who just wanted to play piano, most were hard working people in either the entertainment industry or trying to break into the business. One day I was walking by one of the rooms and heard someone rehearsing a girls singing group. And boy did it sound good! The door was cracked so I stood and watched while I listened and was invited in by the guy playing the piano, and teaching the parts.

When I walked in, I noticed a bottle of liquor where the music usually goes propped on the piano. The liquor turned out to be Gin that the teacher would occasional swig from as he taught the girls their parts. The teacher turned out to someone I had heard of, Eddie Jones, a highly talented, overweight teddy bear of a guy.

In 1960's/70's New York recording industry, Eddie Jones was legendary when it came to teaching harmony to singing groups. On many occasions, I had noticed him walking around Harlequin but didn't know who he was.

Now I watched him, how he would sing the part and then prompt the girls until they got the part right; I could see why Eddie was considered good. I could tell that the girls individually did not have strong voices, but when they sang the parts Eddie gave them together, they sound great. I promised myself that one day I would sit with singers anticipating what I would give them to sing. So I watched everything that Eddie did as he taught the girls. After awhile I left because I had already paid for my own piano room.

When I started, I had never had a piano lesson. That first day I sat looking at the keys and didn't know what to do. I almost wondered why I was there, then, remembering my Aunt's hands as they played for the choir and tried to position mine the same way. Listening as I positioned

my hands, I tried to make sounds that I recalled from Granny's and it worked! It did not take me more than a day to find cords, creating sounds that fit melodies in my head. After that, almost every day I found myself at Harlequin's, at the piano creating. Soon I started to meet others who shared my passion, as my friendship with Eddie Jones deepened. Most often, Eddie and I would find ourselves at Harlequin's at the same time and started a habit of checking in on each other.

Now, I would ask the front desk when I came in if Eddie Jones was in one of the rooms. Eddie started to show me different chord progressions and how they fit with vocal harmonies. At that time, one of the groups he rehearsed was the O'Jays who was being produced by George Kerr. This was when the group was just starting and looking for a hit. One day Eddie told me that George had rented him a small office across from the Ed Sullivan building and he would not be rehearsing at Harlequin's anymore.

Eddie's rented office was on the corner of 53rd Street off 7th Avenue, across from the Ed Sullivan building. The office turned out to be a room not much larger than the bigger rooms at Harlequin's, but Eddie converted it into a nice place to spend some time. He brought in furniture; first, a couch then other stuff like lamps, a small table and chairs from home and made it very cozy. Before long, I found myself regularly at Eddie's spot. I still went to Harlequin's because Eddie only had one piano but Eddie's was always a great place to meet people and find out what was going on in the business.

At some point on most days I was at Eddie's office. The only problem I found after hanging with him for a while was his drinking. I don't drink at all but didn't hold it against anyone who did, however Eddie just drank too much. Anytime he rehearsed, he drank. He rehearsed with an ever-present bottle of gin sitting on the piano. I soon found that Eddie was known for his drinking and some people did not work with him because of it. But most of the time Eddie was fine.

One afternoon, I was on my way to Eddie's and saw Lloyd Price across the street. Lloyd Price was coming out of the Round Table, a club he or his manager owned. I went across the street and told him I admired his music and he asked me what I did; I told him I was a writer. He did the strangest thing. He looked up at where Eddie's window was and said, "I bet you know that fucking Eddie Jones", and walked away. I stood there thinking, what the fuck just happened?

JJ Jackson was a good friend of Eddie's and would come over often. They would sit and talk about the good times they enjoyed together, at one time or the other. One day Eddie and I were hanging out when the phone rang; it was JJ asking Eddie if he could stop by. Eddie told him to fall on by and soon JJ arrived. He hurried in and sat at the piano. He told Eddie in a voice so rushed that you could hardly understand what he was saying that he was hearing something he had to get out. I only knew JJ from the times I had talked with him here at Eddies. So I watched, fascinated.

JJ sat at the piano and started playing a melody of just a couple of notes. Then he changed what he was playing from the right hand to the left, making it a bass part and sat back, humming to himself. Then he stood up, saying to Eddie, while going in his pocket.

'Man, I knew I forgot to show you something', and pulled out a bag of herb. JJ started telling Eddie how good it was and threw him the bag. 'Roll one' he told Eddie.

While Eddie sat at the little round table and rolled the joint, JJ started to play again, this time, adding chords to the bass line he had been playing before. After awhile the bass and chords started to work together. JJ then started to sing out loud what he had been humming earlier. The hum now becoming words, "It's all right, all right girl. You'll never, never know. It's all right, all right girl." This song I watched, written in a couple of hours; with the writer banged on good herb sold in excess of a million records.

One evening I went to meet Fat Daddy and he was not at the usual place we met, the Orange Julius restaurant on 7th Avenue and 43rd Street. We would meet and order a papaya and hot dog before we went to work. While we ate, we would discuss the best areas for tourist and which hotels were best for our business that evening. Fat Daddy preached over and over again that planning the game, made the game work. He would say, going over the game each evening kept us on top of the rules.

Now, Fat Daddy preached when he got passionate about a subject, and the game was his passion. He told me that, money was not the game; the getaway was the game. You always needed to know your getaway, before you took the money and Fat Daddy never missed one of these meetings, so I got worried. I wondered if one of the tricks had caught him, but quickly put that aside. I knew Fats was too slick for that. It was about 6:45 so I decided to wait until about 7:30 and if he didn't show up; I would try to work by myself.

Glancing at the clock, 7:30 came and no Fats, so here we go I thought getting up to leave the restaurant. On my own, working by myself for the first time was different. I had no one to warn me about police in the area. I had no one to let me know when groups of tourists were approaching, so I could position myself. I walked looking, watching for a glimpse of Fat daddy, while I thought and planned what to do.

I went to every restaurant and hotel Fat Daddy used for the game, but couldn't find him. While walking down Broadway towards my regular working grounds, I was stopped by a group of young tourist who actually asked me if I knew where they could get some girls. There were about eight or nine of them and I started counting to myself what I was about to make. I looked up at the one speaking to me, I recall he was tall, white, foreign, then looked around the group and said,

'Sure I know where they are....I have them'.

All the now lusty, eager young faces were turned to me and in almost one voice asked.... WHERE? I told them to follow me and we started walking. As we walked, I racked my brains for a hotel to use for the drop and getaway. I had not met with Fat Daddy that evening and had no

idea which hotels were OK to use because that was Fats job. I racked my brains and couldn't think of any hotel that I could use without first knowing who was at the front desk. We walked and I listened as the young foreigners talked about what they were going to do to the girls I told them I had. When they asked what kind of girls would be there, I told them there were four White girls, three Black girls and two Chinese. I watched their faces as we walked and talked, all the while I tried to decide on a hotel.

When running this type of scam, the action must be fluid. There must be a trust based on the trick's lack of knowledge and greed, for what you had. 'If the trick had any thoughts of your insincerity, you lose the money. You must always be in control of the action.' Fat Daddy said in my head and without a getaway, there is no control.

And this scam started out with no plan. I had met these guys around 52nd Street and had to come up with something quick before reaching 49th Street. Finally, I had it. I now lived at the Belvedere Hotel on the East Side, but recalled the America Hotel where I recently moved from had a front desk that could be seen from the street. This allowed me to see what was happening so I could time my entrance. There was also a way of going completely through the hotel to the next street.

Off the main entrance, 47th Street, you could take a stairway to the first floor, walk down a hallway to the back entrance and come out on 48th Street. Because of the hotel's construction, most visitors did not know about this passageway. So, I decided to use the America Hotel.

By the time we reached the hotel, I had informed the youths, it would cost fifty dollars each and they had agreed. When I told them, this was where we had to go; they all started to go in when I stopped them.

'Yo, where are you going?' I asked and they all looked at me, wondering what I was talking about, and I explained,

'You pay me first before you go to the rooms'.

As usual at this point, the trick would hesitate, wanting to pay the girls instead. I would have to explain that we had no problems with our girls because the girls didn't keep any money in their rooms. I would explain that this policy also protected the clients and avoided prostitution charges by no exchange of money.

The young tourists talked among themselves and decided I had to come up also. I calmly told them, I could come only to the elevator because I had to stay on watch outside and held out my hand for payment. I must say, for a minute or more I thought that I had lost them, but slowly they all paid. I gave them a made-up room number with my old room-key and seeing no one at the front desk, quickly entered.

The front desk was the first thing you saw when you entered the hotel lobby; the elevators were located off to the right side, hidden by a corner of the wall. This was a small hotel where I had once lived so there was a possibility I could be recognized so I was very nervous as I led

them inside walking to the side elevators. I had chosen a time to enter the hotel lobby when I saw the front desk clerk leave, but she could return at any minute. She could look up at a mirror hung high in a corner that allowed front desk personnel a view of the elevators and see me. To have me say "Hello" would blow my game, and when the game blew, the tricks would start asking questions and the front desk would give them all my information, so I sweated.

I waited with a now quiet group, all the young faces turned toward the elevator, watching as a bright green dial slowly indicated the floors. All faces except mine, I was trying to see around the corner that blocked the elevators from the front desk. I knew there was a person on duty who knew me. I had spied the young lady, as I looked through the front door earlier.

To keep the game in play, I had to maintain an appearance of business as usual. I had to make it appear that the hotel was in on the scam. I had four hundred dollars in my pocket and all I needed now was the elevator to come before the front desk clerk recognized me.

I stood there trying hard not to sweat. Not wanting to make a noise that would draw attention to myself or make anyone want to notice who was waiting for the elevator. The elevator took so long to come that I started to suggest taking the stairs when the doors opened and the group of young dudes eagerly got in. I told them to enjoy themselves as the doors closed. I knew this scam needed a fast getaway because it falls apart as soon as the trick tries the door key.

Immediately, I ran to the stairway and up to the first floor, made the left turn, huffed and puffed down the long hallway and finally through to the stairwell taking me to the street level and down another hallway to 48th Street. Abruptly stopping, I walked normally through the entrance onto 48th Street, I knew that my pursuers would come out the front entrance, a block away on 47th Street, giving me a major start. I had worked for about forty-five minutes and made four hundred dollars that was enough I thought as I walked. I also knew my working area would be hot for a few hours so I decided to get off the streets.

It was only about 10:30 so I decided to go up to Eddie's spot. I arrived to find him in rehearsal with Phyllis Hyman. I came in and was greeted by Eddie who introduced me to Phyllis and her friend Tony Sylvester, leader of the group, The Main Ingredient. I sat back and listened to Phyllis Hyman sing. Eddie seemed to be rehearsing a lot of Jazz oriented tunes and later told me that he was getting her ready for a European concert. While she rehearsed, Tony and I struck up a quiet conversation. He asked me what I did and I told him that I sang and wrote songs.

Tony asked me if I had any hits for him to hear and then started telling me that they were looking for a new lead singer for his group. I had no idea the group was replacing their lead singer so I was interested. I thought woo, me, lead singer for Main Ingredient, what a break. Tony quietly, continued to tell me, the group was still auditioning and if I wanted to try out, here was his number, and gave me a business card. Eddie had meantime finished rehearsing Phyllis and Tony, paying Eddie for the rehearsal +looked over and reminded me to call.

So, I called Tony Sylvester that next day and got no answer. I continued to call for the next couple of days not believing, he would give me a wrong number. The last time I called the operator told me the number was no longer in service. A couple of days later I told Eddie and he laughed telling me, Tony did that all the time. Eddie told me, the Tony “thing” may not have worked out, but George Kerr bought songs and heard me playing a song he was interested in.

GEORGE KERR

Eddie told me, go over to George’s; he paid one hundred fifty dollars a song. Eddie told me, this was one way he and other songwriters earned their rent money. I knew George Kerr had offices in the Ed Sullivan Building located across the street from Eddie’s. When I left to go meet Fat Daddy that evening, I glanced over and thought I’ll see you tomorrow George.

I thought of a lot of things walking the streets that night. I walked from 53rd Street down 7th Avenue toward 42nd, I thought about what I would play for George. I thought about Fat Daddy and what might have happened to him. I also wondered if I should tell Fats that I had worked alone and made good money.

Fat Daddy had a slight ego problem. He liked to think of himself as teacher and everyone else as his student. Fats could get a little up tight when something good happened and he had not been the planner. I thought about my girlfriend Verdell. I had not seen her in almost a week since I had started making money with Fat Daddy Walker. I decided, as I looked in the brightly lit store windows that I would catch the train to Jamaica and see Verdell.

It was late by the time I arrived at Verdell’s house, and everyone was asleep. It had taken me more than an hour and a half by train and bus to get to ‘Vert’s’ and I was exhausted. The house was dark, all lights were off and I was afraid to wake someone other than Verdell if I tried throwing rocks at her window. So I quietly crept up the dark driveway, found the abandoned car and slowly opened the door and got in. To my relief I found the blanket Verdell had given me still folded under the front seat. I set the alarm of my newly purchased watch, wrapped myself in the blanket and went to sleep.

I awoke suddenly, a pounding in my head. It was morning; I jumped up awake and ready to move. I knew that Verdell’s parents got up early each morning for work and I certainly did not want to get my girl in trouble. But the pounding in my head turned out to be pounding on the car window. Verdell, it turned out, checked the car every morning to see if I had returned. She told me she had school that day and asked me to ride to school with her. She told me to hang out in the neighborhood until her parents left and come back. I told her OK, I would visit my Grandmother, who now lived with my father about ten blocks away.

My grandmother was at the side of my father’s two story home, putting something in the trash can when I approached and said,

‘Hi, Lila’. My grandmother turned, looked at me and smiled saying,

‘You look awful nice boy in your new clothes. How have you been?’

But before I could say anything, my grandmother informed me that my father did not want me to come around the house. But, he was not home now she said. So we talked there, standing at the side of the house.

I didn't tell my grandmother how I earned money but I did tell her about some of the music people I was meeting and that I was writing songs. I told my grandmother about going to see George Kerr and the possibility of selling some of my songs. And my grandmother listened, sometimes nodding her head but I could tell she didn't know half of what I was talking about, but she listened anyway. After about twenty minutes of standing there talking, my grandmother started to act nervous.

I asked what was wrong and she said she was concerned that one of the neighbors might tell Pop I had been there. I didn't want to create a problem between my father and grandmother. So, I kissed my grandmother on the cheek and told her I would stay in touch and left. As I opened the front yard gate, I saw a friend of mine across the street.

'James', I shouted, 'wait up'. James was a friend who lived a few houses down on the other side of the street.

I rushed across the street as James slowed to allow me to catch up. It was really good to see my Bud. He and I had spent many evenings talking about girls and music. James knew that I sang but didn't know I had been kicked out of my father's house. He told me that he was on his way to school and asked me where I had been, why I hadn't been over to see him. I told James about the fight with my father and what Pop said to me. I told him that I was living in the City now and had gotten back into music.

'Man, your father must be trippin', James told me.

And started to relate the latest happenings in the hood; he told me about a mutual friend, Artis who had been sent to jail for beating his girlfriend. But the rumor was the girlfriend had actually beat Artis. It seems that she had a bruise so the cops arrested Artist for Battery. Then James started to tell me about these two guys who were forming a group and needed a singer. James wanted to know if I was interested in meeting them. I said sure, and he told me where to meet him later that day. It was now about 8:15 am and later than I thought. I had planned to be back a Vert's before she left for school, so I rushed.

I got back to Verdell's house just as she was closing her front door and waited. I just stood there and watched her body move; gosh, I loved her body. When I first saw Verdell, it was from the side and I thought then, Damn! The ass she had, her body, just made you want to scream, damn! I first met Verdell at my friend Skip's house. Skip was one of the leaders of a local group called, "Skip, Sonny and the Pace Brothers". The group worked Long Island's Chitlin' circuit as a self-contained band, meaning they both played instruments and sang. Skip had become famous on the Chitlin' circuit, performing his incredible impersonation of James Brown. The group later changed its name to "Mother Night" when it signed with Columbia Records and had a hit called "Send your roaches to Julie Nixon".

VERDELL HOUSTON

I had been hanging at Skip's that day in the basement waiting for them to start their rehearsal when I first saw Verdell Houston. She was talking to Skip's girlfriend Eleanor. As I said before, I saw her from the side and thought, damn, who is she. I first thought she was one of the band member's ladies but she wasn't, she was free.

I walked over and said something probably stupid but was able to make a date for a movie. I took Verdell to a theater on Jamaica Avenue that weekend and recall sitting in the movies sucking the popcorn to keep from making sounds when I ate. I can't figure out why I thought she would find it offensive if I crunched my popcorn. But I did. In the darkened theater, I sat there and sucked on my popcorn, crazy, but so is young love.

Verdell and I continued to see each other at every chance. I had become friends with her father because of my upholstery skills and her mom liked me, so I was at Vert's often. We were like rabbits. Or at least I was. I could not get enough of Verdell Houston. By this time I had discovered not only that she had a great body but she was a nice person. She was smart, I enjoyed being with her and everything was great until my father threw me out.

Now, walking down Farmers Blvd. headed towards the bus stop, I held her hand and started to tell her of what had been happening to me. I started with telling her about Eddie Jones and tried to describe how hanging with him was like tripping. I tried to describe the world of the committed musician and how happy everyone seemed to be. I told her about the people I had begun to meet at Harlequin's and tried to describe Harlequin's itself but failed. I wound up telling her that she would just have to come and see for herself. And to my astonishment, she told me that she didn't really feel like going to school that day, so why not go to the City now.

I could not believe my luck. I had no idea when I came out the previous night, Verdell would be coming back with me. The Q3a bus finally arrived and we boarded with our destination changed to Manhattan. The early morning rush hour was over and we found ourselves two among only five passengers onboard. As we rode, occasionally looking out the dirty bus window, I talked. I told Verdell that I had to make a call when we reached the City; that I might have to go to a meeting. I told her that I had been writing songs and someone was interested in possibly buying one. She began to tell me about her plans to attend school for hair design. She was telling me about her mother's attitude regarding her choice when we arrived at the train station on Jamaica Avenue.

We boarded the express train going to 42nd Street and tried to continue our conversation but the train although not crowded was loud. We even tried moving to another car but the tracks seemed to be making the noise so we didn't talk much on the ride into Manhattan. The train pulled into 42nd Street, where we got off and went upstairs leading to the 7th Avenue side of the street. Verdell had already told me that although her grandmother lived in Harlem, she was not familiar with the mid-town area.

I told her that I had some money and we could do anything she liked. She was fascinated by all the movie theaters on 42nd Street and wanted to walk towards 8th Avenue going down one side and up the other towards 7th Avenue. And that's what we did. Looking up at the movie marquees, peering into every brightly lit store window and sometimes, trying not to giggle, peek into one or two sex shops.

I occasionally glanced at Verdell to see how she was doing and could see very plainly that she was enjoying herself. I would also hang back so she would have to walk in front of me so I could see her ass. I tell you, I loved that ass. No, let me rephrase that, I loved the way her ass moved. One or two times she caught me looking and smiling, told me to stop trying to walk behind her. But most of the time I think I got away with it.

After walking back up to 7th Avenue, we stopped at the corner to order hotdogs from a street vendor. As we stood waiting for the vendor to fix the dogs, Vert picked up the conversation we had began on the bus. Vert told me that she had never heard me sing before and jokingly said,

'I bet you can't even sing'.

And wanted me to sing something for her. But I told her, what I would do is take her up to Harlequin's and she could listen to me go over the songs I was going to play for George Kerr.

That's when I remembered that I had not called him yet. I was so involved with entertaining Verdell that I had simply forgotten. My big day and I had forgotten. I told Verdell that I had to make a call and found a phone booth. The area we were in had phones on every corner so no problem. I found a phone and called. After two rings, I got George who remembered me and recalled the song he liked and told me to come on over. I told George I could be there in two hours and he said sure.

I wanted to go over the songs to make sure I had them right and I wanted to shower and put on something fresh. I was wearing the same clothes I slept in the night before. I told Vert about my appointment and what I wanted to do. She told me that we were going to the studio any way and "tell me about your apartment", she said. She had overheard me tell George that I wanted to go back to my place to change. I had forgotten to tell her because I didn't want to explain how I could afford an apartment if I was not working.

When Verdell surprised me with wanting to hang out today, I almost said no. Because this, was the very scenario I feared. I had not wanted her to find out what I was doing. I had hoped that I would see George and he would buy my songs. With this money, I could justify payment for a place. I told Verdell that I didn't have an apartment. I told her I had a room at a hotel on the east side that I rented. She didn't ask me how it was paid for and I always assumed she thought it was my grandmother.

We walked from 42nd to 46th Street in no time. As we neared the entrance, I proudly pointed to the sign indicating Harlequin's. Vert took one look at the faded sign and I could swear that she was ready to leave. But the look faded, her face color returned and she smiled saying,

'It sure is different'.

'Harlequin's is not a look it', I said glancing at her, 'it's a place to be at if you want to learn your craft, and this is a place to learn. Everybody you see, is coming to learn something, or is working out something involving dance or music. Come on lets go in.'" I told her.

I said hello to the front desk clerk and asked for a room for an hour. There was one available so we were able to go right back. The room I got that day had a piano with a stuck key and I had to ask for another room. I was embarrassed because of Verdell's first negative reaction to Harlequin's dingy appearance. I thought she would probably think I had been making everything up about the people who came here. She thinks it's a dump, I thought.

The new room I noticed was one I had been in before and knew it had a good piano. I sat and Verdell made herself comfortable on the bench beside me, sitting so that our thighs touched and put her hand on my leg. I told Vert,

'This is one of the songs I'm going to play for George Kerr'.

I told her that I had not been playing long and in fact, I could only play songs that I had written. Then I stopped talking and began to play and sing.

I started writing songs not trying to write a song. I started writing songs trying to create piano chords by positioning my hands like I recalled seeing my Aunts do. I began to sing as I learned the hand positions for the chords because it was easier. While fooling around, I found that if I sang the song it helped me understand how the chord should sound. I hummed as I blundered into a chord progression that inspired a melody and remembered it. Or, I discovered a chord progression that inspired humming and humming became a melody creating a word picture. This last way is how the first of my songs were written. They seemed to pour out.

I played the first song for Verdell and she just sat there. Quiet and still, her hand no longer gripping my leg, her face void of expression. For a moment, we both looked at each other. I started to speak but she interrupted me, saying,

'I didn't know you could sing like that.'

Then she told me that she really liked the song and would I play her something else. I spent the rest of my hour at Harlequin's that day playing and singing the three songs I had for George Kerr. We talked and laughed. I even played her ideas I had for other songs and wound up having a great time that day.

We left Harlequin's and grabbed a cab to my Hotel where I quickly showered and changed. While I rushed around the small room, Verdell wandered around looking into everything, finally sitting in the large leather chair and turned on the television. Boy did I breathe a sigh of relief then. I had been uncomfortable bringing Vert to my room because I didn't know what might give my secret away. When I noticed she was looking around the room I left the door to the shower room cracked. I could see the room at an angle and wanted to stop her if she came close to

where I knew I had a large stack of cash. In only a little over a week working with Fats and now for myself, I had more than a grand stashed. There would be no way I could explain that kind of money to my lady.

But I got through it and finished my hurried shower. I dried off, put on matching green iridescent shirt and pants set I bought the day before and a long black leather coat. Verdell was impressed and told me that there was a glow about me. I didn't know, maybe it was the new clothes. Or maybe a new confidence, provided by my new hustle with Fat Daddy Walker. Maybe it was going to see George Kerr or just being with the girl I thought I loved. I didn't know, I just knew I felt damn good.

We found a cabbie hoping for a fare as we exited the hotel. We jumped in and gave the address of the Ed Sullivan building. Vert and I soon found that we were blessed with an African cab driver who wanted to tell us everything we should know about our ancestors. It was very interesting and I was enjoying the conversation, but he kept making the wrong turns. What should have been a fifteen-minute ride took almost a half hour because he wouldn't shut up. So, we had no time to spare when we reached our destination.

We finally arrived at the side entrance of the Ed Sullivan building. I paid the talkative cabdriver and we jumped out. I grabbed Vert's hand and hustled to the bank of elevators. I punched George's floor and we impatiently waited, watching the yellow floor indicator light. Next to the elevators hung the office directories indicating the names of the building's occupants. While we waited, Verdell studied the names of the companies and was surprised to see listed Mrs. Ophelia Devore's School of Charm. The school was a place where young African-American girls were sent to learn how to act in proper society. By now, I had often been in the Ed Sullivan building and had stopped on their floor many times to gaze at the very beautiful girls attending the charm school.

I was concentrating more on my upcoming meeting, but distractedly promised Verdell to stop there afterwards. By now, it was about two o'clock in the afternoon and I figured it would take no more than an hour with George so we would have plenty of time for Mrs. Devore. I figured I would not be with George very long and could spend fifteen or twenty minutes looking around the charm school. I had checked my watch when we got out of the cab because of my desire to be on time for the meeting. So, I was a surprise when I glanced again and discovered that seven minutes had passed and now I had only ten minutes before the appointment. I glanced up at the floor indicator light and turned to Verdell,

'Hey, let's take the stairs'. I started towards the stairwell when the elevator came.

The doors opened and I recognized Brook Benton as he got off, deep in conversation with Red Fox. When they got out, we had the elevator to ourselves. I told Vert who had just gotten off the elevator and she recognized Red Fox but not Brook Benton. Verdell told me that she knew who Brook Benton was because her mother liked him and had some of his records, but didn't recognize him. We got off at George's floor and walked down the hallway to his office. I asked Verdell to walk in front of me for luck, but she wouldn't do it.

We stopped in front of George's office and I opened the door into a small room with a large desk as its centerpiece. George was sitting in a plush, black leather chair behind a large, crescent shaped desk, piled with reel-to-reel tape boxes. George looked up and invited us in, then stood and leaned over his desk to shake my hand. George looked directly at Verdell but asked me if she was one of my singers. I told him no and he said, still looking at Vert, that he wished she could sing. I just looked at him, saying nothing.

George sat back in his chair and making himself comfortable, started talking about my song. He told me that he had heard me playing the song he was interested in at Eddie's a few days ago. He wanted me to play it for him and got up to show me where I could use a piano. George's office consisted of the room we came in, a conference room and small rooms with pianos in the back.

As I followed behind George, I noticed, in some rooms we passed, there were people at the pianos. Listening, I quickly realized the people were trying to write new songs. I found out later that all worked as songwriters for George Kerr and his partner Rocky G. Who was the star disk jockey for WBLS radio, the station most black New Yorkers listened to at the time.

While Verdell sat in George's front office waiting, I tried to think of what song he was talking about. I didn't know which one he was referring to, but I only had three songs. I started to play a little of one then the other and George recognized the second tune. I sang the song George requested and he hated it. He told me that "World please help me to find myself" couldn't be the title of a song.

He told me, he loved the melody and some of the words but it needed some work. George started to make suggestions about changes and we started, trying different combinations, but couldn't come up with anything we could live with. After awhile I told him, George, you haven't heard the other tunes I have. And he looked at me, blank eyed, a weird expression on his face and said,

'I got so into the first tune that I forgot.'

And hearing George Kerr say that to me, really made me feel good so I played George the other two tunes and he wound up liking one.

'So what do you want for the tune', George asked, looking at me.

I was nervous but said, 'a hundred and fifty'. George sat for a moment, thinking, then started telling me that I was a new writer and he didn't know when he would use the song. But he would give me a hundred for it. His point seemed to be because he didn't have an artist to use the tune immediately and adding in my being a new writer, I should get less.

I told George that I had bills. I lied and said I knew the going rate for songs and what I was asking wasn't top dollar, just a fair price. George said something like,

'Listen, man I really like the song, so I'll give you a hundred and twenty five.'

I told him, 'George, if you like the tune that much, then it's got to be worth at least a hundred and fifty. And you see how fast I write, so you know I'll be coming back with more'.

George sort of laughed and said,

'Hey man, I'll give you the one fifty'.

As George and I walked back to the front of the office, I looked at my watch. My meeting had taken longer than anticipated. It was now almost four o'clock and I needed to get Vert home before six. At all cost I had to keep Verdell's parents from knowing she had gone to Manhattan instead of school. It also dawned on me that I had been so engrossed in what George and I were doing that I had not thought about Verdell. But I had no need for concern. After examining the records hanging on the walls, reading testimonials about the artist below them and then reading some magazines, Verdell had an adventure. She decided to find Ophelia Devore's studio herself. She found it on the third floor, went in, hung out for a while, and had just returned.

I said good-bye to George and he again looked at Verdell as he bid me farewell. As I opened the door, George reminded me that he was to be the first to hear any new stuff I wrote. Vert looked at me, a question on her lips, but said nothing. Once we were through the door she asked me what happened, and I told her.

'Baby, this is just the beginning; George bought one of my songs and wants more. Now, if I can sell three or four songs a week, we'll be OK'.

I was feeling fantastic as we rode the elevator to the ground floor and held Verdell's hand as we went through the glass doors of the Ed Sullivan building. I looked across at Eddie's building, glancing up at the windows. I wanted to see if there were any signs of Eddie being in, but the windows were dark. I wanted to show off my girl and tell Eddie about my first deal, but he was not there.

I held up my wrist and showing Vert my watch, reminded her that we had a long ride back and needed to start for home. Verdell didn't want to leave, she wanted to do some other stuff, but I insisted. I told her that we were closer to the 59th Street train station and we started walking. Verdell put her arm through mine so I couldn't let her walk in front and watch that ass, but I still enjoyed her closeness.

At the 59th Street station, we caught a local to Times Square and got the F train just as it was closing the doors. Seeing the doors about to close, I shoved money at Verdell and ran, shouting,

'I'll hold the doors. Pay for both of us' as I jumped the turn-style running for the train. Vert was confused but took the money and paid for both of our tokens. I held the doors while Verdell boarded and finding no vacant seats, we stood.

We had gotten aboard one of the newer trains that had a smooth ride. Because it was a new train, it was clean. Because it was built right, it was quiet. Because it was the beginning of rush hour, it was crowded and loud. Now, a crowded train can be a very unromantic place with the pushing and shoving of bodies during a New York rush hour. However, it can be.....sexually nasty. Once aboard the crowded train, every opportunity I got, I tried to move the two of us to the back of the train.

I excused, moved, apologized and shoved people until we were at the back of the train. When holding the doors for Verdell to board, I had spotted a corner that would put us away from people getting on and off every time the doors opened. We were now in that corner. I was pressed against the train wall with Verdell backed against me. Pushed hard by the crowd, we were spoon fashion, pressed against each other. We were both dressed warm for a cold February in New York. But I still felt that unbelievable part of Verdell pressed against me and I could tell that I was getting hard. At the very moment, I realized I was getting aroused, Verdell ground her sweet, sweet, butt hard against me, and 'Mr. Jim' jumped.

Some would say I throbbed, but 'Mr. Jim' did not throb. My 'Mr. Jim' was so surprised by Vert's action and how it made me feel that he jumped trying to tear threw my pants. What the hell is she doing I thought as I opened my coat trying to get in the best position to enjoy it. Verdell felt me moving and using her hand, reached back between us to help, and that is how we stayed until reaching the Jamaica Avenue bus stop.

As soon as Verdell moved away she looked down at my crouch said,

'You better cover that,' and smiled.

I didn't have to look down. I knew what she was talking about. I was in the act of holding my coat together when she spoke. Verdell must have been a little self-conscious because she walked ahead of me as I fumbled to make myself respectful. When I caught up to her, I suggested we take a cab instead of the bus. I wanted to spend some alone time to exam this other sexy side.

Coming out of the train station, we walked to the corner cabstand and got a cab. We got in; I gave Verdell's address to the driver and got comfortable in the back seat. Verdell lay back against me and talked.....first, in lowered voices. I asked Vert what time her Mom was expected and we discussed the horrors of her Sister Shirley finding out. Shirley hated me. For some reason she could not stand me, even though I had never done anything to her. But then Shirley didn't like a lot of people, so I didn't feel bad only aware not to cross her path.

Verdell started to move in my arms, twisting and turning so that she was almost lying on top and kissed me....hard. I thank the stars that this was not the first time she kissed me. I so loved the way her lips felt, that every time was fantastic and it was fantastic now. We touched, rubbed and slobbered all over each other on that ride back to St. Albans, Queens.

'Is this it?' the driver asked, looking at us in the rear view mirror.

We jumped, straightening our clothes and I looked back, not at all embarrassed, just asked how much I owed. As I got out the cabbie said,

'Next time you should get a room, my friend' as I paid him.

Verdell was already at her opened door calling out,

'Is anybody home?'

When I walked up the front steps and stopped beside her. There was no answer so I ask Verdell if it was OK for me to come in. She said no, her Mom would be home soon and there was no telling where her sister Shirley was or when Shirley might come back.

I asked her if I could come in to make a quick call. She hesitated saying I had to be quick but let me in. We walked into the front sunroom where I waited while Vert went in the house to bring the phone from inside. I called James, told him I was at Verdell's, and asked when he wanted to meet. James said the guys wanted to meet that evening. I told James that I was leaving Verdell's now and could meet him in about ten or fifteen minutes and hung up. I told Verdell that I had something to do and left.

THE 3 GENTS

I was only a house or two from James when he saw me and waved.

'Man, I finally did it', James said as I came up. 'Man, I finally got that box.' I didn't know what he was talking about, but listened. I knew he would eventually get around to filling in the missing pieces. James was telling me about some girl named Muriel. Muriel a girl beautiful beyond belief. Muriel the girl everyone wanted....fucked his brains out. James was one of the few guys I knew who talked about going to college. Now he was in his first year at New York University.

Without telling me the destination, James started walking and talking. He told me that Muriel was in her last year of high school. They had met when he was in his last year at the same high school. Now he was in first year college and she was in last year high school.

'Man, he said, you won't believe how fine this girl is. She's a sister but I thought she was Spanish,' He told me, 'When I was in high school she and I were friends, but that was all.'

Everybody it seems was hitting on her but she never paid any attention. Now, they had run into each other a couple of weeks ago. "I told her I was at NYU and she was impressed'. James told me that Muriel had been calling him now and invited him over to her place. He told me that two days before he had gone over and they had did the 'nasty'. He started to describe just what nasty meant, when I interrupted.

'James where are we going?' I asked.

'Sorry, we're going over to Shelton's house. He's one of the guys starting the group.' James said. James told me that Shelton lived on 114th Street off Murdock. We were walking on Murdock and I could see now headed in the right direction.

'The other guy's name is Jamesee' and I don't know much about them, just that they're starting a group.'

Shelton's house looked like most on the quiet, tree-lined street of private two story homes. Vestiges of snow covered roofs and ice sickles twinkled on the evergreen bushes every home seemed to have. James opened the front gate; we walked around to the side entrance and knocked on the door. After only a few moments, the door opened and Shelton invited us inside.

We walked down stairs to a basement crowded with items stored or discarded over the years. The two had cleared an area and put down a large rug; put a nice couch, chairs, and lamps on it and made it cozy. The low basement lighting gave the place a laid-back feeling, and burning incense added to the room's atmosphere. Shelton Garland a tall, almost light skin and kind of thin, nervous dude didn't say much when I first came in. He just greeted us, let us in, and walked down the stairs. His partner was Jamesee Myers, a smooth talking, brown skin brother who did most of the talking.

Jamesee began by telling me that he and Shelton had been singing with another guy who left because he now had a baby and needed to work. He explained that they needed someone who could do lead and background. Jamesee told me they planned to put together a nightclub act to work the Long Island and Brooklyn circuits. I thought as he was talking that I could do that. Shelton jumped in and started telling me about some of the places he and Jamesee had played.

Jamesee added to Shelton's list of clubs, talked about how often the group might need to rehearse and was about to get into something else, when Shelton interrupted with, 'Let's hit some notes'. All the time Jamesee and Shelton had been questioning me, my friend James had been sitting quiet, listening. Now I remembered him as he got up and moved closer.

The three of us Jamesee, Shelton and I stood up and as a group, moved to the center of the rug. We looked at each other and Jamesee asked me what songs I knew. Did I know anything by The Four Tops and I said yes. We settled on "Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch", Jamesee gave us the parts and we started to rehearse. Before long, the two understood that I could do the parts and learned quickly.

Show me the part once and I had it. Then I was asked to do a lead and I sang, "I'm so proud" by Curtis Mayfield with Jamesee and Shelton doing background parts. When we finished, my friend James told us that we really sound good together and wanted to be our first fan. We all started laughing then and Shelton suggested we chill out and have a joint.

Hanging with Eddie Jones had put me around people who smoked herb all the time, but I didn't, I smoked cigarettes but not herb. But I wanted to bond with these guys and I really wasn't

afraid, so I tried it. I knew how to inhale so when I was given the joint I inhaled a lung full, held it in as I saw the others do, and exhaled. I waited a moment or two and nothing. I felt nothing so I took another and then another puff and passed the joint. I watched as the other guys sat back and talked while the joint went from one hand to the next. My friend James hesitated as he passed the joint and asked,

‘You alright Andre’?’

I didn’t know what he was talking about as I accepted the joint. The joint was getting small now and threatening to burn my fingers but I took a nice long drag and passed it to Jamesee. As I passed Jamesee the joint, I noticed a hat sitting on the table near me. I thought, wow what a funny looking hat. It looked very expensive and was blue with a red feather stuck in the crown band. All I could see was a thug in a pink suit, with this feathered blue hat on, bopping down the street. I thought that hat was the funniest thing I had ever seen and laughed, and laughed, and laughed. I just could not stop laughing.

Finally, after about five or ten minutes, I was able to get myself in check enough to notice that nobody else was laughing. They were standing around watching me. My friend James kept asking me if I was OK and Shelton was telling Jamesee that I probably had never smoked before. I meantime, was still trying not to laugh. I was grasping for breath, chocking.

I heard Jamesee say something to me, but didn’t quite understand. Then he repeated it and I did. Jamesee was saying that it was his hat and that it was Blue Beaver from Stacy Adams. He said there wasn’t shit funny about his hat. I found that even funnier because Jamesee was just the kind of dude I pictured in a hat that to me looked like one worn by old women to church. I doubled over laughing all over again and passed out.

I guess I must have hyperventilated with all the laughing. But I was only out for a minute or so and awoke a little groggy, but alright.

‘Man, are you alright?’ James asked me as I straightened up. I stood, rubbing the back of my neck,

‘Yea, Bro. I’m fine.’ I said.

Jamesee, lounging back in one of the plush chairs, looked at me and said,

‘There ain’t nothing funny about my motherfucking hat. You just don’t go around laughing at a motherfucker’s hat.’ Hearing that, I almost went off again but could see that he was serious.

At that moment, I realized there was something a little dangerous about Jamesee Myers. I thought that if I sang with them I had to watch out for Jamesee. For a moment, the room was tense when Shelton said,

'So, do you want to sing with us?' I said yes and we arranged for rehearsal the next night. That's how Shelton Garland, Jamesee Myers and now Andre" Saunders became a singing group.

I decided not to work that night; deciding it was already after nine and I didn't feel like standing in the cold waiting for a bus. But I did not want to sleep in Vert's abandoned car either. I finally decided to ask Shelton to call me a cab. I had decided to go back to my hotel and hang in for the evening. When the cab came, I gave my address, telling him where to drop James on the way.

When I got back to my hotel, I found a couple of messages stuffed in my mail slot. I asked the desk clerk for them and both were from Fat Daddy. Using the lobby phone, I called the number Fats listed but got no answer so I just forgot about it. I caught the elevator to my floor, thinking about what had happened that day. The deal with George, the train rides with Verdell and now being in a singing group. I didn't think I had a lot going on just that things were happening.

Opening my dresser drawer, I added the one fifty I got from George to my growing stash and closed it. Thinking about what I told Vert about making money with my songs, I thought about the money in my drawer. I felt like it was pulling me in the wrong direction. I made four hundred and fifty dollars in one evening just the night before. And I had a feeling that I could have many more nights like that. But at the same time, I just didn't like the idea of taking advantage of people.

When I told Vert about my plans, about selling three or four songs a week and what that would mean, I realized that I had been talking to myself. What I really wanted to do was sing and write songs. I knew I could write more than three songs a week. And being naïve, thought they were all hits. I decided to part with Fat Daddy that evening. I had about fifteen hundred dollars and could live on that until I sold some songs. I decided to save money. I would check out of the hotel, get the newspaper and find myself a cheap room.

The next day I got a newspaper and turned to the real estate section for rooms. There were many available and I selected one on west 111th Street in Harlem. I caught a cab uptown to see the room. The building's super showed it, informing me it was only sixty-five dollars a week for the small, single bed, room. All the room had beside a window, one large chair and bed was a half-sized refrigerator and toilet with a small shower stall. I decided to take the room and paid two months in advance. I still had more than a grand left.

After I signed the rental agreement, the super gave me the room keys and I left, catching a cab back to my hotel. I told the front desk that I was checking out and went up to my room. Everything I owned fit into a small suitcase, which I packed. Putting the money in my pocket, I looked around the room one last time, and feeling no regret, walked out. I caught a cab to the Port Authority Bus Terminal on 42nd Street and 8th Avenue, put my suitcase in one of the pay lockers and headed up to Harlequin's.

I stopped at the front desk to book a room when I heard sounds of a guitar and piano. I ask the front desk person who was playing. He said that he didn't know but would have to tell whomever it was to quiet down. It disturbed people he said. All the time he was talking, I was thinking how good it sound. Before I went to my room, I stopped at the door where I heard those sounds.

I pushed open the door and stuck my head in. Everyone in the room looked around at me, but continued to rehearse. There was a woman standing off to the side who, after a few minutes came over and asked,

'You need something?' I said no, 'I'm in a room down the hall and stopped in to say they really sound good.'

The woman told me that they were the Flamingos and were rehearsing for an upcoming gig. She asked me a little about myself and then said I would have to leave.

I booked the room that day for two hours. I wanted to do some rewriting of my two songs George had not bought and started working on 'World please help me'. The original idea for the song was a discovery of self from a political standpoint. This was the point that George had problems with. He wanted straight up, sexy love songs. So, I changed the title to 'Boy please help me' and restructured the story for a girl. Instead of 'World' I sang, 'Boy please help me to find myself, 'cause I woke up this morning, to find that I've been, living the life of, somebody else, other than me.

I finished the idea and sat back thinking, that worked, when my door opened. It was Eddie Jones. He came in smiling and sat down saying,

'George told me he got one of your tunes. I think he might cut it on the O'Jays or Timothy Wilson', Eddie said. 'But, with George one never knows until it's done.'

I told Eddie the song George originally wanted wasn't the one he bought. He wanted love songs and my tune was political. But, I told Eddie, I had changed it and started playing the new version 'Boy please help me'.

I had written the tune using part of a chord progression Eddie had taught me, and recognizing a cord, Eddie interrupted me saying,

'Hey, you playing my shit man.'

'What do you mean; I'm playing your shit? You taught me a couple of chords and I used one or two for the tune; now you want to say I'm stealing. Man, you must be crazy.' I said. Suddenly, Eddie cracked up with laughter,

'I'm just fucking with you bro', he squeezed out in between laughing.

However, I was serious, I said, 'Eddie, you're my friend and I would never steal from you. I hang out at your place because you can teach me a lot. But, I take your teachings and do my own thing, just like you.'

'Man, I told you I was pulling your leg. I heard what you did with the chords I taught you and I was just fucking with you. You learn quick. I think the changes work and George should love the tune.' Eddie said. 'Hey, I got to run. I have a group coming over in about ten minutes and I want to grab something before I go up. 'You going to stop over?'

'I forgot to tell you Eddie,' I said, 'I got a crib today; it's on West 111th and I'll probably go there when I'm finished. I need to take my clothes over and put some food in the frig. But I'll give you a holler.'

'In touch.' Eddie said and left, closing the door behind.

I glanced down at my watch and noticed that only twenty minutes were left of my two hours, so I got back to work. Inspired by the success of the 'World' rewrite, I decided to work the other tune the same way. I changed the words and altered the melody to be sexier. I had just started getting an idea for a new song when my time was up and I had to leave. I left Harlequins that day in a wonderful mood. It was a typical cold ass, February day in the Big Apple, but I was warm inside, and fired up.

I MOVE TO HARLEM

I walked the few blocks to the Port Authority, claimed my suitcase from the pay locker and caught a cab to my new crib. A hotel turned into permanent residency for Harlem residents; my new abode I later discovered was a rooming house, where everyone had a room, no apartment. Some rooms were larger than others, some smaller, but all were one room with a refrigerator, bed and toilet. I opened the door to my medium sized room for the first time and knew this was a beginning. I thought of what a friend once told me, 'Where you're coming from, is not where you're going' and walked in.

No way would I live here any longer than I needed I thought as I closed the door and put my suitcase down. I looked at the lumpy mattress on the bed, walked over and sat down. I looked around noticing details of the room and wondered what the mark was on the wall. On the wall, slightly above where the half-sized refrigerator stood, I could see a sort of odd shaped, medium long, black mark. It looked almost like something spattered from the back of the refrigerator and I was almost about to get a cloth to wipe it...when it moved.

I'm sitting there wondering what the hell it was, when the damn stain moved. I jumped up from the bed, hustled over to the spot and bent to see. I was bending over but ready to run at a moment's notice when I saw the spot move again. The damn thing wiggled. Then off to my right

I saw another spot....wiggle, and then another. What's the fuck is going on I thought, then I notice an odor and opening the refrigerator door; I knew the super must not have cleaned it since the last tenant left.

There was rotting food in the form of bologna, moldy cheese and something else drippy. However, this did not account for the wiggly things that on closer inspection were maggots. The wiggly things were maggots coming from something behind the refrigerator. I braced my hip against the corner of the frig and shoved it enough to see behind. Against the wall almost on the floor was a sandwich stuck to the wall. I could see now, stuck by aged mayo was a green edged bologna sandwich. The little critters were coming from some kid's lost lunch.

I looked around the place for something to rid myself of the maggots and rotting refrigerator contents, but could find nothing. I decided that I would go get some cleaning gear, hot plate to cook on since there was no stove and some food. Leaving my suitcase unpacked I pushed it under the bed then decided not to take all my money with me, I counted out a hundred dollars, put it in my pocket, put the rest between the mattress and left. As I locked the door, I thought of my money and decided to put on an extra lock.

I stood on the stoop of my rooming house and looked across the street at Central Park, nice I thought and headed east on a 111th Street. As I walked the snowy streets of Harlem, I noticed there were many people moving about. I saw one dude cursing and shoveling, cursing and shoveling snow away from his car. The city snow sweepers had cleared the streets but piled snow next to his car and he couldn't get out. I thought that Brother was really pissed.

Nothing I needed on Lenox so I changed directions at a 115th Street, cut across, heading west towards what is now Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. A sense of exploration made me stop in many stores on Adam Clayton out of curiosity.

I stopped in one or two of the many West Indian stores that smelled of exotic herbs, spices and incense even in the frigid air. Every storeowner had an accent, West Indian, Spanish or Chinese. I walked up Adam Clayton and found most of what I needed quickly, but had difficulty locating a locksmith. I found one finally on 112th Street, bought a double key lock and headed home.

That first day in Harlem, I purchased a lock from a West Indian, the cleaning supplies and other household items I needed from a Spanish owned "sell-everything" store. The groceries I bought at a white owned supermarket. I found it ironic that this first day in Harlem I could not find an African American storeowner selling what I needed in the immediate in the neighborhood.

Retracing my route, I cut across a 115th Street and noticed there was now a group of guys standing in the middle of the block. They were across the street, all looking at me. I griped my bags tighter, but kept walking, nervously growing closer and closer. When I got almost directly across, one yelled from across the street,

'Hey man, stop for a minute, I want to ask you something.' I did not stop; I kept walking trying to act as if I didn't know he was talking to me. However, I knew, and could tell he knew, when he said,

'I know you heard me talking to you man.'

This time I stopped, and turned to look across the street at five guys. While holding my breath, I asked,

'What you need Bro?'

'I think I know you man.' He said. 'Don't you hang out at The Showcase' I let my breath out in relief. This guy who I didn't recognize wasn't a thug he was a musician. The Showcase was another music rehearsal hall on 8th Avenue. I went there only on occasion but now I was glad I did.

'I don't really hang there. I'm usually up at Harlequin's but I do go to The Showcase sometimes.' I said. My unknown savior turned to his friends and said,

'I thought I recognized him.'

Coming across the street, holding out his hand he said,

'My name is Bobby Thompson. I saw you showing some dude a tune last week, and I liked what you were doing.'

Shaking the offered hand, I told Bobby, 'Thanks man but its cold out and I've got to get this stuff back to the crib.'

He said, 'Listen man, we're a group and if you ever have any extra songs we'd like to do one.' I told him that I didn't have anything now but I would keep them in mind. I never saw the group again, but Bobby Thompson came in and out of my life for years.

I finally got back to my room and attacked the little nasties. I sat my just purchased lock on the floor along with the bags of groceries and cleaning products. I got a plastic sandwich baggie out selected, one and stuck my hand in. I used the bag as a glove to pull the stuck sandwich off the wall behind the refrigerator.

Then I attacked the wiggles; cleaning the wall with bleach followed by soap and water. Now I shoved the refrigerator back in place and opened it, got another baggie used it as a glove, and started removing the rotted food, putting it in the garbage can. When I finished, I cleaned inside the half-sized frig with plenty of bleach, soap and water, then put in my groceries.

Finishing, I looked at my watch and saw it was five o'clock and thought, I better start getting ready I had a seven o'clock rehearsal with my new group. I reached under the bed and retrieved

my suitcase, set it on the bed and opened it. I started to unpack, hanging my clothes in the closet. I decided to wear jeans and a nice, black, bulky sweater to rehearsal and got dressed.

I had decided to take the train to St. Albans where I had rehearsal and would need about two hours for train and bus, so I grabbed my coat and left. I walked to the 110th Street subway and changing at 42nd Street got the F train to Jamaica. I got off at Jamaica Avenue and checked to see when the next Farmers Blvd. bus was due. I got the schedule and decided to call Verdell while I waited. I had asked the clerk when I checked the bus schedule where I might find a phone.

'There's a Greek restaurant across the street that has a phone', he had said.

Now I looked, saw the restaurant cross the street. As I walked in, I noticed an open phone booth that allowed a perfect view of the bus stop. Walking to the booth, I picked up the phone and gazing out the window, I called and got Verdell's sister Shirley.

'Hello' she said. Oh, no, I thought, it's Shirley.

'Hi Shirley, is Verdell there?' I asked?

'Is this who I think it is?' Shirley asked.

I said, 'Shirley is Vert home. I really don't have much time and I would like to speak to her.'

'Hold on' Shirley said. 'Vert!' I heard her yell. 'It's Andre'!' I waited.

After a minute or so, 'Hi, Andre'.' Verdell said.

I said, 'Hi Babe' and heard in the background Verdell's mother say,

'Verdell you've got to get off that phone now, it's time to eat. Now put down that phone... now.'

'Andre' I've got to hang up. I've got to go.' Verdell whispered into the phone.

I told her not to worry I was going to rehearsal anyway and would speak to her tomorrow and hung up. Not long after, the Q3a bus came. I boarded, walked to the back of the bus and found a window seat. I sat and looked out the window, noticing the hustle and bustle of people hurriedly moving along Jamaica Avenue. I watched, as the bright lights became muted lights on quiet suburban homes.

There was about twenty minutes before rehearsal when the Q3a let me off at Farmers Boulevard. As I stepped down off the bus, I noticed a small candy store and decided to get some things. I thought I'd pick up some goodies to have at rehearsal. I walked down the aisles, grabbing some chips, a couple of large sodas, paid and left. Carrying my bag, I strode quickly down Farmers, made my left at Murdock and strode up the block to Shelton's house.

That first practice went well, and we did seem to sound good together. We started learning our parts for the first song, Jamesee giving us the parts. Rehearsal started fine, but I was concerned about having only two-part harmony most of the time. We decided to experiment, using background parts more like lead parts, and it seemed to work. That evening we learned the first three songs in our repertoire. Before we knew, it was almost eleven o'clock and noticing the time, Jamesee called a halt to rehearsal.

We sat back, Shelton and I talking about another song we wanted to include when Jamesee interrupted us.

'If we get seven songs together we can start working the clubs.' 'I figured out, on stage, each song takes about five minutes.' Jamesee said. 'When we get seven songs, it will really be an act. When we add jokes and patter along with the songs, we'll have a solid, sixty-minute act. A full, sixty-minute show!' I can then start calling clubs to get some bookings.' Jamesee said.

Shelton and I looked at each other. I thought to myself, could he really do that? Does he have those kinds of connections?'

I asked Jamesee, 'Can't we learn four more songs in a week? We got three down tonight.'

'Yea, we can, but we've got to also learn the routines and that will probably take a week. So realistically, we won't be ready for about two or three weeks.' He said.

'Who's going to teach the dance routines?' I asked.

'I am.' Shelton said. Breaking into a smooth Temptation's routine.

'I've already got some ideas for two of the songs we learned last night'. I wondered what Shelton had in mind; I guess I'll find out later. We ended rehearsal that night with arraignments to meet the next evening. I said later and left.

I walked down to Farmers Boulevard and after only a short wait, caught the bus back to Jamaica Avenue. I hurried down the subway stairs anticipating missing the train and found it stopped with opened doors. I asked the token booth clerk what was wrong with the train, but the clerk didn't answer the question, just informed me, the train would be pulling out shortly. I pushed through the turn style, hurried aboard the stopped train and finding a vacant seat, sat thinking about the possible nightclub engagements.

I was so engrossed with thinking, I almost didn't notice when the train pulled into 42nd Street. I hurriedly got off and was through the turn style, rushing up subway stairs when I recalled my decision to give up the hustle. 42nd Street was so familiar a stop that I had gotten off instinctively. I stopped midway up the stairs thinking, it was not too late and since I was mid-town anyway, I would walk up to Eddie's and hang for about an hour. Pulling my collar a little snugger around my neck, I headed up 7th Avenue.

I had just gotten to the middle of Broadway between 47th and 48th Street when my arm was grabbed from behind and I heard whispered,

‘Andre’! Man I’ve been looking for you.’ I knew instantly from the voice that it was Fat Daddy Walker. And turned.

‘Fats, you scared the fuck out of me. Man, I’ve been looking for you too.’ I said

Fat Daddy continued to hold my arm as he directed me, walking quickly up Broadway. ‘Bro, we’ve got to get you off the Avenue.’ He said, as we rushed along.

I turned my head as we walked and looked at Fat Daddy, now showing a bit of strain from the past pace he set.

‘What’s up Fats?’ I said.’ I waited for you the other evening and when you didn’t show, I checked all your spots...but no you. Now, you grab my arm scaring the hell out of me, saying it’s me that needs to get in the wind. What are you talking about? You’re the one some one’s looking for’. I said.

‘I couldn’t make it the other day.’ Fats said. ‘My lady had a problem and I had to stay to handle it. I called your spot when I could but got no answer, so I left a message. I didn’t want somebody after you, you didn’t know about. Bro,’ Fats said, ‘I called you a few times to warn you about what I’m telling you now. But, the Hotel said you had checked out.’

‘Fats, I said ‘so far you haven’t told me anything’ I could think of a million things he could be referring too. I thought of the game and in the last two weeks, how many times I rushed, scurrying in the night, greedily clutching my nights take and felt like shit. However, I couldn’t think of how anything could come back personally, to me. I had to hear what Fats had to say.

Fats told me, ‘Listen Andre’, last night I was doing my thing and looking for you when I noticed some white boys questioning people, so I positioned myself to be questioned. And they did. One of them asked me about someone who seemed to have your description. But, when they described the leather coat and large brimmed hat, I knew it was you. You know I told them no.’ he said. I called your spot again and was told you had not checked back in, so I decided to look for you again tonight, and found you.’

‘Fats, thanks for looking out, I owe you one man. But, no problem, I don’t know exactly who you’re talking about, but I’m out of the game now. I’m making a little money in music, and that’s what I’m really about, so you don’t have to worry about me. I’m on my way now to make some music.’ I told Fats.

‘Music! I didn’t know that was your thang.’ Fats said. ‘Why didn’t you ever tell me that you were into music? Fats started telling me about all the musicians he knew in his home time of Chicago, Illinois. He told me he was good friends with Lou Rawls and would call him if I needed. He told Barry Gordy was someone he knew through one of his cousins and that he use to

“knock” Aretha. I think if he thought I would have believed it, he would have thrown in being a distant cousin of Frank Sinatra.

Fats also implied that I should think about a manager, someone to look out for me. Fats didn't come right out and say it, but strongly suggested he was the one. Fats told me that he thought I was a natural at the pussy con. He told me that between the two of us we could make enough money to cut our own records. He said once we cut the record, he would call Lou Rawls who he was sure, would get us a deal. We walked as we talked and were now at the corner of Eddies block. I stopped, Fats stopping also and I turned to him saying,

‘Fats this is where I'm going. But, let me thank you for all your help. And thanks for the game. If you hadn't turned me on, I don't know what I would have gotten into. That fifty was the best investment I ever made and thanks man. But I am out of the game. It's me and music for now on'. I told him. ‘Fats, the life was never for me. I'm too straight. I just don't have that kind of a stomach. I make the money but I feel like shit. My grandmother would turn over in her grave if she knew I was doing something like that. It just ain't me Bro'. I told Fat Daddy Walker.

Fats and I talked for about ten or fifteen more minutes, standing in the cold, each knowing it would probably be the last time. I kept trying to have him go away with the understanding that I did, if no one else did, understood that he was a good teacher and a good and honorable friend. I tried to convey all these things, but I had to tell him, I didn't need to consider management since I had nothing to manage. Fats thought this was funny, but continued to talk about the money we could make together. By that time, I was not really listening, wanting to go up to Eddie's. Fats finally stopped talking after a while and I told him that I was going to go on up. We exchanged contact info then, each knowing he'd never use it, shook hands and Fat Daddy Walker walked out of my life.

Eddie was alone that evening. He told me the O'Jays had left about an hour ago and he was thinking about getting something to eat. One of the great things about living in Manhattan is the ability to have most things delivered. We ordered Chinese from a little restaurant a block away that was delivered within twenty minutes. While awaiting our food, Eddie played some songs he rehearsed earlier with the O'Jays.

I listened and thought this is some good material. ‘Who wrote the songs?’ I asked.

‘The Poindexter brothers.’ Eddie said.

‘Damn! They write their ass off.’ I said. We talked about the group. How powerful Eddie LaVert was as a lead singer and how the women went crazy when he performed. Eddie was describing the group's last Apollo performance when our food arrived.

I told Eddie dinner would be my treat. I got up, went to the door and paid the deliveryman. I turned to the sight of Eddie rushing food into his mouth.

‘WO, Eddie, you must be starving’ I said as I walked to the table.

'Man, I haven't eaten all day, and I am starving.' Eddie said, continuing to shovel food in his mouth, eyes looking for more. I sat down, found the dish I ordered and began to eat. I told Eddie about my new singing group and we discussed the possibilities of the group working while we ate. We talked about my new place in Harlem, about George Kerr, and about the maggots, I discovered in my room. Eddie laughed at the story than looking down looking at his noodles in the white take-out container said,

'I wish you hadn't told me that story man', which made me laugh.

We finished eating and Eddie busied himself gathering containers, throwing them in the garbage. I sat at the piano and played the melody I started developing at Harlequin's. I looked up and Eddie was leaning on top of the upright piano, listening.

'Dre' that's pretty. Is there more to it?' Eddie asked as I stopped playing. I told him that it was something I was hearing when my time ran out at Harlequin's.

Eddie told me that one of the reasons he loved having his office, was the piano. He told me that now; anytime he wanted to play, he could...for as long and as loud as he wanted. Eddie said that he loved Harlequin's but damn, he loved having his own spot. Looking at my watch, I told Eddie that I had to boogie, it was late, but I'd probably holler at him tomorrow and left.

I caught a cab home and went to bed. I woke turning my head, one eye open, slowly looked around my room, looking for what had awakened me, noticed the clock read 6:15. I had heard a noise that woke me from a sound sleep, a thumping sound. I didn't know where the sound came from, but there was no sound now. I continued to turn my head slowly, listening for the sound, after a time, still not hearing it; I snuggled back down in bed. I was almost near asleep when it happened....that sound again. It was a rubbing than bumping noise coming from the wall behind my bed. Then it stopped. I listed for it to start again, but after a few minutes, I went back to sleep.

I got up a few hours later, feeling refreshed and hopped into my small shower. Toweling off, I thought about the day ahead, decided I was hungry and would start the day with a hearty breakfast. I would find a neighborhood restaurant and get something to eat. With that thought, I dressed quickly and grabbing some money, left. I got halfway down the stairs when I remembered I hadn't changed the lock on my door and went back upstairs. I went back into my room and finding the lock I bought the day before, gathered my tools.

I was removing the old lock from my door, when the room door next to mine opened. Hearing the door open, I looked over and saw a man's face. He was bald headed and smiling with something sparkling in his mouth. The sparkling mouth man looked over at me and said.

'You live there now?'

I told him that I had just rented the room, and that my name was Andre'. I said that I was changing my lock and hoped I was not disturbing him. But he said no he had just got up himself.

He told me that his name was Dennis and that he had been living there for the last month but was looking for a place to move.

During the conversation, Dennis let it be known that he was a pimp. But told me he liked to be called a player because he was “new school”. As Dennis talked, opening his mouth now and then caused a sparkle. Fascinated, I watched his mouth. I could clearly see a gold tooth in front, but no sparkle. Then I noticed when he smiled...there was a sparkle. I finally realized, the brother had a gold tooth with a diamond mounted high in the tooth. Until he smiled, his upper lip hid the diamond. Wow, I thought, country slick.

I had just come to this realization when Dennis told me he had to sex his lady before she went to work that morning. Hearing this, I couldn't help but think of Dennis as a typical pimp, bragging about his macho. Dennis described to me, almost in detail, how he had held his lady against the wall and how her butt kept making sounds hitting the wall. I continued changing the lock as he talked and thought well, now I know what the sounds were...hard fucking. I realized as he talked that, Dennis had not been bragging he had been explaining. Dennis must have thought I heard the noise this morning and was offering an explanation.

I finished changing the old lock, stepped back, slipped the key into my new lock and twisted. Damn, it worked on the first try.

‘So what do you do?’ Dennis asked me.

‘Not much.’ I told him. I talked about trying to break into the music business and that I had started singing with a group that would hopefully, start working soon. Dennis told me to let him know when the group would be performing so he could come, then went back in his room.

I thought about Dennis as I locked my door and once again headed down the steps, setting off to find a restaurant for a light brunch. I headed up 111th Street headed west toward Adam Clayton, eye out for a restaurant. I was thinking of having a country style meal and was looking for a soul food spot. I found one on Adam Clayton Boulevard between 113th and 114th Street. It was a ground floor restaurant in a once elegant old brownstone. Now a dirty sign advertised in faded letters, “Fa nie May’s S ul Food Restaurant”. I entered a large room with tables covered in bright shinny oil cloth draped tables.

There was an attractive older woman, heavy-set, dark skinned behind a long counter. Six or seven people sat at the counter eating from plates piled with food. The tables were placed around the room crowded with families talking, eating and laughing. I noticed as I moved between tables, headed for the sit-down counter a large, hand written menu hung behind the counter advertising a distinctly southern breakfast menu. Coffee, sweet tea, biscuits, sausage gravy, grits, eggs with bacon, sausage-links, patties, steak or pork chops. Oatmeal, Waffles or pancakes with chicken, corn bread, dinner rolls, Texas toast and buttermilk. I cannot remember all Mrs. Fannie had on the menu, but I do recall my breakfast.

‘Hi, I’m Mrs. Fannie. What can I get you?’ The lady behind the counter asked. Glancing from Mrs. Fannie to the menu,

'I will have coffee, a waffle, and eggs over medium with two pork chops and grits with buttered whole wheat toast.' I said.

Mrs. Fannie took my order, opened an unseen door to the right of the counter and went in. I had been standing, but now sat down in an unoccupied counter seat to my left. I sat looking around the room at the diners while I waited. Everyone appeared to be enjoying their food. 'Niecy, every time I come here the food is great. Ms. Thing shoo can get down' I heard a male voice at the counter say. I overheard another voice, from a table say,

'Somebody told me, Mrs. Fannie don't do the cooking, it's her Granny! Her Grandmomma is back there throwing down, Bro. They say her Grandmomma is real old....around 80.' The restaurant's background noise drowned out the rest of the voice, but I was now, sure looking forward to the food. It was not long before I noticed the door where Mrs. Fannie left open, and Mrs. Fannie entered, carrying my food. The plate, even from this distance, I could tell was heavy with food.

Mrs. Fannie placed the food on the counter in front of me, stepped back, smiled and said, 'I hope you enjoy your food' and moved down the counter to engage in conversation with one of her regulars. I looked down at my plate and thought, damn, this is a lot of food, and started to eat. I added sugar to the steaming mug of coffee and sipped, the temperature was just right; picked up my fork, mixed my eggs with my grits and cut a piece of pork chop.

I took my fork, stuck it in the cut piece of pork chop, added healthy amount grits to the fork and put it in my mouth, along with a bite of toast. When I bit down and got the taste of Mrs. Fannie or her Mrs. Fannie's Grandmomma's cooking, I felt like I was back at Granny's house. The food tasted like Saturday morning's at my Granny's.

I finished most of my large breakfast, complimented Mrs. Fannie on a wonderful meal, paid, and promising to come again, left. I walked from Mrs. Fannie's feeling delightfully full and thought I didn't need to go back to my room so I'd check out Harlem. I walked back down Adam Clayton stopping at the corner of 113th Street and made a turn into the block, headed west.

I recalled seeing a large neighborhood playground with a community house the previous day, when I was looking for a store. I thought then, it might have a piano, and I should check it out. I walked down 113th Street, looking for the playground and quickly realized I was on the wrong block. I continued walking west to Fredrick Douglas and made a right, headed towards 114th Street. I peered down 114th, trying to see the playground, but this wasn't the block either.

I continued walking up Frederick Douglas to 115th Street, peered into the block, and there it was. Approaching the playground, I could see it was large and surrounded on each side by a tall, galvanized fence. There were basketball courts at either end of the playground and a community center off to the side. In the 1960's most neighborhoods had a playground with a community house where supplies such as basketballs and ping-pong paddles were kept. Many had pianos also so I thought I could realistically expect a piano.

I could see there was no one in the playground, and walked on, looking at the community center. The playground was silent, the sound of my breath, and crunch of my shoes in occasional patches of snow, the only sounds. I walked to the door of the quiet building and turned the knob, it didn't turn, locked. I twisted it a couple of times; the same thing happened and turned to leave when it opened inward.

'May I help you', the man said. I turned back to the doorway,

'I don't know, Sir. I wanted to come in to see if there was a piano. I thought the Center was closed, so I was just leaving.' I said.

'It's alright, come one in, I'm not really busy and we do have a piano. I don't know how tuned the piano is, everybody pounds on it, but you're welcome.' The guy said walking away, leaving me alone.

It was a typical neighborhood community center; a long squat room with girls and boys toilets at one end, small cubical office, a line of equipment storage lockers, tables and chairs to sit and play games and a ping-pong table. I entered and saw the piano right away. It sat in a far corner of the room, another scarred and stained upright piano.

I thanked the guy as he walked away, sat down at the piano, looked at the keys, and struck a note, than another. Then I tried a few chords, determining the piano didn't sound too bad and started to play. I played for over an hour in the quiet of the community center, changing the melody I played at Eddies the night before, until it became a song.

The guy who let me in returned, just as I was trying a new chord progression saying,

'You a songwriter or something?' I looked up and saw it was the guy who let me in. I thought, that's the first time anybody referred to me as a songwriter and felt good. I told him that I was trying to be one, but was just starting out. The guy told me that he had been sitting in his office listening, and thought he might have heard some of my stuff on the radio.

I had to explain that I didn't have anything recorded yet. I told him about my George Kerr deal and there was a possibility of the O'Jays doing one of my tunes, but I had nothing going yet. That I had sold only one song so far.

'You're gonna make it Bro. You're gonna make it' he said as he walked back towards his office. 'Oh, by the way, it's quiet now, but kids will be coming in soon.' He called over his shoulder.

I played for another forty minutes before I decided to leave. I walked to the small office and looked in. The guy looked up and said,

'You through?' I said I was, and thanked him, asking his name. He told me his name was Tony Majors and I was welcome anytime I wanted to stop in. He told me he was a

schoolteacher but helped out at the center. Tony said he was there about '1:00 pm most days, so stop by'. I thanked him again and left.

It was about time to catch the train for St. Albans so I began to walk towards 116th Street. I would catch the local train to 42nd Street and transfer to the express for Jamaica. Getting a train at 116th was not the best idea, it was a local station. After waiting for almost an hour, it was a reminder to go to an express stop. Local trains seem to take all day to stop at your local station. I stood and watched express train after express train speed down the center train tracks. Express trains tearing by, speeding by while I waited. My train arrived, finally; I boarded and stood, grabbing an overhead hand-strap to brace myself.

The train ride was short, only a couple of stops and I was at 42nd Street. At my familiar stop, I got off and caught the F train to Jamaica. I caught the Q3a bus to Farmers Boulevard, got off and headed towards Murdock. I was about forty-five minutes early for rehearsal and thought I would see James before I went to rehearsal. The problem was James lived on the same block as my father. I was having problems with Pop and did not want to see him. I decided my father was probably not at home anyway and turned off Farmers onto 113th Road, my father's street. I walked along looking at the houses, recalling which friend lived in which house while watching out for my father.

James lived closer to Murdock than my father so I didn't have to walk across from Pops house with the chance he might see me. Because of this, I was a little less wary as I approached James's house. I walked up to James's gate, opened it, walked to the side entrance without being seen, and rang the bell.

James answered, 'So what you been up to, "City Boy"?' James said letting me in, directing me to the basement, his hang out. I walked into the dark paneled basement, sat in one of the plush, brown, leather chairs and said,

'I've just been busy, Bro., trying to stay afloat.'

'You seem to be doing more than floating.' James said. 'Shelton was saying something about Jamesee having a gig for you guys.'

'A gig!' I said. 'I haven't heard anything about a gig. The last time we talked, it was about getting an act together and the possibilities of a gig.' I told James.

'Shelton told me, Jamesee had booked your group at some club.' James said.

'Man, we don't even have a name, how can we be booked at some club. I said to James. 'James, we don't only not have a name for the group, we don't know enough songs for an act, we don't know any jokes, we don't have clothes.....Man we don't have a lot of shit it takes to work a club. This is crazy.' I said.

James neither the less continued to insist Sheldon had told him Jamesee booked us a gig. James just didn't know where it was or how long before we were to do the show. I sat there not

wanting to believe what I was hearing. I told James that I would find out when I got to rehearsal and get back to him. We then started talking about my room. It was the first time he or I had our own crib and he was envious, saying 'I'd have ladies over all the time.'

I told James, he would have too much to do to have ladies over all the time. Then I described how small my room was, told him about Dennis with the diamond gold tooth and about the maggots. When I told him about how the spots on my wall turned out to be maggots, how I reacted, James cracked up laughing.

We talked some more, mostly about his Muriel, but now it was almost time for my rehearsal. I decided to leave then, to avoid rushing, and I really wanted to find out what was the deal with Jamesee booking a gig.

'Gotta boogie Bro. It's almost time for my rehearsal.' I said getting up. 'Thanks for telling me what Shelton said. But I still can't believe Jamesee would book the group, and we don't even have a name. Crazy'

James had stood up when I did, now walking towards the door, opened it,

'Well, see you later 'Dre. Don't forget to let me know about the gig.' James said as I walked through the door. I promised James that I would call and headed for rehearsal.

Rehearsal began awkward for me that evening. I walked in wanting to know if Jamesee had booked the group, but Jamesee started rehearsal right away. We rehearsed for about twenty or thirty minutes when Shelton said,

'What's wrong Andre'? Why do you keep fucking up your part man.? We've been going over the same song for a half hour and you still don't have it down. What the fuck is up?'

I said, 'Man, I just can't concentrate. James told me that Jamesee had booked us somewhere and we don't even have a name for the group.' Turning to Jamesee I asked, 'Jamesee did you book the group?'

'Andre' I didn't actually book the group. Jamesee said, 'A friend of mine who books groups told me he could get us work. The dude told me a club in Brooklyn needed a group in three weeks. He told me it was a weekend gig that would only last four weekends. He said if I wanted, he would give me the gig. I told the dude we might be ready but I didn't sign no contract man.' Jamesee said.

I said, 'Jamesee, you didn't say anything to me or Shelton about talking to someone about a gig. What you said was, when we got enough songs for an act you would call some clubs. I thought you had the connections. Now you're telling me about some other dude.' Looking at me Shelton said,

'Jamesee told me.'

'You don't have a telephone number Man.' Jamesee said. 'Nobody can reach you until you call. I didn't book the group, but if we can get it together, we got a gig.'

'What's the name of the group?' I ask Jamesee.

'I told him "The Three Gents." Jamesee said.

'I thought you hadn't booked the group?' I said to Jamesee.

'I had to tell the dude something. Jamesee said. Jamesee went on to tell Shelton and I that he knew we could do it; we would have the act together for the gig. He said that the name could be changed but that he and Shelton had previously discussed it as a name for the group.

I realized a couple of things as Jamesee talked, he had booked the group, he wanted us to do the gig and he and Shelton were a team; I was the odd man in the picture. I should have also realized then that this dynamic would never work, but I didn't. I would not make that connection fully until months later. But at that time, I was still trying to fit in and only addressed the issues of a group name and getting ready for the job.

'So what's your plan now? I say your plan, because I wasn't a part of it. But let's not hassle. What do we do now? I asked Jamesee.

Jamesee told Shelton and I that we had almost learned seven songs in two rehearsals, that the jokes were easy and started telling us some. Shelton and I didn't really laugh but did agree that a crowd might like them. I asked the two about costumes and was told Shelton's girlfriend would do them.

'When do we start the choreography?' I asked Shelton and Jamesee. Jamesee spoke up saying,

'We'll start that next rehearsal. We'll continue to polish the tunes but concentrate on the steps.'

And, that's what we did for the next two and a half weeks; rehearse the songs, stumble through dance routines and practice joking with an unseen audience. For the next few weeks, my schedule was free until five o'clock then catch a train for St. Albans; enjoying it, I settled into the routine.

MANHATTAN PAUL

One morning, a week or so after my conversation with Jamesee, I was on Adam Clayton Powell headed to Mrs. Fannie's for breakfast when "Manhattan Paul", an old friend, stopped me.

“Manhattan Paul”, slightly gray, in his fifties now, received his name by creating himself a home under the Manhattan Bridge in the 1920’s.

Paul was from Kansas, but hopped a train to New York, at age of eighteen to become an actor...with very little money. When Paul’s money ran out, being determined to stay, he used cardboard boxes and wood he found to build a home under the Manhattan Bridge. For his ‘I’m gonna make it, no matter the cost’ attitude, Paul received a kind of notoriety among the theatre crowd.

Paul Ronald Jackson became “Manhattan Paul” and worked many years as an MC at top nightclubs, with some top black stars of his day. The demise of large theatres and the Chitlin’ circuit, limited work for black entertainers like Paul. No more gigs with stars like Cab Calloway, Lena Horn, Nipsy Russell or paying his rent regularly.

Paul now relied on old friends like Mrs. Alma Johns, a radio personality on WBLS radio station to help during his ever-increasing times between work. But Paul used his connections from years of working to help groups find work if he thought they were good. He also earned money on the side creating nightclub acts.

Paul lived a few blocks from my father. We met when I went to the home of someone I met playing basketball. The dude had given his address and told me to stop by to get him the next time we played. I stopped by that day and an older gentleman answered the door, letting me in to the living room. Standing there waiting for my friend to dress and come down, I looked around the room, noticing pictures of the older gentleman professionally posed or performing with many faces I recognized.

It was easy to see the person on the wall and who let me in, were the same. I turned, and said, ‘Wo, you’re famous!’ He smiled and said, ‘I’m “Manhattan Paul”, I use to be in the entertainment business’. Then started to tell me stories of when he was in the nineteen thirties, forties and fifties entertainment business. Friends told me later that Paul was a faggot and the guy I went to see was his lover.

“Manhattan Paul” was gay, but if you didn’t give him a certain vibe, he didn’t bother you. I didn’t care about Paul’s sex life, I didn’t care about who he “diddled” and I became became friends. I started to see him around the neighborhood and one day told him of my music aspirations. Paul told me he still knew some club owners and could find work if I ever needed.

‘Andre’ What are you doing in Harlem?’ “Manhattan Paul” asked, as we stopped to talk. I told Paul that I was living in Harlem, that I had a room on 111th Street near Central Park. I told him I was going to get some breakfast and invited him to come along. Paul said he had some time, so sure. We began to walk towards 115th Street, I told Paul about the incredible restaurant I discovered and about the delicious food.

‘I bet, I can tell you where we’re going.’ Paul said, smiling. I looked over at him,

‘You just might.’ I said. ‘I know you know Harlem, so you just might.’

'I bet we're going to Mrs. Fannie's. She's had that place for years.' Manhattan Paul said. 'It's always been known for good food and large portions.'

When we stopped at the restaurant, Paul said, 'Told you', as we went in.' Manhattan 'Paul!' Mrs. Fannie shouted from behind the sit-down counter. 'Manhattan Paul!' she shouted again, coming from behind the counter.

'Man, I haven't spoke to you, Mrs. Fannie said, embracing Paul in a tight hug. 'since, let me see, since Arthur Prysock was over at Bowman's Showcase. Where you been keepin' yourself.' Mrs. Fannie asked Paul. The always half-crowded restaurant customers watched Mrs. Fannie. They wondered if this was some celebrity who walked in and wondered who it was.

Mrs. Fannie didn't pay attention to her customer's stares; she only had eyes for Manhattan Paul. Mrs. Fannie led us to an unoccupied table and we sat down. All the time talking about people they both knew, I was silent, listening. It seemed that Paul had failed to mention knowing the restaurant owners for years. Mrs. Fannie and her mother knew Paul when he was a top MC, fed him on many occasions, and liked him very much. Mrs. Fannie took our orders, left, and returned shortly, plates heavy with our breakfast.

She sat down, across from "Manhattan Paul" and talked while we ate, Mrs. Fannie and Paul quietly talking and laughing recalling old times. Mrs. Fannie occasionally, getting up to serve a customer, returning to continue their conversation.

Breakfast over, plates pushed back, I paid, while Mrs. Fannie protested, treating Paul to breakfast as promised and left. Now, walking with Paul I told him about my new career as a songwriter, about being in a group, about Jamesee booking the group, and how we were preparing for the gig. "Manhattan Paul" advised me if we were not prepared; don't take the gig under any circumstances. He told me, 'that could be a disaster to your career.' Paul was explaining that being professional was being prepared; when I saw a cab parked at the curb, up the block.

Looking towards the cab, I told Paul I was going grab it and head downtown to work on some tunes. He asked me where I worked; I told him I primarily rented piano rooms at Harlequin studio.'

'That's a midtown studio, isn't it?' Paul asked. 'I have a friend who has a studio in midtown, he's a dancer, his name is Henry LeTang and if you ever run in to him, say hello for me.'

I told Paul I would and got in the cab, '44th and Broadway,' I said to the driver. The cabdriver sped down 8th Avenue to 44th Street, turned into the block and let me off in front of Harlequin's. I booked a room for two hours, got the room I asked for and turned bumping into someone.

I excused myself saying, 'Sorry, Bro.' as recognition set in. 'Sorry, bout that.' Bobby Thomson said at the same time recognizing me.

'Sorry, I didn't see you Andre'" Bobby said.

'No problem. I didn't see you either.' I said. I'm about to go to my room. What are you doing here?' I asked Bobby Thompson.

'I was supposed to have rehearsal, but the other guys haven't got here yet.' Bobby said. I told him that he was welcome to hang with me until his group got there. And Bobby said, 'Great, let me tell the desk to let me know when my people arrive. What's your room number Andre?'

I told him, Bobby told the front desk where he would be and we walked back to my room. Bobby watched me as I put down my goodies I brought for later, sat down at the piano and prepared to work. I started out with a groove I thought about earlier and began to play. I tried some chords that didn't quite fit, and changed them around while Bobby watched. After while,

'It's working Andre'. It's starting to come together.' He said as I tried different chord progressions. I started adding words and Bobby began saying, "Yea, yea, that's it, that's it. That's what I like man. Now that's what I like.'

I tried to tune Bobby out while I concentrated on the song. I continued trying different words along with what I was playing, but it wasn't working. Finally I got something that worked for me. And satisfied, began to play from the top, the completed song.

Bobby had been standing behind the piano; arms propped on top, leaning over, and watching me, now began pacing the room. When I finished, Bobby said,

'Man, when my group gets here I'm gonna talk to them about buying that song. How much you want Man? We can get it. How much you want?'

I told Bobby that I didn't know what to say, I was trying to get songs together for George Kerry. I didn't want to hurt his feelings but letting his group do my tune wouldn't benefit me at all. And I didn't think he had the connections to get a song recorded. So I had to tell Bobby the tune was already taken. At that point luckily, the phone rang, it was the front desk notifying Bobby his group had arrived. 'I want that tune'. Bobby said as he left, closing the door.

Now, I had eleven songs to show George Kerr, I decided to call him and walked to the lobby to use the phone. I reached George on the second ring and told him I had some new tunes, he told me he would be there most of the day. I told him I would be there in a few and hung up.

I left Harlequin's and walked to George's office in about fifteen minutes. When I opened the door, George looked up from his desk and said,

'That was quick. I didn't know you were in the neighborhood Andre'. Take a seat. I was just finishing something. Sit tight, I'll be right with you.'

'No problem. I got time.' I said and sat down. George got up from his desk, opened the door to the piano rooms and disappeared, while I waited. I picked one of many magazines off the small glass table, opened it, attempted to read, and found I couldn't concentrate. The songs I was to play for George filled my mind.

The door opened and a person walked in as I sat waiting for George to return. He stepped through the door, glanced over, saw me sitting and asked,

“Hi, do you know if George is around?”

I recognized who it was as soon as he spoke. It was Frankie Crocker, protégée of Rocky G and now becoming the new personality at WBLS radio station. Frankie, the “Velvet Voice” was someone I listened to all the time because he was my favorite Jock on WBLS.

Before I could answer, the door to the back rooms opened and George stepped through pointing to a record he held, talking to Richard Tee. Richard Tee was a keyboard player, music arranger, record producer partnered with George to produce the O’Jays and others. The two walked in, deep in conversation about the record George was holding.

‘Frankie!’ George said, as he noticed Frankie Crocker standing there. ‘I was just telling Richard, you were coming by to pick this up. I hope you haven’t been waiting long.’

‘Hey George, how are you doing Richard? No, I just got here.’ Frankie said. ‘That it? pointing to the record George was holding.’

George, holding the record out, told Frankie what he was holding was the O’Jays new single. Frankie was there to hear the just received first mastered copy George was holding. Mastering is the final sound adjustments before a record is manufactured for public release. Frankie and George felt they could increase record sales by “on air” hyping the record’s release. Frankie said he would get the radio audience excited to buy by playing a bit of the record on air before its official release and talk about the group.

‘You bet.’ George excitedly, said to Frankie Crocker.

‘Man, if you like the group’s last single, this.. will.. blow.. you.. away. Bro, Eddie Lavert is singing his ass off.’ George said.

Frankie reminded George that he loved the O’Jays first single, knew this one was probably a hit before hearing it, and wanted to know if he could tell his listeners, there would be an album to follow. George told Frankie, the group was working on an album then and would have something for Frankie to hear soon.

George turned to me, ‘Andre” let me take care of this, it won’t take long. As a matter of fact, you can listen too.’ He said gesturing for me to follow. I got up saying, ‘Thanks George.’

We walked together into the large, comfortably furnished, conference room. Light wood paneling covered the room’s three sides, relieved by one wall of shelves holding a record turntable, sound equipment of all types and stacks of records. Large floor speakers, sat in two corners, two small speakers hung on the wall above each, mounted, facing into the room.

George, Frankie Crocker and I sat at the black, leather topped, conference table in matching soft, leather chairs. Richard Tee took the record from George as we sat and walked to the record player. Stood, watching as we made ourselves comfortable, then looked at Frankie saying,

'Before you say anything Frankie, let's listen to both sides. You were asking for an album, well, listening to both sides, will give you a good idea where we're headed with the album we're working on.

Frankie told Richard Tee he thought that was a good idea. I glanced at George wondering if he would voice an opinion, but he said nothing. Richard put the record on and the soft sounds of vinyl came through speakers as he walked to where we were and sat. We all listened as the song's intro started, then the voice of Eddie LaVert sang, "I'll Be Sweeter Tomorrow (Than I Was Today).

Frankie Crocker, loudly passed judgment on the song and group's performance before the record stopped. He thought 'it was great', however, recalling what Richard Tee said, abruptly stopped talking. Richard Tee, not saying anything, got up, walked to the record turntable, turned the record over, walked back and sat down.

The room again was quiet as the O'Jays sang; I thought to myself, listening, recognizing my song, as the record played. I thought, that was quick, George recorded the song I wrote, quick. If he liked that tune, I know he's going to like what I've got now, thinking about the eleven songs, I was prepared to play.

When the second song finished, George, Frankie and Richard Tee talked about the record and ideas for their radio promotion. George told Frankie Crocker that he could get the group to do a live interview, if Frankie wanted. Frankie thought this was a good idea and spent some time talking about the possibilities, while I sat silently, taking in everything.

Their listening session ended, Richard Tee gave Frankie Crocker his copy of the new O'Jays release and Frankie left. George looked over,

'Andre' lets move to a piano room' he said, getting up. Richard Tee was about to make a phone call as we left the room.

George and I walked the short distance to a small bare, room. Only a piano, piano bench and one chair occupied the small space. We walked in; I sat at the piano while George sat in the room's only chair. I told George, I had written eleven songs since I last saw him and that I changed words to the song we worked on.

George made the comment, he didn't know if he had the time to hear all the tunes, but would like to hear as much as he could. I started to play and George stopped me when I finished "Boy Please Help Me" saying, 'Andre', that's what we were shooting for. That's it Man. What else you got?'

And I played the next song, the next, and the next. I wound up playing eight songs before George's phone rang. He got up, 'Excuse me Andre"', he said and walked out. I sat there thinking, I almost played him, all my shit. And wondered how many tunes George liked.

I was thinking this, when George stepped through the door, 'I want 'em all Andre". I want everything you played for me. How much for all of them?' George asked.

My heart started to pound in my chest, I felt slightly faint. I thought all eight songs? My mind calculated the amount of money that many songs represented. Greed set in and I thought, what it would mean, dollar wise.... if I could sell George.... all eleven songs.

'The same as before is cool with me, one fifty.' I said.

'Andre" I'm talking about eight songs. You don't expect me to pay the same for eight as I do for one.' George said.

I said, 'George, you seem to like what I do.' George interrupted me saying, 'I do, Man. I do.'

'But,' I continued, asking me for more songs but paying me less, for the songs, just don't feel right to me. I really like what you did with the O'Jays; Eddie sang the shit out of my tune. A week ago, I stopped by Eddie Jones' spot and heard him rehearsing the group on my tune. But, hearing the finished product blew me away. I think you did a hell of a job.' I told George.

'I told you, when we made the deal, for the tune, I had someone in mind, I just didn't tell you who. Andre", we're gonna do a lot of business Man. Give me a break.' George said. I sat at the piano, looking at George as he spoke and wondered, just where is he coming from? I was new in the business, but I knew that I was not going to accept less than one fifty a song.

Hanging out at Eddie Jones spot, exposed me to more than just new chord progressions. Because Eddie was a voice coach, rehearsed vocal groups and was a songwriter, Musician, actors and recording executives visited all the time. I was exposed to lots of information. Eddie was their good friend and listener, so they talked.

I would listen to these conversations, who did what and who was looking for what, dominated the conversations. Fascinated, I would listen, learned and remembered. I had heard more than one visitor complain about song publishers taking advantage of writers, and the warning, don't get ripped off.

Eddie complained often of problems doing business with a small song publisher like George and large publishers like, Mills Music. When I told Eddie, about my first deal with George, he said, George would try talking me down in price.

'George I'm the one really in need of a break. I'm just starting out in the business and all I have are my songs. We agreed that one hundred fifty was fair, when you bought the first tune. Now you argue George, one fifty is too much, if you buy more than one song. I worked hard on

each tune and each song is worth at least one fifty.' The price should be going up,' I told George, 'not down.'

While I talked, George had sat, in the room's only chair looking at me, now he said,

'Andre', Look, I'm working with a budget Man, and I only have so much allocated for songs.'

'George, I said, I know you had to include something for songs.'

George interrupted, saying, 'I did'.

I interrupted George, 'That's my point George, one-fifty per tune is cheap. So I know you included at least that much.' I said.

'Listen, Andre', George said, 'I don't want to hassle this, I'm going to give you your price. You just keep bringing me hits.'

Standing in front of George's desk watching him write my \$1200 check, I realized something. I really could make decent money writing songs. I thought one day, I'll be in a position where I would not have to sell my songs. I'd make publishing deals with major song publishers and earn real money.

'When can I hear the other tunes?' George said handing me my check. I told him that I could do it the next day, set an appointment for one o'clock in the afternoon and left. It was now time to catch the "Iron Horse" for Jamaica. I walked up 7th Avenue to 59th Street and caught the F train to Jamaica Avenue, got off and called Verdell.

'Hello,' Verdell said.

'Hey Babe, How's my stuff?' I said, relieved it wasn't her sister.

'Your stuff is just fine. Where are you?' Verdell asked.

I told Vert I was on Jamaica Avenue, had rehearsal and was waiting for the bus. Verdell wanted to know when I was going to see her again. I told her I now had a place in Harlem, it was just a room but would she like to see it and Vert said she wanted to right away. I said,

'When?'

'I'll be in Harlem Friday, spending the week-end at my grandmother's, that's one reason I'm glad you called. You know it's hard on a girl, when she wants to reach her boyfriend and she can't. When are you going to get a phone? Now that you have an apartment, there's no excuse.' Verdell said.

'It's not an apartment, it's only one room, I told her. 'And it's not too big. But I'll tell you what it does have.

'What? Vert said.

'A bed.' I said, and laughed.

Verdell gave me her grandmother's phone number, address and we arranged a time for me to call Friday. I hung up elated; I could not believe it. Up until now, intimacy with Verdell had always been hurried and furtive, always in fear of discovery. Now we had all the time we wanted. Pictured fantasies of Verdell flooded my brain.

Erotic images in adult films became actors with our faces. My face, between the thighs, of the film's starlet, the girl with.....Verdell's face. Suddenly I remembered I had not, told Vert about selling my songs or meeting Frankie Crocker. Then thought, I'd tell her Friday.

Thinking of Friday and Verdell, the bus ride seemed awful short that evening. I got off at Farmers and walked still thinking of Verdell, made the turn onto Shelton's block. I was thinking, today is Wednesday and I've got some things to do tomorrow, so Friday works just fine. When I rang Shelton's bell.

THE 3 GENTS' STARTS TO WORK

Shelton opened the door smiling and let me in. As he led me down the basement steps, he kept looking back, strangely smiling at me. When I walked into the basement, I noticed Jamesee was seated, looking up at me...and also smiling. I wondered, what the hell are they smiling at me for, as I sat down.

'We've got another gig, Andre" Shelton finally said, now fully smiling. 'The dude who told Jamesee about the Brooklyn gig, called Jamesee and said he had an emergency. He needed a singing group for a one-night gig. It's a private Social Club on Nostrand Avenue in Brooklyn.

I stared at Shelton, looked over at Jamesee, seated, watching us both. Then looked at both and asked, 'So you guys think we're ready.'

'Yea.' Jamesee said, 'I do. Man, we've been doing the same thing for two weeks. And, for the last few days, we haven't made any mistakes. We're ready Man, we're ready.'

'What are you worried about Andre"', you've got most of the leads. That's the easy part. Jamesee and I have to remember all the background parts and steps.' Shelton said.

'That's not the point.' I said. 'We're a group. What I'm wondering is, are we ready as a group. I think I'm ready.' I told Shelton.

'Don't you know all your parts?' Shelton asked me.

'I hope so' I said. Otherwise there's gonna be a whole bunch of motherfuckers laughing at my ass.' I said.

'This is a chance to work out the kinks before the Tip Top.' Jamesee said to Shelton and I.

What is the Tip Top I wondered? Is that the club we're playing next week? Do I really have all the songs down? Every time I come to rehearsal something new, new songs, new steps, new gig, and new bullshit from Jamesee or Shelton. When do we get uniforms? My mind was racing.

'Jamesee, first, let me tell you and Shelton something, what ever happens, I'll do my part, I'll hold up my end. What bothers me is, you and Shelton keep telling me what's... happened, and you don't ask my opinion. I come to rehearsal and its past tense, whatever it is, it's already happened.'

'Andre! You don't have a phone man.' Shelton said.

'Phone! A phone is not the problem; you guys keep getting ideas...after we rehearse Man. The two of you, decide the idea is great and make a move. The two of you decide.... then you tell me. There's no me in that, and, it bothers me. With the other groups I've sang with, the rule was, every body was involved.' I told Jamesee and Shelton.

I watched the two as I spoke, Jamesee setting up in his chair, staring at me. Shelton standing, both hands gentle, rubbing his temples, looking at the floor.

'I'm really trying to fit in, to make it a group. I'm never late for rehearsal, work my ass off when I'm here to learn my parts and if you hear what I'm saying; I'm talking about, being a group.' I said.

Jamesee got up, walked over to an old stationary exercise bike, got on, started pedaling and looked up, saying to me,

'I'm sorry you feel that way Man. I don't. From the first time we sang together, I felt like it was a group. Glancing at Shelton, then back to me, he said,

'I told Shelton if we stayed together, we were going to the top. Things are happening quickly, because we are good. This one-nighter, only pays a hundred dollars, but it will prepare us for the important gig, the Tip Top.'

I listened, a hundred dollars I thought thinking of the \$1200 in my pocket,

'That's my point Jamesee. How do you know a hundred dollars is cool with me? You never asked me. And when are we supposed to do this gig?'

Jamesee sat up straighter in the chair, glanced at Sheldon, then back at me and quietly asked,

'How much do you want?'

I said,

'Jamesee, right now the money is not the prime issue. I'm going to do the gig, but you've got to stop committing me, without including me. We've been together one month and you have us working, great! But on the other hand; there's a lot of stuff we still don't have together, like outfits. And I would still like to know; when is the gig we're talking about? And is Tip Top, the name of the club, we're at next week?' I asked.

'So the money is cool? You're alright with the money?' Jamesee asked me.

'Jamesee, it's not the money Man.' I said. 'I just want to be included. You say it's a group, fine, lets all talk about what we want, before it's done. Let us decide as a group. And I asked you about the club because, this is the first time I've heard the name mentioned.'

'Andre", lets put this to bed.' Jamesee said. 'The dude called me to say he only had a week left and needed to know if we were taking the gig. I told him yes, and that's when the dude told me the name of the club. I did not know until last night, after you left.' Jamesee said.

'I told my guy that we had a forty minute show the audience was going to love. Then, he started telling me about needing a group for a gig, Friday. My dude told me, some group backed out at the last minute, and he was stuck.'

'Dude told me, the gig only paid a hundred dollars a man, but we only have one show to do. He told me it's a small place, a social club in Brooklyn, with a nice stage. We will not have to rehearse with the band, the house band plays everything my guy said. We just have to show up early Friday and go over what we're going to do with the band.' Jamesee said.

As James talked, I thought of the relationship he had with the mysterious "my dude". Jamesee hadn't done anything wrong as far as I was concerned, Jamesee just didn't act as a group. But the arrangements he spoke of were dictations of what I had to comply with...without having a say. Suddenly, it hit me.

'Friday? Jamesee, did you mean....this Friday?' I asked?

Shelton jumped in saying, 'Yea Man, this Friday. The Tip Top is next Friday. You got a problem?'

'Damn!' I said quietly, head down, wringing my hands.

'I can't believe the position this puts me in. This Friday. Man Friday is the worst day in the world right now. Jamesee, what time is the gig?' I asked, looking up hoping for relief. And, got it!

'Its an early gig Bro, that's another good thing. We have to be there at five o'clock, but we are guaranteed to be out by eight o'clock. They don't know exactly what time the show will start so they want a two-hour window.'

My mind raced listening to Jamesee talk. Five to eight, I could do it. I could still see Vert if I left the club around eight o'clock. I could get to Harlem, and be at 116th Street, where her grandmother lived, by nine o'clock. My problem is solved, I hoped.

Realizing I could still see Verdell and do the gig, I suddenly, got up from my chair, dropped to my knees and shouted,

'It works! It works!' I shouted, looking up at the basement ceiling.

'Man, what the fuck is wrong with him?' Shelton asked Jamesee, looking down at me kneeling.

'I have no idea.' I heard Jamesee say.

I got back in my chair, and told them about my date with Verdell Friday, how important it was to me. I told them, my arrangements were loose and if we got out of the club at eight-o'clock, I would still pick her up.

'Great!' Jamesee said. 'I'm glad that works for you. Now, Shelton's girlfriend can't make us outfits fast enough for this gig and we have got to get uniforms quick. One of my guys has a men's clothing store on Jamaica Avenue with some nice stuff. We can get matching shirts, pants and maybe different color jackets, for not to much. What do you dudes think?'

We spent the first hour of rehearsal that night discussing changes to unify the group, the two gigs we had coming up and what style cloths we should buy. Jamesee wanted black, pants and shirts with different colored jackets. Shelton told us his girlfriend was working on the layout for the costumes she was to making for us. But, they weren't ready yet. Then he suggested the craziest thing, 'Why don't we go to the costume shop and rent costumes?' Shelton asked Jamesee and I.

I looked at Jamesee waiting for his reaction but he just sat there, looking at Shelton with no expression, then he said,

'Negro, are you crazy?' he asked Shelton.

'What the fuck are you suggesting? We go somewhere that rents shit like, pirate costumes, clown shit, and fucking Halloween costumes! I can't believe you came up with some monkey ass shit like that Shelton.'

Witnessing this exchange between the two, gave me a sense of their relationship. Shelton followed Jamesee I thought. This was useful to know, but I didn't know how useful until sometime later.

I got up saying, 'Yo, we've been talking for over an hour now, why don't we talk some more, after we rehearse? I need to go over the routines again.'

Jamesee still grumbling and Shelton, looking questioning at Jamesee, walked to the center of the basement where I was standing and rehearsal started.

Despite the shaky start, rehearsal went well and we finished that evening, knowing our routines were polished and now, only awaited a live audience. We talked more about the style and color for our uniforms, deciding black pants and shirts with different colored Jackets would work. Getting them from Jamesee's 'guy' would be cheaper and the alterations were done on site. Jamesee assured Shelton and I, so no problem.

We talked about the upcoming gigs and the two began to recall gigs with groups they use to sing with. Jamesee recalled a relationship with a hatcheck girl he met during a weekend gig at some club on Long Island. He told Shelton and I, that first night during the group's show, he noticed the girl, a cute little thing, kept watching him from the side of the stage. Jamesee said, 'She couldn't keep her eyes off me'. When the show ended, he talked to her, telling her it was his birthday, that was on Friday. Over the weekend,

'I kept sweet talking, the young fine thing.' He said.

Jamesee told us, Saturday, the next night, she took him home and fucked his brains out. Then Sunday night, after the last show, she took him aside and gave him a sealed birthday card, with a kiss and 'Happy Birthday'.

He said he was in a cab, going home when he remembered the birthday card and opened it. 'Bam', Jamesee said and winked as he told us, 'a hundred dollars. Girlfriend had given me some pussy, anda hundred dollars for my "Birthday"!

I put that away in my "Fat Daddy" hustle files, continuing to listen to their other stories in the now comfortable atmosphere. We arranged to meet at three o'clock the next day, on Jamaica Avenue and go to Jamesee's friend's store.

I caught the bus and train back to my room, as I stuck my key in the new lock, I noticed scratches and bent, looking closer. There were marks, someone had tampered with my lock I thought. Heart pounding, I inserted the key, turning slowly opened the door inward. I stood at in the doorway, looking around the room for anything out of place, but saw nothing.

The only unseen areas were the closed bathroom door and the closed door of my clothes closet. I approached the closed, bathroom door first, slowly, staying to the side of the unopened door. Moving very slowly forwards, I open the door quietly...no one there. Good, now the closet I thought. Again, stealthily moving, I approached, I am there, I yank....nothing, just clothes.

Relieved, I walked back to my open room door, again examined the lock and noticed, although tampered with, was not damaged. I decided then, to add a stop-stick to my locking system. This device would stop a burglar from pushing or kicking the door in. I closed the door, thinking I would do this tomorrow, walked over to bed and sat down.

I thought about Jamesee Myers, the way of referencing who he knew as Dude or My Guy. He almost never used the person's name. Why would Jamesee want to hold back this kind of information?

I moved around my room, preparing myself for bed, thinking about the group, what it would take to actually be a group. About the friendship of Jamesee and Shelton, I wondered if we would ever be three friends, instead of two. I went to bed that evening, pulling the cover up to my chin and turning off the light, thought of how Verdell's body would feel pressed to mine...in this bed.

I got up the next morning around ten o'clock and walked over to Mrs. Fannie's for breakfast. Mrs. Fannie greeted me as I came in and all she wanted to talk about was, "Manhattan' Paul. As I ate, she regaled me with many stories about Paul and his days as a MC; Mrs. Fannie also told me something Paul had not. Paul had acting roles in a number of Oscar Micheaux films. I didn't have much to say during breakfast, not because I was eating; because Mrs. Fannie talked so much, I couldn't get a word in.

I finished breakfast and headed to the lock store for a stop-stick. I walked in and went to the lock display hanging on the sidewall. The clerk noticed me, remembered my lock purchase a few days before and suggested purchasing an outer lock security plate as well. I explained I had tampering with my lock and wanted a stop-stick to prevent a kick in when I wasn't home.

He told me to hold on, stepped in the back for a moment and returned with my stop stick. A long iron bar with hardware that slides into a slot that props the bar against a door from inside when closed. This prevents a kick in or push in style burglary. When you walk out the iron bar engages, closing the door.

The clerk explained that an outer lock security plate would help prevent lock tampering, as he handed me the heavy iron bar. I bought the stop-stick, outer lock security plate and a screwdriver, paid the clerk and walked back to my rooming house.

When I got back to my room, I opened the door and immediately started to install the stop-stick. There was already an iron ringed, recessed hole, in the floor to sit the iron bar in. I just had to install the upper plate for the bar slide. I stood, looking at the door, wondering what I'd use to make screw holes for the bar-slide plate. Suddenly, feeling a too near presence, I turned,

'You need a drill,' Dennis said, standing, peering around me at what I was doing.

'Yo, Dennis! I didn't hear you Bro.' I said to my next-door neighbor. 'You can't be creeping up behind a brother like that man, 'cause I'm bad. I could have threw up an apple, tossed my knife behind, peeled it and cored it, then cut it up for nine. Parted your hair with my forty four, without even turning around, and all these actions happen, before the peelings hit the ground, cause I'm bad man.' I said. And we both cracked up, laughing.

'You're going to need a drill to make those holes Man.' Dennis said. 'Hold on, I've got one next door.' As he turned and strode away. He returned shortly with a boxed drill and a professional set of drill bits.

'Dennis this is a brand new drill.' I said looking at the unopened box.

'You got a problem with that Bro? Open the fucking box. It's a drill.' Dennis said.

I opened the box, took out the brand new drill, plugged it in the electrical outlet next to the side of the door and made the holes. I worked while Dennis stood watching me, I thought, this is definitely not the safest place for me to be. Dennis had helped me on two occasions but there was something about Dennis I just didn't trust.

'What's happening with your group Andre'?' You dudes doing anything yet? Dennis asked.

I told Dennis about the gig Friday and gave him the time and address. Dennis told me he would call some of his friends and talk the place up.

'Man, I'ma pack the joint for you, call some of my boys, liven up the place. Give the joint some life!'

As Dennis talked, I noticed, he frequently punctuated his speech with a smile, flashing his diamond tooth. Suddenly, I pictured myself with a diamond flashing smile and thought, naa. I completed drilling the holes, picked up the screws, slide plate, aligned it with the drill holes and started to screw. I screwed while Dennis continued to talk and became paranoid. The more Dennis talked, I began to realize, Dennis knew a lot of street people. I realized he might tell one of his friends about his musician neighbor who was seldom home. And Dennis talking, causing unwanted visitors...slowly became my fear.

'Man, you don't have to worry about a motherfucker kicking in your door.' Dennis said'.

Finished with the slide plate, I sat the iron bar in its floor recess hole, propped it against the slide plate and the bar slide smoothly into the slot. Satisfied, I stepped back, turned to Dennis and said,

'This is only part of the hook up' I said, lying.

I had not planned to tell this lie; it just came of its own accord. I realized as I was talking, my lie was an attempt to have Dennis included this information in his stories to any friends. I was lying without any prior thought of what the story would be only it had to be a warning.

'White boy turned me on to this acid hook-up. It works sort of like dumping water when the door is opened. Only, you use acid and it doesn't work the same as dumping a bucket of water, it's more like a spray, more complicated. It will fuck up your crib when it's set off, but it will definitely fuck up whoever was coming in.' I told Dennis.

I picked up the drill and began drilling holes for the outer lock security plate. I could not believe the lie I'd just made up. Where the hell did that come from? I thought to myself. Looking at Dennis, I wondered if he believed me; wondering if the lie was believable at all, when he said.

'Yea, Man. I know about that shit. Somebody told me, they knew somebody who got fucked up real bad, going in a crib that way. Fucked their shit up! Dude said.'

I thought. What! You know about it! Man, I made that shit up! Then thought it's probably an idea a lot of people had, pouring acid on somebody coming in your crib. I thought if I could convince Dennis I knew what I was talking about, he'd really believe me.

'I'm not going into how It works, but if you want the hooked up I'll introduce you to the Dude. But let me tell you up front, it's expensive and the dude doesn't supply the acid. That, you've got to get yourself.'

I watched Dennis as I lied, watched his eyes watching me. Dennis looked as though he was interested! Could this mean I was being believed?

'When I get some money, I want you to hook me up Andre', Dennis said. 'Man, how much did you pay for yours?'

'Well, like I said, I know the dude so he charged me five hundred. I don't know what he charges other folk. But, if you decide and want me to hook you up, I'll turn you on to the spot where I get my acid. They only charge seventy five dollars for a small bottle'

Watching his face, a slight widening of the eyes, interested I thought. I think he believes me.

'You can count on it.' Dennis said as I stepped back, finished with my installations. I repacked the drill, gave it to Dennis and thanking him, promising to put him in touch with "my Dude". I was about to close my door, when Dennis said,

'If I hear screaming from your apartment one night, I'll know a motherfucker done got his due and I'll laugh my ass off Bro. Man, soon as I get some extra cash, I want you to hook a Brother up!' Dennis said.

It was almost time to head for Jamaica Avenue, so I got dressed and closing my door, thought of the iron bar now braced against the back and felt a bit more secure. I decided to take a "bootleg" cab to Jamaica Avenue if I could get a deal. Almost as soon as I walked out of my building, I saw a passing "bootleg" cab and throwing up my hand, flagged him down.

The he turned out to be a she, small, dark, and from what I could see, lovely. I told the lovely cab driver where I was going and which route I wanted to take. We haggled, made the deal and I was on my way to Jamaica Avenue.

I got in thinking of my conversation with Dennis and felt I did the right thing. If he talked at all, I wanted a broadcast of my warning. It might not work but, if it got me a layer of protection, it was worth it. If I could scare some thieves off, all the better for me.

I thought about what color I wanted for the uniforms and realized I didn't care, I could work with any color. I thought about Verdell and smiled....my Baby; I'm going to fuck her brains out. With that thought, I laid back getting comfortable in the seat and gazed out the window, enjoying the ride.

The driver dropped me off in front of Mr. Earl's House of Style on Jamaica Avenue and 169th Street. I walked in; Jamesee greeted me and turning to a tall, thin, light-skinned brother, said,

'Earl, we're all here now so you can show us what you have.'

As soon Jamesee's friend left to get the items, Jamesee told Shelton and I, his friend would give us pants, shirts and suit jackets for only a hundred fifty dollars each. Earl returned, wheeling a clothing rack with stylish, black silk, daggered collard, shirts, black bell bottomed pants and different colored jackets, all in different sizes. He stepped back, pointing to the rack and asked if we saw something we liked.

After examining the various styles and sizes, we made our selection; black, daggered collard shirts, with matching, powder blue, fitted jackets. We tried everything on, needing only the waist in my pants altered. As Jamesee promised, alterations were done on the premises. Jamesee, Shelton and I paid and were out the door twenty minutes later.

We walked out, each carrying a long, black plastic men's zip up clothing bag with gold lettering that read, "Mr. Earl's House of Style, Jamaica Avenue." We walked along the Avenue, headed toward the train stop for me, the bus stop for Jamesee and Shelton. We talked as we walked; about the good deal Mr. Earl had given us, deciding the ladies were going to love our outfits.

We talked about the gig Friday, about our show, tonight's rehearsal, deciding we would not rehearse that evening. We would get some rest for the job tomorrow instead of rehearsing and meet early round eleven to go over the act. Meeting early allowed more than enough time to go over the act, chill out a little and be at the club by five.

We needed to be at the club by five o'clock to meet with the bandleader. We needed time decide the keys and go over our songs and stop/start cues with him. We had to tell the bandleader what we wanted and he would direct the band. Having agreed what time to meet, I left the two on Jamaica Avenue, catching the train back to Manhattan.

It was still early, glancing at my watch, two-forty in the afternoon, I think I'll hang my clothes up and make the stash for my cash, I thought. Opening my room door, I bent, examining the lock, no new marks, great! I thought straightening up, closing the door. I walked straight to the closet, hung up my clothes bag and sat on the bed, thinking.

After awhile I went to my only chair, picked up the cushion, turned it over, unzipped the cover and retrieved my stash stuffed inside. I then sat back on the bed, removing the rubber band around it and counted my stash thinking. I had fifteen hundred cash left from hustling, George Kerr's twelve hundred dollar check and still had three hundred seventy dollars in my pocket. I really need to hide this money, I thought.

Looking around the room I thought, where to hide my stash? I began thinking about an old Humphrey Bogart movie. Bogie was a gangster hiding from the police. He held up in a motel with twenty thousand dollars that he needed to hide before the police came. Bogie carefully removed the wall baseboard behind the refrigerator, created a compartment between the wood studs and made a small shelf. Bogie then put in his cash, carefully replaced the baseboard and pushed the refrigerator back in place. The police came, tore up the room and did not find the stash.

My STASH

The more I thought about the movie, the plot, how Bogie hid his stash, the more I became convinced it could work for me. If someone did get in my room they would search everywhere. However, the more I thought about it, I doubted if anyone would move my half-sized refrigerator and pull back the baseboard to search.

I went to the refrigerator, shoved with my hip sliding it. As more of the wall became visible, I recalled the last time looking and finding a sandwich stuck to the wall. Refrigerator out of the way, I got down on my knees examining the baseboard for nails. I noticed the nails were spaced wide apart and I would only have to remove about eight to allow access to the area I wanted. This I would do very carefully and put them back in the same holes.

The baseboard was standard wood about six inches tall, joined at a seam almost behind the refrigerator, on the right side. I got my screwdriver, hammer and started to carefully remove the nails and pry the baseboard from the wall. I removed the nails holding the baseboard seams together and four nails from each side of the seams. To keep the baseboard away from the wall while I worked, I took a pair of my shoes and wedged one between the baseboard and wall on each side of the baseboard seam.

As I worked, removing the baseboard I appreciated my hiding place's simplicity. The damage created for the hole would be invisible once I replaced the baseboard. There would be no detection unless you knew what you were looking for if I were careful. Using the screwdriver as a chisel behind the baseboard, I hammered a four-inch tall by 10-inch wide hole in the sheet rock wall. After a bit of work I created a deep fairly wide space between the wood studs.

I took stiff cardboard packaging, cut it to the size I needed for a shelf, hammering three nails leveled to act as a platform and placed the cardboard on the nails, creating a shelf. Then I

retrieved my stash, fifteen hundred cash and the twelve hundred dollar check and placed both in the hole.

Removing my shoes, the baseboard sprung back in place and I carefully put the nails back in the original holes hammered lightly securing the baseboard back in place and stood up examining my work, my new stash.

Since my first visit to the Community Center on 115th Street, I stopped by when ever I felt something musical and didn't want to run downtown. Tony Majors, the guy I met the first day, had become a friend. Most of the times I stopped by the Community center he was there and we would talk. Tony told me, he was also an actor but had only gotten jobs as an extra so far. Tony said that He was teaching school to earn money for room and board, while he studied.

Feeling a bit more secure, I decided to head over to the Community Center, play a little piano and see what I could come up with. The Center was quiet when I got there; no one seemed to be around. I walked over to Tony's office and stuck my head in he was sitting behind his desk,

'Yo, Tony, What's up?' I said.

'Andre", my man.' he said, waving his hand, motioning for me to come in, 'Come in, have a seat. How would you like to be in the movies? Tony said, looking at me, smiling.'

Movies! What the fuck is he talking about? Movies! Me in the movies? I thought.

'Man, you should see the look on your face. You look like I smacked you with a "dookie" stick.' Tony said, almost laughing.

'Tony, what do you mean, do I want to be in the movies?'

Tony began to explain that a movie company was coming to Harlem to shoot a classroom scene and needed young people as extras. The company had asked Tony to get young classroom extras. Everyone would be paid union scale and if asked to say lines, there would be additional pay.

For a moment, I just sat there looking, staring at Tony smiling at me. I had never in my life thought of myself as an actor. I had certainly never thought of myself being in a movie and now, 'Do I want to be in a movie?' and get paid? Damn right!

I said, 'Tony, if I seem dumbfounded, it's because I've never thought of myself being in a movie. Acting is your thing man, I'm a musician.'

'Andre", being an extra is easy. Most of the time you're sitting around or standing around waiting. But the clock starts running from the time you check in. Make the money, have some fun and meet some girls. Bro, you'll have a ball.' Tony said, gazing at me, still smiling that same stupid smile.

I told Tony, if he were willing to take the chance, I'd do it.

Tony and I talked for quite a while that evening about being an extra in the entrainment business. He told me commercials, documentaries, movies shoot everyday in New York and all needed extras. If you had a good agent, Tony said, you could earn a hundred thousand dollars a year or more as an extra, primarily walking in and out of scenes. Tony told me, this movie company was shooting that following week, and call him that Monday, writing down, giving me his home number. Before leaving, I asked Tony why he asked me and Tony said he wanted to give me a "life experience".

I thanked Tony, leaving his office headed for the piano. Walking across the large room, thinking about being in movies, a booty walked by, jiggling. I say booty because that's all my eyes registered as the young lady walked by. Stopping a few feet from me the booty turned and said,

'Hey, are you the one that's been coming by playing the piano?'

'I don't know. I come by a lot and I am a songwriter. But, I don't know who else uses the piano'.

Now that I could see her, all of her, I thought, Damn Vert; you have some competition here. She was every bit Puerto Rican, Madonna face with greenish brown eyes, a flawless olive complexion, curly styled, black hair and a sister's body. I had never before seen a girl who was not fat, with a booty that jiggled. It must be Jell-o because only Jell-o shakes like that, I thought.

'My sister and I were here last week and we heard somebody playing some song about a girl.' We were outside and couldn't see him, it was something like; and started humming. As soon as she started to hum, I recognized my song.

'I guess you're talking about me, because that's my song. Come on,' heading again towards the piano, she now walking beside me, 'I'll play it for you.'

'How long you been writing songs? She asked as we walked.

We reached the piano, sat on the piano bench and she stood up leaning against the piano, waiting for me to answer.

'Not long. As a matter of fact, I'm just starting my career. Hey, I think you're talking about this tune, striking a couple of cords. I was working on it last week, but I've finished it now. I hope I didn't bother you, going over and over the same thing.' I said to the lovely stranger, starting to play and sing, "Little girl, please stop your crying, cause I'll erase your pain", a song years later recorded by the "Whatnauts" on All Platinum Records.

'That's a sweet song.' she said looking at me with her bedroom eyes.

'Now that I've served you my music, you must pay with your name fair maiden.' I said and got the smile, then the giggle I wanted.

'My name is Andre'. I said.

'I'm sorry, my name is Jackie. My sister Beverly and I come here all the time, we only live up the block, in the projects.' Then looking me dead in the eyes, said,

'Play some more for me.'

I played and sang my ass off trying to impress the lovely Jackie, as she gazed at me smiling, and sometimes, touching my arm or hand, finally sitting beside me on the small piano bench,