

Interview with Dr. Clifford Alexis

transcript from Art Lives podcast Episode 8

Dr. Clifford Alexis 0:00

I was born in East Port of Spain, which was called "behind the bridge." I was born in an area that was considered, in American so-called language, "ghetto" area. In Trinidad, it was called the "underprivileged area." But a lot of people didn't, didn't let that stop them from being born in that area. at that particular time. People come from all over the Caribbean, it was a kind of melting pot, like for instance my grandfather came from Grenada. Where could he settle, when he come to Trinidad; in an area that maybe he could afford a little rent or a little hut or something like that?

Elizabeth 1:09

I didn't know he came from Grenada.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 1:11

My grandfather came from Grenada. My grandmother came from - on my mother's side - Alexis - and my grandmother came from Tobago. My father side, which I don't really know much, too much. Because my father died when I was 11. My mother died when I was five. I didn't... My father's side was from another area called Maravale. I think they said that my father's mother had gone to Venezuela and he was born there and brought him back to Trinidad. Because he looks something similar as a mixed person from that area.

Anyhow. My beginnings of pan, to me, was heard probably in my mother's womb. I was born by one - there are several first in Trinidad - but I was born by one of the first steelbands started. Steelband called the Hill 60. I was quite young: 8, 9, 10, 11, 7, 5, 6, 4... whatever you call it. I grew accustomed to seeing people with the biscuit can or the biscuit tin as they say, around the neck and a man with an iron up and down the street. I saw that with my own eyes. And I guess it proliferated into what you know, I seeing the "Mary Had a Little Lamb" pans. This was where I was, Desperados was up that way, Tokyo was the other way, there were other bands other places in that area. And as a little boy going to school, it was not unusual for us to stop off by one of those yards and take out a knock and run out. Cause you can't let nobody see you take a little knock here and then run out. But Hill 60 was was the band right there. Look out my little window in a boarded up house right there. Seeing Andrew de la Bastide. Remember the first TASPO? He was the leader of Hill 60. Seeing him making pans, Seeing the convex pans, and all of that stuff.

Around 11 we moved away from that area. Went to live in another part of Port of Spain. Went to a place Boissiere Village. But at that time you had to concentrate in school. I was one of the unfortunate ones that had no parents I was relegated to different family members at any given time. "Go stay here, go live here, go do whatever." And going to school again right into school. We will stop here, take a little knock, stop there take a little knock, can't be seen by even the neighbors or whoever seeing you - it's bad to be seen in a panyard. At that time too, there were a lot of fighting going on between

steelbands, and what they call the "riots" with this band and that band and that other band and, you know, stuff like that...

And then, when I was like 14, 15 I started venturing into some little band's yards, but nothing to say I'm a member of this band. I might be going to school and I might pass by where the Dry River is and there's guys down inside of there pounding pan, and we would go down there, looking up to see nobody seeing you... then about 16 I think, or maybe 15, I can't remember, a guy took me to this band in Woodbrook. "So you want to play pan?" and you don't want nobody to see you at that time they had the white band and this band, he says, "I'm gonna take you by a band." Tell me where to meet, him jump on my bike, wait 3, 4 hours went down by this band. This band was called Hit Paraders. You don't know the people was just in there, couldn't play nothing. Guy says, "You want to learn how to strum?" was a guy named Gerald Fernandez and his brother Tommy. It was a safe area because I wasn't living in that area. And so I could go there, play with them, then jump on a bike and ride home again. Nobody knowing where you are unless Carnival time they might see you in town in a band.

Elizabeth 7:49
Right (laugh)

Dr. Clifford Alexis 7:46

You know, I remember the first time I was seen in a band by my uncle. I was living there and he says, "Anybody who playing pan in this house can't stay here. Cannot live here." And you had to play like you don't know what he's saying? And I stayed there with Hit Paraders because it a safe area. And they called it a "white boy band" and they had no fight. So I stayed there, and I remember quite distinctly playing with them at a party in St. James and a whole bunch of guys from Tripoli was hanging around seeing me. At that time you had to sit and play the pan on your lap. It was a single Second [steelpan] and they said, "You should come and play with us." And of course it was kind of surprise to me. They say, "You playing good." So I left there and I went to Tripoli. And that's where it became worse (laugh) because Tripoli was a fighting band! And quite a few guys not working, hanging around the neighborhood, playing in nightclubs, and I got into that. Still can't tell them at home you're playing any pan.

Don't bring sticks home, you know all of those things like that. You hide your sticks in the panyard... So I stayed with Tripoli. When they started making Double pans and triple cellos I played the first triple cello in Tripoli. '57 or '58. And these guys thought I was very good, except that I was in Tripoli playing second plan and they were going to a steelband competition at Roxy Theater and I rehearse and tell my family to come and right in front of the Roxy theater they [Tripoli] dropped me in favor of a Bad John.

Because this bad john say, "oh look a drop can't he - he's destroying the band." So they dropped me. Tears. I said that would never happen to me again. So, it never did happen to me again anyway. So from that Tripoli experience I left Tripoli and went... I didn't leave... yeah I left Tripoli and was supposed to join another offshoot of Tripoli. And when we thought that the guys who were saying, "Well we're gonna join this offshoot and

bring a new band." They didn't come. They stayed right there. So me and one or two guys looked like we out of place. I said to them. "I'm not even staying with these guys anyway." You know.

Elizabeth 11:37

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 11:39

So by this time I'm living in Diego Martin, no more Boissiere I live in Diego Martin. I remember riding my bike one day and a guy ran out from a store and says to me, "These guys want you to arrange for them." This was a pan tuner [named] Cobo Jack to be specific. Ran out this store and says, "You see these fellas lookoin? I want you to arrange for them. Again, I'm living in Diego Martin and I'm not touching no pan in Diego Martin.

Elizabeth 12:29

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 12:29

I'm riding out of Diego Martin at night and going to St. James, you know.

Elizabeth 12:35

You had..had you arranged before?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 12:37

No.

Elizabeth 12:38

They just asked you because you're a good player.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 12:41

Out of the clear blue sky. Umm, I'm trying to piece this together. I started hanging out with Cobo Jack really from Invaders and around Invaders panyard but I wasn't playing too much inside of there. And I knew Cobo Jack and he said, "These guys want you to arrange." I says, "Me?" He said, "Yes." I said, "How I gonna arrange I don;t know nothing." He said, "Meet them in the yard tonight." And they were right there in Petit Valley, not too far from where I live. So I'm in my neighborhood now.

Elizabeth 13:32

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 13:34

So I go in there and started dabbling around and I said, "How they could going to appoint me as an arranger, I never arranged a tune, but I guess they'd seen me around, playing and stuff like that. But anyhow, I started arranging for that band. A band called Stereophonics.

Elizabeth 13:58

That's right, Stereophonics!

Dr. Clifford Alexis 14:01

By the time I'm arranging for Stereophonics, another band named Joylanders came and said, "We want you to arrange for us." At this particular time now I'm playing in Invaders. I'm bucking the system now because you can't be in two bands and do this. I'm bucking the system! You know.

Elizabeth 14:27

(laugh) Right. Did you get grief for that?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 14:29

No. It never got - arrangers didn't get paid ent?

Elizabeth 14:32

Right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 14:32

There's nothing like pay.

Elizabeth 14:34

So then nobody gave you a hard time about it.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 14:38

There was nothing like pay. As a matter of fact a guy told me the other day that they probably owe us a lot of money. (They laugh) Because we arrange for stage side and this side and then get no money. But anyhow I stayed with Stereophonics, go in Festival, blah, blah, blah. And then 1961 or 62 George Goddard decided to form a National Steelband. I used to play in Invaders during Carnival?

Elizabeth 15:11

Right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 15:12

And I know definitely I wasn't gonna get picked from Invaders because they had Cobo Jack. They had all these big stars. And Stereophonics guys say, "Well, you go. Why don't you go?" Because they had said, "Send the arrangers or your best whatever or your tuner."

Elizabeth 15:35

Ohhhh. Right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 15:36

So, they say, "Why don't you go?"

Elizabeth 15:39

Cool. I saw you listed as from Stereophonics.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 15:44

Right. Here I am, in the National Steelband. They picked 44 guys, and here I am in the National Steelband. Still arranging for Stereophonics but playing jouvert morning, Carnival with Invaders.

Elizabeth 16:03

Did they? They each knew about that.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 16:05

Oh, yeah.

Elizabeth 16:06

And nobody had a problem.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 16:07

Nah. At that time. It could have been a problem if I was a different person. What happened was when I leave Tripoli there was guys mad at me. And I think I was one of the few guys that left Tripoli living in Diego Martin that could arrive through St. James. Without nobody pelting any bottle at me because I had my good friend at Tripoli still there. Clyde Inniss.

Elizabeth 16:37

Right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 16:38

And so I was we ll protected. We used to hang out with. But anyhow I got into the National Steelband, And therefore you're with Cobo Jack all the big players.

Hugh Borde, he was the captain of Tripoli, Bobby Mohammed, Steve Regis, Errol Zephrene. All these guys in the National Steelband. From all over Trinidad. Some people said that we had people from Renegades who was a "fighting band" then. Some people say that that probably was one of the things that settled down pan violence for a bit, because of these guys from all different bands playing together in one band. Rudolf Charles, from Desperados was there at one time. Robert Greenidge was there at one time, a whole bunch of guys. Anyhow, word got out that they wanted the National Steelband to come to America. The president of - It wasn't Pantrinbago yet -it was the Association of Trinidad & Tobago Steelband Men- George Goddard. They had invited him to come and speak at this big conference and he says, "No, I have a bunch of men, a group of men that could do better than I can." So the decision was made to pick 22 of the 44 guys.

The people had said all they wanted Trinidad to do was get us to Miami. And they will take care of all the rest. But there was no money, and we had to beg government for money, get the government to loan pan people like 10 grand to get out of Trinidad. Anyhow. But they had to pick 22 out of 44. I remember the day distinctly they looking to pick 22 men. They have 6 orI was playing seconds. They have maybe about 6 or 8 second players and they have to pick 4 out of that. I'm saying, "there's Cobo Jack, there's Winston McClean, there's Lennox Glean there's guys from these bands the crack shots..." you know. Anyhow, so the day they were picking, it took like all day, all night.

Elizabeth 19:44
Just talking.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 19:45

We weren't allowed in the region they had the people who were selecting inside of there. You don't know who on the selection committee don't like you or what they might say... But anyhow, I went home and sleep. Then about maybe seven o'clock in the morning it started [Cliff makes a knocking sound] Grandma came and wake me up. "They say here your name on the radio, your name on the radio! You get picked to go away!" Say, "I get picked to go away?" She say, "Yeah!" Get up. Jump on a bike and go on in town. Four seconds: You, Cobo Jack, this other guy named McClean, this guy named Glean. They are the 4 second players. Wow. And you're gonna have to get a good uniform and blah blah, blah. And rehearsal now at a hectic pace, and the 22 men who didn't get picked, they quarreling. You know: "How'd you get picked and I didn't get picked?" But anyhow, we left Trinidad And we went to Mackinac Island, Michigan.

Elizabeth 21:14
That's right! (laugh)

Dr. Clifford Alexis 21:18

Trinidad that was my first plane ride. Flew there, went to Miami, Miami to Mackinac Island. We landed at a Air Force Base in Michigan, Kincheloe Air Force Base. I don't know if it's still there, but I know that we were get off the plane in utter darkness.

A bus in front say, "Follow me, Follow me." This bus lighted. And we had to, next thing we know, we had to go take a boat across Lake Huron. That was a night to remember. Then, they never said anything to the conference that we will coming in. We came in in the night. That night, pans came in. They had us rehearse in secret that day. To play with the night for the conference, there was 1100 people from all over the world.

Elizabeth 22:37
Oh my gosh.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 22:39

We rehearse, we rehearse, nobody know. In this secret place rehearsing. And then they put the pans on stage. And when they announce that we are here and pull the screen,

it was pandemonium. (laughing) I saw that! I says, "Wow! If this for pan, and they're not doing this in Trinidad. Do this here, in America." And I was watching, watching. But before that, before we left Trinidad, there was a question of how do you get visas to come to America?

And I remember George got to calling the ambassador and saying, "Madame Ambassador, I got 22 men to go away I need visas." And before that he had said, "Bring down your passports and blah, blah, blah." And I remember when he called the ambassador and he got all our passports. He says, "Loan me a bike, somebody, anybody got a bike?" He jump on a bike with the passports in hand. And in less than an hour he came back with visas.

Elizabeth 24:02
Wow!

Dr. Clifford Alexis 24:03
That don't happen in Trinidad now. But when I open my passport, it says, "4 years." Four years. You could go and come to America as a visitor. So when we were in America, we went all over Michigan. I mean, in that area. Then we went to the Southwest. We went to Indian reservations, you know, the stuff like that... we played in a lot of pueblos in New Mexico, Like in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, and all those places. We played in Trinidad, Colorado, on Independence night. Lot of places. Kentucky, West Virginia. And the tour's coming to an end and guys getting antsy. They want to go back home, and we went back to Trinidad. And I said to myself, "I am not staying here. Not with a visa that people trying and begging to get, an I have one. Lucky me have one." So I stayed waiting there. We went back in '65 no '64. In 65 I waited until Panorama - it wasn't Panorama then it was Pan on the Move- I arranged for Stereophonics and Joyland, They join up as two bands. So I arranged for them and they made it in the first 10.

Elizabeth 26:12
Yeah!

Dr. Clifford Alexis 26:14
I have it in a book here. I came 10 out of 10.

Elizabeth 26:16
You remember the song?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 26:18
huh?

Elizabeth 26:18
What was the song?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 26:20

I can't remember the song. I have a book here with it... During that time, I wasn't working. My mind was on pan. I wasn't working.

Elizabeth 26:43
Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 26:44
So I know, George Goddard, when he was president, during Carnival season, they used to offer little contracts that put up fence around the Savannah. Low and behold, I get one of them contracts. It was like \$600. But I have to have guys to work with. So I have a book at home still with the guys who work on that contract. But I have my little diary from the Moral Rearmament.

Elizabeth 27:24
Woah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 27:24
Still at home. Different places we go, where we played, what I was thinking today, blah, blah, blah, and different stuff because Moral Rearmament. It was not a religion, but it's something that tried to teach you to live in an absolute way. Honesty and purity, love and all of these different things, and hope to advanced your morals, and they were trying to teach young people, those kind of things too. So I work, I get paid. And I found out it was \$212 to leave Trinidad then.

Elizabeth 28:12
And what was that for?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 28:14
Plane ticket.

Elizabeth 28:14
That was for the plane ticket to New York?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 28:17
To New York. During that time, in the meantime, I was talking to guys in Brooklyn. Because they had a band in Brooklyn, and one guy told me they were looking for him to come up there that he didn't want to go, and put me in touch with the people running the band and they say, "Yeah, come up! Come up. Everything will be okay." That's another story. (She laughs) So then me and my family who I was living with, we not talking. We mad at each other. Not talking at all.

Elizabeth 28:56
But you've been in the national band. You've toured.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 28:59
Right? That doesn't say nothing. I still wasn't working.

Elizabeth 29:04
Ohhhh.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 29:04

Anyhow. So I have this \$212.00 in my pocket, rolled up in my pocket. And if you saw me during Carnival time in Trinidad, my right hand was in my pocket. Clutching the \$212. I have nothing else more than \$212 for plane tickets, no money to spend. No nothing, just \$212. I decided to make an arrangement with this guy to take me to the airport and didn't tell them anything at home. my suitcase to my sister's house in town. I spent the night there with whatever little I had in my suitcase. During that day was a Sunday. What day was I leaving? I guess that was an Ash Wednesday? Right after Carnival Ash Wednesday I says, 'I'm out of town.' George Goddard, all National Steelband people was mad at me because when we came back from from the US, some of the arrangers resigned. I was made an arranger of the National Steelband.

Elizabeth 29:16
Okay.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 29:24

"How could you want to leave us now?" I'm gone. I said, "I'm going." A guy who lived on the same street wit me, Andrew Anisette. Gave me \$20[TT] to change and it became five US dollars. So besides the 212, I have 5 US. Coming up the road. Guy took me to the airport. You could just walk over buy a ticket. Buy a ticket. I have a visa, landed in Kennedy Airport. Wasn't Kennedy Airport then but... So...what it was it Idlewild? I can't remember. But anyhow, on the plane or in the airport or someplace like that. This lady said, "I know you I know you." She says, "You played at Anisette party." And this was the same man who give me the \$5.

Elizabeth 31:42
Okay, right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 31:44

So when we got to the airport, get to New York. We got off the plane. She saw me outside. She says, "Anybody coming to?" I say, "Yeah" She says, "Where you going?" I say, "Brooklyn." She says, "You have hard America money?" I said, "Yeah, I got mad American money! Five dollars." (laugh)

So her husband came to pick her up, and they were passing, "Nobody?" I say "No they didn't come to get me." He said, "Well come with me."

And she took me to her house with her husband. And they fed me and I hang out there making calls to Brooklyn. And I landed at three and they didn't pick me up until 10 o'clock at night. (they laugh)

10 o'clock that night, they pick me up, and they brought me to Brooklyn to this band. And while they are I'm listening to conversation; "Well where is he going to stay, is he going to stay with you? Or gonna stay with that woman?" [I'm thinking] What the hell is going on?

Anyhow, I finally get to stay with a guy. And I'm hanging out there, they're going to rehearse. I understand that I was getting like maybe \$100 to arrange for this band because they were sponsored by BWIA. But my disappointment was I thought this band was playing every night and in nightclubs. And going in all these nice places like when I was with the National Steelband. No, those guys had to work a regular day job. They come and rehearse in a basement, they might have some weekend basement party or dance. And I say, "Oh boy, I ain't gonna last too long here." but I bide my time. '65 its March of '65 so I've made it. '66 I miss Carnival. '67 BLM give us a ticket to go to Trinidad. I went back I played in invaders, that's when I first met Murray Narell, Andy Narell's father, and he was trying to get Ellie Mannette to come to America.

So I played in Invaders and came back up in '67 and decide to form my own little band now. Form my own little "Cliff Alexis and the Trinidad Troubadors," Formed my own little band and started gettin little gigs. And then there's a war now between me and the other band and I left. So... '66 to about '69 no '67. I started getting the job my friend Hugh Borde got that Liberace show. And He invited me to his shows and then he got some gigs for me. And I started traveling a little bit blah blah blah. At that time I was married in Brooklyn.

Elizabeth 35:30

What were you doing for a day job? You never told me that.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 35:33

They took me to a pocket book factory and I stayed one half a day. Took me to a scale company I think I spent 10 minutes. Took me to another place for printing to read, a guy say, "You're a bright guy" I say, "Yeah I know I'm bright. But I ain't staying here." So I start getting little gigs, hanging out by the bar in Brooklyn. And there was a guy by the name of Mojay used to have a lot of jobs up state. And he says, "I need four men. I'm paying \$50 for the weekend. You gettin food and board and transport. And only paying us \$50. Friday, Saturday, Sunday. \$50 for the weekend. Could you imagine that?"

Elizabeth 36:38

What did it feel like in that moment for you? Was that good or bad?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 36:41

Bad! I'm paying \$25 a week rent.

Elizabeth 36:46

Ohhhhhhh.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 36:52

So one thing that - this is a long story - one thing led to another and I started doing a little traveling, going around - like Alabama and different places like that. You married, you separate, all kinds of stuff going on. I went to Reno, I lived for three months in Hollywood, all kinds of different things. Tahoe, Vegas...

Elizabeth 37:27

How did you get a new gig? If you are in Hollywood, how did you?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 37:31

I had a guy who was an agent. A manager.

Elizabeth 37:34

Oh, you did?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 37:35

Yeah. He used to be with the Liberace show.

Elizabeth 37:39

When did you get with him?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 37:42

Somewhere either '69 or '70. Hugh Borde introduce me to him. He was he was the merchandising man for the Liberace Show. But we were at Hollywood, Reno, Lake Tahoe, you know we doing State Fairs. That's satisfying sometimes, and then it's not satisfying. So one day my first wife said, "I'm in Minnesota." (I had my kid then) "You should come to Minnesota." I says, "Ohh, there's a lot of things going on" and I went up there. Somebody said, "There's a performing arts center run by the public schools. Why you don't go there?" I took a pan with me. I walked in the office with a pan and set it up and start playing. They said, "Wow this would be something good for the school." At that time, they had learning centers all through St. Paul the district satisfying a mandate by the US government that integration- and segregation and the integration -where they take kids from all over the city and bring them to these different satellites.

Elizabeth 39:20

Oh. Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 39:22

Some kid's into, there wasn't computer then, but photography, into performing arts, into anything you name it. And I went in there and I had my own pans then. I was using them and but I went to the pan and the guy says, "Could you wait a minute, I got to call my boss." I says, "You gotta hurry you know, because I was just in Minneapolis. And they offered me a job but I didn't go to Minneapolis." I was just bluffing. (Laugh) So he said to me he'll call his boss, and they talk and they talk and he says, "We want to set up something for you. But give us two weeks and then we will take you around different schools to recruit kids to come to the performing arts center for pan." And I go into these different schools on a two-week trial thing, recruitment. And at the end of the two week

period I used to see this guy in the audience and I used to wonder, "Why is he around does he like pan so much?" And at the end of that two weeks he says, "My name is so and so. I'm the supervisor of music for the City of St. Paul. Do you want a job?" I got the job.

So I'm playing at the performing arts music center and 2,3 years I'm getting antsy again for the road. One summer I called one of the people I used to work for. This small company and they said, "We have a new mall opening and do you want to put a band together to come to Tampa, Florida?" I went there for that summer. Before that, during that summer, I worked with Sergio Frankie shows that in San Francisco, all the way to Boston. Getting antsy for it and the guys saying, "Man you should be out..." So I went to Tampa and played, went back to the school and tell them "Listen, I want a leave of absence or sabbatical or whatever." And went take off for a year. I went to Tampa in '76, September of '76. I got diabetic in '77, maybe August of '77. But at that particular time it wasn't working. Guys giving you trouble. But in the meantime, I started learning to tune. In St. Paul when the program was going okay, they say, "We got money for you to tune." I says, "No not me. I could bring somebody to tune." I brought Patrick Arnold to make the first set of pans. The Learning Center.

Elizabeth 6:41

Where did you get the barrels?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 6:44

In St. Paul. And I used to watch. Watch, and say, "I'm going to learn to tune." And so I started digging around because I had a lot of free time. Plenty free time. School ended at... we had junior highs in the morning, and we had senior high in the afternoon, school end at 3:00. I have keys to the building. But I took off then, went to Florida. I was making a few pans down there too, working a problem with these guys. Then I got diabetic. I was in a hospital. I said, "I ain't staying here." I got called back to school. They say, "Well, if you ready to come back your year isn't up yet. Come back." Went back to the Learning Center. And the minute I got there they says, "We moving this into a regular high school. You're going to St. Paul Central."

Went to St. Paul Central. Where they build a performing arts wing. It was a magnet school this time. Arts magnet school. Dance and you name it. We had it there. I became part of the teaching staff there. Twelve years! And I'm making pan, making pan, we didn't need to buy no more pan. That's why I started making pan. I had a workshop. I was living across the street from the school. Could be in there anytime, keep me out of trouble.

Elizabeth 8:41

That's right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 8:43

And I remember the US Navy coming near to St. Paul. I went to see them. Because I saw the Navy Steelband in Trinidad many years. I was quite familiar with the Navy Steelband and knew who played for them.

And the guy said we have a note- you could fix this note? I says, "I think so." "Great now how much" I said , "No." They went up to New Orleans. They want me to come and tune for them in New Orleans and I made a pan for them... I can't remember... After that, Al O' Connor heard them somewhere and said, "Who made those pans?" You know they said, "This big guy in Minnesota." Took him two years to find me.

Elizabeth 9:44
(Laugh) Really?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 9:44
Yeah. Because, you know, I'm saying I don't live even, you know, in St. Paul.

Elizabeth 9:52
You wouldn't even talk to him though?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 9:54
Huh?

Elizabeth 9:54
You didn't even talk to him. I mean, were you refusing to talk to him or he really didn't.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 9:58
In some ways I'm refusing and in some ways I'm... you know. But we finally start talking and I start coming and blend the pans. And he says, anytime I get a position here, I'm gonna bring you here. He got to be assistant chairman. And he keep bugging me. I said, "No, I don't want to come, I don't.." We used to do workshops together. This one was in Akron together me and him and I says, "I don't feel like coming." Anyhow, that particular year, I had a mass exodus at graduation in St. Paul.

Elizabeth 10:52
Oh right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 10:56
Lot of kids. Because I had three bands: beginning band, intermediate band, and advanced band. Mass exodus, because my advanced band with another band sponsored by community art - programs in the arts and sciences. So they used to go places.

Elizabeth 11:15
Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 11:16

You know. Mass exodus. To college, blah blah. I said, "Look I'm tired I'm gone." So I took a leave of absence from the school in Minnesota and came here in '85. In '85 they made me an adjunct instructor. And then in '86, we change. Then they hire me at full time, blah blah blah. The rest is history as we go along. Okay?

Elizabeth 11:50

Well, I want to know a couple of things.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 11:52

I got to call this guy.

Elizabeth 11:53

Okay. [tape paused]

When you started coming up here, and then when you started touring, and you were going all over with your agent, did people come up to you like they do now and ask you all about the instruments, in your in your concerts ever? Or was it always just- when did you start talking to people about it? You said you did presentations in St. Paul, and you went around to recruit? Had you already begun talking

Dr. Clifford Alexis 12:29

One of the things that surprised not only me - a lot of us coming out of Trinidad when we were like playing this instrument?

Elizabeth 12:38

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 12:38

We never knew that when we got to America, we'd have to be quizzed by historians.

Elizabeth 12:46

(laugh) Yeah, right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 12:51

Because the average American wants to know: "How this started? Do you know this?" Or, "Do you know that?" Or, "Do you know the lyrics for this calypso?" And these are some of the things that we never paid attention to.

Elizabeth 13:04

Right. So when that started, did you think it was annoying or curious? Or did you like answering questions?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 13:14

No, because we think it was annoying.

Elizabeth 13:16

Okay.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 13:18

I don't know no history of no pan like you. (Elizabeth laughs) A male or female? I don't know no history of no pan, you know.

Elizabeth 13:27

I think you know a lot.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 13:28

A lady came and says, "Maybe I should take you to Juilliard and get a scholarship." I says, "To do what?" Who is Juilliard? You know.

Elizabeth 13:39

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 13:40

And then you started doing...I remember like in Birmingham, Alabama, to be specific. We went and played for the big art's fair in Birmingham and then playing... I played every junior high, senior high, and junior college in the city of Birmingham.

Elizabeth 13:58

Oh, my gosh. When was that?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 14:03

'70, '71 around that time. '69, '70 yeah.

Elizabeth 14:07

Wow. So then, when you started doing it for schools,

Dr. Clifford Alexis 14:12

Then it becomes very apparent that you have to do these lectures in what this instrument is all about. And now you have to start brushing up on some of the history, some of the things you didn't know, some of the things you refuse to talk about. Because that's just how it was.

Elizabeth 14:41

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 14:43

And so it became a sort of everyday thing now that you go to this school, or you go to that school: "How are these things made and how were they made?" and blah, blah, blah... I could make more pan then, or whatever, but you have to explain.

Elizabeth 14:58

Okay.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 15:00

So that's how most of these things were. You get a state fair to play. And you play, maybe four shows a day, some time, somebody gonna have to ask for something

Elizabeth 15:12

Was it different when you started doing it for kids. At what point did you was it not annoying? Did you just get used to it and accept it? Or at what point?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 15:23

Well at one point, it became something that you must do? You can't play stupid all the time. And at one point, you must do it, it's gotta be done. So I remember when I first started doing workshops on the college level, I used to take Al O'Connor with me. And you know, you have 30 people. You're not knowing that some are doctoral students, some are masters, some undergrad, you're just talking, rant and raving and your own jargon, and they're not understanding. So maybe I might say what I have to say, and then say, "There's a professor here now who will give you the real rundown." Translate for me. Because I realized that that aspect had to be done.

Elizabeth 16:22

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 16:23

I wasn't so astute at it, in terms of how you talk to a college student, as opposed to a man in the street. So I learned from a lot of that. How to present and how to do whatever. You know.

Elizabeth 16:41

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 16:43

Because I came from a mimicking society. Action-oriented society. You go, over there. Okay. Take if you use those same skills. See people do things and say, "oh okay, that's how it's being done."

Elizabeth 17:02

That's well said...

Dr. Clifford Alexis 17:03

But my great experience was working at a high school. That experience I will never forget, I will never give up. It was one of the best. And it's funny that I left St. Paul in 85, and up to like, two nights ago student calling me.

Elizabeth 17:30

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 17:34

Last week, or week before, I was supposed to go back up there for reunion they had, but at the last minute I didn't feel like going - a band I played with there. But students call all the time.

Elizabeth 17:52

You are the kind of person that my dad was searching for when he was a kid. He had no family. He had no money. You saved lives. And you get to know the kids differently in high school.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 18:08

But you know, I never knew about co-ed experience in this country because I didn't have it in Trinidad. Boy's school, girl's school. And then see people making out, and I'm sayin, "This is a high school?" People fighting, girls fighting over guys, and "Wow, welcome to the real world." Or "Welcome to America." Which one? But that experience I will never give up. I was telling someone the other day I was watching TV. And a famous choreographer just died, Merce Cunningham. And if I wasn't in that school, among the performing arts and the dancers and all of that, I would have not known who is Merce Cunningham. You know what I'm saying?

Elizabeth 19:05

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 19:05

And different; Gus Giordano and all these people. The guy who used to run the Harlem Dance Theatre. Those guys, the one who died... I would have never known their names.

Elizabeth 19:26

Sure.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 19:26

If I wasn't in that mix, because I was just not in pan I was part of the performing arts. You know, weekly, we have show production meetings and stuff like that. You know, this is pan, I'm here for pan, but I was there for everything. Famous dancers, writers, poets. I had to experience it there. There was a percussionist. I can't remember his name, however. I went to a show at the U. And I'm saying, "Why I am coming here with these people." But that was the day. Openings of art galleries, the wine and the cheese kind of thing you know what I'm saying.

Somebody say, "There's an opening tonight at so and so, so and so and so. Are you going? Do you want to go?" I say, "To do what?" you know, but that was the crowd you hang out with.

Elizabeth 20:35

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 20:36

Or dancers telling you, "Well, we're gonna hang out tonight down at so and so, why you don't come down and hang out?" A lot of people in leotards hanging out I say, "what the hell am I doing here?" You know what I'm saying? So it's quite interesting now, that some of the names, I was able to pick it up right away: Merce Cunningham. Right away. Say, Wow. I'm sure there are people out there in pan who know who Merce Cunningham is. You know, he came to the U of M, a lot of the shows that came to the U of M; school bought tickets, we go over there. Acting; I never had any. My good friend used to teach acting, improvisational acting, teaching young, black kids, "Make up your own stories. Improvise." right. And when he'd get them real interested, then he start bringin real scripts, and teaching them to read because they couldn't read. And they were really happy, doing improvisational things. Because it's not a challenge, really, you have a script you gotta go home and study.

Elizabeth 22:01

That's cool.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 22:03

But lo and behold, he had actors study calling in acting, music and junk, you I'm saying like that? And they could come and play anything and do anything. And then as you grip them, you start bringing them to the other side. And that's like me teaching kids by rote, and they all happy teaching them and then you grip them. They want to play American R&B tunes. And they all going good. And when your time is right, you bring a little piece of a classical snippet. That's it. They say, "We should be playing more like this." You know what I'm saying?

Elizabeth 22:50

Yeah.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 22:51

And then you get that, and then we playing classical music and they had to dress in white and black. Unbeknownst to me, they went and buy white gloves! Classical tune. See what I'm saying? And then you take them to get a chalkboard in the room. You put the chromatic scale in musical form. You put it in letter form.

Elizabeth 23:21

Yeah.Right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 23:21

First space F. Musical form, then an F below that. A, then an A below that. Okay?

Elizabeth 23:31

Right.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 23:31

You teach them that. And you have record player. You start teaching them triads, start teaching them scales, this is this scale. Same people who didn't want to learn that.

Elizabeth 23:49
Right! Oh, yeah!

Dr. Clifford Alexis 23:50
Start teaching them these things. And it proliferated into the fact that I could say to them, I said, "Listen, we want to transpose this tune two steps up," or, "Half a step up." "If you playing A now, what would be the next note up? We're going into that key. So everything you're doing here, you're doing it one note up, one note up, one and they're looking at the board. Who could read the note read it and who could read the long hand reading the long hand. And they get that so and then I'd start introducing, "Okay, take the record player, learn this tune." Two of the best tenor pan people: "Lock up yourself and pick out this tune," because those kids had an astute ear. Stuff like listen to a record and they will tell me, "there's a little trumpet part playing over there, you didn't hear that?" You know, and they would and tell me, "Well the key is B flat." I say, "Which B-flat is it?" Go around and teach the melody.

Elizabeth 24:58
Cool.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 24:59
Then I teach the chords and stuff like that. The same kids that didn't want to do, you know? And so you have to learn. I got all of that out of St. Paul Central experience. And I never forget it. Oh, I have no teaching certificate,

Elizabeth 25:23
Right?

Dr. Clifford Alexis 25:25
No college, but I'm administering tenth grade test.

Elizabeth 25:31
But you're a natural educator, and a natural communicator.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 25:34
I did that for five years. And I says, at the end of five years when I get tired and understand what this system is all about I think, "Aw, it's just a piece of cake." Tell the principal I says, "But what why am I doing this? I ain't no certified teacher." He says, "Man, come on. You know, just as more than these people." I became a Student Advocate, advocating on behalf of students, because I hated to hear a teacher telling them, "Get out." If there's a kid in a steel band, and somebody says, "but he shouldn't be in math because..." I said, "But Miss, he's playing about 15 tunes by rote. Some of them have double stops in them. It's about 80 double stops. Multiply that by two and he could remember all that. You going to tell him he can't come to math?" Those are the

things that I did. A lot of pregnant girls come to me and want to tell me something. One of the things I did I never locked my desk drawer. I never locked up my hallway passbook. I put it on the thing, and you want to go to the bathroom? Make up a pass, I'll sign, go down to the bathroom. If at any time. I should hear you weren't there, or you were some place else, that privilege is cut.

Elizabeth 27:01

Right. A little responsibility.

Dr. Clifford Alexis 27:07

Or taking away drugs from people. School loses a bass guitar, and I could go to the house and say, "Bring the people's bass guitar back. Is your mom here?" Yes. I Say, "Well I am so and so, and I came to collect a bass from St. Paul Central." "Well I thought the bass..." I said, "No, it belongs to the school." These are the things that I learned.