Preface

Bob Gumbs

Today when people think of the South Bronx, images of violence and the fires of the 1970s come to their minds. The true history of this section of the borough before this period, however, has rarely been accurately documented and told by the African Americans who lived in these communities.

Beginning in the 1930s, African Americans from Harlem, the South, and the Caribbean began to migrate to the South Bronx, then a predominantly Jewish, Italian, and Irish area. Many of these newcomers settled in the Morrisania and Hunts Point sections of the borough, living in public housing, tenements, and private homes.

I was born in Harlem in 1939. My family moved to the Morrisania section of the South Bronx in 1941 after the birth of my younger sister, Jean. My parents were from the Virgin Islands in the Caribbean. We initially lived on Union Avenue and in 1943 moved to Lyman Place, a small block of tenements and private houses between Freeman and 169th Streets.

Lyman Place was the home of two famous jazz musicians, Thelonious Monk and Elmo Hope. Leo Mitchell, who also grew up on the block, later became a drummer with the West Coast jazz trumpeter Chet Baker. Bertha Hope, the jazz pianist and the wife of Elmo Hope, lived there for a few years. A number of future artists, actors, and writers were also residents of Lyman Place.

Upon graduation from Public School 54, I went on to study music at Junior High School 40, one of the few schools in the South Bronx that had a music and art program. Some of the graduates later became

professional jazz musicians and graphic artists. I attended the School of Industrial Art (now the High School of Art and Design) in Manhattan and New York City Community College in Brooklyn (now the New York City College of Technology). After serving two years in the U.S. Army, I became a graphic designer, publisher, writer, editor, and photographer.

Morrisania was home to a number of jazz clubs. In 1956, I joined the Jazz-Art Society, a group of young artists and jazz fans. We produced a series of Sunday afternoon concerts at Club 845 on Prospect Avenue. In the mid-1940s the club featured many famous jazz musicians and singers, among them Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk, Henry “Red” Allen, and Helen Merrill. In 1961 the name of the group was changed to the African Jazz Art Society and Studios, and we started the “Black Is Beautiful” movement, featuring the Grandassa Models, in Harlem.

In 2003, on a visit to Lyman Place, I saw Professor Hetty Fox, a community activist who has lived on the block for many years. She told me about the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University, which was documenting the history of African Americans in the South Bronx through oral interviews of people who had lived there since the late 1930s. I immediately contacted Professor Mark Naison and made an appointment to be interviewed about my experience growing up in the area. After my interview, I contacted a number of friends about this opportunity to share their stories about life in the South Bronx.

Before the Fires tells the personal stories of seventeen men and women who lived in the South Bronx before the area’s social and economic decline, which began in the late 1960s. When I reflect on my years growing up in Morrisania, I realize how fortunate many of us were to have lived in such a stimulating and culturally rich environment. I feel grateful that this book provides an opportunity to share the stories of this neighborhood with the wider world.