

Interview with Jamie Bernstein Thomas, Nina Bernstein Simmons, and Burton Bernstein¹

Music 194rs: Leonard Bernstein's Boston

March 7, 2006, 1-4 p.m.

Professors Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Carol Oja

Class Interviewers: Katherine Lee and Drew Massey

Minor editing by Elizabeth T. Craft

Begin Disk 1 Track 1:

Approximately. 0:50 in

Carol Oja (CJO):

So I think we're at that moment when there's a natural pause and we're ready to begin. So this is a really special day for this seminar, which as we've been telling you has been focusing on the Boston experiences of Leonard Bernstein and doing so in multiple ways, um, in the classroom with a series of people who have come in to be interviewed, and all who have been videotaped, and we're archiving all of this. Um, and then outside of class, in a series of research teams where they're fanning out to do archival research, interviews...and it's really pretty remarkable what students are are turning up. So I'm going to begin today with some formal interviews, interviews, excuse me, introductions um, of our guests and then we'll move into um, to talking with them, and learning more from their perspective, about this man with whom we've been

^[1] Timecode in this interview is relative to the beginning of the tracks on the CD, and is in five minute increments.

spending a lot of time with, in many senses. Um, starting with um, Burton Bernstein, in the middle here, who is the younger brother, as you all know, of Leonard, um, someone whom you've read in the book, uh, *Family Matters*. He was born in Boston. We'll have to find out if your first house was the Park Avenue house that we were in on Sunday.

Burton Bernstein (BB):

Almost

CJO:

Okay, we'll find out about that.

BB:

Pleasanton Street in Roxbury

CJO:

I see, um, and educated at Dartmouth College, and and went to graduate school at the Columbia School of Journalism. Um, he's a noted staff member for the New Yorker, and in addition to *Family Matters* has published quite a number of books including a biography of Thurber and a book called *The Grove*.

CJO:

Next to me is Jamie Bernstein Thomas, who is the eldest daughter of Leonard and his wife Felicia. She, um, is a graduate of Harvard College, as many of you will be at some point in your futures.

[laughter]

CJO:

Um, and she's had a an accomplished career in multiple dimensions. As a singer-songwriter, as a broadcaster, a writer, a narrator. Um, she's hosted the New York Philharmonic's live radio broadcasts. Recently she's been involved with the conductor Michael Barrett, in a continuation in a way, if that's a fair word, of her father's "Young People's Concerts." A series called "The Bernstein Beat," which has been everywhere from Carnegie Hall to China and to uh, Havana. And she, like her sister Nina, whom I'll be introducing in a moment, has been very involved in multiple ways with um, paying respects to her father's legacy and with promoting that legacy around the world.

And then Nina Bernstein Simmons, who is the youngest daughter of uh, Leonard and his wife Felicia. And as I mentioned, she too works to promote her father's legacy. She played a crucial role in, um, getting together the the collection of Bernstein materials that are now at the Library of Congress. The collection that we all are benefiting from so very much. Oh my. Finding treasures there all the time. Um, during her father's life she recited the poems of his *Songfest* in concert with him, and her voice can be heard as Maria in the spoken parts of the Bernstein conducted 1985 *West Wide Story* recording.

Nina Bernstein Simmons (NBS):

And our brother is Tony. Let's let's not forget that.

CJO:

Uh-huh. And she um, produced a recent film. Which um, I'm hoping that we'll get to see called *Leonard Bernstein: A Total Embrace*. She too, is a Harvard graduate and has at least one other Boston piece in her in her um biography, probably many others

I don't know about. And that is that she was part of the original staging of *Big River* here at ART [American Repertory Theater].

NBS:

Where'd you dig that up?

[laughter]

CJO:

We dig, we dig, lemme tell ya. We dig. We aim to impress. Yes

Jamie Bernstein Thomas (JBT):

Wow

NBS:

Wow

CJO:

So Mr. Bernstein, you had said you wanted to start with a statement that you've prepared. Why don't we do that?

BB:

Well, not to monopolize...

CJO:

Oh, no, no, it's your show.

Begin Disk 1, Track 2:

BB:

Since I was invited to come here, I've done a lot of wool gathering uh, both

asleep and awake, I guess...and dredging up [05:00] the old Boston memories. Millions of 'em I thought, would never be dredged. And it was like running a home movie with sound. A mental home movie with sound, if you'll pardon that mixed metaphor. Um, anyway, the obvious umbilical connection with Lenny - and I refer to him as Lenny here, 'cause I can't think of him as anything else - um, and Boston is is obvious. I mean, it was his hometown, and it was the homes, the various homes of him ever since infancy. Revere, various places that most people don't even know they can associate with him. Revere, Mattapan, Roxbury, Newton, Brookline, and uh, his early education was at, when he lived in Roxbury, was at the William Lloyd Garrison school, a very strict old Boston grammar school and then of course Boston Latin School, and of course, Harvard, and then various piano teachers through the years, including uh, Helen Coates who became his longtime assistant, and uh, secretary and Gebhard, Heinrich Gebhard. And uh, he even took courses once at the New England Conservatory of Music. Plus a whole bunch of dreadful piano teachers that told him that taught him how to play with no third knuckle curved.

Uh, and his youth in Boston was very exciting for him, and as it turned out, for my sister Shirley and me, because uh, Lenny was not only our older brother, but he was a kind of mentor and father too. And he loved, as you all know, to teach. So he taught us, music and politics and history and love of words, love of music, love of everything, art. And I got, believe it or not, a Harvard education at, starting at the age of four, because we shared a bedroom in our Newton house, our cavernous Newton house. Whenever he came home on weekends, which was fairly often, he taught me everything,

this kid who had a very limited vocabulary and mentality. He taught me everything he had learned. So I learned about things like the Spanish Civil War, the John Reed Society, everything. He also taught me something that has stayed with me to this very day and I gotta give him credit to him for uh, a a career, really...He was telling me once - and this really was at the age of four or five, or something - about what you can do with 12 notes of music. They're only 12 notes, in different ranges, and he said, and he said, "And just think, with 26 letters, what you can do with uh, with words and writing. Just 26 letters and a few punctuation marks. And that's it." And to this day, I think of that when I'm having writer's block or something and Jesus, just 26 lousy letters, you know.

Anyway, getting back to the Lenny. The earliest job he had also was in Boston, which was giving piano lessons in Huntington Avenue studio, a little walk-up studio in Huntington Avenue. And he took those lessons because he had more or less failed in New York when he'd gone to New York, and to get a job. And uh, it was a way of avoiding at least temporarily going into my father's business, which was the beauty parlor business called the Samuel J. Bernstein Hair Company, on 59 Temple Place in downtown Boston. And not only did Lenny not have a mind for business or any thought of vague desire to go into it, even though it looked like it might be the only out. Uh, but he was also embarrassed by it, embarrassed by the whole idea of business, as indeed, I was too...My father had a small fleet of trucks that delivered beauty supplies in emergency situations to various hairdressers around the Boston area, and the trucks had emblazoned on the side, "In Boston, it's Bernstein" it said.

JBT or NBS [unclear]:

Huh!

BB:

And then on alliteratively [10:00]: “The best in beauty business.” And every time I’d be, you know, somewhere downtown, I’d see one of these trucks go by and cringe.

[laughter]

BB:

You know. And poor Lenny, did too. And also letterheads, always letterheads, for notes to teachers and things like that – “In Boston, it’s Bernstein.” It was just another embarrassment about the mercantile world here.

And uh, getting back to Lenny’s studio. As luck would have it, either good or bad, depending on how you wanna look at it, it opened for business, for teaching piano lessons on December 5, 1941. And as you can...

JBT:

The day that will live in [indistinct]...

BB:

And as you can well imagine, two days later, no one was in the mood for piano lessons. So it was a natural failure. Uh, and, uh the strange thing was, Lenny, when he was at Boston Latin School... I guess you had to take drill that day. He used to appear back home in his uniform. In petiz [?] and all kinds of strange things that

would impress me to no end 'cause I was this tall [gestures], and uh, a Sam Browne belt, and he would salute and show us all the stuff...and he kinda liked it, the truth of the the matter is. He kinda liked the whole thing, his uniform, snappy thing. And then he went up for his physical, when he got his draft notice, war broke out, and of course, he had terrible asthma and was, and as it turned out, the doctor who examined him was an asthma expert, and said the "4-F" and he was out...so Lenny was quite crushed, and that was, to the point where he was, thought that everything was against him. His piano teaching career, everything was goin' down...and as it turned out to be great luck, as far as he was concerned, because well, you know the rest, uh, and also Boston, represents another great event in his life...Namely, his marriage to your mother and your mother,

JBT:

Her mother.

BB:

Huh?

NBS:

Her mother,

JBT:

No, her mother.

[laughter]

BB:

That uh, temple in Roxbury, a very grand, if tense affair. [chuckles] And uh,

with not one, but two rabbis. Then that was in 1951.

JBT:

I didn't know there were 2 rabbis.

BB:

Yeah, two. The old one, the emeritus rabbi...

JBT:

Emeritus!

BB:

Yeah. Emeri...[laughs] And I was one of...He had two best men too, of which I was one, and uh,

NBS:

David Oppenheim

BB:

David Oppenheim was the other. There were two of everything. Two people to hold up your grandmother, [laughter] who was very upset. Anyway, but that's beside the point. Now, as far... all this dredging of memories, for me, when I think of Lenny, and youth and Boston and its environments...what comes to mind more than anything else to me, is humor, laughter, jokes. And I I can't emphasize this enough. That was so important to Lenny in his life. Humor, it was as important as notes and words were to him, and very often, as you know, they were mixed together... 'cause humor was such an important part of his writing and, and composition. He loved all kinds of humor, all kinds... Good humor, bad humor, clean humor, filthy humor, witty humor,

broad humor, ethnic humor, almost racist humor, and very p.c. humor. Anything that would cause laughter and humor, he adored...and Boston bred this in him. Uh, it was, and this humor again spilled over from my sister Shirley and from me. Because we, if Lenny laughed at it and thought it was funny, we laughed at it and thought it was funny.

And of course, part of this humor was a private language called Rybernian, which you may have been ordered to [indistinct] wrote about. which came out of his extreme youth in Roxbury and his friends and one of whom [15:00] I gather you, has already spoken to you...Sid Ramin....uh, it was an imaginary land and country, with uh, leaders and...

JBT:

and a national anthem

BB:

and a national anthem [chuckles]

NBS:

and a PC

BB:

...and a language. And I can't emphasize this enough. And it was a language that continued to live right up to his last day, on earth. And as far as we're concerned...

JBT:

continues...

BB:

it still is around. It still is a living language. There are very few languages I think you can say that about.

NBS:

Do you want to bring their attention to this?

BB:

Huh?

NBS:

Do you want to point this out?

BB:

Well,

NBS:

Later?

BB:

You're right...that's a....The influences on this language were legion. They were uh, mainly my father and his friends with their peculiar accents from the old world. Lot of Yiddish was thrown in...Relatives of all kinds, some outrageously funny. And peculiarly enough, even Koussevitzky. Sergei Koussevitzky, who was Lenny's mentor and spiritual father, who was truly as important a source for this language as anything else. Specifically, one thing that comes to mind, about Koussevitzky with his accent and his lack of syntax (huh huh) in the English language. He confused the past tense of any

verb with the imperative. And one memorable occasion was when a student conductor at Tanglewood was being very erratic and was getting all mixed up in his tempi. And Koussie jumped up. This was at a rehearsal at a student rehearsal with a student orchestra and he said... "Took it the tempo und kept it!" and that was, that became a basic part of Rybernian too. For instance, uh, the all important question in Rybernian that Lenny, Shirley and I would ask on crucial moments was: "How you gonna did it?" That was a salute to Koussevitzky.

[laughter]

BB:

Um, uh, so, and again, all accents, this is again part of the humor I think of when I think of Boston. All accents were funny and derisive. It was a very derisive kind of humor. And one of the accents that was most funny to all three of us, because we had them ourselves was the Boston accent. And it was a constant joke right up to the end for Lenny and Shirley and me...we never really lost it like the Kennedys. In fact, Lenny discussed this with various Kennedys. And said, "How come we tried so hard to lose our Boston accent and you guys didn't?" ...but, and uh, I don't know the answer to that, but uh, we did try. And you know, I still say to this day. "Barth," "ahn," "cah,"...and uh, we used to make a joke about Lenny going starting out as a freshman at "Hahvahd" and graduating from Harvard.

[laughter]

BB:

Just as I, later on said, I started out at "Dahtmoth," and was graduated from

Dartmouth. Big difference. But, when any one of us were, was excited we said, out would blurt, “ahchestra” and like Lenny would be rehearsing it and suddenly he’d say, “OK ahchestra.” And we’d...that was a good, big laugh right there. And “hawses,” we liked to ride “hawses.” Lenny and I once worked as cowboys when we lived out in Wyoming. And we rode “hawses” when we were excited. And we took our kids for rides on the “swahn” boat in the Public “Gahdens.” [laughter] And speaking of the Public Gardens...one of Lenny’s favorite little ditties was...he never failed to do this when we walked past this statue of Sherman on his horse in the Public Gardens. He would sing to *Humoresque*, “We go walking in the park, goosing statues at the park. If Sherman’s horse can take it why can’t you?” [BB sings to tune of *Humoresque*]

[Laughter]

BB:

Excuse my voice. I have the only voice on earth that’s worse than Lenny’s...and uh, one of my fondest memories, of, speaking of the Public Gardens in Boston Commons...was whenever we’d go he’d take me when I was a little kid, ’cause I couldn’t go into Boston [20:00] alone. And he’d take me if we’d go to have lunch with my father at his office or something on Temple Place. And He’d take me. We’d go by the Boston Common, the band shell I don’t know if it’s still there. Is it? It was a kind of a Hyde Park Corner and uh, where various people would hold forth. This was in the ’30s, and a lot of people were holding forth. It was inevitably a Socialist, a Communist ranting on there and were and Lenny would always stop to listen. And I’d remember holding his hand and standing there listening too....and this guy would go

on and on. And invariably, there'd be somebody listening who would say, "Go back to Russia, I'll pay your fay-uh!"

[laughter]

BB:

...and it never failed. It was always this case. "Go back to Russia, I'll pay your fay-uh." That became a shibboleth in our family. Whenever we'd have a political discussion and I'd disagree or something... "Go back to Russia. I'll pay your fay-uh." And uh, still on the subject of Boston as you [indistinct] know we're here. Uh, Lenny's, some of Lenny's favorite anecdotes – uh, the funny anecdotes, he just loved to tell constantly., concerned Harvard and his various witty professors here. Edward Burlingame Hill, right? Burlingame Hill? And Walter Piston. And he had two favorites that came to mind. And one was, I think it was Hill who said, he was explaining, uh, lecturing on instrumentation one day. Various orchestral instrumentation. He said he started out by taking out his yellowing notes, and said "The English horn is neither English nor a horn. Just as the Holy Roman Empire is neither English nor a horn."

[BB imitates in an affected British accent]

[laughter]

BB:

And the other was, uh, I think this was Walter Piston though I may be wrong...he was trying to illustrate various uh, canons and the things that would naturally lend themselves to canons and fugues. And to do this he picked various national anthems. So he said, "Now let's try La Marseillaise." Didn't work...."Let's try

God Save the King.” Didn’t work “Star Spangled Banner.” Didn’t work...and then go through ’em all and then he’d look at the assembled class, and say, “I’m told Bolivia works.”

[laughter]

BB:

I’m not doing it as well as Lenny did. And the jokes, the musical jokes were an enormous part of this. Uh, we were always trying to make up funny programs. And uh, one, I, if fact, two, these were both of I think my origin. Uh, I was always trying to get Lenny to program something by Bach, and Walter Piston and and Mozart just so he could say, I’m playing “Bach Pissed on Mozart.”

[laughter]

BB:

But he wouldn’t do it, and uh, but, he almost did.

NBS:

High level, folks.

[laughter]

BB:

He almost did...what?

NBS:

Yes.

BB:

Oh. He almost did when I suggested which was to play something by Irving

Fine, who I believe went to Harvard too. And was a good friend of Lenny's. And uh, I said, "Why don't you do it with a piece by Vincent D'Indy so you could say I played Fine and Dandy." [laughter] But he wouldn't, he didn't do that either. But it was an idea, I thought.

Begin Disk 1, Track 3:

BB:

And then, uh there was, at one point, when Lenny was at the Eliot House. He made a record. On those days amateur records were aluminum records and you had to play them with bamboo needles and wind up phonographs. I know this sounds incredible, but it's true, and he loved to play this record at home on our wind up phonograph with the bamboo needles.. And long after he disappeared and went off into the world...I would trot out this thing. I was like 10 years old, or something, and play it because it amused me so. And what it was was...First of all it was a series of very revolutionary songs he and his friends who were Harold Shapero and um, uh I.B. Cohen and various others would sing. They were revolutionary songs like *Bandiera Rossa*, the Italian [25:00] socialist song and so. But in the middle of all this was a song and again I won't sing it for you...but I remember some of the words. This was all from memory. This is Eliot 351, I guess was his room number. Right? Am I right? 351?

Shira Brettman:

I think it's E51.

Indistinct:

E

JBT:

Oh, E 51.

NBS:

E 51.

BB:

E 51. Well, I remember it as Eliot 351. This was all in Yiddish. It was like a Yiddish kvetchy Hasidic song. "Eliot 351 is a vina rom" [fine room] I'm imitating here. And then they'd all chime in. "O-mane..."

[laughter].

BB:

..."the piano failed tuning, the pants need prressing. Nor kind gelt is nischt gut."

[laughter].

BB:

and then it would go on with this...

NBS:

Does this exist?

BB:

It was a wonderful re...I don't know where that record is today but, but it would be a prize. Although I don't know how you'd find a phonograph with bamboo needles to play that...

NBS:

They'd find one.

BB:

So, to sum up here. Everything in Boston was somehow filled with this love and humor and consequent good times. At least that's how I see it now. There were probably terribly painful times too, but I look back on it, in my memory there's nothing but fun, laughs, a laugh a minute. And the food, I think of wonderfully. Uh, those Locke-Obers where my father would take us on very special occasions and was a great restaurant. [indistinct] Lenny adored Locke-Obers. He would shut up and just eat lobster endlessly...and uh, the Union Oyster House, which he also loved, and Pieroni's which my father took us all to on every Sunday afternoon when we could talk him into it to see a stage show. It was like Boston's Radio City Music Hall, the Metropolitan Theater...and we'd go to Pieroni's first and uh, Jake Wirth's, a great German restaurant for lunch. I don't know if it still exists. But it was a great place with sawdust on the floor. And Thompson's Spa, where my father ate lunch every single business day...

NBS:

Every day

BB:

...until he found a burnt match in his rice pudding and never turned up there again. And on the Sunday afternoons when we'd go up to our house in Sharon... on the Old Route 128. We'd also stop inevitably at Mary "Hah-tigans," as we called it,

which was an an ice cream place. Where my mother would always have pistachio, my father would always have strawberry, and I would always have black raspberry. And that's the way it was. [chuckles] It was a standard thing, and it was also, I hasten to add, a great relief from my mother's cooking, because she flew in the face of every Jewish mother in history by being the worst cook in the world. [laughter] Bar none. Again you'll find this in *Family Matters*, under the title of "Jennie Bernstein Cookbook"...

[laughter].

BB:

And also in Boston again of, is the Ritz Hotel and its bar, which I think was Lenny's favorite hotel and bar in the world...he adored it. He adored it, and from the very earliest times, which I happen to have been a witness to...which was the tryout of *On the Town* in 1944 in Boston. I was 12 years old and playing hooky from school at every opportunity, so I could sit in and watch Jerry Robbins and George Abbott and Lenny and Adolph Green and Betty Comden...throw out numbers...put in numbers...staying up all night. My parents never knew where the hell I was. I was only 12 years old. And I fell in love at that time with the Colonial Theater in Boston where it was trying out, and the Ritz, because this was all going on in the Ritz where they were moving pianos in and out of the rooms. And dancers were coming into uh, and it was all big showbiz, and I felt of, somehow a part of it. And Lenny, for all the work and the hard work, was in seventh heaven...and of course the results were remarkable. 'Cause out of this came one of the great shows of all time. And, and I

don't, [30:00] I'm not exaggerating. It really was one of the freshest shows ever. And again, speaking again of music, there was the...not to mention, the Boston Symphony Orchestra. And and I'm not putting this down, but Pops, the Pops Orchestra. Because it was Lenny's first conducting opportunity I believe in Boston, where he conducted one piece at the Esplanade concert. And uh, he was invited by I guess, Fieldler, Arthur Fiedler to do one piece there. And we all went to the Esplanade, I remember on a beautiful evening...and Lenny came out wearing a white jacket, conducted one piece, which I can't remember for the life of me remember what the piece was, but I'm sure it's somewhere. Okay...

Ayden Adler (AA):

I think it's Meistersinger. I think it was the Overture to Meistersinger.

BB:

I'm sorry?

CJO:

Meistersinger.

AA:

I think it was the Overture to Meistersinger.

BB:

Was it?

CJO:

She's writing a dissertation about the Pops. Yeah.

BB:

Oh well, thank you.

BB:

...and, you really can't emphasize Pops enough. 'Cause Lenny adored the Pops, and the whole idea. And the proof of it is, this isn't just my opinion. Considered one of the, his most popular, witty, satiric, loving piece, and very popular today called...*Divertimento*. I don't know if you're all...you must certainly know this, which was written for the Pops. It's a kind of love letter to the Pops and Boston. And um, it even satirizes *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, among other things. And uh, of course, mixed up in all of this were all his eccentric, witty friends, like Harold Shapero, who, I guess spoke to you, who was extremely witty and eccentric...Irving Fine, all these, and I.B. Cohen, his roommate Al Eisner, who died very young, unfortunately. And so, that was Boston, and in 1943 when we Bernsteins came home to Brookline after the momentous uh debut of Lenny when he substituted for Bruno Walter...the more, perhaps one of the more theatric moments, momentous moments. And he was welcomed home. Lenny's first appearance back here was like, um, uh a native son who was a war hero. I mean the, the whole city...We suddenly were, were everyone was in awe of us. I remember going to school and the teacher saying, "That's your brother?" You know, and [chuckles] and uh, suddenly I was instead of a little shy kid in school I was suddenly, you know, people were staring at me. My father would hold forth endlessly on all sorts of imaginary dreams he had of Lenny being a musician. Although he still suspected deep down it would all fall apart. And Lenny would have to go into the beauty parlor supply business.

[laughter]

BB:

And naturally the Jewish community in Boston really worshipped Lenny. He was nothing short of God brought down to earth. So Boston adored Lenny, and the feeling was always mutual and reciprocal right to the end. And it was only fitting that that last concert I remember on that cold, August afternoon, rainy afternoon, in 1990 which was his, turned out to be his last concert, last public appearance ever...was at Tanglewood with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His beloved Boston Symphony Orchestra. And remember Tanglewood is is really kind of an extension of Boston. I mean it's... it is Boston, in effect, but it it it's some miles away. And uh, for those who were there, it was one helluva concert. The weather, notwithstanding. It was even a mythic concert. And it was like Lenny, uh, when I think about it now, it was like Lenny coming home to die. So to speak. It was, he was coming home to a real home, and he knew deep down that was it. That was the ball game. And sure enough, he didn't die right away, a couple months later, but he died. And that to me, is what I what I have dredged up about Boston. And I thank you again for asking me. [35:00]

Begin Disk 1, Track 4:

CJO:

Um, Yes, well thank you. It's really a lovely a lovely batch of memories. And uh, and you've really opened the gate to memory lane. And maybe we can kind of keep strolling a little bit. Maybe we'll start by - we have a photo here of your parents

with your brother and sister...um, a familiar photo to all of us um, from having spent a lot of time working on this period, and I wondered if all three of you might just want to riff on this photo a little. Just what it, what memories it incites in you. And you can take off in any order you please.

BB:

Well Shirley has no front teeth, I guess.

[laughter]

JBT:

It's a real kid brother observation.

[laughter]

CJO:

So, so Shirley is about how old here? About how old is Leonard?

BB:

It was before I was born, so she had to be...

NBS:

Seven?

JBT:

She looks seven.

BB:

She was eight years older than I, so she had to be uh, nine or ten. Eight, nine or ten, something like that.

JBT:

Well, A little younger. Because if you're not there yet...Then if it's before you were born. If you were born, you'd be in the picture, right?

BB:

I said it was before. The picture was before.

JBT:

Right So she's younger then.

NBS:

So she'd be seven.

JBT:

So, she must be only seven. Probably, I'm guessing.

NBS:

Yeah.

BB:

Oh, right, yeah.

NBS:

Daddy looks twelve or thirteen.

BB:

Well, I might have been home with the cradle, or something, in the...with a nanny.

NBS:

You might have been an infant.

JBT:

You might have been an infink.

BB:

We were rich by then, I think, by the time I was born.

JBT:

Yes, a very prosperous looking photo, isn't it?

CJO:

Right. It is indeed.

NBS:

Infink is Ryber...Rybernian isn't it?

JBT:

Must be. Got some popeye action [indistinct]

NBS:

Oh, it is.

BB:

Also, it's very, it's a very Anna Magnani picture of my mother.

NBS:

Yeah

BB:

She always did look like an Italian movie star.

Indistinct:

Yes.

CJO:

She's beautiful.

BB:

She could be in an Italian movie – a Fellini movie.

JBT:

She looks so much like Shirley did at that age...

NBS:

...a little more flesh.

JBT:

No but she has that same you know, the sort of [indistinct]

BB:

And Sam was the man - I think he was even a Republican back then, and still...

NBS:

Yeah, I didn't know about their politics.

BB:

Yeah, he was a Republican. He was registered as a Republican - can you imagine?

NBS:

It meant something different back then.

CJO:

So did he vote for Roosevelt?

BB:

Until Roosevelt.

CJO:

I see.

JBT:

Oh, I see.

CJO:

Alright, well, the next slide we wanted to look at is, is uh your poem for your mother um, from 1988, and...

BB:

That's embarrassing.

CJO:

Not at...It's a lovely tribute. And there's some interesting spots in it, um, that. I wonder if we could talk about a little bit. On the second stanza there's a whole segment about...um "...not to wander about on heedless missions following the tunes of street musicians....dangerous strolls for a nice Jewish girl." Are there musician stories from the Ukraine?

BB:

Yeah, uh, she got lost in the town of Shepetovka that she grew up in the Ukraine and what she did was she was just following some street musicians. And she got out of the ghetto area and into some other area. And a cop, a czarist cop found her and said, "What are you doing here?" and uh, I guess she was hauled into the ja-, something. Anyway, they came and got her finally. It was terrifying. And her mother

told her. “[indistinct] Don’t you ever leave, you know, go out of the ghetto area...”

JBT:

Beyond the pale.

BB:

...yeah, beyond the pale. And, that’s uh, I think I wrote something about this in *Family Matters* too. She liked to follow musicians.

CJO:

Uh-hum.

BB:

...but she had that great curiosity about everything. And, uh, unfortunately, her education was stilted. And she had to go work in the mills in Lawrence...

CJO:

Uh-hum

BB:

...and uh, and before there were child labor laws. So she started working I think she was eleven, twelve or something. She was the oldest kid so she had to go help out.

CJO:

Right. Right. Well also here in the fourth stanza down you refer to steerage, and I wondered if you had any stories you heard as a child about the trip over. I mean, I certainly heard that from my grandparents. Um, just about the voyage, the difficulties at Ellis Island, if that’s where they came through.

BB:

Well, on, in steerage, on the ship she broke her wrist...a barrel broke loose in the hold where she was and broke her wrist. And I guess what they did was they wrapped it up.

What did they do in those days? Probably just took some cloth and wrapped it up.

[40:00] She always had this arthritic wrist...but, it did heal, but...and uh, it was terrible.

Very rough crossing. And she remembered her mother just praying, for the sea not to take them. And you know, to win over the sea...some sort of Jewish expression about winning over the sea. Come through, but they made it - came across, and got to Ellis Island. Her father who was already working the mills, in Lawrence, came and picked them up. And took 'em to Lawrence.

CJO:

Do you, uh, know anything about the Hasidic line that her family was descended from and?

BB:

Not hers. That was my father's.

CJO:

Uh-huh.

BB:

Hers was blue collar, I'd say. My father was, my grandfather was the intellectual, you know. And its interesting that these two forces. I think I went into this in family matters these two forces are called Dionysian and uh, uh

NBS:

Apollonian.

BB:

Appolonian. Thank you...uh, were fused into Lenny. Because he was very much both things - very earthy and uh, and intellectual, just like my mother and my father.

Kay Kaufman Shelemay (KKS):

While you're still talking about your grandfather...Do you know anything more and your father and his father about the Hasidic line with which they were associated? I was trying to look up and find out which Hasidic tradition. Did did you have any information about that?

BB:

All I ever knew was that it was Hasidic. But I don't know which strain. But there was a, they skipped one generation.

KKS:

Oh really?

BB:

...'cause there was my father's father, my grandfather was a scholar-rabbi, not necessarily a practicing one, but a kind who just sits and studies. But his father was a blacksmith.

KKS:

Oh

BB:

And that's after whom after I'm named. His name was Bezalel, and that's my name. I've always been proud of that. And also he died a kind of heroic death by carrying out his iron tool box when there was a fire in his blacksmiths shop. And and carried out this red hot tool box and then collapsed over it dead....and, but that blacksmith's father was a a scholar. So it just skipped around a little. And uh, but as far as I know all my mother's forebears were were

NBS:

Laborers

BB:

Laborers [indistinct] one or another...or factory workers. Something.

CJO:

So, Jamie and Nina, you must have some memories of these grandparents too 'cause they... Especially your grandmother lived quite a while. Yes.

NBS:

Yeah

JBT:

Yeah, both of them. She outlived our father by a few years. Truly amazing.

NBS:

Right.

JBT:

Although when he died, she said, "This will shorten my life." And she was

already ninety

NBS:

...ninety

JBT:

...So, kind of adorable. Um, I have so many memories of my grandparents because we used to go visit them in Brookline. Did you ever go to Brookline?

NBS:

Couple times.

JBT:

Nina's younger than I am. So so, uh sometimes our memories uh, are slightly different. But I remember going up there a few times and we loved it there. Because you could eat in front of the TV. That that was the ultimate. And we could play canasta all day long. We played canasta with our grandparents. And for, this was my brother and I, for hours, days on end, and we never got tired of it and neither did they. So you know, lunch in front of the TV and lots of canasta. And uh and then of course, grandpa would go disappear into his study and read the Talmud for hours. And then he would go to shul and do that. So that was really beyond avocation. It was really what mattered in his life and everything else was kind of secondary. Although he did appear to be pretty fond of his grandchildren, but there was this sense...

BB:

C'mon, he adored you.

JBT:

...yeah. But there was this sense that he had other things on his mind. And grandma was expansive in every way. She was kind of large and and uh comforting. She was, you know, the perfect grandma. And I used to call her thighs [45:00] my pillows.

[laughter]

JBT:

I don't know how she felt about that.

[laughter]

JBT:

But to me, they were most beautiful objects you could possibly imagine. You know, they were voluminous and soft and they were, you know, like a like an ocean of a feather bed that you could spread out on [laughter]...that was grandma's thighs.

[Laughter]

JBT:

but uh, you know...For me, you know, she was the greatest. And she was very... she had this wonderful kind of sprightly sensibility, which which our dad definitely inherited. That she just...she had a kind of, you know, impish spirit and a and a sense of uh, and a sense of lightness like it's hard to explain. She was, she was uh sprightly. Not physically, obviously. But but she was in her spirit. She had a, she was quick-witted and funny, and and loved laughter and she must have had a blast with these three kids running around the house. I know that she liked to complain about it but I think she adored having all this racket in the house all the time, and the

screaming around the piano. And there was always millions of friends in and out and...

NBS:

You mean these three kids not us

JBT:

Those three kids, yeah.

BB:

...and the, and the detritus we all left behind when Lenny was rehearsing.

NBS:

That she had to pick up.

BB:

That she had to pick up because the maid was the lead singer in these things.

NBS:

Oh right.

JBT:

Right.

NBS:

He scripted her.

[laughter]

BB:

So, Lee Jianpietro was the lead singer.

JBT:

Was she the one who had a voice like a regular Florence Nightingale?

BB:

Yep, like a Florence Nightingale. Yeah.

JBT:

Yeah. That was the other thing about grandma. She was the she was the absolute czarina of malaprop

BB:

Yep. Yep.

[laughter]

NBS:

They both were.

BB:

...but they, they'd all leave the rehearsal for the Mikado over there where Lenny was rehearsing. And and there were these hoodsie cups. I don't know if there's still hoodsie cups.

NBS:

Oh sure.

BB:

Are there still hoodsies?

NBS:

Little ice cream -

BB:

Little ice cream things. Tons of hoodsie cups over everything and everything

spilled on the upholstery.

NBS:

That's why she got that vinyl...

JBT:

...plastic.

NBS:

...Now we know why.

BB:

...you gotta have a good nature as a mother to put up with that. But if Lenny
- again, if Lenny did it, it was okay.

JBT:

Right.

[laughter].

JBT:

It would. And that pattern was repeated his whole life.

BB:

His whole life. If Lenny did it, he'd get away with it.

JBT:

Finding out what the barrier was...

BB:

My father bought her a car. A Plymouth convertible. It was really in the chips
there.

CJO:

So when was this, approximately?

BB:

This must have been the 30s.

CJO:

Uh-um.

BB:

The late 30s.

CJO:

Yeah.

BB:

He bought her a spanking new, Plymouth flashy convertible. This is very...

NBS:

A convertible!

BB:

...so unlike my father and mother. And Lenny usurped the car and loaded it up with about 30 friends and went off to rehearse Gilbert and Sullivan stuff at the Town Hall in Sharon. And uh, Jennie was left standing there, with the maid in the car. [laughter] And she just...She always said "I was left standing there with a broom or a mop, to clean up waving goodbye as they went off in my car." But it was Lenny, so it was okay.

NBS:

I wonder if he had a sense of entitlement.

JBT:

Hmm.

NBS:

Funny.

Begin Disk 1, Track 5:

NBS:

And my memories of grandpa are nearly nil. I mean, he died when I was six. And I do remember that it was the most I had ever cried in my life, for some reason. The news of his death got, took me down. They had to put in a cold shower. I remember that. It was very strange in retrospect. Uh -

JBT:

Hmm. Interesting.

BB:

Hmm.

NBS:

But, it really affected me. And of course, grandma was around for many many years after that. But I will say this...that um, you probably have read that our mom and our dad's mom were not the best of friends. I mean, they were cordial, but my mom was considerably frosty towards towards her in-laws.

JBT:

Well, it was a cultural abyss...

NBS:

Yeah well it was -

JBT:

... between them. She was from South America, and -

NBS:

and was raised very properly.

JBT:

and raised very regal and it was all about everything about being just so. And so she was very snobby about Jennie. And about the way that Jennie organized her house and her life and and uh, so we were always getting these mixed signals.

NBS:

Yeah.

JBT:

As the kids, you know. We loved grandma and grandpa. But we also were getting that there was something, somehow -

NBS:

Less than ideal about them. So I think I was the one who ended up with most of that. You and Alexander...see [50:00] I don't remember having any fun at their house.

JBT:

Oh yeah?

NBS:

Yeah, I had nothing to balance it against. So, so I I ended up with a, with a not as wonderful time with grandma as you did. And also, she never got to see my daughter. You know.

JBT:

Well. ...that's true.

NBS:

She never got to live to see that. See you got to raise your children with grandma around. That was really great.

JBT:

Well, a little bit.

NBS:

But that was really pretty great.

JBT:

It was great.

NBS:

I mean, you got to hear about how in her day she used to stir the diapers in a pot with a stick.

JBT:

Yeah, she told me that. She used to boil the diapers with a big stick. But you know what, that was really early on, when daddy was an infant. Even by the time Shirley came along, I think they had more money and they had -

BB:

Oh, we had, in Newton, we had something that I guess would probably be a museum piece today, which was a laundry room...this was before the washing machine.

JBT:

A laundry room?

BB:

A laundry room. Where we had a laundress who came in, and it was a big chute that went down from the third floor of the Newton house and go down...and dirty laundry would come down the chute and into a big wicker basket at the bottom of the chute. And the maid, the laundress...

JBT:

Did you ever go down the chute?

BB:

Yes!

NBS:

Of course!

BB:

It would just fit me. I would go right down the chute.

[laughter]

BB:

The laundry room was one of my big playrooms. 'Cause I'd make believe it was an airplane a cockpit, and a boat. Uh...you know, the engine room of a boat, I

had all kinds of fantasies. And and then there were these huge tubs. And the laundry would be put into the tubs and stirred. And I remembered they used special hangers.

JBT:

Did they have a mangle?

BB:

Yeah, yeah, yeah a ringer thing? Yeah

JBT:

Yeah, the mangle

BB:

And then these hangers in front of a gas heater, that would dry the clothes. 'Cause there was no drier.

JBT:

And it would come out all stiff and disgusting, right?

BB:

...but it was nice sheets, and you know...It was uh, it was a quite a thing.

NBS:

Not everybody had that

BB:

Everybody was very proud of this.

JBT:

I'll bet. Fancy.

BB:

Butlers, pantries, all kinds of things.

CJO:

Well, we were in the Newton house...

BB:

Oh you were? Gosh.

CJO:

...on Sunday, as part of our bus tour.

BB:

Did they still have the laundry room?

CJO:

and actually why don't we go ahead two two slides, to the one of this one. Is this the Newton house? This photo at the piano?

BB:

uhhhh

Indistinct:

After being...

JBT:

I've never seen that one.

BB:

I think that's New York, the apartment in New York. Somewhere...

CJO:

You do, okay, well then

NBS:

...or even Philadelphia.

BB:

Or Philadelphia, yeah

CJO:

Uh-huh.

BB:

That doesn't look like the Newton house.

CJO:

Alright, well, the next slide is from Sunday.

[laughter]

CJO:

This is this young man right here, [laughter] who'll be asking you questions in just a moment. But we were all inside. And uh, this is looking toward the dining room, and we're hoping it'll inspire some more memories of that house, where things were placed...

BB:

The chandelier looks awfully familiar. [chuckles]

JBT:

So was the laundry room still there?

BB:

Was there a laundry room still?

KKS:

Maybe that was the maid's room?

Drew Massey (DMM):

We didn't go in the basement.

Katherine Lee (KL):

Yeah.

NBS:

Was it in the basement?

BB:

Absolutely in the basement, in the lowest part of the basement.

CJO:

But these people amazingly brought us upstairs. I mean...

NBS:

That's awfully nice.

CJO:

Right up to the bedrooms.

BB:

It was before the invention of a washing machine, right. There was no need for a laundry room.

CJO:

Yeah.

BB:

...but that looks familiar, yeah. Stucco. Were the walls stucco still?

CJO:

Uh-hum. Yes, they are indeed.

BB:

They haven't changed it then.

DMM:

Which, uh, room did you share with your your brother?

BB:

There was a, there was a well, when I was very little, I had my own little nursery room – where I had uh, all my toys and things, but, and where I built things. I had a carpentry set and built things. I'd start at 6 in the morning, waking everyone up. And but then as I got older, they gave me a big cavernous upstairs bedroom with two huge iron beds...and that was, one of those beds was Lenny was, for Lenny when he came home on the weekends. So that's when I got the Harvard education. 'Cause I'd be trying to go to sleep and Lenny would come in and say, and uh...And this is what happens. And this is what Karl Marx said, you see

JBT:

Mahx

NBS:

Karl Mahx

BB:

And this is about overtones. And uh, this is about this, and this is about, you

know. And then of course, I could hear him playing the piano. The Chickering downstairs. The old Chickering. And he'd play Ravel piano concerto and things. So it, all this became absolutely second nature to me by the time I was you know, I don't know.

CJO:

Uh-hum. Well, earlier, you started to talk a little bit about the Marcus family. And the squabbles that your family had with them

BB:

We bought, my father bought the lot next to the Marcuses [55:00] - who was a uh, a fellow member of the Mishkan Tefila temple. So they were pals and members of the Brotherhood at the Mishkan Tefila Temple. And uh, this, Ben Marcus, had the idea that why, since the lots were not that wide, they were long, but not wide...why not share a driveway? Rather than have two driveways, have one, since the garages were fairly close together. The two houses. You have one driveway and just. both could use the same driveway. This sounded like a pretty good idea. Two driveways. Then there came problems about who was to plow and who was to shovel, and what to do. And I remember the 1939 hurricane. 38? 39? One of those...a huge tree came down. And that was a big thing. It went across the driveway. And that was a...who's going to take care of cutting up the tree to get the cars out 'cause our cars were trapped in the garage. And it was a big fight. And my father and Mr. Marcus and even though they still would go by car to the same temple, to services. They'd always take separate cars, even though they were leaving the same driveway. They never spoke to each other.

And Lenny was great pals with Grace Marcus, who was very musical. And they liked each other a lot and. And I was friends with their, their son who was a lot older than I, but he loved and he was an expert at electrical stuff and radios and stuff. Sumner Marcus. And uh, so I used to sneak over, I wasn't allowed to do it. I'd sneak over and sit in the basement with Sumner Marcus while he made crystal radio sets and things and uh, Lenny would sneak over to play the piano with Grace Marcus, but we weren't allowed to do this.

NBS:

But you know, it's, it's worth pointing out that that our dad, that Lenny, would never ever have held a grudge about something as petty as...

BB:

No

NBS:

as a driveway. Or anything. I mean. It was not in his nature whatsoever. To even, you know...

BB:

He was the most...

NBS:

...Waste five minutes.

BB:

...he was the most forgiving sonuvabitch who ever lived.

[laughter]

BB:

I couldn't.

NBS:

He just couldn't be bothered by such nonsense.

BB:

How could you allow this person to get away with it? And he said, "Oh well, life's too short."

NBS:

Yeah c'mon.

NBS:

That was a real Sam thing.

BB:

I'll go beat him up if you want

NBS:

I think that was one of the things about Sam that bugged daddy so much. Was his was his uh, intractability. Is that right?

BB:

Yeah, I guess I inherited that. [Laughs]

BB:

I was a grunt in the army, so I have very little patience for that sort of thing.

[chuckles]

CJO:

Well, do you know why your father chose Newton? Was there a Jewish community? I mean Newton now is...

BB:

It was just opening up...

CJO:

Yeah.

BB:

...to Jews. It was um, there were, there were towns that were completely off limits. Wellesley...

CJO:

Uh-hum.

BB:

...and um, let's see, a lot of towns in the cape, near the cape Duxbury, Swampscott, around there. But Newton and Brookline were just opening up. And uh, it was possible to get land and build houses there, so. Of course, now, it's quite different. But uh, back then, and that's how Sharon came to be....'cause Sharon uh, in the Depression was on, in hard times. And a lot of the...well, and I'm not being terribly derisive by saying this...the "Swamp Yankees." You know what the Swamp Yankees are? I don't know if you know are acquainted with that term. In Boston, in New England there's a class of person called a "Swamp Yankee" which means he comes from old, old stock. Sometimes -

NBS:

[indistinct]

BB:

Sometimes...even in the case of one guy who was in my squad in the army, who was a direct descendent of John Adams.

CJO:

Hmm.

BB:

It was an illiterate person who the first thing the army did when he came in was take out every tooth in his mouth 'cause he had never been to a dentist. This was a direct descendent of John Adams - of two presidents. And uh, but they were they were, uh, very well-born but poor. They were the well-born who didn't go to Harvard. In fact, didn't even go to grammar school. Just uh, you know, chicken farmers...

NBS:

Just rotted [indistinct]

BB:

And uh, uh, Sharon had a lot of people like this. [60:00] And they were, and um in very hard times during the Depression. And when better off Jews from Boston wanted to buy land there and build houses, they said okay. And even though other towns around there - Easton, and Bridgewater - they said no, Sharon said yes. So that's how that community called "The Grove" started.

CJO:

Uh-hum. I see.

Begin Disk 1, Track 6:

NBS:

Um, have you covered the, any of the anti-Semitism in uh daddy's - I'm sorry, I'm going to refer to him as that - In uh, Lenny's youth at all in this course?

KKS:

We'd love to hear your thoughts.

NBS:

Because, because he referred to it often.

KKS:

Did he?

NBS:

Yeah and, and I thought there was something about it in *Findings*. Um, but you would probably remember it better than I. I mean, I don't remember anything specific except that he was constantly being taunted.

BB:

Well, not as a kid, so much.

NBS:

Yeah!

BB:

I don't recall that. I mean I wasn't around then.

NBS:

I thought he used to get beat up.

JBT:

I thought he used to get beat up on the way home from school.

BB:

Really?

CJO:

Was this Irish-Jewish tension? Or just -

BB:

No, because he lived in a Jewish neighborhood in Roxbury.

CJO:

Yeah

JBT:

Maybe it happened once and he embellished.

NBS:

I can't imagine it.

BB:

Well, he ran into a little more sophisticated anti-Semitism when Koussevitzky wanted him to change his religion.

NBS:

Oh, change his *nom*.

BB:

And he was pretty much told that you can't become conductor of the Boston

Symphony Orchestra one day or even assistant conductor with the name Bernstein and following the Jewish religion. And Koussevitzky suggested you change it to, uh...

NBS:

Leonard S. Burns.

JBT:

Leonard S. Burns.

BB:

Leonard S. Burns, right. And Lenny, as he said, "I thought about it for about 30 seconds and I said no." [chuckles] And uh, that was that was that. He never brought it up again as far as I knew. But of course, Koussevitzky had done that...though not changed his name, but he had become a Russian orthodox when he married Natalia. Who not only was Russian orthodox but a Romanov, which is really Russian orthodox.

NBS:

Oh, that's right.

BB:

I don't know what the Romanovs back in Russia thought of that.

NBS:

Of her marrying a...?

BB:

Of her marrying a nice Jewish boy.

JBT:

Well, they left, so...

CJO:

Yeah

NBS:

Yeah

CJO:

Katherine Lee and Drew Massey are going to pick up with some of the questioning now.

JBT:

Ok.

Begin Disk 1, Track 7:

KL:

Well first of all let me just say, it's a real pleasure to meet all three of you. Um, I wanted to ask about um, music and the family. And um, your brother, Mr. Bernstein, mentions that um, Sam used to sing a Hasidic tune in the shower. And we were wondering if you recalled that.

BB:

Say again?

KL:

A Hasidic tune in the shower that Sam used to sing.

BB:

Yeah, my father sang, yeah.

KL:

Do you recall that tune?

BB:

He even wrote the whole piece about it, yeah

JBT:

What was the tune?

BB:

My father at Sam's testimonial dinner in Boston. He wrote this piece, yeah, based on a song my father sang in the shower.

NBS:

A prayerful tune my father sang

BB:

It was one of those...My father was not given to singing. Uh, you know. I think both Lenny and I inherited his lack of singing voice. [chuckles] But, uh, it was, I can't remember the tune, to tell you the truth. It was...well, I'm sure there was...He probably wrote it down. So there's probably some music somewhere.

NBS:

I'm sure it's at the Library of Congress. Let's see.

BB:

The Library of Congress must have it somewhere.

JBT:

If it's from that speech...

BB:

Yeah, it is.

JBT:

...then that tune, then that manuscript must exist somewhere. And it's actually entitled, "Something...my father sang".

"Some..."

NBS:

Something like after a prayerful tune my father used to sing in the shower.

KL:

OK, we'll look into that.

JBT:

What's the trouble?

Jim? (Videographer):

Oh, I'm sorry

NBS:

Pesky bottles

BB:

Oh, it's in your way?

JBT:

In the way of the video.

Videographer:

You look so beautiful. I'd rather not...I'd rather see you than the bottles.

BB:

Aw shucks

KL:

Were there other sorts of similar tunes that were sung by your parents? By Sam- by Jennie, for instance?

BB:

I'm sorry?

KL:

Oh, I'll speak louder. I'm sorry. Were there other tunes that Jennie sang in the house?

BB:

[chuckles] Yeah. She loved to sing I mean. She was, while she was doing the dishes, she'd be singing something and doing...but we once caught her stealing to the piano. The old Chickering, and playing a little ditty that she had somehow played. [65:00] We said, "What's that?" She said, "It's called *Dolly's Waltz*." And it was very simple. And I made fun of her for years by playing it as badly as possible myself. I can't play the piano.

JBT:

Oh, that's...[starts singing the tune]

BB:

And we now skip many years. It was a family joke. You had to play *Dolly's Waltz*. We'd...we'd insist...

NBS:

Had she made it up?

BB:

Well, that's what we thought. She heard it somewhere. I don't know. Anyway. We now skip many years, if not decades. And Lenny's conducting La Scala. And uh, he was, they were doing a performance of *Norma* at La Scala. And he's sitting there listening. He wasn't leading the performance, but it was somebody else, and he was just in the audience. And he's just sitting there, and there's a scene with a little waltz and hears...

BB:

[starts singing tune] Agh!!

[laughter]

BB:

It's *Dolly's Waltz*.

NBS:

[snorts] I can hear him snorting

BB:

He couldn't wait to tell us. We got all kinds of letters. He called Shirley. And said, "You know, its from *Norma*!"

NBS:

And she'd heard it on the radio I guess?

BB:

What?

NBS:

Had she heard it on the radio?

BB:

I have...we don't know. Maybe she, she may have taken a piano lesson at some point and somebody taught her to play this. I don't know. It's very easy to play. I mean, uh, that was Jennie's musical uh, fillip. But that was about it. Except for just singing, she loved music, she really did. She adored music.

JBT:

She listened to the radio all the time.

BB:

She listened to the radio

JBT:

And that's how our dad and all of them, just...he knew all the songs on the radio 'cause it was it was in the air all the time. They were always listening and singing and...

BB:

She used to drive me insane when I was driving with her. Long before I could get/have a license because she would keep time to whatever was on the movie, on the radio. By keeping time by pressing the accelerator.

[laughter]

BB:

Stop that!

[laughter]

KKS:

Were there any lullabies transmitted in the family that Jennie sang to you, and that then that you have all sung to your children? And that maybe you two still sing?

JBT:

No. we have dit...we have rhymes. There's "Ride away to Boston."

BB:

Yeah after all, Boston

KKS:

Oh, what's that?

JBT:

That's uh, dandling the kid on your knee. [JBT and BB proceed to "sing" rhyme] "Ride away to Boston. Ride away to Lynn. You better be careful or you'll fall in! [NBS chimes in] And then you know, you go like this with your knees [gestures] and the kid falls down.

NBS:

And they always say Again! Again! Again!

JBT:

Ride away to Boston. Again!

BB:

All the kids.

JBT:

Yeah, that I definitely remember on grandma's capacious knees.

[laughter]

JBT:

But where does, now that I think about it, you know, who made up the Boston Lynn thing?

NBS:

I thought it was a standard.

BB:

Probably...

JBT:

Does anybody else know it?

Sarah Adams (SA):

I heard it.

JBT:

You do? Oh great.

NBS:

Are you from the area? Is that why?

SA:

From New England, yeah.

JBT:

So you used to do “Ride away to Boston” too.

SA:

I remember it, I just remember it when I was a kid.

JBT:

Cool. I’m sure it’s a standard

BB:

But Jennie made up her own stories, though, Little Smary...

JBT:

Little Smary

BB:

...and that was all pure Jennie.

JBT:

which was immortalized in uh,

JBT and NBS:

Arias and Barcarolles.

JBT:

You know, there’s this movement in *Arias and Barcarolles* that tells the story of Little Smary, which was actually the story of the little whuddit. Perhaps you’d like to tell this story. It only takes...

BB:

Gee.

JBT:

I can do it.

BB:

You do it.

JBT:

OK This is the fast version:

One day little Smary went for a walk in the woods with her little whuddit. See how it was?

[BB laughs]

And little Smary took the whuddit by the tail and she spun it round and round and round [NBS gestures]. And all of a sudden there was no more little whuddit. And little Smary cried and cried, because she had lost the little whuddit. And little Smary went home and laid down on her bed and cried and cried. And all of a sudden there was a noise and she looked up. And there on the window sill...

JBT/NBS/BB:

was the little whuddit!

[Laughter].

JBT:

The end.

BB:

and Lenny and Lenny always played the...just collapse in joy at the end of...

JBT:

So he wrote this sort of big Straussian...very uh, kind of atonal aria.

NBS:

Full of weltschmerz

JBT:

It's very lush and angsty and over the top.

[BB chuckles]

JBT:

And gave her the, half of the royalties.

BB:

Yes

NSB:

Yeah

JBT:

So Jennie Bernstein became a member of ASCAP at the end of '88.

BB:

And I get a check, [70:00] because I'm the heir or whatever it is. Uh, whaddaya call it? Test-taker test, testwhatever

JBT:

Test person

BB:

...in her will. So I, once about once every couple of years get a check from ASCAP for a dollar and a half.

[Laughter]

BB:

Jennie Bernstein's.

NBS:

That's so cute.

CJO:

Well, the songs you heard that Jennie sing. Were these mostly tunes off the radio? Maybe some Yiddish songs?

JBT:

You know, she left so early from Russia that she almost didn't remember her Russian and her Yiddish.

CJO:

I see.

JBT:

So, 'cause she left much earlier than Sam did.

BB:

She was only about 6

NBS:

And it's interesting because I always had the sense that even though Sam held

onto his his Talmudic studies and his Jewishness, that she really wanted to become American, most of all.

JBT:

Yeah, she was much better assimilated.

BB:

Oh, she was, she was.

NBS:

She wanted to assimilate and he didn't exactly

BB:

Yeah...

NBS:

Would you say that was true?

BB:

...She wanted to go out dancing, on dates.

JBT:

In fact, she had a perfect Boston accent. And Sam always sounded like he was from the old country.

NBS:

Yup

JBT:

Now that I think about it.

NBS:

Yup.

JBT:

I never thought about that before.

NBS:

Yup.

JBT:

Did anyone watch Rugrats? You know Grandpa Boris? Grandpa Boris was Sam Bernstein.

[Laughter]

And he had the exact same accent. It was uncanny! Because actually for Rugrats it oughta have been Great Grandpa Boris, if ya think about it. But it's like they condensed the generations for the TV show.

NBS:

The Rugrats are Jewish?

[laughter]

JBT:

Uh, yeah. Its uh, it's one of the Rugrats's family is Jewish. I think it's Tommy's family.

BB:

I'll tell you the, a great musical influence on Lenny. That was from the family. But it wasn't necessarily from Sam and Jennie. It's only directly. It was my Uncle Harry and Aunt Paulie from Hartford. Uncle Harry's the man...

JBT:

Hahttford

BB:

Oh, Hahttford.

JBT:

Hahhtford

NBS:

Halfok, Halfok.

BB:

He was Sam's uncle. My great uncle. He was the man who got Sam to come to America. He was a barber in Hartford. That's how Sam got into beauty parlors, but that's a whole other story. But the point is, he had a gramophone, one of the orig...first gramophones. A wind-up thing. He had all the old records and when we'd go to Hartford, Lenny and Shirley and I was barely able to stand, uh, would listen to these old records. And they had an enormous influence on Lenny. And were a constant, uh, means of connection with Adolph Green. Because - eh, who was maybe Lenny's best friend in all the world, who was, and uh and collaborator - because these records were I would say *I'd been born in Borneo*

NBS:

All the novelty songs from the 20s.

JBT:

Oh!

BB:

...all the novelty songs. *Oh how I would wish again I was in Michigan. Down on the farm.* And uh,

JBT:

And Nina is the Queen of Palestina.

NBS:

Nina's the queen of Palestina

BB:

Nina's the Queen of Palestina, right.

JBT:

[starts "singing"]

BB:

Yeah

[laughter]

BB:

And these were loving musical treasures for Lenny and of course, Adolph, who grew up with the same kind of gramophone in his house in the Bronx - and my parents. So it was a connection. Something they could all do together and when we went to Hartford, the first thing that would happen was the phonograph they'd open up this enormous wooden thing. And wind up and put on these records. And everyone would laugh and dance and jump around, and it was great fun. And uh, it never left Lenny. I'll tell ya that. Right up 'til the end.

NBS:

Dying day.

JBT:

And of course, he was the great lint collector.

NBS:

Yeah.

JBT:

There was no tune that ever went in one ear that ever came out the other. He just remembered everything. Everything! So...

NBS:

and, and that was true of words too.

BB:

Yep

JBT:

Yeah

JBT:

And people's names.

NBS:

And people's names, and the minute details of their lives.

JBT:

Yeah, people tell stories all the time about you know, meeting him backstage. And then he comes back to their town, you know, eleven years later. And, and they

come backstage again. And he goes, “Ohhhh Carol Oja! 126 Maple Street.”

[Laughter]

JBT:

And they say, “Agh! How do you remember that?” Yeah. He was prodigious.

BB:

And boy was it a thrill to be remembered by Lenny.

JBT:

Sure.

BB:

Boy it was. And people would just...swoon. It was just, you know a complement from Lenny – God. I can remember as a kid. Lenny said, “Hey that’s nice. [75:00] That’s a nice job. When we’re playing ball together or something. That’s a nice catch,” or tennis and he gave you a complement. You just thought, “Oh god.”

NBS:

Better than your own dad.

BB:

Yeah, really. [laughs] It was just the greatest thing in the world. And anagrams.

NBS:

Oh, if he complemented a steal.

BB:

And we played anagrams, if he complemented you on a great change. Anagrams was the great game. Everything. In a way it was the only game.

JBT:

When did you start playing anagrams?

BB:

Oh gee.

NBS:

It was a Sondheim introduction, right?

BB:

Oh, no no.

NBS:

You played before Steve?

BB:

Oh no. Yeah, yeah.

JBT:

As kids?

BB:

We had anagrams yeah. And um, very early on. I guess I came into it a little later. But uh, you know, if you made a change that was really great. And uh, and Lenny made these fantastic changes. Although Steve Sondheim, I gotta admit. He was...

JBT:

...He's the king.

BB:

...He was the king. And Lenny was somewhat green with envy sometimes.

Somewhat. [chuckles] But uh...

JBT:

Not an emotion he experienced often. Green...

BB:

...Green with envy. He just shut up. He was just...but when Jamie, or Nina or Alexander or I, or somebody would make a great change, which in the kind of anagrams we played, was not easy, because it was always, it was everybody's turn all the time. This wasn't the old fashioned anagrams where you go in order. It was everybody's turn all the time. So...

NBS:

Steal any time.

BB:

So turn over and everybody's hovering all over you.

NBS:

All the anxiety.

JBT:

Oh

NBS:

And we still play.

JBT:

Yeah. We still play.

NBS:

And all the old jokes

JBT:

And all the old jokes come up again. And all the old complaints and...

BB:

And it was a famous case I wrote about in the "Preludes, Fugues and Riffs." where Felicia, their mother, and my sister-in-law - my beloved sister-in-law and a second sister to me - was, came up with a great word that was absolutely unchangeable. And it was "toffy." Spelled not ee, but "t-o-f-f-y." And it just looked like nothing. You can't do anything. "Toffy" looked impossible. And so we all forgot about it and I was just sitting out there in the anagram table...

JBT:

A typical mummy word.

NBS:

Yeah

BB:

...and uh, yeah, and she forgot about it, everyone forgot it, because it looked like it was hers forever. And she was winning, what's more, so it looked like she could... All she needed was one or two more and she'd won the game. And suddenly, an "L" was turned up. And you know, you just literally turn up an "L." Turn up a tile and there was an "L." And we hear Lenny yell out: "Filfot!" And we said, "Oh come on, whaddaya talking about. Filfot. How do you spell it?"

JBT:

Oh right. It's a swastika.

NBS:

That's right.

BB:

"F-y-l-f-o-t." we said "C'mon. [indistinct] fylfot." "Well does somebody challenge me?" You see, you could challenge, so Felicia naturally said, "C'mon, you're, you're bluffing." And she said, "I challenge you." Now when you challenge, according to our rules, you had to give the definition. You couldn't just say it's a word I saw once.

JBT:

Agriculturally

NBS:

Agriculturally

[laughter]

BB:

Lenny said, "Yes, I'll tell you. It means swastika." I said, "What?" So we go to the dictionary and look it up and there it is. "Fylfot...Swastika."

NBS:

In what language?

JBT:

Impress your friends.

[laughter]

BB:

In English. In English...And he proceeded to...what you do is, you take it, it's yours, you see. And you know, put the "L" in and "fylfot." And uh, you know, and of course we were all so snowed by this. And Lenny went on to win like that. He just got all the [indistinct]...

NBS:

He didn't lose often.

[BB laughs]

NBS:

Did you, did um, I'm sorry just for a second, did, did you all get to hear the radio biography that um? No?

JBT:

The American uh?

Interview with Jamie Bernstein Thomas, Nina Bernstein Simmons, and Burton Bernstein^{2[1]}

Disk 2 Track 1:

Burton Bernstein (BB):

It's very good.

Carol Oja (CJO):

^{2[1]} Timecode in this interview is relative to the beginning of the tracks on the CD, and is in five minute increments.

I know it is, right.

Nina Bernstein Simmons (NBS):

Oh, it's an eleven part series – it's awesome. And the reason I bring it up is because Adolph Green, you get to hear Adolph Green singing "I wish that I'd been born in Borneo," which is one of those great novelty songs from, uh, that were on those records in Hartford. So you should really get your hand on that, you should have that on reserve somewhere.

Jamie Bernstein Thomas (JBT):

You can get it online if you're clever. Because I -

BB:

Well, you can get all the records, all the disks.

JBT:

Yeah! That's what I mean. You can get the CDs. Not a web cast, but you can. You can order them online. You can't buy them in the store, but you can order them online. But you can do it. I think if you

Katherine Lee (KL):

[indistinct]

JBT:

I don't know if you can do it through the Bernstein web site. But if you – what is it called? It's called "Leonard Bernstein: An American Life." So if you google that, you'll find, you'll finally come to a place where you can buy it. It takes a little doing. I just found this out from a professor at Claremont University who had a hard time getting a hold of it. And he's doing a whole course about our dad as well, that I just came from Los Angeles and talked to that class. And, uh, they're doing something much more specifically about the music and also about Copland, so that's a whole other, uh, angle.

BB:

Something just occurred to me. I don't mean to monopolize here, but it just occurred to me, thinking of Harvard, and all you kids, students. Are you all undergraduates? Or are a lot of you graduates?

Drew Massey (DMM):

A mix.

BB:

All undergraduates?

JBT:

No, some graduates

BB:

Well, something just occurred to me, it that, I don't know if you're aware of this, but Lenny was the rarest of creatures in that he had an intensive Harvard liberal arts education. When he went to the Curtis Institute of Music, he was like a bull in the China shop, for lack of a better phrase. He was absolutely ... because all they were were prodigies. They were brilliant, some of them were eight years old or something, playing away on the violin, brilliant pianists, just fantastic everything. Everything was ... percussionists, you know. There was nothing but prodigies. But they didn't know the capital of France! They didn't know, you know, the alphabet. They didn't know anything! And here comes Lenny, out of Harvard, with a supreme education, somebody who was absolutely interested in everything – catholic with a small c – Everything. He loved history, he loved geography, he loved science, he loved anything. He was interested in everything. He arrived there, and as he once told me, the only real friend he had at the Curtis Institute was Randall Thomson. [laughter] He was on the faculty! Because Randall Thomson ...

JBT:

... was actually an educated person!

BB:

... an extremely educated person. Brilliant. What's more, did difficult British crossword puzzles.

JBT:

... well, that's the real reason ...

BB:

... and they could sit together and do the London Times crosswords. And talk about things. 'Cause Lenny was going nuts – he had friends in Philadelphia who were obviously up to him intellectually, but he was an anomaly. There was no such thing there. I don't know what it's like now there, I don't know if any of you know about Curtis Institute now, if its different... back then.

DMM:

Some thing that strikes me is that something the three of you have in common is that you're all Harvard educated, in a fashion, either while ...

JBT:

Oh! He's a Dartmouth man! Please!

DMM:

... but you said earlier

BB:

In my day, we [indistinct] ...

JBT:

Oh yeah, by proxy!

BB:

Oh, by proxy.

DMM:

and I was wondering if, for the two of you [indicating NBS and JBT], coming back to Harvard, after your father's career had started to take off, were there echoes of Leonard Bernstein at Harvard, or [indistinct]

NBS:

Jamie knows

[begin Disk 2 Track 2]

JBT:

No need for an echo. In my junior year, he arrived to prepare and deliver the Norton lectures. He was basically here for the rest of my college life. So, as I was saying earlier, whatever chances I had of establishing myself as an autonomous person were effectively

dashed in my junior year. It was very exciting of course, to be here while the Norton lectures were coming out because they were extraordinary. But it was a mixed blessing for sure. I felt very much the burden of the past. I was just saying to Nina in the cab here, from the train station, that I never really believed that I belonged here, at Harvard, I always feared and suspected that, you know, that it was because of my dad having been here and who he was, and that was how I got in, and that I didn't really deserve to be here for, you know, more intellectual reasons. Which is, it's all, you know, academic of course, it doesn't matter. But I sure had a chip on my shoulder, and I probably would have been better off going someplace else. I don't think I made the most of Harvard while I was here because I was so oppressed by my own preoccupations. Nina, however ...

NBS:

... I had a grand old time, and there was really no echo, whatsoever. I remember once Lowell house, no it must have been Eliot House, had invited daddy to come and give a talk in the Common Room, which he did, and I was thrilled! It was my freshman year, and I went along. It was fun to have daddy at school, and I was already so happily doing my own thing that it didn't really bother me. I loved Harvard.

BB:

Should I tell you why I didn't go to Harvard?

NBS:

Why what?

BB:

I told them that they'd have to kill me first, to go to Harvard. For one thing, I lived five miles away.

NBS:

Well that, yeah, that's a good reason

BB:

I'd seen Lenny having to come home

NBS:

Right! And eat that food...

BB:

He was constantly pressured: "Come home for the weekend, come home for the weekend. Come home for this, come home for that." For holidays and whatnot. I wanted to be, not far away, but sufficiently far away, like 150 miles...

DMM:

Did you ever visit him at Harvard?

BB:

Oh yeah, all the time, yeah. I used to go to the rehearsal of *Cradle Will Rock*, which was perfect. And I loved to ski. And I loved Dartmouth. The time I laid eyes on it, I said “this is for me.” So, I never regretted it for a minute. I used to come over, whenever Jennie brought over his laundry, or picked up laundry, or came over for anything. My sister, who was in *Cradle Will Rock*, that Lenny did at Harvard.

CJO:

Well, actually we wanted to ask some questions about Shirley. I wondered if you wanted to dive in and do that, yeah.

KL:

We’ve gotten something of a sense of Shirley from the published literature, but we were wondering if you could each kind of fill in the blanks a little bit for us.

BB:

In what way?

KL:

How would you characterize her? What kind of role did she have in the family?

JBT:

She's actually a fascinating character. Through Shirley you can understand so much about the rest of the family, because she, you know, I think all three of the siblings were very interested in assimilating and becoming regular American kids. As a woman, I think that Shirley bore a different brunt of that experience. She had a lot more invested in making sure that she was, you know, accepted, you know, don't you, don't you think she was very socially anxious that way ...

NBS:

She was socially anxious. I don't know that it was about assimilation necessarily, you might be on to something there.

JBT:

That's what I've always thought about.

NBS:

But in any case she was socially anxious...

JBT:

.... right

NBS:

... it was always important that she looked terrific.

BB:

... yeah ...

NBS:

She was very vain.

BB:

Extremely. She would always pose ...

JBT:

But she was, she did look terrific, she had this Jewish Katherine Hepburn thing going on. With flared nostrils, and so on.

NBS:

... she also adopted the way that movie stars tended to talk in those days with a very

[5:00] broad accent. She's very...

BB:

... she went to Mt. Holyoke

NBS:

She went to Mt. Holyoke, and she was very proud of her elocution.

BB:

But she ... Shirley, you have to understand, got the short end because a.) she was the middle child. I was the baby, so I was, you know, fussed over constantly. Lenny was Lenny, you know, he was king. And then there was this middle kid, who my parents adored, they loved her, but a.) she was a girl and b.) she was the middle kid, so it wasn't much expected of her. What was expected of her was, marry a nice guy, if possible take over my father's business, you know. Live in Newton. You know, raise a lot of kids. That was what was ... although my father was very sure that she would get a good education. That was true. No question about that.

JBT:

And she did.

BB:

And she did. So she got the short end in that sense. But what was so important in her life was her older brother ...

JBT:

Who doted on her.

BB:

Who loved her deeply, and she loved him. And he used her as somebody to try out all the opera scores he was playing. So she sang every single part there was, and everything. And then she'd appear, actually, in the Sharon productions, and *The Cradle will Rock* – can you imagine – a teenage kid, she played the role of the prostitute, by Marc Blitzstein.

NBS:

And she was listed in the program as Shirley Mann, because of the Mann act. You remember that?

BB:

[laughter] Yep – Shirley Mann.

NBS:

And the Mann Act, do you guys know what the Mann Act was? This was something to do with taking minors over state lines.

BB:

Yeah. And later on, when she was in *On the Town*, when she was in the chorus, she didn't want to appear as Shirley Bernstein...

NBS:

... nepotism ...

BB:

Right, because of nepotism, so she became Shirley Burton [laughter]. But she was, I can hear Shirley from on high, or wherever she is, saying, "Don't you dare say that!" But it's true. She was enthralled with Lenny. She was absolutely enthralled.

JBT:

And you can hardly blame her.

BB:

And you can't blame her. Lenny was -

JBT:

So you know, the ... she never really found a guy out there who measured up. So in the end she did not do the one thing that was most expected of her by her parents, and she never did get married and have kids. She had a career...

BB:

She fell in love many times, and she was very close to it, but couldn't do it.

CJO:

Did you come to Harvard to hear the production of *Cradle Will Rock*?

BB:

Yep. And I also saw either *The Birds* or *The Frogs*.

CJO:

Birds.

BB:

The Birds. I saw that, I didn't dig it, I was too young.

JBT:

Bernstein did *The Birds*, Sondheim did *The Frogs*.

CJO:

So do you have memories of the *Cradle* production, or *The Birds*?

BB:

Oh, yeah. I knew it by heart.

CJO:

Would you share some with us?

BB:

To this day I can sing the whole thing. But it really became part of the ... and then of course I saw the later productions in New York, and I knew Marc Blitzstein pretty well. Oh, here's something musicologically, might be interesting. I don't know if you've ever gotten hold

of Lenny's score for *The Birds*. But if you listen to *On the Town*, you're gonna find an awful lot of *The Birds* in *On the Town*.

JBT:

Oh, yeah, yeah.

BB:

An awful lot. Nothing in Lenny's trunk, as it were, was ever thrown away.

JBT:

Plenty of recycling. Big recycling.

BB:

Yeah. Well, he didn't cheat, it was his music, he wrote it. He just used the chase music in *On the Town*.

JBT:

Oh! [sings, with BB] [laughter]

BB:

That was all from *The Birds*. One of my favorite stories is - for reasons I won't bore you with, in the army I was stationed down in the Caribbean for awhile. In a ghastly all Puerto Rican infantry regiment, for my sins. Anyway, I got out of it finally, and was stationed in San

Juan in a very cushy job, although I was only a corporal. And, at some point Lenny said, “I’m coming down [10:00] to Puerto Rico on vacation.” I said, “Great!” He got a hotel room at the Condado. I said great, I’ll go on leave, and we’ll go off together, and we’ll go to the Virgin Islands, and so on. He said one thing, though, “take me to some of the nightclubs. I want to hear some of the music.” So I said “sure! I have a dozen nightclubs I go to all the time, you know, [indistinct] to eat roast pig and listen to the musicians.” So I took him and we were in one place, and I said “Oh, this is the best place, because they got a, there’s a wonderful group.” So we’re listening and this group always started with this same riff -

JBT:

... so that’s where it came from.

BB:

Oh yes, no matter what they were playing, they started with the same riff, which went as follows: [sings opening to the Mambo from *West Side Story*], and then they go off in to whatever it was. So Lenny took out a napkin [gestures towards writing]. It went in one head and out the other, as I like to say, and that was the end of that. We now skip a few years, and I’m at the first run-through of *West Side Story*. And there it is! [sings it again] And I said “Lenny!” [laughter] “How could you?” And he said “Well, how am I gonna pay the guy, I

don't even know, whoever, I don't know who it is." I said, "it probably isn't a guy, it's just this group." And he said, "Well, if I ever hear from them, or run into them..." But there it is.

Forever. So I use that as an illustration of how nothing, nothing ... *Scotland the Brave* when we were in Scotland, got into things.

JBT:

Scotland the Brave?

BB:

Yeah, yeah.

JBT:

What in?

BB:

Because we saw *Tattoo* when he was in...

JBT:

But what did it end up in?

BB:

Oh, it came in something. And then later, in that same trip, in Ireland, we were staying at Glenveagh Castle in Ireland. With Henry McIlhenny.

JBT:

The Tabasco king!

BB:

... and it was a very feudal existence. He'd clap his hands and say "bring the girlies in," you know, and they'd come in and perform for everybody. One of the things they performed was a song that went as follows: [sings] No! Excuse me wait a minute!

JBT:

[sings something else]

BB:

It's "My Sister Irene." [sings again with others]. And he stole it lock, stock, and barrel.

JBT:

Well, I'm sure it was traditional, so we're all right. So we're off the hook.

BB:

... it just goes in there and, you know....

[Begin Disk 2 Track 3]

KL:

Well, speaking of influence, we were wondering about connections to Congregation Mishkan Tefila. Actually, our whole class went on a bus tour on Sunday, this past Sunday, where we went to the temple in Sharon and also the old Temple Mishkan Tefila in Roxbury. So Mr. Bernstein, I was wondering...

BB:

What is it now, it's a ...

KL:

It's the First Haitian Baptist Church.

BB:

Yes, that's right. So does it still look good? It looked like the Parthenon.

KL:

Yeah, the architecture is just phenomenal, and we were allowed inside, so we got to see the stained glass windows, and just, yeah, it looks really great. So we're wondering if you could share some of your memories of that.

BB:

Well, that was the first real musical influence on Leonard. The first time he really heard music, music. Because of a man named Braslavsky, who was the choirmaster and

organist, who was a Viennese disciple of Mahler, and Bruckner, and that whole thing. He came to America, and the job that was open to him was liturgical musical director. And he was terrific. He had a wonderful Viennese accent [indistinct]. And he conducted this choir, and he really trained them into a hell of a good choir. And, uh, was a very good organist, and he composed. He arranged liturgical stuff. And it snowed Lenny. It was just great. I mean, it was the real thing, as far as he was concerned. And, as I've said before, everything that Lenny likes spilled over, as you kids will agree, I'm sure, to the rest of us, so that Shirley and I and my parents suddenly saw things they never saw before in this music. It was thrilling music, it really was. It was terrific. And Lenny was so taken with it, and I would say it was an immense influence in so much of what he did: *Jeremiah* Symphony, *Kaddish*, the *Mass*, all sorts of things. Enormous.

KL:

Did he have any musical role in the temple?

BB:

Did he?

KL:

Yeah.

BB:

Only playing the piano at my father's, men's – brotherhood – meetings. He'd play
"Malagueña" and, uh -

JBT:

Really?

BB:

Yeah. That was one of the few times Sam was proud of him being a musician. He
would say, "We have this wonderful son who can play "Malagueña." They always said - the
favorite was, "Play the Hungarian."

JBT:

That's where that came from?

BB:

Yes. He always played the Hungarian, you know, even though it was Romanian, but
they always thought of it as the Hungarian, and Lenny

JBT:

Which is what? One of the Rhapsodies? Wasn't it one of the Rhapsodies?

BB:

What? Yeah.

JBT:

One of the Liszt Rhapsodies.

BB:

Yeah.

JBT:

That is Hungarian.

BB:

There was also the Romanian he played *Flora staccato* which is Dinicu

JBT:

Ooh, I don't even know what that is.

BB:

American composer. [sings a fragment] Anyway.

JBT:

“Play the Hungarian!”

BB:

“Play the Hungarian.” I can hear my father's friends saying, “Play the Hungarian.”

JBT:

These are phrases that we heard all our lives.

BB:

They've become part of family lore.

JBT:

We didn't necessarily know where they came from, like "Dolly's Waltz." All I knew was the way Uncle BB played it. Perhaps you'd like to ... no....

BB:

No, no.

JBT:

Maybe afterwards he'll play "Tea for Two." [laughter]

BB:

No, he won't.

KL:

Did Alexander have his Bar Mitzvah at the temple?

BB:

Yes. Very grand, it was.

JBT:

And before his thirteenth birthday. They slipped him under the wire, because they were so afraid of Sam's dying before...

NBS:

Is that what it was?

JBT:

Yeah.

KKS:

Was this at the new Mishkan Tefila?

JBT:

Yeah, it was at the new one, it wasn't the one in Roxbury. I was six years old, I don't remember.

BB:

However, I was bar mitzvahed there.

KKS:

Can I ask a question about...

BB:

The biggest Bar Mitzvah that ever took place...

KKS:

... I'd like to hear about that.

BB:

... because I memorized it.

JBT:

Oh, you weren't reading.

BB:

I wasn't reading. I memorized the whole thing.

JBT:

But did you know what you were saying?

BB:

Didn't have a clue. I gave the speech very well, and everyone came up to my father:

"Isn't it wonderful? You have such a scholarly son." [5:00]

JBT:

And surely he knew. Sam...

BB:

Oh, sure he did.

KKS:

We have a question about Alexander's Bar Mitzvah because the cantor at Congregation Mishkan Tefila told us that your dad had come and was going to ... he actually wanted to not only do the blessing, but he wanted to read the portion of the Torah that day. And so that the Cantor had given him a recording. Anyway, he came up and did the blessing, and then he took out a score with the *parasha*, the portion notated, in western notation and the Hebrew all written out, because you know in the Torah it's not written out and you're supposed to use the *yad*. Evidently, the sextant just let him go ahead, although it was a very irregular thing. We were curious: does this manuscript survive anywhere?

JBT:

I have no memories.

KKS:

Is it lost? At the Library of Congress?

NBS:

It's not.

KKS:

Alexander wouldn't have it in his own memorabilia?

JBT:

I doubt it, but he might remember more about it. I don't even remember ...

CJO:

I was going to say, do you remember this happening, this moment.

BB:

I was there, I don't remember it.

JBT:

Well this is current Mishkan Tefila.

NBS:

Yes, current lore.

JBT:

No, and besides I was not bat mitzvahed and I was out of the Jewish loop early. So any sort of, that sort of liturgical detail it was like phew! [makes gesture of hand passing over head] I was not really paying attention.

NBS:

Same thing.

KKS:

You were not bat mitzvahed, either?

NBS:

No.

JBT:

No. We were girls, you know, it doesn't count. You know, it really only, in the olden days, the Bat Mitzvah was just not a big deal. It was only in the last 25 years that the Bat Mitzvah in America has been elevated to the same status as a Bar Mitzvah because of women's rights and everything. But it's really kind of a fabrication; it wasn't always the case in the tradition. So when I was growing up it was still like, "Eh! Do you want a Bat Mitzvah?" it wasn't like, "Now you will study for your Bat Mitzvah..."

NBS:

But for Alexander it was not an option.

JBT:

Correct! 'Cause he was the boy.

BB:

Well, he wanted to, too...

JBT:

He was ambivalent, but he knew he had no choice. He knew he had to go through with it. And he had a pretty skin of his teeth experience himself, with his bar mitzvah and the reading of the Torah and everything. It was, it was tough.

BB:

Oy! Faked it.

JBT:

Well, I don't know to what degree he faked it, but he did just about get through it. It was something that he knew he had to do for his grandfather and his father and so he just knew he had to do it. And so he did. And he did a fine old job. But I remember that was the first time that we first met all the relatives. Relatives we didn't even know we had. Frightening, strange relatives. Deformed relatives. Creepy relatives! So many relatives, you know - second and third cousins, twice, three times removed, who all lived up here in the Boston area and we had never met them for that reason but they all turned up at Mishkan Tefila that day for the Bar Mitzvah. And I remember thinking, "This is my family? You know, they're all so peculiar. So Jewish!" Not to mention...

KL:

Did some of his relatives show up at the testimonial dinner for Sam Bernstein?

BB:

Some turned up in the mail! I still get letters from people saying, or phone calls, saying, “You don’t know me, I live in, you know, Nebraska, but I’m the fourth cousin twice removed from your Aunt,” and they’ll mention some aunt I never heard of, you know -

NBS:

And it’s a – I’m sorry to interrupt – but probably if not for LB’s fame, they wouldn’t come out of the woodwork like that, right?

BB:

Yeah, I mean, why would they? Some of them, a couple of them are fairly interesting. One’s from Texas, you know, who knew I had relatives in Texas, and that kind of thing. But, you know, I don’t know how legit they are. Probably not.

[Begin Disk 2 Track 4]

KL:

We also had a question about family stories. Who carries them?

BB:

Who’s living?

KL:

Yes.

JBT:

That one [indicating BB].

BB:

Yes, me. But the real archivist is Nina. She's the one who, well, you're the one who did all the Library of Congress stuff.

JBT:

That's different from stories, though.

NBS:

[indistinct]

JBT:

I'd say the oral history is carried ...

NBS:

...equally...

JBT:

... you know, together, like you make that chair, you know, with four hands,
somehow we do that with six arms, we kind of carry it all together.

NBS:

Yeah. It's a really good image, because we do need one another to flesh out stories.

For example, was it the time we went to Jamaica in ...

JBT:

... you're right.

NBS:

... in '76 or was it the one where ... and you, you know, you flesh it out and it's
family stories.

JBT:

yeah.

NBS:

You can't keep it all to yourself. But I'd say that all of us are good at telling them.

Right?

JBT:

The thing, we really had delight in them. But we had such good teachers. ‘Cause that was the deal in our family. And the thing is that, you know, as you may have gathered, Burton and Shirley and Lenny, they were like this [knots up fingers]. And so we had the perfect role models, Alexander and Nina and I, for how to be siblings. And I would say that we have successfully modeled ourselves like this [makes same gesture with fingers] – for better or worse.

NBS:

The fact that Alexander is not here today really amazes me. He had something he had to do. Ordinarily he would be here, of course. And he’d be correcting us and teasing us.

BB:

I gather a lot of you have read *Family Matters*. You may remember that whole section about the trip in 1950 when Lenny, Shirley, and I went to – our last real fling together, as what I call the “dribbling siblings” – to Europe, accompanying Lenny on a tour. It was just the – I don’t know if I’ve explained it fully in the *New Yorker* pieces and the book itself, but it was the wildest, craziest thing that any three Americans, siblings or not, ever did. Because we just stood the whole continent on its ear. They didn’t know what the hell to make of us. Who were these crazy people? [*laughing*]

JBT:

Were you so badly behaved, is that it?

BB:

Badly behaved! And, you know, Lenny, he ...

JBT:

They spoke of it as the impenetrable Bernstein front.

BB:

Yeah! There was the Concertgebouw symphony and the Edinburgh and the London Symphony and the *Radiodiffusion Française*, and every big orchestra. And, you know, in a lot of 'em, I think the Concertgebouw was Lenny's debut there. And the receptions were the Comtessa this, and the Comte this, and the Duke of this, and whatnot. And all we'd do was talk Rybernian to each other. And say [whispering - indistinct], you know -

JBT:

And play canasta!

BB:

... right, and get back to the hotel so we could play canasta.

CJO:

Well, speaking of Rybernian, how about if we go to the next slide, you can be our guide here.

JBT:

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

BB:

Well, this impossible to - you have to -

DMM:

So this is the, uh, this is a letter that your brother wrote to you, Mr. Bernstein, in 1959 from Munich. And, as far as we can tell, the signature says –

BB:

Okay. You really want to know what it says?

DMM:

You could maybe fill this out.

BB:

“We miss our kat.” That’s Rybernian for kit-kat, which meant anything, anyone you liked, is a kit-kat. Uh -

JBT:

Like mad.

BB:

Like mad, yeah. Mü-la-dü. You have to use the umlaut U. Which means “I love,” “we love you or I love you” [indistinct word; laughter]

JBT:

Isn't it always funny to talk Rybernian in front of other people --

BB:

It's impossible, yeah. It's very hard to do. But it means “more,” it means “more than more,” it means “really more.”

JBT:

... the most more.

BB:

The most.

JBT:

And what you would do, if one person said Müladü, the other person would say Müladümüs.

BB:

[5:00] This is really hard to explain. [indistinct] B. Lennuhtt – Lennuhtt was his Rybernian name, from Annie Miller, a relative, who had a polish accent. With a wallop.

JBT:

A very nasal Polish.

BB:

Von. Probably said von because he was in Germany. Kolovson, Jr. Now, a man, a crony of my father's from Mishkan Tefila, whose gravestone is right next to my father's in the cemetery, or somewhere nearby, his name was B. Leonard Kolovson. And we were greatly amused by always referring to Lenny as B. Lennuhtt. And the von is because it was in Germany, and Jr. was because ...

NBS:

... because it's fun.

JBT:

... the honorific.

BB:

And over there it says "love to," Star of David, Ofra, who was my girlfriend then, an Israeli, and is now known as Ofra Bikel, the famous documentary film maker. Who is...

NBS:

What does it say at the bottom there?

JBT:

I can't tell – “Tell Shirl...”

NBS:

“Tell Shirley”

BB:

I can't figure out what that says.

JBT:

Maybe you hadn't told her yet that you were seeing Ofra.

BB:

Yeah, yeah she was my girlfriend.

NBS:

Oh that's why – “Tell Shirley” for God's sake.

JBT:

“Tell Shirley.” Spill the beans. I'm just speculating. [laughter].

CJO:

And what's all this?

JBT:

That's the John Hancock, the fancy signature [laughter]. That's hysterical!

BB:

If that makes any sense to anybody, I don't know.

NBS:

But it's a great example of just, you know, if it's not fun, or funny, it's not worth doing, kind of thing.

BB:

Yeah. And so what if nobody else understands it or cares. We didn't give a damn. That's what I was saying about this trip in 1950. We could've – it could've, as it often was, in Ireland for instance, it was the Guinness family, was also guests at this place. And the Angus – oh god what was his name? The English writer, Angus something. And all sorts of very fancy people, and we behaved like a bunch of nitwit Americans. Couldn't have cared less. Didn't give a damn. But they thought of us ... Lenny, here he was, as he was often referred to as the *chef d'orchestre distingué*. He was *chef d'orchestre* all right, but not *distingué*. We just didn't care. And that was it. We blew our stack on that trip, and after that we had to quiet down.

JBT:

Oh really? [laughter] You could have fooled me!

BB:

As far as appearing and behaving that way in public.

NBS:

Well you really must ... hmm, yeah, I don't know. Either you were really beyond the
beyond...

BB:

Oh, we were.

NBS:

Or...

JBT:

They could still whip it up on occasion.

NBS:

Yeah...

DMM:

So when the family would play word games together was Rybernian fair game in the word games?

JBT:

Oh, that's a good question.

NBS:

Yeah, that's a good question.

JBT:

No. Nope. But a lot of the epithets at one another were in Rybernian.

BB:

Screaming at each other.

JBT:

Screaming.

BB:

More often than I like to think, there were real fights.

JBT:

Oh yeah, really bad. People leaving the table.

BB:

Yeah, people would get up from the table. Lillian Hellman, when she played, would always pick on poor Jamie, poor girl. She'd come up with a word, and it would be misspelled. She couldn't spell very well. We'd challenge her...

NBS:

She was ten years old!

BB:

... look it up in a dictionary, and she was wrong. She'd say, "Jamie wrote that dictionary!" [laughter] Rosalia was the other one. Rosalia was the cook. She'd say, "Rosalia wrote that dictionary."

JBT:

Terrible.

BB:

That was Lillian Hellman. Not to be trifled with.

[Begin disk 2 track 5]

JBT:

Competitive people.

NBS:

Yeah.

JBT:

I would say.

NBS:

To say the least.

DMM:

I was wondering, we've been talking for about two hours, maybe we could -

NBS:

You wanna take a break?

DMM:

We can take a break, or we could listen to some music instead of talking, or take a break and then listen to some music, or take a break and then ... [laughter]

CJO:

I think we should take a break.

[break – Begin disk 2 track 6]

CJO:

So we're going to get going again for the home stretch, and maybe start out with some music. Want to introduce it, Drew?

DMM:

So the excerpt that we have is from the 1953 musical *Wonderful Town*, it's from the song called "Quiet Girl," which I understand was written as a lullaby for –
[pointing at JBT].

BB:

Yeah.

DMM:

... and I was wondering if you wanted to say something before we listened to it? Or should we just listen to it?

JBT:

Let's just listen to it.

DMM:

Okay.

CJO:

And maybe one verse, right Ryan?

[music starts]

JBT:

Oh, George Gaynes.

BB:

George Gaynes.

[music stops]

JBT:

Aww....

BB:

Is that all? What happened?

CJO:

Okay. All right.

NBS:

Just an excerpt.

DMM:

So I was wondering if you could tell us about this song as a lullaby.

JBT:

Well it, *Wonderful Town*, was written just around the time I was... Was I? I was one.

Really little. So my father -

BB:

You weren't one, this was written when you were born.

JBT:

When I was born. Yeah, to keep me in diapers, that was just it. He took the job because he needed a little extra dough, because there was another mouth to feed. And so he said that this was my lullaby. And the irony of course being that I was not very quiet. Ever.

Still.

BB:

I was present at the creation of this.

JBT:

Yeah?

BB:

Yeah. Cause he was, I was still in college. And they, both Lenny and Felicia, were hoping for a boy. And it wasn't a boy. It was Jamie. And they looked at her, and of course it all

went out of the picture, because they were thrilled. Because she was very, it's hard to believe, but she was a very [indistinct] baby. [laughter] And he immediately went home, and wrote this.

JBT:

Right away!

BB:

It was very pretty lyrics. It was all about, I think to say how wonderful a girl is, or something.

JBT:

Mmm... "When she's near me the world's in repose." I like that line.

BB:

Something I believe is that it's better to have a girl than a boy. [laughter] And it was a real love poem. And probably a little guilt-ridden cause he, both Lenny and Felicia both wanted a son.

JBT:

That's the first I heard of that.

BB:

Yep. I was there! [3.05]

DMM:

Wonderful Town is about New York, but this is Bernstein's Boston that we're talking about. Another thing I was hoping to ask you about is how your father talked about Boston in his life as you were growing up. Not just war stories but it was also an important part when he was a young man. He had important premieres here – the first and second symphonies premiered here – and I was wondering if he ever talked about Boston, he mentioned -

JBT:

He didn't talk about his career so much. He talked a lot about Harvard. He talked a lot about, you know, the really early times, his childhood and putting on the operas with his family and friends. And he talked about all the people in the neighborhood in the process of teaching us Rybernian. I don't think he ever taught us Rybernian, it was just kind of through osmosis, you know, that we picked it up. But we would pick up information as we went along about this relative or that neighbor. So we had a sense of what it looked like. And then of course Uncle BB wrote it all down. So we had a real place to go to get the details.

DMM:

Now, I saw this DVD that you made, and you were speaking Spanish in part of this, so Spanish was part of the language that was spoken at home alongside English?

JBT:

Yeah, well we haven't talked very much about our mother. But she is a big part of the story. She was from South America. She was born in Costa Rica, and raised in Chile. And we have a gigantic family down in Chile, a whole other side of the family, down there...

BB:

... which we don't talk about...

JBT:

[5:00] Well, you don't talk about. [laughter] Right. But anyway. So at home, everything in the back stairs was in Spanish. Our nanny was from Chile, and the cook was also from South America, and there was, you know, like a staff, a domestic staff, that changed over the years, but they were always from South or Central America, so that life was in Spanish at home.

BB:

The cook was the one who wrote the dictionary.

JBT:

Right. Rosalia wrote that dictionary.

NBS:

She shows up in *West Side Story*, too. [5.26]

JBT:

Right, there's a character named Rosalia, who was named after the cook.

BB:

Santa Rosalia.

JBT:

Santa Rosalia's in -

NBS:

Candide.

BB:

In *Candide*.

JBT:

And there's a Rosalina in *West Side Story*. She was everywhere. Our cook.

DMM:

Did you travel to South America as a family while you were growing up?

JBT:

Yep. We did a few times. We were there ... oh, a bunch of times. One time we were there for Christmas. I was twelve, so you were really little, did you go on that trip?

NBS:

Nope.

JBT:

Wow, you stayed home with [indistinct] for Christmas. That stinks. Anyway our, uh, our mother's youngest sister and her husband gave our family a *trutrukka*, which is a very, very long Alpin Horn that they use in the Andes mountains, you know, made of deer gut and sheep gut, like, you know, wrapped around something. It was really long, you know to take it home we had to put it in two ski boxes taped end to end.

NBS:

10 feet tall!

JBT:

And take it on the plane that way. But it arrived intact, and it sits on the molding in our house in Connecticut. On special occasions we take it down and we make uncle BB blow the *trutrukka*, which we call "the ape horn."

BB:

Not the alp horn, the ape horn.

JBT:

The ape horn. The ape being the family mascot.

BB:

What a silly word. I'm the only known mortal who can play the *trutruka*. [laughter]

JBT:

Every year he would have trouble getting a good sound out of it and say "There's a mouse that died in there! There's a mouse in here!"

DMM:

Can you tell us some more about the house in Connecticut as a retreat for the family?

JBT:

You go ahead.

NBS:

This is where it would be handy to have Alexander present because it's really where his heart lives. But all of us in one way or another adore being there. It's, you know, you know how a place you've grown up with really becomes its own character, and has its own quirks and characteristics, so much so that you don't even see things anymore. I mean, there are ... remember that awful framed wreath that had cobwebs,

JBT:

That had living insects ...

NBS:

... mouse poop in it, and it was Jamie's husband who finally pointed out that this thing was decaying in front of us.

JBT:

It was disgusting.

NBS:

The thing was that we never really looked at it before – you're right. That is an absolute disgrace. You know? Throw it away. But it had always been there. It's like, the house itself is like another relative. You know, it just happens to...

JBT:

With sedimentary layers of ...

NBS:

We moved there when I was one.

BB:

So as I said, ad infinitum, humor was such an important part, having fun was such an important part, to Lenny, and to the rest of us, by, kind of osmosis. Because anything that

Lenny liked we also liked. Fairfield, and houses on Martha's Vineyard, too, represented that. It was fun. I mean you look back, and there were terrible moments there, too, but there were ... but it was fun. There was tennis, swimming,

JBT:

Anagrams!

BB:

Anagrams, [indistinct, all talking at once: "dogs, canasta, dinners, ping pong"]

JBT:

It was very loud. Very loud.

BB:

Chickens!

NBS:

Horses!

BB:

You know, walks in the woods – Everything was going on there.

CJO:

So was it a ...

BB:

People coming in and out all the time

JBT:

Sort of the antidote to urban life is what is was all about.

BB:

I remember Jackie Kennedy, Remember that? We were playing touch football. We have a Thanksgiving standard, which we call “the Nose Bowl.”

JBT:

For obvious reasons.

BB:

[laughter] It’s a touch football game. I guess she saw it, or something – was it the Nose Bowl? – and she said “god, you’re all like the goddamn Kennedys or something.”

JBT:

[laughter] That’ll be the day!

BB:

The same thing – playing touch football. But it was fun. It was just, am I right?

NBS:

[10:00] Yeah, it was just the antidote to the formality of urban life.

BB:

Yeah.

NBS:

Where, you know, daddy had to be a certain person, have a certain persona, public persona, and he didn't have to there. We wouldn't let him get away with it if he did.

CJO:

Well it sounds a little bit like Sharon, then, maybe?

BB:

Well, Sharon's a lot younger.

CJO:

Oh, I know, but...

BB:

You see, the family was quite large by this time. Two kids...

JBT:

Yeah, and Sharon, you were in part of the community there, and we were very isolated.

BB:

This was isolated, yeah.

NBS:

Still.

JBT:

But we deliberately did not [indistinct]

BB:

Lenny would say, "I heard a joke." And we'd all have to sit around and hear this joke, whatever it was. And it was like an event. To tell a joke! 'Cause it was. And Lenny loved to tell jokes.

JBT:

And he was pretty good at it! Except when he wasn't.

NBS:

Except when he wasn't. Yeah. He'd really screw it up.

JBT:

We would talk about, you know, that you would have to go to joke school, if you didn't tell jokes right.

BB:

Then we'd extemporize whole scenes. Like with Alexander when he's the chef, remember?

JBT:

Oh, ask the chef!

NBS:

Ask the chef!

BB:

Ask the chef! I don't know where it came from.

NBS:

Yeah, a lot of wine later.

BB:

A lot of drinks. We did a whole show called "Ask the Chef."

DMM:

So what was the format of "Ask the Chef?"

NBS:

Oh, daddy would put a slipper on his head. [laughter]

JBT:

You know, this should end. [laughter]

NBS:

Wasn't that right? About the slipper? [laughter]

BB:

I spent an awful lot of time driving on long trips with Lenny, just the two of us. And sometimes Stephen Spender, but that's another matter. But uh, we drove across the country, practically, with Stephen Spender in the back seat. Which is something one does not go through very often. Lenny and I would go – we'd call them in Rybernian – “Trupputz.” We'd go on these long trips together. On long trips you tend to play games. One of our favorites was mental jado [?], and “Who am I?” which was a favorite game. But we'd also do a game of “What is your favorite,” kind of thing. It was one of those childish things. You say you're on a desert island, you only get to bring with you one joke. All other jokes are erased from the world. You have only one joke. What joke would you bring? We'd think and we'd think and then Lenny'd say, “Ok, this is my one time favorite joke. If I tell this to myself every day I'll be happy.” And then I'd do it. And then we'd do: you're only allowed to bring one tune. Not a song on earth, a tune.

KL:

What'd he pick?

BB:

You really wanna know? It's kind of embarrassing.

JBT:

I know! I remember this! I don't remember what it was, but I remember it was embarrassing.

BB:

It was from "The Count of Luxembourg" [laughter] Believe it or not! It wasn't a tune that he'd wish to hear, really. You were only allowed to take one tune with you. Franz Lehár, you know?

JBT:

Yeah, it's an operetta. But what's the tune, can you sing it?

BB:

[sings tune]

NBS:

Stop it!

BB:

You'll have to ask him. That's the one tune, he thought, it was so simple. It was a perfect, perfect tune. It was balanced, and, I think that he wished that he had written it.

JBT:

I know, but ...

BB:

It was just the tune that...

JBT:

It pleased him.

BB:

Yep.

DMM:

It seems like, with the long trips, and what you said about the public persona, go hand in hand, and I actually had a question for the daughters. I was wondering when you sort of first realized that your father was in this limelight. And that sort of ties in with another question I had.

[begin Disk 2 Track 7]

DMM:

Say if you wanted to take a single, something that was misunderstood about your father to a desert island, for example, what would it be, having had such a public persona in his life?

JBT:

God, he's been so scrutinized, I don't know that there's...

NBS:

Well, to answer the first question, which is easier ...

JBT:

We didn't really get it until the *Flintstones* episode where Betty Rubble and Wilma Flintstone are going to the Hollyrock Bowl to see Leonard Bernstone conduct! [laughter] And we suddenly went "Woah!" He had really hit the big time!

NBS:

Big time!

JBT:

Um, but the other question, like something about him that's misunderstood? I don't know. Is there anything left to discover? There must be, there must be tons, but I don't know.

NBS:

You know, he was often mistaken for a tall person. [laughter] He looked so much taller on the podium. But yeah, he was really a little homunculus like all of us.

BB:

Like me.

JBT:

No, no, that's not right. You're taller.

BB:

Two things I had over Lenny. I was taller and I had better legs. [laughter]

NBS:

Ok, let the record reflect...

JBT:

He used to get a lot of grief about how flamboyant he was on the podium, when he conducted. He'd jump in the air, and people, for some reason, they just couldn't write enough about this, as if he were doing it for the benefit of the audience. And I remember being very gratified when after he died, they interviewed members of the New York Philharmonic about him, and one of the violinists was talking about this issue of how Lenny moved around a lot,

and he said, “But whatever he did served the music and was conveying information. And it was very much for us the musicians, that he was doing this, it was not for the audience behind him.” It wasn’t for the purposes of showmanship; it was just kind of convenient that it was showmanship. And that made him all the more appreciated by the audiences, if not by the critics. But I think it is true that it did a lot for the audience. And I know that when I was watching him conduct it was like he was telling me something about music with his body. He was literally a conductor in the electrical sense. That, you know, he could make the current and the energy of the music, the sense of the music, really run around in a circle between him and the musicians and the audience back to him and around in a circle.

BB:

That’s the key. I’ll tell you something about Lenny and musicians. And this is not from me; this is from the musicians. I was assigned to write a piece for *Esquire* on a Philharmonics trip to Berlin, sponsored by the Ford motor company, of all things. It was also going to be a television show with Robert Saudek...

JBT:

A long time ago, then.

BB:

Long time, it was 1959, I think. Something like that. I was thrilled to do it; it was a lot of fun to go with the Philharmonic. There were a whole bunch of people who weren't in the Philharmonic, because there were a lot of extra seats in the plane. Lenny's doctor came along, just for laughs, not because Lenny'd need him. David Oppenheim, there were a lot of different people who came. We had a wonderful time. This was obviously, even before the wall went up. It was just before so we were able to go back and forth into East Berlin. I had a wonderful time. As the plane took off, one of the musicians came up to me and said, "Who are you?" And said "O, I am," being the wise ass I am, I said, "I'm the new triangle player. I play the triangle." [laughter] And he bought it! He said, "Were you here when...?" and I said, "You never saw me way back behind the timpani." I threw it out. I thought I was getting in a little deep here. He was like a violinist or something. He said, "You must be great [indistinct], come on, you know." I said, [5:00] "Yeah, nice chance, you know. We're playing something with a triangle in it, so I [indistinct]. Nice gig here. Get to play the triangle." I thought, as long as I got him buffaloed this way, I might ask about Lenny. I said, "Do you like going on tour with Lenny?" He said, "It's wonderful. You know, it's such a drag, sometimes, being a musician. It's really boring, especially when you're on tour, and you know you have to play the same thing at every city over, and over, and over. But Lenny has a way of bringing, of making us do things

we can never do. We don't think we can do. We'll turn up for the concert, and we've played Brahms First 9,000 times, 'til we can do it in our sleep, just sawing away, or whatever." He said, "But Lenny gets up there and he does something." It's like what you were saying. I don't know what he did. He never actually spelled it out. But just something, he gives you a look, something. Suddenly, it's like taking a shot of gin, or something. He says, "We start playing, and I very often find myself playing in a way I never thought I could play." I was so taken with this. I was so taken I finally said, "Look, I was only kidding. I'm not the triangle player. I'm Lenny's brother." He said, "Oh, don't tell him I said this!" I don't even remember his name. He said, "It's true. You can ask a lot - especially the old-timers who remember him when he was assistant conductor - there's something he does, that makes us play like we never thought we could play." And it's true. I've heard Lenny do concerts of an old war horse with an old, with the BSO or [indistinct] or even the Vienna Philharmonic, and they play like gods. And, uh... I don't know what it is! I'm not a musician, I don't know.

[begin Disk 2 Track 8]

But it's what you said, there was something ...

CJO:

Well, that's the mystery and the magic, isn't it?

BB:

Yeah. Maybe it's just jumpin' up in the air. I don't know. Whatever it is. I was just going to say, something – I don't want to sound catty, but it's something an awful lot of other conductors, could, well, get. If it was something you could buy, I can think of quite a few who would be well served by having it.

CJO:

Right, right. Well, I wonder before we wind up if there's anything any of you might want to add – something we haven't thought to ask, some memories of Boston, connectedness to the place...

NBS:

I just – I have one anecdote, which is a Harvard anecdote, which didn't get covered. And maybe you can tell it better, but there was a – his junior year, he took a class, a history course, and by this time, he was just so off-and-running with the music that he - and it met at nine in the morning, and he just never made it to class. He figured he would just, you know, cram one day. And sure enough, the exam rolled around, and he realized he was in big, big trouble, and showed up for the exam and there was an essay question that said, "Talk about the political forces at work in the Revolution of 1848." And he was skunked! Except that he

remembered – was it the *Manfred* overture? Something – you know, he had some distant recollection of a political, of a historical context for this piece of Schumann’s. And he concocted an essay that actually earned him an A minus.

JBT:

Right, and don’t forget what the topic sentence was!

NBS:

Yeah, and this was his topic sentence: “In 1848, the cat was out of the bag in Europe!”

[laughter]

JBT:

That’s all you need is a good opening sentence, and you’re off to the races!

NBS:

That stinker! He just could, he could get out of –

BB:

Yeah, a special commendation or something, didn’t he, from the Professor?

NBS:

Oh, I don’t know about that.

BB:

Yeah, he got some sort of –

NBS:

A for –

BB:

The way he told it anyway, he got a special...

CJO:

Another final word of any sort?

JBT:

Well, I do know that every time we came up here he got sort of excited. He loved coming back to Boston. You know, he didn't feel burdened by bad memories, or feel oppressed the way people often do when they go back home. He was always sort of giddy about coming back to Boston, and seeing all the old places and the old friends.

BB:

And Tanglewood. As I said, Tanglewood for him was like Boston, really.

JBT:

It was the best part of his Boston experience, transplanted.

BB:

Just smelling the pines, he just adored it.

JBT:

He would be so thrilled to know this was going on.

BB:

Yeah.

NBS:

Tickled.

BB:

I just got one more thing. I promise this is it. The thing to remember about Lenny, with all his brilliance, talent, ambition, luck, all those things that went to make Leonard Bernstein, they were a bundle of things, he was a human being. He had all the frailties and wonders and successes, and plusses and minuses of a human being. To be with Lenny a long time, as not only we can attest, but anybody who knew him well would, was just thrilling, because you just saw the depth of a person. Even when he was down, when he was depressed, he still, he was a human being. I personally have met a lot of human beings in my life, and I

have never met anyone vaguely close to him. He was, I don't know, one in 100,000,000. I don't think there are too many others.

NBS:

I don't know that I ever saw him uncomfortable in any situation. Do you know what I mean? He was never self-conscious, or uneasy in his skin.

JBT:

He was in the *Person to Person* interview with Ed Morrow.

NBS:

Oh, that's right!

JBT:

That was pretty bad.

BB:

That's true.

JBT:

Have you ever seen that? One day you will. There are parts of it that have been excerpted in biographical things. You might have seen little bits of it. They're all smoking like

chimneys. And Ed Morrow is just like [guttural sound]. It's all supposed to look very casual, for which reason it was not. They were very stiff.

NBS:

Right. Television crew in the living room.

BB:

Yes, well you know why your mother was so tense when all that...

NBS:

Why?

BB:

Because they moved in dolly tracks for the camera into the Osborne apartment. The whole place was turned upside down. There were these tracks where they could move the camera around, too...

JBT:

It was about as unnatural as it could possibly be.

BB:

Her whole house, her beautiful house, was turned upside down.

NBS:

No, but I mean in general, he just knew, he knew who he was...

JBT:

Well, he had those people skills that they talk about.

NBS:

Yeah.

JBT:

He could make friends with anybody. Absolutely anybody, in any walk of life or any situation. He was that kind of a person.

CJO:

Well, thank you for your memories

JBT:

Well, thank you for taking such an interest in the topic, and doing all this wonderful research, it's been fantastically interesting.

BB:

Now what are we going to talk about in October?

CJO:

Oh, we'll find a few things.

JBT:

Oh, yeah!

NBS:

That's right! We'll go to Sharon in October, how about that?

KKS:

You got it.

JBT:

Oh, that's a great idea. That would be really fun. It's a date.

KKS:

Sharon. I love it.

CJO:

So folks, I think they deserve a big hand. [applause]
