

**Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center Project, Bridgeport History Center****Interviewer: Michelle Black Smith****Interviewee: Ralph Williams****Date: July 19, 2016**

**Q:** Mr. Williams, how did you hear about the Arts Center? And how were you hired?

**Williams:** I returned from Boston, I was studying and playing in the Boston area and I returned here because it was closer to NY and everyone from Boston went into the city anyways, John Meade, I knew Ben Johnson and John Meade previously in high school, Ben and I played football together so I ran into him one day and he said "I heard you're doing the jazz for a lot of people and traveling" and I said "yeah" and he said, and then I ran into Jami (Ayinde), Jerry Johnson, and Jerry said, "I'm going to go out to Chicago and study music" he wanted to go study music composition and piano and he said, "I may be leaving the Arts Center", well that happened so a few months later Ben interviewed me and asked me if I was interested and in no way did I want to leave the night life and the music and he told me it was part-time, 20 hours per week, they arranged my hours so that I could be in the city three days a week and keep my career and also it helped support me here. To raise my family so it was great.

**Q:** So before we continue talking about the Arts Center, I just wanted to hear a little bit more about your relationship or ties to Jerry, Jami Johnson, and to Ben Johnson, who was the director. You mentioned that you all played football together in high school, what high school did you attend?

**Williams:** I attended Bassick for two years, I think it was '60 and '61, I believe, and after that I returned to Philadelphia because there was no music here. There was no competition, there were no gigs, and anyway Ben and I loved jazz and we all came from the school scattin and talking about Miles (Davis) and Bird (Charlie Parker) and Train and they were our heroes so we knew that right away we wanted to be musicians or artists. Like I said after two years in high school here I returned to Philadelphia and began working full time, five nights a week, every week until I got out which propelled me into, I was ready when I got out of high school, I was already working so I just continued and Philly was a great city for, I saw the difference in Bridgeport and the opportunities there here.

**Q:** So you began your professional career as a musician while still in high school? While you were a teenager?

**Williams:** Yes.

**Q:** And what did you do at the Arts Center?

**Williams:** My specialty is percussion and I would like to mention it was jazz percussion because we played instruments from every culture and we, in other words it was --improvisation is the key as opposed to working in a Latin band or a big band where everything is more structured, so let's see. I kind of lost my train of thought. Ok, so it was Jami, he played percussion and he was also playing piano, he played a little of everything so they thought that it would be good for the

kids with the equipment that they had and basically it was teaching them the basics of percussion for the orchestra for the school and having them also learn a lot about African American music and African music.

**Q:** So what instruments did you teach?

**Williams:** The mallet instruments that you bang or strike, that would be the percussion family. Hand drums, xylophones, we used the piano in class for theory and steel drums. I have quite a collection of instruments from around the world. I would, I had most of them there at the Arts Center and then when we had a chance to order things I got more. I gave them a world view. We would do Jamaican stuff, Latin, and my favorite was just having them jam and do funky things and let them improvise. I saw them grow quite a bit.

**Q:** How many students would you say you taught at a time in your class?

**Williams:** We had a music room which Ben let me design, we had the walls cut and it was not completely sound proof but in that room I think we got as many as 20 which was kind of stuffy, 20 or 25 but the kids were really attracted to it and everybody at that age wanted to be musicians so sometimes I had private students that I'd work with. We had adults from the community who came in and in the afternoon and the evenings I'd say 20 or at least 20-25 per class.

**Q:** I know that with the Arts Center there was a relationship between the Bridgeport Public School system and the Arts Center so that was one of the ways in which children flowed in and then there was the community stream, first downtown and then at the Gary Crooks center which almost gave a built-in audience of students. But I'm curious about the adults who came to the Arts Center because that's a little bit different than having the school assign you or your parents say "go there to find something to do" or as a child wanting to find something to do. Now you're an adult and you're attracted to the arts you are making a certain kind of effort and also you're self-directed so I'd like to hear from you and some of your impressions of the adults that came to study with you.

**Williams:** We had quite a few adults come in over the years. We had visual artists, like one guy Al. I can't remember his last name now. He came from the service and he needed a lot of rehabilitation after Vietnam and all the things but anyways he had abilities and I was 26/27 years old and he began to come to the Arts Center. Rich worked with him. Ben worked with him and he almost became like a volunteer. He was coming like 3-4 days a week and drawing in between the classes and helping us out also. We had another musician, Greg Packham, who owns a music store here --well, Don's Music Box over on Boston Ave. He worked there with Ladon (sp?) and later he took over the store. Greg would come out and jam with us, when people came by I would have them come in and play for the kids. But he was another adult and for our workshops, we had music workshops, I remember Steven Clarke came in and he is one of the best younger musicians now. And so Greg Packham, Steven Clarke, Harrison Buster, Lanzo Baker, who got into the ceramics, and Lanzo stayed. We got some funding for him after a while and he worked part time and the kids loved him. He took over when Rich (Stamats) left for Colorado so we needed an instructor. I'm thinking about other adults, we had an orchestra. Leo Smith came in and did a workshop, who is one of the biggest names now in creative music. A lot of musicians

today still call it jazz and our orchestra was called *The Creative Musicians Improvisers Forum* and we got funding from the CT Commission on the Arts. We visited colleges and schools throughout the state with our grants and we recorded a record -- which I did the art work on it -- called *The Sky Cries the Blues* was the title and different members from the orchestra wrote compositions. We received record of the year; it was us and the Dallas jazz orchestra on billboard. I still have a copy of that so there are very few orchestras like that in the United States. And in Philadelphia you have the Sun-Ra Arkestra and these guys are also playing creative music, a lot of improvisation, you have the Art Ensemble of Chicago which has been together for 40-50 years. They did a record every year, so here in CT, and the Dallas jazz orchestra. I was proud that we had somebody on the same level. Anthony Braxton from Wesleyan University, who has been there for years and is probably way up there as far as recognition and being known. I'm missing some teachers who came in and did workshops. Jackie McLean who I played drums with, Jackie came in and Dolly and they directed the artist's collective in Hartford. Later we had René McLean, Jackie's son, who came in and did workshops on improvisation and reading. A lot of my students were able to attend and other people could just sit and observe. We had Ed Blackwell, the drummer who over at Coleman, he played drums for (Ornette) Coleman for most of his life and Ed Blackwell's wife brought him down and he did Saturday workshops and showed us New Orleans's drumming and four-way coordination which I was teaching the kids. Let's see, that's a few until I can think of a couple others. And individual members of the orchestras -- we got some of them to come back. When we had the orchestra rehearsals, it was great to fill that room with LeRoy Jenkins, Amina Claudine Myers, (Muh) Richard Abrams, these are the biggest names in creative music today. From the community I had a student Edwin Sedanyo who came from Bassick High School, he was very talented and he had the drum-fever and he asked me about lessons and if I would work with him privately and he loved music so much. He would stay almost every day and assist me with the classes so a lot of the people like him and Harrison Buster really contributed and not just came together to lessons. Ben had a lot of visual artists. Several people came in who wanted to do photography and they didn't have a dark room so this is kind of general but--

**Q:** So how long did you work at the Arts Center and do you remember the dates?

**Williams:** I remember being hired in late '74 because it was around then that I was hired and I worked there until, 13 years would be '89. I was there a couple years longer because the way the Arts Center closed was funding began to diminish and we had staff people laid off and sometimes it was one at a time, 6 months later or a year later. And Ben and I were the last two left and we kept it open. We had, we didn't do all we could do but we would take turns from evening to the daytime and finally Ben's funding ran out and then I was there maybe for another year. So it was sad then because I was there and we would do as much as we could. Then Julius Johnson, I think, he taught art and he was on the staff for a while but he helped us out when the funding ran out. We had many local musicians who didn't have a place to practice, Raymond from Stratford, he worked with Eric Gail who was a big name back then and Fusion jazz and he would come and we gave him our sewing room when we weren't using it to take out his saxophone and play. So Steve Clarke would come in and we'd have jam sessions and Dr. James Beckett from Bridgeport hospital would play Sax in my band and he utilized it in the evening so that's a few of the people. And I remember it was '74, I believe it was then because I recorded, it was Don Elliot that year of Columbia records and I had a string of commercials and I was a

studio percussionist and I had a string of commercials at that time and I could tell the kids to watch out for him: Co-Co Cooler, Monsanto and a lot of toy commercials, around Christmas time. We'd get the Martels, I think it was Martel, we couldn't see it because we say car 1, car 2 and that was a lot of fun cause the kids could see me use the assorted and miscellaneous instruments that nobody really wanted to play in the orchestra and percussionists are the ones who not only play the drums and the tympani and the gongs and the symbols and all that. But we need sound effects in the orchestra and it was always assigned to them so. Soundtracks, I did several soundtracks around that time, *Who's in Rabbits House?* was the last one with James Earl Jones. That was, they were all for Westport, the film company -- they make children's, it's the children's anyways but I did about 3 animated films with them. One of them was *Who's in Rabbits House?* with J-- and that was the last one with James Earl Jones, there was *Round and Square Houses*, oh boy, we received the American Library Award for --which one was it?, time goes by, for one of those Western Wood Studios but I have copies of all that. So it was a busy time for me and the 20 hours a week was great because I could go into the studio and into the city and play which was my whole purpose and I think I brought energy back from actually doing it there.

**Q:** Who do you remember at the Arts Center? Both students and instructors. You've talked about some but is there anyone else that you remember? That made an impression that you haven't talked about?

**Williams:** George Alford moved here and he worked with the Special Education population and he plays trumpet. And he also played in our orchestra. And George spent a lot of time at the Arts Center working with, -- he studied at the community college in Harlem and when he got his -- while he was studying there he'd come out and use our piano but he worked with a lot of the kids. And he'd sit and teach kids Stevie Wonder parts on the piano for hours. And he came regularly and we let his band rehearse there when they needed space. So it was an exchange, the musicians sort of exchanged, we created some communication for the people living in this area. I was in New Haven and when I'd go to Hartford there was a community center in every neighborhood. I worked up there for about 6 or 7 years and they paid real money and that just shows you that it's a capital and there was a lot of funding and a lot of politics. But here the Arts Center was -- we were on the map. James Bell was a young man who was very talented. He could draw, paint and he lived in P.T. Barnum (low income housing complex). And I just remember the way, his sense of rhythm, you know, he was just born with it. They bussed him out to a school in Weston or Westport and something happened. He had behavioral problems and he's dead now. The pressures -- because to build up from P.T. Barnum to Westport -- and his behavior. Daryl Merrill who was Mr. Jesse Merrill's son, he played percussion with us. He loved music, he didn't like art that much, but his poetry -- he would come in and work on a poem and I know he went home with all of the anxieties of the drugs and the things that were going on then. And he went home and wrote poetry and he'd bring it back and I would read it and would show him some of mine and I saw the artist in him but he had a place to nurture it. Dallas Reddick was quite a talented musician on percussion especially. He and his brother played in our band and many of them are gone now. But when I go around this area, especially Bridgeport, in the supermarket or anywhere somebody will yell "Mr. Williams or Mr. Johnson" -- and they get it mixed up -- then they remember and say that I taught them at the Arts Center. And that's been happening a lot. That happens very frequently.

**Q:** So can you tell me, Mr. Williams, what impact did the Arts Center have on you personally?

**Williams:** Well I, when I returned from school I had been on the road traveling and I didn't graduate because I was on the road too much. I mean, I was taking off. But when your instructor, Alan Dawson, says "You want to go to Cleveland, you want to go to New York," and I know a lot of people didn't study at all and I was a professional before I went to music school but I went there knowing that down the road I should have finished school and I just knew it would help me and a lot of the musicians had the ability to read and a lot more training, it can't hurt you just because you play with these people so at that point when the Arts Center came up it, my kids, my second son was born, Dr. Yohuru Williams, and my third daughter was on the way about a year later so the job worked out good. It made me more stable, I was able to study part time at the local schools and I was able to grow. I saw my kids growing up right in the mix with them and I would bring them there very often and I mean how many jobs can you -- Pat Melvin would bring her son sometimes or anybody on the staff because they knew how we conducted it and when we got there it was flexible enough that we had space. So now the jobs are doing that now where they have an area for the children but since it was the arts I think that the kids probably enjoyed it more.

**Q:** Now what impact do you think the Arts Center had on our community?

**Williams:** As I mentioned to Dr. Williams, it was a system in the desert for P.T. Barnum (low income housing complex) and I remember you're isolated, on the West End. They tore down all the tenement houses that were around it. Think about transportation, bus fare, lunch money, whatever, as I say we had an audience right there and everyday those kids would just walk over and their mothers would look out the window, "Ok, you stay in the Arts Center." Sometimes their parents would drop them off and many of them picked them up, but they knew that that was the place that if they didn't have a lesson that night they could hang there and watch a movie. I definitely miss our kitchen where we had popcorn and a full kitchen and a sewing room, there was always an area we could put them in where they could do homework, you know, and I'm getting a little--.

**Q:** And so you've talked about why the Arts Center closed and it was a matter of funding and it sounds like instead of closing abruptly it came to a slow leaking as staff left and resources dwindled. Do you think that Bridgeport would benefit from a re-opening or recreation of the Arts Center now?

**Williams:** I think every community would benefit. I can't imagine communities that don't have them or have very few but I see the difference in Hartford. Those kids up there, by the time they get to high school, their level of performance, the level of the work they're doing, and that's because you've got the music schools there, Hart School of Music, there are a lot of schools and it's a bigger city, well, I don't know about the population now, but I think it's needed. They're still dying, although we saved a lot of lives. We lost Daryl, we lost James Bell, I could go on and on. But I remember arriving at work on Monday very often I would get near the Gary Crooks Center and see all these cars on Bostwick Avenue and crowded, when I saw a lot of traffic, even if it was energy, people signing up for energy or some benefits or a funeral. So most of the time

it was, especially early in the week, it was a funeral. I mean they have them all during the week and I'd open my van door and I'd smell fried chicken and then I knew and then I'd see folks milling around in their white shirts and ties. And those were days that were hard because we carried on. We'd go next door and pay our respects but we'd have classes as usual from the Bridgeport School system too. One was--two were bussed in the day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon and when they left the party really started because we had the neighborhood kids then and that was the difference. The kids knew us and I lived in this area. I wasn't like Ronald McDonald. I was a real person and I could show them products I've done and all the records and albums I'd recorded and I was lucky then when I started working there. I did 3 or 4 records in a couple year period and that plus the commercials, it was quite a bit. I think it just helped me grow, and since I didn't finish school, I still studied privately with a few people and I was always -- musicians get together a lot and artists too and talk shop and I used all that time wisely.

**Q:** Mr. Williams, this is the last question, is there anything that you would like to talk about that hasn't been asked already?

**Williams:** Basically, the problems or situations that we faced back in the '70s are pretty much the same today. The music has changed. In the beginning it was Donna Summer and George Clinton -- "Ain't nothing but a..." and the kids drove me crazy but that was what they heard at home most of them, and Nike Sneakers, Jordache Jeans. And then crack came about. Rap, this was pre-Rap and pre-crack, what I'm talking about the early '70s. But as the '80s came on we saw a difference in the number of kids that were getting in trouble, the arrests. P.T. Barnum is just like any other public housing project and our country had the same problems. But they were just isolated there and I feel like people drove in and people drove out and did what they had to do and the kids, the kids --many of them suffered from it. A lot of those kids are incarcerated now and uh -- or dead. We need it. They're still dying and lately in our news we can see what's happening throughout the world and the only difference is the change in music but we've got the same problems. Our kids still need that time to grow, nurture. And the arts helped them to problem solve. If you can figure out the lines where they meet, and the colors and write a song or figure a song out, get a melody and keep adding notes you're problem solving and I think you can be more beneficial to society and probably be maybe happier, maybe in more control.

**Q:** Thank you very much, Mr. Williams.

**Williams:** You're welcome.

**END OF INTERVIEW**