

**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
SOUTH VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview

DAVID AMRAM

By Liza Zapol

Putnam Valley, NY

January 28, 2014

Oral History Interview with David Amram, January 28, 2014

Narrator	David Amram
Birthdate	November 17, 1930
Birthplace	Philadelphia, PA
Interviewee Age at time of interview	83
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	David Amram's Home, Putnam Valley, NY
Date of Interview	1/28/2014
Duration of Interview	2 hours
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Yes
Format Recorded	Wav, 98 khz, 24 bit
Archival File Names	140128-001.wav; 140128-002.wav
MP3 File Name	Amram_DavidOralHistory1.mp3; Amram_DavidOralHistory2.mp3
Order in Oral Histories	1

Background/ Notes:

(Any events that happened before/ during the interview, that affect the interview or interview sound)

Interview was at Amram's home. His cat can be heard briefly during the interview, scratching the chair and on the table. His phone rang 2 times during the interview. The interview took place the morning after Pete Seeger died, and Amram was visibly affected by the loss and was also receiving calls throughout the day.

Partial re-editing of the transcript based on Amram's requests.

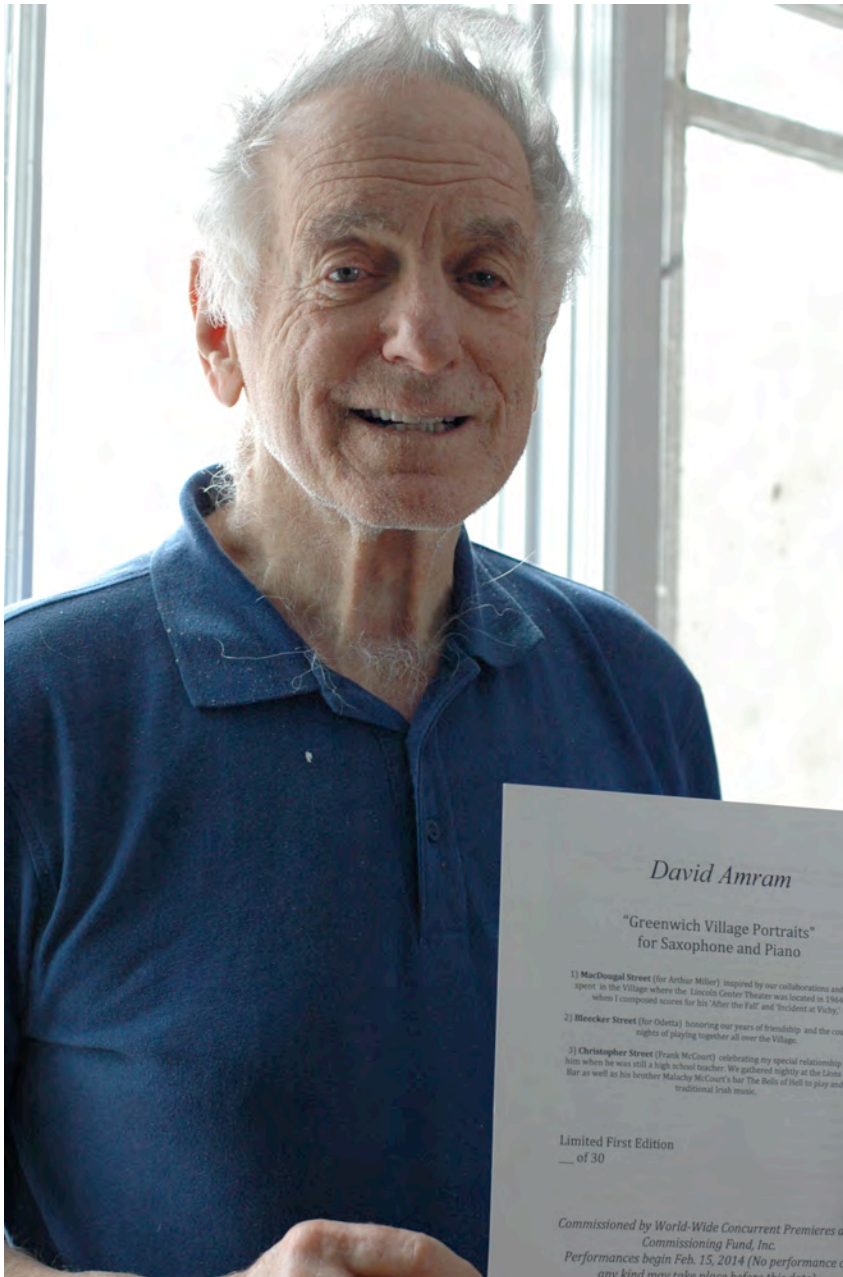
Additional Materials (shown or given to Oral Historian):

Given after interview:

A one-page description of David Amram's "Greenwich Village Portraits" for saxophone and piano

A DVD of a documentary film about Amram.

Several emails with additional documentary materials- saved in Research file on hard drive.



David Amram in his home in Putnam Valley, NY, January 28, 2014. Photograph by Liza Zapol. Additional photographs at end of transcript.

Quotes from Oral History Interview with David Amram

“It was constantly that way, where the Village was also a refuge—a refuge and an oasis for very successful people who found out that that wasn’t the end answer to what they’d been searching for in life—that very often that position engenders so much envy and nastiness in other people. Often they realized that they were surrounded by so many people who said, “Well, you’re doing great, but you should be doing greater.” They suddenly felt the need to go somewhere to be in a place where you could just say, ‘Hello, how are you?’ or where you could have a conversation with someone about something besides ‘What are you doing now? Are you going to go back to being the failure that you were before?’

...But somehow, when you got below 14th Street, there wasn’t a big sign saying, ‘You’ve got to cool it now and be for real.’ It wasn’t necessary to have a billboard telling you this because that was just something that was practiced.”

(Amram, p. 6)

“Well, I would just think of the time I walked down MacDougal Street—I wrote about this in *Offbeat: Collaborating with Kerouac*—We were walking down MacDougal Street one night. One side of the street was dark, and they have those steel trap doors in the sidewalk, and they open those up at night so they can take stock down into the place. They also take garbage out. So they would open up this, like a steel gate that was in the sidewalk.

If you were walking down the dark side of the sidewalk, you could fall down in one of those things. So most people walked in the street, if they were on a side that wasn’t lit.

This was a dark street, and you could see the piles of old newspapers and half-eaten souvlakis and popsicle sticks and beer cans and bottles and cigarette and cigar butts, because that was before anybody had a conception of anything remotely relating to the idea of ecology. Certainly in the ‘50s, it was still everybody throwing everything around.

So Jack started walking right close to the buildings in the darkest side of the street. I said, ‘Jack, think of that Fats Waller song. I said, ‘Sunny Side of the Street. Fats used to sing that.’ I said, ‘We’re going to fall down in one of those basements. Let’s go on the other side of the street. Let’s walk on the sunny side of the street. And he said, Nah. He said, An artist always has to be in the shadow. He wanted to be in that shadow where he could observe and think.

Finally, I got him to come on the other side of the street. As we walked, he looked and he said, ‘Look at that.’ So I looked, stared at the sidewalk, thinking maybe he saw something interesting that had been dumped there. He said, ‘See those diamonds in the sidewalk?’ I said, ‘What?’ He said, ‘Yeah, look at that.’ And I looked down, and sure enough, if you looked hard enough there was this little glistening stuff like asphalt.

He said, ‘Those are all the reflections of all the beauty that’s here, not just in this sidewalk, but everything in life that we take for granted and ignore that’s right here for all of us to have, those precious diamonds.’ And I always thought about the diamonds in the sidewalk ever since that night.”

(Amram, pp. 41-42)

Summary of Oral History Interview with David Amram

Early Years

- Born November 17, 1930 Philadelphia, PA
- Attends 1939 World's Fair
- 1942 family moves from PA to Washington D.C.
 - Jazz musicians in Washington D.C spoke about the Village in NYC
- Visits NYC as a teenager, hears Eddie Condon play in The Village
- Egalitarian aspect of The Village
- Sister moves to the Village. David visits her. Washington Square Park
- Enlists in the Army
- Moves to Paris after Army (1 year)

New York, 1955

- Moves to NYC from Paris
- Home
 - 319 E. 8th St., East Village, then the Lower East Side (1955-57)
 - Christopher Street (1957-59)
 - 6th Ave.& 11th St., paid \$162 a week- entire block was evicted
- Education
 - Attends Manhattan School of Music, GI Bill
- Neighborhood
 - Refuge and oasis for successful people
 - Neighborhoods within neighborhood
 - Italian American places
 - Notable locations
 - Café Bohemia- playing jazz French horn with Charles Mingus
 - Meets poets, musicians, writers, theater people: Miles Davis, Thelonius Monk, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, Joe Papp
 - Cedar Tavern—artists
 - San Remo (family owned business)
 - Lion's Head Bar
 - Merchant's House
 - Club—Village Gate (now closed) / Le Poisson Rouge
 - The Bells of Hell
 - The Gaslight
 - Kettle of Fish
 - Theater
 - Theatre Delice
 - Threepenny Opera

- Notable people
 - Downtown artist scene
 - Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers
 - Folk Singers
 - Pete Seeger, Cisco Houston, Woody Guthrie, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee
 - Shawn O'Neill (son of Eugene O'Neill)
 - Doris Diether
 - Arthur Miller: Worked together at the Lincoln Center theater in the Village before it opened
 - Odetta
 - Frank McCourt
 - Lord Buckley
- Gentrification
 - NYU—expansion of the school

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an Oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

GVSHP began the South Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP South Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing South Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and, in this case, edited by the narrator. Please note that this transcript departs from the recording of the oral history. You may request other versions of this transcript that reflect the original recorded interview, and which show where the narrator has made changes.

Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Zapol: This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. It's January 28th, 2014. This is Liza Zapol, and this is for the South Village Oral History Project. Can I ask you to introduce yourself please?

Amram: Yes. My name is David Amram. Born in 1930. November 17th, 1930 at the Lying In Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and it's been uphill ever since.

Zapol: Just briefly, what is your connection to Greenwich Village?

Amram: Well, Greenwich Village to the people of our generation was always a place that we heard of, sort of one of those magical places in the 1930s. After I lived at my grandmother's, we moved nearby and then, in 1936 went to the first grade in Florida, because my sister was there. A place called Pass-a-Grille, 1936-37, where we literally went to school barefooted because there was no need to wear shoes. The little public school was right by the Gulf of Mexico. So for recess we would go swimming. We used to wear bathing suits to school. I loved school. It was just so great.

Then we moved up north to our little farm in Feasterville, Pennsylvania. It was owned by my father, his brother and my aunt and grandfather, and I went to school there. There was a big silver express train called 'The Crusader' that that used to roar by the local train station in Somerton Springs, a mile and a half from our farm. It never stopped there, but I could hear that whistle up in my room late at night, and I knew that it was going to this magical place called New York. I used to see those black and white movies that they showed all during the Depression of this magical place called 'New York.'

Some of the films, they indicated there was a place called, 'Greenwich Village,' but the only impression I had from that was, first of all, if I could ever get to this place called Greenwich Village, it would be amazing just to go down there to this unusual place. That was kind of way in the back of my mind.

Then in 1939, when they had the World's Fair, I went with some of my family, and we went out to those fairgrounds. When we were wandering around New York. We went to this place called Greenwich Village. I expected it maybe to be some kind of a village, like the ones you see in those horror movies where they have a little German village, or a little town full of

villagers. But in Greenwich Village, all I could see was a bunch of crazy streets all going in different directions, and a whole lot of really different kinds of people all gathered in one place that I'd never seen before.

Of course the whole thing with New York—seeing those gigantic tall buildings and the mobs of people—was completely mind blowing. I was just standing there, staring up into the sky until I got a crick in my neck like most people who visited New York for the first time.

We got down to that place called 'The Village.' I noticed that you could actually see where the top of the buildings were. It was kind of nice. I remember that. I said, "Boy, this is almost like a different place than the rest of New York."

In 1942, we moved from our 160-acre farm to Washington, DC, into a small place right next door to an all-night, 24-hour-a-day garage, in what they called a 'checkerboard neighborhood,' which is where black and white folks lived together, even though Washington was officially segregated. But I was surrounded by music and heard jazz everyday. I remember meeting Louis Brown, who was a mentor of Duke Ellington's, and he was in his seventies. He was playing at this party for kids, and he kind of took me under his wing and said, "You come and play with us and sit in with our band and learn something." He just liked me. I was just really fortunate. [00:05:00]

Some of the musicians whom I met in Washington used to mention 'The Village,' as a place where black people from the South felt welcome. In the early 1940s, Washington DC was still a Southern town. Sometimes musicians from the South went north to play, but they spoke mostly of Harlem, because at that time that was where African American folks did most of their playing. But they told me that there was this place called 'The Village,' where they could also go and play and where jazz was appreciated.

A few years later, when I was about fourteen, I went to New York. This friend of mine's folks took us down to Eddie Condon's, which was in the Village. I also went to hear Josh White, the great singer, who was also performing in the Village. Then we started wandering around there, and I said, "Wow!" I saw artists wearing berets and making sketches of people in the streets. It was just like those books I had read about what Paris was like, which was a place I'd never dreamed I would ever go to. When I went to Paris ten years later in 1955, it was like that.

But in 1944 in the Village, it didn't feel like it was a bunch of people looking like they were trying to imitate Paris. It seemed to be indigenous as part of the whole picture. I remember

going down those little streets and seeing a lot of older Italian American women in their black shawls and their black headdresses, just like real Old-Country style. All kinds of people seeming to have a good time. I was invited to some party with this kid, because his dad was an artist. We saw all these amazing people at the party. They were having so much fun. There we were, kids, and they were inviting us to be part of it. It was not, here come a bunch of kids who were kids of some another artist, and I wish they'd get out of here. They didn't make us feel like they invited a dog to the party and wanted to put it in the side room.

They made us part of it. I said, "Boy!" and at the end of the party, one of the young artists said, "Well, now you're one of us." I almost passed out. I said, "What?" I wasn't used to that warm egalitarian feeling. That was something that I always felt in the Village ever since that time. This was back in 1945.

When I got old enough to drive, I got a Model B Plymouth. The one that had those things like gigantic rubber bands. 'Floating Power', I think they called it, where the engine would jump around inside the car, but it wouldn't wear it out. I would drive that old car all the way from Washington DC to New York. It would take a little over seven hours.

I'd come to visit New York and see my friend. We would always go down to the Village, just to be around that fantastic atmosphere. When we went to visit our friends, we would have such a good time, we'd want to stay out late and not come back to his parents' place. We would just stay in the car and camp out on some little side street in the Village. You could park anywhere and just sleep in the car if you didn't have a place or know anybody.

No policeman ever came by and asked us to wake up and move, and people who lived in that block and saw a car with a bunch of kids sleeping in a car didn't seem to care. I just found this an amazing place. It was so different. Finally, my sister moved with our first cousin to the Village. They shared a place on Sixth Avenue, between 11th and 12th Street. I used to visit her. To my amazement, her apartment had burlap on the wall. Instead of wallpaper, they had burlap, which was pretty unusual at that particular up-tight time in our country. My first cousin worked for a magazine, and my sister worked in book publishing. She was a Phi Beta Kappa English student. She was the brain of our family. They both loved the Village.

The world that they worked in seemed like pretty much an uptown scene. But when they went downtown after work, they always could have that Greenwich Village feeling. Their little apartment had that feeling. I'll always remember that burlap all over the walls. That really

impressed me. The candles and all that. [00:10:14]

Then I started going out to Washington Square Park, which wasn't that far away. Seeing all the people sitting around the fountain—especially on Sundays—playing music and playing records and talking and telling jokes and playing chess. It was just like a big never-ending party, like a big free-for-all. I wandered around the streets. Just fell in love with it. Thought, boy, this is really it! Someday, I want to move to New York and live right here.

Sure enough, after I got out of the Army in 1954, I lived in Paris for a year. I came to New York in 1955 in September, with the GI Bill, to go to the Manhattan School of Music. I dreamed of trying to get a place in Greenwich Village, but a friend of mine called up and said, “There's this great place in what they call the Lower East Side.” They said you could walk to the Village. “You can get this place that's only, I think, \$37 a month. It's five rooms, sixth floor walk up with five rooms.” I said “Boy, I can't pass that up.”

So I lived at 319 East 8th Street from 1955 to 1957 and walked over to the Village just about every night. In fact, the very first night I came there, I stayed at a friend's house I'd known in high school and walked down to the Café Bohemia on Barrow Street. Heard George Wallington, who's a great jazz piano player and composer. This amazing saxophone player named Jackie McLean, who I had never heard of, who was like fantastic!

I thought, boy, maybe someday if I'm good enough, I can get at least to sit in with one of these bands. Because I had already recorded with Lionel Hampton in Paris, and I had my own group. I had met Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. I was playing jazz French horn. But this was New York, where there's thousands of incredible musicians living here and tens of thousands of people visiting. So I just was happy I could even be around that.

Three weeks later, there I was playing there with Charles Mingus, who had invited me to join his quintet. So playing there, right in the Village, was really a life-changing experience. All the people I met just in that bar in the Village—Miles Davis; Thelonius Monk, who took me under his wing; Allen Ginsberg; Gregory Corso; later on Jack Kerouac; Joe Papp, who actually was working on the Lower East Side.

But all these people were part of that world, and we would all gather. Sometimes to go over to one of those little places on MacDougal Street where they had jazz or folk music or Middle Eastern music. Or Washington Square Park, where every kind of entertainment or genre of arts was available. The little swimming pool in the Village—I

Can't remember the exact address. The reason we went there was because all the best bartenders, that was their place where they all went.

The big social cachet was to make friends with the bartender of anyplace, because then you come in and get a big hello, and you were cool. At the Cedar Tavern and the other places that we frequented, there were no 'A' tables. In fact that whole downtown scene, if you acted in any snobbish or disrespectful way, the artists, like de Kooning, Franz Klein, Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers—people who had overnight achieved phenomenal success after struggling until they were middle aged people with nothing went out of their way to be sure that you treated everybody with respect, and you understood you were part of a larger picture.

They would lecture anybody, including their contemporaries, if they started any of that snobbish, egotistical, narcissistic, foul behavior, which made a huge re-emergence in the [19]60s and [19]70s. It's largely still with us—not due to anybody's fault. It's just when you have thirty years of television and popular media advertising disrespectful, boorish behavior and promoting mediocrity, disrespect and sleaziness, egomania and sadism, it does have an effect on people, since it costs several thousand dollars a minute to have a minute's advertising on television. Having an hour programming based on boorish foul behavior certainly does affect people in some way. Marshall McLuhan nailed that one. The left and the right lobe of the brain. **[00:15:19]**

But fortunately those of us who were lucky enough to be around outstanding people in the Village during the 1950s who were so much against anybody behaving that way to anybody gave us all a picture that there was another way to deal with life, whether you were a struggling young person, which I was before I became a struggling old person, or older person—or if you were someone who was lucky enough to have a modicum of success, you still tried to be decent to other people.

This was something that wasn't only in the Cedar Tavern among the painters, it was that way with the jazz musicians. It was that way with the folk musicians—I met Cisco Houston and Gene Richie, Woody Guthrie. Those, Brownie and Sunny Terry McGhee. Brownie McGhee and Sunny Terry and Pete Seeger, of course, whom I'd known before I even came to the Village—but these people were all in that same frame of mind. When I met Jerome Robbins, he was driving a motorcycle on MacDougal Street, and he wasn't coming there to promote his success with West Side Story. He came down to hang out, so he could remind himself who he was and just have a good time.

It was constantly that way, where the Village was also a refuge—a refuge and an oasis for very successful people who found out that that wasn't the end answer to what they'd been searching for in life—that very often that position engenders so much envy and nastiness in other people. Often they realized that they were surrounded by so many people who said, “Well, you're doing great, but you should be doing greater.” They suddenly felt the need to go somewhere to be in a place where you could just say ‘Hello, how are you?’ or where you could have a conversation with someone about something besides ‘What are you doing now? Are you going to go back to being the failure that you were before?’

All that kind of famous ‘What Makes Sammy Run’ rat race, that was famous in, as an aspect of New York life. But somehow, when you got below 14th Street, there wasn't a big sign saying, “You've got to cool it now and be for real.” It wasn't necessary to have a billboard telling you this because that was just something that was practiced.

One reason was that Greenwich Village was still a series of neighborhoods within that large neighborhood, and each had its own history. The Italian Americans had a history of people who lived there for two or three generations, some of whom were learning to speak English just as Lawrence Welk born in a German community in North Dakota had a German accent. Not as an affectation, but because where he lived in North Dakota, there were a preponderance of people who had been here over a hundred years, who still didn't speak English fluently.

A lot of the whole Italian American community in the Village retained that wonderful family sense—places like the San Remo that were family-owned places—run by people who were very often staunch old-school Catholics and quite conservative perhaps in their political views, but were always so warm and generous and egalitarian and familial to strangers and people who would walk in or people who couldn't pay the bill who were hungry. The owners of the San Remo would actually exhibit graciousness and kindness to anyone whom they sensed was hurting. Instead of calling the police or getting them beaten up if you couldn't pay your whole bill after eating, they'd give you a helping hand, and suggest something to do to find a job.

Zapol: Can you think of a particular story?

Amram: They would make some practical suggestions for your survival. Like, why don't you shave? “Why don't you take a bath?” “Why don't you have something to eat?” “Why don't you call up your mother and ask her if she can lend you some lunch money?” “Why don't you have a

little better manners when you're in our place?" All the basics of Civilization 101. This was south of 14th Street, where the Village was still a combination of all of these different elements of old-fashioned, familial neighborhood feelings, but still welcomed spontaneity and interaction. Encouraged people in all of the arts to act like neighbors and abandon careerism, narcissism, 'A' table swinish behavior and relate to one another on a human scale.

Some people said, "Well, that's because they don't have the skyscrapers, so you can remind yourself you're part of the human race and not a robot," but I think it was more than that. It was something else. I have no idea what it was. But it was a certain vibrational thing about that Village, which I felt when I was in Egypt close to the pyramids, when I was in the Khyber Pass on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and places in Central America, and New Orleans and places through the south and the west. Different parts of New York City, where there's just a different feeling, and you could be blindfolded and know you're in a different place. There's just something about that Village that was just miraculous. [00:20:52]

Many of my favorite moments in the Village occur when walking in Washington Square Park and going and seeing the gorgeous, stately buildings where O'Henry lived, and imagining when he wrote *Rose of Washington Square*, what it must have been like for him and what it must have been like for Eugene O'Neill when he was walking those same streets. I used to speak to his son, Sean O'Neill, and he would talk about that and being there with his dad when he was a little boy and how it had changed so much, but that there still was something very special about that place.

So the mantra that we all had once we became hooked on Greenwich Village, which usually took about five minutes for anybody was, wow, if I don't live here I want to hang out here.' So here I am, speaking to you about all this in 2014, even though I don't live in the Village any more. All of us in the entire block who were rent controlled were thrown out of their apartments.

But we weren't thrown out of our lives or our love of the Village. I may sleep in a different location, but my heart is still in Greenwich Village, and Greenwich Village will always be in my heart, regardless of where I'm parked for the night. Every time I go back there, I still feel at home. Just like when you're married and you have children, if your wife leaves or your children get in an argument or something happens, they're still your family. That's a real deep, basic, simple human thing. That's what makes people and even people in the animal kingdom—

which the Native American Indians don't call 'animals.' They say 'four leggeds' and 'two leggeds'—that's the relationship we all have with one another, and being in the Village reminds of those real simple values. This neighborhood familial feeling has got nothing to do with Left Wing, Right Wing, New Age hustling of ossified manufactured fake spirituality. It's just a basic organic principle of nature that reminds of the fundamental relationships we all have with one another over the course of our lives, regardless of where we are or who you're supposed to become.

Even when I see people now that I am eighty-three, who were around the Village fifty years ago, they still all have that mantra built into their DNA—the mantra that told us 'Don't go above 14th Street.' This mantra didn't mean that the rest of New York wasn't exciting and wonderful, or that if you were working in the arts, and you got a job uptown you shouldn't take it. In 1958, when I wrote music for *J.B.*, the play that won the Pulitzer Prize that was on Broadway, I was living in my sixth-floor walkup on Christopher Street, and the landlady called me up at the theater on opening night and said, "Hey, that toilet's busted. We're getting a flood in there! Where are you?"

I said, "I'm up here at the opening of this play. "But I'll be down and help fix it." Eight years later, when Leonard Bernstein chose me as the first-ever composer in residence of the New York Philharmonic at the Lincoln Center. It was a thrill to be there, but boy, every night I came down below 14th Street, I felt even better. A great violinist named Sanford Allen, who also lived in the Village, was with the Philharmonic. After we'd done the concerts—I would always wear my little black suit with a vest that I wore every day when I went to the Lincoln Center so that I would look respectful to Leonard Bernstein who chosen me, and to show my respect to those great composers of the past and present whose music was being played, and to all those wonderful musicians who were members of the Philharmonic. I'd go down from my apartment on the corner of 6th Ave and 11th Street to the Lion's Head Bar on Christopher Street, and Sanford Allen would be there after playing his violin with the Philharmonic. We were just cooling out and enjoying being back in the Village.

After four months of being the composer-in-residence, one night when we met as usual at the Lions Head after the concert, Sanford said, "You know, David, four months you've been with the Philharmonic, I finally got a chance to tell you. I love that suit you've been wearing every day. Maybe you should take it to the dry cleaners on your night off."

Sanford made me realize that while I had my ‘above-14th Street’ suit, my mind and my heart was always in that Village. Now when I go down to the Village to see how beautiful it is, and realize my old \$148-a-month apartment, which they put a fresh coat of paint on after they threw me out, probably rents for \$4,000 a month. Still, if I hit the lotto—after I tried to help my kids out, because they all live in Brooklyn and sharing places with five other people, like everyone does nowadays—if I hit the lotto, or discovered an oil well or had an airplane drop a gigantic suitcase filled with millions of dollars, I wouldn’t have any problem. I’d just buy a brownstone right in the Village, or rent back my old apartment in a *minute*. In a minute.

[00:26:05]

Because I love it. Every time I go down there and visit, I still love it. Whatever happens, it’s just part of the constant change, which is what made the Village in New York so exciting anyway. That spirit of the Village exists now all over the country, where people are making their own Greenwich Villages and their own little communities and their own neighborhoods everywhere else that they go.

My kids live in Bushwick, and eventually that’s going to become so expensive. Now they’re moving to parts of South Bronx, or calling it ‘SoBo,’ and real estate agents are now calling it ‘SoBo.’ Soon the South Bronx will become expensive. Eventually people might all be forced to move out of New York and go around the world to other places, which is already what many young people are doing. But the wonderful thing with the Internet and YouTube is we can see and read and hear about the Village before it became too expensive for most people to ever be able to afford to live there. Still, even if we can’t go back to the England of Charles Dickens, his book tells us what it was like to be there at that time.

So part of the artist’s gig as a composer, as a musician, a conductor, writer—whatever you’re doing, sculptor, painter, or just conversationalist—for those of us blessed to have spent many years of our lives in the Village, part of our gig is to paint a picture for other people to see what it was, and therefore what it is today and how new places with new people [cat meowing] can create their own Village. So when I hear people are complaining and saying, “Oh, the Village isn’t what it used to be,” I say, “Well, imagine what O.Henry would think if he saw his old neighborhood in the Village today. When I was there, this period from 1955 through 1995 is now considered to have been a Golden Era. But still, I always wonder Eugene O’Neill would have said as his son Sean told me he is sure that his father would have said, after being shocked

to see what the Village was like in the 1940s and '50s, compared the Village of his dad's youth at the turn of the 20th century.

Things always, always change. But the wonderful thing with the Greenwich Village Historic Society is that before the Village becomes a totally a gigantic corporate chain—or what happens is that so many of the beautiful little towns that we have across the U.S.A., where you go down the Main Street, and if you were blindfolded and then you suddenly had the blindfold taken off, you'd have no idea where you were. There's hardly any regional accents left today. There's hardly any old buildings, or mom and pop stores. There's hardly anything that reflects that history.

Every place has a history. Even deserted places like mountains with no people living on them. Every place has a certain history. All the places that I go to in Europe always have old towns within their towns, which are preserved. There's always a historic place. When I was in Bari, Italy, there is a really old town near Bari called Alta Mura. Not exactly a gigantic tourist stop, but there is an old town within this old town. Not to mention Bonn, Germany, a bustling modern city, but with an old town where you can visit where Beethoven lived and composed some of his greatest music. Even when I was in Bari, Italy, and Alta Mura—A-L-T-A M-U-R-A. Not exactly gigantic tourist stops. Not to mention Bonn, Germany. There's always old towns. There's always a historic place.

In London, they have places where they have maintained what it was like centuries ago so that you can walk in the most elegant, great, trendy, modern surroundings, and then walk somewhere else and see what it was like, and therefore what it still is. That's a real important thing. The fact that miraculously, thanks to the Greenwich Village Historic Society and a lot of people who—people like Doris Diether, an old neighbor of mine and an activist for fifty years, and Jane Jacobs, no longer with us, there are still parts of the Village which retain the unique character of this beautiful neighborhood. [00:29:49]

We still have some Village left in the Village, thanks to the efforts of these extraordinary people. Instead of being one gigantic series of supermarkets and huge egomaniacal buildings with exquisitely dressed doormen and a bunch of angry looking people that never would talk to each other, and no mom and pop marketplaces. We still have what they call 'schmoozing'—the great art of discussion on the street and hanging out. All these simple things are an antidote to the poisonous process of eviscerating a whole part of history in the name of economic progress. The

death sentence for community preservation in the name of progress has been not only challenged, but has been put in abeyance.

NYU, one of the best schools in our country's history has become a major offender to the heart of the Village. I recently participated in a big meeting protesting the fact that, with the professors themselves and many of us who had worked at NYU, we were all horrified at what the school was planning to do to what was left of our beloved Village.

I'd been an adjunct at NYU one summer, and I've done scores of concerts there. I had my opera "12th Night" done there. Played jazz and folk concerts and a kids program for the Newport Jazz Festival at NYU. I've had classical pieces premiered there. I've attended wonderful concerts and seminars and innovative programs of other people. Spent some of the happiest days of my life in Washington Square Park. I was the musical director for the great Kerouac Beat Conference there at NYU in 1994 and 1995. All these extraordinary things that have happened were events that helped to make the Village such a special place.

That's why so many of us were revolted by the paying-off process that's done in politics since the beginning of time. This disgusting behavior by NYU was challenged by a judge in court. This was the result of months of hard boring work, rather than somebody getting fifteen minutes of fame by lying in the street and setting a trash can on fire, so that they could enhance their show business career by getting on the news for one night. We hope that the Greenwich Village Historical Society can stop this decimation of our precious remaining neighborhoods, so that we'll have more in New York City than just The Merchants' House, a wonderful old place that has been preserved by volunteers in the neighborhood who maintain this great old house themselves. This one old building downtown shows us all what it was like to live in New York 150 years ago.

A lot of those neighborhoods in the Village are in jeopardy today, with plans too soon to have jackhammers outside for the next twenty years while whole neighborhoods are down and new luxury apartment houses are constructed.

Many of these old buildings, where NYU professors are housed, are subject to being torn down, in what appears to be a plan to drive them out of teaching at NYU by making their lives insufferable, to be replaced by some gigantic, atrocious, money-making machines with charming names like Greenwich Village Garden Apartments. And if tenured professors retire because they can no longer stand living in what has become like a war zone, they can be replaced by adjunct

teachers and save NYU small fortune. This is not a new occurrence in the history of the Village.

If it hadn't been for Jane Jacobs we'd have a gigantic highway running right through the middle of Greenwich Village decades ago.

If it hadn't been for Joe Papp, there never would have been a Shakespeare in the Park. I was around when all this happened. I mention that because those of us who respectfully disagree with NYU's disgraceful behavior cannot be dismissed as a bunch of loud-mouthed, Left Wing, self-promoting activists. Most of the people who want to preserve the Village have all said in effect, "We're going to devote our whole lives to what we think is right—not just for us, but for all people, but for their children and grandchildren—and try to preserve what we have for all New Yorkers and all who visit New York."

That's why the landmarking that the Historic Society is doing is so important, because some young person can come there and say, "Wow, look at this little place and all this stuff happened there." If they're not from New York, and they go home, they could say, "Boy, you know, I bet we could do this in Podunk or Smalltownville." It makes everybody appreciate themselves and remember that throughout history that small is beautiful.

As Pete Seeger says so eloquently, "Think globally, but act locally." There's a wonderful new newspaper now, *The Westside*—I can't remember the exact name of it.¹ It's like the other classic paper, "The Villager." They are both like the *Village Voice* was sixty years ago. But in its own terms today, the new paper is a wonderful little paper that's a community paper. So as long as the Village has two community papers today, that means somebody is addressing themselves to this sense of community.

For those people who criticize and say, "Well, now they have movie stars living there and people with a lot of money," well, if I had a lot of money, I'd want to live the Village, too. No one ever said wealthy people have ruined the Upper East Side. I never had as much fun on the Upper East Side. But that's my problem. That's not the Upper East Side's. I always had more fun down in Greenwich Village, and I still do, even if I can't afford to live there today.

The thing that is devastating is the fact that the courts allow landlords to continue to throw people out who are old residents who have no where to go, while also making it impossible for small places to exist, where residents can go shopping and to have a newspaper and to hang out and do some neighborly schmoozing.

¹ Amram is referring to *WestView News*, a paper published since 2003 focusing on the West Village.

All I can do is be grateful for the places that are still there. We can't mourn the dead to the point where you can't appreciate the living. So the little places that are there, like the Cornelia Street Cafe, where I play the first Monday of every month when I don't have serious concerts out of town. My programs there celebrate the Village since 1955. Miraculously, the Cornelia Street Cafe has been able to survive and continue to renew their lease. I don't know how they do it. Well, I do know how they do it. The people that run it work sixteen hours a day, and that's their whole life to make a wonderful environment for people of every discipline to come and enjoy themselves. [00:35:49]

There are little, little places in the Village that have somehow survived, and it's wonderful to see them. It's still wonderful to walk around the Village. Of course, things have reincarnations. The old Village Gate, which was an extraordinary fount of every genre of music, is still there but now it's called the Poisson Rouge. I played there several times and recently did a concert there, which I have the poster of up on the wall here, where a bunch of us joined forces to try to stop the plans to tear down large parts of the Village. It wasn't done to be disrespecting NYU, because a lot of us are proud to know we have such a great college for so many years, which is located in the heart of Greenwich Village. When I spoke before playing, I said that some of the finest students in the world save up their money, and their families work three jobs so that they can go to one of the greatest colleges in the world. I said, "Thirty years from now when these students in leadership positions, and distinguished members of the peer culture, do you think they're going to give one cent to an institution that's just eviscerated and destroyed the entire Greenwich Village neighborhoods forever?"

I don't think they're going to give one cent. They're going to be ashamed to be associated with what the administration did, against the wishes of the majority of the faculty, the students and the alumni. So from a business point of view, thirty years down the line when you need to increase their endowment, the new administrators and fundraisers for NYU are not going to get anybody who went to the school to give them one cent, because the distinguished alumni will all be ashamed and disgusted with what the university did to destroy the Village.

I don't like to disrespect anybody, but I feel obliged to say all of this before playing because it made sense, and it's true. The place that we did that concert was in the old basement of what used to be called the Village Gate. I looked around and said, "My God, this is the old Village Gate," where I played with Dizzy Gillespie and Mongo Santamaria, Where Edgard

Varèse, the great classical composer, had the United States premiere of his *Poem Electronique*. Now that same room, that same building, next month—February 16—we’re doing this whole program of my music called, “Greenwich Village Portraits”, and the new piece I’ve written, entitled "Greenwich Village Portraits" is having its World Premiere right in the heart of the Village. The piece was composed for alto saxophone and piano, and was commissioned and will be premiered by the great classical saxophonist Kenneth Radnofsky, who plays with the Boston Symphony. He was also a soloist with the New York Philharmonic.

“Greenwich Village Portraits” is dedicated to three streets and their adjoining neighborhoods of Greenwich Village—The first movement is called "MacDougal Street", in memory of Arthur Miller, with whom I worked at the 1964 opening of the Lincoln Center Theater, which was located at the old ANTA theater on West 8th street, right in the Village.

In 1964, when Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall* opened up the Lincoln Center Theater, they hadn’t finished the building at the Lincoln Center complex. During the first three years of the Lincoln Center Theater productions, all of them were held in Greenwich Village. Arthur Miller and I and members of the cast used to go and hang out at all those little places on MacDougal Street after rehearsals. He loved jazz and folk music and international music, and all the remaining neighborhoods of New York City he always talked about the Village he remembered from his youth in New York, and what an important thing that was for people to have a sense of place and history.

The second movement is called “Bleecker Street” in memory of the great singer and dear old friend Odetta, whom I met in the Village on Bleecker Street, where we used to play all the time.

The third movement, Christopher Street, was in memory of Frank McCourt, with whom I worked and his brother Malachy, who, who had the Bells of Hell bar, which is close by the Lion’s Head on Christopher Street, the place where I learned so much traditional Irish music, and which I later included in my violin concert and other classical pieces. [00:40:06]

I hope the concert in February will capture the whole feeling of the Village, when Ken Radnofsky will also play my saxophone concerto, “Ode To Lord Buckley”, dedicated to the comedian who was an icon in the Village, and a great figure of the [19]30s, [19]40s and ‘50s. I played with him the last night he was alive at a benefit for him. But two weeks prior to that, he had played in the very same room where we’re giving this concert at the old Village Gate, for the

PBA—Police Benevolent Association. Art D’Lugoff, who owned The Village Gate, told me that, so that Lord Buckley could try to get his cabaret card back so that he could work again.

So here we will be playing, “Ode To Lord Buckley” fifty, fifty-four years later. That’s pretty far out. Then after that we’re going to have musical friends join me to celebrate Greenwich Village with jazz, folk, Latin, Native American, traditional Irish, Middle Eastern music, much of which I learned right in Greenwich Village. Later on in life, when I went around the world, I was able to be comfortable in Cairo, Egypt, in Cork, Ireland, Chengdu China, Sao Paulo, Brazil, Tel Aviv, Israel, Reykjavik, Iceland, Nairobi Kenya and Native American Indian reservations because I learned about these musics from people who played these genres in the Village.

Zapol: How so?

Amram: Because living in the Village was my university. So after my classical compositions in the first half of the program, during the second part of the program I’ll be doing at the Poisson Rouge, all things we perform will be honoring the blessing of living in the Village all those years. That’s why the whole the whole evening is called “Greenwich Village Portraits.”

Zapol: How did you learn about those different places in the Village? In what way?

Amram: Just using the footmobile—because you didn’t have to drive anywhere—and the enrolling, getting a lifetime scholarship in the University of Hangout-ology, which meant you would just go out the door. In my case I would make a right turn, because on Sixth Avenue, when I left my apartment at 461 Sixth Avenue, if I made a right turn, I would be in the heart of the Village. If I made a left turn, I would go three blocks, and I’d be above 14th Street, which was not like the DMZ Line or something, where I’d be afraid of being kidnapped or shot. But I never left the Village unless I had to.

I loved going all around the world, but every minute you could spend in the Village, it’s just like you didn’t want to miss anything. Every night I would leave when I was done writing music or whatever I was doing. I would make the right turn out of my building and go down and two minutes later—no, four or five minutes later—I’d be right at Bleecker and Cornelia Street and all the other wonderful places. Christopher Street and all those great places.

1957, I actually moved from 319 East Eighth Street. I made a big move from the Lower

East Side to 114 Christopher Street, where I lived for two years. That was fantastic. Right across from the Theater de Lys. that was really something. They had *Three Penny Opera* running there full-time. I got in free, because I knew the people who worked in the theater, so I really got to appreciate that by seeing it about fifty-five times. I was a neighborhood cat who lived right across the street, so they just let me walk in.

It was such a wonderful production. Lotte Lehmann was in it at one point, an original person. So many of the great actors and actresses that we know today, like Estelle Parsons were there back then. The Circle in the Square Theatre, of course, was close by. That's where Kerouac and I did our jazz/poetry readings in 1957. Then you could walk by the Gaslight and hear every wonderful folk musician that ever walked the face of the earth.

Zapol: Tell me about a night at the Gaslight.

Amram: Pardon?

Zapol: Tell me about a night at the Gaslight.

Amram: Well, one of the great nights was a young fellow by the name of Roland Musso, who was a Native American singer—this is later on, 1969 or [19]70—said, “Hi Amram. I’ve got a night at the Gaslight.” I said, “Great.” So I walked down there. The whole room is full of Native American people. My Uncle Milton, who married my father’s sister, was from Las Vegas, New Mexico and was brought up with Indian people, so he had always showed me different stuff about music that he’d learned as well as the dances and the visual arts of the Native people which were so unique and soulful. When I went out West to visit him as a boy, I already had a picture in my mind, even though I was then still living on our farm in Feasterville Pennsylvania. But my Uncle Milton made me aware that there were people who had been here thousands of years before we came. So I felt very comfortable, when I went to see Roland down in the basement of the Gaslight and it was filled with Indian people who had come to hear Roland. It just felt beautiful. [00:44:56]

I knew a lot of Native American people that I came across over the years in New York. Effie Kimball, who was a painter, was a great friend. So were Joan and Teddy Thompson and Swift Eagle, but I had never been in a room in the Village with that many Indians. Then I started looking around. There were people that I knew that I never knew were Native American. I

learned a long time ago—a long, long time ago—that you don't come up to a stranger or anybody and say, "What is your ethnic background?" That's like saying, "What type of, what species of subhuman are you?"

So you just don't say that to people. It's very disrespectful. But then I realized that there were a lot of people who I knew and hung out with had an Indian heritage. When I played with Oscar Pettiford, the great bass player, he would talk about his Native American heritage. Mary Lou Williams, the great jazz pianist sometimes did. Effie Kimball, the painter, always did. Some of them would share that information with you if they saw that you were really interested.

My Uncle Milton always told me to respect other people's privacy and family heritages and not to ask Indian people to talk about things that were personal any more than I would want to talk to a stranger about what my great-grandmother cooked or where her uncle was Bar Mitzvahed, you know. Unless it was somebody I was really close to or it came up, often you keep personal family stuff to yourself. So when I saw all the Indians coming out to see Roland and fill up the Gaslight, I said, 'Wow! I said to a friend, "Even though they now live here in the concrete jungle, they manage to still keep their heritage and their history alive, and support one another."

So when Roland finished his set at the Gaslight, we all went up to the Kettle of Fish above, and it was wonderful. It was like being on an Indian reservation again. Suddenly the Kettle of Fish was all full of Indians, and everybody that was there was happy. Roland told me later that they had told him they felt welcome, and we were glad to see them. It was really nice. It wasn't, who are these people? Or people making Indian jokes or any of that type of racist stuff.

I used to go down to the Gaslight all the time and sit in and play with Ramblin' Jack Elliot and Dave Van Ronk and so many of the great folk players. Hugh Romney, who later became Wavy Gravy, used to go down there just to hang out, because he lived in that neighborhood, as so many of the people that we knew did.

Then, of course, when you went up to the Kettle of Fish, that was a continuation of the show, where sometimes they would be having a little jam session in the back of the bar that was so interesting that everybody would leave the Gaslight and go up there. The people that owned the Gaslight didn't care. They'd even go up. It was just like floating music that happened to float by.

Of course Dave Van Ronk was there, through all of that. He was what they called the

Mayor of Greenwich Village. He was so totally different than anything that the movie² was about. And to be perfectly candid, his book was marvelous. His music was marvelous. All of his musicians were extraordinary. That music that they all did, Dave's book and his legacy, and all the other wonderful people who were part of that—and still, today, part of that folk scene—will be here long after films of that nature go to the landfill, because they had lasting, enduring value. Carolyn Hester, Joe Mapes, Bob Dylan, Len Chandler, Jerry Jeff Walker, Logan English, Bob Gibson, Happy and Artie Traum, Sonny and Terry, Rev Gary Davis and the great Tom Paxton and John Hammond Jr. were all there. Many of these amazing people did it for love and had various day jobs before there even was a remote chance of picking up enough change out of a tip box when you were done playing to be able to afford to quit your day job. They never whined and complained. Like the great jazz and classical artists I knew, they were in love with music and were concerned with trying to get better, not just trying to become famous.

One of the nice things was they had a Gaslight reunion organized by Bob Porco, the grandson of the legendary Mike Porco, who was the founder of Folk City At the Gaslight reunion. Tom Paxton was there. Patrick Sky, whom I hadn't seen for years came to perform and so did Carolyn Hester.

They all were just as beautiful, warm, having fun, and glad to be there as they were fifty years ago. We were all happy to be together again, glad not just for us to be together again, glad to be there, to be alive and be doing the music. They hadn't lost a beat, and they were playing and singing even better than ever. That really made me feel good.

It was right in the same place. They'd changed the Gaslight's name, but it was just so much fun to be back there. Even though the place had been remodeled, it still retained that wonderful, wonderful spirit.

Then there's a place called The Feenjon. That's where I learned so much Middle Eastern music—really was able to tap into the music of my whole Sephardic heritage in a different way than I ever would have otherwise by being with musicians from Lebanon and Greece and Turkey and Israel, to learn a fraction of the thousands of different subtleties of how people can play one song or one scale in a different way—just like all those subtleties in language and in cooking and in dancing in and in body language. Just extraordinary. These places were all like little

² The movie *Inside Llewyn Davis* was released on December 6, 2013. Written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, the movie is loosely inspired by the life of folk musician Dave Van Ronk and the book *The Mayor of MacDougall Street*, written by Van Ronk and Elijah Wald.

universities. [00:50:07]

Zapol: You talked about, in your book, about living in the Lower East Side—the East Village now—which is also a part of this, you know. This Greenwich Village Society of Historic Preservation also does work in the East Village. So you talked about that also being an area where there were a lot of Jews. There were Ukrainians. That kind of music of that area—can you talk about the sounds that you heard in the Lower East Side when you lived there, and maybe a story about living over there?

Amram: Sure. At that particular point, Tompkins Square Park was still a neighborhood park, and the Ukrainian musicians would always come and play those beautiful little button accordions. I don't know what the name is in the Ukrainian language. Many of them played an instrument called the *bandura*—B-A-N-D-U-R-A—which is this huge sort of almost like a lap harp. but with an incredible tuning series of strings. It's just remarkable. Some of this beautiful music that's different than any other Slavic music.

There was a temple, an old Orthodox temple on my block at 319 East 8th Street, and I would sometimes go up on the roof in warmer weather and hear the singing, and it just took me right back to a place I'd never been. I can feel my own thousands of years of DNA or whatever that is just go right through me. It wasn't exclusive to me, because other people would come up and hear that singing, and feel it all, too. Jazz artists I knew would say, "Man, those cats are wailing."

Because it was a feeling, just as you can go to an African American sanctified church service, if you're lucky enough as I've been to be invited to come and sit in with the church band. When you're right there in the middle of it, without being the center of attention, you're just part of it—get that feeling that's just so powerful. You know there's some great things out there that are non-denominational, just like a beautiful sunset or being in a thunderstorm, and seeing a rainbow is not specific to one group. You don't need tuition or reservation for an interview or a qualification of your credentials to be able to have a beautiful experience. You just have to be fortunate enough to be there and be receptive to it.

There were so many wonderful languages that were spoken on the Lower East Side, some of which I didn't know. I'd never really heard Spanish spoken like it was spoken in New York when I lived in Washington, DC, and even when I went to Spain briefly when I got out of

the Army. Since I was overseas, I got a European discharge, and I went to Spain when I had a little time off from my gig in Paris. I'd never heard Spanish except from people I knew in Mexico, and my Uncle David, my father's brother, who spoke Spanish fluently and lived in Mexico for years. But I'd never heard Spanish spoken that way until I was in the Lower East Side, and folks from Puerto Rico had a different way of speaking Spanish than they did in Mexico, Spain or New Mexico. When I would ask my friends from Mexico who were living in New York why everyone from the Caribbean talked so fast in Spanish, they'd say, "No, man," they'd say, "We're different from them Nuyoricans." I said, "What?"

Because the "Nuyoricans" were people who were born in New York City of Puerto Rican heritage, but they'd already had a slightly different way of doing it because they had a New York accent, and included English words [phone rings], just as there's what they call 'New York Chinese,' which was a form of Cantonese based on a dialect that was spoken at the turn of the century. There was also what they call, 'New York Italian', which is actually dialects from Sicily, Naples and Bari, combined with New York expressions in English and smattering of words from different parts of Italy which have their own specific dialects.

Or the way Yiddish is spoken in New York as compared to other places, because Yiddish itself is a mixture of different languages and experiences, and the way Yiddish is spoken in Poland is different than the way Yiddish is spoken in Russia, or the way Yiddish was spoken in Germany, even though a lot of German Jews living here today don't speak Yiddish any more, because they came here, as part of my family did, a hundred years ago. After two generations, they wanted to be disassociated from the newcomers. That's also part of everybody's sociology. Whoever gets here ten years earlier, even if they're in the bottom of the sewer fancy themselves to be more aristocratic than the *nouveau arrivistes*. [00:55:09]

That's part of human nature that you get to understand, and then realize that that's not a good way to behave. But sometimes being in a neighborhood and hearing different languages, different ways of speaking, gives you that sense of history—who got there first, which part of the Old Country they're from, and what that means to them.

When I lived on the Lower East Side I heard a lot of people speaking Polish. The woman who had the little deli downstairs from where I lived was a Holocaust survivor from Poland. Since my grandmother was named Brylawski—which is scarcely a German name—when her father came here, he said he was from a part of Germany that was about twenty-five feet from

Poland. He said he was of German ancestry, instead of being Polish. But none of that mattered when the Civil War broke out, and he was conscripted into the North Carolina Rifles as part of the Confederate Army.

Still every time I went to the Deli and the woman told me about her life as a young Jewish woman in Poland and then sang me some old Yiddish folk songs from Poland, I felt a certain something when I heard her speak in that language.

The Lower East side made you see that there are so many different languages, and so many different people from every part of the world. Somehow, even though it was a very rough neighborhood back then, there was a sense of community there as well. The Five Spot, the legendary jazz club was on Third Avenue, which was then considered to still be the Lower East Side, was the Bowery. Now it's so beautiful and so cleaned up. In the '50s, the Bowery was place where people came to die. For alcoholics sleeping on the streets, it was the perpetual last call closing time, the very last call before you couldn't get a drink. So alcoholics from around the country would all gravitate towards there and try and scrape up enough money to buy some wine, or some of them even drank Sterno.

This little neighborhood bar, which was called the Five Spot, was owned by the Termini Brothers, which was a family business. We began this jazz series there. The great Cecil Taylor came, who I had brought down there. While it was still a Bowery bar, it was changing because a lot of painters from The Cedar Tavern used to want to go out of the Village and go to the Lower East Side, where a lot of the painters still lived, where Charlie Parker had moved on Avenue B at the end of his life, where Franz Kline and Alfred Leslie and a lot of the wonderful artists—many, many artists still had studios there.

Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie conscripted practically the whole cast of the Kerouac-narrated short silent film. *Pull My Daisy*, from people who were living in the Lower East Side and were congregating at the Five Spot as well as The Cedar Tavern. The Five Spot became a great jazz place, and Cecil Taylor and his quartet were the first professional group to play there at the end of 1956. Staring January 3rd, 1957, I played there with my quartet for eleven weeks.

I lived in a sixth floor walkup. Thelonious Monk came up there to visit me, and after he showed me how to play some of his music. I cooked him supper one night. Harry Colomby who later became Monk's manager, used to come by with his brother, who was a trumpet player. Harry was a schoolteacher. He reminded me years later how he made a phone call to me at my

apartment after Monk's wife, Nellie, gave Harry my phone number saying that he decided that he was going to be Monk's manager. Harry was still working full-time as a schoolteacher. Monk wasn't even working at that time.

Sonny Rollins, Randy Weston, Elmo Hope, Cedar Walton used to come up and play, and Kerouac used to come up there and crash out with me. That's where I met Woody Guthrie in 1956 when Ahmed Bashir, who was a friend of Sonny Rollins and Charlie Parker, said, "Do you want to meet Woody?" I said, "Do you mean Woody Herman?" and he said, "No, Woody Guthrie." I said, "Yeah, man." And Ahmed Bashir said, "Well, he has a friend right down here on the Lower East Side a block from you."

So we went over to this little place, and there I spent the whole day with Woody Guthrie. I met Joe Papp there, because he was having his Shakespeare productions on the Lower East Side in 1956. Before he presented his first ones in Central Park in 1957, he was going to do a production of *Titus Andronicus*, and they couldn't find anybody to do the music for it who knew how to actually write classical music that could also do it for nothing. So I stumbled into that at the Emmanuel Church between Avenue C and D on Seventh Street, which was a block from where I lived.

I figured, "What the heck, it's only a block away, so I may as well go," and they did a production of *Titus Andronicus*. Roscoe Lee Browne, who later became famous on *The Cosby Show*, was in it—and who was going to be an Olympic runner until he hurt his leg. He was a famous athlete. He worked for the Schenley Liquor Company as sort of a celebrity goodwill ambassador selling liquor. He was a fantastic actor. He later became a successful movie actor.

Colleen Dewhurst, the great actress, was in it. Joe Papp's wife was in it. It was really wonderful. That's where Joe Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival started, right on the Lower East Side, before there was a Shakespeare in the Park. So many extraordinary things happened in that neighborhood. [01:00:29]

Of course, I could walk to the Village every night, so to me it was all part of a whole big, larger picture.

Zapol: Tell me about what that apartment looked like. What was it like inside? Who lived in the building?

Amram: It was a railroad flat, which is basically five rooms. I began fixing it up and after I

painted it started digging up all the linoleum, and it had another layer of old linoleum, piled up on older rotted linoleum and anything else that would serve as insulation when the cold weather came. Then of course underneath that were old newspapers from the 1930s. It was like being an archeologist going into a tomb and discovering an ancient city. As I ripped up all the rotted linoleum, I could see efforts made by all the different people who lived there before me and how they tried to keep the cold air as well as the rats and cockroaches from taking over when winter came.

What previous tenants would do was when a hole would appear in the floor or a leak would spring up, they'd just put a bunch of newspapers down and put a fresh coat of linoleum on. then I painted the whole place a second time to see if some of the roaches would leave. Then I said, "Boy, I really got a pretty nice place here."

Then of course when the winter came, the rats needed someplace warm. So then the rats and the roaches would come back. Finally, I was with my friend from the Army, violist Midhat Serbagi, who now lives up here in Putnam Valley. Since we were in the Army together, he was coming and visiting me before he moved to New York City. When he saw a gigantic rat staring at him while he was eating a sandwich, he said, "Man, you've got to get out of here. You couldn't even get a cat to get rid of that rat, because that rat's bigger than a cat."

So we took a monkey wrench and threw it, tried to scare, the rat. The rat, of course, escaped. The rat stared at Midhat's sandwich for another minute and finally crawled away.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE, 'Amram_DavidOralHistory1.mp3'; BEGINNING OF SECOND, 'Amram_DavidOralHistory2.mp3']

Amram: I had a chance for \$56 a month to get a place on Christopher Street. I said, "Well, I've always wanted to live right in the village-Village, so maybe I'll do that." So in 1957, I moved from a sixth-floor walkup to a fifth-floor walkup at 114 Christopher Street, and I realized I was on the way up. I stayed there until 1959.

Then Stuart Vaughn, who had directed the first shows of Shakespeare in the Park, called me and said, "David, there's a really nice apartment over on Sixth Avenue and 11th Street," and that's where I went from 1959 until I was unceremoniously thrown out into late 90s. I'll never forget that. My lawyer said, "David, get packing." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "The landlord has found a judge this time around who is friendly." That meant time to move on out.

So after all the years in a place I loved, I realized it was the beginning of another new chapter in my life.

But being forced to leave didn't move me out of my life. And some of the other people on the block, because of all the stuff I had done over the years told me that they wanted to put a plaque up for me on the building, you know, someday. So I told one of the people in the neighborhood, I said, "Well you know, instead of getting a plaque, I just got my eviction papers in the mail. Maybe that's better."

I just finished composing this new piece, called "Greenwich Village Portraits," and in addition to the upcoming world premier at the Poisson Rouge, it's going to be played in Boston the next night. It's going to be recorded, and I am orchestrating it for string orchestra. Thirty other classical saxophone players all around the world are going to play it the same week, because they have a group that Ken Radnofsky, this great saxophone player, formed of all classical symphonic saxophone players that want new literature, so they don't just have to play transcriptions of violin concertos.

In the past, composers like Ebert and so many others have written wonderful works for sax. When my saxophone concerto, "Ode to Lord Buckley" is recorded—I'll give you a copy of that before you leave. "Greenwich Village Portraits" is another new piece for the classical saxophone repertoire. So in addition to all I have written about Greenwich Village in my three books, I can share stories via a new musical composition, so someone in Detroit or even New York City, who doesn't know about the Village, can get a picture of it hopefully through the music. The piece is published by C.F. Peters, who are the publishers of Mozart and Beethoven, so "Greenwich Village Portraits" won't go in the trash heap because it doesn't sell enough copies.

Zapol: How do you capture the sounds of these people or of the Village, or of these memories in composition?

Amram: Oh, they just inspire me. I would never dare to think I could get a fraction of how that made me feel. That's already more than I could hope for, because the real—Stravinsky, he said, "Music expresses itself." That's the wonderful thing, that you can hear a piece of music sometimes, and it takes you to some place. I think that's true of literature and painting, with art, with theater, and with human relationships, too. It's that the unspoken language, which becomes

the deepest message for all of us to cherish, because that captures some spiritual part of you.

But I hate—I hesitate to use the word ‘spiritual’ because then I think of the army of blasphemous fakers and desecraters of ancient religions. What I call the ‘Burger King-ization of ancient religions’ that became part of the New Age phenomenon. Well, snake oil salesmen have been around for a long time. When P.T. Barnum said that, “There’s a sucker born every minute,” he was giving us a certain businesslike assessment of the society that he lived in, especially if you wanted to have successful business ventures without working too hard.

All that notwithstanding, and without being judgmental of what other people do to conduct their lives, “stuff of the spirit,” as Stravinsky said about music, “expresses itself”, so I would say the great vernacular expression ‘what it is’ says it all. [00:05:06]

So my hope with the new piece is that it will bring people to the Village that they might not have ever experienced.

In the first movement, “MacDougal Street,” I am taking the listener on a walk down MacDougal Street with Arthur Miller. We hear a mélange of nighttime blues, creating a warm, longing feeling which is suddenly interrupted by a Middle Eastern, Jewish, klezmer street group which you hear on MacDougal Street when you walk past the Feenjon. All the nighttime sounds we used to hear on our strolls down the street after rehearsals of his play, *After the Fall*, gave me the idea of what to go for.

Zapol: What are you—

Amram: In the second movement, “Bleecker Street” for Odetta, I tried to write something that would be almost like a hymn, because sometimes she would hum some beautiful hymn when we were in the midst of some insanity of a hootenanny, jam session, hanging out at three o’clock in the morning with people coming up and talking to her, and myself, but regardless of the chaos, there was always some other special spiritual part that she kept.

For the last movement, “Christopher Street” for Frank McCourt I’m using the only folk melody in the entire piece, I have a traditional Irish song “Will You Go Lassie, Go.” The melody appears in the middle of this kind of enormous Irish jig that I wrote myself, “Will Ya Go Lassie, Go.” At the Lion’s Head Bar at three o’clock in the morning someone would sing “Will You Go Lassie, Go,” and that meant it was time to close down.

Frank McCourt was such a beautiful person. All those wonderful writers and people who

came to the Lions Head kept it the most egalitarian bar in New York. The Lions Head was a writers' place, where they had the book covers put up on the wall, but all of the bartenders were writers, too. If they weren't, it didn't make any difference. If anybody acted like they were Mr. Literature, they'd be thrown out. It was very much a neighborhood bar.

All the writers and journalists and newspapermen and English students and moving men and cops and everybody would all come down there, and then in the back room they'd have people playing Irish music and singing. One of the legendary bartenders, Captain Paul Shiffman, a retired seaman, who was famous sort of like being the Don Rickles of insulting everybody. If you were insulted by him, then you knew you had a certain social status. At three o'clock in the morning he would come out from behind the bar and join us in the back room, take out the harmonica and start playing it. It was an amazing place. I tried to capture some of these feelings in the last movement of "Greenwich Village Portraits."

There were certain little things that I used musically drawn from my own experiences in real life. But the thing that I'm really proud of with the piece is that nobody has to know *anything* about any of this, and somebody in Vienna, when they hear it played by some symphony saxophone player and a pianist who never came to Greenwich Village, themselves and never knew any of those people will find out what it felt like to be there through the music.

The reason I say this is because the great conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos, to whom I dedicated my first book *Vibrations*, said, "David, you have to remember one thing," he said, "since you also write and are interested in so many things. You can have a ten-page treatise on the brotherhood and the humanity of all people and their relationship to the earth, to God, to history, and the betterment of the world. But if it's not good music, I can't ever conduct it. Even though I sympathize with those ideals, it has to be in the music."

I mention that because ultimately that's the great thing about music. You want to have all those things said but it has to be in the music itself. If it's really put together right, and really notated right, and it's really done in the correct way, you get taken to that place, and the third or fourth time you'll say, "Oh." [00:09:58]

Just as Yo-Yo Ma was not born in Bach's neighborhood—you know, Bach died in 1750, so Bach wasn't around two centuries later when Yo-Yo Ma decided to play those unaccompanied cello suites. But when Yo-Yo Ma plays that stuff, he's channeling Bach. Bach's right in there. Like they say now, 'Brooklyn's in the house.' When Yo-Yo Ma plays the

unaccompanied cello music of the master, ‘Bach is in the house.’ That’s the wonderful thing about music. When you get a creative, terrific player, they can make that connection. It stays. That’s why I like being a classical composer and writing it down as well as what I do being a spontaneous person. It always made me feel good to know that Chopin was better known as an improviser and a great party piano player than he was as a composer. His piano music is so exquisite, I figured “Heck, the guy probably never even had time to play.”

George Gershwin was noted for playing all night long. But boy, when he wrote it down, it sounded like you were in the room with him improvising. So that’s part of one of the things that living in Greenwich Village taught us all—that you didn’t have to be a pretentious, uptight person if you decided you wanted to be a novelist or a painter or poet. You didn’t have to be Mr. Fake-Distingue and disassociate yourself with people. The Village gave you a place where everybody had a chance to develop in their own way and improve their own skill. You could always find someone in the neighborhood to appreciate it and not be worried about having their life determined by whether or not you got a good review in *The New York Times*, or if you even had a career at all.

So when people say to you, “You had an amazing career,” I say, “I had no career.” I said, “I hope my music some day has a career.” Big difference.

Zapol: You, I want to—

Amram: Can I stop just for a second?

Zapol: Yes, please.

Amram: I just have to go to the bathroom. [00:11:58]

[Interruption]

Zapol: So when you were in Paris, you were in France. You’d spent some time in Europe. You had already had some success there. Why did you come to New York? What was the promise of New York that would be different for you as a musician?

Amram: Well, I always dreamed of coming to New York. When I met Dizzy Gillespie, before I went in the Army, before I went to Europe, he said, “Man, you’ve got to come to New York.” He said, “You’ve got to meet this guy, Julius Watkins. He plays jazz French horn, too. You guys

will get along great together.” Of course, I ended up, when I came to New York, meeting Julius, and we played together with Oscar Pettiford’s band for two years as two French horn players. I even soloed on a recording with Julius on a piece which featured us with Oscar Pettiford’s band called, ”Two French Fries,” which now classical horn players have transcribed our improvised solos from the recording, made back in 1957.

When I met Charlie Parker in [19]52, he said, “Man, you’ve gotta come to The Apple.” So of course I would go there to visit, but I never dreamed I would actually live there. Then I was in Paris, and this guy named Lobo Nocho, whom I ended up writing a piece for, said, “You’re ready.” He said, “You’re ready to come to New York.”

These kids came through Paris and sat in with my band and invited me to return to the USA with them on a student ship and have me play in the band and get a free trip back. I’d seen Gunther Schuller in 1954 when I was in the Army playing in a bar in Frankfurt. I was playing in a bar in Frankfurt, Germany. Gunther had played French horn in Miles Davis’ *Birth of the Cool* record and was first horn in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and was already a brilliant classical composer who loved jazz.

He said, “You should come back to the USA study horn with me. I know you want to be a composer. You should go to the Manhattan School of Music. You can study orchestration and counterpoint and classical style of composing and study horn with me.” I felt, “Wow, I can get the GI Bill. Maybe I should do that.”

So those things were in the back of my mind. So a year later, when this bunch of kids came in while I was playing in a little place in Paris, and they said, “Hey, we’re going back on a student ship called ‘The Gruderbier.’ Why don’t you come along?” I said, “Oh, man. I’m already 24 years old. I’m already too old to look like I’m still in college.” Because all these kids were teenagers. They said, “No, no. You, we’ll say you’re in the band.” So I got a student ship trip back, I came back on a student ship on the Gruderbier and decided to come to New York.

Thought, boy, I’d sure like to—maybe I can go and live in the Village. That same block where my sister used to live. Except my sister by that time had moved, and my cousin had moved, so I knew I couldn’t stay with them. I spent the first night with an old friend of mine from school. then found my place on the Lower East Side, moved there. [00:14:56]

But I just wanted to come, and I felt maybe I was ready. I had no idea. But I had never really made specific plans anyway, except to try to get up each day and play better. I was trying

to write symphonies and books, and playing jazz and hanging out and leading my sixteen-hour-a-day days and nights.

Now I'm still doing it, except I have a little more defined tasks to do. But it all came from that—by just kind of jumping in. I guess you'd say 'going with the flow,' but that implies you're just passively lying around not doing anything. It wasn't just lying back on an air mattress, floating down the river. I was trying to be part of something and search for something and try to find some way where I could improve and even make a contribution. I'm still trying to do that.

Zapol: On the phone and in the car, you talked about some of the Village personalities, you know, or characters. Can you tell me some of the stories of some of those people?

Amram: Well, the old-timers when I came were Maurice, the famous newspaper salesman. They called him 'The Mayor of Greenwich Village.' Dave Van Ronk later on was called, 'The Mayor of MacDougal Street,' but that was later on when he wrote the book. That was his nickname. There were a lot of people that could have fulfilled that category any night, any time. Dave would be the first people to nominate twenty people.

But the Mayor of Greenwich Village, as he was nicknamed, was named Maurice who had been an artist as a younger guy. Then he was a great friend of Edna St. Vincent Millay. He had a long, white beard. He used to have a little bell he would ring. He would go into these places, and you'd hear Maurice's bell, like a dinner bell. Little hand bell. Then he would come in, and he'd sell old newspapers. Everybody would buy the papers just to hang out with him.

The he would go to machines and get quarters. Had this little bag full of quarters, and he would go down the subways for his collections. After knowing him for about twenty-five years, he said, "Man, come with me and come and see my collection." So I went, and sure enough every other subway stop there would be a locker. He would go and put some money in the locker to renew his being able to store his stuff. He would open them up, and there would be nothing in there but old magazines and old newspapers and just a bunch of junk. That was his way of keeping active, to hang out. To run around and have the action taking care of these lockers.

Then he also had an apartment that he kept being given by some of his fans that was also full of junk. He was like that TV show, *Hoarding*. He had an inordinate amount of old junk, which he loved, because it gave him something to do. He was so much fun that, in fact, when I got married in 1979, he even got in one of the wedding pictures. He said, "I gotta be in that

picture with you.” So with all my relatives and everything, there was Maurice as part of the ensemble.

He was a fantastic, wonderful person. Just before he passed away, he said, “Man, David, I want you to be my legal guardian,” because I lived a block from St. Vincent’s Hospital. So I went to the hospital, and I said, “How can you be a guy’s legal guardian, like fifty years younger than him?” I said, “Well, that’s what Maurice asked for.” They said, “Well, he doesn’t need one.” I said, “Well, OK, if he does I’ll be around—in case you decide he needs somebody.” I said, “I probably need a legal guardian myself, but in the meantime I’m happy to do what I can, and he can always come to my place and crash on the couch,” because by that time Jack Kerouac was down in Florida. He wasn’t crashing much at my place except for a rare visit to New York. My army of other friends now did that. So I put Maurice on my crash pad list.

Also Joe Gould, who was a little older than Maurice. He was the person who was famous for having written the oral history of the world. He used to carry this big bunch of bags. Inside the bags were just all these scraps of paper. Suddenly some literary type, while Joe Gould left the table he was with to go and panhandled him and hang out with some of his other fans, looked in the bag, and there was nothing but a whole bunch of scraps of paper. Junk and crossword puzzles and scribbles and cartoons.

When Joe returned to our table, the literary guy said, “Well there’s nothing here. There’s no text.” And Joe said, “Of course not,” He said, “It’s an *oral* history. It’s right up here”—pointing to his head. “It’s right here”—he pointed to his tongue and said, “Here. That’s where the oral history is. The bag is just for my notes.” [00:20:13]

There was also another great character named Jake Spencer, who received a certain amount of fame in the Village, because there was a horrible scene where he was out in the ocean on the Cape in Provincetown in a rowboat when Provincetown was still the remains of a Portuguese fishing village in the [19]30s and [19]40s, and artists would all go there, and it was really affordable. You could live in the sand dunes all summer, and build a little shack or pitch a tent. It was all wide open.

He would go there. But that was one of the places the Villagers would go and hang out and crash out, on a zero budget. All you need to do is to hitchhike or get a ride with somebody. When Jake was rowing in the ocean, his boat overturned—I guess they were all high or drunk or something. He swam seven miles to shore. I think some of the other people drowned, but he

managed to swim seven miles to shore. It was incredible. He was another one of the great Village characters.

Eugene O’Neill’s son, Sean O’Neill was an amazing, sad guy—was all messed up on drinking too much and everything else as well. But he had great stories about his dad and that era. Maurice had all the folklore about what it was like being with Edna St. Vincent Millay in her heyday.

There was a wonderful painter named De Hirsch Margulies. He was then in his seventies when I was there. Wore a big beret. He looked like just exactly the kind of artist you would dream of meeting in Greenwich Village. Wonderful, wonderful painter. Had a little place. He still lived with his mother, who must have been in her nineties. He was the sweetest man that ever lived. I would be up there on my sixth floor on Christopher Street writing music, and he would coach me and say, “Yes, yes! No, I don’t like that note!” Almost like a radio announcer, barking out instructions if I played a chord that he didn’t like.

A wonderful priest named Father Rover, who was Jack Kerouac’s personal priest: we used to come in. We always left our doors open. One night I came back, and I saw someone had slept there. I saw a note, little piece of paper, and it said, “I have visited Chez Amram”—C-H-E-Z—“I have visited Chez Amram and been reborn again. Hallelujah. Father Rover” That was my heaviest religious message that I ever got.

There were two wonderful writers—Anatole Broyard, who was the hero of the great undiscovered writers who’d written an incredible story called, “What the Cystoscope Said,” but he had writer’s block. Could never finish anything. Then he became a writer, a critic for *The New York Times* and wrote fantastic reviews, because once he had a deadline, he could do anything. But he never could get a deadline for his book in time.

Another one of his buddies named Milton Klonsky—K--L-O-N-S-K-Y—who was a fantastic writer who also had severe writer’s block and had troubles getting anything finished, but was really gifted. His most famous adventure was coming into the Lion’s Head Bar one night and saying, “David,” he said, “I’m finally leaving New York for the first time in my life, and I’m going to go all through Europe.”

I said, “Oh, man, you’re going to love it. I hope you come back. You’re going to love it so much, you’ll probably never want to come back.” So three weeks I go down to the Lion’s Head Bar, and I said, “Boy, Milton, you’re back already. What happened? I thought maybe—“ I

said, “Did you get sick?”

He said, “No, no.” He said, “I’m back. I couldn’t stand it.” ‘I said, “What do you mean?”’ He said, “There was no good pastrami sandwiches anywhere.” He was being serious. He was such a New Yorker that once he got to a place where he couldn’t get a pastrami sandwich, he wanted to come right back home.

There was another guy in the Village named Tony Fruscella. Incredible genius jazz trumpet player that used to carry his trumpet around in a paper sack. Had never left New York City his entire life. Finally—and he was the kind of guy who could play with a band without ever rehearsing. He didn’t need any music. He could hear everything. Anything he could hear, he could play. Like a genius. played gorgeous, lyrical trumpets.

So they finally said, “Look, Tony. You gotta make some money playing. You want to have a family and everything. You’ve got to make a little bit of money. Not just living on handouts. Come out to the Catskills. They’ll love you out there, the way you play so beautifully. You just do whatever you hear.” **[00:25:19]**

So Tony said, “OK.” So he finally left New York for the first time. Played that night. Everybody was bowled over. “Who’s this great, gorgeous, lyrical trumpet player?” So they said, “Tony, it’s nice out here in the country. You just go to bed, get some fresh air, and you wake up in the morning, your first good night’s sleep in your life and you’ll feel great.”

So about three in the morning, they heard this screaming and banging on the walls and yelling. They thought, “Oh my god, maybe he’s being robbed.” He was having a mental breakdown. He said, “I can’t stand it!” Because he heard all these crickets and no car sounds or subway rumblings. He had to go back. They had to drive him back to New York. He was having an out-of-town attack, because he was so New York-ed out he had to come back to the Village.

There were always so many wonderful people—my composition teacher, Charles Mills, who had stuff played by the New York Philharmonic. He was a legendary Village character in addition to being a fantastic composer. He used to sit at a card table and write out a whole symphony in pen and ink, just like Mozart. Impeccable handwriting. He was a great, great friend and a great inspiration as a person.

But he was not what you would call ‘Mr.Responsibility.’ There was a wonderful Dutch jazz accordion player named Matt Matthews. Matt had a gorgeous wife, Rosemary, whom he didn’t treat very well. My best friend Malcolm Raphael, who ended up being the best man at my

wedding and I, boyhood friend and I, were asked by Matt to look after his wife while he was gone for a week to play out of town. So the day Matt left, the three of us thought we would drive around New York with Rosemary, because Malcolm had a car with no top on it. We drove down to Wall Street, where Rosemary had never been. She worked as an airline hostess part time, but she had never actually seen New York.

So we drove her down there. Charles Mills was entranced. He used to come to Matt's apartment and bring a copy of his "Crazy Horse Symphony," which the Cincinnati Symphony had recorded. He would play this beautiful symphony that he had written. sort of sit there staring at Rosemary, looking like a North Carolina version of Beethoven. Matt Matthews didn't care because he ignored her unless he wanted something to eat or drink. I always thought that Charles was secretly in love with her.

Suddenly, while driving down to Wall Street, looked in the back seat and sure enough, it looked like they were holding hands. I thought, oh my god, what do we do now? What do we tell her husband? And Charles said, 'Everything's OK. We're just friends. I'll take her home, and we'll see you tonight.'

After our ride around the city, we dropped Charles and Rosemary off at Charles's apartment and three hours later called her to take her out to dinner. Charles answered the phone and said "Thank you, but no thank you. We're living together."

They had a really stormy relationship, and after he went berserk for the tenth time, she got really upset and called me up and said, "You know, he's a wonderful man. He just has a lot of emotional problems."

Another friend of mine who was the person by coincidence I met when I first came to New York, called me up the same day to discuss his romantic problems. His wife had left him and ran off with a roof gardener. They both called up the same day to tell me that their lives were ruined because they couldn't find a way to sustain a happy relationship.

"What should I do?" said Rosemary.

I said, "Look, we all have troubles. My buddy Ken is having troubles too. Let's the three of us go to a double feature on 42nd Street." So we violated the code. Went up to above 14th Street. Went to see a double feature. Went to Grant's, where you could get a whole meal for \$1.00.

Fifteen minutes after the Humphrey Bogart film had started, I looked over, and I saw

them holding hands, and I said, “My god, man, I must be like some cupid or what they call the ‘shadkhn’ in Yiddish. You know, someone who’s a matchmaker. Scarcely my job in life. I couldn’t even make a match for myself at that time.

Anyway, they ended up, from that movie, living together for a year. I’m not sure if they got married or not, but then Ken went to jail for selling pot. I thought, boy, poor Rosemary. She’s never going to get a break. She was such a lovely person. Then one day she called up. I asked how she was. I wanted to make sure she was OK and didn’t need a place to stay or something.

She said, “No,” she said, “I’ve really hit it. I’ve found myself a real man who’s making something of himself, and he wants to get married. He’s going to make me a happy person.”

[00:30.00]

I said, “Well, Rosemary, you deserve it. Whoever is with you is a lucky person,” and it turned out to be Timothy Leary, who I had seen when I played at Casey’s Bar, who was wearing his guru’s robes and talking about extraterrestrial life and spiritual powers—in the meantime drinking martinis and pinching waitresses as they went by.

I was not entranced by him. I’d met enough hustlers in the nightlife in New York, and all kinds of unsavory types, so I was familiar with that. But I just prayed she would be OK. Then, of course, when he went to prison, and then the Black Panthers and everybody—the Weathermen—broke him out, and he went over to Algeria. Then he made a deal with the FBI as a lifetime informant.

Part of his deal with the FBI was he was going to have her join him and turn in all the names of the people who had helped him to escape. She said, “I can’t do that. These people have helped you not to go to prison for life.” He said, “Well, if you don’t become an informant with me, I’ll have to turn you in.” So she went underground for twenty-some years. She was beloved in the Village. Before she passed away she was able to reemerged and get some kind of pardon and not have to do any jail time.

Matt Matthews remarried and had a happy family. Malcolm was a beloved Villager and legendary bar tender at the 55 Bar next door to the Lion’s Head, and Charles Mills, who remarried to a fine woman still carried a torch for Rosemary until he passed away. Ken found a wonderful wife who straightened out his life.

I was also at home on Sixth Ave writing music when the Weathermen accidentally blew

up the whole building when their bomb went off. It was always so noisy in the Village, that when I heard the explosion I figured, well, just some truck crashing into a parked car or something. And then I smelled all that smoke, and I said, “Well, it’s probably just the incinerator down on Patchen Place.”

Then I heard people screaming on the sidewalk, and I figured, well, maybe somebody’s having a party, or a car accident. I finally went out on the street, and it looked like a swinging singles meeting at the Club 54. Everybody was out there networking, flirting with each other, taking their numbers. In the meantime, the building was burning. I said, “Boy, that’s a real New York experience.” Here the whole building’s been dynamited, and everybody’s out there on the street hustling one another. It’s kind of interesting. A slight change. This was about the 1960s it had changed somewhat. I saw that the 1960s—it had changed everything. The corporate Summer of Love, Postmodernism and the new philistine Full Greed Ahead was flourishing at this moment, right in the heart of the Village.

Dustin Hoffman lived right down the street, and he came running down the block was understandably upset, because it was right in a building very close by to where he lived. He used to come in a place—we all used to—called Art Foods Delicatessen, run by Igor Sudarsky—S-U-D-A-R-S-K-Y—and his wife Sonja, both of whom had been imprisoned in World War II during the Holocaust and survived. Separated. Never thought they’d see each other again. Found one another. Moved to the United States. Started a family.

Igor’s sandwich place, called Art Foods Delicatessen, was like a university in itself. Some of the old-time revolutionary intellectuals would come by and suddenly go into these berserk screaming monologues about how Kerensky was really shafted by the original Russian revolutionaries, just as Citizen Tom Paine was shafted by the Americans, and Che Guevara was as well. Go into these incredible screaming witnessing monologues. They’d come in and say hello and be very polite, and then four minutes later there would be this howling and yelling, and Igor would just sit there, enjoying witnessing the First Amendment in action.

Then after everybody was done screaming, he’d say, “Look, you can all have a sandwich on me and a cup of coffee. Why don’t you quiet down?” He had all this stuff on the walls. It was like a museum of Jewish studies. We had all the Hebrew stuff. He said, “You know, I was a Communist, and my family were all Socialists in the Old Country.”

He said, “Then when I got imprisoned by Hitler,” he said, “I figured if I was because I

was Jewish, I'd better find out what being Jewish was about." So he became a born again Hebrew scholar on his own. It was like a university, just being in this place. When I wrote my Holocaust Opera, I went to him to get all of the dialogue of how the guards spoke to the prisoners, because he had been in a concentration camp. [00:34:56]

He had all these different people who like to remain anonymous. Howard Moss, the poetry editor of the *New Yorker* magazine lived there, and he used to come in, and he said, "David, if you ever blow my cover, I can never come here again, because there are 10,000 poets who will be after me enraged that I haven't published their poem." So it was a secret for all those years that this nice guy 'Howard' was actually Howard Moss.

Dustin loved coming there. Before he made the film *The Graduate*, Dustin Hoffman had been a waiter at the Village Gate, and when he really hit it, he had all his interviews at the Art Foods Delicatessen, so Igor could get a mention in the article. I was in there one day. Dustin was being interviewed, and people were lining up to interview him after the *Midnight Cowboy* had become another hit. Suddenly, he turned to this reporter and he said, "Oh, there's our wonderful neighbor, the jazz musician and classical composer David Amram. You've got to interview him. David, come over here."

I was embarrassed. I said, "Dustin, this is your interview." He said, "No, no. I want you to be in it. I want your picture taken." I thought, well, god, that's kind of him. So the guy asked me questions, took my picture. I said, "Boy this is really something." After the journalist left, I said, "Dustin, what journal is this?" Without batting an eye, Dustin said, "*The National Geographic* magazine." I said, "You're kidding?" He said, "No, that's who it was. I like animals, so they wanted to interview me." Naturally I wasn't in the interview.

But it was kind of sweet of Dustin to think of doing that. That's the way Art Foods Delicatessen was. It was not like a big Upper East Side networking place like Elaine's or a grim go to be seen eatery like the Russian Tea Room, and everybody was looking at everybody, or other places where you were getting either dirty looks, or the dirtiest look of all: 'Who is that nobody?'

One time I went up to the Russian Tea Room for some great gig that I didn't get. Joel Oppenheimer, who's a fantastic poet that never went above 14th Street either—except when he had to—was there all dressed up in the middle of the day, looking very uncomfortable. Both of us were wearing our suits and ties and looking uncomfortable. Then we saw each other at the

Lion's Head Bar, and he said, "God, I never thought I could survive being there. I was so ashamed you saw me there. You'd think I was betraying our code of honor."

I said, "No, man," I said, "You have to survive, you know. We're in New York City. Greenwich Village is just a part of the whole picture." But wherever you were it was always so nice to come back downtown.

Zapol: Let me give you one more place to talk about, which was the San Remo. You know you had that event with the Greenwich Village Society there.

Amram: Yeah. Well, the San Remo, again, was a big family bar café. Like so many of those places, a family business, where everybody in the family worked, helped out. Anybody that was working there was always treated great. Always got a wonderful meal, were treated as if they were a part of the family.

That extended not only to where they would treat the people who were doing the cleaning up. It would be people who were customers, or people who lived in the neighborhood that couldn't even afford to be a customer. They'd be taken in. If they could interview every single person that the San Remo gave something to eat—occasionally a free drink, you would have to print all the names in a phone book. But they were responsible, as well as generous. They knew if you were getting belligerent and wanted to get another drink, you didn't need one, and were probably better off not drinking that much anyway.

But anybody who looked like they were hungry, or they had just come to town or were confused would be welcomed, treated warmly, which is a pretty amazing thing anywhere in this world, and especially in New York City. That was one of the hallmarks of the San Remo.

Then so many of the writers and people who came there liked that because it was a real neighborhood place. A lot of the writers like Jimmy Baldwin who used to go to the White Horse would go to San Remo's because of that warm feeling. Kerouac loved it, because he was from Lowell, Massachusetts, a mill town, and he was always much more comfortable in a non-stuffy, non-competitive, non-uptight atmosphere.

Jack was a real intellectual and loved literature, and could quote Beowulf and Shakespeare and Racine, the French poets and all kinds of stuff by heart, but he liked just being around people that also loved playing baseball or to go bowling or play darts.

The Village moving men used to come in, a lot of merchant seamen. The San Remo was

one of the places that they would go hang out. Different athletes who no longer were able to excel were also often there. It was a classic old-fashioned neighborhood bar, for just regular folks who lived in the neighborhood. It always had that atmosphere, so there was never the thing of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, or the ‘outsiders’ and the ‘insiders’. It was pretty wide open. We all loved it. [00:40:00]

But at the same time, it was very much of a traditional neighborhood bar. If you really got out of line or obnoxious, even if you were part of the neighborhood, then the people who ran it would take you outside and speak to you. Then if you really were obnoxious, they would tell you weren’t welcome back. Then if you came back anyway and were even more obnoxious, then they’d punch you out. I don’t think they ever had to call a policeman. Because the family that owned and their devoted clientele were able, under the most severe circumstances, to take care of themselves.

Now the time that Jack Kerouac got beaten up, they tried to imply in a lot of the books that it was a bunch of ruffians and sadistic goons that went to the bar, and that certainly it makes colorful reading. The reality is Jack went into the San Remo with a guy name Stanley Gould, who was the best-dressed junky in the Village, famous for always having a suit in the cleaner. A masterful conman that would get everybody and guilt-trip them into giving him money. He was also capable of being outstandingly obnoxious whenever he had a mood-swing if he couldn’t get his drug money, so that he could calm himself down.

One morning in December of 1957, after I had worked the night shift at the Post Office on Church Street, I went to Joe’s on Bleecker Street to eat some breakfast. Joe’s was a little sandwich shop. Stanley Gould was already up, dressed as nattily as ever, and making his rounds, hitting on guilt-ridden White liberals, and he said, “David, I need two dollars.” I said, “Stanley, I’ve been working all night long. I’m trying to finish my symphony. I’m busting my ass, working in the post office so I can pay my rent.” I said, “Go out and get a job, man. You’re a good-looking white guy with a great gift of gab. Go out and get a gig.”

He was shocked that I dare not to succumb to his ability as a master guilt-tripper. After he defamed my character, my abilities as a young artist, my family and my greed in not giving him what he wanted, he saw that I was not impressed by this. But that was his specialty.

When college students would come down to the Village, especially in the ‘50s from Barnard College or Wellesley or some women’s colleges especially, and they wanted to see

some real Bohemian hip people, Stanley was the man because he was so suave. He always was immaculately dressed. He had a great sense of style, which is more than I can say for ninety-seven percent of the rest of us. He was very, very fashionable. Very well kept. Very charming. Also very adept at getting everything paid for by others after he received his mandatory donation, and then was adept at getting paid on top of that as a special tip to him for your time spent in his company.

So the night he went to the San Remo, because he was so self-confident, he tried to take his hustling skills into the wrong neighborhood and started insulting people standing at the bar. I was told someone at the bar said, "Hey, you know, I don't like your mouth. Knock it off." Instead of taking the hint, Stanley continued being rude. Finally, the guy cursed him out and said, "I'm going to punch you, you punk."

Jack, who'd been a football player who'd never hit anybody in his life and was really big and strong, but was a totally non-violent person, said, "Look, the guy's a little high. He's messed up. He didn't mean any harm. I'll buy you both a drink. Please leave him alone." And someone said, "Who the hell are you?" Jack said, "Well, I'm just trying to help." Jack got sucker punched. Bam. Jack said, "What did you do that for?"

"Come outside and we'll talk about it," said the second guy at the bar. "I want you to tell this smart-ass you came in with to apologize to me."

So then they went outside, and the people in the bar didn't know what was happening. They saw this great big guy Jack and figured he was attacking the person at the bar. It was actually Stanley's big mouth that did that. So instead of beating up Stanley, they took Jack out and banged him up and hit his head on the sidewalk. He had to go to the hospital and get it stitched up.

After all that, Jack remained friendly to Stanley, but didn't accompany him anywhere again. Jack went back to the San Remo a few weeks afterwards and never had a problem. I never knew anybody that did, because essentially that kind of thing didn't happen. If there was a fight or a dispute, it was only because somebody really was out of line and wouldn't exhibit basic manners or humility to say 'excuse me,' in which case he'd be bought a drink by the person he was arguing with.

It was a certain old-fashioned King Arthur's Court code of honor. Transposed into the old vestigial remains of an old Italian American neighborhood bar. It was a wonderful place. And

then, like a lot of other places, it had to get more trendy as the times changed. It still was fun, but it lost a certain amount of that character. But it was wonderful to see that old building again when the Greenwich Village Historical Society put up a plaque and some of the surviving family members came back and talked to us all. [00:45:00]

It was nice listening to middle-aged people from the family reminisce about when they were little kids, and how hard they worked there in their family's bar, to make it a safe haven for all of us. They reminded us of this little oasis was a port of call in the storm.

Zapol: It's interesting to hear about these—the overlap of the different kind of people and places—

Amram: Yeah.

Zapol: —which you're talking about, which the Village is in so many ways.

Amram: Sure. So is the world. When you get to be blessed like I still am to travel around the world, you can see that in all different roles I am assigned to. Because when you can conduct a symphony, then you're in the executive class, and you get picked up in a car, and you're put up in a great place. If you're writing a movie score—not an independent film—but when I did the Hollywood films, then you get treated like an executive.

When they did, when I did the score for *The Manchurian Candidate*, and they had a preview in San Francisco, and they flew me out, I was staying in a room that was so big it was like being in a whole house. I said to George Axelrod, who was the producer, I said to his wife—who I used to see at George Plimpton's parties when I played piano. I said, "Man, this is some incredible place." She said, "Well, dahling, that's Hollywood."

Then when you'd go to a folk festival very often you'd stay in a funky old motel, and just hope that the bed bugs find you unattractive. But because of having my place on the Lower East Side, I didn't mind the roaches. As long as there were no rats, I was cool with that, too. Different places, sometimes you stay at friends' houses. Sometimes you'd stay on a couch. It doesn't make any difference. If you're doing the music, you're there for that.

But if you're in it for the music, you're able to cross every sociological milieu. I played at the Blair House with the Thelonious Monk Institute, for then Vice President Gore with some of the world's most renowned musicians, and I played at Attica Prison with the band made up of

inmates. When I do the 4-H Fair up here in Putnam County and roast corn and then go down and play with whoever shows up, or when I play with Pete Seeger at the Corn Festival and play with all kids who never played an instrument before, they're all different milieus. Each one is a community. Each one has its own nuances, its own special feeling.

That keeps you attuned to trying to check out what each situation is. The Village, of course, was a great preparation for that, because in the Village, everybody was there together, and no one felt that by definition they were that much better or that much worse than anybody else.

So life in the Village taught me that the superiority complexes, and the inferiority complexes, are two sides to the same coin, and if you allow yourself to value that rotten currency which is thrust upon us all the time, you realize that this is counterfeit currency. You don't try to cash in on it. The Village helped us to search for lasting values and provided a fresh way of seeing and looking at things.

Zapol: Just to close the interview, because I've taken a lot of your time today—we started with sort of a riff on your introduction to the Village. how you kind of found your way there, what it felt like—sort of the energy of the place and sounds of the place. But now when you think of your time in the Village, what are some of the sounds or the images, the faces that come to mind if we were to make sort of a poem to finish this oral history?

Amram: Well, I would just think of the time I walked down MacDougal Street—I wrote about this in *Offbeat: Collaborating with Kerouac*—We were walking down MacDougal Street one night. One side of the street was dark, and they have those steel trap doors in the sidewalk, and they open those up at night so they can take stock down into the place. They also take garbage out. So they would open up this, like a steel gate that was in the sidewalk.

If you were walking down the dark side of the sidewalk, you could fall down in one of those things. So most people walked in the street, if they were on a side that wasn't lit.

[00:50:02]

This was a dark street, and you could see the piles of old newspapers and half-eaten souvlakis and popsicle sticks and beer cans and bottles and cigarette and cigar butts, because that was before anybody had a conception of anything remotely relating to the idea of ecology. Certainly in the '50s, it was still everybody throwing everything around.

So Jack started walking right close to the buildings in the darkest side of the street. I said, “Jack, think of that Fats Waller song.” I said, “‘Sunny Side of the Street.’ Fats used to sing that.” I said, “We’re going to fall down in one of those basements. Let’s go on the other side of the street. Let’s walk on the sunny side of the street.” And he said, “Nah.” He said, “An artist always has to be in the shadow.” He wanted to be in that shadow where he could observe and think.

Finally, I got him to come on the other side of the street. As we walked, he looked, and he said, “Look at that.” So I looked, stared at the sidewalk, thinking maybe he saw something interesting that had been dumped there. He said, “See those diamonds in the sidewalk?” I said, “What?” He said, “Yeah, look at that.” And I looked down, and sure enough, if you looked hard enough there was this little glistening stuff like asphalt.

He said, “Those are all the reflections of all the beauty that’s here, not just in this sidewalk, but everything in life that we take for granted and ignore that’s right here for all of us to have, those precious diamonds.” And I always thought about the diamonds in the sidewalk ever since that night. We have talked about that in relation to people—[coughing]—Oh, sure. Don’t worry. [cough] Are you OK?

Zapol: Just have a tickle in my throat.

Amram: Oh. That’s like the moments in *La Bohème* when Mimi is ill. Do you know at the end of *La Bohème* and Mimi’s coughing—

Zapol: Yes. Yeah. It’s a terrible cough. Yeah.

Amram: A little Puccini.

Zapol: So the diamonds.

Amram: Yeah. The other one I’ll always remember is 1971. I completed my first RCA Red Seal symphonic recording, and Odetta said, “Dahling, I want to hear your orchestral music with you leading it. I want to see you conducting your symphony.” So she came after the recording like a goddess in her big, beautiful white robes. She said, “Dahling, let’s go down to the Village where we belong and celebrate.”

So we went down to stand in front of the Kettle of Fish and the Gaslight and across, and then planned that we were going to go to the Gate and to Feenjon’s to hear some Middle Eastern

music—all that circuit where you could hear the whole world’s music in one night. We never got past the entrance to the Gaslight. As soon as we got down there and walked over, before we went into the Kettle of Fish, before going to the Gaslight, someone came up and said, “Sister Odetta.” And that was it. She started saying hello, the way she always did.

Then someone walked by and stopped and said, “Dave Amram, what’s happening, man?” We were there probably ten or more hours. I mean it was like a meet-and-greet that never stopped. People kept coming by, and I thought, my god, how can Odetta shake hands with that many people? She was just there like some kind of a person in a—if Wagner had been lucky enough to live in Greenwich Village instead of in Germany, and had been there that night with us, he would have named *Das Rheingold*, *Das MacDougal Street*. It was really beautiful.

She was just standing there, and we were both hanging out with people the whole night long, until about three or four o’clock in the morning. I just remember how much she was enjoying just seeing that kind of life. Then the times when we would go to hear young musicians play or see young people—places like Folk City and some of the little jazz places. You hear people who were so terrific, like hearing Jimi Hendrix the summer he played before he went to England—some of the extraordinary people that you would meet, and sometimes never see again.

Very often today I’ll be somewhere, see somebody with gray or white hair and they’ll say, “Hey man,” and then they’ll tell me something that happened forty years ago, and I’ll remember the whole thing that minute, like a computer would. Once you hit the icon that opens up that file, you know, everything is there, because the brain works that way.

So if you’re fortunate enough not to drug and drink yourself to death, and get your brain cells functioning again, it’s amazing how much stuff is in there of a positive, beautiful nature that you can recall. That’s part of your life experience. I just count my blessings for the joy and education and health that I received from so many wonderful people all those times. **[00:55:41]** I try now wherever I go to share my blessings, whatever the milieu, whatever the environment—whether it’s working with the symphony, a folk festival, a jazz festival, a literary festival, a spoken word festival, a Kerouac celebration, something celebrating Native American culture or Middle East—all the different parts of life I’ve been blessed to be in.

Whatever the milieu is, I try to bring some of that spirit and that quality with me to share with other people, and not go into a big five-hour rap about, ‘I was there, and you weren’t, and

here's what happened, but you're not welcome.' Just to explain that in terms of anything to do with beauty or humanity, there's never a trespassing—never a 'no trespassing' sign. There's never a membership fee required to be human.

Those simple old-fashioned values really were personified somehow in the whole great picture of Greenwich Village, which is a whole lot more valuable than the various demeaning stereotypes used to criticize a place that those who criticize it never even went to. Almost everything in our culture is assigned a certain slot and often defined by a negative stereotype created by people who don't even know what they're stereotyping, but they want to make it their exclusive turf.

The Village was never a turf to which you were not welcome. You never had to pay a fee to enter or leave the Village. There's a difference between seeing a purveyor to buy the services of a prostitute and having a lifelong relationship with someone that you love. There is a difference. I think part of our gig, especially for older people, is to show the beauty of lifelong relationships and the value of love. The Village greeted us with open arms and made us all realize that we should never act like purveyors of anything. Especially anything that's cultural, spiritual, or human. That's because the Village made all of us feel blessed, as outsiders, knowing that were we were welcome to be allowed to be part of it. That's what I learned, and realize now that it is our job to pass that on and keep that spirit alive!

Zapol: Thank you. Thank you for your time.

Amram: All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS (Taken at David Amram's home)

