

Selwyn Jacob

Q: Please tell me a little bit about yourself and where you were born.

SJ: I was born in Trinidad, in the south of Trinidad in a place called Point Fortin. I went to elementary school there, went to high school in Port of Spain, Queens Royal College. Then I also got teachers college, part of the pioneer group, '63-'65. I worked for a number of years in Trinidad and immigrated to Canada in '68. I came directly to Edmonton to attend the University of Alberta.

Q: Did you know about Edmonton from Trinidad?

SJ: I had a colleague who had attended teachers' college with me, and he had immigrated the year before and he had attended the University of Alberta. That was my only connection to a place. A group of us had thought about going away, and we did the usual – University of Manitoba, York University, Sir George Williams. I settled in Alberta primarily because I was interested in physical education and drama. My long range goal at that time was to go to California to study film, so I thought if I were on the West Coast it would be easier to commute, not to commute but to relocate to L.A. than if I were say down east. The only person I knew in Canada at that time that was encouraging me to migrate was based in Edmonton.

Q: So you had friends here. Did you have family as well?

SJ: No family. I came independently.

Q: So education brought you to Canada.

SJ: Education brought me to Canada.

Q: Did you pursue that?

SJ: Education? Yes, I did. I did a B.Ed at the University of Alberta, graduated in 1970. Then I did some graduate work in Drama and Physical Education in '71. By '72 I was starting to get bored with what I was studying. I knew that I wanted to get into film school. So I abandoned ship, so to speak, and went to the University of Southern California and I spent three years in L.A. where I did my Masters degree in Filmmaking.

Q: So Edmonton was no longer home.

SJ: Well it was, because I only spent three years in L.A. and I came back in 1974 and resided in Edmonton from '74 until '97. So I lived in Edmonton for 29 years.

Q: What part of Edmonton?

SJ: A variety of places. Initially going to university I was right on campus. We had a West Indian House there, sort of a co-op.

Q: How was that experience?

SJ: Well it was pretty interesting. There were a number of students who were here before us. They had gone to the university and at that time the university owned a whole bunch of houses which they would demolish as their needs sort of evolved. So they'd rent these houses out to the different sororities and fraternities. When I came here there was something called the West Indian House, and in it we'd have students from St. Vincent, from Jamaica, from Grenada, from Guyana, and from Trinidad. So that's where I lived. It was a co-op in the sense that we brought groceries communally and one person was designated to cook one day per week. It was the hub of the West Indian culture at that time because there was really no organized community as such. Anybody who immigrated or was visiting at that time would drop in at the West Indian House. We celebrated something on campus called West Indian Week, where we volunteered to go to the different classes and to talk about West Indian culture and to put on a show. I was

interested in the arts at that time so I would appear on some of the shows. We put on a play and just have cultural expressions, reach out to radio stations, CBC, and do interviews and that sort of thing. So that was like the precursor to any kind of West Indian community, any organized West Indian community – the West Indian House, 11126 – 87<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The address is etched in my mind. It doesn't exist anymore; I think it's part of the Timms Centre. But it's right at that intersection there opposite what used to be a bank. I'm not sure what's in that location, but at the corner of 87<sup>th</sup> and 112<sup>th</sup> Street.

Q: How big a group was this?

SJ: It wasn't a big group. There were basically six rooms in the house. But as people moved on in their lives, on Friday nights they would still congregate and come back. If you wanted to have a party while you were going to university and the winter was getting to you, that was a place where people got together. It served as a community centre really, but it was a house with about six rooms or seven rooms and there was a student in every room. You went through a rotation. If you got married and moved out or something, somebody came in to take your place. That was the core of it back in the late '60s.

Q: How long do you think this unrecognized community centre lasted?

SJ: I would have no idea, because I left in '74. I went up north teaching in '76. It continued and then I moved out, got married. I was living in Mill Woods and I lived in some other areas, but the West Indian House was always there. We had a steel band at a certain point and that's where the steel band was housed basically. That's where people came. That's where we practiced and that's where people came to get information about the West Indian community.

Q: You mentioned that you lived in Mill Woods. What took you to Mill Woods at the time you moved there?

SJ: I don't know if it was a conscious decision. At first I lived in the West Indian House, then I lived somewhere else close to Southgate, then we bought a house in North Delton. You keep moving around. Then I got a job teaching up in Lac La Biche. We sold that house, I came back. Mill Woods was sort of opening up and that's the only place you could've gotten a relatively new house, it was a new community, at a reasonable price. So I moved into Mill Woods and I think I lived there for about three years. Then I moved to the Whitemud area, Rice Road. So you sort of move around. Moving to Mill Woods was not necessarily a conscious decision. You either move to Castle Downs, which was new, St. Albert was new, or Mill Woods. The four corners of the city there were new areas as the city of Edmonton expanded. When I came here the city stopped at Southgate. If you went beyond 51<sup>st</sup> Avenue you felt as though you were leaving Edmonton. That's how it felt back then. Now there are communities beyond Southgate almost all the way to Nisku. But in those days Nisku was seen as a place on the way to the airport basically.

Q: When you first came to Edmonton, how did you find the city? Did you find it a welcoming place?

SJ: The city didn't mean anything to me at that point. The city for me was just being in the West Indian House and the University of Alberta. My city was basically about four blocks from 87<sup>th</sup> Avenue to Corbett Hall to the Drama building, just where my courses were. What made it for me was the fact that in this one house you'd run into people from the entire Caribbean, whereas when you lived in Trinidad I think I must have met one Jamaican and I met one person with a Guyanese accent for all of my life in Trinidad. But within this one house, as I said, we had Jamaican students, we had one from Grenada, we had from St. Vincent – we pretty much were a microcosm of the Caribbean. So that to me was the experience. Then we tried to sort of push that Caribbean culture on the community at large. Other people who came to Edmonton, not necessarily to go to university, they were the ones who felt isolated, so they would come and visit the West Indian House. There were a couple of combos, we call them. There was a band called the Caribbean Ambassadors and another one called the Tropical Playboys, and there was a steel band. On average there'd always be Caribbean dances at a place called Hazeldean,

the Hazeldean Community Centre. So the world or the city as far as I was concerned was just the immediate West Indian community, the extended community with Hazeldean, and wherever the Caribbean bands were playing. Other things relative to life in Edmonton meant nothing to me at that point in my life.

Q: You mentioned at certain times you'd go to classes and share that experience with students. Where did these ideas come from?

SJ: It was already in existence when I got here. I remember there was a guy called Curtis Macintosh. He was from Carricou, so he was part of that pioneering thing. I came here and I was interested in drama, I was interested in the arts. So I immediately hitched onto that wagon. I was taking a course called English 210 from a guy named Robert Wilson and I seized on the opportunity to kind of play some calypso and explain the difference between calypso and poetry, show them limbo dances and that sort of thing.

Q: Could you give us a demonstration?

SJ: Not anymore, but I used to dance the limbo for the steel band in my younger days. But that's what I did. I remember Allan Clovis, he was the one who invited me. He would be on CBC evening show talking about pelau and how the dish evolved and how to make it. So in a way we saw ourselves as pioneers because there were no big amount of West Indians. There might've been the odd individual, but nobody had that sense of community. There was a guy named Roy Howard, he used to have a West Indian show on the radio. Probably he would've been one of the pioneers in kind of putting Caribbean music on the air. But there was nothing organized per se. I think in lieu of a sort of a Caribbean community, the students were the ones who tried to kind of foster the sense of Caribbean culture. I remember during the week we used to call it West Indian Week, I would put on a play and do something by say Freddie Kissoon. It was ostensibly for the Caribbean community but there were people who would come out from the mainstream culture who were kind of just interested or curious about what this culture is all about. So we tried to do all of those things. We were naïve. I remember putting on a show which

went for about three hours. We'd put on a play and then we'd have stick fighting and then we'd do limbo dancing – you name it, we did it. But it was a way of trying to create some sort of cultural identity. I think we saw ourselves as having that, I don't know if we just assumed that we had to be the ones to indoctrinate the Canadian public at large as to what Caribbean culture was all about. So that's what we did.

Q: Did you form any cultural organizations to be a part of?

SJ: Well there's an Edmonton Caribbean Cultural Association. A guy by the name of Andy Edwards always had a vision for a Caribbean cultural association. That has always been, I have always felt that going Caribbean was the way to go. I was associated with that and later on with Cariwest. But the island mentality that we bring with us sometimes gets into the way. We find that there's a Barbados association, a St. Vincent association, a Grenada association, a Jamaican association, but nobody is thinking Caribbean. The irony when you're in a place like Edmonton, because the Jamaicans were the first set of people to sort of settle in this part of Canada, everybody would call everybody from the Caribbean a Jamaican. So they don't know the subtle differences anyway. So you have that sort of internal struggle that went on within the community. But at the end of the day I felt that maybe a Caribbean culture is what we needed; at the time that's what we needed.

Q: Could you tell me a bit more about your involvement with Cariwest. Was this something that evolved out of ECCA?

SJ: Cariwest was started by Cecil George. I'm not too sure when he started it – could be in the late '80s or mid '80s. It was a time when Caribbean carnivals were springing up in literally any city in North America. My feeling at the time was I was very skeptical. I said, why do we need a carnival? We've got Caribana or we've got Labor Day carnival in New York. My sense of the carnival is that you had to do it at a certain level, otherwise don't do it at all. Cecil is somebody that I knew from Trinidad, I actually knew him from Point Fortin, from my same community. So it's kind of ironic when I ran into him here;

he had a steel band. I had been teaching out of town and I came into town and I think they approached me to be a judge for the dimanche gras show. I did that for about two years. While judging the show, I saw the potential that the Cariwest could be something that could be used to give community something that they could rally upon. So when Cecil stepped down, because he was busy with his steel band he couldn't do all of the organizational thing. I don't know if he asked me or I volunteered, but somehow I became president of Cariwest. With it I had certain visions. I felt that this thing could be a good street parade. I had seen the potential for the dimanche gras show to be something that could be very theatrical. I'd come out of the University Alberta, I'd studied drama, I'd been in plays, but I also had that desire in me to kind of see carnival as a form of street theatre. I was very much influenced by what Peter Minshall had done and I felt this is the way this mardi gras would work in this North American setting. There are certain things that work in Trinidad because they're in Trinidad, and people feel sometimes that you could just move a cultural event from one location to another location and not do anything about it, and it would work. So part of the challenge for me was go come up with something where this event would succeed in the new environment in which we found ourselves living. I remember Errol Hill, a drama professor at Dartmouth College, and he came to Trinidad to run the mardi gras; he ran afoul of the Trinidad community because his ideas did not jive with the local peoples' expectations. The people go out at 8 o'clock and they want to leave at 4 o'clock in the morning. Whether the show starts at 8 o'clock, you say 8 o'clock but it starts at 11 o'clock. In Trinidad it doesn't matter because it's a long night of fete. You apply that same logic to trying to put on a mardi gras event here and it doesn't work. You know you have 2-1/2 hours maximum that people are going to sit in an auditorium to take on some kind of a show. So I tried to put that theatrical stamp on the mardi gras show. We used to do it in Hawrelak Park, which had an outdoor stage there. That worked for a little while, but Hawrelak Park is not accessible to everybody. Even though the show was great, it didn't really do what we thought it should do. We went to the Agridome and we got the Agridome's small arena. I thought that was beautiful. People can sit almost in a theatrical ring; we brought in lighting, and we tried to really do it. But it was very, very expensive. Along with that was a certain amount of discipline that you're not in Trinidad. If you say the show is going to start at 8 o'clock the

Canadians are showing up at quarter to 8. If by 8:15 the show is not on the road, you can't have somebody come in with their costume just trying to get on stage and that sort of thing. So that was a very frustrating experience but I thought that we're on the road to selling it. We got volunteers and we tried to run it like any other cultural event that was taking place in the city. I don't think people realize that you apply to the government, you get a grant, and you feel that that grant now allows you to put on an event only for your people. Well it's taxpayers, everybody's taxpayers' money is involved in that grant that you have received. So if you have to make adjustments to the event to fit the needs of the community at large, so be it. But then you have a faction – we culture. So you're right in that kind of discrepancy there, that's the challenge. Yes it's we culture, but it's their money or it's our money. So how do you make that event fit in? So those were some of the challenges we faced even with the masqueraders. There's a guy from Seattle, Gerald DeFreitas, good mas man and we got along quite well. He really was pushing the mas into that theatrical type of level, but the other people didn't want to go in that direction. There's a difference between when you put the mas on a stage and when you put the mas on the street. On the street there's a sort of spontaneity that happens there, so people from the side can jump in and participate with that. But there's also the formality where you want to see the presentation as a presentation, so you're going to have the spectators out where they should be and the mas should be out there so it could be perceived as what it is. There's a lot of challenges we faced and I think a lot of it, there were people who just wanted to hold onto the terms of dimanche gras and mardi gras. Okay, so if you know some French you know that dimanche gras we're talking about on Sunday, and mardi gras is for Tuesday. You know, within this North American society people use the term mardi gras now to mean any kind of celebration. If you hang onto the fact that dimanche gras and mardi gras are tied into the Lenten season on the days preceding Ash Wednesday, some people will get it. Some people wouldn't get it. So then you get to the point where you say, well should we call this the king and queen show, or should we hang onto mardi gras? You always have to go on the media and explain what mardi gras means. I don't know what the answer is. But I know we had the traditionalists who felt, well if we didn't use the term mardi gras or we didn't use the term dimanche gras, it's almost like sacrilege. But those are challenges that I think you have to do. It's like the Caribana right now, it

was called Caribana for like 25 or 30 years, then they tried to call it something else. Now I just saw that they're going to be going back to the term Caribana, because Caribana has evolved into something that represents a certain spirit. A lot of people from the Caribbean who don't have a culture of carnival, it's part of their cultural heritage. It doesn't matter, but you have the name Caribana.

Q: What was your mission or goal in your involvement with Cariwest. What was the outcome you were hoping for?

SJ: Well I don't know if I set out to have an outcome. I had personal philosophies. Why I got involved, I don't know. But I said, we can make it theatrical, right? I think we can present it in a form that it can appeal to most of our audiences here, right? And we can also make a statement that we have a rich and vibrant culture from the Caribbean. It's not as though we are in the Caribbean. We are a small group from the Caribbean trying to get something on Jasper Avenue. I'll give you a classic example. You had asked me, not in this interview, why the carnival moved to Mill Woods. That one year or couple of years we'd moved to Mill Woods because we knew that Mill Woods was more accessible, it was easier to get permission. You had less encumbrance on the street and that sort of thing. And you had more West Indians living in Mill Woods. So you ask the philosophical question, who is the carnival for? Is it for the people, the West Indian people? Is it for the population at large? If it's for the population at large, then that would influence where you're going to have it. You want it where it's more accessible for the majority of the people. There is a perception in Edmonton or there was a perception in Edmonton at the time that if you had a festival and you weren't on Jasper Avenue you are a second class festival. So people felt, look at Klondike Days, it's Jasper. Whatever it is, I haven't been here for a long time. So we felt we had to be on Jasper Avenue. But there's nobody on Jasper, nobody lives there. But it didn't matter. The perception for this to be an A-1 festival it had to be on Jasper Avenue. That was the reason why we left Mill Woods and came back down to Jasper Avenue, started at 124 Street. Now the challenge with that is that if you have two or three hours for your parade and the cops say that you're leaving 124<sup>th</sup> Street at 12 o'clock on Saturday and at 12:01 this parade isn't moving, the cops will

be there on their motorbike, Selwyn, are we going or not? That was the attitude. How do you break that? So you get to the cops and you let them know the world isn't going to end if the parade doesn't start at 12:01. It's nothing to do with being lackadaisical in this culture or what have you. But you have a culture where time is not as crucial in the Caribbean for a parade as it is here where the cops have to be hired and they're looking at their watch, 12:01, when is this parade going to get started, and that sort of thing. Eventually the cops were there and they were joking at 12:30 and looking at me, well you think we're going to be leaving in half an hour? But to me that's part of what Cariwest was all about, is breaking down that barrier, a barrier which serves no real purpose other than to say we started at 12 o'clock.

Q: This year we started at 10 after 12; they wrote it up in a report. Last year we started at 11:56. So they complained this year that we were ten minutes late, but they didn't give us credit for...

SJ: ...for starting at 11:56. Somebody used to say, you know, having lived in this country for a long time, it's a question of what is important to certain cultures. There's no right or wrong, but you should be able to stand up to somebody and defend, ya we can start at 12:05, it's not going to be the end of the world. It's the fundamental in what does the parade mean to the people. To the cop who's on duty, for him it's just another job where he clocks in at 12 o'clock and clocks out at 2 o'clock. For the people who live 364 days waiting for this parade, it doesn't matter if it starts 12:01 or 12:29. Maybe if it's 3 o'clock you have a problem, but philosophically and deep down inside there is no real problem. That needs to be on their agenda. So those are some of the things I thought the carnival could help explain to people.

Q: Have you seen any evolution in Cariwest. It's in its 29<sup>th</sup> year of unbroken presentations.

SJ: I left here in '97 and I think I came back one year. I noticed that the dances were really big. They were at the Shaw Convention Centre. I saw the parade on the street. But

what I noticed is that whenever there were international events taking place in Edmonton, Cariwest was featured prominently in the things that would be promoted as Edmonton's culture. I think that was an accomplishment. That has to be the biggest accomplishment. Just like in Vancouver where I live right now, there's a Caribbean Days on the north shore. It's the biggest summer festival. Every weekend there's a festival, but the Caribbean Days festival is the biggest. Caribana is now the biggest cultural event in Canada. So if you look at what we're doing here in Edmonton, relatively speaking I think there's nothing like it. If you go back to the very beginning, I came in 1968. In 1969 we had a steel band on the road on Klondike Days. It had nothing to do, there were no blacks involved in Klondike Days, but there was this desire to put something out on the street. So the first mas band that we put on, I don't think anybody else did that. That was in 1969. We had a steel band. I knew a guy working with the city and he was a welder, so we could weld these what do you call it, the stands for carrying the band on the road, because we had to be on the road. It was the most impactful, it was at the end of Klondike Days or something, called the promenade, that they would have. We had the biggest, like the whole parade was behind the steel band playing Do-Re-Me from The Sound of Music. I guy named Bertie Fraser was arranging. The next year we went to the Calgary Stampede. Again we had a steel band on the road but on a truck this time. So there has always been this desire and this urge to participate in something. I wish all of the cultures could be as accepting and inviting as those organizations, because I don't know what we would do if a group decided to come and participate in our carnival parade. It works both ways. For example, when there's St. Patrick's Day in Vancouver, even though it's an Irish celebration there are people from Brazil, the aboriginal, everybody comes in. That's how parades should be. I think that's where we, I don't know if we didn't make inroads. At a certain point I had suggested that we should have bands that are non aligned. Like you don't have a St. Vincent band or Barbadian, you just have a Canadian band. Anybody who wants to play should get a T-shirt and participate.

Q: And did that fit your philosophy?

SJ: I think if I had to look for a philosophy, I think one philosophy I probably would've had at that time is that carnival should expand beyond the boundaries of the Caribbean community, because we just couldn't support it. We just didn't have the clientele for participation. I thought if you can make inroads into some of the communities at large, anybody who can identify with the spirit of Cariwest should be allowed to come in. I think maybe that's one way that they have progressed. One of the reasons we actually call the celebration Cariwest is that we knew that Edmonton did not have the infrastructure to support a carnival by itself. So there's a time when we had bands coming in from Winnipeg, from Calgary, from Vancouver, and it truly was a western carnival. There was a sort of support. I remember when I was president I went to Winnipeg carnival. I went to Winnipeg carnival and the Calgary carnival, I went to Miami at a certain point. I was just checking out all the different carnivals to see how we could learn something from that. But also I think we also had the vision of going into the classroom and teaching the kids about making costumes and so on. I think that's where we needed to make the inroads, because the young Caribbean kids are not, unless they're really tied to their parents apron or something like that, they're not picking up on the carnival culture. They're going hip-hop or they're going to something else that they perceive as more acceptable. But you can name the few people, like Cecil, who has his kids beating on steel band or Charlene Thomas, who has a daughter in dance or something like that. But that's testimony that people are not ashamed of their culture. One of the challenges they have in the irony of that situation is that when people when Nikki Minaj is exploiting the Caribbean heritage to make it in North America, then you realize where the roots of that whining comes from. It doesn't come from America, it comes from Trinidad. I think we have to do better in that direction and be more inviting. You'd have a few people who would be opposing that kind of philosophy, but you just have to ignore them. The carnival is not going to grow until you get the indigenous people participating in it.

Q: Do you keep in touch with any of your old friends from Edmonton?

SJ: Not really. I know that while I was there, Brian Alleyne, I had brought him in. I was president and he came in. We had high school together and he was in Montreal originally

and then he moved out here. So I brought Brian in and then when I left he sort of took over and he was president for a certain time. He and I have kept I would say the closest. I just got a note from the Organizer Jackie Reece. I think she was the secretary or something like that of Cariwest. But not really. Nigel Darbesie, that's Pat's brother. Again, because of what I do when I started off in film, Nigel was getting into his poetry and that sort of thing. I know where he is, I know where Pat is. So if I get a call from somebody from Toronto wanting to know if there are any black actresses, can you recommend somebody – so I kept my fingers sort of in everything even though I was in Vancouver. But most of the people have moved on. Asamol Caramy used to live in the house; he's moved to Calgary. He used to work at Syncrude. Curtis MacIntosh used to be at the house; he went to UWI and he has since retired. Bobby MacIntosh used to live in the house; he's in the real estate business. Arthur Chin used to meet with the steel band; I think he's retired. Let's see who else I remember from back in those days. There's a guy named Alfred Fraser from St. Vincent, and Victor Fraser, two brothers from St. Vincent. Alfred is in Vancouver or somewhere in B.C.

Q: Ashley Daniel?

SJ: Ashley Daniel, I haven't kept in touch but at a certain time we were very close because Ashley was the top DJ playing all the Caribbean music. Ashley, Arthur and myself, we are together, and Greg Sills was another person who was part of that group. I don't know who is still in Edmonton and who has moved on, that sort of thing.

Q: We still have bands coming from Calgary, we used to have a lot from Vancouver and Seattle.

SJ: Yes Seattle definitely, once we get a hold of the Freitas.

Q: Bands come from Winnipeg?

SJ: At one point Winnipeg carnival was pretty big, that's what I meant. But they had all the in-fighting there at a certain point.

Q: I think people have moved away... What took you away from Edmonton?

SJ: Well when I was running Cariwest I was working for the Department of Education, Alberta Education. I'd stopped teaching but working with teachers. Then I also started making my own documentary films. It was getting to a point where I felt that I really wanted to move into documentary. So I took a leave of absence from my job, freelanced for a year – this was '95, '96, somewhere in there. While I was freelancing there was a producer job opening at the National Film Board for working with people of diverse cultures. So I took that job, and that job took me to Vancouver, the job was in Vancouver. So that's when I moved to Vancouver.

Q: Are you still with National Film Board?

SJ: I'm still with the National Film Board. I'm still a producer. It's been very long, 16 years.

Q: What made you return to Edmonton at this time?

SJ: I am receiving an award from the University of Alberta Alumni Association. They're recognizing a number of their graduates who have made a contribution to their community. In this case I guess it would be the filmmaking community. I made a contribution to the Edmonton community but I've been gone now for about 16 years. I don't have that same attachment to the community in Vancouver, because it's a different sort of community compared to say Edmonton. Edmonton, I was here for a significantly longer period of time, but I'm still known now more in the filmmaking community I would say in Vancouver. So that's why I'm back here, to receive this award tomorrow night.

Q: Congratulations, we're very proud of your achievements.

SJ: Thank you very much.

Q: It's been a long journey from Point Fortin.

SJ: It has been.

Q: That's where I was born.

SJ: And your name then was?

Q: Coombs.

SJ: You're related to Courtney Coombs?

Q: He's my cousin.

SJ: I was at Courtney's. Last time I was in Trinidad, I saw Courtney. He's a contemporary of mine. I went to Point EC also, but PFC wasn't built so I had to go to QRC.

Q: Are you comfortable talking about the roots of carnival in Trinidad?

SJ: I can talk. I have been formulating my own thoughts

Q: Talk to Donna.

SJ: Yea. I've been formulating my own theories about the carnival. In Trinidad there's this big debate as to whether it's an "African" thing or whether it's a Trinidad thing or whether the East Indians have any impact on it, or even the European influence. My

personal take on it, it's a combination of all of those, as Minshall would say in any interview. How he put it is that you have this phenomenon which takes place in this little island where people are brought from all around the world literally. Early in my career I didn't even know that it was African; my belief is that it was European. I just thought it was this festival that took place before Ash Wednesday. You have to be of a certain religious persuasion to even know what Ash Wednesday means. If you're talking to somebody who doesn't know what Ash Wednesday means I say, it's this big celebration which takes place before those two days, it doesn't matter. I think the French influence and the Spanish influence have been the two significant things in shaping the carnival in the Caribbean. All you have to do is look at certain places like Jamaica, it's part of the Caribbean, and look at places like Guyana, which have no carnival so to speak. They may have mashramani or whatever it's called, Jamaica may have something else, but nobody has this kind of carnival which is rooted in the European type of thing. So I felt that that was the only source of that. I was fortunate to go to Africa for a film festival about 15 years ago. I went to a place called Wagadugu and saw people beating on the origins of the xylophone. But the actions that they were doing is just like how we beat the steel band in Trinidad. Then I saw moko jumbies, or stilts, and realize, oh these things came from Africa. Then I've seen documentaries where some of the costumes are straight from Africa. So I have a completely different, it's a hybrid event. It's rooted in a religious ceremony in the sense that it happens in certain countries Monday and Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday, which is a religious kind of significance. But the carnival has now more of a tourist attraction. You have carnival in Grenada, in Barbados it's Cropover, in Dominican Republic it's something else. ... Its root is that big kind of thing when people are set free. It's just like the walk for freedom for the aboriginals. I went and participated in that walk on Sunday. If you have things that are welling up, then you need a place to let out steam, so to speak. The carnival was a place to let out steam. But in addition to that it was places to play or stick fighting, to become jab molasi, and to do a whole bunch of things which are unique to Trinidad. But I can put all those things in perspective and understand that right now. When Minshall talks about it being street theatre, it is basic street theatre fundamentally. You don't have to put it up on a stage. But you go and see the jab molasi and you see the blue devils and the black devils and what have you, it's

real, it's real. I was studying drama when I heard Minshall put out a band called Paradise Lost. I hadn't seen the band but deep down inside of me I felt I know where that band was coming from. Those are the sort of ideas that I had. I figure if you grow up with carnival and you get into the arts, you will want to find a stage to kind of put that and get your form of expression. That's what Minshall did. I've been working on a documentary on Peter Minshall now for about 20 years, so I know him inside out. Plus when I was going to school he put on a play by Derek Walcott, "Dream on Monkey Mountain". He put on that. I as a young boy didn't get to see it, but he always had those artistic sensibilities. He went away to England to study; I went to Canada. He said he was trying to design for ballet and all this sort of thing. He showed this one guy, his sketches for something he did in Trinidad. The guy said, why don't you go back home? You will get more appreciation from your people in Trinidad than you'll ever get trying to design your ballet and that sort of thing. That's how Minshall made that transition from leaving that world, making a name for himself in Trinidad, and then that name became bigger when he put it out there on the global circuit. But he is up there with them in that he can argue where this phenomenon came from, so that you can understand there are pockets of East Indian culture. If you see some of those East Indian celebrations, like in Vancouver now they have they have the authentic type of bongo and those sorts of things. You can see, oh my goodness, this has to have some influence in Trinidad; it's not all African. We've had Syrians, we've had Chinese in Trinidad for the longest time. We don't know what influence the dragon dance may have had on Trinidad's carnival. Then as I travel now, not travel but I go see documentaries, I see black cultures that exist in Peru, in Colombia. You start seeing pockets and you say, oh my goodness. I saw the stilt, the moko jumbie when they came to China. Well they went where the Africans went. Each place where they went, the moko jumbie took on a different type of thing. Those are the things that fascinate me. I want to do a documentary on just moko jumbie period. When I go to Point Fortin and I see those guys on the stilts going down the road and doing incredible feats 20 feet up in the air, these are little kids. They didn't go to school but I think there's groups now that are teaching them moko jumbie dance. I would just like to take that one item and show how it has morphed in different places around the world, so much so that when

you go see a parade here, you see a moko jumbie you think it's a North American concept.

Q: There's a moko jumbie school here run by Phil Fraser's son, Randall Fraser.

SJ: Yea, because he went to Trinidad and studied with Minshall. He was recommended by Tony Hall back in the '80s.

Q: It all connects.

SJ: Yea, it all connects. Randal Fraser's father Fil Fraser is from Trinidad originally.

Q: For the record, can you explain who Peter Minshall is?

SJ: Peter Minshall, I know a lot about him because I'm fascinated. I was actually in class with him when I went to high school. He was so brilliant. I was sitting there in Form 1B and he came first, I remember that, and I came second. The movement from 1B to 1A, that was put you to pass so you can write all levels, whatever it was at that time, Cambridge certificate or what have you. But he was brilliant. So by age 17 I was getting fascinated with theatre. As I said, Peter Minshall put on this play. He designed this incredible set and the principal called the entire school on a Monday to take a look at it. I'd never seen a stage set before. If you went to see a play, there was just basically a stage and maybe a table and something like that. But this, the Sea of Urchins was about fishermen, and he had nets and all that sort of thing. I just said, wow I wonder if I could be part of that world. The next time I saw Peter Minshall he was just out of high school. I don't even know that I knew there was something called a talk show, but he was at the corner of Frederick Street and Marine Square and they were just doing a show right there out in the open. This was unheard of, unheard of. So that's how far ahead he was. Then of course he got involved with Errol Hill. Errol Hill put on a play called "Man Better Man", and Minshall was asked to design. That's what brought him to North American theatre, because that's what his background was. Then he moved back to Trinidad and he was

designing mas for I can't remember who the band leader was, and he got onto his own. I started tracking his career.

Q: Papillon...

SJ: Pre Papillon. He was designing for Stephen Lee Heung I believe for a number of years. Then the first one he designed was a carnival queen for his sister. She was the queen of the bands, the character I can't remember. But he's still lurking in the background, lurking in the background. But in 1992 he got invited to Barcelona to design the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics. Even then he wasn't, because Time Magazine featured an article about him and it says, a man from the Caribbean, the artist was a man from the Caribbean. That's how he was referred to. But I remember I was watching television and I saw these, just the movement I saw and I said to my wife, that looks like Minshall in mas. But this was the Olympics and I didn't know because I was living in Edmonton at the time. Then I would find out later on that he was the person who designed it. So I got a phone call from Tony Hall and they said that what Peter did in Barcelona he's bringing it to Trinidad and he's going to do something that connects the Barcelona, we want to make a documentary. So I went down to Trinidad with a film crew ostensibly to film something about Peter Minshall about that, and that's when he talked about that. Then in '96 he went to Atlanta and then he talked about what it was, how incredible the feeling. Now when you follow those stories and you realize what this guy had accomplished with women from Trinidad like Allison Brown, and she would have tears in her eyes. She said, Selwyn, when we got to Atlanta teaching these American women how to dance with these costumes and so on, and you could cut from a Trinidad mas that had Minshall might have put on and you see the connection, you see how this carnival morphed into that, or you see the scenes in Barcelona with the guys and the drums coming and beating like that, straight from J'ouvert and that sort of thing. So I thought he was just sort of brilliant in taking what was common activities in Trinidad...

Q: That we took for granted.

SJ: That we took for granted, taking it to a different culture. He said to me, my role was not to get the Spanish people to be like Trinidadians, but I give them a vision and they had to take that vision and make it their own; so I just gave them some direction and they ran with it. The same thing when you look at Atlanta when they were playing, there's a southern piece that they were playing and the women were dressed in white and they had this very nice movement and so on. Again, it's very, very inspirational. So those are Minshall's visions. The other one which I didn't see was when they had the Olympics, the winter Olympics. I think he did the opening ceremonies there, and he won an Emmy for that also. By that time he had really made a stamp. I've gotten to the point where I felt I understood everything that he was doing and how he was defining this phenomenon as theatre of the streets. I'm very, very proud, very, very proud. Somebody had written a book called Caribbean Festival Arts. It's a very good book if you want to look at all of the carnivals and the festivals that take place in the Caribbean. Beautiful. He said to me, I get damn mad. If Picasso does a painting it's art, if so and so does it's art. But if I do something it's folk art. So they'd always classify what he does as folk art. Well art is art, and who determines whether it's folk art, which would suggest that it's not real art but is art which is tribal. It is all art. You can take all of the costumes he has created and see. When you see Tan Tan and Saga Boy and you think about those puppets moving like this, and the puppets are like 30 feet up, he captures those nuances. If you go see a play like War Horse right now where they have live people and animated puppetry, Minshall has created that. As a matter of fact, Julie Traimor, she directed one of these plays on Broadway which evolved from Southern Africa, and I could've sworn some of those things that she used, she would've been to Trinidad and would've been influenced by some of the things that Minshall has created in his carnival. So that's Peter Minshall for you.

Q: I just want to come back to something you said about the origins of the mas in the European tradition. The irony that that tradition was then turned on its head and became part of an anti-colonial statement or expression of people, maybe talk a bit about that.

SJ: What would've happened back then is that if you go back to Trinidad before slavery was abolished, the freed people, the slave owners participated in carnival. So they would have their celebrations. The slaves would be in the background watching. So they're dressed up in all the elaborate costumes and all that sort of thing, because that's what they knew coming from Europe. So this was embedded in the slaves. Yes, go ahead. Oh sorry. This was embedded in the slaves. But the slaves now saw the carnival as a means to kind of get their propaganda going, so they started singing their calypsos. But in the calypsoes they would be saying derogatory things about the owners, or protest, or they would be planning some kind of escape. Now they had nothing, they couldn't buy any of those expensive costumes. But they could pour molasses over themselves and create the character called Jab Molassie, molasses devil. So that's how they started. But eventually when slavery was abolished, one of the things they started doing is started imitating or mimicking or dressing up like some of those characters. So the carnival went, I would say the costume went in two directions – the people who aspired to be in the upper class or the people who would just be the grassroots people there. The other thing that I noticed also that is very African is this idea of cutting branches of trees and parading with them. That is something that is still very common when you see a political demonstration in certain African countries. But in the early days of Trinidad carnivals you'd see people with these branches. Things like stick fighting. Stick fighting came from a certain place in Africa and it's a very violent war. It went to Brazil and they've made it into this type of a dance, but it's a very basic form of warfare that came from Africa. Stick fighting was banned in Trinidad since the late '50s; it's too violent. I went to Trinidad in the '90s with a camera crew and we went to Mayaro and it was incredible. You can't have stick fighting there but the choreography is something else. It's natural. So now there's somebody from Trinidad who has made a good film, “Stick Man no Dance” or something like that. First time they've made a sort of official type of documentary, feature length. It played in Toronto in the Caribbean festival. So things are beginning to revert to some of these characters.

Q: Are you comfortable at all times with the politics? There's class politics and there's also politics of culture?

SJ: Give me specifics.

Q: There's two kinds of politics. We talked a bit about the class origins of carnival, and the other was the black politics of culture and identity. How do you see the role of the festival in that? Is there a consciousness of that anymore, or was there ever?

SJ: Well I think there always is the politics. Let's deal with Caribana, if you have to put Caribana in a sort of political type of situation. In the early days it was just let's give the blacks a place where they can amuse themselves. Just in terms of the street, I was just reading an article of that. I think it was on Yonge Street and then it went to university and now it's on Lakeshore Blvd. The person who wrote the article said they love this but they'd prefer Yonge Street. On Yonge Street it was taking too long. As you said, there's a difference between getting the street for four hours versus taking it over for the entire day. As somebody said, there are other activities where they'd shut down Yonge Street for the day and nobody complains. But if it's black people jumping up in the street, that creates a problem. But the parade now has evolved where it has become the most, in terms of the economic impact in Toronto, it's the single biggest influx of revenue for the city of Toronto in terms of hotel rooms and so on and so on. All of that was coming in and the businessmen were giving nothing back to the community when they were asking for anything. So that is a situation of politics because any other event that any other community was putting on a festival that was so highly regarded, the people would've been running out to give them their sponsorship and so on. So Caribana is always fighting that uphill battle. Then the government stepped in, Scotia Bank got in. Scotia Bank wanted them to change to Scotia Bank Caribbean Carnival or something like that. That's all politics. Caribana was associated with where people would come up with their guns and shoot people in the street and that sort of thing. Even though people may shoot other people outside of Caribana, the media will sort of say, well don't go to Caribana, it's too dangerous, and that sort of thing. Now I think all of that has played itself out and then it has settled down into a big thing which is now a very successful carnival event. I think you could just use what's happened to Caribana as a sort of metaphor for any time you

put on the carnival. How to deal with the police – common sense would tell you that there's something cultural that is happening here and you will figure out exactly what is happening. There's one year I went there and I saw the women wining up on a policeman and the policemen were wining back. So I said to somebody, what does that mean? Well you know, the chief took some of his policemen to Trinidad to observe how people behave in that sort of context, and now they come back here and they're a little more understanding. So sometimes what is perceived as a problem is not necessarily a problem, it's somebody doesn't understand how to deal with the situation. If you see people doing things on the street on carnival day, it's something that has evolved from all that repression of slavery, and on those two days the population at large feel, you know what, I'm going to stick it to them, I'm going to show them that I can get out there and behave. If you think I'm a jamette women – you know the meaning of jamette, right? Jamette has to do with class. Jamette is French for diametre. You're either on this part of the class spectrum or this part. But at carnival I can show you, you might think I'm a jamette but ... So if you understand it, it's a political statement. So when the police in Toronto were seeing somebody coming up to them and challenge them to a dance, it's not being out of place but actually it's an attempt to bring the policeman into the culture and say, you're part of us. The people who understand it will get along, and those who don't will create a problem. So a simple act of people going around and throwing powder on the spectators was something that was very, very common in the early days of carnival until some foreigners didn't understand or they were so paranoid that somebody threw powder at them and they got scared and reacted, so throwing powder was banned. Wearing a mask in Trinidad is banned for mardi gras. When I was a little boy the idea was to put a mask on your face. That's the whole thing that they got from the Europeans, is to put on a mask – you're taking part in a masquerade. But then people put on masks and decided to rob banks and that sort of thing, and then the government banned it. So sometimes you have to change the rules of the game for a whole bunch of reasons that don't make any sense at all. But I used to like, I remember as a kid, I grew up in the time when you could still go and buy a mask and you'd put a mask with two elastic things around your face. It's no different from the Phantom of the Opera type of mask; that was very commonplace. Now we don't do that. In Brazil you can't do that, not allowed to do

that. But the mask and the concept of sympathetic magic is common in all cultures. Saturday, as I said, I went to this walk. The people from the Niska in this walk here. This is in Vancouver. They are the Truth and Reconciliation. There were people from the west coast and they make a lot of faces that look like animal features, birds and what have you. Many times I had to stop in my tracks because I thought I was watching mas in Trinidad, it was so similar. So when they put on that mask and they start to dance, it's no different from watching a dragon dance in Trinidad or the dragon dance by the Chinese or these other things. I saw one guy, I swear he was dancing like an eagle, but in real motion it was slowed down. I thought, god, as if I was watching a film in slow motion. But he had on this eagle head piece, which we call a headpiece in Trinidad. Sometimes I watched that and said, I wonder if some of these Trinidad mas designers were to see the real things if they're going to get into trouble with cultural appropriation, because they do it without thinking about any of the implications of that. Then I saw a guy with a fabulous costume, this simple dancer just dancing there. He had on his regalia and everything. I said, I just wish I could take this footage and just take it down to something like that, because there was no difference. The only thing was that this is the reality here, and in Trinidad it's an escape, it's a fantasy. We just decide to pick anything.

Q: You can imitate anybody you want.

SJ: Exactly, without asking permission, and see it in that context. So I don't know if you got your politics there. . .

[ END ]