

Interviewee: John Chamberlin

Interviewer: Melissa Acosta

Location: Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo MI.

Date: May 24, 2013

This interview was reviewed and edited by Donna Odom, Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society.

Melissa Acosta: I'm Melissa Acosta on May 24, 2013 at 4 pm at Kalamazoo College, and I am interviewing John Chamberlin. John, would you please tell us your current address?

John Chamberlin: I live REDACTED.

MA: So we would just like to start off with your childhood. Tell me about where you grew up.

JC: Well I was born and lived my, well, let's see, I was born in Fairmont, West Virginia. I lived until I was eight in Chicago Illinois and then moved back to Fairmont until my third year of college.

MA: When did you get to Kalamazoo?

JC: I moved to Kalamazoo in 1969. I had gotten a degree in music therapy and I came here to work at the state hospital as a music therapist.

MA: Could you share a specific childhood incident that was especially important to you that caused you to go into music therapy?

JC: Well I can share incidents that, that caused me to be really interested in music. I was raised from the time I was eight by my great aunt, and she had raised a number of children in our family, none of them her own, and one of her philosophies was that "Every child should learn some music." So at the age of eight she started me taking piano lessons and then as I got further along in school I picked up clarinet, and saxophone, and, and I sang. And I found that I took to

these things like it seemed natural. I enjoyed entertainment. I remember I was in a fundraiser talent show in Fairmont. Fairmont's a small town, 28,000, and sometimes I would get up on a picnic table and sing when I was, oh junior high school, or late grade school. Then when I got into high school, I was in the band and the chorus. I actually went into music therapy somewhat as a default because my mother and my grandfather, who were very instrumental in my life, all encouraged me that I should have a backup plan, that making a living, making music was a challenging and iffy profession and I didn't want to be a music teacher. So then I found out about music therapy, which was using your music talents along with psychology to help people with various mental disabilities. And I, when I transferred from West Virginia University to Indiana University, that's when I took up music therapy.

MA: And so, how did that transition to you playing jazz and your career now?

JC: Well, even in high school, I was starting to "gig" as we call it, played professionally. I remember when I was a freshman in high school and I went to band camp. There was a fellow by the name Johnny Christian, and he was two years older than me, or two grades older than me. And he had some of us come around behind the barracks and he had some music stands set up and some sheet music, and he wanted us to play it. And it was Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, you know different swing dance music from the time and because of how I, he liked how I played, so he wanted me to join his dance band. Now you had to be a member of the union, and you couldn't get into the union until you were sixteen. I was fourteen at the time, but he managed to get an exception because there wasn't another tenor sax player available in town. But there was another hurdle because my great aunt was not interested in having me go out and play music at clubs at the age of fourteen. But Johnny Christian's father came to talk to my aunt, my great aunt. I'll make it less cumbersome, Aunt B, and he told her that he would pick me up

for every gig, he would chaperone it, and he would make sure I got home. So she allowed me to start playing. So even at that point, and I say, we played all the animal clubs in town. People say, “Animal clubs?” Yeah we played the Lions, the Moose, the Eagles, the Elks. So that’s how I got started playing professionally. Then all the time that I was in college, on and off, I would be in various bands, either of someone else’s or in bands that I started and make a little money on the side.

MA: What was that like, starting so young in that industry? What was it like for you?

JC: Well, I was very sheltered at the time, so it was fun, but I didn’t get into any of the temptations of drinking, or smoking, or those sorts of things. And it put a little money in my pocket. Back then ten or fifteen dollars was, “Wow!” (laughs), you know, for doing something I had fun doing.

MA: And is that when you would play jazz, at that time?

JC: Yeah. Well it was, it was dance music and it kind of, some of it was jazz-oriented. It was, back then, it was swing, and, you know, jazz, early jazz was dance music.

MA: Are there any artists or bands back then that really inspired you to continue and pursue it?

JC: I can’t say that there were artists that caused me to go further in music, but there are, there are artists that I really liked, but they kind of spanned genres. My, my first, jazz record was of Dave Brubeck and Take Five. But then I also liked pop music, and I think one of my first forty-five singles that I bought was the Four Seasons. So—at that age, I wasn’t totally focused on, on jazz. I, I liked jazz. I did some music in our church. I liked pop music. I liked rhythm and blues.

MA: So were there any values or issues like, I know you said that your great aunt said every child should learn music. Were there any other values that she instilled in you that you still have to this day?

JC: Well, yeah. She was—she was very strongly religious and that, that left its imprint on me. She believed very strongly in being honest, and, you know, treating others as you would want to be treated (unclear), but one of the biggest things that I learned from her, because of something that she didn't do, and none of us are perfect, she—(pondering) for quite a while that I lived with her, it was just the two of us and, and we lived in a large house and she would sometimes send me to find something in another part of the house. Like she'd be down in the kitchen and she wanted her house slippers, and they were upstairs under the bed—so I'd, I'd go. I went up and (mimes looking for something). I don't see any house slippers, so I'd come down and tell her. (Imitating great aunt) "I know they're up there. Now you go back up and look good." So I'd go up and I'd look even better - no house slippers. Well she'd be angry with me. Later, she'd find them someplace else, and she (emphatically) never (waves finger) apologized and that left its mark on me—that I'm just the opposite. I mean, it's not, I, I don't mean I apologize when I haven't done anything wrong, but if I realize I've screwed something up, even when I was (unclear). Raising my son, I'd always make sure that I apologized—or, if he did something wrong and I thought I went over the top (gestures), ya know, as far as yelling at him or something I said, even though *he* did something wrong, if I didn't feel my response was appropriate, ya know, I would apologize. So, I think that's a good thing, but—(trails off)

MA: Could you talk about your family now, your wife, and how that got started, and where you met her—(trails off)

JC: Yeah. (nods) My wife's name is Pam, and, I love her very much (smiles), and, she actually pursued me (laughs).

MA: (Unintelligible)

JC: We were going—we were going to—the same church, but we didn’t know each other, and we had a mutual friend who lived upstairs from my apartment, and—she was also a nurse, my, my wife Pam was a nurse, and so they would—she would ask her, well, (mimicking) “What’s going on with John?” And so, she found out that the lady that I’d been seeing for quite a while, ya know, that I was frustrated with the relationship, and so she let Shea (?) her friend know that, ya know, she was interested. Well I was, I was, I had tunnel vision, (mimes a tunnel in front of eyes). If I was dating somebody, ya know, nobody else was in the picture—so I went up to Pam in church and she thought (mimicking Pam) “Oh! He’s gonna ask me out!” And I fixed her up with a friend of mine (laughs)—and she was so disappointed—fortunately it didn’t work out. So, later on, she heard that I, still things weren’t going well so she just took the—ya know—the, the initiative to call me up and she said, “You—you know, I heard things weren’t going real well with your relationship, and, I broke up with the guy I’m going with. I just thought I’d call and see if we had anything in common.” And, and she sounded kind of nervous so, it let me know that she wasn’t, that wasn’t something she just did all the time, you know. So we talked for about an hour and a half and later, about a week later I asked her out and—within a year or so, we got married, ya know. So we’ve been married—28 years now. (nods) Happily, mostly happy—happily (smiles)

MA: (laughs) And you, you, you have kids?

JC: Right, we’ve got a 35-year-old—her daughter, my step daughter—named Sarah, and then our son Mark, who we adopted, who is—no, Sarah’s 34, Mark’s 25.

MA: So—okay, so you said that when you did music therapy—what was that like? And, I know you said it was by default, but are there any stories or anything that you really took back from that experience?

JC: Well, music therapy, as I said, is a combination of, of music, using music in psychology, and in using it with the mentally ill. Of course, what I'm going to relate to you is so dated—I mean, it's (gestures as if outlining points), music therapy is, is, is still valid, but it's been developed much further since I got out of the field. I actually left the field in '88, because the State Hospital was getting smaller and smaller and I had an opportunity to transition into community mental health and work in administration, which had nothing to do with music (shakes head). But, I would—we, at that time, patients, as they would call them, would stay at the State Hospital for a long time, so I would do music lessons. We had, we had groups, we had, a, a dance band, we had something we called a hillbilly band, was kind of a country group (gestures), and the clients would, would play in the band, And then sometimes we'd use music in conjunction with art, or one, one difference with music and some of the other therapies, if I, if you were mentally ill and I asked you to draw a picture, you could draw (mimes drawing) part of the picture and hallucinate for a little bit and draw (mimes drawing) some more then, when you were done you might have a beautiful picture, but, if you're going to sing a song, it has to be continuous, ya know, (mimes keeping musical time). It has to fit into time. And so that can be—a way of seeing into someone's brain, how they're how they're functioning so to, so to speak - how in touch they are continuously with, with reality. Music therapy is very useful with people who have a developmental disability. It's also for some reason very useful with—especially children—who are, have autism. Right now I can't think of any interesting anecdotes though related to music therapy.

MA: Okay, so, after music therapy, how did you get, like, are there any bands that stemmed from the music therapy time in your life and continued after?

JC: Well, the interesting thing was when I moved to Kalamazoo I was married to my first wife, Gail. And she and I did some musical things together. She played guitar, and sang and composed. And eventually we, along with Janice Lakers, who is a current faculty here at K College, she teaches jazz students and I accompany her jazz students here, but the three of us started singing together, kind of as a folk duo and eventually we got, built it up into a six piece band called Sweet Maya and that band was for a while the most popular band in Kalamazoo, and I actually left working at the State Hospital to try to make a living playing music - never was very successful at it, but we didn't starve anyway. So the band Sweet Maya was together between '72 and '74, then the band broke up and I went to work at the University of Michigan Psychiatric Institute, and I worked there for a year and a half and then we were gonna get the band together just for a reunion concert, and we enjoyed it so much we put the band back together and played together for another two years.

MA: And when was that?

JC: I beg your pardon.

MA: And when was that?

JC: That was '76 to '78.

MA: Oh, okay.

JC: One of the problems was disco that was coming in, and while we got to play some concerts, and in fact we actually played a concert at Wings Stadium. We opened for Chris Brubeck, who is the son of Dave Brubeck, and they had a group called New Heavenly Blue, so that was one of the biggest gigs that we had. But a lot of our work was in bars. And as disco came in people didn't want to hear all of the creative things we were doing. They wanted to hear what was on the radio played just like it was on the radio, and we were very much into changing things

around. The band, if you listen to the repertoire, if you listen to four different tunes you might think it was four different bands because of the different styles of music that we played, from country or country rock, I mean country or folk-type tinged, to funk, to pop, to jazz, to kind of new age, and as you can imagine that didn't go over so well with people who came out wanted to dance disco (laughs) and we tried for a while to adjust, just to keep eating until we could be discovered (laughs), but it didn't work out, so we eventually had to pack it in.

MA: That's very interesting. So after, so you said you worked with Janice Lakers right?

JC: Mhm.

MA: So are there any projects that you've worked on in your life that you're just really, you're really proud of? And can you explain some of those projects that you've done?

JC: Well, I guess the, the, the project that I was most proud, proud of was Sweet Maya.

MA: Mhm.

JC: But since then we have collaborated - oh most recently, two years ago, I was invited to do three tunes along with the Kalamazoo Ballet Ensemble. And so we had drums, bass, and I played piano and I, I sang, or no I didn't sing, we brought Janice in to sing one number, and we were playing live while the dancers were dancing (smiles), and that was a lot of fun. Let's see, I don't know, we've done a number of different projects. Sometimes she and I worked together with Don Neal, who was a wonderful musician, trombone player, and club owner in Kalamazoo for quite a number of years and brought in some fantastic musicians like Count Basie, and Duke Ellington, Andy (?) Chase, and Ella - various, various people, and more recently, before Don died unfortunately a couple months, ago we played, we did some gigs with him. And that was fun (nods), that was fun.

MA: Are there any projects you're working on now?

JC: What I'm doing now, about, maybe five six months ago, I felt as though, I don't know, God was talking to me, and saying: "John I'd like to kind of re-prioritize," and up to that point I was still pushing to try to do some, you know, jazz things out in the club, working with Ken Morgan. Oh let me digress, when we talk about things that I'm proud of. We did something called the concert for P-Purulia, Purulia is a, a small town in India, and St. Martin de Tours Church, Episcopal Church, here in Kalamazoo, chose to take on a project of building a youth hostel for them, where kids could live, get fed, go to school, have decent clothing, and many of these children were children of lepers. And some people are surprised they don't know that there is still leprosy around, so, at any rate, that was a wonderful project that we did with Ken Morgan, yeah. So anyway those are types of things that I'm open to doing now, and when I say, you know, I was asked I felt like I was supposed to re-prioritize my, it wasn't that playing out in bars is bad, church is good, no (smiles). It was more that, that when I was doing that type of music, um it took a lot of time and energy. I had to spend a lot of time practicing, researching music, writing arrangements, rehearsing with others. And it was more that, you know, spending less time doing that and more I'm playing in my church's praise band, I'm doing arrangements there, and maybe not being so busy with music. And what I've found that as I've slowed down certain people are kind of gravitating to me to talk and maybe to get assistance. I have a couple friends who are bipolar, and since my son is bipolar, I kinda understand. I'm not a therapist, but I kind of understand and they'll call me up a and want to talk about it. And it's something I wouldn't have had, or felt like I could take the time to do in the past. So I think—I feel like I'm getting used in different ways.

MA: Was there any, like, incidence that occurred that caused you to feel, like, this need. And you said that you felt, you know, like God was telling you - but was there anything in your life going on at the time that caused you to feel like you needed to reconnect with your spirituality?

JC: There was not a particular incident. And I was, you know, quite involved with my church and with, with off-shoots of that, you know, in a spiritual way, so it wasn't like I was away from my spirituality. But, actually I went to the Fountains at Bronson Place¹ to play for a, a church service that they had. They had one every other Wednesday, and it'd be about 45 minutes. And I'd go in and play three hymns and they'd have a minister who spoke. And it was a very strange experience because the minister who spoke, he was very arti, articulate, and he gave an interesting message, but as I sat there and listened, the message that I was getting, you know, about the reprioritization and the sort of thing seemed to be unrelated to his message. It just seemed to be, you know, contiguous in time, happening at the same time. But it wasn't like he said something and I said, "Aha!," you know. And it just feels right.

MA: So I'm going to shift gears a little bit, but I wanna kinda talk about race in your life, and how has your race affected your life and your career?

JC: You know when I was asked to do this, I said, "Are you sure you want me, because my great aunt who raised me tried very hard to emulate the whites around her, okay, and I would have to say that I was kind of acculturated white," you know. There were a lot of poor African Americans that lived around us, and she, unfortunately, kinda looked down on them and wouldn't let me play with them or associate. For instance, when I went to my high school prom, well, although our town was integrated, our high school was integrated, and that all happened

¹ The Fountains at Bronson Place is a senior retirement community in Kalamazoo.

peacefully, interracial dating wasn't going on. So, you know, I could only take out a, a black girl, but my great aunt had narrowed that down to a list of three that would be suitable (laughs). The others were, you know - So that was very restricting, and it, it left me in a, a no man's land because I obviously wasn't white but because I didn't get to go to the dances or hang out on the corner, all places where I *might get in trouble*, I didn't learn how to talk the slang, I didn't learn how to dance, you know. I didn't learn how to relate to African American women, you know. And as, as a result, my marriages have been interracial, you know. The dating part, early on, like when I got out of college, late college, and when I got out of college, there were times when I was lucky not to get harmed because, um - well I can think of an incidence where I was in, I was doing my internship at a state hospital just south of Michigan City, Indiana. And a group of us went to the beach at Michigan City, and we weren't dating, but there happened to be three guys, two of whom were black, and two white women. And we were just being there together, you know, enjoying the beach, and this guy came up, and he was so upset cause he had just come home from boot camp, and boot camp was integrated, and now they were trying to integrate his beach. And he, you know, broke a beer bottle, and he was threatening us, and fortunately one of the, one of the woman, who was from the South and had a very calming effect— seemed to have a calming effect on him - managed to talk him down enough that we were able to leave without having an altercation. So that was kinda scary, you know. And there were, there were other things that happened - more in the past. I haven't, I moved to Kalamazoo in '69, and I've found Kalamazoo a very welcoming town, as far as, you know, having an interracial marriage. Of course you don't necessarily know the people who didn't invite you to their house or things that didn't happen because of that, but there certainly weren't any threats or crosses burned or anything, anything like that.

MA: You said there were some other things in the past. Can you explain more of those incidents and how they shaped you as a person?

JC: Oh, there were similar incidences where white men were angry that I was with a white woman and, you know, threatened violence. And I've always said I must have had a guardian angel, cause I shoulda had better sense than going to that place or the other place. I don't know that there are any other incidents that come to mind or that I really want to relate but just that, you know, I learned to be a little careful. And I think I've been fortunate.

MA: So has your experience with your Aunt, your great Aunt, telling, you know, who to hang out with, has that affected who your friend group is as an adult as well? Are you able to connect to other Black people now better than you were when you were younger?

JC: Yes and no, because of the way I was raised and what I'm comfortable with. We generally, gravitate toward what we are comfortable with. I've attended integrated, but predominantly white churches, and a lot of my friends are from church. Now I have some African American friends but I'd say most of my friends are, are white. And it's not a – I don't have a bias but I also don't find myself putting myself in places, I mean I'm not going to an African American church, you know, maybe I don't belong to a certain Association or go to a certain – there used to be clubs in Kalamazoo that were predominately African American and I wouldn't necessarily go there, you know, on a regular basis. So, I guess, yeah, you know, it's affected my social circle.

MA: So -

JC: And, and I'm pretty well at peace now that, you know, here at 67, I am who I am, you know. But there certainly have been times in the past that I struggled with that, you know, that I wasn't

being real, or I wasn't being true to my Black heritage. You know, just questions: Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? Should I be doing something about this? (Nods head).

MA: Were you, because you talked about white people causing you harm or, you know, scaring you -

JC: Yeah.

MA: - but were you ever scared of other Black people as well? Like them not accepting you?

JC: I was, I was in scary situations with African Americans but not because of associating with whites. (Librarian comes over the loudspeaker and interrupts the interview to report that the library will be closing in fifteen minutes). Thank you very much [referring to the announcement]. (Laughs). Okay, are we back on? Yeah? So I mean there were, there've been situations maybe, where I felt like it might be dangerous, but it didn't have anything to do with my race or who I was with at the time.

MA: So, so you – I know you played several types of music in your life,

JC: Mm-hm.

MA: but is there any specific type of music that is just your favorite? And why is that?

JC: I think, currently, jazz is probably my favorite style of music - jazz and smooth jazz. And why that is, I don't know. I guess I enjoy the complexity; I enjoy the spirit of the music; I enjoy the creativity of the music, and I probably spend more time listening to that than other types of music. On the other hand, I have XM Radio in my car and I'll sit and listen to Margaritaville, the, the Jimmy Buffet station (laughs). Or occasionally I'll listen to some country, you know, and then of course I try to regularly listen to contemporary Christian music to look for songs that, that I can arrange for our praise band to do. But I guess I'd have to give jazz top spot (smiles).

Well, you know there are others. I enjoy old school reggae (chuckles). And occasionally classical (nods). Yeah.

MA: And you play several instruments. Is there any that's your favorite (unintelligible)?

JC: Well, what I've been called upon to do the most, more recently, is to play piano. Although I was a, a saxophone major in college, and I still play saxophone, but I don't have very much opportunity. At one point I was leading a group and I would sing and play sax and then I'd have a guitar, bass and drums or piano, bass and drums. But as the economics of the music world changed, it wasn't always easy to employ three other people, you know and nobody's going to hire me just to play sax by myself, but they will hire me to play piano by myself or to play piano and sing. So, I still love to play sax, but mostly these days I play piano. I also play a little electric bass in our praise band, and I still play some flute, although I'm not real good at it (chuckles).

MA: I kinda was interested when you were talking about Sweet Maya. Where did that name come from?

JC: Ah, well that is an interesting story. We were having a band meeting in, in the house I shared with my first wife Gail and we had two Siamese cats - Pasha and Maya, and in that context, Maya - we were kinda into, I don't think they called it New Age back then - Indian, some Hindu -typed beliefs, and Maya meant the cosmic illusion of duality. If we wanted to say - you have seen the yin-yang symbol, you know - so at that saying, cold is just the other side of hot, you know, and good is the just other side of bad and that it is really all one. And so the illusion that it's not all one is referred to as Maya. Someone who is more knowledgeable might say, well John you almost got it right (chuckle) but that's how I understand it. And so, going from the lofty to the mundane, we were trying to find a name for the band and our cat walks through the room (chuckles) and somebody called her name and said Maya, hmmm (pause) an illusion, ok. And

then somehow we tacked on sweet, cause we thought if we wanted to be an illusion, we wanted it to be harmonious, you know, so Sweet Maya, that's where the name came from. I might add that if anybody ever wanted to hear some of our music from either of our two -we did two reunion concerts, one about six years a- (pause) no, time, one more recently - but, you can go on YouTube and put in Sweet Maya, M-A-Y-A, and, we have different songs on there for people to listen to. It's very interesting group; it's a six person group, four guys and two women, but we had three piano players, three flute players, three guitar players, sax, bass, drums, so we had a wide variety of combinations that we could put together.

MA: Did you guys sing as well? Or was it-

JC: Yes. Five of us sang - everyone but the drummer.

MA: Is there anything that you would go back and change - in your career, in your life?

JC: That's an interesting question. When I was being raised, I was very sheltered, as I kinda mentioned, and, that worked to my detriment, in combination with the fact that I was skipped a grade - now they don't do that nowadays, and in the fourth grade, I got such good grades that they skipped me to the sixth grade. Well that, in combination with the fact that I was sixteen, well that my birthday is in October, meant that I entered college at sixteen. And I was just (pause) not emotionally mature enough. And if there were any way to, to relive those times and be more emotionally mature or if I could have said, "No I don't want to skip a grade." I don't know that my opinion would have carried any weight or not, but I would have loved to have taken advantage of the opportunities that I had and been more serious about my practicing and less -I would have hopefully been less emotionally flighty (chuckles).

MA: Is there anything that you spoke about earlier in the interview that you would like to elaborate on? Or anything you want to talk about?

JC: I suppose I haven't talked a lot about the different projects that I have been a part of in Kalamazoo and uh, I mentioned that I was a part of the Neale Connection. Don Neale was the first person who hired me when I came to Kalamazoo, and of course we had the band Sweet Maya and then I had a band of my own called Freelance, which did a- did pop music, and then after that, I just - because my name was known around town - I just called it the John Chamberlin Quartet or the John Chamberlin Trio. I've really had wonderful opportunities to play in different places and get to see sometimes how the other half lives, like playing music at the Kalamazoo Country Club, or you know, at some posh home on a lake, that sort of thing, and to work with some wonderful, wonderful musicians. So that, that's been, that's been a very enjoyable part of working Kalamazoo. I say I'm a medium-sized fish in a small pond (chuckles).

MA: That's great. Um I think that's about it, but thank you very much.

JC: We have a question over here.

Yongle Wang: I think I can ??+. Sorry but, when you said you had a hard time reconciling - you felt you wasn't being real (pause) to your heritage - how did you reconcile with it, and then you said you felt more ?? now with that, I just, I was like, I said this in my head, I was like how did you reconcile that?

JC: That's a good question. I, I guess I wouldn't say I totally reconciled that. But in part, it's been to just accept who I am, and that I can't go back and undo the things that have contributed to the good part of me as well as maybe, something that I don't find quite so useful and just saying well, here I am. This is who I am now, and I will make the best of it.

MA: Thank you very much.

JC: You're welcome. It has been a pleasure.