

Interview: James Spaulding (and wife Jean)
Interviewer: Willard Jenkins, w/Kaitlyn Greenidge and Jennifer Scott
Location: Weeksville Heritage Center
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Willard Jenkins: When did you migrate to Brooklyn from your hometown Indianapolis?

James Spaulding: I came to Brooklyn somewhere between 1959 and 1960.

WJ: What brought you to Brooklyn?

JS: Actually I was coming up to hang out with Freddie Hubbard; he was already in New York working with Art Blakey when I got here. So I stayed at his place when he got married to his first wife Brenda, until I found a little place to live in Brooklyn.

WJ: When you first got to Brooklyn who were you playing with?

JS: Actually I was trying to find a place to live, then I got a little day job until Freddie called me for the "Hub Tones" record date, which was in about 1962. I didn't do much playing, I just made a few jam sessions; in fact Freddie took me down to the Vanguard for a jam session with Dexter Gordon and Lee Morgan at the time. That's when I first met J.J. Johnson; that was the first time I made up my mind to stay in New York, because the energy was what I wanted, to be here around a lot of musicians.

WJ: What was the jazz scene like in Brooklyn when you first got here?

JS: There were quite a few nightclubs that were happening, like the Blue Coronet on Fulton Street, I remember playing there with Sonny Stitt. Also there was a place called the Continental, which was right off Fulton Street, and then there was the Baby Grand which was right on Fulton and Nostrand Avenue. There were several other places – like the Club La Marchal, where we did "The Night of the Cookers" [famous record date], that was right on Nostrand and President Streets, but that didn't happen until 1965. A lot of things were going down between that time.

WJ: Did you have an opportunity to play at any of those places in Brooklyn?

JS: At first I jammed at the Blue Coronet and the Continental, where I met Cassandra Wilson who was just starting out. A place called The Happy Landing, which was a little joint on Case Avenue where I was living around the corner, played with a singer named Joe Louis, and that's where I met Carlos Garnett – he came in and jammed with us. There was so much to do, so much energy back then.

WJ: They say back then [1960s] there were just as many places to play in Brooklyn as there were in Manhattan.

JS: I wouldn't know that; all I knew was that I liked Brooklyn, I could afford it. I got some cultural information about Africa and African heritage at the East.

WJ: How did the whole session that produced the record "The Night of the Cookers" come about?

JS: Orville O'Brien was the engineer... he's dead now... he brought his tape machine in to record it that night; those were two nights in that club. It was really powerful both nights, wall-to-wall people in there; I guess you could hear it on those records.

WJ: I understand that place Club La Marchal really didn't have a regular jazz policy.

JS: I don't think so. I don't know who put it together; Freddie called me for it, put the band together – Harold Mabern and all of us. This guy Orville O'Brien was the engineer and he knew his stuff. Actually now the place is an apartment building.

WJ: Getting to the late 1960s and the 70s, you played at the East quite a bit?

JS: Yeah, I made it there; I was introduced there for a short period. We moved to New Jersey not too long after that, in '71 to join Larry Ridley in what he put together at the jazz program at Livingston College; he asked me to come out as an adjunct professor to teach flute. Plus I had my GI Bill and I also went to school out there at the same time. I met my wife Jean in '63. I taught flute and jazz improvisation on the flute.

WJ: At the time of the East, what kind of band did you play with there?

description of the East

JS: Actually that was my first band when I think about it: Bob Cunningham was on bass, a very young Lenny White on drums – chaperoned by his parents - Michael Ridley on trumpet... I don't remember who was on piano. I got maybe a couple of gigs there.

WJ: What was it like to play at the East?

JS: It was beautiful; they had soul cooking – health food, vegetarian food; they had paintings by black artists on the walls... it was just a cultural set there for people of African ancestry that really lifted my spirits up, definitely in terms of finding out who I was, who I be [laughs]. It gave me an awareness of myself, my origins, my parents, going on back to slavery. The East brought all that history to me.

WJ: How did you happen to become involved with the East from a cultural perspective, outside of the bandstand?

JS: It was all around me at the East; there was no other place teaching about our ancestry, our black history. This is what I was searching for; it opened my eyes, nobody had told me about Africa. The only thing I knew about Africa was those Tarzan and Jane movies [chuckles], all those characters. They called Jitu "Big Black" during that period, but he was the head man, the chairman...

Some friends of mine told me 'there's a place where they're playing jazz,' and I said 'let's go by there...' When I walked inside the building I felt all this culture, and the smell of the food, and the music... the sisters were all dressed beautifully, with Afros... It was a cultural awakening for me that I'll never forget.

WJ: When you played there what was the atmosphere like?

JS: Oh man, they were waiting to hear some music; I was just amazed at the attention and the awareness that everyone had that came to [the East]. It was a cultural center for people of African ancestry – everything in the arts, dance, painting... Political figures would come there to speak, like John Henrik Clark; politicians would come there to give lectures and discussions; we don't have that anymore.

WJ: So it was a place of cultural awakening and enrichment for you.

JS: Yeah, a place of cultural enrichment for me, and everybody else that went there. That's what really made me aware. Randy Weston was one of my first teachers; when I first came to Brooklyn I worked with his band and he would always talk about Africa and African traditional music; he was always teaching. At the same time I was working with Freddie Hubbard's band and Freddie got me a gig with Max Roach, so I was blessed to have some wonderful artists to work with and learn from. It's a journey that we all have to take... and we have to take that journey when we leave here too.

The East

WJ: Do you remember any other places you played during that time, the late 1960s-early 1970s?

JS: Places were starting to close up... I was working at the Blue Coronet when Dr. King was killed that evening ['68] and the news spread all over Brooklyn. I was working with Freddie's band and I really didn't feel like playing any kind of music after Dr. King was killed. In '69 there were a lot of clubs starting to shut down, and then we moved out to New Jersey with my wife and my kids. Everything was starting to dry up in the 70s in Brooklyn.

Jean Spaulding: We moved back to Brooklyn and you produced your first CDs.

JS: You know these recordings I produced at the Up Over Jazz Café? That was around 1999-2000s. That was a nice club, another club that shut down. That was a little small, intimate place with nice acoustics and piano. I did some recordings there. I did two recordings there at the Up Over.

WJ: When did you move to Queens?

JS: We moved out here in 1991. I graduated in '75, my wife graduated in 1981 [Livingston College]. After that we found a place on St. Felix [Brooklyn], moved to Park Side Ave., then we moved out here to Queens where we are now.

WJ: When you moved back to Brooklyn [1980s], what was happening in Brooklyn as far as jazz?

JS: Aw man, wasn't nothing happening.

WJ: You have performed often at Sista's Place.

JS: Yeah, I just finished a date there July 24. I was just overwhelmed that night, too much love... it was beautiful. It's a cultural center, a little small place. It has a political and a cultural platform.

WJ: Is it a different feeling these days when you play Sista's Place as opposed to other places you play?

JS: Of course, it feels like its your family... like the East felt when I played there; people running the place that look like me, I have a feeling of being at home. Most places the audiences are all European, wherever I travel.

WJ: You don't get an opportunity to play for black audiences much?

JS: I don't know of any place here in this country really. I'm sure there are... Sista's Place is an exception... also the African Poetry Theatre here in Queens. I've played out here quite a few times.

WJ: When you play at Sista's Place, how is the feeling of the audience different than other places?

JS: Like I said before, they inspire me... I see people that look like me in the majority, and they really encourage me to play and to bring the music back home; it's like a homecoming.

WJ: What are you playing these days?

JS: I'm playing originals and I'm playing standards. Whatever the budget can afford; sometimes I can get a vocalist, like TC III. I have a rhythm section, a conga player... that's about the size of it for me when I'm playing these clubs.

James Spaulding
147-17 109 Avenue
Jamaica Queens, NY 11435