**Interview with Ben Boretz**

Date: March 24th, 2023

Attendees: Ben Boretz, Raissa St. Pierre ‘87, Carl Hoyt ‘85

Ben: You used to come with a little blue, baby blue boombox and you’d carry it around and play tapes on it.

Carl: I don’t remember the baby blue, but I remember the boombox.

Ben: Well, it was very, very striking that it was a baby blue boombox. Anyway, you were certainly important in that group.

Raissa: You have an amazing memory, Ben.

Ben: Well, the consequence of a fairly empty life.

Raissa: [Laughs] I doubt that.

Ben: But anyway.

Raissa: So we have to say our particulars.

Ben: Oh, you actually have questions!

Raissa: So today we're here with Ben Boretz. The date is March 24th. It's a Friday. We’re being served some yummy coffee. Thank you. My name is Raissa Saint-Pierre. I went to Bard, graduated in ‘87.

Carl: I'm Carl Hoyt, graduated in 1985.

Raissa: Do you just go by Ben Boretz?

Ben: Yeah, that’s…

Raissa: Benjamin? You don’t go by your full…

Ben: Most people call me Ben. I don’t know, I sign my name Benjamin. I don't use Ben as a regular name. But you know, I don’t really know anybody who calls me Benjamin except my mother did.

Raissa: [Laughs] That’s kind of how it is, right?

Raissa: Well, I guess we want to just to get your parts of your story, of your history, where you went to school…

Ben: You mean personal history?

Raissa: Yeah, just I mean…

Ben: But pre-Bard?

Raissa: Yeah…right?

Carl: Yeah, Bard stuff and including before…

Ben: Well, I mean, I was not literally born, but most of my childhood I grew up in the Black ghetto in Brooklyn, called Bedford Stuyvesant, an important part of my life. There's actually a long interview I did for *Perspectives of New Music* where I talk about my childhood history, because it was important in the formation of any way that I've been interacting with people.

Raissa: Was there a lot of music in the neighborhood where you were?

Ben: Well, there was, but that's not… I mean, I heard it, you know, but I didn't do music with other guys in the neighborhood because, I mean, I played piano since I was three and studied with this guy, a Russian composer, who was a student of Glazunov in Russia. So my whole orientation was, you know, my parents were Ukrainian Jewish, which means that they didn't think of themselves as Ukrainian. In fact, interesting with the current Ukrainian awareness, I didn't know when I was a kid that there was such a language as Ukrainian, but my parents both – they didn't know each other in Russia and Ukraine, they only met in Brooklyn – but they grew up in the same region north of Odessa, in the Ukraine. “The Ukraine” is what they called it, when it was part of the Russian empire. And they spoke Russian as their primary language apart from Yiddish, but Ukrainian was not a language I even knew existed, even though they both were born and grew up there. So that's interesting, because Ukrainians in my parents’ life experience were not a positive factor. My grandfather was killed in a pogrom, and so was most of my mother's other family. My father's family left there much earlier after the 1905 revolution. My mother stayed through the Bolshevik Revolution, and she was going to university. She was in medical school in Odessa, and that's when her family was killed by the counterrevolutionaries. You’ve seen the movie *Reds*? Yeah, it's all those guys. There’s a very interesting novel by Mikhail Bulgakov, do you know him? He wrote a book called *The Master and Margarita*, everybody knows. But this is his first novel, it's called *White Guard* and it's a story of Kiev during the time of the counterrevolution, and it's an amazing story. It's not a great novel

actually, but it's a very relevant story for me because it's kind of the style of my family life at that time. And all these armies, all these revolutionary armies that were fighting each other, killing each other. But the one thing they had in common was they all killed Jews. So it was like that. And the novel is very vivid that way. It's actually an interesting story.

Raissa: Did your parents talk about their history very much?

Ben: No, my parents really didn't have the same history, because my father was ten years old when he came to America. He actually was in the U.S. army; he grew up in America. He fought in the First World War. His older brother was actually a hero. Got a, you know, what do you call it, Congressional Medal of Honor and died as a soldier in France. My father never made it all the way to Europe, but he was in the army, so that was a different thing. My mother was a medical student under the Communists, and she was perfectly happy to do that until the family was wiped out. So she and her mother emigrated to America, but her brother stayed behind in the Soviet Union, mostly because of his profession, he was a nuclear physicist, so it was probably not possible for him to find a way to get out. She managed to get out by being smuggled through Kishinev, Moldova, which now is sort of in the news so everybody knows where these places are now.

Raissa & Carl: Yeah.

Ben: Anyway, so I was in this little… My parents were just kind of impoverished European intellectuals that never could have a kind of regular American life. They would do just surviving, basically. They used to have to move house all the time because they couldn't pay rent. And so, I went to elementary school in this neighborhood. And a lot because of the sociological circumstances, they kind of pushed me through very fast. So I graduated from eighth grade when I was 12, and they wouldn't let me go to high school in my neighborhood because they thought it was too dangerous because, you know, as these people, fellow students a lot of them, got big, they got more dangerous as they got big.  I mean, obviously my friends were all Black kids from that group, but there were kids who were kind of tough and dangerous. So they sent me to a school in Flatbush which specialized in music and literature.

Raissa: So you knew you wanted to study music, or…

Ben: No, I didn't, actually, I did music as a matter of life. I was not a student, because of course I wasn't really… I did not compose music, I played and

improvised, but I thought of myself... I didn't think of it in a professional way or, you know, life plan way. I did much more writing, verbal writing through college than I did composing. I did some composing, but it was only when I was a senior in college that I remember walking out of my piano lesson at the Third Street Music School, which was on Third Street and Second Avenue in Manhattan. And I was walking to the subway to go home and suddenly I think 'Oh', and I was about to graduate and I sort of had nothing much in mind as to what would happen after I graduated. And I suddenly thought, I think I'm doing music the rest of my life, just like that. In a moment. I just spoke music as a native natural language, basically.

Raissa: Was your writing about music or creative writing or… poetry?

Ben: No, it was creative, or I guess all writing is creative, but it was – well, I would say if it had a slant, it was probably much more socially conscious writing. My sister was six years older, and she really brought me up because my parents were too busy trying to keep us alive to really pay much attention to us. And my sister was very much involved with New York's left wing and art life. So, when I was a little kid, I knew all these strange people from Greenwich Village, and all these Communists. And when I was seven years old, I marched on [a] picket line, freezing my ass off on Hudson Street in New York. After the war, labor unions made a lot of strikes because they were completely suppressed during the war. So there was a lot of labor ferment after the Second World War, and we were involved in that.

Raissa: Did you guys get in any trouble around that?

Ben: Yeah. Yeah, I did. And, in fact, sort of spectacularly. Because, well, strangely enough, you know, I guess it's sort of characteristic, a little bit complicated. I should say my relation to Communists was interesting because my mother was more left-wing than my father. My father was more like, you know, had a more American outlook. He was, his politics were Robert LaFollette. I don't know if it means anything to you?

Carl: Wisconsin? … Yeah.

Ben: Farmer-Labor, Democratic Farmer-Labor Party now, and it's still going. The cooperative movement was what they called it. So it was sort of Democratic socialists. But my mother was a little more social-movement socialist, not Communist, but socialist. But she had been in the Soviet Union, so she wasn't that enamored of Communism because it was shooting at her when she tried

to escape. But, you know, and of course they were both very, very Zionist. You know, before there was any Israel, they were very nationalistic about that. But so my mother was was very artistically inclined, and she took sculpture lessons with a good famous sculptor named Aaron Goedelman who taught at the Communist school in New York, the Jefferson School of Social Science, between Sixth Avenue and 16th Street. It was officially [a] Communist school, and I used to go along with her when she went to do her sculpture lessons. And I took these classes that they had there, and I was about eight or nine years old, and I thought it was kind of absurd, because I had a class in film and they showed you really interesting films, a guy named Louis Relin, and I remember him very well. But the way he did it was, he showed these films and then he would give a lecture about how you could use these films to indoctrinate people to be Communists. So I thought it was kind of silly. I wasn't really beguiled by Communism, but I was very interested in all the left-wing politics. And I was very free about traveling all over the city when I was a little kid, you know, riding all the subways and everything. So I would just—the whole city was my playground.

Raissa: Just by yourself at that young age? That's wild.

Ben: Yeah. All of the conductors in the subway knew me because I was just a little kid. I'd wander around, ask them questions about what they were doing and stuff. I went to the New York Public Library in Bryant Park, 42nd Street, Fifth Avenue. They had these newsstands there that had all the newspapers from all over the world, and all kinds of political things, American newspapers. I used to read the Socialist Workers newspaper and the Wobblies newspaper, the anarchists, labor unions, International Workers of the World. And then there were these crazy Communist magazines called Masses, New Masses, Masses and Mainstream. And I read all that stuff. You ask me what my focus was: it was very much in that kind of sociopolitical world. And in my high school, by the time I went to high school, there was this organization called the American Youth for Democracy, which was a Communist front pretty blatantly, there wasn't any pretense about it. And this guy you may not have heard of, but you could have, because he was a guy that showed up much later in life on C-SPAN a lot, named Herbert Romerstein, who was the—whatever you call it, the guru, the chief Communist of this group. And he was running the group. And it was a little bit slightly subversive, I guess, but it was open. I used to go to meetings, and I was a little bit of a gadfly because I was not particularly persuaded by propaganda. And he was very angry with me because I was

challenging him a lot. And I think he was giving lectures on the correct doctrine, and I was asking, you know, not totally compliant questions. So then, when it turned out that he was an FBI informant and that he was being run by a history professor, a teacher in the high school, this blew up the whole thing, not just our school, but suddenly the Daily News had it on its front-page headline that they had uncovered a nest of Communist operatives in the high schools in Brooklyn. Well, it was no joke because, you know, there were teachers who committed suicide as a consequence of this. I probably have a clipping somewhere [of] the Daily News. I think because I was sort of this gadfly, he outed me as a leading Communist in this group because, you know….

Carl: Because you were annoying?

Ben: Because I was annoying him and challenging his ability to run the group in his way. And so the principal of my high school called me and told me I'd better leave the country, because he said I would be blacklisted for life because I was a very undesirable person. So that's where it started.

Raissa: Did you split? Did you split, did you leave?

Ben: No, I just laughed. Oh, you know, little kids. I was like 14 years old. I couldn't take it seriously. I mean, I used to do political things. I would go in but not spend a lot of time in classes, which is one of the problems. But the secret was that I had a guidance counselor who was kind of impressed with my IQ test, so that whenever I got in trouble, she would get me out of it. So, you know, I learned to be irresponsible in high school. I did learn something!

Carl: Did your parents have you, did you take music lessons because it was the thing to do, or did you know?

Ben: My sister started taking piano lessons when I was about three years old. She was nine, and I absolutely wouldn't let her near the piano – so I ended up being the one that took the piano lessons from that time. But, see, the trouble with piano lessons was that all the teachers had the idea that if you were gifted, you were going to be a professional and play concerts and all that stuff, and I not only was uninterested in playing concerts and doing that kind of thing, but absolutely appalled by the idea of doing anything but just playing music. So, you know, as soon as a teacher would say that there was a concert, and they wanted me to prepare for it, I would quit practicing. It was very easy. You didn't have to play concerts if you didn't practice. So I was never interested in music as a, you know, as a social self-projection. It was just my native natural

language, and reading books, playing music and writing was all part of that. I don't want it to sound, to you, not like an idealism or anything, it's just the way it was.

Raissa: It was just a part of one's life?

Ben: Yeah, and in a way, I was always much more of a consumer. My relation to music was much more listening. Listening was the creative activity, and playing piano was a way of listening, because I mostly sight-read the piano and I could learn to play pieces, but it wasn't that interesting to me to be a virtuoso.

Raissa: Did you go out to see live music performances?

Ben: Yeah, well, you know, New York was a great place to grow up because everything was free. It was a very socialist city. I mean, for example, every neighborhood had a public health clinic. In New York, you didn't have to have a private doctor.

Raissa: It's great.

Ben: I mean, probably I'm exaggerating a bit, but it was a lot like that. And the public library, public museums. My sister and I used to go to [the] Botanical Gardens in Brooklyn all the time. We'd just walk up there and go walk in, look around. It's $30 now for a ticket and I can't afford it! So it was quite a different place - for fifty cents, you could have student tickets for many concerts in New York. For fifty cents you could go to anything. I used to go to the New York Philharmonic every Friday afternoon and they would give me whatever seats were not being occupied by subscribers – so I sat in boxes frequently.

Raissa: With your sister or…?

Ben: No, no, by myself. My sister didn't do this. She was not as much into concerts. We were into music at home, records that she would buy. Since we didn't have any money, we didn't have fancy equipment or anything, but she found a manual wind-up Victrola somewhere, and a stack of 78 RPM records, and we listened to those. I got to hear a lot of music that way, but concerts were more exciting. I remember listening to her high school orchestra play the first image I ever had of a Mozart Symphony, it was the Jupiter Symphony. God knows what they played, but it lodged with me perfectly. I mean, the image I have of that piece is consistent with what I heard that day. I don't have any explanation for this, but music was an internal thing, much more than an external thing for me.

Raissa: So when you went off to college first, it wasn't to study music?

Ben: Not at all. In fact, I was much more interested in writing and politics and…

Raissa: You went to Brandeis? Is that where you…

Ben: No. I went to Brooklyn College as an undergrad. Brandeis was my graduate school. And again, it was only at the last minute, when I decided to do music, that I applied to Brandeis. And it was a funny story attached to that because what happened at Brandeis was, I went up to visit a friend of mine from summer camp, who was going to be going to Brandeis. I basically hated school, and as a general thing, I didn't study. I didn't do very much in school, and teachers were always frustrated with me. But so I always thought, you know, school and intellectual activity and creative activity were kind of antonyms. School was the killer of all that stuff. So I was pretty antagonistic to school, but I had kind of a natural interest in these things, I guess, if all of this is getting on record. But I had an experience in college that was kind of paradigmatic. I had read a lot of Thomas Mann, so I took a course in German literature because I was interested in Thomas Mann particularly. One of the things we read was *The Magic Mountain*, which was actually a book I spent a lot of time with at that time. And so there were papers for us to write. I wrote this 20-page paper about all my ideas about The Magic Mountain, of which I had many. I got this paper back: zero.

Raissa: Zero?

Be: So I was very amused. I mean, not amused, bemused: how could this happen? So I did something I never did – almost on principle I wouldn't do it – but on this occasion, I went to talk to the teacher and asked him what the fuck was going on. And I said, "Look, I wrote this 20-page paper and you couldn't find one positive point in it, how could that happen?" "It's easy," he said. "None of that was in the notes." So I learned what school was that way. If you want to know the background of how I approached teaching, it was pretty much from that kind of a background…

Raissa: To go opposite that?

Ben: Well, you know, you don't do that to people. That's all, it's simple. And I thought of school – the academic – and the intellectual as antonyms.

Carl: Well, you know, my recollection is that the music department was famously inclusive, but I don't remember if it was exactly true. But I remember

hearing that if someone wanted to do a project in some other division that wasn't allowed, you would say, we'll do it as a music project.

Ben: Well, yeah.

Carl: If that wasn't true? The idea of that being true seems totally plausible.

Raissa: Influence people, yeah.

Ben: But I guess you came in like 1979?

Carl: Yeah, the '80s, early '80s.

Ben: 1980? I had you down for 1979. But think back to, I mean, it was like Sound Consciousness. That was your first year and you were a freshman. I had been chair of the department at that time for seven years, and I started to tell you about my approach to that. I mean, I guess all of this is sort of background to how I thought about being chair of an academic department.

Raissa: Yeah.

Ben: The thing about the music department, when I came in, the reason that the Faculty Senate was so determined to make me be the Chair in order to pull it together was that everything was in a different place, and it would be slightly hostile. They weren't really hostile, but you know, they were kind of standoffish from each of these groups of people. There was Luis's group doing chamber music in Bard Hall, and there was Janet Wheeler doing vocal music in Brook House; she had Brook House built by a friend for her to teach in. And Roswell Rudd was doing jazz in Woods Studio, and Elie was teaching academic music and composition in Albee 100, so they were all over the place. And it was slightly, I don't want to say competitive exactly, but they were not terribly – well, they weren't aware of each other in a way that would be like together, like a community. And then, oddly enough, Annandale House, which was the center, was not a classroom, it was a bunch of practice rooms, and the worst possible place you could have practice rooms because it had absolutely no soundproofing.

Raissa: We remember that. [Laughs] Annandale House.

Ben: Yeah, and the faculty offices were scattered all over the campus, like my office was in the basement of Tewksbury. And, you know, it was an odd place. So my first thought was well, let's make a community. So the first thing I did was move all the practice rooms to where the faculty offices were, and put all

the classes in Annandale House, and we built a little office. B&G built that little office with the glass…

Carl: Yup, the glass windows.

Raissa: …window thing….

Ben: …window. But the main thing I did, I would say, to bring the community together was colloquium. That was my idea, that we would have one meeting every week where everybody would just make everybody aware of what everybody else was doing.

Raissa: Faculty and students?

Ben: Yeah, yeah. Because the whole music community would come together once a week and do this colloquium, and it would not be a performance. You were there for it, right? You did colloquium in your days, or no?

Carl: I don't remember.

Ben: Had it dissipated? I think it was still going on. But of course anything that's gone on for a few years, everybody is – by that time, they're kind of tired of it.

Carl: Yes.

Ben: It became, "Oh, do we have to go to colloquium?" But at the beginning it was very intensely interesting to people.

Raissa: What do you remember about it? What were some of the highlights of what happened in these?

Ben: Everybody played, you know. They were exhibiting what they were doing and playing the music for each other. So, I remember Zeena Parkins played Bach on the piano and everybody was critical of her that she was such an academically expert player, but not very into it in some other way. And then there was Donna Pentaleri, who had tendonitis and just wanted to play the piano, and she was stumbling through this Haydn sonata that she barely could get through, and everybody was so supportive. It was, you know, almost like California, like New Age. And Leon came to that particular colloquium and he was appalled.

Raissa: Oh, my goodness.

Ben: There's this very accomplished, you know, conservatory pianist with somebody saying "You want to get a little more into it, Zeena". Except her

name wasn't Zeena at the time; it was Liz, Liz Parkins. And Donna, we would just constantly, you know, everybody was rooting for her. It was that kind of environment. So that really wasn't going when you were a student?

Carl: I'm sure it was, but I didn't start out as a music student, so I was sort of, you know, wandering around the periphery for a couple of years before I dove in.

Ben: Well, do you remember playing a session with me in this house?

Carl: Yes.

Ben: It was ‘82, October ‘82.

Carl: I still have a lot of tapes and boxes that just have dates on them, you know, those kind of things.

Ben: [to Raissa] But when you did come to Bard?

Raissa: ‘82.

Ben: You did, ‘82?

Raissa: ‘82 to ‘87, and I think I kind of audited your, the --forming class.

Ben: Oh, right? Yeah, that was advanced, that was down the road some.  It’s all personal stuff. In 1978, when I came to Bard, I had been teaching for a long time because when I was 19, I went to graduate school and they wouldn't give me a scholarship unless I agreed to be a teacher. And I had always said my whole life that the one thing I would never do was teach. But I wanted to go to grad school, so I decided to take this assignment. But you know the story. So the point is that I'd been teaching, by the time I came to Bard, I'd been teaching every year in college for 20 years.

Raissa: So you got to like teaching?

Ben: …and I got to wish that I could, you know, do something else. I told Reamer Kline, you know, you don't really want to hire me, because I'm burned out. I'm really burned out as a teacher. I've been teaching for 20 years…

Raissa: So he was trying to recruit you?

Ben: Yeah, well, that's how it happened. I mean, I don't want to make a big deal of it, but Bard went after me when I was at Princeton because of Joan, actually. Joan was my student, so she used to do classes with me at Columbia. And so

she knew something about my ideas about teaching, and she knew that I was not very happy with the Ivy League. So she thought of me when William Sleeper left, he resigned, and he had been the Chair of the department. They needed a replacement for him. So Elie and Joan sort of conspired to get me, but I resisted it. I didn't want to come. And one of the reasons I didn't want to come, and this is probably not so much for the record…

Raissa: We can edit this, right?

Ben: Well, see, I mean, I was at Princeton and they were calling me up there. The Dean was calling me up, and he was called Carl Selinger. He was calling me up a lot and asking me, saying he wanted me to come interview and I didn't want to do it because one of my students at Princeton was a Bard graduate; he loved Bard and applied for the job, and he really wanted the job. And so, you know, they were trying to recruit me, and I said, 'I don't think I want to be a candidate for the job. My student is a candidate.' So they said, okay, Carl Selinger said, I understand you don't want the job, but would you come up and just – we'd like you to survey the department, see what you know, see what things are like here, and maybe give us some input and that kind of thing. And then when it came up, they treated me as if I had come for a job interview and…

Raissa: Wishful thinking situation, hoping to get ya.

Ben: And I think what happened was that I just kind of really fell in love with the place.

Raissa: What struck you right then about Bard that sort of changed your mind?

Ben: That it wasn't a school, it was more like a place in the country where people were just kind of wandering around doing this and that. And this is my kind of place. I mean, apart from the downside that everybody was drugged out, not very functional. … Not everybody…

Raissa: A lot smaller back then, too, right? A lot less…

Ben: Yeah. Bard was shrinking at that time. In fact it was on the verge of disappearing down to…

Raissa: So that was '70-something?

Ben: It was '70-something, '72. My first semester teaching at Bard was the fall of '73. All of this happened in the spring of '73, the '72-'73 academic year.

Raissa: Right. Like so before Leon comes.

Ben: Well, yeah, because I was actually on the search committee that hired Leon, that recommended him to the trustees. And that was another interesting story.

Raissa: We're gonna have to share this on the underground.

Ben: Well, yeah, listen, most of my stories are not for publication.

Carl: Was any of the stuff in Barrytown, the Fluxus group, was that going on when you came here?

Ben: I don't know. Maybe. I mean, no, I don't think so.

Raissa: We were curious if you were involved with Fluxus at all in any way?

Ben: Well, I knew them from New York and European things, but I didn't associate them with Bard particularly.

Raissa: Because we had heard about, you know, Dick Higgins…

Ben: Dick Higgins wasn't here yet when I got here. He came later. I knew Dick pretty well, but I knew him when I was in New York more as a guy who was living in Pennsylvania and had this avant-garde publication company called Something Else Press. And he published a lot of things. I knew who he was, and then he came to live in Barrytown, and Alison Knowles came with him. But that was later, more like around the late 70's. So that by the time the MFA program started, Dick was very much in the loop. I used to meet him and see him in the post office at the time; we talked together, but we didn't do things together. It wasn't my thing. I was never an avant-garde person.

Raissa: Did you collaborate with anybody though who was in the area music-wise, or thought-wise?

Ben: Well.

Raissa: Your colleagues then, at Bard?

Ben: Well, sure, but I don't know how to answer that question exactly, because, you know, I was chair of the department, so I was involved with everything people were doing in one way or another. But my whole philosophy of things was more like "people do their own thing". And they did. And so the things that people did were not necessarily – they were… The colloquium was a place where people related to each other, but they didn't collaborate that much.

Raissa: How did you find the students then, when you were teaching?

Ben: Well, the students were the main reason to come to teach here. They were very interesting and all over the map. It was clear to me that, you know, there were few students who would benefit from a very conventional kind of music learning. I knew that most students would not want to [do] that here. So it was not a matter of an idea of how people should learn music I had, but an idea that everybody should be considered as an individual educational project and that they should be in charge of more or less of the learning curve, with help. My first senior project here was a student named Mary Dalzell, and she was going to do a senior project in organ playing, and it was an organ in the chapel, which was pretty broken, but she managed to play it somehow. So we were going to meet and I was going to be her senior project advisor, and we went to hear her play organ in the chapel and I listened to her for an hour or so. At the end of it, I said to her, 'Mary, you know, you're not doing your senior project in organ playing. You know, you're not an organ player.'

Raissa: Oh, no!

Ben: I said, Anyway, I have the feeling that that's not what you're really interested in.' [I] said, 'What are you really interested in?' She said, "I'm really interested in deaf education."

Raissa: In deaf education?

Ben: You know, music for the deaf. She knew a lot of things about that. I said, 'What's your problem? Why are you thinking about anything else for your senior project?' She said "Well, nobody's interested in having a senior project [about that]" and I said 'It's not a matter of anybody else's interest, it's your interest, so let's get into that.' So we did a project where we did an analysis of the conventional kinds of music for deaf people and concluded that it was all bullshit, that in fact people were kidding themselves as to what they were actually seeing and experiencing and hearing. The short story is that because people could behave as if they were hearing music like you and I hear music didn't mean they really were, but they were learning verbal, you know, reactive behavior. And so we devised this concept of a vibrotactile artform that would be accessible to deaf people, and probably only to deaf people, because it would be specifically geared to the capacities that they had. Hearing people would hear sound, but deaf people would just experience a vibration – because a lot of the deaf education in music was about vibration, people hearing music

through their fingers and stuff. So, you know, I'm just saying we developed the idea of a curriculum which was completely based on the student and the person and what they were interested in. And she went to, what's the name of that school? Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., which isn't that interesting. I don't know what happened to her afterwards, but I think she was very happy to do that senior project and not have to play a fucking organ. [Everybody laughs] That's just an example…

Raissa: And did you just go in on your own instinct about this, you know, teaching in this way, or was this something that felt like a Bard way to do it?

Ben: Oh, no. I mean, I was teaching. I was interacting with people at Columbia before. And that's why Joan was so convinced that I would come, 'cause she would like me to teach here.

Carl: Did you study a lot of pedagogical stuff, or did that just come out of your teaching and your general thinking?

Ben: I certainly didn't study pedagogical stuff. I thought that learning and thinking were something better done extra-institutionally, that institutional forms were regimenting thinking rather than promoting it, and that the categories of institutions are organized and designed to produce uniform results, and that the most valuable function of learning for individual people was the distinctness. Everybody had their own educational needs that they were more or less going to find in some compromising way when negotiating the standard educational situation. But I never did well with standard educational situations. I found them stultifying and intellectually stifling. And so it always seemed to me that school was a terribly inadequate form of education. I mean, it had its resources. Obviously, you went to school with other people and interacting with other people was your major way of learning, you know, reading books, listening to music, studying things.

Raissa: How did you inspire or help students get to that place where they would do what you're suggesting, learn outside of the institution?

Ben: Well, even when I was supposed to be a teacher…

Raissa: Yeah.

Ben: You know, you have a group of students, that somehow or another get signed up for this group, and you come into the group and you find out what the group, as a group and as a bunch of individuals, is interested in and would

be up for. And you design stuff to do and talk about and listen to and… I remember one thing much later on, toward the end of my time at Bard. I remember a workshop where I was saying to the students that if they wanted to do assignments, some sort of, they should give themselves assignments. It would be interesting to see what assignments they would give themselves. And one of the students got very incensed, and she said, "How am I supposed to know what assignment to give myself? You're the professor, you have the experience, you have the knowledge." And I said, "Well, I believe that you would be more precise in finding the right thing for yourself to do than I could possibly just generalize some cookie-cutter thing for everybody to do." And so she argued back and wouldn't hear of it. She was basically accusing me of not doing my job, which is perfectly reasonable because I probably didn't do it. But I said to her, "Here's a little exercise: if I got sick and I couldn't be in class tomorrow, and I called you up and I said, look, I can't be in class tomorrow, would you take over the class for me? And I said, if you agreed to do it, I bet what would happen would be [that] you would know exactly what to do because it's all about the role that you imagine yourself playing. So as a student, you think you're not supposed to take any responsibility for what you do. You just do what you are obliged to do. But if you're supposed to be the teacher, you have to come up with ideas for what the students are supposed to do. And you would do that because you are capable of it, just like anybody. And you think you're not because you've internalized this other role. But this actually had no effect on her at all. She was completely annoyed with me, and we didn't get anywhere.

Raissa: Lost cause? [Laughs]

Ben: But, you know, I'm just telling you how I was thinking.

Carl: Well, I remember vividly that the first time I ever heard this kind of talk was in one of your classes. I didn't hear this till much, much later elsewhere, where we would play things and talk about things, and you would never say, oh, I like this or like that. You would talk about what you were hearing. And it took a while for me to notice that. But it was very different from what I was getting elsewhere in school and elsewhere in life, and it wasn't until I was around a bunch of social workers that I started noticing more than that.

Ben: Well, I think, you know that college professors operate under a sort of internalized-role obligation. The story I told about this student is applicable: people feel obliged. And also there's a certain built-in insecurity that professors

have about being, you know, one person in this whole mob of students and they feel challenged, authority challenged, and they feel obliged to exert authority. The thing that made me comfortable with groups of people was that I didn't feel obliged to have authority officially. I said, look, if we don't have designated roles – if we're just two people and we're talking about something, and we don't know that one of us is entitled to have the right answer and the other is entitled only to receive wisdom from the other – then we just talk, and we have different experiences, and the character of our different experiences will be the coloration of our conversation. And it might involve that I know more about something than you do, and you know more about something than I do – and in the case where I know more, I'll be the authority. In some cases where you know more, you'll be the authority, but just functionally, not officially. So there's such a difference between an institutional role and a simple fact of circumstance.

Carl: That seems to be a big problem right now at Bard, to be honest. I hear a lot about this from students and professors. The students want less of what you're talking about as the one against many. They want more inclusiveness. And some of the professors can't deal with it. Some of them can, and some of the students can deal with it, and some of them can't. It's interesting.

Ben: The way I approached the situation was optimal for some students, and not for a lot. Everybody needs something different, everybody benefits from something different, and nobody's in charge of knowing what they would do best with. Everybody is entitled to their own educational program. I never thought that I had the answer for what would be good for everybody, but there were some people who would learn, would feel more well-served, by being in the kind of environment than I was inclined to interact with. And other people really like regular lecture classes, and it wasn't a question of a critique of people's sanity and purity or anything, it's just that different people would benefit from different types of learning. And learning is just a very general thing. I mean, what's learning? It's just a particular coloration of your life every day. People get a lot of security from  institutional structures, so that the people who liked working with me were people who didn't feel dependent on that kind of security so much.

Carl: Or welcomed by.

Ben: Yeah, well, there was always a danger of a cult mentality because, you know, "There's this great way of doing things and everybody should do this.

And anybody else who doesn't do it is a dork" kind of thing, which is not very healthy. And one of the principles I had personally was always to try to make sure we had different people all the time. Renew it so we didn't develop this in-group thing. It developed anyway, but I tried to counteract it by, you know, not thinking too unilaterally. And the idea that we had the answer to any large questions? Just question one thing at a time.

Carl: It was noticeable. I remember either you or Elie once suggesting to me, "Oh, here's a class in the psychology department. You would be perfect for this. You should take this class."

Ben: It was probably Elie, I don't think I…

Carl: Right. So I went to ask them. They're like, "No." What do you mean, no? "Of course you can't take that. You're a music student". "But my adviser said that I should ask you…" "No, go away."

Ben: Was that Frank Oja?

Carl: I mean, he's the one who accepted me too. I don't know.

Ben: Oh, he did?

Carl: Yeah.

Ben: So you mean there was another psychology professor?

Carl: No, it must have been him. But it just struck me as odd. I was like, "But they told me to take the class!" I was so used to your attitude in the music department.

Ben: Yeah.

Raissa: Well, some people had that. I remember thinking I needed to major in art, and I took a Jake Grossberg class. It was tough, hard, I had a hard time in it, and he took me in his office and he said, "I think you should major in anthropology." I mean, why did he think that? He just had that…

Ben: Because you're a person. Anthropology is about people. [Laughs]

Raissa: It became my major. I mean, how did it happen? He didn't know me that well. He was sort of a real tough guy, you know, you couldn't really impress him at all. And I just was, that was great. And the teacher welcomed me with no problem. I have the… "My art teacher told me I should major in this". I mean, I was interested. I wasn't like, you know…

Ben: You know, Jake was coming from a different place.

Raissa: Yeah. [Laughs]

Ben: He specialized in copping attitudes, and he was very proud, very forcefully.

Raissa: Oh, yeah.

Carl: Did you have any part in this? In the MFA program starting out?

Ben: I was part of the formulators of it, and I was in the group of people that was asked by Leon to form the MFA program. And as a result of interacting with that group for a month or two, I quit because I thought they were about to make a school that I didn't really like the idea of so much. And then I came back on board when they actually started the program, and I taught in the MFA program for the first three years. But it was never a happy marriage, because they were kind of… I remember Adolfas yelling at my students after one of our group demonstrations, "Who, who is the composer?" He was incensed that we had this collective presentation and it was not identified for him who was the great genius artist and who were just the people. At that point we were in Bard Hall, and I remember I yelled across the room. I said, "Adolfas, have you ever been a teacher?" Which is kind of nasty, but, you know, meaningful. And he stood up very straight and said, "I am a professor." I felt very bad at that point.

Raissa: The publications *Perspectives of New Music* and then *Open Space*, those things were more catching your interest than some of these things, like joining up with the MFA program. Would that be correct…?

Ben: I started *Perspectives of New Music* when I was still a graduate student.

Raissa: But you kept it going while you were at Bard.

Ben: Well, it was kind of an international institution by that time. We had our office in the basement of Brook House. It really didn't ever have much to do with Bard, completely separate. In fact, I was kind of a pain. Leon was incensed about it because he felt like it did not really identify itself enough with Bard. Bard was giving it a home and housing it, and I never really made any serious attempt to connect Bard.

Raissa: You kept it independent. You wanted that.

Ben: It never came up in my mind as an issue. I mean, there was no way that Bard and *Perspectives* had anything to do with each other. And anyway, I started *Perspectives*—the first issue of *Perspectives* was back in '60, '62 – so by

the time it came to Bard, it was already an institution of its own. We had an office in New York, but Bard was nice enough to give me a place to do it so I didn't have to go down to New York. So, yeah, I don't think *Perspectives* ever really cut any ice at Bard, except we functioned there and Nona was our managing editor. Which was wonderful. She was great. Why'd you…what did you think about…

Raissa: Oh, you were just talking about education or learning in general, like how that fits in. Like putting out a publication is another way of sharing…

Ben: Well, the history of *Perspectives* is very much in sync with that, because the whole idea of *Perspectives* was… I was graduate student at Brandeis, sitting there with a couple of my friends who were also graduate students in New York City, at the Reggio Cafe on MacDougal Street. People were just lamenting the fact that we were not finding very much to read in the literature that was available at that time about contemporary music. And so I said, "Well, why don't we just start a magazine, and get people to write and collect things? We would have stuff to read." I thought it was a great idea. So we went back up to Brandeis and conferred with my teacher, Arthur Berger, who had done some magazines at that time. When he was younger, he also wrote a column for the Saturday Review, so he thought it was a nice idea. Anyway, so that's where the idea started.

Raissa: You published it yourselves?

Ben: Well, no, we didn't do anything at the time. We just tried to get people interested in it. We went around talking to groups of graduate students at various universities around this area, and we couldn't find anybody who was interested in anything except promoting their product. And we weren't interested in that. We were interested in having stuff to read. It was a completely different issue. And then I went to UCLA from Brandeis, and at UCLA I had this conversation with Lukas Foss, who is the main guy there in composition, and after being there for about a month or two, I said to him, "I'm leaving." And he said "Why are you leaving?", and I said "Because L.A. sucks, and California sucks, and this place really gives me the willies. I want to get out of here." He said, "Oh no, no, you don't have to do that. This is the land of opportunity. You can do anything you want here, it's open. But what do you want to do?" And I said, "I'd like to have a place where we could play our music. And I'd like to have a place where we can publish our writing." And he said, "We can do that."

Raissa: Nice.

Ben: So, he got me up to the University of California Press, and they thought it was a nice idea, [so] we started a magazine. I had to have some position, so he gave me an assistant professorship at UCLA. And it was all set to go. And I had actually set up the first issue for publication, and then a guy who's a musicologist, a Viennese musicologist, came back from leave. And he was a senior professor, and he said, “Hey guys, what's been going on while I’ve been gone?” Lukas said, “Well, we have this great thing with this composers’ magazine.” [He said] “Composers’ magazine, what’s that?” So Lukas said, “Well, we have this guy [who’s] going to be the editor, and we’ve named him an assistant professor, and he's 22 years old.” And he said, “Yeah, over my dead body.” So that was where that went. But there’s a lot of history. This is not Bard stuff.

Raissa: Yeah.

Ben: *Perspectives* really had very little overlap with Bard in my life, except for the fact that Nona and I were physically working there. But, you know, none of the bright students, they were just not into the kind of thing that was being published in *Perspectives*. In fact, I think I could think of two or three people who were studying music at Bard, for whom the sort of thing that we were publishing was of interest. You probably didn’t know Mark Rosenberg?

Raissa: No.

Ben: He was here when I got here… Lissa Shelness, and Marjorie Tichenor. But it was a completely different thing.

Raissa: Yeah.

Carl: So when they recruited you because of Zeena talking about your teaching…

Ben: Joan. Joan Tower.

Carl: Joan, sorry.

Ben: Well, Elie knew me also because he knew me in New York and, actually, I got Elie to write an article about Israeli music for *Perspectives*, but we used to run into each other in the city. And when I was teaching at Columbia, he was working at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Studio. He had done electronic music in Israel. But mostly I used to run into him and Nona, walking

around the Village at three in the morning. I had a studio in Washington Square when I was teaching at NYU, and I would finish working mid-morning and, to clear my head before I went to sleep, take a walk, and I would run into them, similarly night owls. So we would get to know each other that way.

Raissa: So we want to make sure to ask you about the computerized sound, that you were one of the first people to start making music with computers?

Ben: Yeah, I didn't invent the technology. People at Princeton invented the technology, and they were my friends and teachers, Jim Randall and Godfrey Winham in particular. But I used the technology. The thing was that I composed music that was too difficult. People played it in New York, you know. They were very good players and they would work very hard and play the pieces, but they couldn't really do [it]. And it just felt like a strange way to interact with other human beings to, you know, turn them into the automatistic instruments of my expression. It's not like a regular classical musician, even in an orchestra where they kind of play music, they don't just execute these mechanical instructions. Because the kind of music I was composing was so difficult, so complicated, that you just barely… In order to produce it, you just had to, you know, do your job, and it wasn't like an expressive activity. And I felt very bad; I don’t want to use my fellow human beings this way. So I got the idea that it was a good idea to be my own performer and to perform this kind of music; the best way to do that would be to make computer music and do it electronically. So that's why I did that, and did this piece.

Raissa: You got help with that, then, like you said? At Princeton people helped you with how to work the computer? Or you just did your own…?

Ben: Oh, I just learned how to do it. Godfrey had produced his manual, so it wasn't that hard, once you knew what the principles were and the techniques were.

Raissa: Was it in the patchchord world of things, or strictly…

Ben: I didn't do that. I did some four-track pieces when I was at Bard, actually. I didn't do analog electronics, no, I just did computer. That was much more intuitive, because it’s more like making scores. So the hands-on stuff, no. I mean, I can't cut a straight line with a pair of scissors, so I never did that.

Raissa: I read some of that about your music with computers. I saw this Sisters with Transistors documentary about people like Pauline Oliveros and stuff, with the patchcords…

Ben: Oh, yes. Pauline was a pioneer in the San Francisco Tape Studio. She was working with Robert Erickson out there in the late ‘50s, the early ‘60s. No, I didn't do that sort of thing.

Carl: One thing that I found really liberating about taking music at Bard was that there was not a distinction between music sound and non-music sound. We were making sound, and then we’re going to listen to it as sound. Did you have a moment where you started to think about sound in that way, or did it just naturally arise out of your teaching?

Ben: Well, it certainly came out into this course that you were in. Were you in one called Sound Consciousness?

Carl: I think so, yeah.

Ben: Because the same workshop started out with a different name, and the name was *Concerning Ears: What's in them, around them, behind them and between them*. That was the original name. And the idea was being expansive, out of a center of music, to the whole world of just taking in the world as a listening project, and to produce things. So it kind of grew up that way, and so it wasn't really outside of music. It was a way of hearing the world as music and of thinking of anything as potentially music, without being officially music. It was a way of thinking about music as a way of taking in sound in the world. That was how it evolved.

Carl: Well, it was very powerful. It's a striking thought, the first time you come across it. And I guess it comes out of your feeling about listening to people and, you know, to things.

Ben: Shortly after that one, I did another – I have a piece called *Language, as a Music* that I wrote in 1978, and the thinking on that translated into an idea for Bard, which I called *Language, as a Language*. Which is the idea that you think about all the different ways that things can be language. That one got me in trouble with Leon, actually – and the following one! It was one among many things – but that one in particular, because we had developed these ideas of different modes of symbolizing communication. So as we got through the semester, we got different vocabularies and different forms in which to

formulate our communication with each other. So on the last crite sheet of the semester for each person, I sent a communication on their crite sheet which was a drawing.

Raissa: A drawing?

Ben: A drawing which was specifically to them from me, and it would be a message that they would understand specifically because of the work we'd been doing in developing this approach to language. And, you know, two minutes after those crite sheets went out, I was in Leon's office being screamed at…

Raissa: I love that.

Ben: …that I was making a mockery of everybody's work and humiliating Annys Wilson who was in charge of administering crite sheets. It was so sad. And then what was even more sad was that at some point I said to him, “Well, I get your point, Leon, so just tear those up and I'll just do whatever you tell me.” He said, “No, you have academic freedom. I will defend your academic freedom to the death!” Yeah, yeah, right.

Carl: I remember seeing one of my class descriptions for the class that I was in with you at the end of a New Yorker article, as a humorous–

Ben: Oh, yeah, that was a bad episode. You know, it was strange because they treated it as for the joke, but to this day, reading it, I can't even imagine – it seems kind of sober, that particular description. It says, you know, how do we do this? The idea was called Creating Thursdays, and it wasn't even my idea. In this class I had called Study and Practice, we went through the semester and we had such a great time. I said to the group, “Well, do you want to keep doing this next semester?” They said “Yeah, okay, let's keep doing it, but we need to have another project. We can’t just keep doing the same thing – so what should we do?” So they went, “Why don't we imagine creating a day on which we do things, and the focus is not on that we're doing this, and that by doing things we're creating a day for ourselves.” So I wrote it up like that, and I said, “the means by which we create a day”, you know, composing music and writing and all this stuff. So it was all pretty standard. But then somebody sent it in to [the New Yorker]; I think it was somebody in the administration. And the Bard people didn't appreciate it. They felt like I had given them a bad name. And I said, “Why do you want to read humor magazines? Yeah, you want to do jokes, but I don't read humor magazines.”

Raissa: I'd like to see some of those…

Ben: It was strictly a misunderstanding, Carl, because there was a sense that I was countercultural, you know, sort of running and doing things, being oppositional.

Carl: For the purpose of doing them?

Ben: Yeah, well, it was an attitude of, you know, apartheid. I didn't have that…

Carl: I didn't feel that at all. The classes seemed very natural to me.

Ben: Well, I was rather concerned, not because… I felt there were some people, for example, even in the educational context, who would really benefit from a much more standard type of academic approach because they were naturally put together that way, and they learned better that way, felt better that way. So I never felt like it was a political thing in that sense. It was political in a certain sense: in the sense that I believe that people should have the freedom to have choices.

Carl: But I think that's threatening to the other people who don't want to give up their podium.

Ben: Of course, of course. But it's better not to think like that. You know? I was a pretty good citizen. I functioned in the Arts division as a peacemaker more than anything else, trying to reconcile people's positions. I was on the Faculty Senate a couple of times, and on the Executive Committee. I did not act antagonistically toward the community. I was very much interested in promoting community. The first thing I did when I got to Bard, I observed that Bard had top-down governance: that before Leon got here, the president was running the school and the faculty was just coming to the faculty meeting. I thought the faculty should be more of a community. So I proposed getting together with people, and I formed something called the Wednesday Group, which was just named [after] the day we met. Let's all get together and just, you know, kick around what we're interested in, and see if we find common interest. And that became kind of a controversial thing, like it was like an alternative power structure or something. So the point is, you can't win them all, but you certainly can lose them all [Raissa and Carl laugh]. So anyway, I don't feel like I was in a position against anything. I mean, I was against people being regimented and I was against… I was against [the] Olin classroom

building because I knew it would change Bard completely, to have people line up to get into the building, to go to classes instead of…

Raissa: Like a regular-looking school.

Ben: Yeah, kind of, because after lunch every day, people would come out of Kline commons and they would be in groups of friends, two or three, and be walking to their different classes all over the campus. And it was an image of, you know, a town. But the Olin building, it's an institution, everybody getting in line, getting in the front door. And that's a completely different environment. So I was very… When I first was chair, and talking about trying to create the music community, I used to put out these memos -- you know, high morale memos. So I developed an idea called the Annandale House Natural Beautification Project.

Raissa: [Laughs] Yeah.

Ben: And I said, everybody in this community should think of something, every day, to make Annandale House a little less grungy. Do something first, plant something, whatever, make it big, and make a nice environment for us to be doing music in. And the one thing I don't want you to do is to make a path to the front door. Let's just see where people walk naturally, and then we'll make the path after we see where they walk. These were the kinds of ideas I had. It worked pretty well actually; I think people felt good about the way they became a community. By the time you got here it was a little bit too old to see. In 1978 I went on leave, and you both came after that. And that was a crisis for me because I'd had five years, an intense five years of doing this, and I'd felt burned out before I got here. I went to Italy, and I sat around in Italy thinking: can I go back and keep teaching, does it make sense for me? So I figured, well, if I'm going to do that, I just have to really rethink the whole issue from the ground up. Really design my own relationship to it and what I would offer people. So I invented what became known as Workshops A and B. The idea of Workshop B was my first idea. In Workshop B was a situation where everybody in the community could propose a project and announce that they wanted to do their project, and then a group would form of people who would respond to that announcement that they would like to do the project with that person, and that would be our curriculum, my curriculum. And I said, okay, well, that would be great, but it probably can't be done with people who have no prior… I'm the one who's thinking about it; the students were just bewildered by it. So

what you need is some kind of a workshop that's like a bootcamp for Workshop B. I called it…

Raissa: To get you prepared, kind of…

Ben: I called it Workshop A. I didn't have a… Workshop A was the opposite. It was all-day, every-day immersion, together, and we did it. We had this fantastic thing going for a year, Workshop A. That was before either of you got here, so you never heard about it. Did you know… You probably knew quite a few people who were in it?

Raissa: Well, some of my friends that I have some memory of… Doug and Dave Henderson, a couple people later who said they were in—I thought it was with you—this guerrilla music class? Where music would happen, like, in the bushes, like where someone would walk up to the library and then—

Ben: Oh, we did happen—

Raissa: —music would happen, by surprise. I think that was with Chris Cochrane. I don't know which other people you had. Love his music so much.

Ben: That was a little later, that was more like in your era. Sure. But that just kind of came out of this day, which was devoted to protesting nuclear weapons. And that had something to do with Ed Sanders' class. You know Ed Sanders, and his piece called *The Karen Silkwood Cantata*?

Raissa: Was he in The Fugs? Woodstock?

Ben: Yeah, yeah. But he's a writer, a great writer. And he organized some socio-creative activities here around political issues. So anyway, it was a big anti-nuclear-war day. And I was thinking about what should the music department do on this day? I developed an idea that instead of demonstrating and, you know, doing those kinds of warlike things, we would have something I called the DMZ, the demilitarized zone. I put a perimeter around Annandale House, and what we were going to do on that day was show what you might do with your life instead of nuclear war. The kind of activity that you think would be much nicer to do than making war. So that was the origin of the guerrilla groups who… We put speakers on the roof of Annandale House with music playing, with…

Raissa: The pictures of this would be great, if there were some evidence of this to share, right? Back before anybody had cameras on them.

Ben: Ah, you know, it wasn’t for a monument. It wasn't for that, it was for the experience of doing these things. But then demonstrations were all about one's own experience and what it would feel like living life as you would like it to be, you know, supposing you had control over that.

Raissa: Like instead of against something, for something. Right?

Ben: No – because, I mean, this is nothing original, but blurring the line between your way of life and going to school was an idea that… a lot of people have had that idea, more in elementary school, you know, Summerhill-type places, I guess.

Carl: My wife went to Summerhill.

Ben: Oh, she did? Yeah, I almost went to a school in New York that was a little bit like that. When I was a kid my parents wanted to send me to a progressive school called the Little Red Schoolhouse, which wasn't Communist “red” [laughs]. But the war happened. I happened to be born in 1934, so was just about ready to go to school when the Second World War happened, so it wasn't a good idea to send me to Manhattan from Brooklyn to go to school. So I just went to this elementary school in the neighborhood. But there were plenty of places using John Dewey ideas and, you know, Bard was founded as a John Dewey School. Did you know that? Yeah, the Bard Foundation was… John Dewey was at Columbia, and he was a very powerful presence and very much full of these ideas about education, and those ideas about progressive education were getting a lot of currency in the twenties and thirties in America. But the traditionalist institutions resisted converting their ways of teaching. They wanted to maintain their academic standards. John Dewey’s idea was the idea of learning as a living thing, rather than as an institutional thing. So the way they responded at Columbia, it was not the only school that was founded this way, it was by establishing small colleges as adjuncts to them. Big college, big university. And Bard was bought by Columbia at that time. It had been St. Stephen's Seminary, or whatever it was, and it became Bard College of Columbia University, which was still an issue even by the time I got here, because Columbia owned the land that Bard was on. It created a lot of financial problems for Bard. So they established this school, Bard College, for the Progressive Education Division of Columbia. But in 1950, Bard’s population being like it was, they began agitating for going coed. Columbia, being a male school, wouldn't hear of it, so they refused to let Bard go coed under their aegis. So Bard voted to go independent, and that's sort of when they started to

go broke, because Columbia was not going to support them anymore. So by the time I got to Bard, it was on the verge of bankruptcy and they were selling land, half the campuses, Forest Park, Linden Acres—they sold it because they were not going to survive. So that's one reason why I was an advocate for having Leon as President, against most of the other people.

Raissa: You saw something in him that you thought could pull Bard out of it—

Ben: Well, I could see that he would make it into a completely different school than the one I had wanted to come to teach at. But that would be the only way it would survive. And I thought that my values were that the people who were working here needed to have jobs and needed to feed family, needed to eat. And that the kind of school that I loved, that Bard had been, was not going to make it. The only way it would survive would be with somebody like Leon, who had ideas, and they were very mainstream ideas. They would plug into the mainstream and he would be able to find the means to keep it going, supported. But it was going to go bankrupt. It was going bankrupt, as this kind of avant-garde place that it was before. But, you know, I think I don't know too much about how it literally is. It's been a long time, but it's still different from other places, I think.

Raissa: When did you stop teaching at Bard?

Ben: In '97.

Raissa: Was Wadada Leo Smith here when you were still teaching?

Ben: Oh, Leo Smith.

Raissa: Because I see some music you made with him recently.

Ben: I brought him here, yeah. No, no, I got him to do—it was a very strange story. Another strange story, which, I mean, half the things I'm saying are probably not for publication. Um, you want another story of Leo Smith?

Raissa: Sure. I love his music.

Ben: Well, I knew Leo Smith's music. I knew him personally. I knew his music from the early '60s. And I always thought he was a wonderful, interesting musician, but he was very radical, very violent. And so we got to this point in the late '80s when Elie retired and the department kind of – there was this disintegration that happened, and we were not really communicating. We weren't really on the same wavelength. Joan had come back from… Joan's

transformation was when she became sort of a classical music, concert music, celebrity composer, like that thing she had at St. Louis. She was a composer in residence at the St. Louis Symphony, and it transformed her into a different kind of figure. When she came back, Leon wanted her to be the leading figure in the music department. He was always very uncomfortable with the music department that Elie and I had more or less—I mean, we were the only two full-time faculty here. Luis was half-time, and Joan was half-time, and Janet Wheeler. So the character of the music department was what Elie and I more or less produced. And Leon was very uncomfortable with it. It wasn't what he wanted. He had a very specific background in music; he went to the University of Chicago. But more than that, he came from a very traditional musical background. When I was advocating for him to be president, people said to me, "Oh, you just want Leon to be president because he's a musician." And I said, "Wha—you got your head up your ass! You think that's what I need? That's what I need in life, is a musician for a boss." I mean, it was kind of stupid to think that, but no, it was really an act of social responsibility on my part. I was thinking about the population of the faculty, and that I didn't want to see people lose their jobs. So it worked out—it was very strange. There were many things about the recruiting of the president that were kind of unusual. One of them was the tradition at Bard of always having Episcopal ministers for president. And that was a big issue. Not that they were going for Episcopal ministers, although Fritz Schaefer considered himself to be a candidate—a major candidate. He thought he should be president. But most of the candidates were distinguished people of retirement age who would come to Bard and grace it with their distinction, but they wouldn't really do anything: sit around and wait for it to go bankrupt, you know, sit in their rocking chair. But Leon was a 28-year-old kid, and he had all these ideas and all this energy and was very smart. And he had everything—all of his ideas were about what he might do, and not congenial to me personally, but, you know, it's not my—I had a job, which was to be doing something for the school, not for myself. So I advocated for him. But one of the things that wasn't so nice was that there was a certain amount of hesitancy to hire somebody who was not a Christian.

Raissa: Pft, really! Ooh.

Ben: If you can believe it. It seems strange. It seemed strange to me at the time. I mean, even Princeton was a little less rigid that way. Strange thing. Well, this brings up another little sidelight. When I first got to Bard there was no such thing as pass-fail courses – so they were thinking about, should they have pass-

fail courses? And they were thinking, what kind of pass-fail system should we have? So I said, well, I can think of one that you might try, and I outlined a certain pass-fail system. They said, “Oh, that's so ridiculous, that’s hippie stuff, that’s radical!” I said, well, what kind of school would have that, Princeton?

Raissa: Oh, did Princeton have that? Wow.

Ben: No, I just told them that the program I described was the one that we had at Princeton. So I didn't think it was so radical. Anyway, they did. Anyway, they did something.

Raissa: Did you have a hand in hiring other music professors during your tenure?

Ben: Yeah. I'd say I probably had the biggest part of it because, as I said earlier, Elie and I were the only two full-time people, and I was the chair. We hired, well, when Roswell—

Raissa: You hired Roswell?

Ben: No, I said, “when Roswell left.” No, he was here. I hired Jeff Presslaff. He was here when you were here.

Raissa: Yeah, electronic music.

Ben: I hired Jeff Presslaff when he was a senior undergraduate at Princeton. I heard his senior project at Princeton, and I was really impressed with his music. So I asked him if he would be interested in coming to Bard. I don't think he was such a terrific teacher, but he's a wonderful musician, wonderful guy. Did you do anything with him?

Raissa: Yeah, I had that class with the patchcords and stuff—

Ben: Oh, with Jeff Presslaff?

Raissa: With Jeff, yeah! It was so much fun.

Ben: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I know. He's still in touch, great guy. And then when Joan—you know, Joan was quarter-time, and she was mostly a piano teacher. And when she got to be half time and then went on leave, we hired Julia Haines and Chuck Stein. You were probably here during that time. That was—

Raissa: Yeah, I wish I’d taken a class with him.

Ben: That was ‘79, ‘80, something like that. You remember Julia? You do know Julia Haines?

Raissa: No!

Ben: She was kind of a folk musician.

Riassa: Yeah, I see her name on some of the course descriptions. But you said Leo Smith, were you responsible for bringing him?

Ben: Oh, well, it was an interesting event because at that time, after Elie left, we were kind of sitting around and more or less agreeing to disagree. And so I devised a scheme. I figured that the way things were among us, that we shouldn't try to come to an agreement about who we would hire, that the best way to do it was that each of us would hire somebody that we would feel good about hiring. And then the other people, everybody would have—and there were four half-time positions that we were filling. So three of them with one, Luis would do one and Joan would do one, I would do one. And then there was a fourth one which I said, okay, let's—we’ll try to do that by consensus. So I hired Richard Teitelbaum.

Raissa: Oh!

Ben: And Joan hired Daron Hagen, you know him?

Raissa: No.

Ben: And Luis hired Sarah Rothenberg, because that's who Leon wanted.

Raissa: Right, they started the Bard Music Festival together.

Ben: So the fourth one was going to be the jazz person. So I was thinking, you know, who could I come up with, that would be helpful, that Joan would feel okay about. So I tried to come up with, you know, people that would be kind of moderately traditionalist, or whatever, and I came up with Marilyn Crispell.

Raissa: Oh, she’s wonderful.

Ben: And absolutely I made the wrong judgment there, because the thing that I thought Joan would like about her was pretty much the thing that she didn't like about her, namely, female. She did not want another female or a strong female personality, apparently. This did not emerge in conversation exactly, but I couldn't imagine why she was so negative about Marilyn. I basically specifically thought of Marilyn because I thought she would be somebody that

Joan would like musically. Well, anyway, Joan and I had a conversation on the telephone and she said, "Oh, by the way, you know, I just talked to my brother, who's a lawyer in Washington, and he just went to this jazz concert in Washington, and he heard this guy he thought is a fantastic player, and said, why don't we hire him?" Who was this? "He said, well, he was called Leo Smith." I almost fell down and fainted because I would have been overjoyed. I would never have dared to think that I could propose Leo Smith, with his avant-garde jazz and his avant-garde Black politics and his dreadlocks. And she was proposing this, and she didn't even know who he was; it was her brother who had liked his music, so that made him okay. I said, okay, if you want Leo Smith!

Raissa: Interesting how things happen.

Ben: But as soon as he showed up at Bard, I knew he wasn't going to last very long.

Raissa: He wasn't here very long?

Ben: No. And uh… I mean, I don't know what you think about Bard, but it's… not exactly what it's supposed to be. I knew that he wasn't going to last very long because they had a picture in, uh, some Bard publicity thing, maybe the magazine or something of the new faculty. And they had Leo on the right-hand side, and they had cut off his dreadlocks in the photograph. So when I saw that, I said, "Leo's dead meat. He's not gonna last at this school." And he didn't like it that much. He wasn't—he wasn't comfortable, you know. But we were good friends and we played a lot together and, you know, spent a lot of time talking, corresponded when we put out this CD.

Raissa: This is recent, right, your music with him?

Ben: Yeah, these last couple of years, yup.

[Fourth person]: Do you have a copy?

Raissa: No. I mean, I just saw it on the Open Space.

[Fourth person]: Can I get that one?

Ben: Sure, whatever you like.

Raissa: Oh, I'd love that, I'd love that!

Ben: You can have anything you'd like; we have lots of CDs. Nobody likes CDs anymore.

Raissa: I still do it! I still have a cassette player in my car.

Ben: But I'm just digitizing all these cassettes from that time, like my session with Carl. I'm going to make a website, I'm going to have all these sessions. I have 2000 sessions—

Raissa: Wow!

Ben: —that I did. My whole creative music life between 1979 and 1991 was playing these sessions with people. I didn't do any desk composition during that time. It's never been anywhere but in my house.

Raissa: So you'll just share that on a website, and say who's with you, and…?

Ben: Yeah. Exactly. Sharing is like, you know, a euphemism for showing it.

Raissa: Yeah, yeah!

Ben: I mean, and people say they're going to share their work with you… They're pushing their product, right? Anyway, so that's the story.

Raissa: Are you always thinking of the next, who you're go—I mean, this is an archival project you're doing. But are you also still doing this thing with Leo? Are there other people you have plans to play with or record with?

Ben: No. My composition since the 1990s, mid-1990s, has all been more like desk composition. I haven't done the playing thing at all. I guess the last playing I did was in the early 2000s. It was so much tied with the work I was doing with groups of people at Bard. I did a lot of solo playing, it's just meditation I would call it, I guess, keyboard solo and playing, sort of interacting with myself. But I'm listening to these and, you know, that's a whole other topic. I'm kind of blown away by the fact that as I'm listening to them, they—to my surprise—more or less live up to the propaganda. You know, the idea that you would just be open to things, and that things would happen and that you would discover all kinds of things you didn't know about yourself and other people. And I find I'm listening to these things with that kind of wonder, and just listening to all this music, and very little of it is much like the music I compose formally, just all kinds of things come out of me. I'm discovering music that's latent within me that I didn't even have any idea was there. And it was all being brought out by this interaction I was doing with everybody who came to the house. A lot of it, I'd say 60% of it, was in the house, and 40% of it was at Bard. But we didn't do too much, right? We did a couple of sessions.

Carl: A couple sessions here, a bunch at Bard.

Ben: We did a bunch at Bard. In what configuration did we do them at Bard? Here it was just you and me.

Carl: Yeah. I remember doing a bunch of different things with Bruce—

Ben: Bruce Huber.

Carl: —and, uh, who was the woman who—she had, uh, I remember one of her compositions was called "Let the Passers By." I just love that title. I can't remember her name now. But I remember working with her. My favorite memory—

Ben: Was she part of a group that I was part of?

Carl: Yeah.

Ben: You're not ringing a bell with me right now.

Carl: Yeah, I'll ask my mom. She'll remember the name. My favorite memory of classroom work at Bard is, there was one class where we all had our own tape machines. And we would sit in different parts of the room and do a composition together, and then listen to the individual tapes and how different they were, and how that informed your thinking about them. Yeah, that was really powerful, too.

Ben: That was an extension of Sound Consciousness. You know, we explored a lot of that kind of thing. Yeah, we were constantly trying things that were interesting ideas. The most interesting ideas are sort of at the idea level: they don't necessarily translate into things you want to listen to again.

Raissa: Yeah.

Carl: Sometimes doing them is the high point.

Ben: Yeah. Yup. It's always interesting. Did you work with the Electronic Music Studio?

Carl: Not so much.

Ben: You did.

Raissa: Just had that class with Jeff, you know, and—

Ben: What did you mostly do? I knew you were a drummer.

Raissa: Yeah. I didn't study music, really, at Bard, it was anthropology, but I was into recorded improvisational music, and wrote about that. That was my project. But it was anthropology. But drum set, playing drum set. I went to India one semester. I got tablas—

Ben: Did you know Brooks?

Raissa: —I kind of got into that for a while. Hm?

Ben: Did you know Brooks Parsons?

Raissa: No.

Ben: He was a tabla player. I did a lot of sessions with him.

Raissa: There was a guy who was in the music—around music—who played, um...I think he had a sarod?

Carl: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Montaigne, something.

Raissa: He played in Brook House a couple times. He had, like, an electronic-y tabla timbre thing, but he played the sarod. And then I went to India after I saw him, so it hit me, so...maybe he just came to visit. He didn't teach at Bard.

Ben: What was the name of the guy you guys worked for?

Raissa: John Storm Roberts?

Ben: Yeah. John Storm Roberts, right. So you both worked at the same time?

Carl: Yep.

Raissa: Yep. No, I was writing my senior project. I thought I was going to write about Himalayan drumming styles, and I was looking for a book. And then my father read about John from the Whole Earth catalog, and I called him, and he was like, "Hey, sure, I can get you that book. I need a little part time help!" Right? So that's how I first met John. And then you came to work and got in there.

Ben: So you guys worked—

Carl: He was hiring; she's like, "We need Carl."

Ben: So you guys worked together on that?

Carl: Yeah, yeah.

Raissa: Yeah. It was a blast. I learned a lot of geography.

Carl: Yes, yes!

Raissa: Speaking of gamelan, we had recordings from all over the world right in the barn.

Ben: Yeah. Right. Yeah, it was a good time. It seems that things were a little more open at that time. Maybe it was an economics thing, that things were not so ferociously expensive to do that, I don't know…

Raissa: Well, John did such great work, but it never was financially, you know…

Ben: Oh, no, I'm sure—

Raissa: I mean, the fancy people like David Byrne came in, and he… People had money with a lot of the world music labels, and John couldn't compete on that level, you know? He had the stuff, but not the resources to promote it, right? I don't know, is that simplifying too much? But…

Ben: When did you start working at Bard?

Carl: Working at Bard? In…sheesh. Well, I worked a little bit in the late '90s, and then came back about fifteen years ago. So, yeah, in 1990-something. No, two-thou—I don't know. Heh! It's terrible—

Raissa: Too many years have gone by.

Ben: You lived around here the whole time?

Carl: No, I went to New York and I worked for New York City for a while, and then I got tired of it.

Ben: I think I remember that.

Carl: Yeah. Worked for homeless services.

Ben: Mm-hm. I think I remember that. [to Raissa] Have you been around the whole time?

Raissa: I went to New York and to Boston, you know, just like waitressing and playing drums and not knowing what I was gonna do in my life. And then I came back up here to work for Original Music again. And, you know, bartended and did this and that, and then got a job for the Bard Music Festival.

Ben: Do you play with people at Bard a lot?

Raissa: The music I play with people [is] various, all over the place. Not necessarily at Bard, you know, because even though I'm involved with the classical music, I'm not really playing that…

Ben: Right, I just meant that the people that you played with, were they not a lot of Bard people?

Raissa: Not a lot of Bard—I mean, when I went to school—

Ben: You had a band, right?

Raissa: We played together, you know, in various… We recorded in Annandale House and things like that.

Ben: But you guys played together.

Carl: Yeah, yeah.

Raissa: I think for one of our little tapes, Adam Yauch was the engineer—you know, the guy from the Beastie Boys?

Ben: How did you ever escape playing a session with me?

Raissa: I don't know! I feel gypped. I remember a couple of things, though, with you where there was a woman who was a tap—she was a dance major, and she wanted to do a piece, like tap dancing and drums. And she invited you to help. And I think you came with a keyboard kind of a synthesizer thing. And we did a recording.

Ben: In Bard Hall?

Raissa: No, it was in, uh… if I remember right, in Woods Studio.

Ben: Woods Studio?

Raissa: Like, in a big open dance space, is my memory. That you were always sort of supportive if somebody had an idea and "okay," you know. I remember that.

Ben: I don't remember this particular thing. I remember that, every week, we used to do a thing in Bard Hall called Open Space.

Raissa: I went to a couple of those. I remember my friend China was involved in a couple of those. China Joran is her name. She's in my timeframe. And, uh…

Ben: Yeah, it's amazing…

Raissa: I have some idea of her in saran wrap or something.

Ben: You know, what's so weird is these tapes I have, these cassettes of all these sessions, every one of them has a name on it, but they don't have last names mostly. And it's so annoying because—

Raissa: We can brainstorm with you on certain years!

Ben: I feel so completely absurd and ridiculous that I can't remember people's last names, I don't know who they are. I just tracked somebody down, just the other day. There was one tape I was listening to and I thought it was really interesting, and it had the name 'Margot' on it, and it was in the '80s. So I went to the Facebook group about Bard in the '80s and I tried to get, you know… Oh, I know what happened. I typed in 'Margot' and it came up with this photo, which had been put there by Bruce Huber. So I emailed Bruce, who I'm in touch with, and I said "Well, who's Margot?" He said, "Oh, I know Margot but I don't remember her last name."

Carl: She had a band, do you remember that?

Raissa: Margot? No, I don't know.

Carl: Yeah.

Ben: Well, he said, "But there might be other people who remember her", and he mentioned a guy named Max Goldstein, you know who I mean? Yeah, well, he's somebody on that list of "Bard in the '80s," so I Messengered him, and he wrote back saying he thinks it might be Margot Day.

Raissa: Oh, that sounds familiar.

Ben: So I looked up Margot Day on Google, and it turns out Margot Day is a huge international celebrity singer, and she just lives in the Caribbean somewhere.

Carl: Fabulous!

Ben: She puts out these CDs and wins Grammys and whatever. But on her website there was an email address, so I wrote her an email, and got a reply in about an hour.

Raissa: Oh, nice!

Ben: It was incredible. And she was just saying, "Oh, I was just talking the other day about what a great time I had playing sessions and music with you at Bard."

And it's incredible. It was like a fairy tale, you know—those things, they just don't happen. But there it was. So I was able to trace Margot Day. But there are all these other people who will forever remain anonymous. I mean, first name.

Carl: Yes.

Raissa: That's great. You tracked her down. I mean, that whole thing of how much a lot of professors, you included, influenced so many students. I mean, this Adam Yauch, who happened to be a friend of mine also, who was in the Beastie Boys, he got an honorary degree a few years before he died.

Ben: Oh, Adam. Yeah.

Raissa: And he went on this long thing of some concert in the chapel with, like, you know, lawnmowers. And somehow Elie was involved because he was the teacher of the class. And, you know, Guy Yarden was there, and there were, like, lawnmowers as part of this piece. And he said it just—it was like nothing like that had ever happened before. And it turned him on to the rest of his Bard experience.

Ben: Yeah, well, I knew Adam because Luis was… We used to have conversations about music teaching, and Luis felt that he was kind of getting a little bit lost, because things were developing in the world, and he was kind of feeling out of it. So I suggested to him that maybe we should just do something together. He liked that idea. So I proposed that we do a kind of workshop together, which would be a record party. Everybody would come, and would bring the records that they would like to listen to, and play them for everybody else. He thought that was… He actually thought it was kind of a strange idea, because his idea of class was that you learn something. But he knew that if I did it, it was going to be a little bit strange, but it was certified, okay? So Adam was in that class, and he had a great time. And he was the most—probably the most interesting, lively person in that class. So I don't know. I wasn't involved in the thing you're telling me about, but, uh…

Raissa: You guys all got through to him, and turned him on enough to inspire him, you know?

Ben: Yeah. Yeah, it was a very lively group, and he was very interesting. There was a guy…a guy named Yetnikoff—

Ben: Dan.

Raissa: Oh, yeah!

Ben: —in that class. I remember that was…

Raissa: Yeah. Another interesting… More on the guitar, and singing after a while. But, um, yeah, I liked him.

Ben: Yeah.

Raissa: Any last question we want to make sure to ask? Anything you want to put on the record?

Ben: Not even on the flip side.

Raissa: Well, it was something in one of the course descriptions, I was surprised to see your name next to it, it said something like "Rock and Roll Tuesdays" or something.

Ben: Oh, that one. Oh, but the phrase "nothing on the flip side" actually comes from the course description. This is the history of classic American pop music that I did in the early-to-mid-'70s, and it said in the last sentence, "… and there would be nothing on the flip side."

Raissa: No "Side B." Well, thank you so much for talking with us.

Ben: Well, thank you. It was a lot of fun. You know, you're both great friends. I mean, from my point of view, I'm happy to see you—see you, and see about you.

*Transcribed by Zachary Ciancanelli and Joanna Luchese '25*