

A TEI Project

Interview of Fayard Nicholas

Contents

1. Transcript

- 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (APRIL 13, 2000)
- 1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (APRIL 13, 2000)
- 1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (APRIL 20, 2000)
- 1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO (APRIL 20, 2000)
- 1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE (MAY 4, 2000)
- 1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO (MAY 4, 2000)
- 1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE (MAY 18, 2000)
- 1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO (MAY 18, 2000)
- 1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE (MAY 24, 2000)
- 1.10. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO (MAY 24, 2000)
- 1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE (JUNE 1, 2000)
- 1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO (JUNE 1, 2000)
- 1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE (JUNE 8, 2000)
- 1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE TWO (JUNE 8, 2000)
- 1.15. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE (JUNE 15, 2000)
- 1.16. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO (JUNE 15, 2000)
- 1.17. TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE (JUNE 21, 2000)

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE APRIL 13, 2000

WHITE

Today is April 13, 2000. I am at the home of Mr. Fayard Nicholas in Woodland Hills [California] at the Motion Picture and Television Fund Country House.
Hello, Mr. Nicholas.

NICHOLAS

Hello there!

WHITE

How are you today?

NICHOLAS

Really good. The weather's nice. I love California. It's always beautiful, and it's wonderful living here at the Motion Picture and Television Country House. I've been living here now for seventeen years, and I love it. This is the best place for actors to live. I've been telling other actors who don't know about the place. I said, "If you want to retire that's the place to go." That is the best place to go.

WHITE

Absolutely. It's lovely. It's very quaint and peaceful.

NICHOLAS

Peaceful and everything. I have something in common here with my friends—show business.

WHITE

Absolutely. It makes it a very pleasant environment.

NICHOLAS

We have something to talk about.

WHITE

Well, I wanted to just say on behalf of the UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] Oral History Program that we wanted to thank you for affording us the opportunity to interview you. We've been looking forward to it and I think it's going to be a very exciting project.

NICHOLAS

Well, thank you. All right!

WHITE

Well, I wanted to start off the interview by just talking about your family history. I want to get a sense of your upbringing and your parents' upbringing.

So first of all, do you have a sense, for instance, of your grandparents on your mother [Viola Harden Nicholas]'s side? Where they were from, what part of the country?

NICHOLAS

I think my grandparents and my mother and father [Ulysses Nicholas] were born in Mobile, Alabama, and so was I. I was born in Mobile, Alabama. My parents were college graduates. They studied music in college. Mother played piano and my father played drums. They were magnificent. They got an orchestra together, and they would play in the theaters, they would play in the orchestra pit. When I was born— I don't know anything about Mobile, Alabama. That's where I was born, but I don't know anything about it. I was just a little baby when they moved from Alabama. That's why I don't know anything about it. They moved to other cities. They moved to Chicago, Winston-Salem [North Carolina], Baltimore, Maryland, Philadelphia. And where they would move I would go to school in those different cities.

WHITE

Well, did your mom come from a large family? Does her family still live in Alabama or in Philadelphia?

NICHOLAS

There were some that lived in Chicago and those in Alabama. My father's family— I remember two brothers that lived in New York City. One brother's name was Clovis [Nicholas]. I knew him, and there were cousins. It was a big family. It was a big family. I remember I was talking to my uncle one day, Uncle Clovis, and he said, "You know something, Fayard? The Nicholases were never slaves." I said, "Really? Well, tell me about it." He told me a little bit about it. He said that they came over to America. There were English people whom they worked for. They came over in the boat and likely were servants or something like that, but never slaves.

WHITE

So indentured servants maybe.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. They were pricey servants. They didn't have to work in the barnyard or anything like that. They were reasonably wealthy people. That's what he told me. I wanted him to tell me more about it, but he passed away and I didn't hear all of it. But one day we were having dinner together and he started talking about that. And I said, "Well, that's very interesting that the Nicholases were never slaves."

WHITE

How long ago did he pass away?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I think it was in the sixties.

WHITE

Okay. Quite some time ago.

NICHOLAS

About the time that Dr. [Martin Luther] King[, Jr.] was assassinated.

WHITE

Okay, '68. Okay.

NICHOLAS

About that time.

WHITE

Did he have other siblings?

NICHOLAS

He was my father's brother. I remember there was another brother who was a half-brother, who was the youngest one of the whole family. The last time I saw him was in 1935.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness, a long time.

NICHOLAS

That's a long time ago.

WHITE

Is he still living?

NICHOLAS

I don't know. I don't know if he's still living. Like I said, my parents had this orchestra and they would play these different cities like, I remember, Baltimore, Maryland. They were playing at the Lincoln Theater there. Have you ever heard of Toby Time? [the TOBA circuit, Theatrical Owners and Bookers Association]. I think this theater was like that. It was a theater that had black entertainers, and they were playing in the orchestra pit. I was going to school there. I was going to a Catholic school in Baltimore, Maryland.

WHITE

Can we back up just a moment?

NICHOLAS

How far back? [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Just to give me your mother's and your father's full names.

NICHOLAS

Oh, their names? My mother, her name was Viola Harden. My father's name was Ulysses Nicholas.

WHITE

Is he a junior?

NICHOLAS

No, he wasn't a junior. They had a beautiful family. They were all different colors. [laughs] There was one brother who had blond hair.

WHITE

Really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, real long blond hair and they wore those Buster Brown outfits. You ever hear of that?

WHITE

Yes, absolutely. Now, you said this is a brother of your mother?

NICHOLAS

These are the brothers of my father. There's a picture that my sister [Dorothy Nicholas Morrow] had on the wall that showed this family, the sisters and the brothers of this Nicholas family. Oh, they're handsome, handsome people.
[laughs]

WHITE

That's where you got your handsome looks, right? [mutual laughter]

NICHOLAS

This was when they were children. There was my father. He looked exactly the same when he was a child as when he became an adult.

WHITE

Oh, really. Do you favor your father at all?

NICHOLAS

I don't know. Some people say I favor my mother more. Like I was saying, they were in this theater in Baltimore, Maryland.

WHITE

So they moved, basically, from Alabama, and one of the stops was Baltimore, Maryland. Do you know why they moved from Alabama?

NICHOLAS

That's because— They moved to get work. That's why they moved. So they were there and I was going to school there. I was going to a Catholic school. There were the nuns who were teaching us.

WHITE

Do you remember the name of the school?

NICHOLAS

No, I don't recall. It's just been so long. It was in the twenties. That's a long time ago. As I told you, I was born on October 20, 1914.

WHITE

Absolutely.

NICHOLAS

See how long back? Way back!

WHITE

That's a few years ago.

NICHOLAS

I certainly don't remember everything.

WHITE

Sure, I understand.

NICHOLAS

It was so wonderful because every school that I went to was integrated, every one of them—in Baltimore, Maryland, in Philadelphia. I didn't know anything about prejudice until I worked at the Cotton Club.

WHITE

Okay, right, in the 1930s.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, in 1932. That's when we opened at the Cotton Club.

WHITE

Exactly. So your school experience was one in which there was a variety of people.

NICHOLAS

It was wonderful because we had all nationalities, all colors, and we were all the same and there was no prejudice. I felt comfortable.

WHITE

Do you remember what your school days were like at all? Did you have hobbies? Or do you remember a teacher or a fellow student or the environment?

NICHOLAS

Well, I remember one afternoon I took my little brother [Harold Nicholas] to this school, this Catholic school in Baltimore, Maryland, and we met two of the nuns. There was a black nun and a white nun. They approached me. I approached them. I said, "Good evening, sisters." There was my little brother there and I took off my cap. My little brother, he looked to see what I was doing. So he took off his cap and the sisters said, "Oh, isn't that cute, this little boy, don't you think?" They loved that.

WHITE

He's seven years younger than you, isn't he?

NICHOLAS

That's right. That was one nice thing that happened in Baltimore, Maryland.

WHITE

So this was your grammar school. Do you remember starting there when you were in kindergarten? Or in the first grade? Did you stay there until sixth grade?

NICHOLAS

Well, I was there, I guess, until the sixth grade. Then we moved to Philadelphia.

WHITE

I see. Okay.

NICHOLAS

This was in the twenties.

WHITE

You must have eleven or twelve years [of age] or something like that.

NICHOLAS

I don't remember. It could have been that age. We moved to Philadelphia. We went to this school called the Stanley School in Philadelphia. That was integrated.

WHITE

That was a junior high school?

NICHOLAS

Something like that. When I first arrived there, they were arranging where I would go, what class I would go to. I would meet all of the students. Right away we became friends. So after school, we would come out the front of the school and everybody surrounded me. One guy said, "Say, I just heard about you. They told me you look like Rudolph Valentino."

WHITE

That's quite a compliment. [mutual laughter]

NICHOLAS

Quite a compliment. I said, "Really?" "Yeah." All because I was just being me. I didn't say that I could dance or that my parents were in show business, nothing like that. They just liked me. That's what I like about some of my friends, that they don't like me just because I can dance, or just because I can sing. They like me. They like the way I talk to them. They like my disposition. That was really a surprise to me that all these people were surrounding me, wanting to talk to me and saying I looked like Rudolph Valentino. That was that handsome actor in the silent movies.

WHITE

Of course. I'm very familiar with him.

NICHOLAS

Because they still had silent movies in those days, see, and I loved going to the movies to see all these great actors like Rudolph Valentino and Charlie Chaplin and Clara Bow and Lillian Gish.

WHITE

Do you have a favorite movie from that period of time? Can you recall?

NICHOLAS

I was crazy about Harold Lloyd. I guess you saw this movie [Safety Last] where he's hanging on the clock in downtown Los Angeles. I loved that movie. I was so crazy about him that when my brother was born and my mother didn't know what to name him, I said, "Name him Harold Lloyd." So my brother— His name is Harold Lloyd Nicholas. I named him.

WHITE

That's creative of you. Do you recall what it was like before your brother was born and then after? Was there a big difference in terms of the amount of attention that you received from your parents?

NICHOLAS

Well, I think I was the favorite because I was the first born. I guess [that accounts for] my disposition and everything, because I was always friendly with everybody, and I liked to talk to them and they liked talking to me. And then my sister was born in Chicago.

WHITE

Oh, she was?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Chicago, see, because my family was always traveling.

WHITE

Do you recall where you were when your brother was born?

NICHOLAS

I was in Winston-Salem. That's where he was born, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Yeah, he was born March 17, 1921.

WHITE

What's your sister's name?

NICHOLAS

Dorothy. She was born in Chicago.

WHITE

Do you know her birth date?

NICHOLAS

January 8, 1920. She's eighty years old.

WHITE

So you were the only son for quite a number of years, from 1914 to 1920. So, gosh, you were about six years old when your sister was born.

NICHOLAS

I guess I was.

WHITE

Do you remember when your sister was born?

NICHOLAS

I remember in Chicago that they took my sister to have a photograph taken of her was she was just a little baby and had on this really long gown. She was lying down on this couch or whatever it was, and there they were taking this picture of her. I wonder if she still has that picture. I don't know, but I remember that when I was just a little boy. There was my sister and they took a picture of her, and I think right after that we went to Winston-Salem.

WHITE

Because your brother was born the next year.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. In Winston-Salem. We stayed there a long time, and I went to school there.

WHITE

Do you recall anything about that area, Winston-Salem? Does it have any memories for you?

NICHOLAS

Well, I remember my parents were playing in a theater called the Lincoln Theater. It was a very nice theater.

WHITE

Your mother was playing the piano, correct? And your father the drums?

NICHOLAS

That's right. That's correct.

WHITE

Did they have a band?

NICHOLAS

Yes. They played in the orchestra pit. I used to go to the theater every day to watch all the entertainers on stage, and I liked what I was seeing up there. So I said, "I would like to be doing something like that."

WHITE

Okay, so the first time you went to see their band was in Winston-Salem?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. I said to myself, "I like what they're doing up there. I'd like to be doing something like that." So I taught myself how to entertain, how to perform. Then later on I taught my brother and my sister.

WHITE

Right. You guys were called the Nicholas Kids at one point.

NICHOLAS

At that time, yeah. The Nicholas Kids.

WHITE

I see. Now, a typical day for you at that time would have been you were at school, and then in the late afternoon you would go and see your parents perform? Or in the evening you would watch them perform?

NICHOLAS

Yes. Then the next day go back to school. I remember in Winston- Salem my parents were playing at this theater called the Lincoln Theater and that's where I saw the Whitman Sisters. Did you ever hear of them?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

That was— There was a beautiful girl. I think her name was Elaine or something, if I'm not mistaken. She was a beautiful dancer, lovely legs. She had blond hair and blue eyes. She was just a lovely, lovely girl. Why can't I think of her first name? [Alice Whitman, also billed as Essie or Elsie] There were four sisters. They had these shows that they did all over the country in these so-called "black theaters." It was called TOBA. My brother and I never did work TOBA, but we were there and we saw it. So we saw all the wonderful entertainers on stage and my parents were playing for them. They called it Toby Time. Oh, she was lovely, and she had a son. His name was Pops [also billed as Little Maxie Whitman, Jr.]. Pops was a little boy, and I used to play with him in Winston-Salem. I didn't see him for a long time. The next time I saw him in New York, he teamed up with this other dancer called Louie. So they were called Pops and Louie. They did a good act, a very good act. I think they were trying to compare them with the Nicholas Brothers [laughs], but we were different. They did their thing and we did our thing. So that's some of the things that happened in Winston-Salem. I remember seeing Butterbeans and Susie. They were a husband and wife team. They made records—Okeh records, they called [the label]. I remember when they were playing at this theater in Winston-Salem. I forget the name of it, but they made a lot of records, conversation type records. He wore a real tight suit, a little dirty, and tight all over, just real tight. He looked like a skeleton.

WHITE

Oh, no! He must have been a sight to see.

NICHOLAS

They had a drawing of a record. On the record it said "Okeh" and had their names on it, Butterbeans and Susie. And then when they announced them they played the record and then said, "Here they are, Butterbeans and Susie," and they walked right through the record. It was paper. They walked right through, I remember that.

WHITE

Of course. That would leave an impression, wouldn't it?

NICHOLAS

A very good impression. Everybody loved it. Everybody just loved it.

WHITE

When you were in the audience watching, were there quite a number of people watching at the same time? Were there other kids, the other band members' children or things like that when you were watching?

NICHOLAS

I don't remember children there, but there were a lot of adults in the audience. I think I was the only child there, and I tried to sit close to where my dad was playing the drums and watch the show.

WHITE

Did you ever have a desire to play the drums or the piano?

NICHOLAS

Yes. I can still play drums.

WHITE

Oh, good for you.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. But mother tried to teach me to play piano. I'm sorry I didn't really get into it. When I played I'm looking at the notes and looking down at the keys,

and you shouldn't do that. Just look at the notes and feel for the keys and know where these notes are, and I'm doing this. [pauses to demonstrate] So I didn't really get into it. I think the same thing happened with my sister.

WHITE

Is that so?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

So by the time you all moved to Baltimore, it was mom and dad and three children.

NICHOLAS

Yes, that's true. I remember when we were in Winston-Salem, there was a lady that our parents got to take care of my little brother. He called this lady "Mama." We would leave and go to Baltimore, Maryland, and my parents would send for him to meet us in Baltimore, Maryland. I remember one day he was feeling real low. He had his head hanging down. I said, "What's the matter? What's wrong, Harold?" He said, "I miss Mama." So my parents sent him back to Winston-Salem to be with her.

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

Yes.

WHITE

Did he stay for quite a while?

NICHOLAS

He stayed quite a while. Then, when we moved to Philadelphia and got all settled, me at school and they working at the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia in the orchestra pit with the orchestra, they sent for my brother to come to Philadelphia.

WHITE

I see. So your brother spent very little time in Baltimore.

NICHOLAS

Yes. When he arrived in Philadelphia he stayed, because this lady who took care of him, she passed away.

WHITE

Okay. They were very closely connected there.

NICHOLAS

He was sad when he heard about it, that she passed away. Then he stayed in Philadelphia. That's when I got together with my brother and my sister and we got our little act together and called ourselves the Nicholas Kids.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

That was in the twenties. It must have been 1929.

WHITE

Right. Your brother would have been eight years old or so.

NICHOLAS

Something like that. My sister couldn't keep the late hours. Nine o'clock, she's had it—has to go to bed. So we told her to go on to school and get her education, and we would put her through and we would do the work. So we started in 1930, the two of us. So I guess that's seventy two years we've been in show business, from 1930 to now.

WHITE

Wow, seventy! Long, long time.

NICHOLAS

Long time to go.

WHITE

When you were practicing your act as the Nicholas Kids, were you and your sister attending the same school? You guys were attending different schools? You had gone through the Catholic school in Baltimore and then you had moved on to the Stanley School in Philadelphia.

NICHOLAS

That's when I got my brother and my sister together— We made up this little act called the Nicholas Kids. We went to certain places. We went back to Baltimore, Maryland, to work in a theater there called the Royal Theater.

WHITE

So you headlined there as the Nicholas Kids?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Then after that we went back to Philadelphia, and that's when she said she can't take it anymore. She gave up.

WHITE

The rehearsals were too strenuous.

NICHOLAS

See, my brother and I, we're night owls.

WHITE

Oh, I see. Okay.

NICHOLAS

That's what it was. It wasn't that it was too strenuous for her. Nine o'clock— She's had it. That's it. My brother and me, we'd just stay up all night at the nightclubs or wherever it may be.

WHITE

So you guys would go to school during the day, and then after school you would go and watch your parents at the Standard Theatre, and then you guys would stay up most of the evening.

NICHOLAS

Let me tell you this. One evening my parents came to our apartment after the theater and they saw all of the lights were on in the living room. My parents said, "Why are you up? You should be in bed. You have to go to school tomorrow." We said, "Sit down. We want to show you something." So we started going through all these different routines, and after we finished our parents looked at each other and said, "Hey, we've got something here." So they gave up their orchestra to manage us.

WHITE

I see. Just like that.

NICHOLAS

Just like that.

WHITE

Wow, the talent must have been very obvious.

NICHOLAS

We worked at the Standard Theatre. My parents took us to the Standard Theater and introduced us to the manager of the theater, J.T. [John T.] Gibson. We was staying at his apartment building, which was called the Gibson Apartments. So my father said to him, "I think my boys have a little talent. Would you look at them?"

WHITE

Now, was the owner of this theater African American?

NICHOLAS

Yes. It was one of those theaters that we called the "black theaters," but it was very famous. Everybody would go there to see the different shows because they had— Louis Armstrong was there. My parents played for him. Buck and Bubbles [Ford Lee Washington and John William Sublett]—they played for them. There was Leonard Reed and Willie Bryant—they were there. There were Pete, Peaches and Duke—they were there. The Berry Brothers [Ananias,

Jimmy, and Warren Berry]—they played— So they played for a lot of famous people.

WHITE

They were quite accomplished, then.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes, they were. So that day we got up on stage and sang a little song and danced for J.T. Gibson. We did a little soft-shoe and he said, "Oh, that's good." He said, "You don't need to do anymore. You're booked here next week."

WHITE

Just like that.

NICHOLAS

He could see we had all this talent. We became stars right away, because when we performed we didn't perform like children. You could see our baby faces, but the rest of us looked like adults. So that made us sort of like a novelty, because right away they just fell in love with us. We couldn't get off the stage. We just did number after number after number. They would keep calling us back and calling us back. We were getting so tired. So when we would go to our dressing room, I said to my brother, "Something has to be done. I can't stand it—dance after dance after dance." I said, "Let's put some singing in the act. Let's talk to the people." My brother said [speaks in a weary voice], "I'm with you!"

WHITE

It's exhausting work.

NICHOLAS

So the next day I told the manager of the theater this is what we were going to do and we rehearsed with the orchestra. I said, "The next day I'll come out— We'll open up with a little dance, a little something that's not strenuous. I go to the microphone and say, "Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. I'm so happy that you came to see our show. Right now my brother's going to sing a song." I think it was [George and Ira Gershwin's] "Oh, Lady, Be Good!" at that time. I said, "I'm going to conduct the orchestra." So as he's singing I'm

conducting the orchestra. The funny thing about it, they were listening to him but they were watching me, because the way I would conduct— With my hands, with my head, with my feet, with my butt. I'd be keeping all the beats of the arrangement, and it was very successful.

WHITE

This wasn't the same orchestra that your parents played in, right? This was a different orchestra.

NICHOLAS

It was a different orchestra, right. So now we are entertainers. Before, we were dancers.

WHITE

I see. Okay, that's the significant difference.

NICHOLAS

That's the difference. We're entertainers now, and we stayed entertainers. It was all that dancing; it would tire us out.

WHITE

Sure. How would you manage that schedule when you danced most of the evening and entertained, and then went to school the next day? How would you manage that schedule?

NICHOLAS

Well, we had a tutor.

WHITE

Oh, you did. You began to have a tutor at that time. So you were no longer attending the Stanley School.

NICHOLAS

Right. When we started professionally in the theater, my parents got a tutor to travel with us.

WHITE

So once you actually performed at the Standard Theatre and everyone found out how talented you were, there was a certain point in time when you said your parents gave up their careers and decided to manage you and you were deemed a professional at that time.

NICHOLAS

Right.

WHITE

That's when they decided to go ahead and get you a tutor, so you could concentrate on your talents.

NICHOLAS

Yes. That's right. We couldn't go to school at that time. It would be too much on us. Like I said, we became stars right away and we had this tutor who would come to teach us. At that time, everybody was talking about the Nicholas Kids or the Nicholas Brothers. They heard about us everywhere—in New York, in Chicago, in New Jersey, you name it. They saw us in Philadelphia at the theaters that we played, like the Standard Theatre and the Pearl Theater, and they were talking about these Nicholas Brothers. Everybody would say, "Who are these Nicholas Brothers? They're raving about them so much." The manager of the Lafayette Theatre, which was in Harlem, in Manhattan, came to see us because he had heard about the Nicholas Brothers. He saw the show, and then after the show that he saw, he came to see us at our dressing room. So he knocked on the door and my father answered the door. He said, "Hello, my name is—" And I just saw those two boys. They are your sons?" He said, "Yes, they are." He said, "They were marvelous. I have a theater in New York City. It's the Lafayette Theatre, and I'd like for them to come there." So my father said, "Yes, fine. If the price is right, yes, then we'll go there."

WHITE

Do you recall receiving a salary at that time for your performances?

NICHOLAS

No, we didn't worry about money at that time. My parents took care of all the bills, all the places that we would work, handled all the money. All they would

do was have us looking sharp. We'd always wear these wonderful suits, shoes, everything. Mother made sure our hair was just right, everything, the fingernails— It was a class act.

WHITE

Now, the stylish suits that you guys would wear and the spit-shined shoes— Was this more characteristic of your mother's style or your father's style or a combination?

NICHOLAS

Both of them. Both of them were stylish. Mother dressed well and so did Father. So they wanted their children to look good too, and we liked looking good.

WHITE

You guys certainly did, on all your film clips and every movie that I've seen. I've never seen you guys in a pair of jeans. Would you ever wear just casual clothes or things like that?

NICHOLAS

No, no.

WHITE

Never.

NICHOLAS

When we were on stage, there would be those little— Or when we'd go out to different places. But if we were going to some place like the Beverly Hilton here in Los Angeles, it might even be black tie, and we'd wear that, or if it wasn't black tie we would always wear our jackets and a tie. We always dressed like that. We'd never go in jeans, baggy pants, just like you see some of the entertainers today.

WHITE

Was that pretty much the case whenever you were in public? You would get dressed up?

NICHOLAS

Always.

WHITE

Always.

NICHOLAS

Even when we'd just go out to see friends in different places, where they'd invite us to their hotels or wherever they'd be, if we'd go out and play we were always sharp.

WHITE

Interesting. Now, at this time your parents had decided to get you a tutor. So you were no longer in a traditional kind of school. Do you recall how you felt about that? I know you were enjoying your performance, but do you recall thinking about the kinds of activities that school children do, recreational games or just the social environment of being in school? Do you recall?

NICHOLAS

I recall that children liked to play baseball, basketball, football, all those things. That's their play. But my brother and I on stage, that's our play. We loved to entertain and we hoped that the audience liked us, because we were having fun and we hoped that they were having fun. It seemed as though— When they would come backstage to our dressing room and they would tell us how wonderful they thought we were, they said it was so intimate they felt like they were on the stage with us. I said, "Yeah, that's the way I want you to feel, like you were in our living room at our home and we were entertaining you." They'd say they felt that way.

WHITE

That's interesting. So most of your interactions were with adults. Do you recall having boyhood friends, other people your age? Did you get a chance to see them or interact with them?

NICHOLAS

I had school friends. When we were staying at the Park Lincoln in New York City— It was 321 Edgecomb Avenue, the Park Lincoln, and we stayed on the first floor there, apartment 1A. Washington Heights. That's where we stayed. We were working at the Cotton Club at that time. The first show at the Cotton Club was twelve [o'clock] midnight. The first was at twelve midnight and the second one would be at three thirty in the morning. So there we were in this nightclub called the Cotton Club. Maybe we'd get away from the Cotton Club at six o'clock in the morning or something like that, maybe seven. So now we'd go into our apartment. We would get to sleep or try to get some sleep because our teacher was coming at three o'clock in the afternoon. So our parents would wake us up and say, "Your teacher's coming. It's time to get up, brothers." So we'd get up and then spend an hour or two with her, and then we'd go back to bed.

WHITE

Quite a schedule for a young person.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we'd go back to bed and sleep more. We had a wonderful cook who stayed with us. Mother would wake us up and say, "Fellahs, it's time for dinner." So we'd go to the bathroom and take a shower and brush our teeth and comb our hair and all that. Then we'd come and have dinner.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO
APRIL 13, 2000

NICHOLAS

We were very lucky because we had wonderful parents who taught us right from wrong. All those things that other kids did I didn't want to do. I liked our lifestyle, the way my parents brought me up. I just didn't like all the other things that kids would do, be with gangs and all of that. That wasn't my cup of tea.

WHITE

Wasn't your style.

NICHOLAS

That wasn't my style at all.

WHITE

A moment ago you were going to talk about classmates that you had or friends that you had that were your age, when you had an opportunity to interact with them. Do you recall their names?

NICHOLAS

I remember one friend I had in Baltimore, Maryland. His name was Ernest. He became a good friend of mine. He would come over to our apartment in Baltimore, Maryland, and we'd play together like children do, or there'd be maybe a little baseball or something like that. Football— I hated that game.
[mutual laughter]

WHITE

I don't blame you.

NICHOLAS

All these guys who get all of this money, millions of dollars— They deserve every penny they get because they don't last long.

WHITE

That's for sure.

NICHOLAS

They get broken knees, hips, elbows, ribs. They get all messed up. So they deserve every penny that they get.

WHITE

I wholeheartedly agree.

NICHOLAS

They don't last long.

WHITE

You had friends that liked to play football? Did they try to encourage you to come out and play those sports?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, but I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do it. That's one of the things— I played a little touch football with them. We're running, and I touch you and you're down.

WHITE

That's enough.

NICHOLAS

You're down. That's enough. But don't tackle— No, none of that.

WHITE

That's dangerous because your legs, that was your business. That's important.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah! Of course. He was my good friend in Baltimore, Maryland. Ernest was his name. We kept in touch with each other. When I moved to New York, we kept in touch. Well, Philadelphia, too. But I lost contact with him. I don't know what really happened with him. But we would correspond, and all of a sudden we didn't hear from each other anymore.

WHITE

Lost touch.

NICHOLAS

Lost touch.

WHITE

Do you recall the kind of reaction you would get from other kids? Because your lifestyle was so different than other kids. Was there any sort of envy or anything like that from other kids?

NICHOLAS

No, no. We had some friends in Washington Heights whom we played with. We'd go to different parties with them. I think it was about eight kids that we were associated with in Manhattan in the thirties. We started at the Cotton

Club in 1932. That's when we were friendly with the children in the neighborhood, because we didn't go to school. They did, but we didn't because we had a tutor.

WHITE

They must have been very envious of that lifestyle.

NICHOLAS

Well, I don't know. We were just children who liked to be with each other, talk to each other, play games with each other, and never talked about the Nicholas Brothers in the Cotton Club or anything else. We were just children. So I could never talk about it either. That was another part of my life.

WHITE

Okay. That was something that you guys didn't have in common, so it never came up really in conversation.

NICHOLAS

No, it never did come up. We also had girlfriends, too.

WHITE

Okay. [mutual laughter] Of course you did.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, of course we did. We became very friendly with two twin girls. They were called the Brown twins, Hilda and Vivian. We became very friendly with them. Later on they danced at the Cotton Club. They became two of the dancing girls, with all of the other girls. There was another girl—ooh, she was so pretty!—her name was Winnie Johnson. Oh, my goodness. She was like my first love. I liked the Brown twins too, but this Winnie Johnson did something to me. Oh, brother! So she was one of the dancing girls also, in the Cotton Club with the dancing girls. I remember another girl that I liked, Edna Mae Holly. She married Sugar Ray Robinson.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I liked her, too.

WHITE

Did you have an opportunity during this period of time to date? Would your schedule afford you time to do so?

NICHOLAS

Well, I guess you'd call it a date, [but] my parents were always with us. So if there was any hanky-panky— It wouldn't happen! It never did happen because they were always there.

WHITE

That's funny.

NICHOLAS

I would kiss the girls and things like that, but that's as far as it would go because my parents, they took good care of us. And I'm glad they did because we could have gotten in trouble. Oh, yes. Children do. Even those who are not in show business will get in trouble. When you're in show business, you're exposed to all these things. You see all these beautiful girls backstage and they'd be checking up their legs and we'd be looking— Holy crackers, what's going on here! [mutual laughter] We had the feeling, but our parents, they took very good care of us.

WHITE

They curtailed any of those activities, right?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and I'm glad they did.

WHITE

Sure. Now, you spoke a moment ago about influences that other kids had. You said that you guys were living in Washington Heights. That was, I think, at the time when you were performing at the Lafayette, around that period of time?

NICHOLAS

Well, before we moved to Washington Heights— That was the first engagement, there at the Lafayette Theatre in Manhattan. It was after that. Then we moved to Washington Heights and got an apartment there, 321 Edgecomb Avenue, because we were living in some other places. I guess you would call it typical Harlem there. On Lennox Avenue there was some kind of apartment building where we lived. I forget the name of the building where we were before we moved to the Park Lincoln, 321 Edgecomb Avenue in Washington Heights, but when we went to the Lafayette Theatre, that's where we were. I think it was on Lennox Avenue.

WHITE

Can you describe the neighborhood for Lennox Avenue at that time and also at the Park Lincoln?

NICHOLAS

Well, that was where the Cotton Club was—also where the Savoy Ballroom was—on Lennox Avenue. The Apollo Theatre was on 125th Street between 7th Avenue and 8th Avenue. So we played there a lot, too.

WHITE

So this was the late twenties basically, when you were at the Lafayette, before you went to the Cotton Club in 1932.

NICHOLAS

No, wait a minute, wait a minute. We started in 1930, our career. We opened in the Lafayette Theatre in 1932. Just don't bother to talk about the twenties now, because we did not perform in the twenties.

WHITE

Okay. At all.

NICHOLAS

No. The only way I performed in the twenties was when I'd perform in school plays. I would do benefits. This is without my brother or my sister.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

This was by myself.

WHITE

Oh, for school benefits.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, for school, which was in the twenties. I remember one of my first engagements was on the radio.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

It was Horn and Hardart.

WHITE

Horn and Hardart Children's Hour, wasn't it?

NICHOLAS

Right. That's right. I think the producer of this all-kiddie show Horn and Hardart saw me at one of the benefits and invited me to come on and do something on the radio. So I was singing, talking and tap-dancing over the radio.

WHITE

Oh, were you? Okay.

NICHOLAS

Then I said to the producer, "I have a little brother. I think he has some talent." He said, "Well, bring him!" So then my brother had to come over there, and he was tap-dancing on the radio. I think the station was [radio station] WCAU. That was the station.

WHITE

In Philadelphia.

NICHOLAS

That was one of our first jobs, you might say.

WHITE

You were actually compensated for doing this work?

NICHOLAS

I think so. I told you I never did worry about money. I just wanted to entertain, but we must have gotten something.

WHITE

Sure. Now, radio at that time was the primary form of entertainment. Of course, television hadn't come to pass at that point.

NICHOLAS

Television wasn't even thought about.

WHITE

Absolutely. Did you listen to the radio a lot?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. I used to listen all the radio shows like with Bob Hope, Red Skelton, all the big bands, Benny Goodman. I always tuned the radio up. I liked it because it was great in those days. Then, when Jack Benny and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson— I loved those shows.

WHITE

Do you recall ever thinking that maybe radio would be a career for you?

NICHOLAS

Oh, we did try one time. We were in Chicago at the Chez Paris and we were there with Ben Bunny and his orchestra. And Ben Bunny, he liked us and he said he wanted us on his radio show. So we did. They liked it when I was tapdancing. Oh, it sounds so good over the radio. They loved that. Then there was singing and we brought up sketches. We did the opening show and then all of a sudden they didn't want the Nicholas Brothers anymore. We said,

"Why? What's the matter?" They said, "The producer said that your brother's voice sounds too much like Ben Bunny's."

WHITE

Oh, there was too much competition.

NICHOLAS

Too much competition. Our manager at that time was Herman Stark, who was also the manager of the Cotton Club.

WHITE

I see. This was your personal manager.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, he was the manager. So he threatened them, because— I guess you know that the Cotton Club was run by gangsters.

WHITE

Right. I'm aware of that.

NICHOLAS

Well, he was one of them. So he had this threatening thing about him. He said, "You've got to keep them on." So they kept us on for four weeks. For four weeks we were on and we did different numbers each week. So at least we were on, and all of the country heard us on this show.

WHITE

So this is basically your first job.

NICHOLAS

First job on radio. Of course, we did that thing in Philadelphia, but that wasn't really a big thing. But this was a big thing. It was national, played all over the country. That was our radio experience.

WHITE

What kind of response did you get from the audience? Did you have people writing you and telling you that they had heard you?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Oh, they loved us. They loved us on the radio, but those producers had their way. So what could Ben Bunny do? Because Ben Bunny— They made a recording of the show, and he was in his room at a hotel there in Manhattan and he was listening to this record over and over again, because he really wanted us on that show. He wanted us to be on that show for the run of it. But we were only on for four weeks. That's the agreement that they made with our manager. The whole country heard about the Nicholas Brothers and they loved those taps.

WHITE

I'm sure they did. Now, at this point you had another manager. Your mother and father had decided no longer to manager you.

NICHOLAS

My mother and father managed us. We went to the Cotton Club. Two years straight we weren't going any other place.

WHITE

Did you have this manager before you started at the Cotton Club? You did, because you had him when you were at the radio show.

NICHOLAS

Our manager was the manager of the Cotton Club. Before that, my mother and father were our managers. Then they found out that the manager of the Cotton Club, who wanted to be our manager, could do better things than they could do. They were doing well, but they knew the power that he had. So he became our manager, and at the time we did those radio shows he was our manager. So my parents were not managers anymore, but they always did travel with us.

WHITE

So that's how they spent most of their time. Were they performing at all at that point?

NICHOLAS

No.

WHITE

They decided to leave it alone.

NICHOLAS

I guess we made enough money to take care of everybody. So we bought Mother's fur coats and all of that. Dad was always sharp. So it worked out well. Like I said, we were at the Cotton Club two years straight before we went to any other place. Then Samuel Goldwyn, the producer, saw us at the Cotton Club and wanted us to be in this new movie starring Eddie Cantor. The name of the movie was Kid Millions. Ethel Merman was in it, George Murphy was in it, Ann Sothern, and a comedy team called Block and Sully. So that was our first time out here in Los Angeles, to do this film called Kid Millions. Everybody just fell in love with us. It was our first movie out here. It was in 1934.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

We had such a wonderful time. Oh, it was so funny. George Murphy was supposed to be the interlocutor of a minstrel show that was on this ship that was going abroad. Samuel Goldwyn liked my brother so much that he said, "I want Harold Nicholas to be the interlocutor. Take George Murphy out." Eddie Cantor said, "Can you imagine what Sam said? He wants that kid to be the interlocutor in this movie." He said, "You're stealing the film from everybody."

WHITE

And that's what happened, right?

NICHOLAS

Well, no. See, Eddie Cantor was the star of the movie. So Eddie Cantor— This will not happen because— They always say animals and kids will steal the show if they're in it with you. So Eddie Cantor knew what would happen if they made my brother the interlocutor.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

But we did a good job in it. We wore white tails and high hats [top hats]. At the beginning of this show that they did on the ship, they opened up with my brother singing a song called "I Want to be a Minstrel Man." He sang the chorus all by himself, and then the next chorus these beautiful girls came out called the Goldwyn Girls, the blonds and the brunettes and the redheads. They were surrounding my little brother. They had on a sort of a costume, like a jacket with little [coat]tails, and showed all their beautiful legs. They didn't wear pants. And they looked good. They had high hats, but they were in sort of black and white costumes. Their shirts would be white and the rest of the costume would be black, the black hose and the black shoes. They were surrounding my little brother. Now, that was integration before integration. They had never done that before in motion pictures. They had this little boy— What did they call us then? "Colored," didn't they?

WHITE

Yes. [mutual laughter]

NICHOLAS

So he did a good job and he was singing and looking at all these— Because they would kneel down on their knees and look at him, and he's looking at them. Oh, boy, he was in heaven! Now, Lucille Ball was one of those Goldwyn Girls. We'd go outside between the takes and we're talking to my mother and father, my sister and my brother and me. We were outside talking and catching a little fresh air. All of a sudden we see Lucille Ball. She was coming towards us and she had a little dog. When she got closer to us, my brother said, "Oh, that's a nice little dog. I like it." Lucille said, "You do? He's yours." So she gave him the dog. But the funny thing about it— His dog, but I had to take care of it. I didn't like that at all. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

I'm sure. While he was off dancing and singing, right?

NICHOLAS

I said to my parents, when I saw Lucille, "That girl has star qualities. I bet one day she's going to be a star." In this movie all she did was look pretty with all the other girls; she wasn't a part of the story. I said, "She's going to be a star," because she had that same energy that she had when she was doing I Love Lucy and all the motion pictures that she made. I never dreamed she was going to be a superstar.

WHITE

You were a visionary; you predicted something there.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I had that vision, didn't I?

WHITE

Yes, you did, and what a long and fruitful career she had.

NICHOLAS

That was a wonderful time that we had, when we were doing this motion picture called Kid Millions.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE
APRIL 20, 2000

WHITE

I am at the home of Mr. Fayard Nicholas in Woodland Hills. Hello there, Mr. Nicholas. How are you?

NICHOLAS

Hello there. Like you said, you're at my home and the name of my home is the Motion Picture and Television [Fund] Country House. I'm feeling good. I'm going to be a happy man tomorrow, because I'm getting married to my lovely lady, Catherine Hopkins.

WHITE

Congratulations to you. That's very exciting.

NICHOLAS

Thank you. We're going to get married at city hall in Van Nuys at 4:15 tomorrow.

WHITE

At 4:15, Friday, April 21, 2000.

NICHOLAS

Friday, April 21. Good Friday.

WHITE

Good Friday! That's perfect.

NICHOLAS

It's going to be a good deal.

WHITE

I'm sure it is. The whole day, everything.

NICHOLAS

Yes. She's going to wear her gown, her wedding gown, and I'm going to wear my tuxedo. So we're going to be the sharpest ones there.

WHITE

I'm sure you are.

NICHOLAS

I know we are. I hope nobody comes in their jeans.

WHITE

You're known for your dapper outfits. I'm sure you'll be the best dressed man in the room.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, well, thank you.

WHITE

Your evening and the whole weekend is going to make for a very joyous new beginning for life for you, Mr. Nicholas.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. We're going to have a little honeymoon, because we're going to drive up to Santa Barbara and we're going to see a show there called Ain't Misbehavin'. I guess you've heard about that.

WHITE

Yes, I have. I've heard it's a very good play.

NICHOLAS

The music of Fats Waller. So we're going up there for a day or two and just have a ball, just have wonderful— Oh, but before we leave— It'll be on Saturday that we go to Santa Barbara. After our wedding, we're going to this French restaurant— I forget the name of it. Catherine should be here; she writes everything down. My sister [Dorothy Nicholas Morrow] and her husband [Byron Morrow] will be there, my two sons, Tony [Anthony Nicholas] and Paul [Nicholas], and one of my granddaughters, Cathy [Nicholas]. She'll be there. My friend Jackie Curtis, he'll be there with his wife Bobby. Her name is Barbara, but they call her Bobby. He's going to videotape the wedding, and she's going to take still pictures of the wedding. So that'll be nice and something for us to look at one day in our old age. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Well, I hope I'll have an opportunity to see some of your photos. That would be exciting.

NICHOLAS

Thank you. Yes. That's going to be nice. It's nice to have nice friends who appreciate you and they're not phonies and they think positive. I think that's why Catherine likes me, because I think positive.

WHITE

I'm sure that has a lot to do with it.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. All the other men that she's been with are all negative, she was telling me. She said she likes me because I give her space. I don't holler at her. If she gets a little upset, I just keep quiet and just let her get herself together. She likes that about me. I've been that way all my life, with my last two marriages, to Geri [Geraldine] Pate Nicholas—now she's Geri Pate Branton—and with my second wife, Barbara January, who became Barbara January Nicholas. I got along with them beautifully, just like I get along with Catherine, who's going to become my third wife.

WHITE

I guess marriage suits you well.

NICHOLAS

Yes, I think so. I like to get married. I married Barbara in Philadelphia, and her sister [Vivian Vaughters] was there. One of her sisters stayed in Philadelphia, and she said, "You and Barbara have to get married." So she arranged the marriage with a reverend there from her church and we got married. Then the next time Barbara and I got married was in Las Vegas. We were there to see a show with Gregory Hines. He was playing at the MGM Hotel with Rich Little. So he was there to see us get married. My brother [Harold Nicholas] and his wife [Rigmor Newman] were there. My brother was the best man. So they were the witnesses. That was the second time Barbara and I got married. Now, the third time was right here at the Motion Picture [and Television Fund Country House] library. It was a Bahá'í wedding because Barbara and I are Bahá'ís. So we had the Bahá'í wedding there. That was great. The family came. All of Barbara's sisters came. She has four sisters. So it's five girls all together and there's one brother-in-law [Alfred Johnson] and Barbara's mother. It was a beautiful ceremony. They don't have a clergyman in the Bahá'í faith. If you want to learn about the faith, there will be a speaker. You go to someone's home and he will speak and tell you about the faith, and we'll have a little break and have tea and coffee and maybe cookies or whatever, and then he'll come back and you can ask him any questions. Ask him something about the Bible or anything, and he'll try to explain it to you. In the Bahá'í faith, we believe in all religions. So when Catherine and I get married again we're going to have a rabbi. We're going to have a priest. We're going to have a Bahá'í and a Hindu [officiant].

WHITE

Really?

NICHOLAS

Four. All of them there together.

WHITE

Wow. So who is going to perform the ceremony?

NICHOLAS

You mean tomorrow?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Someone there at the courthouse.

WHITE

Oh, the courthouse tomorrow. Okay, that's different.

NICHOLAS

But when we have the other marriage, we'll have to find out who will be the rabbi and the priest and get them all there together. Catherine said she would like for the rabbi to be the last one to give us his blessings, because I think there's a glass that they put on the floor [stamps his foot] and we crush it.

WHITE

Right. That's the tradition.

NICHOLAS

That's for good luck.

WHITE

So will you guys follow the African American tradition and jump over the broom?

NICHOLAS

I don't know. I don't know, I didn't think about that. I'm going to tell Catherine about that because she— That's why she's crazy about me, because I believe in all the religions and she believes in all the religions and the men that she's been around, they don't dig her with that. They don't like her because she goes with this. I go to the temple with her, the Jewish temple, and she's been with me to a fireside in the Bahá'í faith. We just go to all of them, and she likes that about me.

WHITE

That's great.

NICHOLAS

That's because the other guys, they wouldn't go. We believe in all the prophets, but there are some people who are religious fanatics. All they can say is "Jesus Christ." Everything is Jesus Christ. I remember one of Barbara's sisters— Her name is June [Johnson] and that's all she says to me—"Jesus Christ." One day she was saying, "The only way you can reach God is through Jesus Christ." I said, "Well, that's fine, June. But," I say, "maybe I want to make a shortcut and go straight to God." [mutual laughter]

WHITE

So the Bahá'í faith is basically based on embracing your spirituality as opposed to practicing a religion, so to speak.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it's a beautiful religion. It started in 1844. Like I said, we believe in all the prophets—Jesus Christ, Mohammed, and all of them. You name them. Our prophet is Bahá'u'lláh. He's one. He's like Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ suffered. Well, Bahá'u'lláh suffered, too. He first started in Persia, which is Iran now. They put him in jail and he was in jail for many many years. So he was just like Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ suffered and they killed him and all of that. So the Bahá'u'lláh, he died in this prison, and he did it because of the faith. So it's a beautiful— I wish you could go with me sometime to a fireside.

WHITE

Maybe I will. How were you introduced to that faith?

NICHOLAS

Oh, let me tell you this. My wife's daughter— Barbara had had a daughter by her first marriage.

WHITE

What's her name?

NICHOLAS

Well, her original name was Pamela [Peterson] and we called her Pam. Then she changed the name to Nina[trova] [Peterson]. Then, after that, she changed it to Carlahansa [Peterson].

WHITE

Is she an actress?

NICHOLAS

Yes, she's an actress and a singer. She went to one of the firesides of the Bahá'í faith. Barbara and I were in our apartment and she was out. We didn't know where she was—Nina. We were worried about her, and when she arrived at the apartment, we said, "Where have you been? We've been so worried about you." She said, "I had the most wonderful time in my life." I said, "Well, tell us about it." She said, "I was at a fireside for the Bahá'í faith." Then she said, "You should go there," because she didn't come home until four o'clock in the morning. She said, "You must go there." I said, "Okay. All right." We were staying in a duplex type of thing, apartment building, where there was our friend who was downstairs. His name was John Angelo. We were staying upstairs and we had a terrace and everything. It was right downstairs where she was. We didn't know she was downstairs.

WHITE

Really? Until four in the morning, she had been right downstairs.

NICHOLAS

I said, "Okay." So we went there. When John Angelo opened the door I could feel love, because the people were so nice. So we listened to the speaker. I

didn't declare myself right away. I wanted to hear more about it, but my wife became a Bahá'í right away. It took me a year before I became a Bahá'í. Then I found out what our daughter was talking about, because these people didn't have this thing like the Bahá'í faith is the greatest in the world and that's it. Like June, my wife's sister. That was it. Jesus Christ and nothing else. She would always say, "He died for us. He was our savior." I said, "Okay, that's fine. But you just think that Jesus Christ was the only one. My goodness, June." So I took her to a fireside. She agreed to go with me. Her husband, he went too. She was listening, but she wasn't convinced at all. After the speaker finished speaking, her husband came over to me and said, "Fayard—" He didn't believe in any religion. He was an atheist. He said, "Fayard, if I were going to have any kind of religion, the Bahá'í faith would be it, because it makes sense to me." I said, "Are you going to declare yourself?" He said, "No, I've got to hear more about it. I'll have to come to other firesides." So it opened his eyes. He didn't care about that way his wife was always trying to convert everybody.

WHITE

What is his name?

NICHOLAS

His name is Alfred, Alfred Johnson. His wife was June Johnson.

WHITE

So you've been following the Bahá'í faith from that point forward?

NICHOLAS

Yes, since 1967.

WHITE

Wow, that's a long time.

NICHOLAS

I've been a Bahá'í, and they're wonderful people.

WHITE

That's great.

NICHOLAS

When I was younger, my mother [Viola Harden Nicholas] would take me to church every Sunday and she was a Methodist. I hated to go to church because I'd get there and the reverend— All he'd say is, "You are all sinners. You are going to hell if you don't straighten up and fly right." I didn't want to hear that. I want to hear something about how to make this a better world. I want to hear about love. We should love each other. I don't want to hear about sinners and all of that.

WHITE

Did your father [Ulysses Nicholas] go to church with you?

NICHOLAS

I guess he did. I was very young then. He [Ulysses Nicholas] wasn't very religious, but my mother, she would read the Bible every night.

WHITE

Religion played a very significant role in her life.

NICHOLAS

It was right at her bedside. She was always religious. So I was always searching. I would go to the Catholic church. I would go to the Baptist church. I would go to the Jewish faith. I went to all of them, and I didn't find anything that really satisfied me. I always believed in God. Then, when I went to a fireside for the Bahá'í faith—

WHITE

That's where you found your place.

NICHOLAS

That's when I found it.

WHITE

It spoke to you in a very personal way.

NICHOLAS

Yes, that's when I found it. I always believed in all the faiths, but it really didn't satisfy me, because I didn't like the people, the way they acted when they would go to church. At Easter time, I didn't like what was going on. Everybody would be at the church in their beautiful outfits, and it seemed as though [they] would come in and come in late, and just go down the aisle so they could see their outfit, the ladies and the guys just looking around. They couldn't find a seat, so they went down front.

WHITE

It was like a fashion show.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Everybody could see them. I said, "What is this?" Just like you said, a fashion show. That's what it looked like. So I say, when you go to church, you go there to worship God. You're not going there to show you have this lovely outfit on. That's not the way. No.

WHITE

Well, tell me something. Was there a certain point in time when you stopped going to church with your mother, to the Methodist church, when you were younger?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. I stopped, myself. I said, "Mother, you go by yourself. I'm tired."

WHITE

Do you remember how old you were approximately at that time?

NICHOLAS

No, I don't remember exactly. I was quite young.

WHITE

Adolescent? Ten, twelve, something in there—?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, something around there. That age, I think, because when I was in Baltimore, Maryland, I went to a Catholic school and we'd always to go church.

WHITE

To Mass.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, to the Mass. The priest was there. He was dressed in his wonderful outfit and he's going around with something in his hand and he's dressed like that, blessing everybody. There were pictures on the wall all around the church and he would go from one to the other—when Jesus Christ is carrying the cross. He'd go to each one of them. There would be a couple of boys behind him to make sure his robe wouldn't get caught in anything. We were always getting on our knees. Oh, my knees were so sore. Oh, my goodness. I'd say, "I'll be glad when this is over!"

WHITE

Did you feel a bit of discomfort in that faith? Do you remember feeling uncomfortable there?

NICHOLAS

Only with the knees. Only on my knees.

WHITE

Only with the knees.

NICHOLAS

I liked what was going on, because that priest put on a good show.

WHITE

Did he? [laughs]

NICHOLAS

I was going to give him a hand. The nuns— Oh, they liked me. The nuns really liked me because— I remember one afternoon I took my little brother to the school and the nuns, they met me there and I said, "Good afternoon, sisters,"

and I took my cap off. Then my little brother, he saw what I did, so he took his cap off. He was acting like his big brother. All of the nuns said, "Isn't that cute that the little brother is doing like his big brother?" So they were crazy about me, the nuns there. It's wonderful that, thinking about prejudice, I never knew anything about prejudice until I worked in the Cotton Club, because I went to all integrated schools.

WHITE

That Catholic school, was it integrated?

NICHOLAS

Yes. The Catholic school was integrated. They had black nuns, white nuns, Chinese nuns. It was all integrated. And there were the kids, all different colors and races. So it was wonderful.

WHITE

Did you ever go back to the Catholic church after you guys moved from Baltimore?

NICHOLAS

No, I didn't.

WHITE

You didn't after you left the school.

NICHOLAS

No, I didn't. The only time I would probably go to a Catholic church is if I were going to do some kind of special show for them.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

Then I'd go like that, but I wasn't there to really worship anything. It was like a benefit, something like that.

WHITE

So basically your interaction with the church was then—

NICHOLAS

To raise money and it could be with any religion. If it was for a worthy cause I would go to raise money for the church or the synagogue.

WHITE

So the Methodist church, once you guys moved to Philadelphia— That was where you practiced your faith with your mother.

NICHOLAS

With my mother.

WHITE

Was Harold born then? Would he go with you? He would be very young.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, very young. I don't remember him going to church. He was very young.

WHITE

After you stopped going to the Methodist church, did you go to church as a young person, as a teenager, as an adolescent?

NICHOLAS

No.

WHITE

You didn't? As a young adult?

NICHOLAS

No, because I told you I was still searching.

WHITE

I see. Sure.

NICHOLAS

I just didn't like the way the people were acting. You go to church, like I said before, to worship God. You don't go there to show how you have the best outfit of anybody. I didn't like that, and I didn't like the preacher saying that we're all sinners.

WHITE

Right. I can appreciate that.

NICHOLAS

I didn't like that. I wanted him to say how we can love each other and lead a wonderful life. He was just saying we were hypocrites.

WHITE

They didn't really speak to you personally, the churches at that time when you were growing up and in your young adulthood. I can understand that.

NICHOLAS

I didn't like that. I didn't like that. So I hated going to church. Saying I'm a sinner and all that? Going to hell? What's going on! I'd say, "Tell me how I can be a better man and go to heaven."

WHITE

Right. So tell me something— I want to go back and revisit a couple of things from our last interview. We've been talking a little bit about your childhood. There are a couple of things that I had questions about. Can you actually remember or recall when your parents got married? Do you know when their anniversary would have been?

NICHOLAS

Can I recall when they got married? Oh, gee. I don't know when— Because I wasn't born! [laughs]

WHITE

I just wondered if they celebrated their anniversary.

NICHOLAS

I don't recall when they did. All I know is that they were in show business and I would go to the theater all the time. That I knew.

WHITE

I see. Now, outside of the theater— I know they performed at a number of theaters— Were they involved in the community outside the theater from what you can recall?

NICHOLAS

With people?

WHITE

Yes, or with organizations or did they have any sort of political affiliation or anything like that?

NICHOLAS

No. I don't recall. I just know that it was always show business, always show business and we were traveling so much from city to city. I was going to school in these different cities. They were in the theater. They would come to the apartment. They were wonderful parents, wonderful. They us right from wrong and all the things that other kids were doing, I didn't want to do.

WHITE

Right. We talked about that.

NICHOLAS

I didn't want to be in gangs and all that.

WHITE

They were very good influences on you.

NICHOLAS

Oh, they were. They were wonderful, and they always kept us looking neat.

WHITE

So tell me something now. In the late teens, of course, World War I was going on. Do you recall if your father was drafted or anything like that?

NICHOLAS

No, he wasn't. No, he wasn't there.

WHITE

He never went to the war.

NICHOLAS

No, he never did.

WHITE

Now, in the 1920s, how would you describe your family's economic status? Would you say middle class? Lower middle class? In terms of just the socioeconomic status.

NICHOLAS

I guess it was middle class or whatever. They weren't millionaires or anything like that! Wherever they would go, they fitted in. They were college graduates.

WHITE

Right. Do you know what college they attended?

NICHOLAS

No. It was in Alabama. So it must have been Alabama—

WHITE

They were only a few there, particularly for African Americans at that point in time.

NICHOLAS

I don't know.

WHITE

You mentioned school, of course, a moment ago. There are a couple of additional questions that I just wanted to ask you about your school experience. You said that when you were at school, in the various schools,

that you tended to be quite popular and the students were very welcoming and at one point you were even referred to as Rudolph Valentino. [Nicholas laughs] Now, tell me, the social activities must have been pretty prominent for you there, but I wonder what kind of academic student you were. What kinds of grades did you receive?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I was a good student.

WHITE

Yes?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. But, I always wanted to make the kids laugh.

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

And the teachers didn't like that. I was good in my studies, but that's what happened with me. I remember there was a teacher [who] was always after me about— "Fayard, straighten up! Sit in your seat and be a nice boy. Stop making the kids laugh." But I always wanted to have fun. And I had good marks in everything and she failed me.

WHITE

Oh, no!

NICHOLAS

Just because of my laughter and making the kids laugh. And I got better grades than the ones she passed.

WHITE

My goodness. Do you recall what subject that was in?

NICHOLAS

I was doing all the subjects, all of them, all the subjects: arithmetic, English, you name it.

WHITE

But she failed you in one particular subject?

NICHOLAS

No, she just failed me.

WHITE

Oh, completely.

NICHOLAS

Completely, and it was because of that and all the kids knew that. They said, "Why did she fail you? Look at so-and-so, he wasn't as smart as you and she passed him." Then other things that she wanted me to do— I could write better than anyone else. So she'd have me write on the blackboard, because I could write real straight and they could understand it because I was good in penmanship. So I could write with the chalk on the blackboard. I did that well. Then she would have me draw different things because I would draw. She said, "Would you draw this for me?" So I'd copy it and draw it. She said, "Oh, that's wonderful, Fayard. It looks just like that picture." So I did all those things, but because of my laughter—

WHITE

Right. Because of your sense of humor.

NICHOLAS

My sense of humor.

WHITE

Do you recall this teacher's name?

NICHOLAS

No! [mutual laughter]

WHITE

By design you wanted to forget her name.

NICHOLAS

Way back in the twenties? And this is the year 2000? I don't remember that!

WHITE

Absolutely.

NICHOLAS

What I should have done was to have a diary and write everything down, because now I'm just remembering things that have occurred.

WHITE

You have a very good memory, though, for the most part. You really do.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I do pretty good. It's a funny thing— When my brother and I are on talk shows, he may be sitting next to the host. I'm on the other side. The host will look at him and say, "So-and-so and so-and-so." My brother will say, "Ask my brother that. I don't remember what you just asked me." So I have to answer the best way I can when the host will ask me different questions. My brother, he'll come in when he remembers something.

WHITE

Now, tell me, in school during this period of time, did you have a favorite subject? Was there something that you liked a bit more than the others?

NICHOLAS

Oh, arithmetic.

WHITE

Arithmetic.

NICHOLAS

I remember I went to a school the first day— I was one of the new ones, and the teacher was doing some kind of example on the blackboard for the children and I looked at it and said, "I can do that." She asked everybody, "Did

you understand what I just did?" I said, "I did." She said, "Oh, well come on up here." So I went up there and went over everything. I said, "There." She said, "Yeah, that's correct. You're good, and you just got here."

WHITE

A real aptitude for math.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I was pretty good. I remember numbers, I remember telephone numbers. I can't remember names. What is your name? [mutual laughter] What is it, Damita Jo?

WHITE

Damita Jo!

NICHOLAS

Is it Damita? No, it's not. No, you're White, aren't you?

WHITE

Yes. Renee White.

NICHOLAS

You're white? Are you kidding? [mutual laughter] Oh, my goodness! I shouldn't have said that!

WHITE

That's okay. That's perfectly fine. So you were a math whiz so to speak in school.

NICHOLAS

So to speak, yes. I learned Catherine Hopkins's telephone number right away.

WHITE

I'm sure you did.

NICHOLAS

Numbers around here I remember, but I can't remember names. Isn't that crazy?

WHITE

No, not at all. We often have one skill better than another.

NICHOLAS

I remember your face, but when you think about names— I can remember I would be at some kind of party here in Los Angeles and people would come up to me— "Hello, Fayard. How are you doin'? Glad to see you." And this person just came up. He knows my name; I don't know his name. I don't know. They'd start talking to me, "Do you remember?" "Yes, I remember that. Yes, I do." Then, another guy would come over— "Hello, Fayard. How are you doin'?" I can't remember his name. He knows me. I said, "Excuse me, guys. I have an appointment over here. You introduce each other. I'll see you later."

WHITE

That's a very smooth way to get out of it. After all, you've met just hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people.

NICHOLAS

I have met so many people all over the world. I can remember people in show business, like Carmen Miranda and all the people I've worked with: Alice Faye and Betty Grable, John Payne and Milton Berle— names like that that I see all the time. See all the time. It's before me. But when I meet someone for the first time, I will forget their names right at that moment.

WHITE

That's understandable. I know a number of people like that who are very proficient in math. It's a right brain-left brain kind of phenomenon, so to speak. I'd like to talk a little bit more— You mentioned that when you were in school, you used to perform in school plays and school benefits. I wonder if you can recall any of those experiences, what that was like. Were you in a drama club or anything like that?

NICHOLAS

When I did the plays in the schools I used to play Santa Claus.

WHITE

Did you?

NICHOLAS

Put a big pillow right in front of me, with the beard and everything. I used to do plays like that in school. I used to do benefits in theaters in Philadelphia. I used to do things like that at the Royal Theater in Philadelphia and the Lincoln Theater in Philadelphia.

WHITE

But these were not affiliated with your school experience. Not the Lincoln Theater, those kinds of benefits. I'm just referring to the school plays and things like that. Do you recall having acting parts or would you dance in some of the plays?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah, acting parts.

WHITE

Acting parts.

NICHOLAS

I was always an actor. Before I could dance I was an actor. It's like this— I learned this from a great director. His name was Rouben Mamoulian. He was from Russia. He directed a lot of movies with Greta Garbo.

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

He was directing the musical drama that we did called St. Louis Woman. Do you remember that? The song from that show, "Come Rain or Come Shine"?

WHITE

Yes, I do.

NICHOLAS

[Sings] "I'm gonna to love you like nobody's loved you, come rain or come shine." We were rehearsing the show one day and he said, "I'm stopping rehearsal now. I want all of you to get chairs and sit down. I just want to talk to you." He was good. He said, "I want to tell you that you are all actors." He says, "I don't care what you do. You sing, you dance and you have lines in the show? You're acting. Dancing? You're acting. Singing, you're acting. Doing lines in the show, you're acting. If you're a juggler you're acting. If you're a musician, you play the horn, you're acting. When you're on that stage that's what you are doing, because when you are singing you feel the lyrics and when you say "love"— The expression comes into your face when you say that. When you're dancing, you're selling the dance and you want the audience to like you. You like what you're doing and you express yourself with your dance, your smile on your face. You're acting. Now, you wouldn't do that if you're walking down the street. You wouldn't sing or dance in the street, but when you're on that stage, that's what you're doing. You're acting. I don't care what you do. If you're a juggler, if you're a—sleight of hand [artist], you are acting. When you hit that stage and you're in front of an audience, you're acting. You are an actor. I want all of you to remember that. Just because maybe you're out there dancing and you don't have anything to say, you're expressing yourself in your dance. You're acting." I liked when he said that because he gave a lot of them confidence. So I liked what he said, but, like I said, I've always been an actor. In St. Louis Woman, my brother and I were the main characters in that show. We were the stars of that show. He played the part of Little Augie, a jockey, and I was Barney, a rival jockey. So we had lines in the show. We were the stars, so we were all through the show. Ruby Hill was my brother's girlfriend and she was the "St. Louis Woman." Pearl Bailey was my girlfriend.

WHITE

Is that so?

NICHOLAS

Yes.

WHITE

Where did this performance take place?

NICHOLAS

In New York City at the Martin Beck Theatre.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

That was in 1946.

WHITE

Okay. That was a little later on in your career.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that was later on, 1946 that we did this musical drama play, and we had a ball.

WHITE

I'm sure. It must have been fascinating, just the people you were working with.

NICHOLAS

It was fascinating. Yes.

WHITE

Now, tell me something. Do you recall when you stopped attending school formally? I know you did get a tutor. Your parents got that for you.

NICHOLAS

I stopped school— It was in Philadelphia. First I went to the Stanley School and then there was another school called— Oh, what was the name of that school? It was near where we lived. We stayed at the Gibson Apartments. I think the name of the school was the name of the street we stayed on and I could walk to the school. Lombard, I think, is the name of it. The Lombard Junior High School. I only went to the eighth grade. When I got into show business, that's when I stopped going to school and then that's when we had a tutor.

WHITE

Do you remember your tutor's name?

NICHOLAS

No. I don't remember.

WHITE

Did you have one continuous tutor or did they change?

NICHOLAS

Well, I changed. Different tutors. The one who would— I think I had about three. One who could travel with us and the one who was right there in New York, for when we went to the Cotton Club. We were at the Cotton Club for two years straight.

WHITE

From '32 to '34.

NICHOLAS

Something like that. Yeah. Then we would come out here to do a motion picture and then go back to the Cotton Club.

WHITE

When you came out here to do the motion pictures, would the tutor follow you? While you were on the set?

NICHOLAS

Let me see. Yes. She would always come to our apartment. The only time she would be at the theater is when we would invite her, if she wanted to see the show, but she would always come to our apartment to teach us. We stayed at the— It was 321 Edgecomb Avenue, the Park Lincoln. That's where she would come. Mother would wake us up like three o'clock in the afternoon to get our lessons and after the lessons we'd go back to bed.

WHITE

At this time she was tutoring, of course, you and Harold. Dorothy, then, was attending school, a traditional school?

NICHOLAS

Yes. She went to Howard University.

WHITE

Oh, she did?

NICHOLAS

In Washington, D.C.

WHITE

Good for her.

NICHOLAS

She's the only one of the family with a diploma—I mean as far as the kids are concerned, because my mother and father got their degree in Alabama. She got hers.

WHITE

Did she attend some of those schools that you left, like the Stanley School? Was she in those schools after that?

NICHOLAS

I think she was.

WHITE

The neighborhood schools, more or less.

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

**1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO
APRIL 20, 2000**

WHITE

I wanted to talk about your training. It's my understanding that most white kids at the time when you were growing up would take formal lessons in studios, but more often than not African Americans couldn't necessarily afford those same types of lessons.

NICHOLAS

I saved a lot of money, because I taught myself. So I didn't have to worry about getting someone to teach me, because if I had gone to a dancing school with a teacher I wouldn't be doing me. I wouldn't be doing Fayard Nicholas. I'd be doing him or her. So I taught myself and then later on I created the Nicholas Brothers style, see, because at the beginning I would see all of these entertainers on stage while my mother and father played in the orchestra pit, she playing the piano and he playing the drums. I'd listen to them play and watch the entertainers on stage. I'd go home and try to do what I saw them do.

WHITE

For instance, whom did you see on stage?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I saw a lot of dancers. I saw Leonard Reed and Willie Bryant. I saw the Berry Brothers [Ananias, Jimmy, and Warren Berry]. I saw Buck and Bubbles [Ford Lee Washington and John William Sublett]. I saw Louis Armstrong when he was there, Adelaide Hall, all of these wonderful entertainers.

WHITE

Did you see Bill "Bojangles" Robinson?

NICHOLAS

I saw him at a benefit that they gave at the Lincoln Theater in Philadelphia and I had heard so much about him. He was the world's greatest tap dancer. So I wanted to see him. I never saw him before. So I went to this theater and it was time for him to come on stage. So he came out and right away he started talking about what was going on backstage. He had had an argument with a lot of the people backstage. He said he told them off. I didn't want to hear that. Come on! Do something! So right away he said he wasn't feeling well. He'd just had four teeth extracted, and he said, "but I'm going to entertain you

the best way I can." So he started to go into his dance and he didn't impress me at all.

WHITE

Really?

NICHOLAS

Not at all. And I say, "Whew! Was that the great Bill Robinson I've been hearing about?" Now, when I saw him in a motion picture at one of the theaters in Philadelphia, he was dancing down these stairs. It seemed like it was one hundred, because it was way, way up. He was up on the platform. Then he danced down the stairs. And he didn't miss one of them. Every one of them he danced down. He got down to the stage and he did something like this— [Does the "shave and a haircut" beat] Dop duhduh duh duh, dop dop. I said, "That's the Bill Robinson I've been hearing about."

WHITE

I see. So it was apparent that he wasn't feeling well that one time you saw him.

NICHOLAS

He wasn't feeling well. And so when I saw him in that movie— Oh, wow! And his taps were so clear—so clear—and he used wooden soles and wooden heels. He didn't wear taps. It was such a beautiful sound. Then, whenever I would hear him on the radio, when he was tap-dancing on the radio, it sounded so great, so great. And I'd say, "He truly is the world's greatest tap dancer."

WHITE

Now, did you incorporate any of his style, any of his techniques into your work?

NICHOLAS

No. No.

WHITE

None whatsoever.

NICHOLAS

I remember he liked us right away. He liked us so much he sort of adopted us and called us his nephews. So we called him Uncle Bill. He taught us one of his soft-shoe dances.

WHITE

Can you describe a soft-shoe dance?

NICHOLAS

The way he did it?

WHITE

The soft-shoe dance in general.

NICHOLAS

It's a soft-shoe dance. It's his own soft-[soled] shoes [without taps]. There are many dancers who do a soft-shoe dance, but they didn't do it like him. He had his own style. So he taught it to us. He taught us his soft-shoe. We went to Capezio's [shop] and he had them make up shoes with the wooden soles and the wooden heels. So if we would do something like a benefit at the Waldorf-Astoria [Hotel] in New York or the Madison Square Garden, a big benefit, he would have us to go there with him and we would do this soft-shoe dance that he taught us. But that evening at the Cotton Club we were still wearing these shoes and we'd do those splits, and those soles would come off.

WHITE

Oh, my.

NICHOLAS

Those shoes weren't for the type of dancing that we did. So we went back to the taps.

WHITE

Is it primarily because of the wooden sole that it's called the soft-shoe tap or is there a certain technique that goes along with that particular style?

NICHOLAS

Well, those shoes are great for Bill Robinson, because he— Naturally, he didn't do any splits. He didn't do anything where he would be pounding his feet heavy or anything. He had a technique with his dancing. He had a great personality when he performed, and it suited him. It was him. It was such a beautiful sound with those wooden soles, but it wasn't good for us. As long as we were just tapping, it was fine, but when we did those splits, they would come off because it was catching on the floor.

WHITE

Of course, that phrase actually originated with him—the soft-shoe tap.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Then he did his other type of dancing, besides the soft-shoe.

WHITE

So, tell me now, when you were at the Standard Theatre and you saw so many performers, just a plethora of talented people, was there one or two that really stood out in your mind from that period of time? When you were a young man sitting in the first row observing all of these talented people?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Buck and Bubbles. They were the ones that I really enjoyed, because they did everything. They were comedians. They would sing, dance, play the piano— A very versatile act, and told some really funny jokes.

WHITE

So the fact that they were really multi-talented made an impression upon you.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, they made a big impression on me. When I saw Louis Armstrong— He made a big impression on me because he had just had this hit record called "[When it's] Sleepy Time Down South." It was a big hit record for him. I think it was on Okeh records that he recorded for. I'm sitting there and I want to hear him sing "Sleepy Time Down South," and I was close to my mother—she sat at the piano. I say, [whispers] "Is he going to sing "Sleepy Time Down South"?" She says, [whispers] "Yes. Yes, he will. He will sing it." Then he went into the song "Sleepy Time Down South," and I was happy then [mutual laughter]

because I would hear this record on the radio. He's in person? I want to hear that song from Louis Armstrong.

WHITE

Sure. I'm sure everyone probably agreed with you.

NICHOLAS

Everybody else wanted to hear it too. It seems as though I just couldn't wait.

WHITE

You were anxious to hear it.

NICHOLAS

I think that was the last song. The big hit is usually one they would sing last, when you have a hit record, but I wanted— "Sing it now!"

WHITE

So you watched these talented performers and I guess formulated in your mind the kind of style that you wanted to originate. Now, when you would go home, just in looking at some of your archival records— There were some notes in there that said that—

NICHOLAS

What'd they say? What'd they say?

WHITE

—that in order to hone your skills, you would do acrobatics to clown for the kids in the neighborhood and you would jump over fire hydrants and hedges to do flips.

NICHOLAS

I would do that. I must have been crazy.

WHITE

No kidding.

NICHOLAS

I don't know. But I didn't hurt myself. I guess because I tried to do it the correct way.

WHITE

Sure. You had a certain style. I know that your dad, of course, was very influential in that he encouraged you to use your hands.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, because he saw me using my hands. So he said, "Do more of that. I like that, what you're doing." So I did more of that, because I liked when he first said to me, "What you do son, you do it well, but don't do what the other dancers do. Do your own thing." I said, "Okay, Dad." He said, "When you're performing, don't look at your feet. Look at the audience because you're entertaining them, not yourself." I said, "Okay, Dad." He said, "There's something that you do I like very much. I like the way you use your hands. Do more of that." I said, "Okay dad." So, I started doing it. Then, I went to one of these studios, dance studios and I rented a room—me, all by myself with a record player and with all the mirrors. I'm watching myself as I'm performing and I say, "That's what my dad's talking about," because I didn't know how I looked. Then, I could see what he was saying about me—with the hands. "Uh huh. Yeah, I'm going to do more of that. And I'll teach my little brother."

WHITE

Okay. To do the same thing.

NICHOLAS

Was there a point in time when you came home, or came home from the studio or from the theater, and decided, "Today, I want to teach my brother and my sister to learn tap." Was there an occasion of sorts?

NICHOLAS

Yes, I did get together with them. There was one day my brother couldn't get a certain step. He was having trouble. I said, "We'll do it tomorrow." He said, "No, I want to learn it now." I said, "Listen to me. You're having trouble. We'll do it tomorrow." He said, "No, I want to learn it now." I said, "Okay." So I started teaching him again. It must have been an hour more. He finally got it and he kept it. He never did lose it. So he was, I'd like to say, my best pupil.

Sometimes my brother— I'll say that on talk shows, on television or radio, and he'll say, "I was your only pupil."

WHITE

What about your sister Dorothy at one point?

NICHOLAS

Right, right, I was teaching her. She was good. She could learn. So we got together and then we called ourselves the Nicholas Kids. I remember we worked at the Royal Theater in Baltimore, Maryland, the three of us. So we had special costumes that my mother made for us—silk blouses. They loved us. The audience loved us, but I think I told you before that my sister couldn't keep the late hours.

WHITE

Right. Right after this performance, she decided that was enough.

NICHOLAS

That was it. Nine o'clock, she's had it. So I told her to go on to school, get her education. We'd put her through school. We'd do the work and so that's what happened.

WHITE

Now at that time did you have actually have names for your routines?

NICHOLAS

No.

WHITE

None whatsoever.

NICHOLAS

No. I didn't have any names for the steps. I don't count. I never did count, because if I counted it would mess me up. Counting and trying to do the routines— No, I never did that. I found out another good friend of mine was the same way—Eleanor Powell. We were over to one of her proteges' house. We were celebrating her birthday. He made his garage into a theater, like a

theater. He would show film clips of every dancer you could think of. It was during the time of Eleanor Powell's birthday. So we would go to this garage and watch the film clips. It was so wonderful. She was sitting right beside me. He was showing all the different dancers. Then, there come the Nicholas Brothers. She's looking at it, and she was holding my hand real tight. She said, "Did you see that?" I said, "Yes, Eleanor, I saw it." She said, "Wait a minute. What's this?" Like I never saw it before. "Yeah, I'm looking, Eleanor. Yes." She said, "Well, what about this?" She was enjoying it and just having fun as we were looking. She said, "One day, I would like to do a Nicholas Brothers concert where we show all the movies and I would talk about it." I said, "Hey, that's great, Eleanor. I'd like to do it with you," I told her. Then, when we came back into the house, they had the cake with all the candles and she would blow them and we'd wish her a happy birthday. Then we would sit down and start reminiscing. I said, "Eleanor, when I dance, I don't count. I never did." She said, "I don't count either." I said, "Wow. Hey, we've got something in common, don't we, Eleanor?" And I said, "Eleanor, the steps that I do, I don't have any names for them. I just do them."

WHITE

That's fascinating.

NICHOLAS

She said, "Yeah, me too. I don't have any names. I just do the steps." I said, "Wow, we really have something in common."

WHITE

Now, how did you train your brother? Would you just do a routine and he would mimic you?

NICHOLAS

I would just sing the steps. I don't count them. I just sing like [sings] "baba, daba, boo boo." So when I'd say that, I'd do it with my feet.

WHITE

I see. Okay.

NICHOLAS

I don't count.

WHITE

That's a unique style for training.

NICHOLAS

Then I said to Eleanor, "Tell me about that film that you made with Fred Astaire, *The Broadway Melody of 1940*." She said, "Oh, Fayard, I had a wonderful time doing that film with Fred. After we finished the film and we were all going our separate ways, I was sitting in a chair taking off my tap shoes. I saw Fred in a corner all by himself with his arms folded like this, and he was looking at me. So I looked at him and I said, 'Come here. Come on over here.' I said, 'Fred, I had a wonderful time doing this film with you.' He said, 'Yes, Eleanor, I had a great time too. But, Eleanor, I don't want to work with you anymore.'" She said, "Why not? Didn't we have a great time?" He said, "Yes, we did have a great time, but Eleanor, I don't want to work with you anymore because you work me too hard."

WHITE

Oh, really!

NICHOLAS

Because when Fred is dancing with Ginger Rogers, Cyd Charisse, or Rita Hayworth, any of those girls, they're following him, but Eleanor doesn't have to follow him. He might be following her!

WHITE

Ah, gave him a little run for his money.

NICHOLAS

If you see that film, I've never seen him work that hard before, because he's so smooth with Ginger Rogers, but with Eleanor, he had to get right in there. He said, "I'm not going to let this girl outdance me."

WHITE

There was a little competition there.

NICHOLAS

She worked the hell out of him. And they look good together. Did you see that film?

WHITE

I didn't see it.

NICHOLAS

Well, go rent that. Broadway Melody of 1940, starring Fred Astaire and Eleanor Powell.

WHITE

Okay. So was that in fact the last film that they did together?

NICHOLAS

It's the only film they did together.

WHITE

That's the only one. Okay, he meant that, then.

NICHOLAS

Yeah! [mutual laughter] He did a lot of films with Ginger Rogers, and I think he did a couple with Cyd Charisse and two with Rita Hayworth.

WHITE

Interesting, interesting, the whole concept of developing one's style and how you watch other people and determine what it is that you want to incorporate into your work of art and then the way in which you train others. It's fascinating.

NICHOLAS

Yes. [laughs]

WHITE

Now, during the 1920s— We're still sort of in that time period.

NICHOLAS

Oh, we're going back to the twenties!

WHITE

Yeah, sure. Tap had arrived on Broadway and black musicals such as Shuffle Along. Also, I understand that it thrived in almost completely a black world, from what my literature says. My research says that it was very prevalent on sort of ghetto street corners and in colored theaters such as the Hoofers Club [Nicholas laughs] which I understand was a paradise for Harlem tap dancing.

NICHOLAS

I never did go to the Hoofers Club.

WHITE

You never did?

NICHOLAS

Never did, no. I was very young at that time. My parents were always with us and never thought about taking us there. We were working at the Lafayette Theatre and the Hoofers Club was in the basement underneath the Lafayette Theater.

WHITE

Is that so?

NICHOLAS

That's where all the hoofers would go. They'd get together down there and trade steps. I remember John Bubbles [of Buck and Bubbles] told me this— He said that he went down there to trade steps with them, and he said, "They danced me out of that place."

WHITE

Is that right?

NICHOLAS

They danced him out. He said, "Fayard, I got together and I went to my apartment and I started rehearsing." In those days, most of the dancers would just dance on their toes. He said, "I created something with my toes and my

heels and it was a rhythm and syncopation and I created this. Then I went down to that Hoofers Club, and I started dancing and I danced them out of the place." Everyone said, "What is that, John? What is this new thing you've brought here? How do you do that?" He said, "Well, I've been rehearsing, man. This is my creation. I guess you guys want to learn it. Well, you just try to pick it up, because I'm not gonna teach you!"

WHITE

Sure. His own style. So, now, the Hoofers, from what I understand— It's a more restrictive style of tap where, like you said, you concentrate on your feet with no regard to your body or your hands. Is that correct?

NICHOLAS

Most of the dancers in those days and the dancers of today are like that, like Savion Glover. He doesn't concentrate on his hands. He'll be looking at his feet. He might be all bent over. The feet sound great—great feet—but nothing else is happening.

WHITE

So your parents didn't— Was it that they didn't allow you to go to those clubs or they felt that that wasn't the proper place for you or you had no interest in going?

NICHOLAS

Well, I didn't ask them or force them, say, "I want to go there," nothing like that. I guess they thought that we were too young to go there because they were all adults and I guess they would be there using language that we shouldn't hear and smoking and carrying on and maybe with pot.

WHITE

Marijuana?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Maybe they'd be doing that down there. So they didn't want me in that environment.

WHITE

Sure. That makes complete sense, of course. Can you tell me during this period of time, did you and your brother perform at the Apollo Theater?

NICHOLAS

Many times.

WHITE

You did? Can you describe that experience?

NICHOLAS

Well, it was like home because always at the Cotton Club— There are three places in Manhattan that we always played: the Cotton Club, the Apollo Theater, and the Roxy Theater downtown. After we made all those movies at 20th Century-Fox, we'd always headline at the Roxy Theater downtown. This theater held six thousand people.

WHITE

Right. It's huge.

NICHOLAS

After we would make a movie at 20th Century-Fox, people in New York would want to see us. They'd want to see us. So we would always headline at the Roxy Theater. Then we'd headline at the Apollo Theater, too. At the Cotton Club, we'd always co-star with Cab Calloway.

WHITE

Right. Now this is— You never had an opportunity to perform at the Apollo Theater prior to your professional career, prior to going to the Cotton Club. Is that correct?

NICHOLAS

We were at the Cotton Club before the Apollo Theater.

WHITE

Okay. Now, at the time when you were sort of beginning to move into your professional career, do you recall any other sort of prevalent names that were going around? Did you have any competitors, so to speak?

NICHOLAS

Oh, well, there were many, many wonderful dancers. Like I said, the Berry Brothers, they were there. There was Pops and Louie. There was the Four Step Brothers, the Charioteers. We had dancers like Bill Bailey and we had— Oh, gee, wait a minute. There was Teddy Hale. Teddy Hale was a very, very good dancer. There was Baby Lawrence. There was a team called the Dunhills. That was a white trio, the Dunhills. Oh, there were many, many, many wonderful dancers in those days. But the Nicholas Brothers— We liked all of them, and then you had the ones in the movies, like Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, Dan Dailey. Then you had the ladies, like Eleanor Powell and Ann Miller. There was Dixie Dunbar. There was Ginger Rogers and Rita Hayworth. They were all great, wonderful dancers.

WHITE

But none that you felt were sort of competitors, direct competitors with you and your brother Harold?

NICHOLAS

All of those dancers were crazy about the Nicholas Brothers.

WHITE

Were they?

NICHOLAS

Every one of them. [mutual laughter] They all had their own styles, but they always wanted to see the Nicholas Brothers because— The Nicholas Brothers, they wanted [us] to act in movies and dance with Ginger Rogers or somebody like Ginger Rogers, but because of the color of our skin, we didn't have that opportunity. But just dancing in those movies—say, five minutes we'd be on the screen up there all by ourselves—made us famous all over the world. Wherever we would go, we would headline. There were some places we'd go. We'd have a big band, and we'd just be only the Nicholas Brothers, nobody else. Because of our versatility, because we sang, we danced, we played drums, we'd tell jokes, we'd talk to the people. We could do a long show like that because we'd take our time and space it. One time I said, "Brother, go on up there and play the drums. I'm going to do a little tapping." So he'd get on

the drums and he'd go chichichi chichichi chichichi, and I'd start tapping, just him and me. He'd catch any beat that I'd make with my feet with this tapping jazz. Sometimes it would be an hour. We could really stretch it to two hours.

WHITE

Could you really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

Wow. That's a long time.

NICHOLAS

That's a long time. Well, you see, we didn't just dance, only dance, because we'd sing, sing a lot of songs in between, and the people loved it even though we weren't dancing. They loved the singing. We'd play the drums. We'd do all these things. I remember telling you that when we first started, I think it was at the Pearl Theater in Philadelphia and we were doing dance after dance. The people just wanted more and more and more. [makes panting sound] We went to our dressing room and I said, "Man"—to my brother—"something's got to be done. I can't stand this. Man, I'm getting tired. Let's put some singing in the act." My brother said, "I'm with you." I said, "Let's talk to the people when we get out on the stage." So we would always open up with a dance, but not a strenuous one, just an opening type of dance. Then I would go to the microphone and say, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. We're very happy that you came here to see our show. We're going to entertain you the best way we can. Right now my brother is going to sing a little song, and I'm going to conduct the orchestra. I think he's going to sing "Oh, Lady Be Good!" I said, "Okay boys, here we go. One, a two, a one-two-three-four," strike up the band and stuff, and I'd do the same for my brother and he'd go right into [sings] "Oh, sweet and lovely lady be good!" Now, I'm directing the band. I'm using my hands, my head, my feet, my buttocks. Now, they're listening to him, but they're watching me, because of the way I'm doing the directing. It's a big hit every time we do that.

WHITE

Do you recall the name of the band that you were working with at that time?

NICHOLAS

There were a lot of bands we worked with. [Earl] "Fatha" Hines, we'd work with. There was, let me see, the Benny Moten band, which later on became the Count Basie band. They worked at the Pearl Theater in Philadelphia. We worked with them. Later on, when we went to New York to play in the Cotton Club, we worked with Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford, and then in the movies, with Glenn Miller's orchestra. When we worked at Paramount Theatre in New York City there would be Tommy Dorsey, Charlie Barnet. We worked with almost all of the big bands. We worked with all of them— Chick Webb, who discovered Ella Fitzgerald. We worked with him. We worked with all of them. It was great.

WHITE

So, tell me now, before you actually went professional, before you went to the Cotton Club, you've described that one of your main intentions was to entertain the audience, to make sure that the audience enjoyed themselves. Prior to going to the Cotton Club, Mr. Nicholas, can you recall any point in time when you had a bad experience, when the audience didn't seem satisfied or the show didn't go quite the way you wanted it?

NICHOLAS

I don't recall that. It seems as though— When we started in show business, we were in Philadelphia. We worked all the vaudeville theaters. That was about in the thirties. It was 1930 when we first started in show business and '31 and '32 we were playing all theaters in Philadelphia. Those were the vaudeville days. Warner Brothers owned those theaters at that time. So we played all the Warner Brothers theaters. Then we played the Standard Theatre, the Lincoln Theater, the Royal Theater, and the Pearl Theater in Philadelphia. Those theaters that I just named are supposed to be black theaters.

WHITE

The TOBAs?

NICHOLAS

No, we never did play Toby [Time, the TOBA circuit, Theatrical Owners and Bookers Association]. This is vaudeville. All the Warner Brothers theaters— I guess you'd call those the white theaters. So we worked there. One of our first engagements was in a burlesque theater.

WHITE

Was it really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. The audience did love— They forgot about those striptease ladies. They wanted to see these little guys. We stopped the show.

WHITE

You stole the show there as well.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we stole the show. Oh, it was great. That was one of the first engagements. And performing on the radio. I think I told you that.

WHITE

Yes, you did. We talked about that.

NICHOLAS

The Horn and Hardart [Children's Hour]. That was in Philadelphia.

WHITE

So basically your experience performing at all the vaudeville theaters before you got to the Cotton Club were all positive experiences.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we had those experiences before the Cotton Club.

WHITE

Right. Of course.

NICHOLAS

Did I tell you when I first went to the Cotton Club, when I first met Duke Ellington?

WHITE

Right. No, we haven't discussed that.

NICHOLAS

I haven't?

WHITE

No, not yet, but I certainly plan to go to into fine detail on that experience.

NICHOLAS

Well, this was right when we just finished this movie for Warner Brothers called Pie Pie Blackbird. We were in the Lafayette Theatre first. Then we made that film. The manager of the Cotton Club saw us at the Lafayette Theatre and invited us to come to the Cotton Club because they were rehearsing a new show starring Cab Calloway. Our parents took us there. Then we met Duke Ellington. He was there. We met Cab Calloway, we met Bill Robinson. Lena Horne was there, but she was one of the dancing girls at that time. We saw this pretty girl, we saw her sitting there, and she was one of the dancing girls. So Herman Stark, who was the manager of the Cotton Club who later on became our manager, said, "Would you do something for everybody?" We said, "Fine." So we got up on stage. We sang a little song.

WHITE

That was your audition, so to speak.

NICHOLAS

Well, yeah, maybe you'd call it that. But not really, because he saw us at the Lafayette Theatre. He saw people loved us there. He just wanted these wonderful entertainers to see us, because they had never seen us before and he's been raving about us. So we did something and Duke Ellington said, "These boys are original." I said, "Thank you, Mr. Ellington. Thank you so much, Mr. Ellington. You're original, too." Everybody laughed.

**1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE
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WHITE

I am at the home, the second home, of Mr. Fayard Nicholas in Toluca Lake today. How are you today, Mr. Nicholas?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I'm fine. I'm still on my honeymoon with my beautiful wife, Catherine Hopkins Nicholas.

WHITE

Congratulations to you.

NICHOLAS

Thank you so much.

WHITE

That's wonderful. Well, we've been talking at length the last couple of interviews about your childhood and we've gone through the 1910s, the 1920s, talked a bit about it. There are a couple of questions that I wanted to just revisit before we begin the interview for today.

NICHOLAS

What's that?

WHITE

We've talked a lot about your experiences at school and with your mom [Viola Harden Nicholas] and dad [Ulysses Nicholas]. I wondered if you had any extended family that was involved in your upbringing—uncles, aunts.

NICHOLAS

You mean cousins?

WHITE

Cousins, grandparents, things like that, extended family.

NICHOLAS

Oh, my goodness. I've lost contact with so many people, my relatives, that is. I can remember one of my cousins in Chicago; his name was Roland. And also my uncle on my mother's side. This is something else you're going to have to ask my sister [Dorothy Nicholas Morrow]. I can't remember his name—my uncle and also my aunt in Chicago and also one of my cousins in Chicago. The names slip my mind, but I remember Roland. I remember him because when I first met him he was just a child. I think it was in the thirties or the forties, because we appeared at the Oriental Theater in Chicago with Milton Berle. It was in 1934. We were playing there with Milton. Milton has to get into everybody's act. So he wrote some lines for us to say with him, some comedy routine that we were doing. There was a song that my brother [Harold Nicholas] was singing, where he used to do an impression of Cab Calloway, "Minnie the Moocher," those types of songs, and then he'd say, "Hi-de-hi-de-ho," and then we would answer. So Milton was right there in between us answering, "Hi-de-hide- ho." So we had fun. We had a lot of fun. Those are some of my relatives that I remember. You may get together with my sister and she can tell you who my uncle, what his name was, and my aunt, what her name was, but I remember Roland.

WHITE

Are these relatives on your mom's side or your dad's?

NICHOLAS

It's on my mother's side.

WHITE

On your mother's side. Okay. Right. I know your dad had a brother in New York City.

NICHOLAS

Clovis [Nicholas].

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Clovis in New York City.

WHITE

All right. Good. Well, I can follow up on that.

NICHOLAS

There were some other relatives. I've lost touch with them, but I think my sister can enlighten you on who because there was one lady—I think she was a cousin or aunt—who visited my sister at her place up there in Laurel Canyon. She came there with her son. I was there at the time, but I don't recall their names. So maybe my sister could tell you the names of those relatives.

WHITE

All right. One other question I had. When I was doing my research in your archival records you indicated that if you hadn't gone into show business, that maybe you would have majored in art.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that's right.

WHITE

I wondered what kind of art. What were you interested in as a young person?

NICHOLAS

When I was a little boy, I used to try to draw everything. One time I drew a whole comic paper. I think it was the Katzenjammer Kids. Do you remember them? This was a long time ago, in the twenties. The Katzenjammer Kids—two little boys and the father and the mother, and there was a whole comic strip. So I got me a big [piece of] paper that I could just copy exactly like it was, the cartoons. Also I would paint with a brush, watercolors, and paint from a movie magazine, the cover. I think it was Joan Crawford. I did that. Then I'd try with ink to draw different things, then with pencil. I was pretty good. It was fun to me just to draw these things. My sister, she really wanted me to get into art, painting and drawing these different pictures.

WHITE

Was that one of her interests, art?

NICHOLAS

Her interest? I don't think so. No. She's a college graduate. She was going to Howard University in Washington, D.C.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

That was her goal, to get her education and get her degree.

WHITE

Right, of course.

NICHOLAS

Which we were proud of because we were always working. We didn't get a chance to finish school, but we did have a tutor to travel with us. So, maybe if I wasn't in show business, I might have been an artist. I also liked architecture, with the drawings of the buildings. It fascinated me to see this. When I would go to different countries, I would go sightseeing. I wouldn't just sit in my hotel and just listen to the radio or watch television or go out to nightclubs and all. I want to see the country. My brother— he'd go play golf. That's what he wanted, to find what golf courses [there were] in that country, whatever country, and I would go sightseeing. In Paris I'd go to the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe. I'd go on this beautiful street, the Champs-Élysées. I'd go to Napoleon's tomb and all these different places. As I'm walking down the street wherever it may, I look at the buildings, the architecture of all these buildings. It's fascinating, like when I was in New York, when I'd see these really tall buildings that reached to the sky. So when I'd go to other countries, I wanted to see their architecture. That fascinated me. I really liked— What's our great architect? Frank Lloyd [Wright]. He built a building— I think it was in Tokyo, Japan. There was an earthquake there. It was the only building that didn't get ruined. It wasn't destroyed. It was still standing there. All the others were falling. That shows you how great he was with his style of architecture. That's fascinating. Art, drawing, and architecture all fascinated me. Like I said, I may have gone into that if I wasn't in show business. But show business is art, too. [laughs]

WHITE

Absolutely. It's a definite art form.

NICHOLAS

It's an art form, especially tap dancing.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

That's an art form.

WHITE

It certainly is.

NICHOLAS

It was created here in America. I'm happy that I was one who helped create this art and kept it alive, tap dancing.

WHITE

Absolutely.

NICHOLAS

Everywhere we'd go, people loved it, tap dancing. They were crazy about it, even when they said it was a dying art, but it was not a dying art, not by a long shot. Television almost ruined everything because people would stay home, didn't have to go out and spend a lot of money, could see whatever they wanted to see on television. It was free.

WHITE

Yes. It diminished social interaction a great deal.

NICHOLAS

At that time, there were no more nightclubs to have entertainers because people would stay home. If they wanted to see tap dancing, they'd see it on television.

WHITE

Right. Live theater wasn't as prominent.

NICHOLAS

Television almost ruined everything. Like the Broadway shows. Why should we spend all that money to go see a Broadway show? We can stay right here and watch it on television. Movies, it almost killed movies. But they got together, those movie people.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

We're not going to let television ruin us.

WHITE

That's right.

NICHOLAS

But, like I said, instead of going to see the movie, stay home and watch it, because it would be on television eventually with these videotapes. You can go to the Blockbuster and rent it or buy it, bring it home, put it in your VCR.

WHITE

It's so convenient.

NICHOLAS

I think to rent it must be \$2.50, something like that.

WHITE

Up to \$4.00 now, actually.

NICHOLAS

Oh, it's \$4.00? Well, that's still cheap, because it costs \$8.00 to go see a movie in the big theaters.

WHITE

Right. \$8.50. That's expensive.

NICHOLAS

So that's what's been happening. I like television, but I don't want it to ruin our art.

WHITE

Right. Art is very important.

NICHOLAS

If there's something I want to see, I will go out and see it, whatever it may be. Like they're rehearsing for The Lion King now. You know that, don't you?

WHITE

I understand that your granddaughter [Cathy Nicholas] is auditioning for it.

NICHOLAS

She's auditioning. They called her back three times. She may get the part. The Lion King is still running in Manhattan. It's been there for two years, and it's still going strong.

WHITE

A very successful show.

NICHOLAS

Now they're going to have a Los Angeles company out here. I don't know if you saw on television that people were in line to buy tickets. The show is going to open in September until June of the year 2001. They're buying their tickets now. I guess a lot are buying for June.

WHITE

That's true, and perhaps around the holidays, too. That would be something very nice to see around Christmas or Thanksgiving or what have you. Yes, that's absolutely true, in terms of the art form and in terms of the social interaction that accompanies the visual aspect of live theater. Tap dance is certainly a profound art form.

NICHOLAS

It's an American art form.

WHITE

Yes, it is. It's the kind of thing where a good tap dancer can tell a story in sound and rhythm and movement. In fact in some of the literature I read that your brother Harold describes you as a poet who speaks with your feet and your hands.

NICHOLAS

Yes, I know.

WHITE

How would you describe Harold as a dancer?

NICHOLAS

My brother Harold is the most versatile entertainer in the world. He does everything. He sings, he dances, he plays drums, he can do impressions—like Sammy Davis[, Jr.] did, but he did it before Sammy.

WHITE

Did he really?

NICHOLAS

He was just a little boy when he started. He was six years old when I taught him how to perform. I taught him how to sing like Louie [Louis] Armstrong, how to sing like Cab Calloway. I taught him how to do all these difficult steps. He really wanted to learn. He was a true performer. I don't know if I told you this before. One day we were rehearsing in our apartment. This was in Philadelphia. In the living room, I was teaching him steps. He was having trouble getting this step. So I said, "I see how difficult it is for you to get this step. We'll do it tomorrow." He said, "No, I want to learn it now."

WHITE

Right. You did tell me this story.

NICHOLAS

Did I tell you that? So that's the way he was. He wanted to learn and do it the best way he could, because he wanted to be like his big brother.

WHITE

A very disciplined and committed pupil, right? Like he said, he was your only pupil.

NICHOLAS

My only pupil.

WHITE

Now, in the records it describes you, in terms of your dance style— You're sort of aligned more with Fred Astaire and Harold more with Gene Kelly. What do you think of that statement?

NICHOLAS

Well, to tell you the truth, we performed and we had this style before we saw Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire.

WHITE

Okay. So they're more like the two of you.

NICHOLAS

They're more like the Nicholas Brothers. We were in show business a long time before Gene Kelly. Oh, this is— What do you think? When Gene Kelly was under contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, when he first went over there to do this movie with Judy Garland called— They sang a song in it [sings], "The bells are ringing for me and my gal." I think that was the name of the film, For Me and My Gal.

WHITE

Okay, right. I think you're right.

NICHOLAS

That was Gene Kelly's first motion picture, with Judy Garland. They starred in this movie together. We were in the show Babes in Arms with Mitzi Green. It was in 1937. [Later] we came to Los Angeles to do these different films, and at

the time she was in Los Angeles. She got in touch with us. I think this was in, maybe, 1940 you might say. She was over at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer visiting and she met Gene Kelly. They started talking and she was telling him about the Nicholas Brothers: "We were in a show together, Babes in Arms. We became very good friends." Gene said, "Oh, yes. I want to perform with the Nicholas Brothers." She said, "Oh, that would be nice, Gene." Then he said, "I want to tell you that Fayard Nicholas is the only man that dances like me."

WHITE

Oh, really.

NICHOLAS

Mitzi to herself said, "What does he mean? He means he dances like Fayard Nicholas."

WHITE

Absolutely. That's interesting.

NICHOLAS

Isn't that interesting?

WHITE

Yeah. Let's see now. I wanted to just go back a little bit. Now, I know that you indicated that you stopped going to formal school, anyway, around the eighth grade, and of course you had your tutor.

NICHOLAS

Because we started performing. It was in 1930. I was in school; it was the eighth grade. That was the last grade that I went to in school.

WHITE

So you were about thirteen or so at that time. Thirteen or fourteen maybe?

NICHOLAS

Something like that. Yes. My brother was eight, I believe, or something like that. Is that seven years difference?

WHITE

He would have been seven, and you were fourteen. So you guys had your tutor. You were actually performing in a number of theaters and that sort of thing.

NICHOLAS

At the nightclub, the Cotton Club.

WHITE

But you started there in 1932.

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

So what I was trying to get at is, can you just tell me what was going on between 1930 and 1932? I know you performed at the Standard Theatre.

NICHOLAS

Yes, the Standard Theatre. The Pearl Theater.

WHITE

The Pearl Theater.

NICHOLAS

The Lincoln Theatre, the Royal Theater, all in Philadelphia. We worked in all of the Warner Brothers theaters there in Philadelphia. Now, you see, the Standard Theatre, the Pearl Theater, the Royal Theater and Lincoln theaters— They called those the "Black Theaters," because that's where black managers would run these theaters and there would be mostly black audiences. Of course white people would come there too when they'd hear about who was playing there. They wanted to see them. Now, the Warner Brothers theaters, I guess you'd call those the white theaters. At that time, Warner Brothers owned these theaters. Naturally, they'd play all of their motion pictures in these theaters. So the government got on them or something and said, "You can't do that. You can't own theaters and show motion pictures too."

WHITE

Oh, okay. It's a monopoly.

NICHOLAS

Like they're making too much money or something like that. It also happened with Paramount. Paramount had a lot of theaters, too. So they had to give up their theaters—and 20th Century-Fox.

WHITE

Right. I remember that.

NICHOLAS

We used to always play at the Roxy Theater in New York City. All our movies played at the Roxy. So they would always have us to appear there at the Roxy, and we were always headlining, because they saw all our movies there at the Roxy, like Tin Pan Alley, Down Argentine Way, and other movies from 20th Century-Fox. So they always wanted to see the Nicholas Brothers. After each film, they wanted us to come back, thinking we were going to do on stage what we did in those movies. No way, especially that Stormy Weather thing. Forget it! But they were happy just to see us on stage, because we were always there. They could see that we were enjoying what we were doing. We would talk to them. So they would forget about Stormy Weather, coming down those stairs.

WHITE

Yeah, nothing like live theater.

NICHOLAS

Did I tell about when I hurt myself at the Roxy Theater?

WHITE

No, you didn't.

NICHOLAS

I didn't? Well, this was opening day.

WHITE

Approximately what year?

NICHOLAS

It must have been about—let me see—before I went into the army. It must have 1941 or '42, around then, because I was drafted in 1943. So it was before that. It was at the Roxy, this big theater, a great theater. They don't build them like that anymore. It holds six thousand people. It's a big theater. It's huge, and the stage just goes on and on. This is where I really can travel, without being pushed in or something like that. So the manager of the theater got this idea that he was going to have this orchestra on stage. It seemed like it was one hundred pieces. It was such a big orchestra, with the violins and the cello and the vibraphones, the French horns, everything, the trumpets, trombones. It was a full orchestra. So the orchestra was right in the middle of the stage, and they had built these stairs on each side of the orchestra. They wanted to create something like Stormy Weather, but it wasn't quite. They wanted my brother to go up one side. He'd dance up, and I'd dance up on the other side of the steps and we'd get right in the middle of this platform. Now, we're looking down, and there's the orchestra. So the manager of the theater said, "Now, fellahs, for a finish, I want you to jump over the orchestra into a split on the stage."

WHITE

Oh, my goodness!

NICHOLAS

I say, "Wait a minute. Wait one moment." I say to my brother, "Do you think we can do it?" He says, "Yeah, we can do it." I say, "You know what we've got to do, don't you? When we jump, we've got to fly over the orchestra. It's not like—" If the orchestra wasn't there, we'd just go a little bit and go down, but now we've got to go [makes a noise and gestures to indicate the outward trajectory] and then go down. Oh, brother! I say, "Okay." Now, the first day we were rehearsing. I say, "Okay, on the count of three, we jump." So I say, "One, two—" And I say, "Wait a minute! Let me think. Let me get my composure. And— All right. Here we go. One, two, three—" Whoooooooooon, over the orchestra, wham! We come up, rump a tum tum, and we dance off the stage.

WHITE

You actually made it over the orchestra into the splits.

NICHOLAS

We made it into the splits.

WHITE

That's incredible.

NICHOLAS

We were flying. Like Michael Jordan, only more so.

WHITE

Real acrobatics.

NICHOLAS

Really. Yes. So we went to our dressing room, because the orchestra leader said, "Take five, everybody. We'll come back and rehearse some more." We went to the dressing room and I said to my brother, "I don't want to do that anymore. I hurt my heel and if I continue it, the heel will get worse." So my brother said, "Oh, that's all right. Just let me do it. When I get up there on the platform and I jump, you bring me down with your hands. Then, when I come up, you bring me up with your hands, and then we'll dance off the stage."

WHITE

I see. So you would both jump, but he would do the splits.

NICHOLAS

No. I don't jump.

WHITE

Oh, you don't jump at all.

NICHOLAS

No, I don't jump at all because he said, "I'll jump. You don't have to do it, since you'll hurt your heel. You're up there on the platform. When I jump down, when I come down, you bring me down with your hands."

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

See, he's up in the air, and I see him up in the air, and I do like this. [gestures] He comes up, and I do like that. [gestures] Then we dance off. So this is the opening day. Six thousand people are there to watch these Nicholas Brothers do something like Stormy Weather. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Were you nervous?

NICHOLAS

I used to be very nervous, but when I got older, I wasn't so much nervous like I used to be when I was younger, because I used to get sick.

WHITE

Really?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. I couldn't keep anything on my stomach.

WHITE

Just before you performed.

NICHOLAS

After.

WHITE

Oh, after. Oh, that's interesting.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Of course, all that jumping and carrying on, it made me sick. So now he makes this jump and we dance off the stage together. We go to our dressing room. My brother looked at me and said, "You were right. I don't want to do that anymore either." [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Did he injure himself also?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. He hurt his heel too, because it was such a high jump from this platform, and then you've got to push yourself to make that leap over the orchestra. Now, if we were just going down, maybe we wouldn't have hurt our heels.

WHITE

That's incredibly dangerous.

NICHOLAS

Yes. Well, they thought we could do everything.

WHITE

Of course. [mutual laughter]

NICHOLAS

So we said, "No. We'll still go up the stairs, but we won't do that jump." So my brother would go up one side, tap-dance up the stairs. I'd tap-dance up the stairs. We'd meet right in the center of the platform and cross each other, and stay there and start dancing up there. Tumpa tumpa tumpa tum. If they think we're going to jump, forget it. Then we'd dance down the stairs. He'd dance on side, and then we'd meet and then maybe I would jump over his head into a split. He might go through my legs in a split, and just maybe go back, all the way back, to where the band is and do a sliding step, like we're going into the audience, and finish like that, something like that.

WHITE

That sounds terrific, equally engaging and entertaining.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Forget about that jump.

WHITE

I guess they thought the Nicholas Brothers were invincible.

NICHOLAS

Right, I guess they did. It would have been nice— We had a movie camera where we took home movies. My valet would go out into the audience and tape these home movies of us. He should have been out there the first show to tape that.

WHITE

Oh, sure. When you guys leaped over the orchestra.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. When we leaped over the orchestra. But he was not there then. He took us when we were on stage with Carmen Miranda. I think that's in the biography. Did you see it?

WHITE

I haven't seen it yet, but I'm going to.

NICHOLAS

Oh, you haven't? Well, we were at the Roxy with Carmen Miranda. This was another time at the Roxy Theater.

WHITE

Are you speaking of the book by Rusty Frank [Tap! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and their Stories, 1900-1955. New York: William Morrow, 1990] or the newest book, Brotherhood in Rhythm [: The Jazz Tap Dancing of the Nicholas Brothers. Hill, Constance Valis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000]?

NICHOLAS

No, I'm speaking about the A&E Biography [episode, The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High].

WHITE

Oh, absolutely. I thought you were referring to a book.

NICHOLAS

It was on TV.

WHITE

Yes, I have that tape.

NICHOLAS

You saw us with Carmen Miranda.

WHITE

Yes, I did.

NICHOLAS

So, there's a whole movie that my valet took when we were there with her, but he forgot to tape us when we were jumping over this damn orchestra.

WHITE

Oh, no. That would have been something to behold.

NICHOLAS

I would have liked to have seen that myself.

WHITE

I would have liked to have seen that also. It would have been nice for you to see yourself in action. Yes, I'm sure. Oh, boy. So you've had some great experiences.

NICHOLAS

That was a great experience. We never did hurt ourselves much, but when we found out that we were going to injure ourselves, we cut it out, whatever it might be. It was a thing that this was all we could do and we had nothing to—what you just might say—substitute, because there are a lot of times when we'd do shows and we didn't do those splits at all, but we would entertain the audience and they liked what we did. We were singing and we were tapdancing, but just didn't do those splits, what they wanted to see. So we would entertain them in such a way they'd forget about all that jumping and carrying on, because we are entertainers. That's what we are really.

WHITE

Not just dancers.

NICHOLAS

Not just dancers.

WHITE

Do you recall if any of the managers responded in an adverse way— Would they really try to encourage you or make you do those kinds of splits because you had an agreement or contract with the club?

NICHOLAS

[laughs] No, no, no. There was no type of agreement like that right in there, that we're going to do those things, no. When we'd show up at the nightclubs, they would accept the act that we did.

WHITE

Which was bound to be terrific.

NICHOLAS

Did I tell you about when we started performing and we were doing dance after dance after dance?

WHITE

Right. You decided to add in the singing.

NICHOLAS

Then we added the singing.

WHITE

Yes, you did.

NICHOLAS

I told my brother, "This will never do."

WHITE

Sure. It's exhausting.

NICHOLAS

I said, "I'm glad they like us out there, but I'm getting tired. They're killing me. They're killing both of us."

WHITE

Encore after encore.

NICHOLAS

Encore after encore. I said, "Come on. Let's put some singing in the act. Let's talk to the people."

WHITE

That was smart of you. Well, tell me— Let's talk a bit about your entree into the Cotton Club in Harlem. I know that during our last interview you spoke briefly about how Herman Stark saw you and your brother at the Lafayette Theatre and he brought you over to the Cotton Club. It wasn't an audition per se, but he wanted to show your talent to some of the people there.

NICHOLAS

It wasn't an audition.

WHITE

Right, and that's when you first met Duke Ellington.

NICHOLAS

That's when we first met Duke Ellington. In fact, all of them were there, because they were rehearsing the new show starring Cab Calloway. That's when Cab introduced the song "I've Got the World on a String." It was in 1932. All the beautiful girls were there, and dancing girls, show girls, and Lena Horne was one of the dancing girls. Bill Robinson was there, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters. Clarence Robinson, who was the choreographer, was there. So Mr. Stark introduced us to everybody and asked us to perform for them. I think I told you that, didn't I?

WHITE

Yes, you spoke about it briefly. So you performed in front of all of these people that you just named?

NICHOLAS

All these people. This was the first time that they ever saw the Nicholas Brothers—or the Nicholas Kids. They always called us Nicholas Kids.

WHITE

Do you find it interesting that none of the people that you just described—Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters—none of those people had actually seen you guys perform at some of the black theaters?

NICHOLAS

No.

WHITE

Prior to your coming to the Cotton Club?

NICHOLAS

They heard all about us.

WHITE

They heard about you.

NICHOLAS

They heard about us. When we were at the Lafayette Theatre, that's when Louie Armstrong came by to see us.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

He came by because he heard that my little brother did an impression of him. He wanted to see this little guy do him. He came backstage to see us, and he said, "Hey, gates! [a performer or man] You were terrific."

WHITE

That must have been a real joy for you.

NICHOLAS

He said, "You have the growl just like me, and you're only six years old."

WHITE

Wow. You must have been very, very fast up.

NICHOLAS

That's how he is. When we performed at the Cotton Club, when they were rehearsing this new review and we performed for all of them, Duke Ellington, Bill Robinson, Cab Calloway and Ethel Waters and all of them, I told you what Duke said, didn't I?

WHITE

Yes, that you guys were original.

NICHOLAS

I told him he was original, too.

WHITE

Do you recall how you felt? Because that was the first time that you performed before such an astute African American audience.

NICHOLAS

Duke Ellington was always my favorite orchestra, and he had so much class. He was a bandleader, composer, and he spoke so well when he was talking. He was educated. He was an educated bandleader, and he wrote all these wonderful tunes. Have you ever seen this comic strip Ripley's Believe It or Not? Well, he had in there— Talking about Duke Ellington, he said, "Duke Ellington could sit at a piano and play every tune he has composed and just play one chorus of, say, "It Don't Mean a Thing if You Ain't Got That Swing," and then go right into "Sophisticated Lady"—tune after tune. He said, "He could sit at that piano for three days and play every tune that he has written and never stop.

WHITE

Wow. And it would take him three days to do so?

NICHOLAS

It would take him three days. Do you know how many hours that is if he'd just play each one?

WHITE

That's a long time.

NICHOLAS

That's a long time.

WHITE

That's a wealth of talent.

NICHOLAS

Then he'd say, "Believe it or not!" [laughs]

WHITE

Do you recall after performing for them— Of course, they really enjoyed it and they were very complimentary of you and your brother. What happened from that point? Were you hired to perform there?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Well, Herman Stark made up his mind right away.

WHITE

Right away. Okay.

NICHOLAS

When he saw us at the Lafayette Theatre, we were hired. He just wanted everybody to see us, because they'd heard about us but they'd never seen us. So he wanted them to see what he saw.

WHITE

Very smart gentleman.

NICHOLAS

So he became our manager.

WHITE

Okay. From that point forward.

NICHOLAS

From that point on— Of course, my mother and father [Ulysses Nicholas], they were still with us all the time.

WHITE

So you were approximately eighteen and I guess your brother was eleven in 1932.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I guess so. Would you say that?

WHITE

Yes. That's how I would calculate that, give or take a month or two, depending upon what month you actually opened at the club.

NICHOLAS

I don't remember the month.

WHITE

Okay. Do you remember the first evening you opened, how you felt when you and your brother were preparing at home? What was the feeling that you had? You were getting ready to perform in one of the most popular clubs in America. Can you describe your feelings?

NICHOLAS

Well, we felt great because we'd see all these wonderful movie stars that would come there, Broadway stars. We were there entertaining them and we liked that. We felt so good that they liked what we were doing. We were on that stage to entertain. We enjoyed it, we wanted the audience to enjoy it. We weren't out there to prove that we were the best in the world. We were just having fun just doing our thing and doing it the best that we could. We were so happy that they enjoyed us.

WHITE

Now, how did you have an idea of the kinds of people that frequented this club? Because, of course, you had never been there. Your parents were not allowed to go there. How were you aware of the audience members? How did you know who went to that club?

NICHOLAS

We saw who went to that club.

WHITE

Prior to your performing there, I mean. Did you have any idea?

NICHOLAS

I didn't have an idea. I didn't have any idea at all. The manager, Herman Stark, wanted us to come up there. I remember when we arrived there, we went up some stairs to go up there. We'd make the entrance there. I saw where the hatcheck girl was. I saw this long stage where everybody would sit and then we'd go backstage to our dressing room. I had no idea what was going on there until afterwards I found out that black people couldn't go there.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

I didn't like that at all. Here is a night club in Harlem, with a black show, with beautiful show girls, beautiful dancing girls, the greatest acts in the world, the greatest orchestras in the world, like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, and black people couldn't come in there to see the show. I didn't like that at all. I didn't learn it until I arrived there. I didn't know that that was happening.

WHITE

It became clear to you through conversations with the entertainers backstage? Or it became most clear to you when you looked at the audience and you realized there weren't any black people there?

NICHOLAS

I didn't see any black people, no black people at all. I could see that, and I noticed that nobody would go out into the audience—like Cab Calloway or any

of the other entertainers. I've seen these people in the movies, on Broadway. So I wanted to go out there and meet them. I think I told you that before, didn't I?

WHITE

Just briefly, but I'd like to hear.

NICHOLAS

So I spoke to Herman Stark, our manager. I said, "I'd like to go out there and meet all of these wonderful stars."

WHITE

How long had you been there before you made that request? Had you performed there a number of times?

NICHOLAS

Right away. At the first performances, I wanted to meet them because I'd seen them so much and I could see how they were enjoying us. I wanted to go and talk to them. So he said, "Go on out there." Now, we're just little kids at that time. We could go out there and mingle with the guests. I remember the first time we met Tallulah Bankhead. Did you ever hear of her?

WHITE

Yes, indeed.

NICHOLAS

I went over to her and I said, "Hello," and she said, "Hello, sit down. What will you have?" I said, "We'd like some orange juice, please." So we'd stay out there until it was time to do the next show. There were only two shows a night.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

The first one was at midnight.

WHITE

The first one was at midnight?

NICHOLAS

The first one was at midnight, because they wanted to get all of the— Like Broadway stars could come after their performance. If they started earlier, they would miss it. It would be twelve midnight, and then I think two thirty in the morning for the second show. So we'd stay out there with Tallulah Bankhead or whoever else would be there and just talk and just have fun until it was time for the next show.

WHITE

So you actually, after you finished performing for the first show, would— Would your manager escort you out to the audience or would you just merely walk out and introduce yourselves?

NICHOLAS

I just walked out. We'd just walk out there and introduce ourselves. He didn't have to come out there because they knew who we were. We knew who they were. So we could introduce each other. He didn't have to come out and say, "This is the Nicholas Brothers." They knew who we were.

WHITE

Now, do you recall the reaction from the people in the audience? Because this was this was a very unusual occurrence. Probably very few, if any, African Americans had been out in the audience. Do you remember any feelings?

NICHOLAS

How they felt?

WHITE

How they felt? This was a very new occurrence for them.

NICHOLAS

They were so pleased that we would come out there to talk to them. We'd just walk there. They wouldn't announce us or anything. We'd just go out there

and say "Hello" and they'd say "Hello!" They were so happy to see us and we'd sit down. There would be other celebrities out there, too. So we're there with Tallulah Bankhead, and then maybe Jimmy Durante would be there and he'd be looking to see and wanted us to come over to his table. There were others, like Eleanor Powell. She'd be out there. She'd want us to come over there.

**1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO
MAY 4, 2000**

WHITE

I was just about to ask you how the other performers, the other entertainers, felt about the fact both you and your brother could go into the audience and intermingle with various celebrities?

NICHOLAS

Well, they were happy that we would go out there and meet all these different entertainers. They would peek through the curtains backstage to see how we were doing. They liked that. It was so wonderful, because there was no jealousy. Just like the entertainers who were sitting out there in the audience— They liked the Nicholas Brothers, and all of our peers liked the Nicholas Brothers too, which was wonderful, because there is so much jealousy in this business that we call show business. It's not many. There are a few who are that way. We found out in our life in show business that there's less prejudice in show business than any other business.

WHITE

Oh, really. Do you really believe that?

NICHOLAS

I know that. There's less prejudice in show business than any other. You can name other businesses— There's a lot of prejudice. Of course, there is prejudice in show business, but it's less than others.

WHITE

It's a matter of degrees.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it's in degrees. So we'd go out there. We were with Tallulah Bankhead. We were talking to her, we were having fun. There are other entertainers out there too who want to talk to us, like Jimmy Durante, maybe, like Eleanor Powell, the Marx Brothers, Al Jolson, Charlie Chaplin. So they had to wait their turn.

WHITE

They had to stand in line.

NICHOLAS

We're talking to Tallulah Bankhead now. Her father was a senator, in politics.

WHITE

Is that so?

NICHOLAS

From Alabama, I think. So she knows all about this prejudice jazz and she hated it.

WHITE

Oh, she did.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah, she hated that type of thing. She was so happy to talk to us because we were little gentlemen—which we learned from our mother and father, and we were always dressed sharp, because they were two fashion plates, Mother and Father. So it rubbed off on us.

WHITE

So these stars, they were delighted to be in your company, I'm sure.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. And I guess we were cute little boys, you might say.

WHITE

Actually, you were a young man. You were eighteen years old at the time.

NICHOLAS

I didn't feel like it.

WHITE

You didn't feel like it. You had a very youthful presence, too.

NICHOLAS

I still have it.

WHITE

You certainly do. I'm sure they would never guess how old you were at that time.

NICHOLAS

Oh, no, no, no. It's so funny that I was older than a lot of the dancing girls there.

WHITE

Oh, were you?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes, and they always thought that I was younger than them. There was one little girl there who I became very friendly with. Her name was Winnie Johnson, very pretty little girl. We started going together. I think she was fourteen or fifteen. Now, I'm eighteen, and she thought she was older than me. I didn't tell her any different.

WHITE

What she didn't know didn't hurt her.

NICHOLAS

No, it didn't hurt her.

WHITE

That's interesting, because I know that the Cotton Club was owned basically by gangsters [the Owney Madden gang] at the time.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that's true.

WHITE

So in terms of age limits, in terms of the hours with which you could perform, there were really no rules. Is that correct?

NICHOLAS

No. I don't know whether you would say we were lucky or it was just because it was run by the gangsters that we could work there, because we were just kids. We're not supposed to be working that late at night. It's because of the power that they had that we could work there. It was like slipping a little money under the table to the policemen. They'd say, "These boys work here and that's it."

WHITE

Enough said.

NICHOLAS

Enough said. But we couldn't work downtown.

WHITE

Like at the Paramount Theatre.

NICHOLAS

I couldn't at the Paramount Theatre downtown.

WHITE

I think there was a regulation, I guess established by the Gerry Society [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children], that stipulates that that would be classified as cruelty to children.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Cruelty to children. We did open at the Paramount Theatre and they had the Cotton Club Revue then, the whole show, everybody.

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

Everybody was there at the Paramount and there we were too, of course. We did the first show, and then this lady came backstage and told my father and mother that we couldn't work there.

WHITE

Oh, really? Okay. So that was the last time.

NICHOLAS

That was it, but we could go uptown and work until the wee hours of the morning.

WHITE

In one of the most prestigious night clubs in the city.

NICHOLAS

But at the Paramount at a decent hour, we couldn't work there.

WHITE

It's a real paradox, isn't it?

NICHOLAS

Isn't that crazy?

WHITE

Yes. The integration in the clubs downtown versus the segregation of the clubs uptown, but uptown you could work and go against the laws, the rules and regulations. So it's quite a paradox. It's quite an interesting period of time.

NICHOLAS

Isn't that something?

WHITE

Yes. Now, in terms of the sort of gangster affiliation with the Cotton Club, do you recall experiencing or observing any sort of violence or anything unusual?

NICHOLAS

No, we did not. We knew something was going on because people would talk about it, but we never did experience anything like one gangster taking another gangster out and blowing them away. We never knew anything like that. We knew that the club was run by gangsters. We knew that's why we could work there. We knew that Herman Stark, who was also one of those gangsters— That was his job, running the Cotton Club. I don't think he was involved in any of those other things that gangsters do. I used to say, when I'd be interviewed on some TV show or the radio and we talked about the Cotton Club and about the gangsters running it, that Herman Stark was one of the good gangsters, because he wasn't involved in any of that shooting or anything. That was his job, just running the Cotton Club. His hands were full.

WHITE

Sure. That's quite a job in and of itself, I'm sure. So tell me now— You had the opportunity to perform on stage and entertain a very astute and talented audience, and then you also were given the privilege of going out into the audience, intermingling with them. It's my understanding, and correct me if I'm wrong, that when you entered the club as an African American and exited the club as an African American, you had to leave by the back door.

NICHOLAS

No, we didn't. We'd go in the entrance that everybody would go, the movie stars, the Broadway stars. We'd go up those steps right into the Cotton Club and then just go to our dressing room. As we were going up those stairs and reached the top, there would be maybe some celebrities around and they would see us, and we'd start talking to them then. They wanted to talk to us then. Like Harold Lloyd. Do you remember Harold Lloyd? He was a big star in the silent movies.

WHITE

Yes, yes I do.

NICHOLAS

The one that was hanging on that clock in downtown Los Angeles [in the movie *Safety Last*]. A great acrobat. It was live, him hanging on this clock, but

it was filmed in such a way that if he did slip, there was a place where he could— It would be like a mattress there.

WHITE

He would fall safely.

NICHOLAS

But you didn't see it that way because it looked like he was hanging from the building. I named my brother after him. Did I tell you that?

WHITE

Yes, you did.

NICHOLAS

Yes. He could be right there waiting to be seated and he would see us and start talking to us. So I told him the story about how I named my brother after him.

WHITE

Oh, did you?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Didn't I tell you that?

WHITE

Yes, you did.

NICHOLAS

He said he was honored. I told him it was an honor to name my brother after him, because I always loved him in his movies. He was one of my favorite actors.

WHITE

So once again you and your brother were somewhat isolated, or more privileged than the other black performers. Is it true that the other black performers had to go through the back door?

NICHOLAS

Yes.

WHITE

I understand, looking at some of the literature, there was actually an African American doorman who would prohibit anyone from coming in.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Wasn't that crazy? Here is this doorman dressed in his outfit. Oh, he would look sharp. He had a special outfit, and he was there to open the door to let everybody go in. If a black couple rode up there in a limousine—it could be a Rolls-Royce and she could have on diamonds and fur coats and he could be in his tails and just looking very elegant—this black doorman wouldn't let them in. It would be likely they'd say, "I have the money just like everybody else. I can afford to be here," and he said, "You can't come in." And he was black, the doorman.

WHITE

But at the same time he would allow you and your brother to go past him.

NICHOLAS

Well, we worked there, and he liked these little boys. So he wouldn't stop us because we were just going in there—we weren't going in there to have a table, to sit down and enjoy ourselves with dinner and drinks. We'd go in there to work. He knew we—we'd go in the front way. The other entertainers would go in the back.

WHITE

Is that so?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

So did you ever— during your time that you were working there, did you ever notice any other black entertainers allowed to go through the front besides yourself and your brother?

NICHOLAS

Josephine Baker.

WHITE

Josephine Baker? She was an exception.

NICHOLAS

She was an exception.

WHITE

No one else?

NICHOLAS

No.

WHITE

Fascinating. That's fascinating.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, isn't that fascinating?

WHITE

Yes, it is. So, tell me now, for someone who has never been to Harlem, who has never been to the Cotton Club, can you describe it?

NICHOLAS

Someone who's never been to Harlem and never been to the Cotton Club?

WHITE

And never seen the Cotton Club.

NICHOLAS

I'd always heard about the Cotton Club. I would always listen to Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington on the radio, and this is where they would broadcast from. So I always wanted to work at the Cotton Club, and I had that privilege, to be one of the entertainers to work there. In the daytime I think it had a canopy. When you drove up there in your car, you went under the canopy and then went up the stairs. There was the neon sign which said "Cotton Club." At that time I don't think they had names for who was playing there, like Cab Calloway and other performers. It was just the name "Cotton Club." That was enough. When people— Say, if they came from other cities, they wanted to go to the Cotton Club. They didn't care who was there because they heard it was always a great show there that would have bands like Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Jimmie Lunceford. They didn't have to know which band was there. They would know a great band would be there. So they didn't question it in any way. "Let's go to the Cotton Club. I know it's going to be a big show. It's going to be a great show." I think that's about the best way I can describe the Cotton Club. It was on Lennox Avenue. About a block away was the Savoy Ballroom where they'd have big bands like Duke Ellington and Count Basie, and they would call it "the battle of the bands." Oh, I can remember that so well. I think when I arrived there, Count Basie was playing.

WHITE

At the Savoy?

NICHOLAS

At the Savoy. Duke Ellington too, but at this time Count was playing and he was playing his last number. The band was playing. I think it was "Every Tub." That's one of his numbers that was a big seller, a record seller. He's playing in the— And they had this revolving stage. Count Basie's gang would go off and then here comes Duke Ellington as it would swing around. Duke would start off with a real [laughs] fast number that was faster than Count Basie's.

WHITE

Oh, really.

NICHOLAS

That was his first number. So the people were up with Count Basie, with "Every Tub," and then maybe Duke would play "It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing." [tape recorder off.] Everybody is out there lindy hopping and jitterbugging and going to town. Duke Ellington comes out and he's playing. So there's no let down. They were still up as they were dancing. To tell you who won, I don't know, because they were both great. I couldn't say Duke was better or Count was better because they picked the right numbers to play. The audience, the dancers, were happy. They were happy.

WHITE

The Savoy was segregated as well, wasn't it?

NICHOLAS

No.

WHITE

So blacks could actually join the audience.

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

Right down the road from the Cotton Club.

NICHOLAS

The blacks and whites could go to the Savoy. That was not segregated. Crazy. Isn't that crazy?

WHITE

Yes, it is. This was such an exciting and creative atmosphere with the Harlem Renaissance going on and black entertainment was favored, obviously. So a lot of black entertainers had an opportunity to perform. For some of them it was the height of their careers.

NICHOLAS

Do you remember there was another nightclub called Connie's Inn?

WHITE

I'm not familiar with that one. Connie's Inn?

NICHOLAS

Connie's Inn. It was a guy who was the manager of Connie's Inn. His name was Connie [Conrad Immerman]. Louie Armstrong played there, the Mills Brothers, and other entertainers. It was also a famous nightclub. We went there and I think we saw the Mills Brothers there. We liked the club. We were trying to make up our minds which club we should go with, Connie's Inn or the Cotton Club. So we talked to different people who said, "Your best bet is the Cotton Club." I said, "Well, okay." My parents, my mother and father, got together and said, "Boys," talking to us, "we're going to the Cotton Club"—because they wanted us at Connie's Inn, too. They said, "No, but the Cotton Club is the best one," and they were right.

WHITE

The reputation and the kinds of entertainers that frequented the place.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. I don't know if that one was segregated or not. I didn't investigate that— Well, I guess it wasn't because we went there with my parents and we had a table ringside.

WHITE

Oh, excellent.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. So I guess it wasn't. Everybody could go there.

WHITE

Except for the Cotton Club.

NICHOLAS

Except for the Cotton Club. How about that?

WHITE

How about that? Even Cab Calloway, who really is credited for in many respects for making the Cotton Club famous— He couldn't even come out to the audience.

NICHOLAS

No, he couldn't go out there either.

WHITE

Or come in the front door.

NICHOLAS

No. I think he had this big ego. He didn't want to go out there. He said, "To hell with them."

WHITE

It's their loss.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. He said, "I'm a big star."

WHITE

He certainly was.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. In that day there were two entertainers who were the biggest drawing cards in vaudeville, Eddie Cantor and Cab Calloway. There would always be a packed house for those two; they outdrew everybody else.

WHITE

That's amazing.

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

Now, is it true—I read this in some literature in your archives—that the talent wasn't even welcome in the restroom at the club? Is that correct?

NICHOLAS

Oh, that's right. But they had to go. Well, they couldn't stop them. That would be horrible—backstage and they have to go to the bathroom. That would be horrible to tell them that they— Well, and the guy who was running the restroom, he was angry about it, like some of the show people from backstage would go and he was [makes grumbling noises] like this and then maybe like he would be smelling something. Well, wait a minute! Those white people, they smell too, just like anybody else when they do their business. So why does he have to put his nose up in the air because the black one went in there and did the thing? Well, the white one did his thing too in there and I'm sure it smells the same or maybe worse. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Yeah, that's really something.

NICHOLAS

Well, we too went in there. We had to get relieved.

WHITE

Sure. I found that really incredibly unbelievable when I read that in your research papers.

NICHOLAS

What they should have done, they should have had a restroom where the dressing rooms were.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Do something there. I didn't like going out there with all those other people, the entertainers. I wanted something more private.

WHITE

Sure. You guys deserve that. Such a talented plethora of people there— yourselves and Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington—and to have to be subjected to this sort of treatment is—

NICHOLAS

To get that kind of treatment, and that darn guy who was there, who would give you the towels and run the water for you, give you some cologne and all those things, I didn't like him at all.

WHITE

Was not one of your favorites.

NICHOLAS

He wasn't one of my favorites.

WHITE

Tell me now— I read an article from the [Los Angeles] Herald-Examiner in July of 1984. You were being interviewed and you were commenting on your experience back at the Cotton Club and you said that blacks, of course, were not let into the Cotton Club when you performed there and this didn't seem fair, but you were too young to sort of understand prejudice. But you just made up your mind to do whatever you wanted to do and to go wherever you wanted to go.

NICHOLAS

I always did that.

WHITE

I'm wondering what kind of relationship did you have with your manager? Do you recall ever expressing dissatisfaction with that atmosphere or the fact that your colleagues, your fellow entertainers, couldn't go out in the audience?

NICHOLAS

No, we got along with him very well. He was in our corner one hundred percent. He really wanted to make us great stars. I remember when we were with Ben Bunny at the Chez Paris in Chicago.

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Did I tell you?

WHITE

You did mention that.

NICHOLAS

He was crazy about us. He had a special radio show that was coast to coast that he was doing and he wanted us to be on this show with him. I think I told you that.

WHITE

Yes, you did. You were speaking about the relationship with yourselves and Herman Stark.

NICHOLAS

Well, he was in our corner so much. He had so much faith. I told you when I was on that radio show with Ben Bunny, and they said that my brother's voice sounded too much like Ben Bunny's so they didn't want us on the show anymore. Then everybody who was on says, "Why are they letting you go? Because you're different. You're different—the way you sing, you perform, when you're tap-dancing. There's not much of that on any of these shows." I said, "Oh, I guess it's just one of those things." So Herman Stark, our manager, threatened them.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

He said, "If you don't have my boys on this show, you're going to be in trouble."

WHITE

And based on his affiliation, I'm sure that's quite a threat.

NICHOLAS

So they said, "Oh, all right. We'll have them on for four weeks," and we were on for four weeks. Everybody liked us, but the producers, because they thought my brother's voice sounded so much like Ben Bunny's, they cancelled us out of it.

WHITE

Too much competition.

NICHOLAS

Yes, it was. Too much competition. At this time my brother's voice was changing. It wasn't that little boy, and that's what they wanted, that little boy's voice. He'd come out bass.

WHITE

Of course, he was twelve or thirteen, around that age.

NICHOLAS

The voice is changing.

WHITE

Well, speaking of your family, how about your sister? Did she ever have an opportunity to see you perform at the Cotton Club from backstage at all?

NICHOLAS

I don't think she did. She was wrapped up in her education.

WHITE

Really?

NICHOLAS

She didn't have time to go to the Cotton Club. The first show was at midnight. She's in bed.

WHITE

That's true.

NICHOLAS

I don't think she ever did go to the Cotton Club.

WHITE

That's unfortunate she didn't get a chance to see you there, though.

NICHOLAS

Well, she saw us other places.

WHITE

Yeah, same thing. I'm sure she saw you guys so many times. Did your parents often come to the club?

NICHOLAS

Mm-hmm.

WHITE

They did? And watched you from backstage?

NICHOLAS

They'd be backstage, but they'd walk through the front with us.

WHITE

They did?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah.

WHITE

They were able to walk through the front with you.

NICHOLAS

And then they'd go straight backstage and stay.

WHITE

Right. Of course, and stay back there.

NICHOLAS

When the show was all over, we'd walk through the— [tape recorder off.] Everybody's going their separate ways. We would walk down those stairs and we would go to our apartment. I told you the apartment we lived at, didn't I, the Park Lincoln, in Washington Heights?

WHITE

You sure did tell me that, which leads me into my next couple of questions. In your archives it was said that during the Great Depression you and your brother made more money than most adults.

NICHOLAS

Yes.

WHITE

I understand that you were never really concerned about money. You left that to your parents.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. They took care of all of that.

WHITE

You just wanted to go on stage and entertain.

NICHOLAS

I just wanted to go and entertain. They'd take care of the money and take care of the bookings of wherever we would play and all of that. So we'd just entertain and dress nice. They'd take us to tailors and get fitted for new costumes and all of that. So I don't know if we ever did have any money in our pockets.

WHITE

Never really needed anything.

NICHOLAS

Didn't need it because they had it. They had the money.

WHITE

I'm interested to know how your home life changed. You guys were beginning to make quite a bit of money and you were living on Edgecomb. Where did you guys move from when you left there?

NICHOLAS

We stayed there until it was time to come out here.

WHITE

Did you really? Now, was that in Harlem? Sugar Hill?

NICHOLAS

No, I call that Washington Heights. I don't call that Harlem. I don't think we called it Sugar Hill.

WHITE

That's interesting, because some of your notes indicated that your family moved to Manhattan, in an area called Sugar Hill.

NICHOLAS

I don't remember that. I know that we were living in Manhattan and different parts of that they'd call Harlem. Washington Heights, the Hudson River, all that was around there somewhere.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Then we had the baseball stadium, Yankee Stadium. That part of it we called the Bronx, where they had the New York Yankees, starring Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, those great baseball players. It was very close to where we were staying. Also in that area were the Giants, the New York Giants staying close to where we were.

WHITE

As you guys began to make more money, do you recall your standard of living changing at home?

NICHOLAS

Standard of living?

WHITE

Uh-huh, because you guys were making quite a bit of money at the Cotton Club.

NICHOLAS

That's true. Like I told you, my mother and father took care of all of that. We didn't go to the office. We were under contract to the William Morris Agency, and they would go to the office and take care of all the business. We didn't have to go there. The only time we'd go there was if they wanted to talk to us about something special.

WHITE

Right. No, I was referring to your home life.

NICHOLAS

The home life was wonderful. We had friends who lived in that area, like the Brown twins, Hilda and Vivian, who lived close by, two beautiful girls. They were also in the Cotton Club.

WHITE

Oh, they were.

NICHOLAS

They were dancing girls in the Cotton Club. Winnie Johnson was near where we lived. She had a big family, sisters and brothers. I was stuck on her.

WHITE

Yeah, you told me that a little earlier.

NICHOLAS

Did I tell you?

WHITE

Yeah. Now, some of the literature, some of the news articles, actually said that you and your brother were pampered like cultural aristocrats and you were kind of sheltered from the harsh realities of most African American experiences at that point in time. What are your thoughts about that?

NICHOLAS

I don't know. I always thought about myself as an "American." This new name that they have given us, African American— I never say that. I'm an American. I don't know anything about Africa. I didn't know— First they were calling us "colored." Let me see. No, first it was Negro, I think it was, then colored, then something else. So you didn't know exactly what you were in America. I say, "Just say American. I was born here." I don't think they say this about other people like Irish American, German American, Swedish American— They don't say that. Mexican American. They don't say that about these different nationalities. Why do they have to put that on us? African American. What is the difference? If they see us, they know what we are. They know that we're colored or whatever they want to say—Negro or black or whatever they want to say. Why do we have to say African American? Does that let them know we're more African or more black when they say that? We were born in this country just like everybody else. So we are Americans.

WHITE

What are your thoughts about being referred to as cultural aristocrats?

NICHOLAS

What do I think about that?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Oh, I don't mind. I don't mind that, but I don't let it go to my head.

WHITE

Do you feel that you and your brother were really pampered? I'm talking about just when you were at the Cotton Club in the thirties, when you were still in New York.

NICHOLAS

Well, people always make over us. I guess it was because of our talent, because we were little gentlemen, because mother and father taught us right from wrong. And all the things that other people did, we didn't want to do that. We never wanted to be in gangs. We never did get into dope. I never smoked or drank. I remember when I'd go to parties and I'd see everybody had such a wonderful time smoking and drinking. I said, "Well, this must be the way of life." So I started puffing on a cigarette. [mimics hacking cough] I got choked. I say— [blows a raspberry] That's not for me. Then I took a little drink of whiskey. I said, "Oooh, ptoeey. That's nasty. I don't want it." That was the first and last time. Then, going into this other thing of pot or marijuana or whatever you call it, this little thin cigarette, you might say— I never did get into that, in fact, didn't even puff it at all. I didn't smoke. Then they would say to me, "Fayard, you should try this. It'll make you so high like you're floating in the air." I said, "Man, I've been high all my life. I was born high. I don't need that to make me high." I said, "I want to know where I am and what I'm doing. I'm want to wake up with a cool head. I want to be sober. I don't want to go through all of that." I said, "It's funny. You guys, you say 'I'll never drink again' because you have this hangover, and the next day you do it again. So you haven't really learned your lesson," I say.

WHITE

You definitely had a mind of your own, and you established yourself as someone who was unique, with a really solid upbringing. So I guess it's not surprising that you and your brother may be referred to as cultural aristocrats at that point in time.

NICHOLAS

I remember one time I saw in the newspapers that they had a picture of my mother and father, my sister, my brother, and me, and they said, "The first family of Harlem." [mutual laughter]

WHITE

That's exciting. So on that note we're going to go ahead and end the interview for today.

NICHOLAS

All right, darling.

**1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE
MAY 18, 2000**

WHITE

How are you doing today?

NICHOLAS

I'm doing well, thank you. Yes, I'm still on my honeymoon, and I'm happy as the day is long.

WHITE

Oh, that's excellent. You're looking really terrific.

NICHOLAS

Thank you.

WHITE

Well, last time we spoke, which was May 4, we spoke about a number of different things, but at the end of our conversation we talked about how you and your brother [Harold Nicholas] had begun becoming really very successful in your career, and about your family and where you guys were living when you first started at the Cotton Club, and we talked about how it has been perceived that you guys were pampered like cultural aristocrats. We talked about that. You described your home and your community at that time. So I just wanted to move on from there. I wanted to shift gears a little bit and talk about the film industry. I know that, of course, you have a long history in films, but I wondered if you could talk a little bit about 1932 and that period of time you were at the Cotton Club. What role did films actually play in life? Did you have an opportunity to go and see any films at all?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I always loved films. Ever since I was a little boy, I loved all the silent movies with all the great silent actors—like Harold Lloyd, who's one of my favorites. I liked him so much I named my brother after him, Harold Lloyd Nicholas.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Lillian Gish and Rudolph Valentino, Charlie Chaplin, Clara Bow. Oh, I could just go on and on. When I first saw *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson— Now this is talking. It was part silent and part talking, where Al Jolson was singing and he was at a piano playing the piano and singing to his mother in the film. That fascinated me. I said, "Oh, gee. This is great! Maybe one day I'll be able to be in a talking movie," and it came true. Our first movie was *Pie Pie Blackbird* starring Eubie Blake and Nina Mae McKinney. That was in 1932 at the Warner Brothers studio in New York.

WHITE

How did that opportunity actually come about?

NICHOLAS

We were playing at the Lafayette Theatre in Manhattan. The producer saw us at the theater, and talked to my parents [Ulysses Nicholas and Viola Harden Nicholas] and wanted us to be in this movie short called *Pie Pie Blackbird*. Now, my parents did all the business, negotiating with different producers. All we did was entertain, all entertainment. We had nothing to do about where we were going to appear. My parents would tell us and there we'd go, we'd appear. We loved entertaining. Right after we made this movie short, we went into the Cotton Club. The manager of the Cotton Club saw us at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem and invited us to come to the Cotton Club, because they were rehearsing the new show starring Cab Calloway. I think I told you this before.

WHITE

Right. We talked at length about that.

NICHOLAS

What do you really want to know about my experience in movies?

WHITE

I want to know about your first experience at this point, and then we can continue from there. Your first experience in Pie Pie Blackbird— Do you recall actually going on the set? If so, how did it differ from being on the stage in a nightclub or theater?

NICHOLAS

It was so much different from the stage because there was no audience there. There was a camera there. So the camera was the audience, you may say, because naturally the cameraman would take you at different angles. Say you're performing in a dance and do maybe thirty-two bars and you stop. Then they pick up where they left off, at a different angle. On stage when you're performing you just go on and on. You don't stop and get another angle. So this was very different from the stage. I began to like it, even though I had to stop, because I tried to put everything into it as we were going along. We would stop and rest, and then they'd have a different angle. I'm glad because I'm getting a rest. Now I'm catching my breath. Then I pick up where I left off, and I put the same energy into the number, but when you're on stage you put it all at one time. I liked that. I would rest a little bit before I'd go into the rest of the number. I liked that about motion pictures. I remember sometimes they would take the whole routine in one shot, say it would be a long shot, and take the whole thing, and finish the number. Then they would take close-ups of us at different parts of the number and different angles. When they edited, they put it all together, and it looked like we were going through it all at one time. That was the art of motion pictures. I liked that. I liked seeing myself on the big screen. It was fascinating.

WHITE

Do you recall what the experience was like interacting with Nina Mae McKinney?

NICHOLAS

Oh, it was lovely. Beautiful, beautiful lady. We became very good friends. It was wonderful when at the beginning of the movie, she's in the kitchen baking a pie. We were little boys coming in in short trousers. We'd come into the kitchen and we'd look at her making this pie. We'd say, "What kind of pie is that, Miss Nina?" She said, "That's a blackbird pie." "A blackbird pie?" we'd say. "There's no such thing as a blackbird pie." Then she goes on to tell us about how she used to sing a song to us when we were little boys, and she sings this song. That was our first appearance in a movie as actors—because we had lines. Yes, we did lines. It was the first time, in 1932, that we made this film. So it was a great experience.

WHITE

When you and your brother originally broke into the movie business at this time, black actors were routinely depicted in sort of one-dimensional roles, often as sort of shiftless servants and that sort of thing.

NICHOLAS

That sort of thing.

WHITE

There were still a lot of white actors that were playing black actors by using blackface, painting their faces black. Can you tell me what your thoughts are about that? How did you feel about that at that time?

NICHOLAS

I didn't like it at all, but also there were black actors who were using blackface like Bert Williams, who was one of our greatest comedians. He was respected by all the white comedians like Eddie Cantor, W.C. Fields, and other great white comedians. They all said that Bert Williams was the number one, number one actor/comedian, because he wrote special songs and the way he would portray these songs on stage, his own songs. I know there's one number that he did where he was playing cards and it was imaginary. He had his hands before him like this, like he had cards in his hands and like there were other players there, but they weren't there. He shuffled the cards, and then he'd throw the cards to each one of them. He was very good at that. I never saw him [on stage], but I always heard about him, how great he was. I

saw an old silent film of him doing this card game thing, and he was wonderful because he made us feel like the people were really there and he really had the cards in his hands and he was shuffling them. I could see why all these other comedians said that he was the greatest. I think he was the only black entertainer who headlined in the Ziegfeld Follies. All the other actors in the Ziegfeld Follies were white. He was the only black and he was the star. He wore this blackface like he did in those days. In fact he'd be at his hotel in New York just before he would go to the theater. He'd be in the hotel and he'd put this blackface on at the hotel and come out, and I guess he would get a taxi and get out and people would see him as he got out of the taxi. He had on his blackface. He'd come into the theater and keep it on as he did the show, and after the show he would come out with the blackface still on. He would get in the cab and go to the hotel.

WHITE

Wow. That's peculiar.

NICHOLAS

Then he would take the blackface off when he was in his room at the hotel. He always did that, and people didn't know whether he was black or white.

WHITE

I see. That's interesting. He was always in character.

NICHOLAS

He was always in that character, and nobody knew. I think when he was on stage they didn't know. A lot of the audience didn't know if he was black or white.

WHITE

I wonder was that by design for him. He wanted to be sort of anonymous.

NICHOLAS

Yes. Take me as I am, as an entertainer, and I'll keep you guessing.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

He was fair. He was very fair, and he had keen features. So you would never know unless he would take off the makeup, but he kept the makeup on all the time, just like Al Jolson with his blackface and Eddie Cantor with the blackface. There were other black entertainers who wore the blackface. I remember when I worked at the Apollo Theater in New York, there was one actor. I think his name was Sandy Burns. He wore the black face. There was Dusty Fletcher—also wore the black face. I always wondered—it was very strange to me: "Why are they wearing this black face?" Well, I guess that the act was that way, that they would all wear the blackface, but I really couldn't understand it at all. I couldn't understand it. But they were all funny, very funny. I liked what they were doing. I liked Dusty Fletcher. He did a routine called "Open The Door, Richard." Did you ever hear of that?

WHITE

I haven't heard of that one, no.

NICHOLAS

Well, he had a routine that he did. He'd be on the stage a little drunk, and he's coming out and he'd try to walk. Then he would fall down. Then he'd try to get up again. He'd fall down. He said, "Oh, this whiskey is so heavy." Then he goes to where his friend is, and his friend is named Richard. He says, "Open the door, Richard, and let me in," and they composed a song about that. He made a recording of it.

WHITE

That's familiar.

NICHOLAS

[sings] "Open the door, Richard. Open the door and let me in." Then he would try to get up again and he would say, "It ain't no use. Just stay on the floor, on the ground, because I can't get up." He was very successful doing that, and he wore blackface.

WHITE

Is he one of the particular people that you admired a great deal at that time?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. I admired all of these great comedians because they were original. Very original. They had their own style of comedy. I appreciated that, even though I didn't like the blackface on them. I liked the way that they presented themselves on stage and made everybody laugh. And there was [Dewey] "Pigmeat" Markham. Did you ever hear of him?

WHITE

No, I'm not familiar with him.

NICHOLAS

He did a lot of shows at the Apollo Theater in New York. I don't think he used blackface, and he would always play the part of a judge. He would try different actors who looked like criminals. He had his mallet— "Order in the courthouse!" That type of thing. He was very funny. Have you heard of truckin'?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

That's a dance. He had a really great way of truckin'. He'd make a turn, he'd turn his head, and everybody loved him when he did that.

WHITE

I suppose that the song—I think it came out in the sixties—"Keep on Truckin'"— Maybe they took that from the original truckin' dance from the 1920s, I suppose, and thirties. It's a very popular song by [Eddie Kendricks].

NICHOLAS

There's one I remember called "Everybody's Truckin'." That was one, too. Oh, it's been so long ago.

WHITE

Sure. It's been a while.

NICHOLAS

Oh, my goodness. There were so many different types of dances like truckin' and pickin', the Suzy Q, and, well, naturally the Charleston was one in those days. There were so many different types of dancing.

WHITE

That's an interesting point. There are so many other types of dances going on. It was a very popular, robust time, particularly for the arts and performance and dance. Did you ever have an opportunity to do much dancing outside of tap?

NICHOLAS

Oh, you mean like the Suzy Q?

WHITE

Sure. Just go out dancing.

NICHOLAS

I remember I used to go to the Savoy Ballroom in New York, and I'd get on the dance floor with a girl. First, I'd hold her when I'm dancing, and then we would separate. She'd be one side. I'd be on the other. We'd start doing truckin' or Suzy Q and those little dances before we'd get back together and hold each other. I did all that.

WHITE

Are you pretty skilled in some of the other dances?

NICHOLAS

Well, I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say I was skilled in it. I just have fun doing it, like I have fun in doing the Latin type of dance like the cha-cha, the rumba and other types of Latin dance. I have fun doing it. I don't say that I'm an expert. I just have fun doing it and a lot of times when I'm out there dancing— Like the other evening Catherine [Hopkins Nicholas] and I were at the Coconut Club. That's a club at the Beverly Hilton Hotel. It's a special one that Merv Griffin built, sort of like a take off on the Cocoanut Grove, but they just call it Coconut Club. Catherine and I were there. There was a Latin orchestra there, and we started doing the cha-cha and going through these different ways of dancing. We were having fun, and everybody was looking at us. Now, we don't

call ourselves experts, but they could see we were having fun [doing] what we were doing. I mean there were other people out there who could outdance us in that type of dancing, but I guess it's because of the way that we were doing it, the expressions on our faces, and they saw that we were having fun. We weren't trying to outdance anybody, just having fun.

WHITE

Sure, that's infectious.

NICHOLAS

And they were all looking at us.

WHITE

Well, you guys are quite the handsome couple.

NICHOLAS

Then we'd dance off and they'd say, "Oh, you were really good out there." I said, "Well, thank you." [mutual laughter] Well, we didn't do it to get praise. We were having fun. We were enjoying ourselves.

WHITE

That makes a big difference.

NICHOLAS

We weren't trying to show that we were any experts, because I was never an expert in dance with a lady on the dance floor. We're just out there having fun. A lot of people think when I'm out there that I'm going to really do a show and they want to see me do it, but no, no, no, I'm just going out there having fun like everybody else.

WHITE

I guess we're just so accustomed to seeing you perform that that's an expectation.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. When I'm in movies or on the stage or television, that's a routine that we have made up. It's all rehearsed and it's with the music. Let me tell you

this. I've known that all professional dancers—you name them—like Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire and Bill Robinson and other great tap dancers, they're none of them experts on getting on that floor and taking a little lady and starting to dance. None of them. They'll get up there and just dance real nice, but not deal with exhibition. Like when Fred Astaire is dancing with Ginger Rogers— That's all rehearsed. That's a routine that they're doing. Now don't expect him to get up and start doing that with a lady he's never danced with before.

WHITE

There's a certain talent for someone to be able to get up and do an improvisation. It's a completely different skill to be trained and rehearsed.

NICHOLAS

That's a separate thing. At that particular time, they were doing that. Now they're going to get up on a stage and entertain an audience up there all by themselves. They might not be as successful as they are with a crowd. So it's a different thing altogether.

WHITE

It's interesting. I hadn't really thought about that until you mentioned some of the other dances that were out at that time. When I think of dance and you, I always think of tap. So it's interesting that you brought that point up and just kind of shared your thoughts on styles of dancing and your level of enjoyment with them.

NICHOLAS

When I'm out dancing like with Catherine, other ladies, I don't think about tapping. I think about just having a nice time doing a fox-trot or a two-step or whatever it may be, maybe do a waltz, and not think about what I do on stage. You know, it's altogether different.

WHITE

Okay. So let's see now, we were talking about Pie Pie Blackbird. Do you recall the kind of reception the film received? Was it well received at that time?

NICHOLAS

Well, I think so. I think so because I only saw it on the big screen in New York City. When we went to see the film at a theater, and it was in Harlem— Of course, this film would play everywhere, not only in the black theaters. It played in the white theaters, too. It was nationally known. When we went to the theater, my parents, my sister, my brother, and me, and we saw the film— After it was over we came outside into the lobby of the theater, and I said to my parents, "I liked that. I liked what I saw up on that screen. I didn't know I looked that good," and they laughed because I didn't know what I looked like. This is the first time I saw myself on this big screen. People were telling me how much they enjoyed us. Fine, but I didn't know what way we looked. When I saw myself on the screen, then I saw what everybody else saw. It was— I guess you might say it was a thrill seeing myself up on that big screen.

WHITE

I'm sure it's fascinating.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it's fascinating. Here I'm sitting in the theater down here—and I'm up there—enjoying myself.

WHITE

Isn't that something?

NICHOLAS

That's really remarkable.

WHITE

Yeah, it certainly is, to be around at a time when a new invention is coming about, such as talking films, and then to be in a film speaking and performing and dancing and having an opportunity to see yourself. It must have been a terrific experience.

NICHOLAS

That's really a great experience. Sound in motion pictures is the reason why my brother and I can work in motion pictures as entertainers, because we wouldn't be any good in silent movies. There's no sound.

WHITE

It wouldn't have the same effect.

NICHOLAS

No, it wouldn't have the same effect, not at all— Dancing up there, tapping, and you don't hear the taps. [laughs]

WHITE

That's true, your timing was really good. Sound was coming in in the late twenties and you guys, your career taking off in the early thirties, very timely.

NICHOLAS

I'm so glad sound came in. It gave us the opportunity to make many motion pictures. Oh, it was the funniest thing. Lillian Gish, who was a great actress in silent movies— They were honoring her at the AFI—that's American Film Institute. Everybody would come up and say things about her. It was time for her to come up and receive her award, and she gets up there and says, "They really spoiled the motion pictures when they put sound to it." I said, "Wait a minute. That's the reason why I'm in motion pictures, because they put sound to it." But I guess she was thinking about when the silent motion pictures played all over the world. It didn't matter what language they were speaking. There were always the titles if it was in German or French or Swedish. They didn't have to worry about the language.

WHITE

That's true.

NICHOLAS

But now that sound is in they're worried about— In some countries they will dub the films. There are other countries where they still have the subtitles for whatever country it may be—Sweden or whatever. Through my travels all over the world, I found that in the majority of the countries, it is always the original language, English, and they have the subtitles. There are a few countries that will dub. Italy will dub and Germany and France, but in all the other countries it's in English. In that way, they learned how to speak English.

WHITE

That's true.

NICHOLAS

In those countries. When I went to all of the Latin countries in South America and in Central America, all the films were all in English, original version, and with the Spanish subtitles, but when I went to Spain it was dubbed in Spanish. In Spain it was dubbed in Spanish. There I'm looking at this movie, say Bob Hope is on the screen, and here Bob Hope's coming out with this Spanish. It doesn't sound anything like him, nothing like him.

WHITE

It looks and seems very odd.

NICHOLAS

But you could still see his mannerisms. It was always there, but a Spanish voice is coming out of his mouth. Isn't that interesting? Even in Mexico they don't dub the films.

WHITE

That's true.

NICHOLAS

They don't dub the films and it's with the Spanish subtitles. I remember one time they tried out something. They dubbed Laurel and Hardy's films. You remember them, don't you?

WHITE

Oh, yes.

NICHOLAS

Dubbed them in Spanish, and the audience didn't like it— "Boo! Boo!" They wanted to hear them in English, because they'd gotten used to them with the funny little things, like [Oliver] Hardy would say to [Stan] Laurel, "This is a fine mess you've gotten me into," and the way he would do it, and they got used to that voice when he said that. Then this comes out in Spanish. It's not the same. So they didn't dub anymore. They tried it out, but they didn't dub it.

WHITE

All the various learning experiences that many people had to deal with at that time—the actors, the directors, the editors—just in developing this new art form is fascinating. It sounds like you had a really good experience yourself, your initiation into this field. So I wanted to talk a bit more about that. After your performance, yours and Harold's in *Pie Pie Blackbird*, of course, you started dancing at the Cotton Club. It's my understanding that you were discovered at the Cotton Club by Samuel Goldwyn.

NICHOLAS

Oh, to do this film with Eddie Cantor called *Kid Millions*.

WHITE

Exactly. Do you remember how that came about?

NICHOLAS

Ah, well, all I know is that we were performing in the Cotton Club. Our manager, who was the manager of the Cotton Club, came backstage to see us and said, "There's someone who would like to meet you and talk to you." He went backstage and brought us over there, and we met Samuel Goldwyn. He was telling us how much he enjoyed us, and he said that he was producing a film in Los Angeles called *Kid Millions*, starring Eddie Cantor and he'd like to have us in the film. We said yes. My parents were there too, because they were still managing us, even though we had the manager of the Cotton Club who became our manager, Herman Stark. They worked together, my parents and him. They said, "That's fine." So we signed the contract and then came out here to Los Angeles.

WHITE

This was your first time to Los Angeles.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. First time. First time to come to Los Angeles, to do this film with Eddie Cantor called *Kid Millions*.

WHITE

The two of you and your parents came together.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, my parents and my sister [Dorothy Nicholas Morrow].

WHITE

And your sister?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we were all here, our first time out here.

WHITE

Do you remember what it was like when you first arrived? How Los Angeles looked and compared to your experience in New York?

NICHOLAS

Well, right away when I got here, I was looking all around, and I said, "This is it. Let's move out here," because I got tired of those winters in New York and those real hot summers. I loved the climate when I came here. Of course, when we first arrived here, they didn't have the real tall buildings like they have here now in Los Angeles. I said, "Gee." When I came out again, I said, "Gee, they're trying to look like New York." [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Do you recall where you guys stayed when you were here? Were you in Hollywood?

NICHOLAS

Oh, we stayed at a hotel called the Clark Hotel. It was on Central Avenue, owned by black managers, and we stayed there when we first came out here. When we came out again we stayed at the Clark Annex. That was still on Central Avenue. It was a smaller hotel. I guess that might be called a motel where entertainers would stay.

WHITE

Do you recall how long you guys stayed the first visit to film Kid Millions?

NICHOLAS

Oh, let me see. We must have worked on that film about a month, on the film a month. Then we started doing vaudeville, like going to San Francisco to do stage shows and then going to other cities in California—San Jose, Oakland and all those different places.

WHITE

This was right after you finished filming *Kid Millions*?

NICHOLAS

Right after I finished the film. We never did stop working. We were always doing something. Then the last place we ended up was at the Cocoanut Grove here in Los Angeles, the Ambassador Hotel, the Cocoanut Grove there. That's when the Cocoanut Grove was the Cocoanut Grove.

WHITE

Was Freddie Martin and his orchestra performing there then?

NICHOLAS

We worked with Freddie Martin there. And the [inaudible] down there was so wonderful. We always closed the show. Nobody wanted to follow us.

WHITE

Right. That's so true. I've read that in a lot of your records. Now, when you first arrived here, Los Angeles, we did have the housing covenant at that point in time where African Americans or blacks were only able to live in a certain area of Los Angeles and specifically Central Avenue was a bustling area and most of the jazz musicians were there.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, well, that's where we were staying. We didn't stay at the hotels downtown like the Biltmore [Hotel], some of the other hotels. This is where we stayed, at the Clark Hotel.

WHITE

You would commute to the Goldwyn studios for this film.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. United Artists released the film.

WHITE

The Goldwyn studio was located in Hollywood at that time, wasn't it?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it was. I think that studio is still there, but it's Warner Brothers now. Warner Brothers took it over. It was [Goldwyn Studios], and that was on Santa Monica Boulevard, if I'm not mistaken. Yeah, right. That's where we did the film.

WHITE

Was it sort of obvious to you at that time that segregation existed in Los Angeles very much in the way that it existed in New York?

NICHOLAS

Well, I knew that this existed, but I never did let it bother me because I always would do things I wanted to do. Another thing, because people liked us, so they would invite us places where no other black people would go. I think we made a hit with certain people because of the way we were friendly with them and the way our parents taught us right from wrong, and when we went out, we didn't think about prejudice— "Can I go there? No, I'd better not go. They won't accept me." I never did think that way. Like when I was in the Cotton Club, when I wanted to go out into the audience and meet these wonderful stars, I never did think— I knew it existed, but I wouldn't think of those things when I'm going to meet these certain people. So they would invite us to their homes. We'd just have a great time. I think I told you before, I found out in show business that there's less prejudice in show business than in any other business. Actors like actors. They appreciate each other. There may be a little jealousy, but it's not that much, not that much. Because when people would see us perform and they— Like when we were at the Coconut Grove and we were a big hit there with the Freddie Martin Orchestra. The headwaiter who came backstage to our dressing room and said, "There's a great actress who would like to meet you." I said, "Yes, who is she?" "Bette Davis would like you to come to her table and have a drink." I said, "Sure." So

we went to her table, sat down there with her, and talked to her. She was telling us how much she liked us. She said she enjoyed us so much she cried. That's how much she enjoyed us. We had our little orange juice with her, and we talked to her, and just had a great time. And I found out that entertainers support other entertainers when they like them. So that was a thrill, for Bette Davis to say that to us. She enjoyed us so much there were tears in her eyes.

WHITE

That's quite a profound statement.

NICHOLAS

So I said, "Well, Miss Davis, we enjoyed you too."

WHITE

A talented, talented actress. So, then, when you first went on the lot, the studio here in Los Angeles, do you recall what that felt like? I'm sure it was quite unusual and different from anything you had experienced before, the Hollywood studio. What was that like?

NICHOLAS

Well, I just said, "Well, we have arrived." That's what I said. I always wanted to come out here and make films and meet all of the movie stars in person. It was the first time we met Eddie Cantor, the first time we met Ethel Merman, George Murphy, and Ann Southern. That was the first time. We were always seeing them on the screen, on the big screen. The first time I saw Eddie Cantor was in this film called Whoopee. I was in Philadelphia that I saw the film. It's before I got into show business. So when I met this wonderful actor, Eddie Cantor, it was a thrill. Then Lucille Ball was in the film. I think I told you this. She was one of the Goldwyn girls.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

She didn't have any lines in the film, just looking beautiful with all the other girls. I think I told you that we were outside between the takes of the film, and Lucille Ball was coming towards us and she had a little dog. My brother said he

liked that little dog. Lucille Ball said, "You do? It's yours." She gave him that little dog there, but the thing about it was I had to take care of the dog. It was my brother's dog, but I had to take care of it.

WHITE

Right. I remember you telling me that.

NICHOLAS

I think I told you that when we saw Lucille Ball and we were talking to her, and then after our conversation she left, and I said to my parents, "That girl has something."

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

I said, "I bet she'll be a star one day," because she had that same energy like she had when she was doing I Love Lucy, the same. I never dreamed she was going to be a superstar. Then I saw her in movies, and then when she had her special TV show, called I Love Lucy, with her husband Desi Arnaz. Now, you see this wonderful woman, a superstar, and then I started thinking about when I first met her on the lot there at [Goldwyn Studios].

WHITE

That's terrific to have met someone before their career took off to such a degree that hers did and see that growth and that progression, but it's interesting that you—

NICHOLAS

If you have it, it'll come out.

WHITE

Yes, that's true, and you identified it right away.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. I identified it right away. That's the great thing about this country. If you have something to give, they'll give you a chance to give it. Like her— They found out she had something, and they gave her a chance.

WHITE

Interesting.

NICHOLAS

Isn't that interesting?

WHITE

Yes, now, when you were on the set, your parents would accompany you, I would imagine.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes.

WHITE

When you guys were rehearsing and what have you. So you had a chance to intermingle with everyone there. Did you dine together with the actors as well?

NICHOLAS

I don't remember. On the set?

WHITE

Uh-huh.

NICHOLAS

I don't remember dining with them, no. I remember something that happened in making that motion picture, Kid Millions. Eddie Cantor and George Murphy were on the ship now, on the ship that was going to Egypt where Eddie Cantor was going to get his millions of dollars.

**1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO
MAY 18, 2000**

NICHOLAS

They were going to Egypt to get these millions of dollars that Eddie Cantor had inherited from his uncle. They asked my brother to be a little page boy, to come to Eddie Cantor and George Murphy and bring them a [radio]gram, and my brother gave the [radio]gram to him and then Eddie Cantor gave my brother a quarter. My mother was coaching my brother. Instead of saying what was in the script, "Can I keep the quarter?", my mother said [whispers], "Ask them 'May I keep the quarter?'" And so my brother throws it up and catches it and says, "May I keep the quarter?" And Eddie Cantor said, "Yes, of course." My brother said "Bye-bye." And he had that cute little face and his eyes were beaming, and he just looks up at Eddie and goes, "May I keep the quarter?" Eddie said yeah. "Thank you." And then he goes off.

WHITE

I imagine this must have been quite the experience for Harold as well.

NICHOLAS

Oh yes.

WHITE

You know, being on a movie set. I mean he was quite a bit younger, so it must have been just awe-inspiring for him.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and then they had a special song for him to sing, called "I Want to Be a Minstrel Man," and he— I don't know if I told you this before. He was in his white tails with a high hat, singing the song, and all of the Goldwyn Girls were surrounding him as he was singing and they would kneel down to him because he was just a little fellow, then. Only eight years old. And he'd look at them as he was singing and they were down on their knees, looking up at him. They didn't touch him, but they were there, which made integration before integration. All these blonds and brunettes and redheads and—most of them were blond—and there they were, around him. I don't think they had ever done that in motion pictures before—have this little "colored" boy [mutual laughter] singing to these beautiful blonds—and everything was fine. He was fine. They had never done that before.

WHITE

Yeah, that's interesting. Do you recall going to the premiere of that film?

NICHOLAS

No, no we didn't. After we finished that film, we went right back to New York at the Cotton Club. See, Cotton Club was home. We could go there anytime. Even if the new show had started. Herman Stark would put us in the show anyway.

WHITE

Now when you were here, in Los Angeles, I understand that in 1934 you had an opportunity to meet Fred Astaire.

NICHOLAS

Oh yes, that was when we were coming out here again.

WHITE

Okay, this wasn't the same visit as when you were here for Kid Millions; this was another visit. Also in 1934, though?

NICHOLAS

No, this is in 1935.

WHITE

Okay, 1935.

NICHOLAS

The next year, yeah, when we were at the Cotton Club and we had just signed a contract to do this film called The Big Broadcast of 1936 at Paramount [Studios].

WHITE

How did that come about? Do you recall? Because you were back at the Cotton Club at that time.

NICHOLAS

Well, you see, my mother and my father and Herman Stark did all these things. We just want to entertain, and to tell you the truth, I didn't know anything about business, anyway. I wouldn't know how to handle the money and all that. We were just little kids.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

So I knew what was supposed to be happening. We signed a contract to do this film, The Big Broadcast of 1936. Now we were in the Cotton Club, just before we were getting ready to come out here to Los Angeles, and Ed Sullivan was there. We went over to his table to talk to him and we told him that we were going to go out there to do this film, The Big Broadcast of 1936. So he said, "While you're out there, I want you to meet a friend of mine." I said, "Sure." I said, "Who is he?" He said, "Fred Astaire." I said, "All right." So he wrote a little note and said, "Give this to him when you see him." When we arrived out here, when we had a day off from the studio, we called and talked to his secretary and told them that we had a note from Ed Sullivan and we would like to meet Fred Astaire. So we went to the studio and at that time, Fred Astaire was in the recording room, where he would synchronize his taps to the film Top Hat.

WHITE

He was at RKO studios, right?

NICHOLAS

RKO studios, yeah. And then there was the big screen that was showing what he was doing and he was putting the taps to what he was doing up on that screen. I don't know if you saw the movie. Did you? Top Hat?

WHITE

I didn't see that one, no.

NICHOLAS

Oh, well that was the first film that he and Ginger Rogers starred in. Well, they made a film before that. It's called Flying Down to Rio—when they first did this number called "The Carioca."

WHITE

Oh, right, uh-huh.

NICHOLAS

That's when they first— And so they made such a big hit in that film— Of course, Dolores del Rio was the star.

WHITE

Okay, sure.

NICHOLAS

And I think Gene Raymond. And they made such a big hit and they decided to make them a team and star in other films, so Top Hat was the [first]. So he was in this recording room, synchronizing his taps to the film, and he was supposed to be in his room in the hotel and Ginger Rogers was beneath him, the next floor, in her room and he would be making all these taps, so she came up and told him to "Stop that racket!" [mutual laughter] And so, "Oh, okay." But he still wanted to dance, so he took [some sand] Then he started doing this sand dance that wouldn't disturb her with all the t-t-t-tap beats.

WHITE

He got around it, huh?

NICHOLAS

So we were watching him doing this. I give him the note, and he said, "Oh." Then he was happy to meet us.

WHITE

The note was from Ed Sullivan?

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh. I gave him the note and he read it and he said how happy he was to meet us—because this was our first time meeting him. And he knew about us.

WHITE

He did. Okay.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, even though we had been in the business just a short time. Kid Millions was our first film, and then we made movie shorts at that time, too. He had seen them. My mother was with us, and after he finished synchronizing his taps to the film, I said, "Let's go outside. Mother has a movie camera and she'll take us together." And I said, "We'll do a little time step." So we went outside—Mother had the camera—and we started doing this time step with him. That was the first time we danced with him, and we never had the opportunity to dance with him again. But we always met him at different affairs, like the Beverly Hilton Hotel or wherever it might be. So Mother's taking this home movie of us, and after we finished dancing the time step with him I said, "Now, wait a minute, you need to do one by yourself." So I picked up the camera and I now started taking him and I said to him, "What you going to do?" He said, "Just roll the camera." And so I started rolling and he started turning and then I said, "Walk this way." So he started walking to us and smiling, and that was the home movie that we made. We have that in the [A&E] Biography [episode, The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High] that we did for— Oh, you saw that, didn't you?

WHITE

Yes, I did.

NICHOLAS

For A&E [Arts and Entertainment network], yes.

WHITE

That must have been fascinating. Do you remember noticing his technique for tap dancing and maybe comparing it with your own?

NICHOLAS

Oh, oh yes. When I first saw him, I knew this was a different style from other tap dancers that I saw. I've seen all the others, like John Bubbles and Bill

Robinson and Eddie Rector and others. They were so much different from him. Or he was so much different from them.

WHITE

In what way?

NICHOLAS

Well, I loved when he danced with a lady. It was something that I had never seen before, the way he would dance with a lady and it looked so beautiful. I liked him dancing with Ginger Rogers and Cyd Charisse and Eleanor Powell better than when I'd see him dancing by himself. That was something that was his own, and then the way the ladies would follow him, and it was so neat and smooth. And I said, "That is why he became so popular in movies, because he danced with a lady."

WHITE

Right, and his charisma.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I think if he was on the screen just all by himself in each film, I don't think he would have been this popular. But because he had Ginger Rogers that could dance with him and the story—like boy meets girl or boy falls in love with girl, boy leaves girl and then boy kisses the girl at the end of the movie, one of those things— Like I said, I think he wouldn't have been as popular if he didn't dance with all these lovely ladies.

WHITE

That's interesting, an interesting perspective. So you stayed on here to make The Big Broadcast of 1936?

NICHOLAS

Well, we did The Big Broadcast of 1936 and back to the Cotton Club.

WHITE

Do you recall your experience on filming The Big Broadcast of 1936? Was that any different? Any unique experiences, in contrast to when you were here for your previous film?

NICHOLAS

Oh, it seemed as though every film that we made, we created such a sensation in these films that the audience in the theater would applaud us. Every time. All of them, every one of them. Like when Walter Winchell— You ever hear of him?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Walter Winchell found out that the Nicholas Brothers were going to be in The Big Broadcast of 1936. He said in his column, "I see now that the Nicholas Brothers are going to be in The Big Broadcast of 1936. It's good that they are in The Big Broadcast of 1936, because they'll be the only ones that will get a hand."

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

That's what he said. Oh, boy!

WHITE

That must have been stinging to the other actors.

NICHOLAS

And what happened is when they premiered the film in one of the theaters. And when we were on that screen, we did get the biggest hand.

WHITE

Did you really? You were at the premiere?

NICHOLAS

I was there to see it. And we were new to a lot of people in the audience. They didn't know who the Nicholas Brothers were. And when they saw the film, then they learned who they were—the Nicholas Brothers—and went out of

the theater talking about the Nicholas Brothers. And then they knew who these guys were, whom they had never seen before.

WHITE

Interesting.

NICHOLAS

So Walter Winchell was right. [laughs]

WHITE

He certainly was, certainly was. Now at this time, when you were filming that movie, you and your family were staying on Central Avenue once again?

NICHOLAS

Yes, yes.

WHITE

Oh, okay, you were still there. So did you have an opportunity to intermingle with the cast?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Well, with Jack Oakie? Jack Oakie was the star of the film. And then there was George Burns and Gracie Allen and there was—let me who else—Henry Wadsworth was in the film. Norman Taurog was the director of the film and between the takes he was talking to someone—I guess it was the cameraman—and looking at the script, and after he got through talking I said, "Ah, Mr. Taurog, here's something I think that we should do." And he said to me, "Listen, I'm the director of this film." I said, "Okay." And I told him my idea and then it came time to make our part of the film. He used my idea. And I didn't say anything because that's all I wanted, was him to use my idea. So I didn't get mad or anything. And I didn't go to him and say, "You used my idea, just like I told you." I didn't say anything. That's all I wanted, just to get him to do what I wanted him to do. And everything was fine.

WHITE

Good for you.

NICHOLAS

That's the way you've got to be a diplomat in this business.

WHITE

Sure, absolutely. [mutual laughter]

NICHOLAS

That happened on The Big Broadcast of 1936. There were a lot of stars who were doing their films at the same time that we were, like Gary Cooper was doing a film then. Gee, I can't remember the film [Peter Ibbetson], but it was a film where he got injured— They had him in prison and I think he had a fight and his back was broken from this fight. He was lying down on his bed there in prison and he was in love with this beautiful lady, and they would both dream at the same time and in these dreams they would meet. Fascinating. And then [they] would tell each other of the dream when they were awake—that they met. And see, in the dream he would be walking, but he couldn't walk because he had a broken back. Then she would dream with him and she would come to him. That was the film that he was making at the same time we were making The Big Broadcast of 1936.

WHITE

It sounds like a terrific film. I'll have to look that one up.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it was a beautiful film, because in the film they were thinking about, like, one of them might die before the other and then they would meet when they both died. They would meet in heaven or wherever it might be. That was a beautiful film.

WHITE

Did you have an opportunity to watch the filming?

NICHOLAS

No. Gary Cooper came over—he was a friend of Jack Oakie's—to see us making the film. And he was in his costume that he wore in the film. There were a lot of the tourists were there and they found out that Gary Cooper was

coming on our set. There they were, all these young girls, and they were fascinated to see him. And he blushed. That was something I heard about him, that when there were people around him and praising him, he would blush because he was so thrilled that they liked him and all those things. Here's something, too. When he first started in motion pictures, it was like a [screen] test. And they're taking him and they're watching him and the director says, "This guy's no good." But when they saw him on the screen they saw something they had never seen before—that he was made for movies, because that camera caught something that you didn't see when you were watching him there in person. When you're looking at him in person, it doesn't have the same thing as when you see him on the screen, because the camera brought out something that nobody—that he didn't even know that he had, and when they saw it on the screen, then they say, "This guy's got something."

WHITE

Right, isn't it the way it usually happens?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

That's really interesting. So there were quite a number of very popular movies being filmed at the same time you guys were putting together The Big Broadcast of 1936.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and we made another film right after that at Paramount; it was called Coronado. Let me see who was in it. Leon Errol, he was in it. I don't know if you know him. He was a comedian.

WHITE

His name is familiar. You made this right after filming the other one, before you went back to New York? You stayed here in Los Angeles.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we stayed here. We made that one right after The Big Broadcast of 1936. After that we made Coronado, then back to the Cotton Club.

WHITE

Back to the Cotton Club. Okay, now at this time you were about twenty or twenty-one years old.

NICHOLAS

No, I don't think I was. Let me— Wait a minute, maybe I was. If you think about it, I was born in 1914.

WHITE

Uh-huh, 1935, you're talking about—

NICHOLAS

And this was 1935. I must have been twenty-one. And my brother must have been, what, fourteen? Yeah, something like that. But we looked younger than we were.

WHITE

Uh-huh, I see.

NICHOLAS

They always called us "the kids." Even the ones who were younger than us called us the kids.

WHITE

Really?

NICHOLAS

Because we looked younger than them.

WHITE

I'm sure, a very youthful presence. I'm wondering what it was like for you, though, because you were becoming an adult. You were in a different city. I wondered if you felt like you wanted to exert your authority or if you wanted to have more of a say-so in terms of your career, you know, as young people do at that point in time. Do you recall having those feelings of wanting to say,

"Listen, Mom and Dad, I'm an adult now and I want to do certain things my way"?

NICHOLAS

Oh, gee. When we heard about the tragedy that happened when we came out here to do The Big Broadcast of 1936— My father passed away.

WHITE

That happened when you were here filming?

NICHOLAS

Yes, we were already here and my father was coming out in this limousine of ours with the chauffeur—his name was Lorenzo Hill—and my father's halfbrother was also coming out and we were at the hotel and we got a call from our chauffeur, Lorenzo Hill, that Father had passed away on their way out.

WHITE

He actually had a heart attack in the limousine?

NICHOLAS

Yes, he had a heart attack, yes. And that was in 1935. So [we] had the funeral and all of that.

WHITE

The funeral took place in New York?

NICHOLAS

No, here.

WHITE

Here?

NICHOLAS

Yes, and the family was there—mother, sister, and brother and friends. We started getting ourselves together in a couple of days, then we went back to finishing this motion picture called The Big Broadcast of 1936. And then we—

Mother was still traveling with us and we did some more vaudeville shows around California—went back to San Francisco. I think it was called the Warfield Theater, in San Francisco. It was a tour, another tour all over California. Then we got back to New York at the Cotton Club, and then we went into the Ziegfeld Follies, starring Fanny Brice, Josephine Baker, Bob Hope, Eve Arden, Judy Canova, the Cherry Sisters—it was all-star—Gertrude Niesen, Hedda Hopper. So many wonderful stars and the Nicholas Brothers were in this.

WHITE

Now prior to beginning this particular production— I'm curious, and if you don't mind sharing, was it unusual that your father was not here with you in Los Angeles when you came for The Big Broadcast of 1936? Because it was my understanding that generally your mom and dad would accompany you to most of your performances.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes.

WHITE

Do you recall what the reason was for him not being here at that time?

NICHOLAS

Oh, the reason why he wasn't with us was because we took the train from New York to come here, and he wanted to drive out here so we'd have the car.

WHITE

I see. Of course, that makes sense. Now when we first started talking about that, before you brought it up, I asked you if you felt like you wanted to exert your authority. You were becoming a young man, and I'm wondering if that had something to do— Were you going to tie those two things in together?

NICHOLAS

Well, now that I'm older—I'm a young man—I wanted to take care of the business myself, but Mother took care of it. I think after we appeared in London at the Gaiety Theater, in a show called Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of

1936— We were there, I think, about ten months, we did this show, and then we arrived in New York from London and we went back into the Cotton Club. This was when the Cotton Club was downtown, at Forty-eighth Street and Broadway. And remember I told you that black people couldn't go into the Cotton Club uptown? Well, downtown everybody could go there. I think my brother and I were the pioneers because we showed them that little colored boys have class. [mutual laughter] We helped to get that started. Everyone could go to the Cotton Club downtown. Couldn't go uptown, but downtown they could go. At the same time we were doing this Broadway musical, Babes in Arms, starring Mitzi Green and—

WHITE

Now, were you and your mom, at this point, sort of negotiating or talking with one another about your upcoming performances or the direction of your career? Did she consult with you a bit more because you had come of age, so to speak?

NICHOLAS

Oh, at this time, I was taking care of all the business.

WHITE

Oh, you were?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. And let Mother rest. Yeah.

WHITE

I see. Okay, when did that transition take place?

NICHOLAS

Well, it just happened.

WHITE

It just sort of happened.

NICHOLAS

Mother would go—we were under contract to the William Morris Agency—to the office with me, but now I would do most of the talking because I was older and I had learned the business, thanks to her and my father. And so it gave her a rest.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

But I would take her a lot of times with me when we would talk to the agent, and she would talk too, because, before, I didn't think about money or anything like that—how much I'm going to make—because she and my father did all of that. Now I'm concerned about that and so we're talking, and now I'm learning more about the business and she's right there with me. Then, when I did get to know the agency and what we would be making and all of that, then she didn't have to go anymore. But she did go in the beginning. She did, because she and my dad would always talk to the William Morris Agency and find out what we would do and where we were going and then they would tell us and then we would go to these different places.

WHITE

I see. Do you recall approximately what year you and your brother signed up with the William Morris Agency?

NICHOLAS

Oh, let's see. It must have been in 1934, I believe—when we made the film with Eddie Cantor. And we were with them for sixteen years.

WHITE

Quite a long time.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it was a long time. Then, when I found out that I didn't need them anymore, I said, "Why should I be giving them ten percent when I can do this myself?" Because a lot of producers would call me and say "so-and-so and so-and-so." Naturally, I'm under contract to the William Morris Agency, so I would tell them, "This producer said, 'So-and-so and so-and-so.'" And then

they would get in contact with the producer and negotiate. This would happen so many times, that they would call me— Why don't they call William Morris? They're calling me. But you see, the thing is that they were calling me, I realized, for more money than William Morris.

WHITE

Oh, good for you. You had become quite savvy in the business.

NICHOLAS

They called me and they thought that I was going to ask for less, but they were wrong.

WHITE

That's interesting. Do you recall approximately the kind of salary that you would make at that time for your performances?

NICHOLAS

We always did get good money—good money—because we would always— Most of the time we would do concerts and it would only be the Nicholas Brothers, so all that money would go to us.

WHITE

Sure, and this was after you had starred in films.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah, this was after. Yeah, because the films made us famous all over the world, so we could do concerts all over the world and it could be just the Nicholas Brothers, because we were so versatile that we could do a show for an hour and maybe stretch it to an hour and a half, because we could talk to the audience, we could tell them jokes. We just didn't have to do dance after dance after dance. We'd sing and we'd play drums, and so now we are entertainers. Naturally, we're dancers, because that's how we started, but—I think I told you this—I got tired of this dance, dance, dance. I'm getting tired, so I told my brother, "Let's do something else. Let's sing, let's talk to the people." Because of that we could do these shows all by ourselves. So naturally it's our show. We were the headliners and we'd have an orchestra to

play. Naturally, we had to pay them for playing. But we didn't have to pay anybody else.

WHITE

I see. So you were basically conducting all the business at that point, without the agent.

NICHOLAS

I was doing it without the agent. I didn't need them. But it's always good to have someone to represent you. The William Morris Agency was one of the biggest agencies in America, and so it was fine for sixteen years. But when I found out I could do these things by myself— like now people are calling me.

WHITE

Of course they are.

NICHOLAS

Right now, I'm going to Detroit. I don't need an agent because they're calling me and my brother to do these different appearances, and we're getting awards. Everywhere we go we get certain awards—like in Detroit we're going to get an award. Here in Los Angeles we're going to get an award. Then we're going to St. Louis [Missouri] and then to St. Paul [Minnesota] and all of these are done without an agent. I don't have to give them ten percent. I don't have to have a manager, because with a manager—

WHITE

They get fifteen percent, don't they?

NICHOLAS

They get fifteen, or maybe they get twenty percent.

WHITE

Yeah, my understanding is that they get fifteen percent.

NICHOLAS

And some of them get twenty-five and thirty. Some of them make more than fifty percent.

WHITE

Sure, for someone who's starting out.

NICHOLAS

And for someone who's starting out— I think that happened with Diana Ross. She had a manager who wanted fifty percent. And she said, "Wait a minute." Now she's become a big star. She doesn't need this man anymore. Get fifty percent? So she bought her contract from him that she had signed. Now she's clear and she gets all that money herself.

WHITE

It's a very interesting time because, you know, the entertainment industry was just beginning to blossom and the whole role of a talent agent and the role of a manager was just really developing and coming into prominence. And a lot of people really took advantage of some very talented actors because it was a new industry. The relationship was new. It had no definition, it had to be created as we went along. I imagine this happened with a lot of actors and performers—

NICHOLAS

—who had a manager who would represent them—

WHITE

—and take advantage in certain ways.

NICHOLAS

You see, those managers would go to the agents and see if they would work together, so that meant that you would be paying the manager and the agent. So if you were giving your manager fifty percent, now it's going to be sixty percent, because the agent is ten percent.

WHITE

Gee, and after taxes, what do you get, like ten or twenty percent?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, what are you going to wind up with? There you are, the big star, and you're paying out all this money. So I can see how Diana Ross felt. She says, "Wait a minute. I'm a big star now, I don't have to be paying out all this money. What's the matter?"

WHITE

Good for you. You had the wherewithal to identify that and make changes.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, so she just bought her contract from him and then everything was fine after that. Because, see, the manager gets some percentage from her records, from her movies, from anything that she does.

WHITE

Right, and it was the same case with yourself and your brother, right?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. So— "Wait a minute! Let's cut all this jazz out. I can do it by myself." Well, now I don't have to work. I just do it because I want to. You see, out there where I'm staying at the Motion Picture and Television Country House, it's home there. It's a great place for retired actors to stay, and you don't have to worry about taxes and a whole lot of things that you worry about in this jungle out here. So I'm out there and these different producers will call me. They find out where I'm staying and say, "I'd like for you and your brother to do a concert"—say—"in San Francisco." I say, "Well, fine, if the price is right, we'll do it." [mutual laughter] And so, see, I'm doing this without an agent or a manager. We negotiate and find out how much money is involved and we'll do it, but I don't have to do it, see. That's the thing. If I don't like a certain thing about where we're going to work and what's going on, I just say, "I'm sorry. We are too busy right now. We won't be able to do it." I'll tell them anything to get out of it, like "I have a previous engagement, I'm sorry." They tell you what date it is and I say, "No, I'm doing something else then."

WHITE

That's great. So you learned these skills from two of the most talented people, obviously, from your parents.

NICHOLAS

Oh, they were great, yeah.

WHITE

They really instilled in you the ability and the confidence to actually negotiate and handle this kind of business. It's more than just a notion. You were dealing with some very prominent, very influential and powerful people at that point in time, and so the fact that you were able to navigate your way through that process as a young man, I think, definitely says a great deal about your parents and your upbringing.

NICHOLAS

Yes, they were the best. The best parents in the world.

**1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE
MAY 24, 2000**

WHITE

I wanted to continue from there and just follow up a little bit on Babes in Arms. I understand from your literature that in 1937 you made a short film in London. It was entitled Calling All Stars.

NICHOLAS

Yes.

WHITE

Mr. [George] Balanchine was the choreographer for that, if I'm not mistaken, and the ballet master?

NICHOLAS

Of Calling All Stars?

WHITE

Uh-huh, is that correct?

NICHOLAS

Who'd you say—?

WHITE

Balanchine.

NICHOLAS

Valentine?

WHITE

Balanchine.

NICHOLAS

Oh. I don't remember who—

WHITE

You don't recall?

NICHOLAS

Because nobody did any choreography for us in that film. We did our own choreography.

WHITE

You did?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

Okay. It shows that he invited you to appear in Babes in Arms, is that correct?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I see what you're getting at. But, no, it wasn't like that. Are you thinking about George Balanchine?

WHITE

Yes, Balanchine, uh-huh.

NICHOLAS

That's who you're talking about. Well, he was not in London with us. He was the choreographer of Babes in Arms.

WHITE

Okay, all right.

NICHOLAS

He's a ballet choreographer.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

And we were appearing at the Cotton Club at that time, the one downtown on Forty-eighth Street and Broadway, which was just a block from the Shubert Theatre, where we were doing Babes in Arms, so we could just walk over to the Cotton Club or walk to the Shubert Theatre. It was very easy. We didn't have to call a taxi or anything like that. As we were appearing in the show at the Cotton Club, the producers of Babes in Arms saw us there and wanted us to come and rehearse for Babes in Arms—because the show had just started rehearsing. They were out of town at different other theaters, like in Philadelphia and Hartford, Connecticut, and it was like a dress rehearsal. All those Broadway shows, before they open, they go out of town. We didn't have to go out of town because they had finished all of that rehearsing. Now, they had two little boys in the show—gee, I forget their names. Well, they were playing the roles that they wanted my brother [Harold Nicholas] and me to play and they thought the two kids weren't strong enough for the show, so they asked us to be in the show. When we arrived there, we met Richard Rodgers and Larry [Lorenz] Hart, who composed all this beautiful music in Babes in Arms, like "The Lady's A Tramp," "Where or When?," "Johnny [One Note]," "My Funny Valentine," and other songs. All hits. All hit songs. We met Richard Rodgers and Larry Hart, yes, and George Balanchine, who was the choreographer of the show Babes in Arms. As we approached him—George Balanchine—he said that he was happy to meet us and he'd seen us in movies. He said, "Would you get up on stage and just do a little something for me?" So we did. We went up on stage and we started tapping and carrying on and my

brother would slide through my legs in the split and I'd jump over Brother's head into a split and right then George Balanchine said, "Stop! I've got an idea." And I said, "What is that?" He said, "This number we're doing is called 'Johnny [One Note].' It's a big production number. All the cast will be in it." And he said, "I want you guys to be in it, too." And he said, "I've got an idea where two girls will come downstage, they'll bend down and, say, Harold, you do a cartwheel over the girls, and Fayard, you jump over the girls and do a split." Now this kept building and building and building. Now there were eight girls. So eight girls would spread their legs, back to back, and my brother would do a split right through the eight girls and then he said, "Fayard, I want you to jump over the eight girls." So I had to take a real long run through. So they went down and I did the jump over them into a split.

WHITE

My goodness, that was quite a show.

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh, and then we did that and then we finished the number and that's what he told us he wanted us to do. Before we rehearsed it, he said, "That's what I want you to do." I said, "Oh, fine." So we went back into the audience to talk to him and he said, "That was fine, fellahs." He said, "Did you ever take up ballet?" And I said, "No, we never did take up ballet." He said, "It looks like it." I said, "Well, that's a great compliment, coming from you, Mr. Balanchine. We just dance the way we feel. If it looks like ballet, so much the good."

WHITE

In your records it does indicate that based on your performance a lot of people actually thought that you guys were ballet dancers or had been trained in ballet. So it was quite a performance, I understand. Actually there was one comment that was made about the performance—in response to it, I should say. [Brooks] Atkinson of the New York Times paid tribute to the Nicholas Brothers as "Two dancing fools who clatter along the stage with rhythmic frenzy that only Negroes can conjure out of a Broadway night." I wonder what your thoughts are about that comment.

NICHOLAS

I didn't understand that at all, the way he put it. He said, like, "only"? What did he say? "Only Negroes" can what?

WHITE

"—that only Negroes can conjure out of a Broadway night."

NICHOLAS

"Only Negroes." "Only Negroes can—"? Well, I think all races can do it. Yeah, not just Negroes. If they have the rhythm, and they have the soul and the talent, anybody can do it—white, black, red, yellow, whatever color. They can do it. Just because they see us up on that stage and they see what color we are— At that moment I guess that's the way he was thinking.

WHITE

I see. Thinking very narrowly.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, narrowly. But I think all races— They can be that way, too.

WHITE

Rhythmic, that rhythmic. [laughs]

NICHOLAS

Yeah, with the talent that they have.

WHITE

That's interesting. I thought that was sort of a provocative quote and I wanted to just get your opinion on that.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, because I want to tell you about— Listen, what he said— I always tell people, when they see my brother and me on the big screen, the movie screen, whatever movie it may be— When you're watching us, you're not looking at black Nicholas Brothers or white Nicholas Brothers. You're looking at the talent. When you're looking at the talent, don't be thinking about what our color is. Just think of the performance. That's what you're looking at.

WHITE

I'm sure you had to remind people about that.

NICHOLAS

I had to remind them about that, yes.

WHITE

Okay, so I was about to say that I know that you danced in 1933 with Paul Robeson in *The Emperor Jones*.

NICHOLAS

Oh! My brother.

WHITE

Harold did that—?

NICHOLAS

Harold did that in the movie *Emperor Jones*. He was just— Let me see, how old was he? I think he was seven years old, or eight, or something like that. It was like in a nightclub where Paul Robeson entered this nightclub with a beautiful lady and the headwaiter took them to their table, and as they sat down the show had started, and there was my little brother conducting the orchestra. He had his baton and he had on his tails and there were the beautiful showgirls that he was dancing with. He would direct the orchestra and then he'd come right in the middle of them and then he would start dancing this routine that they were doing together, in *Emperor Jones*. No, I was not in that film. He was in it alone.

WHITE

Okay, all right. I know that in a previous session you indicated that you and your brother were invited to places that other African Americans were not. Firstly, I wanted to ask about your affiliation with other up-and-coming stars—black stars, I should say—at that time, such as Paul Robeson or Hattie McDaniel, or I wonder if you were aware of the director/producer Oscar Micheaux, and the films that he had been producing since the teens and in the

1920s. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your interaction with up-and-coming prominent stars at that point in time, such as those three people.

NICHOLAS

At that time— Well, most of the stars that we met in those days were already stars. The up-and-coming ones—

WHITE

Or even those that were already stars. Did you interact with them?

NICHOLAS

Oh, well, I always became friends with them, and we respected them and they respected us. And always, when I'd meet them, I'd tell them how much I'd enjoy them. If it's Paul Robeson, how much I enjoyed him in films. And any of the stars, like Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington. I always admired all these people, especially Duke Ellington, because his was my favorite orchestra. He was a great orchestra leader, a great arranger, a great composer of all these wonderful songs. I admired all of these people and I was so happy that they admired my brother and me. We were always passing compliments to each other.

WHITE

I see. Sure. Are you familiar with Oscar Micheaux's work? For instance, he did a film called Black Cat Tales with Buck and Bubbles [Ford Lee Washington and John William Sublett] in 1933, and then he also produced a movie called The Bronze Buckaroo [directed by Richard C. Kahn] with Herb Jeffries in 1938.

NICHOLAS

Yes, I just talked to Herb Jeffries last week.

WHITE

Oh, good.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, he's going to appear at the Roosevelt Hotel.

WHITE

Uh-huh, this coming Saturday.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, they're celebrating Duke Ellington's 100th birthday or something—or maybe his music, maybe that's what it's all about—and Herb Jeffries will be singing there. He's invited us, Catherine [Hopkins Nicholas] and me, to come see him. It's on Saturday, I think, the twenty-seventh.

WHITE

I saw that advertisement.

NICHOLAS

Oh, it's been advertised?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Oh, in the papers?

WHITE

Uh-huh.

NICHOLAS

I saw that— Buckaroo?

WHITE

Yeah, The Bronze Buckaroo.

NICHOLAS

Bronze Buckaroo. Yeah, I saw it, with Herb Jeffries in his white hat.

WHITE

Exactly.

NICHOLAS

It was a funny thing. When he was in a fight, the hat never did come off.
[mutual laughter]

WHITE

Did you ever have any contact with Oscar Micheaux? He was a very prominent African American director.

NICHOLAS

Oscar Micheaux. Never did meet him. When my brother and I were invited to the Paramount Theatre in Oakland, where every year [the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame] would give [the Oscar Micheaux Awards] to prominent black actors and black actresses— They would invite us there, and we received an award, too. And they would have a show and show the films of Oscar Micheaux. They would show films that he made. We never did make a film with him. I guess he made most of them in New York. Did he not? Where were most of them [made]?

WHITE

I think a combination of both New York and Hollywood.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, so we were never in contact with him. Let me see— If you want to call it "black films," we never did make a black film with black producers and— Like Stormy Weather was an all-black cast, but produced by white people.

WHITE

Exactly.

NICHOLAS

Let's see, the shorts that we made, like Pie Pie Blackbird, that was an allblack cast. All-Colored Vaudeville Show was an all-black cast.

WHITE

But they were produced by white producers?

NICHOLAS

The Black [inaudible], all-black cast, but produced by white producers and released by Warner Brothers, one of the biggest studios in America. But that's the only way you can say we made something black—but not really.

WHITE

Right. [mutual laughter] The casting part, at least. Okay. Now at this point in time, were you in contact with other stars such as Shirley Temple or Jane Withers, who has been described as Hollywood's tappiest child star?

NICHOLAS

Well, let's see. The first time I met Shirley Temple was in Oakland, at the Paramount Theatre, when they— It was something that they do every year. Like I told you, they will give awards to different— And they will have their Oscars, you might say, in Oakland at the Paramount Theatre, and say who's the best actor, best actress, best picture. All these movies were produced by the white studios, but there would be black actors in them and they did a great performance, so they give them awards, there in Oakland at the Paramount Theatre. They were paying a tribute to Bill Robinson that year— I forget what year it was [1978]. Shirley Temple was there. She was a guest and she was out there to talk about Bill Robinson, who was her co-star in the movies. They tap-danced together when she was very young—must have been about eight or nine or something like that. And she said Bill Robinson proved to her that black is beautiful. That's what she said in her speech. And naturally they showed film clips of her dancing with Bill Robinson. That was the first time I met her and I got a chance to talk to her when we were backstage in the green room, you might say, where everybody could meet and chat. We talked and I told her little stories about when we first met Bill Robinson, and that we danced with him, too. So we had a wonderful time. Let's see— Jane Withers. Well, Shirley Temple, Jane Withers, Anne Baxter, Linda Darnell, Roddy McDowall— We were all at 20th Century-Fox at the same time, and my brother was going to school with them. Yeah, because that was the law then. You can work here at the studios, but you're supposed to get your education.

WHITE

Absolutely. So he was actually going to school rather than having a tutor?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, at that time, at 20th Century-Fox. We didn't need the tutor then, because we could go right to school right there and then. And I think the lady who taught him is still alive. Yeah, I think she is.

WHITE

That would be a fantastic opportunity, to see her.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it would be, wouldn't it? And so that's when I met Jane Withers. And Jane Withers always wanted to dance with us, she wanted to do a film with us at 20th Century-Fox. But the studio made it a hush hush. And she wanted to do it so badly, but they said no. No colored [inaudible].

WHITE

Exactly.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, right, but Betty Grable wanted to dance with us, too.

WHITE

It was prohibited.

NICHOLAS

It was prohibited. Well, today it's okay. But in those days they were thinking about the box office, and what will be happening in the South and those things.

WHITE

Sure, this was unacceptable at the time. I know that you mentioned in a previous session that at that time you and your brother were invited to places in Los Angeles that other African Americans were not. I wonder if you could expand upon that— Can you recall any of those places?

NICHOLAS

Well, let me see. Well, at the Cocoanut Grove, where we worked— Freddie Martin was the orchestra leader there, and we were co-starring with him, and it was all right for us to go there. I remember when we first opened at the

Cocoanut Grove— Bette Davis, she came there to see the show. After the show was over, the headwaiter came back and said, "There's a young lady who'd like for you and your brother to come to her table."

WHITE

Oh, you shared this with me last week.

NICHOLAS

I told you that?

WHITE

Yeah, you sure did.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that was at the Cocoanut Grove. During the time that we were there, we had a cottage there at the Cocoanut Grove.

WHITE

Did you? A cottage, where you would live?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Yeah, we lived there and there was— Oh, I can't remember his name, but he was a choreographer, he was a dance teacher and he had his studio right there in the hotel. He came by and saw our show, and came backstage to see us and he said, "I've been teaching these movie stars. I'd like for you guys to come and be guest teachers." I said, "Sure." And I said, "Who will I teach?" He said, "Betty Grable, Ruby Keeler." And he said, "Ruby Keeler's sister, she would like to take some lessons too." Fine. So we said, "Let's teach in the Cocoanut Grove because the stage is big and you can move, really move around." So there I was, teaching Betty Grable and Ruby Keeler, and Ruby Keeler used one of our routines in a movie that she did.

WHITE

Is that so?

NICHOLAS

Yes.

WHITE

You made an impression upon her.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, right. So things like that were happening. People just grew to like us. We were friendly to them and they were friendly to us.

WHITE

A very comfortable relationship.

NICHOLAS

Very comfortable, and it was the talent that they really— Because at that time they weren't thinking about color.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

It was the talent. And then we'd be invited out to different parties—the Hollywood parties. But not real wild, because we were just little boys, and so we would— All these things happened in those younger days and of course we knew the prejudice was still there.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

But we didn't let it bother us and we didn't think about it when we would go out to different places.

WHITE

I see. Okay. That's real interesting. Okay, so we're now into the late thirties— 1938, 1939—and I wonder if you could talk about your love interests at this time, both yours and Harold's. I know, of course, that you got married in 1941, but prior to that time, during the 1930s—

NICHOLAS

No, 1942 I got married. I met my first wife [Geraldine Pate Branton] in 1941.

WHITE

Right. Thank you for correcting me. But prior to that time, you guys had quite a reputation as playboys. [Nicholas laughs] I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the love interests that you had and I believe Harold— Perhaps he had met Dorothy Dandridge at this point.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes, well, we always liked the ladies. Did I tell you that I was in love with this beautiful girl? Her name was Winnie Johnson.

WHITE

Yes, that was earlier.

NICHOLAS

I think that was my first love. She was one of the dancing girls at the Cotton Club, the Cotton Club uptown, yes, and—

WHITE

I mean a little bit later, like in your twenties, like 1938, 1939. At this point you were about twenty-five or so—twenty-four or twenty-five. What was going on in your life at that time?

NICHOLAS

It seemed that wherever we would work, there were beautiful dancing girls around. We would always introduce ourselves to them or they would come to us. Like when we were appearing at the Roxy Theater in New York City. There were all these lovely girls dancing and they could do anything. The dance director would tell them to do the dance on big balls and just roll on them with their feet. They would do things like that that seemed impossible. They were all great. While we were appearing at the Roxy Theater, we had two dressing rooms there, one for my brother and one for me, and they connected, like there was a bathroom right in between, and so these girls would come to our rooms and sit and talk to us, because we had enough room there. We had a big couch and chairs and we had a bar where we had all of our drinks—orange juice, that is. [mutual laughter] And Coca-Cola, maybe

something like that. That was the strongest, Coca-Cola. They'd come and talk to us between the shows and we just got a little closer to them. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Okay. Now, had Harold met Dorothy Dandridge at that time?

NICHOLAS

He met her— I think it was '38 or '39. They were the Dandridge Sisters then. It was Dorothy, Vivian [Dandridge], and Etta Jones. Etta Jones was no relation, but the three of them got together and they called it the Dandridge Sisters. That's when we first met them. It was rehearsal at the Cotton Club downtown, in New York—Fortyeighth Street and Broadway. Cab Calloway, his orchestra was there, and my brother and I, we were co-starring with Cab Calloway. We were there for the rehearsal with everybody else. We were sitting on one side and we saw these three lovely little girls across from us. I said to my brother, "Hey, man, look over there." And he said, "Yeah, I see." I said, "Let's go and talk to them." So we went over and said, "We're happy to meet you. Welcome to our great city. My name is—" And they said, "We know your name. You're Fayard and he's Harold." "Yeah, that's right. I'm Fayard Nicholas. This is my brother, Harold Nicholas." She said, "Yeah, we know the Nicholas brothers. You don't have to introduce—" [mutual laughter] So we started talking to them and asked if they would like to go out with us to see a movie or something like that. Now they had this nanny or chaperone. They called her Ma-Ma. I guess you saw the movie *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

The lady who portrayed Ma-Ma? How tough she was? Very strict. She didn't want the girls to go out anywhere, and then she would go with them. It was really that way. Yes. When I met the girls my eye was on Dorothy, and so was my brother's. And I saw that he was making more of a headway than I was. So I just stepped aside, because my brother and I, we would never fight over women.

WHITE

Sure, good for you.

NICHOLAS

If we see a girl is paying more attention to either one of us, that's it. That's the way— You don't fight or anything like that. So my brother and Dorothy— When we would go to different cities they would correspond all the time, always kept in touch. After the show closed at the Cotton Club, [the Dandridge Sisters] went to England at the London Palladium in 1939 and we were on our way to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. They were still corresponding, keeping in touch with each other. They had a big success in London and we had a big success in Rio de Janeiro.

WHITE

Can you tell me a little bit about that experience? I just want to talk kind of briefly about your international experience, particularly in South America, when you danced with Carmen Miranda.

NICHOLAS

Oh, wait a minute. No, Carmen Miranda was not there at that time.

WHITE

She was not?

NICHOLAS

No, she was not. I mean a lot of people think that, because we've been associated with Carmen Miranda and we became very good friends after the movie *Down Argentine Way*. That's when we first met her, at 20th Century-Fox studios.

WHITE

I see. Okay. What was your reason for being in Rio de Janeiro in 1939?

NICHOLAS

Well, our agent, the William Morris Agency, booked us down there. In fact, anywhere that we were popular, that's where they would book us.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

And they'd negotiate with all the producers. So we were working at this club down there called Casino da Urca. That's the name of the club, and at that time, 1939, they were gambling. They were gambling at that time in this beautiful nightclub. We went there to rehearse and we waited for the orchestra. The orchestra was rehearsing the dance music that they were going to play. And gee, I loved the music this big band was playing. It was Latin jazz. That's what it was and I loved it. And I told my brother, "We're not going to have any trouble with this band. They're going to really play our music. So, yes, we were a big hit there. Oh, yes. We learned that just before we arrived there Josephine Baker was playing at this same club.

WHITE

Oh, was she really?

NICHOLAS

Yes, she was the big attraction there, and we followed her a day after she closed. Right away she went back to France. We didn't get a chance to meet her there.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we opened up and we were the stars of the show.

WHITE

It sounds like an exciting experience.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. They had us on radio and it was a wonderful time. They would take us to different nightclubs. They would just give us a tour of the city. That was great; it's a beautiful city.

WHITE

Sure. Well, after that point I understand that you and your brother came and relocated back to Los Angeles.

NICHOLAS

Oh, after our success in Rio de Janeiro?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Right.

WHITE

And it was at that point that you both filmed Down Argentine Way?

NICHOLAS

Yes. Let me tell you how that happened. We had just arrived in New York City and we got in touch with our agent, the William Morris Agency. They said, "Fellahs, they're making a film in Los Angeles called Down Argentine Way. Because of your experience down there in Rio de Janeiro, this will be a great opportunity for you to sing the songs that you learned down there."

WHITE

Oh, absolutely.

NICHOLAS

"And do this [screen] test." So we did a [screen] test in New York.

WHITE

Oh, okay, you auditioned for the movie in New York?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, did this [screen] test. So we learned these songs down there, like [sings] "Mama yo quiero [oh oh] / Mama yo quiero [oh oh] / Mama yo quiero, mama." Then the other one [sings], "Brazil do-do-do do-do-do." And I think

that's why we got the role in Down Argentine Way, because we knew these songs.

WHITE

Well, that was certainly important in the casting process. Now I understand that up until this point you had done most of the choreography, but for Down Argentine Way you worked with Nick Castle?

NICHOLAS

Yes, before we didn't have a dance director to work with us.

WHITE

You did not?

NICHOLAS

No, we never did. We started in 1930 and I did all the choreography all through those years. So now we're going to make this film in Los Angeles called Down Argentine Way in 1940. We were there in our dressing room and all of a sudden there's a knock on our door there at the studio. I opened the door and it was Nick Castle. He said, "I'm happy to meet you guys. My name is Nick Castle, and I'm the choreographer for this film, Down Argentine Way. You will be working with me." I said, "Fine." The three of us got together and we created this number in Down Argentine Way, and it was a song that my brother sang in Spanish, called "Argentina." So it first opened up with a song. He sang it in Spanish and I'm using the maracas, those things that you shake, like the Latin people do in the orchestras. As he's singing I'm doing this, and there's a part in the song where it says, "You find your life will begin every moment you're in Argentina." [does the clicking vocalism from the number] Did you see the movie?

WHITE

I did.

NICHOLAS

You did see the movie. Remember when we did that? [repeats clicking sound]

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and so then we went into the dance. So Nick Castle, my brother and I got this routine together. He didn't do the whole routine.

WHITE

Oh, he didn't? It was a concerted effort.

NICHOLAS

No, no. In fact, he never did all of the routines in all the movies that we made with him. We would also add something to it.

WHITE

I see. You all worked together.

NICHOLAS

But it was great that he was there with us, because he had such wonderful ideas and we put them together. For instance, if he would do a certain step, I'd say, "Hey, Nick, that's great. Okay, let me learn that." So I would learn it and I'd say, "That's great, Nick. Now wait, how about putting this step to it, too?" And I'd do it and he'd say, "Yeah, that's great. They go well together."

WHITE

So you guys were able to collaborate effectively?

NICHOLAS

Collaborate, yeah, like that. We worked so well together and I don't— I think he worked better with us than anybody else, because we both would think of all these different ideas. For instance, when we were doing Stormy Weather the different ideas— Like, do you remember when we were dancing around the orchestra?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

My brother thought of that.

WHITE

Did he really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

Oh, okay. Now in Down Argentine Way—correct me if I'm wrong—the two of you ran up a wall and back flipped into a split?

NICHOLAS

No, that was in Orchestra Wives.

WHITE

That was Orchestra Wives, oh, okay. I know that you crafted some really unique pieces for Down Argentine Way also, and some of them became—

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah, I jumped over the handkerchief.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

When I jump over the handkerchief into a split frontwards and then jump over it backwards in a split without turning the handkerchief loose.

WHITE

Yeah, it's fascinating.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, well that was one of the classics in that film that the audience just went wild about, seeing me jump over that handkerchief frontwards and backwards.

WHITE

That's interesting. Speaking of the audience going wild, I understand that there was a certain point where the marquee had to be changed to indicate that it was "Down Argentine Way starring the Nicholas Brothers."

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Well, when the film opened up at the theater, on the marquee it said, "Down Argentine Way with Don Ameche, Betty Grable, and Carmen Miranda." After we created such a sensation in this movie, when the audience was clapping and whistling and stamping their feet, the operator in the projection room had to rewind the film and show it over again.

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

The manager of the theater found out what was happening, so he went outside and had them change the marquee, and it said, "Nicholas Brothers in Down Argentine Way." And then put their names back [on the marquee below the title].

WHITE

That's terrific.

NICHOLAS

Everybody was going to see the film to see us.

WHITE

I understand that this was somewhat of a turning point in your career, because of the success of this film. I believe right after that you signed a contract with Fox?

NICHOLAS

With 20th Century-Fox, because of that. They got us right away. They signed us right away, because other studios would have wanted us, too. So they signed us right away.

WHITE

Was this for a multiple movie deal?

NICHOLAS

It was five years.

WHITE

Okay, for five years?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we signed for five years. So many things happened. Darryl F. Zanuck, who was the president of 20th Century-Fox, became our biggest fan. He was crazy about us; we could do no wrong. Whenever he'd come by and bring friends to see us rehearsing, like when we were rehearsing "Chattanooga Choo Choo," the number for the film *Sun Valley Serenade*, he came by and we just started rehearsing it.

WHITE

That was also with Nick Castle, right?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that was with Nick Castle, too. We were rehearsing and we were making all kinds of mistakes and I said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Zanuck. We just got this number and we're just rehearsing it and we're still learning it." And he said, "That's all right. I know it's going to be okay. I just brought by some of my friends to meet you and I came by to see you too. I know it's going to be all right. Don't worry about it." So he had that faith in us. He was our biggest fan and he loved— I remember when we were doing *Orchestra Wives*, one of the producers of *Orchestra Wives*—

WHITE

That was in 1942?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. He wanted to cut our singing out of the film. And Darryl F. Zanuck said, "You cut nothing from the Nicholas Brothers. Leave everything just like it is." He was our great fan.

WHITE

Oh, terrific, that was a nice person to have in your corner, right?

NICHOLAS

And another thing, too, let me tell you this. The restaurant there at 20th Century-Fox, the commissary. I remember after we were rehearsing Stormy Weather at 20th Century-Fox we wanted to go to the commissary. This was our first time going to this commissary, because all the time we would just go home and eat.

WHITE

This was about 1943.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, '43. We were with Nick Castle, going up there, and the doorman right there, he stopped us and he called Nick Castle to his side and started talking to him. And after he talked to him, Nick came back to us and said, "He said you can't go in here." I said, "What do you mean, we can't go in there? Listen, we make all this money for this studio. People come to the movie sometimes just to see us, and now we can't go into this commissary? What is going on?" And I see all the extras going in. Of course, all the extras are white.

WHITE

Of course.

NICHOLAS

I said, "Nick, look at those people. They don't make money for this studio. They're going in there just because their skin is different from mine. And I can't go in there?"

**1.10. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO
MAY 24, 2000**

NICHOLAS

Yeah, this doorman stopped us and he called Nick Castle to the side. I saw him there talking to Nick. I didn't know what was going on. Then Nick came back to

us as he finished talking to this doorman. I said, "What's happening, Nick?" He said, "You can't go in there." I said, "What? We can't go in there? Because of the color of our skin?" He said, "Yeah, that's it." And I said, "Look at all the extras who are going in there. Because they're white, they can go in, but the Nicholas Brothers can't go in there because they're black? All the money I make for this studio and I cannot go in there? But they can?" I said, "Something's got to be done, Nick." So Nick said, "Don't worry about it. Don't worry." So Nick went to Darryl F. Zanuck and told him what had happened and then Darryl F. Zanuck got on those people right away and said, "The Nicholas Brothers can go in there any time." The next day, Nick Castle, my brother, and me— We went in and this doorman said, "[Inaudible]" [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Changed his attitude.

NICHOLAS

Changed his attitude after he got the word from the big boss.

WHITE

My goodness. So do you recall what the experience was like when you were actually in there eating? How did the other actors respond to you?

NICHOLAS

Oh, they were fine. They were fine. When we were there they said, "Oh, hello, Nicholas, how are you doing?" You see, they were fine.

WHITE

I guess this was just a policy that had been in place for many years.

NICHOLAS

Some kind of policy before, and so this doorman was keeping that policy. Maybe he didn't know who we were or he was just going by the rules.

WHITE

Of course. Very interesting. Very interesting point in history. Just prior to that incident I know that you guys performed "Chattanooga Choo Choo" [in Sun Valley Serenade], with Dorothy Dandridge singing. I think that was a first in

terms of having an African American woman perform for that kind of production. It was a turning point with respect to the casting of Dorothy Dandridge. Do you recall?

NICHOLAS

I remember when we started rehearsing "Chattanooga Choo Choo" for the film Sun Valley Serenade and we were talking to Nick Castle. I said, "Nick, let's do something a little different. Why don't we have some femininity in one of our routines?" Nick said, "Well, what do you have in mind?" And my brother said, right away, "How about my fiancée doing this number with us?"

WHITE

Okay, they were engaged at this point.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, yeah. He said, "Her name is Dorothy Dandridge and she's made a few films, but I think this will be the first musical that she will be in." We said, "Have her sing and dance with us during this number, "Chattanooga Choo Choo." Nick said, "Fine, that's right." So they started talking to the producers and getting all excited about Dorothy Dandridge doing this number with us. Naturally they sent for her to come there and told her we were rehearsing the song. She was listening to the music as they were playing on the piano. Then Nick said, "I've got this idea." [laughs] Another idea! He said, "Glenn Miller and his Orchestra will start off the song with Tex Beneke and the Modernaires. Right after they finish they'll pan over to you and Dorothy Dandridge." He said, "We're going to have them to build a little train that says 'Chattanooga Choo Choo' on it." I said, "Hey, that's good, Nick." So we got together and started doing the routine. She picked it up fast, the dance steps for the three of us to do. Nothing hard, none of those splits and jumping all over each other.

WHITE

Right, of course.

NICHOLAS

Just a nice little tap dance. She looked so beautiful there, in between us.

WHITE

I'm sure Harold was particularly pleased.

NICHOLAS

Oh, was he pleased! His fiancée is in the movie with him.

WHITE

Sure, it must have been quite a treat.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I think it's two times that someone else danced with us in a movie—Dorothy Dandridge in *Sun Valley Serenade*, when we did "Chattanooga Choo Choo," and *The Pirate*, with Gene Kelly.

WHITE

Uh-huh, in 1948.

NICHOLAS

In 1948. Those were the only two people that danced with us in a film.

WHITE

Well, that was an honor for them, you know, to be able to dance with the Nicholas Brothers. I'm sure it was very intimidating. [mutual laughter] So let's see now, in an interview with you for the Los Angeles [Herald]-Examiner—it was actually done in July of 1984—you were quoted as saying—

NICHOLAS

The Los Angeles Examiner— That paper doesn't exist anymore, does it?

WHITE

No, it doesn't.

NICHOLAS

What happened to that building downtown?

WHITE

Oh, you know, I'm not sure.

NICHOLAS

Did they tear it down? Or did they make a museum out of it? [laughs]

WHITE

They probably just renovated it and maybe something else is in there.

NICHOLAS

Maybe it's a garage.

WHITE

Yeah, a parking space. You never know these days. But you were quoted as saying that even though the story lines and the dialogue of most of the movies at this particular time, in the early forties, late thirties, would make today's blacks cringe, at the time awareness of prejudice and color lines hadn't necessarily become a critical factor. I know you just mentioned the incident about eating on the lot. But in terms of the reception of the films, I know that oftentimes your parts were cut when the films were shown in the South.

NICHOLAS

Well, my brother and I, we did a tour of the South, in all of the southern states. It was one-nighters that we did. I remember we got a call from the William Morris Agency. They wanted us to come to the office; they wanted to talk to us. They said, "We've got a good deal for you and your brother to play down South." I said, "When you say south, you're not talking about South America. You're talking about Deep South, like Georgia and Mississippi?" He said, "Yeah, that's what I mean." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, doing one-nighters." I said, "I don't want to go down there. You know how things are." He said, "Don't worry about it. You'll have your own bus. You'll have a road manager to go down with you, to take care of everything—where you're going to stay—and make sure that everything is okay for you guys." I said, "I don't want to go." Then he started talking about the money, and I saw these dollars before my eyes. "Oh, yes? Yeah, I'll go!" [mutual laughter]

WHITE

You changed that tune pretty quickly.

NICHOLAS

I changed the tune, yeah. I'll tell you another story about something that happened like that, too. When I found out how much money we were going to earn, and he told me that the road manager would be with us and we would be well taken care of as we went. We wouldn't have to associate with anybody; we'd have our own special bus. He said, "There's a bandleader that we'd like for you to take down there with you. He's just started a big band." I said, "Who is that?" And they said, "Dizzy Gillespie." I said, "You mean the Dizzy Gillespie who does the bee-bop music?" He said, "Yeah, that's him. It would be great if you take him down there with you." This was our show, the Nicholas Brothers show, and we were given Dizzy Gillespie to show off his big band, because he never had a big band before, because he always played in little combos with Charlie Parker, playing their bee-bop music. I said, "Fine, fine." And then we had Lovey Lane, the exotic dancer. We had June Eckstine singing, who was Billy Eckstine's wife at that time. We had Patterson and Jackson, comedians—they called them "600 pounds of joy," because they both weighed 300 pounds. They were dancers and singers. One of them did a take off on the Ink Spots, singing [sings] "If I didn't care— Ooooooh—" So we had a good show and we took it down there and I remember the first engagement, let me see, I think it was in Tennessee. I had heard all about this, about cutting black people out of the movies when they played down South. After the show was over there were more white people coming back to see us than black people.

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Then, oh, how they told us how much they enjoyed us and they had never seen anything like this before. They were just going on. This little pretty blond blue-eyed girl came over and hugged me and kissed me and I was thinking to myself, "Is this really the South? What's going on here?" Well, these are probably people who don't think like the majority of the people in the South think. I guess they hated the way everything was going on. They said, "We loved all your movies." I said, "You mean you saw all our movies here in Tennessee?" They said, "Yes." I said, "Which one did you see? Did you

see Down Argentine Way?" They said, "Yes, we saw—" I said, "You saw that here in this city?" What's Tennessee's city, is it Jacksonville, Tennessee?

WHITE

Uh-huh, yes.

NICHOLAS

I said, "You saw that movie here in Tennessee?" They said, "Yes." I said, "Really? Did you see Sun Valley Serenade?" "Yes." I said, "I named some, now you name some more. What other films did you see?" She said, "Tin Pan Alley, Orchestra Wives—" Really?" I said, "They didn't cut—" "No," she said, "No, they didn't cut you out of those films." That's one of the main reasons why a lot of people saw the film. They would come to the theater because of the Nicholas Brothers.

WHITE

That's interesting. So you're saying that— For a lot of other films, though, that had black stars in them, they were actually cut out in the South. But for your films, your parts were not cut out.

NICHOLAS

No, like I told you, they were looking at the talent on that screen and there was no reason why they should cut us out of the film, because we were on that screen all by ourselves. We weren't rubbing elbows with Betty Grable or Alice Faye or any of the other white actresses. It was only us. We got up there on that screen, we'd do our thing, and then they'd go right to something else. There was no reason.

WHITE

Would you attribute it to the fact that you didn't have speaking roles?

NICHOLAS

I don't know. I don't know, because, you see, if we had speaking roles in those films, we would have the prominent part in the film, and if it's a prominent part in the film, I don't think they would cut us out if we were all through the story. Like those pictures that Stepin Fetchit was in, they didn't cut him out of those films.

WHITE

This is true.

NICHOLAS

No. Willie Best, Mantan Moreland, Hattie McDaniel, they didn't cut them. When she won that Academy Award for *Gone with the Wind*, they didn't cut her out. They would ruin the story if they'd cut her out.

WHITE

Sure. I think some of that has to do with the fact that these roles that Best and Moreland, anyway, were playing were very stereotypical roles, so they weren't considered offensive to a white audience.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Well, those types of roles they would never cut out, but if it was a role, say, like someone who was playing a doctor or a lawyer, and they found out, they would cut it out. They would cut that out because it was showing the black man in an educational way.

WHITE

Exactly, which was unacceptable at the time.

NICHOLAS

Unacceptable at the time down there. But it's so different now.

WHITE

Thank goodness.

NICHOLAS

Thank goodness, right.

WHITE

Sure. Well, that's interesting to hear your experience in the South. I understand that you were in Chicago in 1941, and that's where you met your first wife, Geraldine Pate.

NICHOLAS

Geraldine Pate, yes.

WHITE

Can you tell me a little bit about the reason you went to Chicago and how your meeting came about?

NICHOLAS

Well, we were playing at the Regal Theater and it was a continuation of the show that we did in the South. We took our show to New York, Chicago, and other cities in the United States of America. It was in Chicago at the Regal Theater, we were there. And a friend of ours came by to see us. His name was Jimmy Payne. And he says, "Fellahs, I want you to meet three lovely girls." I said, "Oh, we're always ready to meet three lovely girls." He says, "Yes." It was between our shows. I think we were doing five shows every day and we had about an hour or so between the shows. So he said, "I want you to go meet these lovely ladies." I said, "Sure." So he took us over to the home of my first wife and her two sisters, Geraldine, Rose [Pate], and Eloise [Pate]. And Brother was with me. We knocked on the door and Geraldine opened the door, because Jimmy had called and told her that he was going to bring us by. So she greeted us and was happy to meet us. She looked at my brother and she said, "I know you. You're the one— You think you're the ladies man." She had him pegged right away. And my brother said, "What did I say?" They invited us in and we talked and we had lemonade and some hors d'oeuvres and food and everything. Then it was time for us to get back to the theater to do the next show. And so I was talking to Geri because I liked her right away. I liked the way she talked. She was so intelligent. When we were leaving and we were walking back to the theater, I said, "Oh, I like her. I like Geri. Oh, she's so nice." I said, "Fellahs, I'm going to marry that girl." And all through my life until then, I just wanted to be a bachelor. I didn't want to get married, I just wanted to have a good time with all the lovely ladies. But when I saw her and the way that she would talk, I said, "I'm going to marry that girl." Now this was in December 1941. Before I left the house I said to her, "I'd like to see you again." So we made a date, and we'd go out to different places to have dinner. We got to know each other and I asked her to marry me. Love at first sight. This was in December. I know it so well because this was when we got into World War II, because the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

WHITE

Um-hm, December the seventh.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and that was during the time that I met her. We started talking and started talking about marriage and she said yes— [whispers] Just like that. And I said, "I'm going back to Los Angeles because we're going to do another film. I said, "I'll send for you." And I did.

WHITE

And you did.

NICHOLAS

And she got there—bam—we got married.

WHITE

So you got married in Los Angeles?

NICHOLAS

Oh, no. Let me tell you what happened. She came on the train and the train stopped in— The first stop, I think, was in Pasadena. And so we met her. My valet, who was also my chauffeur—his name was Lorenzo Hill—and my mother [Viola Harden Nicholas] were with us. We drove to Pasadena in our limousine and met her there at the train station, and she got off the train there. We greeted her and we took her to the justice of the peace.

WHITE

Did you? Right away? [laughs]

NICHOLAS

Right away. And she said—it took her by surprise—"Where are we going?" I said, "We're going to get married, honey." "Already?" I said, "Yeah, come on, let's go." [mutual laughter] Those were the two witnesses, my mother and our valet. And so— Bam! She was so nervous. She missed— He said, "Do you take this man to be your lawful—" She said [he pretends to stutter], "I-I-I do."

WHITE

This took place in Pasadena?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, in Pasadena. Then we got into the car and drove here, to Los Angeles.

WHITE

Where did you settle down? Where did you live, you and she?

NICHOLAS

Well, first we lived on Van Ness Avenue, near Exposition [Boulevard] at— Let me see, oh, it's been so long—1942. The address, I think it was 3766, I believe, Van Ness Avenue. I could be wrong. We had a lot of friends in the neighborhood.

WHITE

Was this an integrated neighborhood at the time?

NICHOLAS

Yes, yes, at the time. Well, more so now.

WHITE

But it was predominantly black at that time?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, at that time. Different races were there at the time. We lived close to Eddie "Rochester" Anderson.

WHITE

Oh, did you?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, he built a home there.

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, uh-huh. Oh, I remember when Jack Benny was invited over to see his new home. He looked around and said, "This home is better than mine." Because Jack Benny was his boss. You saw Jack Benny in the movies with Rochester, and the radio shows and television shows they did together?

WHITE

Certainly. So did you live in a house there, as well?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we had a house. We had a home there, our first home, in 1942. That's where we lived.

WHITE

That was the first home that you bought in Los Angeles?

NICHOLAS

That was the first one.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

And my mother had a home, too, nearby.

WHITE

She did?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, uh-huh.

WHITE

Okay. How about Harold and Dorothy?

NICHOLAS

Oh, they bought their home when they got married. They bought their home, which was close by.

WHITE

All in the same neighborhood?

NICHOLAS

All in the same neighborhood. And so that was nice, in those days. Geri made a big hit when she came out here.

WHITE

Did she?

NICHOLAS

Everybody wanted to meet her. Everybody. All the agents, like the William Morris Agency, because they heard that we had gotten married. They wanted to see, because they had heard so much about her. And they loved her pretty legs. [mutual laughter] She had little hands, little feet. Size three shoes, she wore.

WHITE

Oh my goodness, very small.

NICHOLAS

Very small, yeah. And a lovely figure. She was something. She was really something. And they all wanted to meet her. And all the show people liked her. They wanted to meet her. So my mother gave a special party and invited everybody to meet Fayard's lovely wife. She invited Lena Horne, Hattie McDaniel. She invited Eddie Rochester and his wife, Carmen Miranda and her band. They were all there. They wanted to meet Geri. And when they met her, they fell in love with her right away. Naturally, Dorothy was there.

WHITE

Of course, they were best friends, right?

NICHOLAS

They were, yeah. They became best friends. They weren't best friends then.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

Herb Jeffries was there. And Nick Stewart, who was also called Nicodemus. He was there.

WHITE

He owns the Ebony Showcase Theatre.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that's right. He was there. Oh, gee. All these wonderful show people came. They wanted to see Geri, and they fell in love with her right away. They even performed for her. Hattie MacDaniel was singing a song. My mother, she arranged this at her place.

WHITE

Oh, this was at her home?

NICHOLAS

Yes, she arranged it, because I was staying with my mother before I married Geri.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

I was still staying with my mother, but when I came back to Los Angeles I didn't want to stay with my mother anymore.

WHITE

Of course not.

NICHOLAS

So we found a place to stay.

WHITE

Well that was nice, to start off your life with your new home and your new wife in Los Angeles.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and this home is where my brother and Dorothy Dandridge got married.

WHITE

Is that so?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

Oh, okay. They had the wedding ceremony there.

NICHOLAS

They had this wedding ceremony there. They invited everybody, the agents and Nick Castle was there with his wife and naturally, Vivian, Dorothy's sister. Etta Jones was there and other celebrities. Those were happy days then.

WHITE

Yes, you have very fond memories of those times.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, very good memories.

WHITE

And you continued your career, because in 1942 you were in the production of Orchestra Wives. What was Geraldine doing while you were at the studio?

NICHOLAS

Well, she always would travel with me wherever I would go.

WHITE

She would come on the set? Here in Los Angeles?

NICHOLAS

Yes, and when we'd go to Europe she would go with me. My first son, Tony [Anthony Nicholas], when he got a little older, like five years old, then she would bring him to Europe to visit me. She would get involved with different

people. She was always reading books. She was a college graduate and everybody liked her. There would be men who would be trying to hit on her, but she knew how for them to keep their distance. She talked to them, and they learned so much from her. There were a lot of times they would just come by to see her to learn something, and not thinking about hitting on her, because they knew they couldn't.

WHITE

Right. That's interesting.

NICHOLAS

She set 'em off right away— "It's not like that, Jim."

WHITE

She was faithful.

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

That's excellent.

NICHOLAS

She got involved with many different friends who were intellectuals that she could talk to and [they could] learn something from each other. She was very good friends to my sister and her husband. Byron Morrow is his name. And my sister, Dorothy Nicholas Morrow. They've been married for fifty-one years now.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness, that's a lifetime.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and so Geri's still friendly with them, and Geri's [second] husband [Leo Branton]. And I'm still friendly with Geri, too, because we have something in common—we have two sons.

WHITE

Absolutely, that's wonderful. Early on in the marriage you were in the production of *Stormy Weather*, which was of course the all-black production. This was, I guess, probably your most famous dance routine.

NICHOLAS

Yes. [laughs]

WHITE

This film was presented as sort of wartime escapist entertainment, because the war had begun, and people wanted to be entertained, so it actually fit the bill very nicely. Of course, that was with Lena Horne and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson—

NICHOLAS

And Cab Calloway.

WHITE

Of course, Cab Calloway.

NICHOLAS

Fats Waller.

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

And Katherine Dunham.

WHITE

Yes, lots and lots of stars, yeah. And it's interesting, because in a couple of different articles that I read it says that audiences routinely assumed—which was, of course, incorrect—that the dance sequence was a product of trick photography.

NICHOLAS

[laughs] People always thought that. Especially Orchestra Wives, running up the wall.

WHITE

This is true.

NICHOLAS

I would talk to a lot of people and they would say, "That was trick photography." "No, no it wasn't. It was real." They couldn't understand how that could be done and not be trick photography.

WHITE

Right, it was fascinating to watch.

NICHOLAS

I know! Every time I see it, it's fascinating. [White laughs] And we did it!

WHITE

Yes. So what was that experience like for Stormy Weather? How did your experience in making that film differ from other films that you had been in previously?

NICHOLAS

Well, every film that we would approach, we always wanted to do something different, so Nick Castle got together with us and we figured out what routine we would do that would be different from everything else that we had done. It was so funny. When we first arrived there on the movie set, Clarence Robinson was the choreographer for the whole movie. He did all the choreography for the movie. And he's talking to me and telling me about what he wanted us to do, and I said "No" to myself. "No, that's not it. We have to do something better than that." So I got in touch with Nick Castle's manager and I said, "I'd like for Nick to come over here and help us with this new film called Stormy Weather. You get together with the agents and all of that and the money situation. We want him to come and do this thing with us." Nick came over and we found out what song we would be dancing to, "Jumpin' Jive." We got together and made up this routine to this song that Cab was singing. We arranged it where Cab would sing it first and we'd be sitting at a

table like we were guests there at the club. He'd come over and start singing to us. [performs some scatting] And we'd answer him [scats] that way, and that's when we jumped on the table and jumped off the table and came over there. Then we hit his hands, like "Give me some skin." And then we went right into the dance. [sings] "Doo-doo dee doo-doo doom doom."

WHITE

I understand that Fred Astaire called it "The greatest dance number ever seen on film."

NICHOLAS

Oh yes, yes.

WHITE

That's quite a compliment, coming from him.

NICHOLAS

That's a great compliment. When he said that to me, I said, "Oh, Mr. Astaire, that's a wonderful compliment, coming from you." And he said, "Mr. Nicholas, I'm telling you that because it's true." I said, "Well, thank you again."

WHITE

So I suppose that the notoriety from this film caused you and your brother to become even more popular, both nationally and internationally. Basically, this film sealed your fate in the film industry, I understand.

NICHOLAS

Yes. [laughs]

WHITE

I also understand that during this same period of time, you and your wife separated, in 1943.

NICHOLAS

No, not right away. No, we were still trying to make it turn out to be a good marriage. Let me see. My first son [Anthony Nicholas] was born in 1945. And

my second son [Paul Nicholas] was born in 1950. So you see, we were still together. The film *Stormy Weather* was made in 1943. We were still together.

WHITE

Had you separated, though, throughout that period of time?

NICHOLAS

We separated in 1955, so we were still trying to make this marriage work.

WHITE

Right. Yeah, when I said separated, I didn't mean divorced. I mean just maybe—

NICHOLAS

Yeah. No, we weren't divorced yet, because she said that she would let me know. I would be the first one to know when we would be divorced and when she would get married again. I was in Spain, in Madrid, Spain, when I got a cable from her. And she said, "Divorce is final." In 1955.

WHITE

I see. Do you feel that perhaps your hectic schedule or the fact that you worked in an industry where you were exposed to so many different people—

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that's what did it.

WHITE

Women, I'm sure, would lay themselves at your feet—

NICHOLAS

That's what did it, yeah.

WHITE

That caused tension in the marriage?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it did. Wherever I'd go, there would always be these ladies who would come backstage to see us—in every country you could think of: Spain, England, Sweden, France, North Africa, Asia. [White laughs] Every continent. I'm exposed to this, and what am I going to say? "Girls, you can't come in here, I'm married." [mutual laughter]

WHITE

The temptations were too great, I suppose.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, the temptation was there. And all of them, they were lovely. Not as lovely as my wife, but the temptation was there. Whenever they'd come around I'd tell them right away, "Listen, I'm married." I had pictures on my desk or in my dressing room or at the hotel, and I said, "This is my wife." And they— [he shrugs]

WHITE

That probably made you even more desirable.

NICHOLAS

I guess it did. I guess it did, because they kept pushing all the time. I couldn't push them away. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

You couldn't, huh?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and [puts on disgruntled voice] my wife finds out about all this. Oh, while I was in America, I was a good father, a good husband. Everything was great. But when I started traveling, that's when everything exploded.

WHITE

Oh my goodness. So she stopped traveling with you as much.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, she didn't go with me all the time. When she was with me, everything was fine. If it was in Europe, in America, wherever we'd go, New York, Chicago,

everything was great, it was fine. But once we were separated that way, she'd be in Los Angeles, and I'd be in Paris or wherever.

WHITE

That's difficult for most marriages, though, the long distance.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. I think that has happened with a lot of marriages of people in show business, other entertainers who were separated from their wives. During that particular time, [they are] going to foreign countries and the wife is still here. And if the wife isn't with them they go astray, or whatever you may say.

WHITE

Interesting. You had an interruption, of course, in your career earlier in the mid-forties, when you were drafted.

NICHOLAS

Oh, that was the unluckiest day of my life. [White laughs] Oh, I was so unhappy. Oh, when they drafted me into that—army. Oh, my goodness. But I adjusted myself. "Well, I'm in here. Let's make the best of it."

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

But the first place that they drafted me was in Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi—the worst place in the world. Oh, jeepers. It was awful and I was in a laundry company. What they did was they would wash clothes for the soldiers who were in combat. Naturally, they would be crawling on their stomachs and all of these outfits would get dirty, so we'd have to wash those. We were behind the lines. We weren't fighting or anything. We just had to wash these clothes for these soldiers. That's what was happening in Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi. Naturally, to keep up my morale I would entertain. I'd entertain soldiers, and so the officer, the head officer of this unit that I was with, liked me. He said I was keeping up the morale of all the soldiers, [but] I wanted to get out of that place. I would always correspond with my valet, Lorenzo Hill, and he was in the army, too. But he was in Fort Huachuca [Arizona]. That's where he was,

and we were writing to each other and he said, "This is where you should be." He was in special service and there were a lot of other entertainers there who were in special service, and that's what they did, entertain the soldiers. They didn't have to go "hut, two, three, four"—marching and carrying the rifle and doing all those things that a soldier does in the army. Well, that's what I was doing besides washing the clothes, I was "hut, two, three, four," marching, and all those things.

WHITE

Where was Harold?

NICHOLAS

He was doing his thing. He made a couple of movies before— Yes, he made movies called Carolina Blues and Reckless Age. They didn't draft him. I'll tell you about that story, too. So that's what he was doing. I had a furlough to come to Los Angeles while he was making this film Carolina Blues, which starred Ann Miller and Kay Kyser and his orchestra. I was there on the set while he was working and he was doing a song called "Mister Beebe." It was a big production number and he'd open up with this song. He was dressed in a high hat and a special outfit that he wore, something like tails. He was singing "Mister Beebe" and he danced with everybody. He was with June Richmond, who was a singer. He danced with Marie Bryant and Anise Boyer, and he also danced with the Four Step Brothers. It was his number, he was the star of this production number. The thing I told you about what he did in Babes in Arms, where he'd slide through the girls' legs, well the Four Step Brothers would line up back to back like that and he'd go right through their legs.

WHITE

So he was having a measure of success himself here.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah, he was doing well.

WHITE

Your wife and son at that time were still living in the house on Van Ness?

NICHOLAS

Yes, they were. And so there I was, suffering in Mississippi, and when this company commander didn't want to let me go— I went to his office and he said, "You don't want to go to Fort Huachuca. Stay here. You're good morale for my soldiers and you're doing all right." I said, "Yes, I am doing all right, but I think I can do better in Fort Huachuca." [mutual laughter] Then he turned [my transfer request] down.

WHITE

He turned you down?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, he turned it down. He said, "No, you're not going." Then my friend Lorenzo Hill started writing to Washington, D.C., telling them about me and that it'd be better for me to be in Fort Huachuca. So an order came from Washington to this commander, the papers saying, "Let him go."

**1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE
JUNE 1, 2000**

WHITE

We're almost halfway through the year 2000.

NICHOLAS

Yes, this is the sixth month of the year 2000. Well, many things are going to be happening, as far as the Nicholas Brothers [Fayard Nicholas and Harold Nicholas] are concerned. We're going to different places, like Detroit, St. Paul, St. Louis, and my brother will be [inaudible] on these three occasions. I think we're going to St. Louis in August, but I don't know what's happening in September. October—Catherine [Hopkins Nicholas] and I may go to Paris to celebrate her birthday, which is in November. November 2. In December we're going to Washington, D.C. for the Kennedy Center Honors. We're invited there every year because they honored us in 1991. You remember that, don't you?

WHITE

Yes, indeed.

NICHOLAS

Did you see it on TV?

WHITE

Yes, I saw it on videotape.

NICHOLAS

The videotape of it, yes. And so now Catherine and I were thinking about— Maybe we could arrange it this way— We will fly to Washington, D.C. in December. It's usually December the fifth until the seventh in Washington, D.C. for the Kennedy Center Honors, then we'll take a plane from Washington, D.C. to Paris, and spend in Paris there maybe a week and then fly back to Los Angeles. So we're thinking about maybe we could arrange that, so we will get all this vacation that we were planning before, because we were supposed to go to Paris May 21, but it didn't work out, because it was going to be with my brother and me and my brother's wife [Rigmor Newman], and my wife, Catherine. So Catherine said, "Why don't we go anyway and perhaps do it this way: Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Paris, then back to L.A."

WHITE

Oh, that sounds like lots of fun.

NICHOLAS

That will be a lot of fun.

WHITE

It sounds like the year 2000 is going to be full of adventure and excitement for you. Well, let's see, the last time we spoke, last Thursday, which I believe was the twenty-fourth of May, at the end of our conversation you had just finished talking about the fact that when you were in the service at Camp Van Dorn in Mississippi, how you used to entertain the soldiers and that you had a deep desire to go to [Fort] Huachuca [Arizona]. You had spoken with your superior and he basically told you no, because he wanted you stay there to help entertain and keep morale up.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, keep the morale up of the soldiers. Well, who's going to keep my morale up?

WHITE

Exactly. So you indicated that Lorenzo Hill, a friend of yours, had written to Washington, D.C. and the order came back from Washington to let you go.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, right.

WHITE

Okay. Can you tell me what happened from that point?

NICHOLAS

I remember when the order came from Washington, D.C. and the company [commander], he received it, and he called me to the office and he says, "I see they want you to go to Fort Huachuca." I said, "Yeah, that's right." And he says, "You don't want to go." I says, "Yes, I do." I said, "I want to go because there I'll be in special service and I'll be doing the things that I've done in my life in show business. I'll be entertaining and that's all. I won't have to be marching and washing clothes, like I'm doing here in Mississippi. That's why I want to go." And he said, "Well, we will really miss you." I said, "Well, I've had a nice time. I'm happy that the soldiers enjoyed my performance and if it helped in any way, I'm glad. But now I'm going where I'm going to be glad." [mutual laughter] And so he said, "I wish you luck." Well, I got there and I met all my friends there—a lot of the guys who were in show business, like Eugene Jackson and—let me see—the trombone player who used to play in the Duke Ellington orchestra. I can't remember his name. Orlando Robeson was there. I don't know if you know of Orlando Robeson. He was a singer. He had one of those high voices when he'd sing "Trees." Remember that song? [singing] "I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree." Well, he sang that song and it was real high. He was there, entertaining the soldiers. That's all I was doing, was entertaining the soldiers who were going overseas, like maybe the 93rd Division or the 92nd Division. And we would always rehearse different shows that we would do. That's the only thing that I was doing. I didn't have to make bed check. I didn't have to make reveille. I'd go to bed when I would

want to, get up when I would want to, and just have a ball. When the company commander would want to see us at his office, well, we had to be there, so he would tell us, "Fellahs, this is what we're going to do. We're going to rehearse a nice show for these soldiers who will be going overseas in a week or so, so we have to get ready for that." So that's the only work that I was doing in Fort Huachuca, just entertaining and rehearsing for these shows and it was great. It was great. Then I met one of the soldiers who was stationed there, who was always there. He was a first sergeant, and he was there with his wife, and they had a cottage and they had a beautiful little baby. And they had an extra room and I said, "Ahh." And I said, "This would be great. I'll call my wife and ask if— Could I stay in your extra room?" He said, "Sure, that would be great." So I called my wife and sent for her to come to Fort Huachuca, and we stayed with this couple and we had fun with the baby and it was great. It was just like being home, because all I was doing was entertaining soldiers and being there with my wife and with my friends, this married couple with their baby.

WHITE

It was as pleasant as it possibly could have been?

NICHOLAS

It was pleasant. It was great, it was great. My wife at that time was Geraldine. Before she married me, she was Geraldine Pate. Then she became Geraldine Nicholas. And it was wonderful, wonderful. And so I was there for quite a while and everything was fine. I'd go to the PX [post exchange] there and have my ice-cream and my Coca-Colas and whatever else I'd want—potato chips. Then I would get sandwiches and something like that. So everything was going real well.

WHITE

When were you actually discharged?

NICHOLAS

Well, let me tell you what happened. Everything was going well—entertaining the soldiers and getting up when I wanted to, going to bed when I wanted to, and all of a sudden there came an order from Washington, D.C. that every

man will soldier. So that meant that we had to soldier, too. All the entertainers, we'd have to get up for reveille, and stand up like all the soldiers lined up in a line, and then the sergeant would say, "Thomas." And he'd say, "Here." "Smith." "Here." "Nicholas." "Here." And that type of thing we had to do. We were dressed up in these uniforms where we would have to carry a rifle and [we were] marching, just like the real soldiers. Before we were just being [inaudible] in our khaki. We had to put on these outfits and the big boots and start "hut, two, three, four, hut, two, three—" Going through all of that, and with this heavy rifle. Oh, jeepers! [White laughs] Damn. I said, "What happened?" Everything was going along so well and then this thing happened. Then one day they were telling us that they were going on some kind of a— I forget the correct name of it. You would have to crawl on your stomach and they would shoot live bullets—machine gun bullets—over your head. I asked them— I said, "These will be blanks." They said, "No, they're not blanks when they're shooting over your head." They said, "You must stay down. Don't stand up, because if you do you'll get killed. Just stay there." He told me, "The reason why they use real bullets is because they want you to get used to that sound. You know that sound. If they're blanks, there won't be that sound." I said, "Well, tell me some of the things." And they said, "Well there have been some tragedies where some guys would stand up, they're so nervous and they're just frantic." They would stand up and they would get shot and they would die. He said, "That's why you must stay on your stomach as you're crawling, crawling towards this machine gun, as they fire." I said, "That's not for me. Oh, no!" So I got sick. [laughs]

WHITE

Oh, did you?

NICHOLAS

I got sick. I went to my barracks and I just— I played the part. I got the idea and said, "I'm going to have lemon juice in the morning and orange juice in the evening." So I told the guys, "Go out and get me two jelly jars. Take all the jelly out of the jars, then squeeze the lemon in one of the jars, then squeeze orange juice in the other jar. And put it by the window sill there so it will get real cold." So that's what I was doing, drinking this lemon juice in the morning and the orange juice in the evening. I got so skinny— Yeah. [mutual laughter]

And so one day I was feeling real hungry. I said, "Here, guy, take this money. Go get me a hamburger." So I got the hamburger and then I was satisfied, but I went back onto the lemon juice and the orange juice and I was getting so thin. The chaplain came by to see me and asked me, "What's the matter, Fayard?" And I said, "I can't make it with this army. I don't like the food. It's just not for me. I'm very unhappy here." He was trying to make me feel better, and I said, "No, I can't stand it." So they sent me to the hospital and there I was in there with this pretty little nurse and she'd bathe me, and boy oh boy— [mutual laughter] Things happened. And so, like a lot of guys said, "Oh, I really hate [getting up in the morning]." I'm happy when morning comes. And they said, "Why?" I said, "That's bath time." Every day, bath time in the morning. So I got used to that, too. "Oh, hooray for bath time!"

WHITE

How long did you stay in the hospital?

NICHOLAS

Not long. So I was there and they would feed me good food. Oh, boy. And I loved it and so I started eating. They would take me and weigh me. I started gaining weight. I was gaining this weight every day, so they sent me back.

WHITE

Oh, no. Your plan didn't work.

NICHOLAS

And I said, "Oh no. My plan isn't working." So what did I do? I went back on the lemon juice and the orange juice. It didn't discourage me. The doctor, this officer who examined me, he liked me and he was very friendly to a lady [Alice Keyes, who] was writing for this newspaper, the Los Angeles Sentinel. She wrote for that paper and she was friendly with my wife, Geraldine. So they came there to the hospital to see me. They said to me, "Everything's going to be all right." I said, "Oh yes?" "Yeah, you're getting out of here." Because this officer was going to help me, but in the right way, though. There I was, still playing the role. And this nurse, she knew what was happening. Every time she would see me, she would laugh. And I still was acting sick. So my wife and Alice Keyes said everything's going to be all right. There was an officer who

came there. He was called the inspector general. He doesn't have to be a general, but at that time he was acting like a general. He could be a colonel. So he was there. This doctor, this officer who was a captain, had this inspector general to come to see me. When the inspector general came in with some other officers, and I'm lying in bed [makes groaning and grumbling sounds] and so the doctor said, "Sit up." So I sat up. He said, "This is the inspector general. He came by to see you." Okay. He said, "Let's go out on the patio." So I struggled to get out of the bed, and they were sitting outside talking and I was sitting there listening to them, and all of a sudden my leg just goes— [demonstrates] like this. Just shaking. And I had to stop it, because I was very nervous, yeah, and the leg was still going. So I had to just hold it, because if I turned it loose, it would still go jumping like that. After they finished talking the doctor said, "Fayard, you can go back to your bed." So I went back to my bed and I guess they were deciding what they were going to do with me. Then a couple of days later my wife came to say, "You're going to be discharged."

WHITE

Oh, my.

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh. I said, "O happy day." And so I got the papers and everything was signed. Honorable discharge.

WHITE

Terrific.

NICHOLAS

And I got it. I had this gown on that they'd give you at the hospital. Now it's time to get dressed. My clothes were so big on me—

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Lucky I had a belt, so I could just—

WHITE

You had played the role well.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I played real well. I was so skinny— Oh gee, I must have gone down to 95 pounds.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

They were giving me some money each month. It was only ten dollars. I was getting that ten dollars each month. I had to go to—I think it was—the Veteran's [Administration] Hospital here in Los Angeles. So I would have to go there to see how I was. They would examine me, and when I got there they found out I had gained weight. That's no problem. I can gain weight anytime I want to. I can lose it when I want to. No problem there. It doesn't mean that I'm sick. They found out that I was gaining weight, so I didn't get the ten dollars anymore.

WHITE

After you were discharged you and your wife came back to Los Angeles.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we came back to Los Angeles and I got in touch with my brother and his wife at that time, Dorothy Dandridge. They were married.

WHITE

You were still living on Van Ness [Avenue] at that time?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I was still living on Van Ness. And there I was with my wife, [and I was like] a skinny little boy. My brother has always been smaller than me, but now I'm smaller than him.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

So then you just sort of got settled back in Los Angeles, got reacclimated to the area?

NICHOLAS

Right, I got settled back. We were still on the contract with 20th Century- Fox.

WHITE

Right, you did *The Pirate* in 1948.

NICHOLAS

That was at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

WHITE

Oh, it was? Okay. Now what year were you discharged? Was it '47 or '46?

NICHOLAS

Well, '44.

WHITE

You said Tony [Anthony Nicholas] was born after you were discharged.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, in '45. Tony was born then. We got married in '42, Geraldine and I. Then, after I was discharged out the army, I guess I got a lot of strength and—
[mutual laughter]

WHITE

I suppose so.

NICHOLAS

And then my first son was born, Tony.

WHITE

So you finished up your contract at 20th Century-Fox. Your next big hit was at MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] with *The Pirate*.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, right. With Judy Garland and Gene Kelly. But we did a tour in the South—one-nighters. Did I tell you that before?

WHITE

You mean during this period of time, just before you did *The Pirate*?

NICHOLAS

Before we did it, yeah.

WHITE

Actually, you did.

NICHOLAS

Let me see. Yes. Now I'm trying to think, did we do those one-nighters before we did the show *St. Louis Woman*? Let me see, I think we did. I think we did those one-nighters, because it was in 1946.

WHITE

Right. You told me about that. We thought that a lot of your parts [in movies] had been cut out in the South, but that wasn't in fact the case.

NICHOLAS

That wasn't the case. They did not cut us out. There was no reason to cut us out.

WHITE

Exactly, yeah, we talked about that during our last interview.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. After that we did *St. Louis Woman*, which was in 1946 with a great cast. Pearl Bailey was in it and Rex Ingram was in it and Juanita Hall was in it. Remember her?

WHITE

Juanita Hall?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. She was in South Pacific, the movie. Remember, she played [Bloody Mary]. Did you see the film?

WHITE

I did not.

NICHOLAS

In fact, she was in the show South Pacific, and I think she was the only original actor who was in the film, because Mary Martin was in [the stage version of] South Pacific and this Italian singer, [Ezio] Pinza. And so she was in St. Louis Woman with us and then she was in South Pacific, the stage show, and also in the motion pictures, playing the same role. Juanita Hall. And she also was in the first movie that had all Chinese actors.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

What was the name of that film? Was it Flower Drum Song?

WHITE

Could be.

NICHOLAS

I think that was the name of it. And this girl, oh, jeepers. The first film I saw her in was [The World of Suzie Wong] with William Holden and she played a Chinese girl. In fact, she is Chinese, but a beautiful, ooh, beautiful Chinese. And they were lovers, William Holden and this girl. What is her name? Goddammit, I forget names. [Nancy Kwan]

WHITE

That's okay. So now these were some of your fellow actors that you were working with at this period of time?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

Before you actually changed your contract over?

NICHOLAS

Oh yeah, before we went to MGM. When we were in St. Louis Woman, Gene Kelly came by to see us and at this time he was in the navy and he saw the show. He came backstage to our dressing room and he said, "Fellahs, we have got to do a movie together, but at the moment we haven't found the right story." And he said, "We're going to do it, we're going to do it." And we said, "Yes, that would be great. We can work together." Arthur Freed, who produced most of Gene Kelly's films, called him into his office one day and said, "Gene, I just found a story. Now you can work with the Nicholas Brothers. It's called The Pirate." And Gene was so happy because he always wanted to work with us.

WHITE

Yes, yes. In some of the literature it says that—like you just said—he wanted to make a film with you all for a very long time.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, right.

WHITE

But he refused to be in a film with you where you and your brother were playing butlers or chauffeurs or something like that.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah, nothing like that. No, he didn't want any part of that, no.

WHITE

He didn't want any part of racist ideology. So then they finally found a story.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and it happens in the Caribbean, so it was the right story to have us in. He had this group of actors who were traveling with him all over the Caribbean and we were a part of the troupe.

WHITE

Now you had— Once your contract finished at 20th Century-Fox, that was the last bit of business you had with that studio, then did you sign a contract with MGM?

NICHOLAS

No, we only signed a contract with MGM for that movie, for that one film. We didn't do any other films, just that one that we did. And we were on that film for a long time, oh yes.

WHITE

Was that an enjoyable experience, working with Gene Kelly?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we had so much fun.

WHITE

And Judy Garland.

NICHOLAS

With Judy Garland, and we all became very good friends. Gene loved to give parties at his house and he'd invite all these different celebrities over there to play games.

WHITE

Where did he live? [tape recorder off]

NICHOLAS

In Beverly Hills.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

At his mansion in Beverly Hills, and he loved to have his friends over and invite them all over to his house and at that time he was married to— What was her name—his wife at that time? Betsy something— Betsy [Blair] I think. I'm not sure, but I think her name was Betsy [Blair]. And she was an actress too; she did movies. In fact, she did one of the Academy Award [Best Motion Picture] movies, Marty.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

That won for best picture, I think, and also for best actor. She was the girlfriend of Marty in the film. The star, Ernest Borgnine, won for best actor and the picture won for best picture. And she played the girlfriend of Marty. That was the name of the film, Marty. And so—

WHITE

She was Gene Kelly's wife?

NICHOLAS

Wife, yeah. I think his first wife, yeah.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

And we were there— Let's see, oh, we get to his home and knock on the door, and Gene Kelly opens the door and there we are. And Judy Garland was there, Ricardo Montalban was there. You remember him, don't you?

WHITE

Yes, indeed.

NICHOLAS

With his wife [Georgiana Young], who was the sister of Loretta Young—yeah, they were married. And there were other celebrities. Oh, and Vincente Minnelli, the director, who directed *The Pirate*, he was there. Judy Garland's husband, yeah. And we were all there and as he opened the door, there was my wife, Geraldine, and my brother's wife, Dorothy Dandridge, and Gene looked and he said, "Oh my goodness. Gee, you've got some beautiful wives." We introduced our wives to him and he said, "Gee, this is great, you two brothers have beautiful wives. Sometimes, when brothers have their wives, one of them has the lemon, but you guys— Both of your wives are beautiful."

WHITE

You guys were lucky.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, yeah.

WHITE

Was there a lot of intermingling and that sort of thing in his home? Were there other people of color, for instance?

NICHOLAS

Oh, we were playing games and Gene loved to play games and so we were all together. We were playing kind of a game, I think it's called charades or something like that.

WHITE

Sure, charades.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we were doing that. It was like we weren't playing at all. It was Gene and his wife. They were the ones who were doing all the answers. And we were just standing. I'm just standing like this [demonstrates] because I wasn't guessing anything.

WHITE

Were there other African-Americans that would come to his parties—say, that worked at MGM Studios?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I don't recall any. I don't recall any— There could have been, but I don't remember. Because Gene, he was that way. He didn't have a prejudiced bone in his body. He just liked everybody, like [Nicholas's current wife] Catherine— just loved everybody. We're human beings. That's what we are—human beings. And when you see each other, you don't think about color. You just think about that person.

WHITE

Right, of course. Just curious if in fact he would intermingle with other African American stars at that time or have them to his home.

NICHOLAS

Oh yes. Well, during the movie *The Pirate* there were a lot of— What do they call us now? African Americans?

WHITE

Yes, yes, African Americans.

NICHOLAS

Well, I don't like that. Just call me an American. I was born in this country. I don't know nothing about Africa.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, because I wish they'd make up their minds. First they were calling us "Colored," then "Negro" and "black" and something else. Now they've decided to call us "African American." Why are they calling us African American? They don't say Irish American, German American, Swedish American.

WHITE

Right, we talked about this.

NICHOLAS

I told you about that? Yeah. So why don't they just call all of us "American"? And then they [say] Mexican American. When you say Mexican, that's his nationality. It's not a race. It's his nationality, being Mexican. Rita Hayworth was born in Mexico and her nationality was Mexican, but her parents came from Spain.

WHITE

Right. I guess it's just a matter of how certain people want to identify themselves.

NICHOLAS

Well, I'll say "I'm an American." That's how I'm going to identify myself. You can look at me and you can see what I am. You don't have to put that label on me. [laughs]

WHITE

Okay. So now you did the movie with Gene Kelly. I understand that The Pirate was actually the last film appearance of you and Harold as a team?

NICHOLAS

As a team. The last film appearance of my brother and me as a team. Of course, we did other things separately.

WHITE

Right, of course.

NICHOLAS

I made a motion picture without him, called The Liberation of L.B. Jones.

WHITE

Yeah, I'm familiar with that one.

NICHOLAS

And then he made movies like— Uptown Saturday Night he did by himself.

WHITE

Now, just in looking at some of your literature, some notes indicated that you and your brother had been a witness to the minority experience in a television and film industry that often promulgated sort of stinging racial stereotypes and withheld stardom from many minority performers who actually had very extraordinary gifts. Back in those days not very many black Americans were getting starring roles, because the codes were very strictly enforced in Hollywood.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes, yes. They were not really starring black actors in these movies. It was always the white actors and the black actors would be a part of that story, but not the real star. But today— Oh, it's a different story today, because the black actors are there for box office. They are box office today, like Eddie Murphy, with his Beverly Hills Cop, or whatever it is. He was the number one box office attraction in motion pictures all over the world.

WHITE

Yeah, things are changing.

NICHOLAS

Changing, really changing.

WHITE

Yes, we've made a lot of progress.

NICHOLAS

Like I told you, whenever these stars see us—like Eddie Murphy or, what's the other one, Denzel Washington, Diana Ross— You name all these wonderful actors of color today who star in motion pictures, and people, they pay to see them—black and white pay to see them. And whenever they see me they're so happy to meet me. They say, "You paved the way for us. You are the pioneers. You made it possible for us to do the things we do today, because of what you have done in the past." And they'll say to me, "Now, if you guys were younger and could do the same thing in movies today that you did in the thirties and the forties and the fifties, no telling how much money you would be making and you'd also be starring in films. You would be dancing with Ginger Rogers."

WHITE

You certainly would. Anyone you choose.

NICHOLAS

Anyone I choose.

WHITE

Now, there was a quote in Ebony magazine in 1983. You were quoted as saying that although old movies provided you with immense popularity, both brothers resent the fact that you were never allowed to do anything else in the films.

NICHOLAS

No, just singing and dancing.

WHITE

Exactly. For instance, Lena Horne only sang and when that trend faded, people in Hollywood weren't very—

NICHOLAS

Well, they thought it faded. It didn't.

WHITE

When they thought it faded, they weren't that enthusiastic about hiring you in other roles. Another quote said that of course you guys were barred from some of those leading roles, and you watched as other white dancers became stars, such as Charles "Honi" Coles, etc. In a 1980 Newsweek article you were quoted as saying, "I felt history did me wrong. Had I been white, I would probably have had the same opportunity as Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly."

NICHOLAS

Oh yeah, and I've heard a lot of white people say that to me, because they liked what we did in motion pictures. They've said to me, "If you were white, Fayard, you would have been starring in motion pictures, much like Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. But what you have done in motion pictures is great because it made you famous all over the world."

WHITE

International star.

NICHOLAS

International. Just for those five minutes in each motion picture that we have done. We would headline everywhere, in Europe or wherever it might be. And sometimes we would do concerts where it would only be the Nicholas Brothers and the band—a big band and the Nicholas brothers. And because of our versatility, we could stay on stage like an hour or an hour and a half. Sometimes we might stretch it to two hours, because we would have a little intermission. It would just be the Nicholas Brothers, entertaining the audience. We became very successful doing that.

WHITE

And like you said, it really set the path and the tone for actors to come in the future— Actors, and dancers as well, performers, entertainers in general. You really are pioneers, mavericks of sorts.

NICHOLAS

And like I said, tap dancing never did die out because we always did it, where we went. The audience just loved it. They loved to see us tap-dancing. So I was saying to my brother, "What is this bad propaganda about 'tap dancing has died'?" I said, "Listen to those people out there. They can't get enough of it. They love tap dancing, so I just couldn't understand— I think I told you, I think television had a lot to do with it.

WHITE

Yes, absolutely. In my notes there is some discussion about the end of the 1940s. I guess the unfairness of segregation had taken its toll, but black entertainers were beginning to rethink their routines. Movies, for instance, that jumped from one dance number to another were sort of inappropriate and so was blackface at that point in time. The audiences, they wanted the old stereotype, what they considered, "The oldtime tap dancing." They thought that acrobatics were no longer really in place, but you and Harold, of course, kept doing what you did best.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we kept doing what— We incorporated the acrobatics with the tapping and we would throw in a little ballet into it and eccentric [dance style] and all these things.

WHITE

So at a time when other black Americans were sort of changing their routine according to the times, you and Harold stuck with your same routine throughout this period into the forties and early fifties, and you still had audiences that were still enthusiastic for your work?

NICHOLAS

Always. It's so wonderful— The wonderful thing about television now is that they show all of our old films on television and the generations of today are seeing these films. Before they saw these films, they were doing the rock and roll and the rapping and all these other things, like—what do they call it?— hip-hop?

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

So when they see us on TV in these old films, it's like they're seeing something new, like they never saw anything like that before. And they like seeing that. Now they're trying to start learning tap dancing and they hear jazz on the radio and they buy these records of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway and Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman and Count Basie and all the other jazz musicians. This is something new to them and they like it better than all that jazz they were listening to before.

WHITE

There's a lot more substance.

NICHOLAS

Yes. And so, like I said, jazz hasn't died. Tap dancing hasn't died and the generation today is getting hip to it, as you might say.

WHITE

Absolutely. On that note, we're going to go ahead and turn the tape over.

NICHOLAS

All right.

**1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO
JUNE 1, 2000**

WHITE

It was known that in Hollywood, back in the forties, whenever they thought they were going to have trouble with a movie in terms of its box office appeal, they would get the brothers to do a number in it.

NICHOLAS

You mean the Nicholas Brothers?

WHITE

The Nicholas Brothers.

NICHOLAS

Well, it just happened. It just happened. It seemed as though when they put the Nicholas Brothers in these movies for only five minutes it made the movie more successful, because a lot of people would go see these movies just to see the Nicholas Brothers.

WHITE

Right, that's what I understand.

NICHOLAS

Right. When that Down Argentine Way came out, that really did it.

WHITE

Sure, that made you superstars.

NICHOLAS

People would go to the theater to see our performance in Down Argentine Way. And some people would find out when we were going on in the film. So

they'd find out, they'd go there to see our number and then walk out of there. That's all they wanted to see was us, that was all they wanted to see.

WHITE

Right. Well, as you mentioned a moment ago, when television actually came to the fore the Hollywood musical extravaganza became sort of the first victim of the economy. More attention in general was just directed toward the television industry. So I understand that you jumped on that bandwagon—you, and your brother as well—and you performed on a number of TV shows, like the Ed Sullivan show.

NICHOLAS

Oh, we did a number of TV shows—the Ed Sullivan show, Jackie Gleason, the Frank Sinatra show.

WHITE

[Bud] Abbott and [Lou] Costello.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Abbott and Costello. Did you see Hollywood Palace?

WHITE

The Hollywood Palace? Yes.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we did Hollywood—

WHITE

Ebony Showcase [Theatre]?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Ebony.

WHITE

Nick Stewart.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. We did, let me see, what were those shows? Oh, when Ebony magazine had their TV shows—

WHITE

Right, okay.

NICHOLAS

I think we did about four shows with them.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

There was no more vaudeville, so TV— We were doing vaudeville on TV.

WHITE

Right. How was that experience in comparison to doing it in film or in the theater?

NICHOLAS

We felt comfortable wherever we were performing. It's just it was a new medium. It was different from the theater and from the movies because some of those TV shows we did, it was live.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Ooh, did I hate live television!

WHITE

Is that right?

NICHOLAS

Oh, my goodness. I remember when we had just returned to this country, and we were in Manhattan for Milton Berle's TV show. Now at that time he was known as Mr. Television. And we were still under contract at the William

Morris Agency. He said, "Fellahs, you've got to do the Milton Berle show. It's the number one show in America. People will stop going out, going to the theater, going to see movies. They stay home on Tuesday night to see the Milton Berle show, so you've got to do this show." They knew we'd be seen by millions of people. We got there and we did the show with Milton Berle. As we were doing our act, Milton said, "Well, I want you to do something like you do in the movies. I want you to go up these stairs and get up on this platform and jump off into a split." I said, "Sure, that's easy." So this would be the last trick that we would do. We get up there, dance up the steps and we jump down. Now, we go down into the split. My brother gets up, but I'm still down. I'm having a hard time getting out of the split. And my brother is looking down there at me and he says, "What are you doing down there?" I said, "I'm trying to get up, man!" [mutual laughter] So we made a routine out of it.

WHITE

Oh, did you? Okay.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and so I finally get up and then we finish the act. It was live. Now, see, if it is a movie and I jump and I can't get up, cut and do it over again. So that's why I hated television.

WHITE

Oh, sure.

NICHOLAS

Live television, that is. I was so happy when videotape came, because with videotape, we could do it over again.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

It's not live.

WHITE

The expectations are different.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. And some people liked that, but I never did like that because— Like a dramatic show, I remember, I think it was Playhouse 90, one of those shows. Now there was a scene where two guys were in the living room of this apartment and they were talking. One of them pulls out a pistol and BAM!!!, shoots him dead. WHAM!!! He's on the floor, dead. And so there he's wondering—the guy who shot him—what to do and he's looking to see if anybody's around, if anybody heard it. He's looking out the door and he thinks, "Oh, my goodness, my girlfriend is coming here. I've got to do something about this." Now, all this time he's doing like this. [demonstrates] Guess what? The camera is on the dead man. The dead man is out like this. [demonstrates] Now the dead man thinks the camera isn't on him, so he gets up and crawls off the stage. And the camera is on him. He's supposed to be dead. The camera's still— Live television.

WHITE

That's one of the disasters.

NICHOLAS

That's it. And people like that. I didn't like that. This is a dramatic show. I want to see the story like it's supposed to be. And they love those mistakes. Some people love those mistakes. Boy, I hated live television.

WHITE

That was quite a different experience for you, I'm sure, from the film experience and from theater.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Well, in theater you rehearse. Let's say you're doing a show like St. Louis Woman. You go out of town, maybe to Philadelphia, Hartford, Connecticut, and Boston. You're rehearsing. It's like a dress rehearsal. You're rehearsing the show so you will be ready for Broadway. When you get to Broadway everything is supposed to be intact. You have rehearsed all these weeks and so you don't have to worry about making mistakes. You might, but you're well rehearsed. You know the story, you know what has to be done. But in television, ugh, this was a new thing for us. When I would try to do these

live shows, and try not to make any mistakes, because you'd see that with millions of people seeing you making this— It was a funny thing. After we did the Milton Berle show and made this mistake, when I couldn't get up out of that split, we went to Harlem—as they say, Harlem in Manhattan—and went to some of the clubs and everybody— It seems as though everybody had seen that show. They said, "What happened to you, Fayard? You couldn't get out of that split. What's the matter? Is it age, or what is it?" They kept kidding me. I said, "Oh, man, live television! I don't like live television. If it was a movie, I could have taken it over again."

WHITE

That's fascinating. So you guys actually covered the circuit more or less with all the television shows. I understand that in the late 1940s your popularity began to wane and the William Morris Agency encouraged you to go to Europe.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes.

WHITE

Is that correct?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes, because we used to work nightclubs all the time, and no more nightclubs. People were staying home watching television. It's free, you see? And so they said, "Fellahs, go to Europe. You should always be active, always. Don't be sitting at home waiting for the telephone to ring to do another movie." He said, "Go to Europe. They want you over there. We're negotiating with Europe." They wanted to see the Nicholas Brothers in Europe, because of all the motion pictures that have played over there. And I said "Okay." So we went over there and stayed the first time four years before coming back to this country.

WHITE

Oh, really? What about your family life here in Los Angeles?

NICHOLAS

Oh, with my wife Geraldine and my son Tony? They would come to Europe and be with me. They'd go to different countries, like Italy and France and North Africa. They were always with me.

WHITE

So this was back in 1948. When you went there for the first time, to Europe, you actually stayed for four years?

NICHOLAS

Oh, the first time. Well the first time we went over there was to England in 1936. The first time after that, in 1947. After World War II, we were at the Cirque Moderne in Paris, France. It was like a circus and we were the headliners. They had all of the elephants and the lions and acrobats and all of that. It was a one-ring thing. See, usually at circuses they have many shows going on at the same time. Have you ever been to a circus?

WHITE

Certainly.

NICHOLAS

And you can see that, in one part, there are the trained elephants and in another part, there's the animal trainer with the tigers and the lions, another one with the trapeze. You just look and so much is going on until there will be the main star. He will be right in the center and you're only watching him or her. And forget about all of this [other] stuff. That wouldn't be there. And they have the spotlight on this star, whatever he or she is doing. But at Cirque Moderne in Paris, France, it was only this one ring, you might say. And that's where they did everything. So when it came time for the Nicholas Brothers they brought out a special stage for us to tap-dance on.

WHITE

Oh, okay, that must have been exciting.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and the orchestra leader was up on a platform and it was a lady who was conducting. We'd come out and do our thing and [perform] at the microphone and all of that. And I was leading the band as my brother was

singing a song—I think it was "[Oh,] Lady Be Good!" And we had such great write-ups in all the newspapers. And one critic said—they were so happy to see me directing the band—we should have moved the leader out of the way. Let Fayard direct the whole show. That's what it said.

WHITE

So that was a terrific experience for you in Paris. I understand that at the London Palladium, you did a royal command performance for the king of England [George VI].

NICHOLAS

Yeah, the king and queen [Elizabeth] were there. That was in 1948. I don't know if I told you this before. They were telling us how to acknowledge the king and queen. Oh, and Princess Margaret, she was up there too, in the royal box with the royal family. And they said, "After you finish your act, first you bow to the king and queen. Then you bow to the audience. Then you bow to the king and queen again. Then you exit."

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

They rehearsed everybody on how to do that. And oh, we broke up the show. Yeah, we were great. It was so great being there, doing a royal command performance for the king and queen. But we were disappointed, because—Whenever there was a royal performance, the king and queen would always come backstage to meet everybody, but this time they didn't. And I could see— I was in the wings looking at them and I saw them getting ready to leave. Someone came in and told them something. I found out later that the reason why they left was that Queen Elizabeth [II], who wasn't queen at that time, was giving birth to her first child, Prince Charles [later Charles, Prince of Wales]. That's why they went to Buckingham Palace, to be there with her, because it was time for her to give birth.

WHITE

Prior to your knowing this, did you feel a little uncomfortable or neglected by the fact that they hadn't come backstage to see you?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I understand why.

WHITE

Yeah, after you found out, but before that—

NICHOLAS

Oh, before that, I was wondering, "Why did they leave? They didn't like the show?" What was going on? Then, when I found out why they had left, I was relieved, I could understand. They wanted to be there with their daughter.

WHITE

So you had some really great experiences when you were in Europe, I understand. You said that your wife was commuting back and forth, and would come and stay with you and travel with you a bit. I understand that in 1950 your son Paul [Nicholas] was born.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that's right. He was conceived in North Africa.

WHITE

Was he really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. In Casablanca, Morocco.

WHITE

Oh, romantic.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that's right.

WHITE

So were you here, actually, when Paul was born? Did you come back to the States for the birth?

NICHOLAS

He was born before I got back.

WHITE

He was?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

Okay, so you missed that.

NICHOLAS

I missed it, yeah. But I was here when Tony was born. I was at the hospital. She was going through labor and everything, like pregnant women do, and I was there with her holding her hand. She didn't suffer much. Then all of a sudden they said, "It's time." So they took her to a room with the doctors—I didn't go—and then Tony was born and they brought her back to the room, because I waited there for her. And she said, "Oh, Fayard, he's so beautiful." At this time we were trying to find out what we were going to name him. We said "Anthony"—that would be the name. And she said, "Oh, you should see him, Fayard." He was born with a full head of hair.

WHITE

How did you feel about the fact that you were out of the country when your second son was born?

NICHOLAS

Well, I wanted to be there, but I had signed all these contracts to play all over Europe.

WHITE

It wasn't possible.

NICHOLAS

It wasn't possible for me to— But my wife, she called me and she wrote me letters about Paul and said, "Oh, he's beautiful, just like Tony." I didn't get with Paul until I arrived and came back here, and he was walking and talking.

WHITE

Right. You came back in 1953, is that correct?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, he was walking and talking before—

WHITE

Before you got a chance to see him?

NICHOLAS

Before I had the chance to see him.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness. So she didn't have an opportunity to come and visit with—

NICHOLAS

No, because she was there with her two sons, and taking care of everything.

WHITE

Now, rumor has it that this is when you were considered sort of an international ladies man.

NICHOLAS

I was an international ladies man? I was? [laughs]

WHITE

That's how rumor has it.

NICHOLAS

Oh, wow. Oh, gee.

WHITE

At that time you were in Europe, before you came back to the States in 1953?

NICHOLAS

Well, I couldn't fight these girls off. I guess I didn't want to. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

That's key. My goodness. When you returned to the States, I understand that you performed at the inauguration of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, President Eisenhower. We were at the White House and took pictures with all the different celebrities there, with President Eisenhower and Mrs. [Mamie D.] Eisenhower right in the center. Jeanette MacDonald was there and Lionel Hampton was there and Marge and Gower Champion were there. Dolores Gray, she was there. All these celebrities who entertained took this picture with the president and the first lady. And, oh, that was a great night. That was a great night, the inauguration of President Eisenhower, and a lot of parties were going on. Oh, it was great. They had a great party at someone's home there. Very elaborate. Gee, and good-looking women. I was there, and this lovely girl came over to me and said, "Oh, Mr. Nicholas, I really enjoyed your performance tonight. You thrilled me. I want to give you something, but I don't know what. To show you my appreciation of your performance." I said, "Thank you very much." She said, "Here's what I'm going to give you. This is my last one." It was marijuana, this little cigarette. [mutual laughter] She said, "This is mine. I want you to have it. This is my last one and this is—" Like it's the greatest thing in the world to her. She said, "This is yours." And I said, "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I don't smoke." If I don't smoke cigarettes, why am I going to smoke this thing? And she broke down and cried, because this is the greatest thing in the world for her and I refused. I said, "Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry." And so she was crying and I pulled her in my arms and said [in a solicitous voice], "Oh, no, no." She was melting—

WHITE

Oh, of course.

NICHOLAS

So I don't know where she— I think she dropped it. I don't know what happened to this thing. And so I talked to her. I said, "I just want to talk to you." We got real close and she said, "Would you like to come to my apartment?" I said, "Sure." Oh, she was pretty. We went to her apartment, and there I was with her in the bed and all that jazz. [mutual laughter] I woke

up the next morning and she was up cooking breakfast for me and she brings it to the bed. Oh, wow. And she had on her robe and there I am in bed, like a king, having my breakfast. Oh, it was great. Then it was time for me to leave. I said, "It's been wonderful, and I hope we meet again." And I don't think I ever met her again. It was the first and last time.

WHITE

Wow, it's quite a wonderful experience.

NICHOLAS

She had fun with me without going through all of this dope stuff, like sniffing the cocaine and smoking the reefer. She had fun just talking to me and then me caressing her and making her feel good in a way that I guess she never had before. Because she was always [at] parties with this dope. So that was the fun for her. I showed her how to have fun without that, because I told her, "Look, sweetheart, I was born high. I don't need this stuff to make me high."

WHITE

Now, this is during the Eisenhower era. Of course, the country was sort of in an upheaval. You know, the Supreme Court decision of 1954, the "separate but equal" [Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas] decision, the Martin Luther King, Jr. [protests and marches], lots of sit-ins at restaurants, [African Americans] demanding equal rights. Tell me, what were your thoughts during this period of time?

NICHOLAS

Well, I admire— I admire those people who would go down to Alabama with Dr. King and walk. The only way I could help, and the only way I would help, was to send them a check.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

That was my way of it. Me going down there in that atmosphere, that wasn't for me. I didn't. So that's the way I would help. And I admired all of them who would go. Like Harry Belafonte would go and I think Sammy Davis, Jr. went

down there and other well-known entertainers would go. So I said, "Great. That's great." I saw them on television as they were marching. Wonderful. I said, "This is the way I will do my part, send you money to help the foundation." I tried to stay away from the South as much as I could because I didn't like the things that were going on. They had these dogs that were attacking people because they would march and say "We want a better life in the South." It was great what they were doing and it worked, but what they had to go through for all of this—! Governor [George C.] Wallace [of Alabama] was trying to fight so that black children couldn't go to white schools, and they sent the [National Guard] down there to protect these children. And, oh, Governor Wallace—yak yak yak—he was firm right until the very last moment—"No, they don't come here." And then these [guardsmen] came down and marched these kids right past him, right into the school. Then he laughed— "Ha, ha, ha, ha." [laughs]

WHITE

Yes, it certainly got national media attention.

NICHOLAS

Right, oh, gee.

WHITE

So now, your son, Tony, he would have been about nine around this time. Was he going to an integrated school? What was his experience?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. In Los Angeles? He was going to an integrated school. I think he was going to a Catholic school, because my wife Geraldine was Catholic. So I'm sure that he was going to a Catholic school. But he doesn't go to a Catholic [church] anymore now.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

He's still a Christian, but he just changed from Catholic to something else. I forget what it is now.

WHITE

He's involved in something else that's more to his liking.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, with his wife, Vanita [Nicholas].

WHITE

I guess at this point in time, when a lot of this political turmoil was going on in the country, you weren't necessarily directly impacted in terms of your interactions in the industry, in terms of your interactions with your colleagues, that sort of thing. Did you feel the impact of this political turmoil in your own personal life?

NICHOLAS

You mean politics?

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

Oh, I think I've always been a Democrat, and that's that way I would always vote. I've been in the presence of six presidents, [such as] President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, who was a Democrat. I would go with a lot of celebrities and entertain the soldiers, like Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, James Cagney and Laurel and Hardy, Mary Martin and Ann Miller. We'd go and entertain the soldiers at these different camps. They were soldiers who were eventually going overseas to be in combat. So those are the things I was doing. We went to Washington, D.C. for a special gathering there with President Roosevelt. We were all there and we did a show like, what is that, that long, skinny building? It looks like a needle.

WHITE

Oh, I know what you're talking about. It escapes me at the moment, but I know exactly what you're talking about.

NICHOLAS

We did a show right there, in front of that, with Lucille Ball and all the other entertainers. So like I said, I've always been a Democrat. But President Eisenhower was a Republican. But whoever is in office, I'm with him and want to help him to make America a better country, yeah, whoever was in office. But I'd always vote Democrat. I was with [Richard M.] Nixon. I was with— Let's see who else. Oh, I didn't have the pleasure of being with President [John F.] Kennedy. No, never did, but all the others, like [George H. W.] Bush, who was a Republican.

WHITE

Right. He and Barbara [P. Bush] actually honored you and your brother at the Kennedy—

NICHOLAS

Yeah, at the Kennedy Center in 1991. I was with President [William J.] Clinton. And so it's been six, I think, six presidents altogether that I've been associated with. And I'm going to be with President Clinton this year, too. The year 2000, in December. My wife Catherine and I will go. We were there in 1998. We were there and we met the president and the first lady, Mrs. [Hillary Rodham] Clinton. They were gracious. We had a wonderful time. We took pictures with them.

WHITE

It's great that you've had the experience of interacting with so many presidents. That's quite unusual.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. And President Reagan, too—I forgot him.

WHITE

So back in the Eisenhower era, times were actually changing a bit for black Americans in the film industry. For instance, Dorothy Dandridge starred in *Carmen Jones* in 1954 with Harry Belafonte.

NICHOLAS

Dorothy Dandridge starred in *Carmen Jones*, and she was nominated for [the] Best Actress [Academy Award].

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Yes. She didn't win, but she was nominated. That was a big step forward, even being nominated for Best Actress.

WHITE

Did you and your wife have a lot of interaction with her and Harold at that time?

NICHOLAS

Oh, we became very good friends. Dorothy and my wife Geraldine were best friends, the best of friends. Dorothy was crazy about Geraldine because Geraldine was a college graduate and she reads a lot. Even today, she's always reading books and everything up to date, in politics and everything. And she's very, very bright. People would like to come to see her and to talk to her because they learned so much from her. Very intelligent. I remember there were times when guys would come to see her and they tried to hit on her, but she knew how to keep the distance. And she'd talk to them and they would start listening to her. They'd learn new things from her and so they didn't think about hitting on her anymore. They'd leave and then they would call and say, "May I come over? I'd like to talk to you." She'd say, "Sure, come on over." So they'd come over and it was only to learn something from her because she had all this information.

WHITE

So she quite an intellect.

NICHOLAS

Oh, she was very intellectual, yes. And I learned so much from her. I remember one time I was getting ready to go to the William Morris Agency here and she said to me, "Why don't you tell them so-and-so—" I forget what it was—"—and see what they think." And I listened. I said, "Geri, that's a good idea. I'll tell them about that." So I went to the William Morris Agency and told them her idea, but it was like it was mine. I came back and I said, "Look, they

liked that idea that you just told me." And she said, "I thought they would, Fayard." The thing was she would never say "It was my idea" when I'd tell people about it. She was happy that it was coming through for me, and never would say, "That was my idea." No, she let the people think it was mine.

WHITE

She was quite supportive to you as a wife, obviously.

NICHOLAS

Yes, she was. She was.

WHITE

She bore you two sons and actually helped to sort of raise the boys at a young age when you were in Europe and taking care of your career.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, she was a good mother.

WHITE

I understand, though, in 1956 you both decided to call it quits.

NICHOLAS

Um-hm.

WHITE

And got a divorce.

NICHOLAS

Yes, because she called me and said, "Fayard, I still love you but today I'm not in love with you." And I knew the difference.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

I knew exactly. I knew that we could still be friends, but no romance. And I understood that. She said, "When I get a divorce from you, you'll be the first

one to know." I was in Madrid, Spain, and she sent me a cable and said, "Fayard, the divorce is final." At the time, she was with Leo Branton.

WHITE

Oh, okay. Her current husband.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, her current husband. He's a big-time lawyer. She married him. It was a funny thing. When I met her in Chicago, they were going together.

WHITE

Is that so?

NICHOLAS

I took her away from him.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness. [laughs]

NICHOLAS

But how about him! He has a lot of patience. He waited. He waited.

WHITE

So she was really his special lady.

NICHOLAS

Oh yeah, because when he found out that we were separated, ooh, he started moving in.

WHITE

Moving in for the kill.

NICHOLAS

For the kill.

WHITE

Do you recall how you felt at this point in time?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I didn't feel—

WHITE

Did you feel relieved that you could go ahead and live your life as a bachelor?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I didn't feel good that she divorced me. I didn't feel good at all, but I kept living. It wasn't the thing that—like, "Oh, this is the end of my life" and "Oh, what am I going to do now?" But I knew I could always depend on her if there was anything I would want. She'd be right there. We were still great friends. So it gave me the courage to go on with my life. Then I met my second wife, Barbara.

WHITE

Right, later on.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Barbara January, who became Barbara Nicholas.

WHITE

Exactly. That was, I guess, in 1967 when you married her?

NICHOLAS

I married her in 1967, yeah.

WHITE

Well, let's see. After your divorce you continued traveling, and then I suppose a couple of years later you came back to the States and I understand that Harold wanted to launch a solo career in France after being told that Sammy Davis, Jr. would be a star, but not him. Does that sound familiar?

NICHOLAS

That's what they told him.

WHITE

That's what they told him.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, because my brother didn't take any of that jazz from those guys, and they said, "That's all right. We'll make Sammy Davis a star."

WHITE

When you say "those guys," who are you referring to?

NICHOLAS

I'm talking about those gangsters who were running Las Vegas, because that's where we were doing our thing at that time in the fifties. We did shows with Frank Sinatra and Jeanette MacDonald and other celebrities, so we didn't just take that type of thing— Like, they were rubbing our heads for good luck. "No, man. You don't do that to me." And they said, "Oh, really? Well, I do it to Sammy." "Well, that's Sammy. You don't do it to me." And they said, "Well, all right, we're going to make him a star." "Well, okay."

WHITE

Interesting. Of course, Harold was very interested in having a singing career at this point.

NICHOLAS

Oh, he always wanted to have a singing career. There were times that he would make records. He made records for the Decca Records company. He did that. And, oh, we made an album, the two of us. In Sweden we made an album that was released in this country on Mercury Records. Well, in that album he did most of the singing, but we'd do some songs together. And I would do one by myself. And we'd do sort of a talking type of a song, like conversation. We'd do things like that in this album. It was about twelve songs on this, a long-playing record. They don't have those anymore, long-playing records. On the cover of this album it said, "We do sing, too. —Nicholas Brothers." And they have us jumping up in the air in the same color on this album.

WHITE

Interesting. So I understand that between 1958 and, I believe, 1964, you and Harold had parted as a team. Harold was in France and you were touring in those days.

NICHOLAS

Oh, in the fifties. I left Europe—I think it was in 1958—and he stayed. I told him I was homesick. I wanted to come back home. So he said, "You're going home. Take care of the business and I'll come later."

WHITE

And when you say "come home," where did you come? Did you live in Los Angeles at this time?

NICHOLAS

Um-hm. I lived down [inaudible]. Let me see, I think I was still staying on Van Ness. Yeah, I think I was. Now let me see— No, wait a minute. No, I wasn't.

WHITE

After your divorce.

NICHOLAS

Because I had divorced. No, I was staying with my sister [Dorothy Nicholas Morrow]—my sister and her husband [Byron Morrow]. I stayed there when I first came back to this country, the United States of America. I stayed with them and that's when my girlfriend Vikki was with me.

WHITE

Right, Vikki Alvarez.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Vikki Alvarez. I stayed with her and then we went to Mexico and we went to a little town that was near Juárez, Mexico. And I did a show with her at one of the— it was across from Texas. I forget the name of the city in Texas.

NICHOLAS

Across the border in this nightclub, where I was performing with Vikki Alvarez, mostly Americans would go there and so we'd do our act in English.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

Because it's close to the border and this is a nice nightclub in Mexico, and so a lot of Americans would go there. And the Mexicans would go there, too, those who spoke English—and maybe those who didn't. But they just wanted to see these entertainers. I remember, just before I opened there, Earl Grant— Do you remember Earl Grant?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

He'd sing and play the organ. He was there before we were there.

WHITE

Okay. So you were well received in Mexico.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes, yes. I'd go there a couple of nights before he'd close and see his show and talk to him. And then he'd introduce me. So it worked out well. Vikki did all these Latin dances, like the mambo and the [cha-cha] and the rumba. I would get in there and do it with her and do my thing, too, my tap dancing. And I would sing my song. It worked out nice and so I was doing that with her and then we— I was staying with Vikki and her family, her mother and all her relatives. Boy, those Mexicans, they live in this house and it's the whole family.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

They sleep, and they'll even sleep on the floor, everywhere, and so—

WHITE

Well, I'd like to finish up that conversation in our next interview. We're going to have to end the interview for today. Okay?

NICHOLAS

Okay. We'll talk about that.

**1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE
JUNE 8, 2000**

WHITE

I'm at the home of Mr. Fayard Nicholas, once again. Hello, Mr. Nicholas.

NICHOLAS

Oh, how do you do do? [laughs]

WHITE

I'm very well. And yourself?

NICHOLAS

I'm still rolling along.

WHITE

Still rolling along.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. I'm happy as the day is long and I feel like I'm seventeen.

WHITE

Oh, excellent. Wow. [mutual laughter] That's pretty youthful.

NICHOLAS

I hope to tell you.

WHITE

That's terrific. Well, let's see. Last time we spoke last Thursday, at the end of our conversation, you had just basically given me some insight about your travels in Mexico. And you had, I guess, met Vikki Alvarez and you guys had

performed there. So from that point I wanted to just move on back to the United States. From your travels in Mexico, did you come directly back to Los Angeles?

NICHOLAS

After Mexico?

WHITE

Uh-huh.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes, yes. I came back here. After I spent a little time down there with Vikki Alvarez and her family. Oh boy, she's got a big family. Holy Christmas. And there were so many of them, they had to sleep on the floor. Vikki and I, we had our own bedroom. Her mother was nice. We performed in a city across the border from Texas, and it's called Juárez. Juárez, Mexico. We were in this nightclub that really catered to Americans going across the border from Texas, so they had American acts there. And, well, the Mexican people, they would go there too, those who spoke English—and maybe those who didn't speak English, but they enjoyed the music. Just before Vikki and I opened there, there was Earl Grant. Do you remember him?

WHITE

The name is familiar, yes.

NICHOLAS

Earl Grant, he would sing and play the organ. He was good. When he was singing, he sort of reminded you of Nat "King" Cole. He had that type of voice. He was a good entertainer. So Vikki and I, we did our little dance, American and Spanish type of act. [laughs and claps his hands] Oh! We'd show them.

WHITE

It brings back fond memories, it seems.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah, it was good at the time. Vikki was a spitfire. Oh, yeah, so jealous— Oh, my goodness. Well, I had to leave her.

WHITE

Oh, is that so?

NICHOLAS

She was so jealous that— I remember one time we were in Europe together and we were in Helsinki, Finland, staying at this fabulous hotel. An American friend called me, because he was there, and he said, "Fayard, I'm here in Helsinki, Finland. I just arrived here from America. Could we come up and see you?" So I said, "Sure." So they came up and Vikki, naturally, she was in the room with me. He knocked on the door. I opened the door and he said, "Hello." And we shook hands. He said, "I want you to meet my girlfriend." Oh, pretty little girl. And I said, "Oh, glad to meet you." And then she put out her hand to shake my hand. I said, "Yeah, I'm glad to see you." Just like that. Just a few seconds, right? And when they left, Vikki said to me, "You held her hand too long." [White laughs] "It was only a second." So what am I supposed to do, then? Say "I can't shake your hand— My girlfriend doesn't like it"? Oh, I had to get rid of her. Yeah.

WHITE

I noticed in your archival records that you guys traveled to Copenhagen? You guys were in Denmark together performing?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Copenhagen, Denmark, yes, we were there in a review, a Danish review. We were the headliners, we starred in the show. We recreated the number that we did in Stormy Weather on those big stairs.

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

They built them for us. They always wanted us to do that. Wherever we would go, all over Europe. I said to them, "Well, I don't have those stairs." They said, "It's all right, we'll build them." I didn't want to do that damn thing, but they found a way to build them so we could jump up and down those stairs, splitting over each other's heads.

WHITE

That's a signature dance. Everyone is so excited to see it.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I guess it is. Yeah. What a signature!

WHITE

Now at the time you were traveling in Denmark, Harold and Dorothy were traveling with you as well? Is that correct?

NICHOLAS

When I was with Vikki Alvarez, my brother [Harold Nicholas] was divorced.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. He was divorced from Dorothy Dandridge.

WHITE

I see. Do you recall what year Harold and Dorothy divorced?

NICHOLAS

Let me see. [hums for a moment—] Wham! [laughs] Yeah, because they divorced before Geri and I divorced.

WHITE

Oh, they did?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Yes, they did.

WHITE

Okay. Was it around the time that Dorothy Dandridge was in Carmen Jones, in 1954?

NICHOLAS

Oh, they were divorced [by then].

WHITE

By then?

NICHOLAS

Before Carmen Jones, yeah[, in 1950].

WHITE

I see, so quite some time ago.

NICHOLAS

But they were still friends. Now, you're talking about Copenhagen, Denmark?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

We were in Copenhagen, Denmark, at the time that Dorothy Dandridge was flying to Copenhagen, Denmark—

WHITE

Oh, okay, that's probably what your literature was indicating.

NICHOLAS

We found out and we met her at the airport.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

And we took pictures with her and they put it in the Danish newspapers. She was just passing by. She wasn't staying, just going somewhere else—I think to Paris, France, to do a motion picture.

WHITE

Sure. Okay, so you traveled around Mexico and you were in Copenhagen performing with Vikki Alvarez. At what point did you come to the United States?

NICHOLAS

Oh, from Mexico, you're talking about?

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh. Let's see, I was there in 1959. In '59 I was there, and I stayed with her down there until 1960 and I came back to America. I left her down there and I came back here.

WHITE

Did you come to Los Angeles?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. I was always in Los Angeles when I would come back to America from foreign countries—Mexico or Europe. This is my headquarters, Los Angeles.

WHITE

Where did you live at that time?

NICHOLAS

Well, when I first came back to this country I lived with my sister and her husband. My sister, Dorothy [Nicholas Morrow] and her husband, Byron [Morrow].

WHITE

Where did they live?

NICHOLAS

Up in Laurel Canyon, up in the Hollywood Hills. They still live there. So I stayed with them for a while. Then I tried to do a simple act. First I did it with Vikki. We worked at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas.

WHITE

Oh, did you?

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh. We were there with Sophie Tucker and Paul Anka.

WHITE

So there was a point that Vikki Alvarez did come to the United States with you.
And then she went back?

NICHOLAS

Then she went back to Mexico.

WHITE

Oh, okay. And you stayed.

NICHOLAS

And so, yeah, I stayed here. I stayed here.

WHITE

Now Harold, in the meantime, seemed to be doing quite well in Europe.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. He was doing well in Europe. He was making records, longplaying records, and doing his European act. He was singing in many languages. And also English, too, as well.

WHITE

Is that so? He sings in French and other languages?

NICHOLAS

He sings in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and a little English.

WHITE

Does he really? He's quite talented.

NICHOLAS

He's quite talented. And so that's the type of act he was doing. And he would dance, too. He was doing quite well. Then he married this lovely lady of France. Her name was Elyanne [Patronne], and they had a son. They named him Melih [Nicholas].

WHITE

Melih?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Melih. It's a Turkish name. So he was there doing his thing and I was here, doing mine. Burt Diamond, who became my manager, said he wanted to get the Nicholas Brothers back together again. Did I tell you that?

WHITE

No, we haven't gotten to that point, yet.

NICHOLAS

I thought so.

WHITE

Before we talk about that, I wonder if you could tell me how you felt performing without Harold. What was it like for you?

NICHOLAS

Well, I used to perform without him, before we got together. I was performing before I taught him.

WHITE

Right, but you were so much younger then.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, but I still had that same feeling of doing my own thing. I was so young and I could do my own choreography and everything like that. So it was easy for me to do it again, even though I was older.

WHITE

Right. I don't mean technically.

NICHOLAS

What do you mean?

WHITE

I'm sure you certainly had the skills, continued to have them, but emotionally, psychologically—

NICHOLAS

I missed him. I missed him, because whenever I would perform I'm looking for him to be beside me and he's not there.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

"What happened to you, man?" And so, like that. I missed him, but I was still performing and trying to please the audience.

WHITE

Do you recall some of the places that you performed? I understand you did a number of one-nighters in sort of medium-sized nightclubs. Do you recall any of the clubs in Los Angeles?

NICHOLAS

Well, I can't tell you exactly the names of the clubs. I remember I performed in San Francisco, in one of the clubs there. And it was real funny— I'm there on stage just singing this song and I'm doing my dance and I think it was the song [sings the title] "Call Me Irresistible." I did that song and I was dancing and I was having fun. There was this man in a party of six. He looked at me and he said to me, "You think you're good, don't you? Don't you? You think you're good." So I said, "Man, I know it." And the lady beside him said, "I guess he told you." He was being a heckler, so I answered him like that. I didn't want to.

WHITE

That was quite rude of him.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, but he was rude. He said, "You think you're something, don't you?"
"Man, I know it." [mutual laughter] And everybody laughed.

WHITE

Well, my notes indicate that without the team, actually, a lot of the booking agents in this city or in the United States weren't as enthusiastic about the whole notion of tap dancing or hiring one of the Nicholas Brothers, as opposed to the team. What are your thoughts about that?

NICHOLAS

[laughs] Well, I could understand. When you see me by myself, you're thinking about my brother, as a team. Through the years, they had never seen me doing a single act. It was a little hard. Burt Diamond, who became my manager, he was taking me [to do] club dates, and introducing me to many, many important people. It was pretty good. It could have been better.

WHITE

Sure. At what point did you sever the relationship with the William Morris Agency and move over to Burt Diamond?

NICHOLAS

Oh, that was when I came back here, to the USA. When I got back, the contract had just expired. Then I got together with another agency called the Associated Booking Corporation. Joe Glaser was the president. He really ran that agency, and he became a partner with Louie [Louis] Armstrong.

WHITE

Oh, did he?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Louie Armstrong said to him, "Joe, listen, I don't know what to do with all this money." He said, "Just give me \$1000 for pocket money and you take all the other [money] and put it in a bank as a joint account with you. Just put it all in the bank." And so Joe Glaser did that. It was wonderful, because that was money for Louie Armstrong's wife. Louie Armstrong passed away and she got all that money, and Joe Glaser saved it for her. Isn't that nice?

WHITE

That's great. It's a nice story. It's an unusual story in Hollywood.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, very unusual.

WHITE

That's for sure.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, because see, Louie Armstrong, he trusted Joe Glaser and they worked well together. Joe Glaser kept him working all the time. Louie Armstrong never did rest—he was working from this date to that date.

WHITE

So then you were introduced, I would imagine, to Burt Diamond by someone in that circle?

NICHOLAS

No, I wasn't introduced to him. I was in that drug store at Sunset and Fairfax, called [Thrifty Drug store], I think.

WHITE

Yeah, it's still there.

NICHOLAS

It's still there, yeah. They didn't change the name, did they? To—

WHITE

Maybe Rite Aid.

NICHOLAS

Rite Aid, yeah. I was in the drugstore and I was looking at postcards of Los Angeles. He saw me looking at these postcards and he approached me and he said, "Aren't you one of the Nicholas Brothers?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "What are you doing now?" I said, "Oh, I'm doing something here and there

and in other places." He said, "Where's your brother?" I said, "He's in Europe. He's coming back here sometime, but he's doing well over there." And he said, "You haven't been thinking about getting back with your brother?" I said, "Sure, that would be fine." He said, "I'm going to get the Nicholas Brothers back together." I said, "That would be great, if you can do it." Then he said, "Well, in the meantime, I'll see what I can do with you until we get him to come back." I said, "Okay." And so he took me over to the Hollywood Palace building [now the Palace] where they did the TV shows. You heard about this variety show called [The] Hollywood Palace?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

So he took me over there to meet all the producers. At that time I was slim and trim and I looked good. So I walked in and met the producers. They looked at me and said, "You look good." And I said, "Well, what other way am I supposed to look?" They said, "Well, we thought we'd see an old man come in here with a cane and he can hardly walk." I said, "Listen, this is me. I feel this way all the time."

WHITE

You were just in your early fifties at that point.

NICHOLAS

You think so? That was in 1964.

WHITE

Oh, okay, yes.

NICHOLAS

Right, was I in the fifties?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

I don't know what age I was.

WHITE

Yes, you were fifty.

NICHOLAS

Thanks for the arithmetic. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

No problem.

NICHOLAS

They said, "Yes, you look good." And I was dressed sharp, too. They said, "Would you get up on stage and do a little something for us?" So I got up onstage and I sang a song and I did a little number for them. And they said, "Ah, that's great, Fayard, that's great. But it would be much better if your brother was here." [laughs] He said, "Don't you think you can get him to come here from Europe?" I said, "We'll try. We'll try to see what we can do." And I said, "Wait a minute. If he doesn't come here, will you still have me on the show?" And they said, "Yes."

WHITE

Oh, good.

NICHOLAS

They said, "Yes, if he doesn't come, okay. But you will try, won't you?" I said, "Yes, we'll try. We'll try." So we called him. At the time he was in the south of France. I think he was in Nice or Cannes, one of those cities. Burt Diamond called and he talked to his wife in Paris—because that's the headquarters, in Paris—and she told him that he wasn't there but he would be coming in tomorrow. So Burt Diamond called the next day and talked to my brother and he said, "I got a good deal that you can come to America and do this Hollywood television show with your brother." Then he told him that everything was, like, first class tickets, airline, first class hotel, they can sign the check for room service, they can send a limousine for him. "All these things, you don't have to spend any money at all." And he told him what a good salary he was going to make. Oh, that sounded good to him.

WHITE

What an incentive.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. So my brother said, "Honey, would you like to go to America?" She said, "Oh, yes, I would like to go to America." He said, "I'm going and I'll make all the arrangements and I'll send for you to come. And you bring Melih." That's their son, Melih.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

And so he arrived here, in LAX [Los Angeles International Airport]. I met him at the airport. And it was— What airline was it? Pan Am [Pan American Airlines]. I don't think there is Pan Am anymore, is there?

WHITE

I don't think so, no.

NICHOLAS

No, and I met him there and they took pictures of us at the airport. We were in a dance pose. They put it in the newspapers and all that. After he got settled in the hotel— it was the Knickerbocker Hotel. It's right there in the area of the Hollywood Palace; he could come out of the hotel and just walk to the theater. So we were there and we were rehearsing. We got together with a music arranger, and [laughs] we did the dance that we did in Stormy Weather. They wanted those damn steps.

WHITE

Once again.

NICHOLAS

Once again. Oh, my goodness. They said, "Oh, we'll build the steps."

WHITE

Oh, no.

NICHOLAS

I'm trying to get out of this thing. "Oh, we'll build it for you." Okay. All right. So that was the first time that we did The Hollywood Palace television show and we did that number.

WHITE

Did you really? You guys were still able to perform it?

NICHOLAS

We were still able to perform it.

WHITE

Wow, that's incredible.

NICHOLAS

And, boy, I was so thin then— I was thinner than my brother. Now he's always been smaller than me. So we went to wardrobe to get measurements and all of that, and found out what outfit we would wear. Now, a show before we did the show, they had special costumes for little boys, so they tried these costumes on us. And they found out my waist— Well, the trousers were too big for me. They had to take the waist in. They had to do it for my brother, too. And it fit fine. So the wardrobe lady came to our dressing room and gave us the trousers. My brother, he was looking at the trousers and he said, "These are mine." I said, "I don't know. I think they're mine." And he said, "Oh, come now. Give me that." And he put them on and he couldn't button it. He couldn't button the trousers. I said, "Let me try." So I put them on. Wham! I could button them. He said "What?" because he's always been smaller than me. I said, "My waist is just smaller than yours. That's it. I'm a little taller than you, but it seems as though my waist is smaller than yours." And he was flabbergasted. He couldn't understand that because he's always been smaller. So we got into these costumes and we did The Hollywood Palace show and they loved us.

WHITE

Did they?

NICHOLAS

They loved us. And so they asked us to be on another show. And on that show, we did "My Kind of Town"—[singing] "My kind of town, Manhattan is—" [substituting name of own home town for Chicago]

WHITE

Do you remember what show that was?

NICHOLAS

That was the one with, let me see— He plays the piano and he's a comic. Victor Borge. He was the master of ceremonies and the star of that particular one. Now the first one we did was with Ed Wynn, the first television Hollywood Palace show we did, with Steve and Eydie—Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gormé. They were in the show, too, with Ed Wynn. Ed Wynn was the star of the show. That's when he welcomed us back to America. He was talking to us and he said, "Harold Nicholas was in France—very successful. He made a special trip to come back to America to perform with his brother." And he said, "Here he is, ladies and gentlemen, with his brother, Fayard Nicholas, the Nicholas Brothers." That's where he brought us on. Then the second show was with Victor and that was great. That was great. When we did all of those splits and we went over to shake Victor's hand after we finished the routine, he said, "Those famous Nicholas Brothers. They jump like it was ten feet high right down to the stage." And he said, "If they jumped any higher, there would be four Nicholas Brothers."

WHITE

So it seems like this was a very exciting time for you to be reuniting with Harold.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Yes. And then we did another Hollywood Palace show. Oh yes, they liked us very much and this is when we did the song "That Old Black Magic." [singing] "That old black magic—" And then we did our dance. We did our dance. That was with Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, the husband and wife team, the cowboy. They were the stars of that particular show. And it was fine. My brother was supposed to go back to France after the first Hollywood television

show. Then the producers said, "We'd like you to do another show." And then we did the third one.

WHITE

Did his wife and son remain here with him?

NICHOLAS

His wife came over later and then they decided that they wanted to go to Las Vegas, because they heard that Las Vegas had changed from the way it used to be, as far as race was concerned.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

They found out that now you could stay in any hotel— There was one time that every hotel had black entertainers, all headlining—Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte. At different hotels. Sammy Davis, Jr., the Mills Brothers, and others, they were starring in all of these hotels. And here, these hotels are making all of this money with all of these black entertainers and they're going to tell them they can't stay in the hotel? And they're making money for these people? That was when it stopped, this segregation. It stopped.

WHITE

Right, and the Civil Rights Movement at that point in time—

NICHOLAS

Right. And all of that, yes.

WHITE

It was one of the most important decades for African Americans in the twentieth century.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Oh, right.

WHITE

It was definitely sort of an evolution of a black cultural aesthetic, and there was a resurgence of interest in black entertainment and black art and that sort of thing. So I'm sure that would account for a lot of the entertainers headlining in Las Vegas.

NICHOLAS

Right, because they helped. And my brother and I, we helped too, to break down this type of thing.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Yes, so my brother went to Las Vegas, and he liked what was going on and he decided to stay, so we opened up at the Desert Inn hotel with Pearl Bailey and did our show with her.

WHITE

Were you able to stay at the hotel?

NICHOLAS

Yes. Oh, yes. Sure, this was in 1965. And things were better.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

Much better. Everybody got together. Maybe the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] was a part of this, where they built this hotel in Las Vegas. It was called the Moulin Rouge.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Remember that? It said, oh, okay, we can't get what we want at these damn hotels on the Strip [Las Vegas Boulevard]. We're going to have our own hotel.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

And so they built it and it was great. Gee! All of the entertainers from the Strip were coming there after they would finish their shows, because the Moulin Rouge would stay open all night. Gambling and everything. And all of these stars would just come over there and just have a ball. They would get up on stage and entertain. Sammy Davis, Jr. and Steve and Eydie, and— What's his name? He plays the trumpet and he sings. What's his name? You don't remember, huh? Oh, damn it. I know his name so well, because he sang [singing], "That old black magic has me in its spell"—and his wife would sing with him. Man, I can't think of her name now. Isn't that a drag? I can't think of their names and I know them. It'll come to me. [Louis Prima and Keeley Smith]

WHITE

It's okay. For the record, we hear Catherine [Hopkins] Nicholas's voice in the background, Mr. Nicholas's wife.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, oh there she is, isn't she?

WHITE

Just for the record.

NICHOLAS

Boy, isn't she pretty? Ooh, I'm a lucky guy, huh?

WHITE

Yes, you are.

NICHOLAS

Look, she's much taller than I am. Guess what she tells me? She says, "Fayard, you're ten feet tall." CATHERINE

NICHOLAS

You're the tallest man I know.

NICHOLAS

Oh, I'm the tallest man that she knows.

WHITE

That's terrific, that's terrific.

NICHOLAS

Oh, I was thinking about this man, Louie Prima.

WHITE

Oh, okay. The name comes back to you, okay.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, he would go to the Moulin Rouge in Las Vegas. Now this hotel was like it was on the other side of the tracks, but it was a place just like the other hotels on the strip, exactly. And everybody went there. And then all of the managers of all the other hotels heard about this and said, "What is going on? All of you are going over there and performing for nothing and we're paying you millions of dollars over here. You're going over there and giving your talent to them for nothing."

WHITE

That must have started quite a bit of controversy.

NICHOLAS

Oh, controversy. So they had to cut that out.

WHITE

Oh, really? The performances at the Moulin Rouge had to be cut out?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, cut out. They're going out there and not getting paid.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

They're just going over there and having fun and getting up there and doing the same act that they do in the other places, and they're paying them all this money on the Strip and they're going over there and doing it for nothing. So they cut that out. Well, I could understand that. So the hotel, it folded. It stayed open as a hotel, but it didn't have the entertainment like they used to have, where they had their own special shows, something like a Cotton Club review, with all the beautiful girls—showgirls and dancing girls—and their own show. Then afterwards all of these entertainers would come from the Strip and go there and that's another show. With all these entertainers, all these headliners, like maybe Wayne Newton would be there and Louie Prima and Sammy Davis, Jr. Oh, Sammy, he just loved to entertain. He didn't care if you didn't pay him anything. He just loved to entertain.

WHITE

This reminds me of the Cotton Club, with all of the black entertainers kind of getting in one place. Of course, it was a different time, different era, but it still reminds me of it.

NICHOLAS

It does. Oh, yes.

WHITE

So how long did you guys stay in Las Vegas?

NICHOLAS

We opened up with Pearl Bailey and did our show and then my brother— They decided to move there, he and his wife and his son. And then we went to— Let me see, where else? We went to the Flamingo Club and we were performing there with Larry Steele. Did you ever hear of him?

WHITE

Larry Steele, no I can't say that I have.

NICHOLAS

Larry Steele, he always worked in Atlantic City at a club they called Club Harlem, and we worked there with Larry Steele before we worked with him at the Flamingo in Las Vegas. We did a show there, in the lounge. And we worked there and then we worked at the Castaways. The Castaways hotel, there with Louie [Louis] Jordan. We worked there and then we worked at the Thunderbird hotel. We worked there.

WHITE

You guys were quite busy.

NICHOLAS

We were quite busy. Then we went to the Landmark [hotel]. We worked at the Thunderbird with— Well, the first time we worked at the Thunderbird, was in the review called The Ziegfeld Follies of 1965.

WHITE

Yes, of course.

NICHOLAS

We did that one and we came back again to the Thunderbird and worked with Della Reese. Uh-huh. Then later on we went to the Landmark and worked with Redd Foxx.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness. You guys were certainly very busy.

NICHOLAS

So we were going from one hotel to the other and then we— Oh yeah, we worked at the Sahara [Hotel] with this guy who had this puppet called Madam something. Do you remember that? What was it called? Madam— I can't remember the name. I'll think about it later and tell you. But we worked there. This was the first time we danced with the film that was made in New York for Warner Brothers [in 1936] called The Black Network. And we were singing the song and dancing to "Lucky Numbers." So we showed that film at the Sahara Hotel on the screen. We did the same dance on stage that we're doing on the screen. It was the first time that we did it. And then we continued doing it at other places. Now the first time that we performed this at the Sahara, they cut

off the sound of the movie and the orchestra played the same arrangement that the orchestra played in the film.

WHITE

That must have been terrific.

NICHOLAS

It was terrific. But I said, "I like it better the other way."

WHITE

Oh, did you?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, just the song and the taps were there, too. All right there. So we did it that way. Oh, okay. We didn't have to have music to give to the orchestra. It made it better, because if we wanted to do it that way all the time, we'd have to be carrying this music around and giving it to musicians to play and maybe the orchestra isn't big enough.

WHITE

Sure, it becomes too problematic doing it that way.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, so let's leave the sound on of the film and just dance with it like that. So that's what we were doing.

WHITE

So tell me, did you actually move to Las Vegas also, or were you commuting?

NICHOLAS

I was commuting, and they—my brother and his wife, Elyanne, and their son, Melih—stayed there. I'd come back to Los Angeles because this was home to me.

WHITE

You would come back and still reside with your sister, Dorothy?

NICHOLAS

No, I found other places to stay.

WHITE

Oh really? Where did you stay at that time?

NICHOLAS

Oh, sometimes I would stay with my mother in Compton. That's where Mother was staying. She had a house there that we had bought for her, so I'd go stay with her, because she had three bedrooms, so it was easy for me to stay with her.

WHITE

There was a certain point in time where she moved from the home on Van Ness over to Compton? What period was that?

NICHOLAS

Oh, that was like— Let me see now. That was like in the fifties. Yeah, it was, in the early fifties.

WHITE

Oh, okay. You guys moved her over there.

NICHOLAS

We were in Europe. And just before we went to Europe, we saw that she was well taken care of. It was in the early fifties, yeah.

WHITE

Okay, so you would come back to Los Angeles and you would stay with her. And who else?

NICHOLAS

I'd find a place to stay. I don't remember where it was [mutual laughter], but I'd find a little place to stay for a while and I'd give it up and go back to Vegas to be there with my brother.

WHITE

Oh, okay. So what were your thoughts about what was going on in the Hollywood film scene? Like, for instance, Sidney Poitier, he had been in *Lilies of the Field*, I think in 1963—

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh, he won [the Academy Award for Best Actor].

WHITE

—and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, in 1967. Yeah, what were your thoughts about what was going on in Hollywood at the time?

NICHOLAS

Well, I wasn't doing any movies at the time and all of a sudden— I had this agent, her name was Lil Cumber. She had me going on interviews and all the things like that, and then I went to be interviewed by William Wyler, the great director who won Oscars [Academy Awards] for *Ben-Hur* and other movies. So I went to his office. Lil Cumber arranged it. We were there and he didn't ask me to read or do anything. He was just talking to me. So I told him what I have done, that I've done a little acting, like in the movie *The Big Broadcast* of 1936. I did acting in that. I was in shows like *Babes in Arms*. I was acting in that. And I wanted him to know that I was an actor.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

See, I acted in *St. Louis Woman*. I had my part in that. My name was Barney in that and my brother was named Little Augie. So it was still the Nicholas Brothers, but the Nicholas Brothers were singing, dancing, acting, and doing everything. So I told him this. I told him this, that I've had my experience in acting. I knew that this movie would call for dramatic acting. I said, "I can do that." And so we talked and talked, and he was looking at me, and then we finished and I left. I was staying at my sister's at this time. And Lil Cumber called me the next day and she said to me, "I want to tell you something." I said, "Yes, what is it?" She said, "You got the part." I said, "You're kidding."

WHITE

Excellent.

NICHOLAS

"You got the part for—" "The Liberation of L.B. Jones, that's the one you're talking about?" "Yes." She said to me, "I think I know why you got it." I said, "Well, why did I get it?" She said, "Because you fit the role of this character in the story. His name is Benny. You're five feet four [inches], you're slender, and your complexion is the right complexion." She said, "It wasn't because you told him what a great actor you are. He liked the way you looked." [laughs]

WHITE

That's half the battle, though.

NICHOLAS

And she said, "If there's any acting to be done, he can bring it out of you, because he's a great director. But he just wanted that look."

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

And I said, "Well, I'll be damned. Well, this is the first time I didn't have to read and do an audition." They just looked at me and said, "You're the one that we want in this film."

WHITE

That's terrific.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, like this film I'm doing now.

WHITE

Right. Right.

NICHOLAS

Because the writer, he had me in mind.

WHITE

Exactly, when they actually did the casting.

NICHOLAS

Well, that's the way to go. That's the way to go. I used to go on these things where you'd audition. And they'd give me the script. So I'd look at it for a while and then they would call me into the room where I'd see all these guys sitting around. And they're just looking. They're looking like to say, "Give me blood."

WHITE

Right, entertainment.

NICHOLAS

They don't smile at all.

WHITE

It's very intimidating.

NICHOLAS

You say, "Hello. Good afternoon." They say [in dour voice], "Good afternoon." That's it. No smiles. And it's like, "Go on. Give me blood." And I'm reading this script and it's a two part script. There's a lady involved. Now, a man is reading a part for the lady. I'm supposed to read this and give them all [this] emotion and he is reading the lady's part and doesn't give me anything. He's just reading. No emotion or anything. But I'm the one who's supposed to give all the emotion.

**1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE TWO
JUNE 8, 2000**

WHITE

You were saying about your audition.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, yeah. Like I said, I was in this room with all these men. The producers and maybe the director. They are all there. And I have this script to read to them and there's a lady's part in the script. So there's a man who's reading the lady's part. Now I'm supposed to give all the emotion of how this should be done. But he doesn't feed me anything. He's just reading, just like he's reading a book. And so I'm supposed to give all the reaction there. I was never good at auditions, never. So I didn't get the part. I didn't get the part. A lot of times when Lil Cumber would call me and say, "Fayard, you must go on this interview. I know you got it. This is for you," she's saying it like they really picked me. And so I get there and I see this long line of actors for this one part. I thought I was just going on in.

WHITE

Like you did with L.B. Jones.

NICHOLAS

Like I did— Yeah, right. And so I was disgusted. I said, "Here we go again with this same thing." So I'm looking at the script and there's a lady's part in it, too. I said, "It's going to be the same thing. It's going to be a man." So I go in and there they are, the same way, like "Give me blood." And I get there and I sit down and I look at the script and here's this guy with the script. I said, "I'm sorry, fellahs. I don't need this. Thank you. Goodbye." I walked out.

WHITE

Did you? Good for you.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. I knew the same thing was going to happen. Why should I waste my time? You see, because they will interview all these different actors for the same role and then they will pick who they want. There are some actors who are good at that, at these auditions. The one that they pick may be the wrong one. He's good at reading, but when he gets before the camera he's not the same. Now maybe they should have picked me for going before the camera, but at the readings I'm no good at all. My brother-in-law, Byron Morrow, who's married to my sister, he's an actor. He's good when he goes on these

interviews, but he can do it both ways. He'll read and give them a good performance at reading and when he's on camera, he's good.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

That's good. But I'm only good on camera, not reading. He was telling me about this wonderful Shakespearian actor, Maurice Evans. Did you ever hear of him?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

He said that he and Maurice Evans went on this thing and were reading the part. The both of them had lines together they were going to read, and he said, "Fayard, you know how good Maurice is when you see him on that screen—oh, he's wonderful. But when he's there reading," he says, "for instance [speaks in stilted voice], 'the boy went to the store.'" He said, "He would be reading that way—

WHITE

Oh, no.

NICHOLAS

Instead of giving the performance. He said, "When he's reading, he's terrible. But when he's on that screen or on stage, he's marvelous."

WHITE

Sure, it's a different skill.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, but you see, when he's reading— He said, "Fayard, he's terrible." And so the producers, they know that he does great performances, so they don't say he's not good because he doesn't read well. They say, "We know he's going to

be good." So he's just reading what the script is all about, whatever it is. So he said, "Fayard, don't feel bad. Maurice Evans doesn't read, either."

WHITE

Okay. So tell me now, how was your experience in The Liberation of L.B. Jones? That was with Lola Falana, if I'm not mistaken. How was your experience in that film?

NICHOLAS

Oh, we had a wonderful time. Wonderful time. It was— Barbara Hershey was in it and Lee J. Cobb. Let's see, who else was in it? All well-known actors. Yaphet Kotto—He was also on this TV series not too long ago—

WHITE

Homicide.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. He also was in the film. And Lola Falana, and let me see who else. The guy who was the Bionic Man [on the television series The Six Million Dollar Man].

WHITE

The Bionic Man? Lee Majors?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Lee Majors. He was in it, too. All these well-known actors were in this film, and there I am, Fayard Nicholas, one of the Nicholas Brothers, doing the dramatic part without singing or dancing, uh-huh. It worked out well. Everybody connected with the film liked me, and I saw they were praising me and everything. Then we had a reception where they invited the press, and naturally they wanted to talk to everybody. So they started to talk to me, and I told them about the story and the part I played and how everything— And then they'd say, "Hey, now we know something about the story," because I was telling them everything about it, all the details. The actors, they didn't tell them anything. They were just there posing for pictures.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

And they wanted to know more about it. Then I thought I would be getting more parts, but nobody called me up.

WHITE

Exactly, in your archival records, it said that you looked for other roles based on your success in that film, but no one called.

NICHOLAS

Nobody called me. I guess Lil Cumber was still trying to get me in other films. But she did get me on a Bob Hope television [special].

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

At that time Sammy Davis, Jr. was the special guest on the Bob Hope show. And so I had a little part in there with Frenchy. Do you know a dancer, his name is Frenchy? They call him Frenchy.

WHITE

No, I don't. I have not heard of him.

NICHOLAS

No? His— Oh, I can't think of his real name, but they call him Frenchy. He was also in the show. Let me see, how did it go? I think it was the thing where Sammy Davis, Jr. was looking for a dancer and I was Frenchy's agent. And Sammy said, "I want this dancer." And I said, "Oh, Mr. Davis. I've got the man for you. Here he is. He's a dancer. He can do this. He's done that." And then I go and show him, "This is what my man can do." And I'm dancing. My dancer is just there looking, and I'm dancing. "He does this and he does that." And Sammy said, "Oh, that's great. You're good." I say, "Wait a minute, it's not me. He's the dancer." But I had shown him what my dancer does.

WHITE

Right, as his agent.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, as his agent. Oh, that was funny.

WHITE

That's interesting. That sounds like a fun experience.

NICHOLAS

I did that. That was one of the shows I did by myself, and Lil Cumber, she got that job for me.

WHITE

I'm sorry, who got the job for you?

NICHOLAS

The Lil Cumber agency. Oh, she's still an agent, and she books for commercials and television and movies. All those types of things. So she did some nice things for me.

WHITE

Now, I get the impression, based on some of the archival records, that at that time many black Americans saw the Nicholas Brothers as sort of an old stereotype from an unenlightened Hollywood time.

NICHOLAS

Who saw that? Who?

WHITE

In some of the archival records.

NICHOLAS

Really? Is that what they said? You mean, these were black entertainers, not the white entertainers?

WHITE

Not necessarily entertainers, just black Americans in general. They saw the brothers as an old stereotype.

NICHOLAS

Oh, you mean like the ones who payed the money to see?

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

And who said that?

WHITE

I don't have specific names. It's just the general feeling that—

NICHOLAS

But the general public had that feeling that— Say that again.

WHITE

That they saw the brothers as an old stereotype from sort of an unenlightened Hollywood era.

NICHOLAS

Oh, stereo? What do you mean stereo? What is that? I don't know that.

WHITE

Well, stereotype in the sense of the idea that the style of tap dancing that you guys performed was of another time, of another era, and they associated it with sort of a Steppin Fetchit, stereotypical kind of a performance.

NICHOLAS

Oh, now how could they say that? We were nothing like that. And then, in that way, they were not only talking about the Nicholas Brothers, they were talking about Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, because we were all in that area. During that time we were very popular: Nicholas Brothers, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Bill Robinson, and Eleanor Powell and Ann Miller. We were all in that area at that time, and we were all very popular. People were paying to see us. So how

they were putting that— Oh, they wanted to get to what they— Rock and roll was their thing.

WHITE

Probably, at that point in time, yeah.

NICHOLAS

And the rapping.

WHITE

Well, rapping came a bit later, in the eighties, but in the seventies there was another sort of black aesthetic coming around where— There were a lot of independent films, for instance, being made and a lot of more independent actors and that sort of thing. Like, for instance, the black exploitation films, like *Superfly* and *Shaft*. So it was a different kind of an era with a more current mindset.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I remember, I saw those movies.

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

There were a lot of those movies.

WHITE

Yeah, a lot of them. What are your thoughts on some of those blaxploitation films?

NICHOLAS

Well, they were all right. *Shaft* was the first one that I payed any attention to. Then they went on to these other types of things they do, like a gangster type of thing and—

WHITE

Superfly

NICHOLAS

Superfly. And Cotton Comes to Harlem, or something like that? Then they had Pam Grier in—

WHITE

Coffy. [mutual laughter]

NICHOLAS

Coffy. They wanted to make film after film after film. I was never approached to play in any of those films.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

I guess they were just thinking of my brother and me as singers and dancers.

WHITE

That's true.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and maybe that's why we weren't called.

WHITE

Do you think you would have agreed to perform in some of those films?

NICHOLAS

I don't know if I would have or not. My brother, he was in Uptown Saturday Night with Bill Cosby, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier.

WHITE

Exactly.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Well, how would you classify that film? Would you classify it with those others?

WHITE

Oh, no. No, it wouldn't be considered blaxploitation, no.

NICHOLAS

Well, they did call my brother for that film.

WHITE

That film, *Uptown Saturday Night*, had more of a humorous sort of comedic flare. There was a certain formula that was associated with black exploitation films, and this one didn't fit into that genre.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. But I can't understand how they were sort of putting down the Nicholas Brothers and what they did, and all of a sudden what they were doing didn't have class—The Nicholas Brothers had class. I don't understand how they were going to put us in that type of category.

WHITE

Different generation. Different things were important to different people at that time.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, but isn't it something? Today they're still showing our films. Every day they're showing our films on television.

WHITE

Oh, yes.

NICHOLAS

And this young generation today, they like it.

WHITE

Absolutely. I think it was just this period in the sixties and seventies, when there was such change and such turmoil, particularly in the black American community. What had happened in the thirties was not necessarily appreciated, because they were so involved with what was happening at that

point in time. But in the 1980s, of course, we see a resurgence in tap dancing, a resurgence of interest and the popularity of tap dancing. You know, The Tap Dancing Kid and Gregory Hines and a number of other different vehicles that sort of brought it back to the forefront. People developed a deeper appreciation for it in the 1980s, but the 1960s and seventies, I think, were very particular, special decades that didn't really appreciate the history and the talent of the people in the 1930s during the Harlem Renaissance, you know, performers like yourself. Let's just backtrack for a few moments. We've been talking about what you've been doing in your professional career at this point in time. I know that you got married again, to Barbara January, I believe back in 1967.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

WHITE

Okay. All right. Can you tell me about that? How did you meet her?

NICHOLAS

Well, the first time I met her I didn't know I did. [laughs]

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

We were in New York City—in Manhattan, that is. There was a club there where Bill Bailey— Do you remember him?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Pearl Bailey's brother, he was appearing there. I went by to see the show and they had all of these lovely girls, like dancing showgirls, and Barbara—she was Barbara January at the time—was in the show. She wasn't a dancer, but the choreographer arranged it so it looked like she was dancing, because she'd walk across the stage. She was a model.

WHITE

Right. A very famous model, I understand.

NICHOLAS

Yes, she was, so she knew how to walk, and she would walk in and he'd show her a little step that she could do. And so she was in this show. After the show all of the girls came over to our table and wanted to talk to us, and so we got acquainted. Bill Bailey came over, too. So my brother and I said, "Let's go have breakfast"—because it was like four o'clock in the morning. The shows run late, there in New York. I said, "Let's go." So we went to one of the restaurants and invited all the girls and Bill Bailey and everybody else to come over and have breakfast with us. So they did. And that's how I met her, but I didn't know that I had met her. I was in Las Vegas at the Desert Inn and we were playing there with Lionel Hampton and Freda Payne. And after we did our show, we were working in the lounge. Lounge was big in those days.

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Like in the sixties. We went to the restaurant in the hotel. I was sitting there with two of these tall showgirls. I had a blond on this side and a redhead on the other side, and I'm sitting right in the middle there—we're there talking and having our Coca-Cola. All of a sudden I see this pretty little girl with a man and I'm looking and I just said, "Hello, there." She looked and she saw me and she said, "Aah." And she came running over and she's pushing the other girls so that she can sit down. [mutual laughter] Not really like that, but she wanted to— "I want to sit here and talk to Fayard." So she started talking to me. She said, "Don't you remember me?" I said, "No, I don't." And she said, "Don't you remember when you came to this nightclub to see Bill Bailey? I was one of the dancing girls in the show." I said, "You were?" She said, "Yes, don't you—?" And she told me all of it: "Don't you remember you invited all of us to have breakfast? You took us to a restaurant?" I said, "I remember that; I don't remember you. But I'm happy to meet you." She was with her ex-husband, named Caleb Peterson. You ever hear of him?

WHITE

No, I haven't.

NICHOLAS

No? He was like an opera singer. Yes, and he— Caleb Peterson. And so she was there with him and she said, "We came in to have a little bite." I said, "Well, get your table and I'll come over later." So they went and got their table and I'm still with these two girls. And I said, "Girls, I'm going over to see my friend and I'll see you a little later." I left these two gorgeous girls to go with another gorgeous girl. [mutual laughter]

WHITE

Poor thing.

NICHOLAS

I went over and started talking to them. I asked them what they were doing here. They told me that Caleb Peterson was doing a concert, and she was helping to sell tickets. She said she was like his secretary because she took care of all the paperwork and the business. She told me where they were staying—it was a hotel there—and she let me know right away they had separate rooms. There was no hankypanky just because they used to be married. They weren't together anymore.

WHITE

She wanted to make that very clear.

NICHOLAS

Very clear. And I found out that they were divorced, and they weren't together in any way and they weren't trying to get back together. It was just business. I said, "Would you like to go out with me, say tomorrow?" And she said, "Yes. Just call me." She gave me the number and everything. So we started going to different places. I took her to— I think it was the Dunes Hotel, which isn't there anymore; it's torn down. We went to the Sky Room and there was this big orchestra there. Let me see, I forget the name of the orchestra. And we danced. Oh, we just had a wonderful time. We danced and

so I said, "Would you like to go other places with me?" So we did. We were going to the different hotels, and we didn't gamble, because I don't gamble.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

I just like to see other people losing their money. I say, "Oh, you sorry soul. Oh." I say, "Do like I do. Keep the money. Don't give it to them, because that's what you're doing. That's why they can run these hotels, because you're coming in here and giving all your money to them when you gamble."

WHITE

That's for sure.

NICHOLAS

There are some who hit the jackpot. Very few, though. And I think that's why they keep coming back. They say, "Oh, he won that. He won one million dollars! Let me go there. Maybe I can do it, too." So everybody has a chance.

WHITE

Right. So you guys were spending a lot of time in Las Vegas, but you were living in Los Angeles.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I was living in Los Angeles.

WHITE

Okay. But you spent quite a bit of time in Las Vegas?

NICHOLAS

Yes, the only time I would say I might be living there was that when I'd be doing a show for maybe a month or two months, I'd have a place to stay.

WHITE

I see. Okay. So at what point did you decide that you wanted her to be your wife?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I was in Atlantic City appearing at the Club Harlem with Larry Steele, who was a producer of the show. We were in that show, oh, I think it was two months, two months or more. And we were always being the featured act, but each week, they would bring in another star, like what's her name, Dionne Warwick. Dionne Warwick would be there and Slappy White. Slappy White and the Nicholas Brothers stayed for the whole two or three months.

WHITE

You said "Slappy White"?

NICHOLAS

Slappy White used to be with Redd Foxx. They were a team.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

So we'd perform each week, and Barbara, she was there with me. She would come to see the show in Atlantic City. We became very good friends. We went to Philadelphia, where one of her sisters stays. There were five sisters. Vivian [Vaughters] was the one that stayed in Philadelphia. She had sisters that stayed up in the Bay Area, San Francisco. Another one stayed in San Bernardino, and there was one staying in Los Angeles and Barbara would be staying— She stayed in Los Angeles. She had her own apartment. So she was visiting her sister Vivian in Philadelphia. Barbara and I were so close that when we would go to her sister's house—with her husband—she had a special room for us. Now we weren't married, but we stayed together. And I guess because her sister liked me so much, that was all right. So we were driving in the car— Vivian was driving and she said, "Why don't you two get married?" Just like that. I said, "Well, yeah. How about that?" Barbara said, "Well, I guess so," and Vivian said, "Don't worry about it, I've got it all fixed." She called the preacher and everything, took us to the church and got us married.

WHITE

You're kidding. And where were you? You were in Las Vegas at the time?

NICHOLAS

No, this is in Philadelphia. I met her in Las Vegas. We kept corresponding. We'd call each other. And then when I started doing shows in Atlantic City, we'd get together and we'd go to Philadelphia and her sister arranged where we'd get married.

WHITE

Wow, how'd you feel about that?

NICHOLAS

I felt good.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

But after we got married, we got into the car and Barbara was saying, "Did it happen?" She was confused. "It did happen." I said, "Yeah, we're husband and wife now."

WHITE

Wow, boy!

NICHOLAS

And she was still flabbergasted. I said, "Wake up, Barbara. It really happened."

WHITE

Oh, sort of knocked the wind out of her.

NICHOLAS

That was in 1967.

WHITE

Right. Where did you guys make your home?

NICHOLAS

Well, I stayed in her apartment right after we got married—

WHITE

In Las Vegas?

NICHOLAS

No, no. In Los Angeles.

WHITE

In Los Angeles. She had an apartment in Los Angeles, okay.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, you're getting the two cities mixed up.

WHITE

Okay, I'm clear now.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I told you what happened in Las Vegas, then we went to Atlantic City, and we went to Philadelphia and we got married. And now we're—

WHITE

In Los Angeles.

NICHOLAS

In Los Angeles now. So we stayed in her apartment.

WHITE

Where was her apartment?

NICHOLAS

It was really in West Hollywood.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

On Harper Avenue. It was a duplex apartment—we stayed upstairs and we had a little terrace where we'd come out and sit down and have chairs and the

table, and drink our lemonade or whatever and look out and see all the other people walking and the cars going by. It was very nice. She had a very nice apartment, so I stayed with her and we were there for a while. I remember when I was doing The Liberation of L.B. Jones we were staying there.

WHITE

Oh, okay. So you were close by.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that was in 1970.

WHITE

Right, exactly. Okay on that note, we're going to go ahead and end the interview for today.

NICHOLAS

Okay.

**1.15. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE
JUNE 15, 2000**

WHITE

How are you today?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I'm still rolling along.

WHITE

Good, good. Glad to hear it. Well, the last time we spoke, we wrapped up our conversation really just talking a bit about some of the blaxploitation [black exploitation] films that were out and just chatting a bit about that. So I want to move on from there and talk a little bit with you about some health challenges that you had around 1975. You had some arthritis in your hips.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes, yes. When I first realized that I had arthritis, I didn't know what was happening with me. It must have been in 1973, I think it was. I was still

working with my brother [Harold Nicholas] and doing these splits and things like that and we were doing a tour with Sammy Davis, Jr., theater in the round, and we went to Europe with him. And here I'm in pain trying to do these things that I used to do and I'm just having trouble. And so my brother said, "Don't do that. Just let me do it." He said, "When I go down in the split, you bring me down in the split with your hands and then when I come up, you bring me up with your hands." And it worked out well and all the other things I could do pretty good, just tapping, because I did impressions of all the different dancers and I had special music to do it. My brother would sit offstage on a stool as I'm doing these different impressions—like I'd do Bill Robinson, Fred Astaire, Roy Bolger, Gene Kelly, Eleanor Powell, Jose Greco. And sometimes, when I'd— Maybe I'd do Ray Bolger and my brother would say, "Oh, I know who that is. Oh, yeah. That's Bob Hope." And then the audience would laugh because they'd know that's not Bob Hope. That's Ray Bolger that I'm doing, and they recognize everything that I'm doing. And that was fine. But sometimes, to do those splits, there would be— Like my brother and I would do a run and split and slide. Well, I would just run and he'd go down and slide and I'd come up and shake his hand or something. So it worked out fine. But then it was too bad. And Sammy Davis, Jr., he could see what was happening. It was in 1975 that I just said, "I can't do it anymore." So it was like I was going to retire. My brother, he did a single, because he's really versatile. He's a great singer. He sings in five languages and he was doing his single act. Some places, if there's a stage large enough to dance, he would dance a little bit. But he would do these supper clubs and all he'd do is sit on the stool and just sing. Just sing. He's a great entertainer. So in 1975 it was 10 years that I was suffering. I remember my brother and I, we were out here and they were doing this film called *That's Dancing* produced by Jack Haley, Jr. It was over at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, when it was [still] Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, out there in Culver City. It had all the dancers you could think of. Everybody was there. Oh, gee, Sammy Davis, Jr. was there, Paula Kelly, Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Gene Nelson, Buddy Ebsen, Shirley MacLaine, and every dancer you could think of. We were there. And we had a luncheon there, at Metro. They took pictures of all of us. I was walking around with my cane. Roy Bolger saw me and he said, "Well, what's the matter, Fayard?" I said, "Ray, I have arthritis." He said, "You have arthritis?" I said, "Yes, I have." He said, "Fayard, I have arthritis, too." I said, "You do?" Then he started

dancing, kicking up his legs and turning. I said, "Wait a minute, how can you do that and you have arthritis?" He said, "Fayard, I had an operation on my hips. That's why I can do that. You should have it done, too." Now you see, I didn't want anybody cutting on me.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

I didn't know, because maybe they'd cut on me and maybe I'd be worse. So that's why I wasn't so cool about having this operation. And Gene Kelly was there and Jack Haley, Jr. and they said, "Listen to Ray, Fayard. Have that operation." And so I started thinking. So when I went back to the Motion Picture and Television [Fund] Country House, I talked to the board of directors and said, "I think I want to have an operation on my hip." So that's fine. They said, "We know the doctor who would do this for you. His name is Dr. Koshak." And I said, "Okay." So I got in touch with the doctor, I found out his telephone number and we got together. I went to the hospital, the Northridge Hospital, out here in the [San Fernando] Valley, the city of Los Angeles—I always put that in because people don't know that all of this is the city of Los Angeles.

WHITE

Right, that's correct.

NICHOLAS

We talked, I listened to him, he listened to me, and he told me what would happen, complications there could be. He said, "But I've done this operation many times and there hasn't been any trouble." But he just wanted to let me know what could happen.

WHITE

Certainly.

NICHOLAS

Then he said, "I want you to go to the clinic and have them draw your blood, because if we have to have a transfusion, we have your blood, no other

[person's]." So I went for four weeks; four pints of blood, I think. But it was lucky—I didn't have to use it.

WHITE

Good.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. So I went there to have the operation and I said, "I'd like a spinal. Give me a spinal, I want to be awake when this goes on."

WHITE

Oh, you're kidding.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Well, I couldn't feel anything, see? And so they said, "Okay. We have a lady who's a specialist in this type of thing." So she said "Bend over" and she put the needle in my spine. She said, "Don't move." I said, "I'm not going to move!" I could feel the needle as it was going in, just a pinch. And then the anesthesia. I was numb from here down.

WHITE

Oh, my.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and then they took me to the operating room and the doctor was there. "Hi, Doc!" [laughs] There were two of them there. They had a screen in front of me so I couldn't see what was going on. So they started doing the operation on the right hip. The nurse was coming by and saying, "How are you doing, Mr. Nicholas?" "I'm doing fine." And she'd come back again, and I was talking to her and telling her jokes and we were just laughing and carrying on. Five times she was coming by, saying, "How are you doing, Mr. Nicholas?" I said, "I'm doing fine, sweetheart. But tell me, how are they doing?" And she said, "Don't worry about it. They've done this many, many times so you have nothing to worry about." After it was all over the doctors came over to me and said, "Well, that's it. It's finished." I said, "How long did it take?" They said, "Two hours." I said, "It felt like fifteen minutes." Well, I guess I was just having so much fun with this nurse, I didn't know what time it was. The time was just

going by, yeah. Then they took me to my room, there at the hospital, Northridge Hospital. I was there and I was thinking in my mind, "Now when the anesthesia wears off, there will be no pain." That was in my mind. "No pain." And there wasn't.

WHITE

Really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, no pain. During the time that I was recuperating, all the nurses would come by. Like two of them would come by and I'd have them laughing and carrying on. Ah, they were having so much fun. And one of them said, "I'll be right back." And she went back and she brought some other nurses. So I did my show [mutual laughter] with all these nurses. Oh my goodness, there must have been about six, seven, or eight of them. They were all there having fun with me. And there I was recuperating and I said, "No pain." No pain. Now they're saying that "we don't want you to stay in bed and just to feel sorry for yourself or anything. You must get up and walk." Yes. So the next day they got me up right away.

WHITE

The very next day?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, with a walker. So I was walking around. After that, they had me on the crutches, and after the crutches, the cane. So I was in Northridge Hospital for ten days and then they transferred me to the hospital out there, the Motion Picture and Television [Fund] Hospital. I was there seven days, going through therapy and all the different things and getting stronger and better and just walking with my cane now. They released me on a Tuesday from the Motion Picture and Television Hospital and Thursday I was on a plane going to London to do a special television show called Cotton Club Remembered.

WHITE

You're kidding.

NICHOLAS

No. I was doing it with my brother. It was at the Ritz Hotel in London, where the queen would go every afternoon to have her tea. [mutual laughter] I was doing the show with my brother, with my cane and tapping. The cane was making more taps than my feet.

WHITE

Okay. Well, this was within three weeks of the surgery, right?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, how about that!

WHITE

That's terrific. You're pretty resilient.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I guess I healed easily.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and these operations were six months apart, because then I had the other hip done.

WHITE

Okay, right.

NICHOLAS

So it was great there in London. We had a great time. Cab Calloway was on the show and Adelaide Hall and Max Roach, the drummer, and the trumpet player— let me see, I think his name is Chi Chi, or something like that. Very good trumpet player. And we did this show. First it was shown in England and then here, I think on PBS—that's KCET, channel 28. So that's what happened. Six months later, I had the other hip done and went through the same thing, spinal and all of that.

WHITE

You had a similar recovery time with the second one?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and then I thought the same thing. "There will be no pain. No pain." The nurses were coming around all the time and I was entertaining them. And with the walker and the crutches and the cane. Then after I was getting better we were doing shows out there at the Motion Picture and Television Country House every year. Paula Stone was the producer of this show; she would write it, she would choreograph it, and be the mistress of ceremonies. She did the whole thing and she always asked me to be a part of the show. So now I was better. Yeah, I was better now and dancing a little bit, and so I would do these shows every year with her and this time I invited my doctor to come and see the show. Yeah, I invited him to come and see the show. And I was performing with a little girl. Her name is— I have got to find out her name. Oh, it's been so long ago.

WHITE

No problem.

NICHOLAS

I think her last name is Lane. Her first name— I'll find out.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

We were doing this number together and it was like a little soft-shoe that we did. And after we did the soft-shoe she said to me, "You don't need that cane." Because I was dancing with the cane. She said, "You don't need that cane." I said, "Yes, I do. This is my crutch, it holds me up. I can't dance without this cane." She says, "Oh, yes you can." And she took it from me and she threw it off the stage. And then I was without the cane. Holy Christmas. I said, "What am I going to do?" She said, "Go on. You can do it without the cane." I said, "Okay." And I started dancing. Well, I could dance better then than I can dance now.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

And I went through— [makes tapping noises] and I did the old standby [hums the "shave and a haircut" beat]. And the audience— [clapping] "Yay! Yay, yay, yay!" Then we did another number together, and I did this number without the cane. I would dance around her, then she would go up and I'd follow her, and I'd look at the audience and I'd say, "Later."

WHITE

She was right after all.

NICHOLAS

I went to my dressing room when the show was over, after we did our finale. And my doctor came by and he says, "Oh, my goodness. Everybody, they were pulling for you out there. Performing without your cane, and you're out there dancing like a teenager and everybody's thinking, 'I hope he doesn't fall.' There were tears in their eyes." And he said, "I almost had a heart attack." He was pulling for me. "Oh my goodness. I hope he makes it." And he said, "Oh, Mr. Nicholas, don't ever do that again. Please don't do that." I said, "Doctor, I know just how far to go. I know what I can do and what I cannot do. You have nothing to worry about. I know exactly. I'm not going to do anymore of those splits. I'd be crazy to do that." [laughs] He said, "Okay, Mr. Nicholas. Just take it easy, because you were one of my special patients."

WHITE

Aw, that's nice.

NICHOLAS

So that's what happened with this operation.

WHITE

Overall it was a pretty good experience. I mean, it relieved a lot of the pain and the recovery was very short.

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh. And let me tell you this— I get x-rays of my hips every year.

WHITE

Okay, good.

NICHOLAS

And they're still in place. That was in 1985, and this is the year 2000, and they're still in place.

WHITE

That's great. Fifteen years ago. Yeah, that doctor was quite accomplished and proficient.

NICHOLAS

Oh, he was wonderful. Wonderful. He doesn't practice anymore now, he's retired. I'm so thankful for him because, like I told you, I didn't want to have this operation.

WHITE

Right. Speaking of which, let's just back up for a few moments. I understand that before you actually decided to have a hip replacement in 1984 you actually moved to the Motion Picture and Television Fund Country House.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, in 1984. Yeah.

WHITE

From my research it says that one of the reasons you decided to move there is because you had been robbed when you were living in Hollywood.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, oh my goodness. Yes, it was terrible, it was terrible. It really was terrible. I was living with my mother in Compton, California. I remember the first time that they broke into the house. I was going to take my laundry to have it cleaned at one of the places where you can do it yourself— Laundromat they call it, don't they? As I was driving away I saw all these guys were outside— talking like they do, talking about girls or whatever. I saw them looking at me as I was driving away. All of them stopped talking and were just looking at me.

I didn't realize what was going on, so I drove away. They were watching me to find out when I would leave the house. They made up their minds to come and rob it, because they thought I was a millionaire.

WHITE

Okay, sure. Fayard Nicholas.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Fayard Nicholas. So after I washed the clothes and everything, and I came back and looked, the front door is open and the place is just torn up. They stole the television and the radio. They tried to get the couch out of the place, but it was too big. They couldn't get it out the door, because they had to do things fast, you see. Maybe they could have gotten it out if they had had more time. But they had moved it and the couch was in the kitchen; they tried to get it out the back door. And then my music was all on the floor. And they were searching for money but there wasn't any money. My wife Barbara [January Nicholas] was also staying there with me. She had some money, but she put it in something like a box of cornflakes or something and put it up on the shelf. That's the last place they would look for money. I knew where it was so I looked up there. The money was still there. "Ha, ha. You guys weren't so smart after all."

WHITE

Exactly. Outsmarted the robbers.

NICHOLAS

I can get another television set and radio. But all my music was all over the floor. I had to pick it up and put it back together.

WHITE

It's an awful feeling. You feel so violated.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and that was the first time that someone broke into the house. Then I put bars on the windows and the doors. That didn't stop them.

WHITE

They came again?

NICHOLAS

They broke the bars, yeah.

WHITE

They broke the bars?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Boy, they were desperate.

WHITE

Sure, they were determined. That's for sure. So that, of course, prompted you to decide to go ahead and move, and move into the retirement community.

NICHOLAS

Yes, when I found out about the Motion Picture and Television Country House, I went to the office. There was an office on La Brea [Avenue] and Beverly [Boulevard], and I went by and spoke to this lady. Her name is Veronica. I said, "I'm thinking about moving out there, to the Motion Picture and Television Fund [Country House]." And she said, "Okay. Here's the application you can sign. I want to tell you this— It's going to take about four or five years before you can move out there." I said, "Well let me sign now. I don't want to wait ten years."

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

And I said to her, "Can my wife move out there with me?" She said, "Yes. Bring her in tomorrow." I said, "Okay." So I took her there and introduced her. I said, "This is my wife, Barbara. This is Veronica." She looked at Barbara and she said, "Oh, Mr. Nicholas, oh, she's very pretty." I said, "Well, thank you." She said, "But she can't move out there." I said, "Well, what do you mean she can't move out there?" "She's too young." I said, "Well, if she can't move out there, I don't want to move out there."

WHITE

Certainly.

NICHOLAS

And she said, "Take it easy, Mr. Nicholas. I'll see what can be done." So she called me back in about three days. We went to the office and she said, "I have some news for you, Mr. Nicholas. Your wife can move out there with you." I said, "Oh, that's great. But I still have to wait for four or five years." She said, "Yes, maybe so." So she said, "Well, we'll keep in touch." I said, "That's fine." And then in about two weeks, she called me again to come to the office. I said, "Okay. What news do you have for me now?" She said, "Mr. Nicholas, you can move out there now." I said, "Wait a minute, what strings did you pull?" She said, "I'll tell you this. They have double cottages out there that are empty. Nobody's living in them. The long line is the single people, they're waiting. But these double cottages are there and nobody's living in them, so they decided that you can move out there with your wife now."

WHITE

Oh, excellent.

NICHOLAS

And that was in 1984. We signed the application in 1984 and moved out there in 1984. That was in July. They gave us a month to get everything, because I said, "Wait a minute." [laughs]

WHITE

It took you off guard a little bit.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it took me off guard. I said, "I've got to get all my things." They said, "Well, they'll give you a month to move your things out there." I said, "Well that's fine. That's fine." So that's what happened. And I got my sons to help me move out there because they had a truck so that we could move clothes and everything. When I first moved out there, I was moved to cottage 51. There was a couple who was in this cottage, and they were moving out of the cottage and going back to this jungle where we are now.

WHITE

Oh, okay. The urban sprawl.

NICHOLAS

So we saw it and said, "Oh, that's nice, very nice." So we got our pictures together and put them up on the walls, and we moved into cottage 51. And it was fine. It was fine— We met all the residents and got acquainted with everybody and met Paula Stone, who wanted to do the shows at our theater out there, called the Louis B. Mayer Memorial Theatre. That's where we performed. This is the theater where we show first run motion pictures every Thursday and every Sunday, first run, just like they are in the big theaters. We get them at the same time. And the studios donate these films to us; we don't have to pay for them. And the residents, when we go to the theater to see these films, it's free for us. If we have friends who would like to come and see they can come with us, as long as they're with us, and go in free. But there are people who will come who would like to see these movies, because when they go to the first run theater it costs \$8.

WHITE

Sure, \$8.50.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, something like that. So when they come to our theater, they can donate what they want to. They can give \$2 or maybe \$5. See, they don't have to pay \$8.50. Whatever they want to give—\$1. And go right on in. Give whatever you like. And so it's nice, it's nice. And we've got the hospital right there. If you're sick and if you're not really bad, you can walk to the hospital and see the doctor. Of course, they have little cars, like a little tram, where you can get on and they drive you over to the hospital.

WHITE

It's a very special place.

NICHOLAS

Very special. Very.

WHITE

In fact, I know that it's one of the only industries—film and television, obviously—with a retirement community and a hospital that work without the benefit of government funding. It's one of the very few.

NICHOLAS

One of the very few. Yeah. It's like— If you want to retire, that's the place. You see, you have to be in motion pictures or television for twenty years. Then you become eligible to move out there.

WHITE

Right, you also have to—

NICHOLAS

And they take good care of you, yeah.

WHITE

Exactly. It's my understanding that you also have to have earned more than half of your income from movies and television.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Well, when I was making motion pictures, something came out of my check every week, and it went towards the fund.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

That's why I can move out there, because all my money's there.

WHITE

This is an investment you've been making for a number of years. That's your place.

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

You and all the residents.

NICHOLAS

That's my place, right.

WHITE

Well, let's see. So things continued along from that point and you had your surgery in 1985. Now around this period of time it seems there was a resurgence of interest in tap dancing. Sort of a revival in the theater world. I think there was a play called *My One and Only*. There was *The Tap Dance Kid* and *42nd Street*.

NICHOLAS

And then there was *Sophisticated Ladies*.

WHITE

Exactly. And Gregory Hines sort of brought the notoriety back to the forefront.

NICHOLAS

Let me tell you this story about Gregory Hines. Gregory Hines retired and he was here in Los Angeles, that place in Los Angeles called Venice.

WHITE

Yes, it's a beach community.

NICHOLAS

By the beach. He was there like a *maître d'*[*hôtel*] in this restaurant and he was playing drums, had his combo. He was just having fun, just having a ball. He used to work with his father and his brother.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

And they called the team—let me see, what did they call it—Hines, Hines, and Dad. Dad played the drums and the boys would sing and dance and do their thing. All of a sudden they separated, broke up the trio. And so Gregory just

wanted to do what he wanted to do. He went out to Venice there and became this maître d'. He'd invite people as they would come and he would seat them where they wanted and all that, and then he would do little shows for them. And all of a sudden they were getting a show together they called Eubie! And it was a musical about Eubie Blake.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Like this song he wrote, "Memories of You." Do you remember that show?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

Maurice Hines was rehearsing for this show and the producers loved him. They were crazy about him. Now, Henry LeTang was the choreographer for the show. So Henry went to the producers and said, "Look, this will be a better show if we had Gregory Hines in the show with his brother. It would be the Hines Brothers." And they said, "Fine. Oh, that's great. Oh, we're crazy about Maurice. That's fine. Why don't we send for Gregory to come here and be in the show?" And so the producer said, "Okay. We'll send for him." So they sent for Gregory to come to the theater to be there. They were there for rehearsal and they said, "Okay, Mr. Hines, get up and just do something for us." So Gregory went up and he was just doing like this [demonstrates], real nonchalantly. No energy at all, because he's one that doesn't like to rehearse. My brother doesn't like to rehearse, and some other dancers, they don't like to rehearse. When it's time for the show, wow, they give their best performance. So Gregory was doing like that, just taking it easy. And so the producer called Henry over and said, "Listen, this guy is no good. Look at him." Henry said, "He's fine, he's fine, don't worry about him." He said, "Yeah? I don't like him." He said, "Listen, tomorrow, we'll come and see—" So the next day Gregory gets up on stage and he's the same way. He doesn't do anything. Just like this, so unconcerned. [The producer] said, "Henry, come here. I told you this guy is lousy. Now Maurice is great. He's wonderful. He's very

professional. He does everything well." And so Henry said, "Listen, I'll tell you how much faith I have in this man. If he doesn't do a good show, you can have all of my salary. That's how much faith I have in him. I know he's great." He said, "What? You will give all—" He said, "Yeah. You can take all of my money. That's how much faith I have in him. I know how great he is." And so they did the show. The producer said, "If he likes him that much, he must be something." Gregory was the best thing in the show. He got the best write-ups. When he gets on that stage he gives his all. Naturally he worked with his brother. But then they both did solos and Gregory did his solo and the people just went wild about it.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and so that started Gregory back. He might still be in Venice if they hadn't called.

WHITE

Maybe so.

NICHOLAS

So Gregory was getting all this publicity, and then all of a sudden they wanted him to do other shows. Then along came *Sophisticated Ladies*. Then he had trouble in that show, too.

WHITE

Oh, really? For rehearsals?

NICHOLAS

With rehearsals, with— Oh, jeepers, I can't think of the choreographer's name. *Sophisticated Ladies*, they opened in New York, but naturally they go out to Philadelphia or Hartford, Connecticut, and different places as a dress rehearsal before they reach Broadway. Gregory and the choreographer were always arguing. The choreographer—and I think he was like a producer, too—fired him, I mean fired Gregory Hines.

WHITE

Oh, really? From Sophisticated Ladies?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Fired him while they were on the road. I think it was in Hartford, Connecticut. Fired him. "No, I don't like you. Get out of here." And the whole company says, "Wait a minute. If Gregory goes, we go." The whole company said, "We're leaving if Gregory has to leave." And so the producer says, "Come back, Gregory." Yeah, did you hear that? Yeah, he said, "Come back, Gregory. You've got to stay in the show because you're killing me. I put all this money in this show."

WHITE

Then they probably doubled his salary at that point.

NICHOLAS

So the choreographer who did the show was all done now. He said, "I'm leaving."

WHITE

Oh, no.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, he was leaving. So they got Henry LeTang to come in and finish the show.

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. You didn't know that? Yeah. And that's what really started Gregory tap-dancing again. And not only that, they wanted him for motion pictures, as an actor.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

He was such a big hit in New York and then the show came out here to Los Angeles, at the Shubert Theatre. A big success, with Paula Kelly and Hinton Battle. Remember— Hinton Battle, he won a Tony [Antoinette Perry Award] in the show *Sophisticated Ladies*. And I think Gregory was nominated too, but he didn't get it, they didn't give it to him. So that was good publicity for Hinton Battle, and the show was a big success. I was there opening night and I went there with Henry LeTang. We were on television and everything the first night of the show. It was a big hit. And then they had a reception right after that with all the cast and we went over to the Beverly Hills Hotel and everybody was waiting for us there. I remember— I remember this so well. Oh, thank you, sweetheart [to his wife Catherine Hopkins Nicholas as she hands him a glass]. Yeah, I need that. Best drink in the world. The best drink in the world— water. I bet you thought I was going to say something else. [laughs] I was there in the lobby talking to the people from the cast of *Sophisticated Ladies*. As I was talking, I turned my head and looked, and I saw this guy way over in the corner there. And it was Fosse, yeah, Bob Fosse. He directed this film *Cabaret*. He won an Oscar [Academy Award] for best director. Now I saw him there and I said, "Hey, come here." So I met him half way. Right away he started talking to me. He said, "Oh, let me tell you something." I said, "Yes, what is it?" He said, "When I was living in Chicago I used to go to this Chicago theater to see the Nicholas Brothers, who were headlining there. At that time you were doing eight shows every day. I stayed there for the eight shows to see you and your brother perform. Because of the Nicholas Brothers and Fred Astaire, that's why I got into show business." And I said, "Thank you. That's a great compliment." And he started praising the Nicholas Brothers. I said, "Wait a minute. Let me tell you something. You have done some wonderful things. You are a great choreographer. You've become a great director. You won the Oscar for best director for *Cabaret*. You won the Tony Award for [Pippin]. You won the Emmy Award for the show that you did with Liza Minnelli [Liza with a Z]." I said, "You won the Tony Award. You won the Emmy Award. You won all of these awards, and every time I see these awards you're running up the steps to go get your award—for the Oscar, you run up again for the Emmy, you run up again for the Tony. It looks like a rerun— You're going up. Every time I see an award show, there you are going up the stairs accepting these awards. Listen, that's so wonderful. That's great." And he says, "Well, it's

because of you and Fred Astaire. That's the reason why I'm in show business." I said, "Well, you've done some wonderful things. I want to congratulate you." That's what happened when I was there to see *Sophisticated Ladies* with Gregory Hines and the rest of the cast. It was so surprising to see Bob Fosse there. They invited me over to the house of one of the cast members. I had my 16mm [millimeter] films of the Nicholas Brothers, and they had a projector for 16mm film. They put on the Nicholas Brothers. Now they were showing the Nicholas Brothers doing the first one, which was *Down Argentine Way*, and as it was going on there was no sound. I said, "What's the matter?" Paula Kelly, she arranged this whole thing. And I said, "Paula, no sound." So they're trying to get the sound together. And I said, "That's all right. Just let it go." Then I started— When my brother starts singing, I sang with it. I said, "Here's the sound." And I'm going with how the music was arranged. I said, "You don't need the sound. I'll be the sound." Oh, they had a ball. In the routine I jump over the handkerchief frontwards and backward. And all the dancers said, "Ah! Rewind that. We want to see that again."

1.16. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO
JUNE 15, 2000

NICHOLAS

We were at this apartment. I think it was Paula Kelley's apartment, because she arranged everything where all the cast would be there and they had me there like a special guest. And I brought my film clips and they were showing all these different films. The first one was *Down Argentine Way*, where my brother and I were singing in Spanish. And there was no sound. I said, "What's going on?" They're trying to get the sound to come on, but they couldn't do it. I said, "That's all right. I'll do the sound." So I would do the way my brother was, singing in Spanish and the little thing where we'd go [does the clicking vocalism from the number] like that. And then we were going through these routines. There's a part in the film where I take my handkerchief out of my pocket. I jump over the handkerchief in the split frontwards, then jump over the handkerchief backwards in the split, and I'm down and I'm out like a Chinese split. And I'm going like this, right? And going right to the camera. All of those dancers said, "Oh, wow. Rewind that. We want to see that again. Just that part."

WHITE

Wow. That was a terrific experience.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. We had so much fun. And then they showed other clips of my brother and me and so I did the sound for those movies, too. A silent movie with Fayard Nicholas's sound.

WHITE

You were the sound director. Well, let's see now. So from that point, I understand that in 1987 you danced with Chuck Green and Jimmy "Slyde" Godbolt at the Kennedy Center Honors and everybody was really thrilled to see you dance after you had had your two hip replacements. Do you recall?

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. That's when President [Ronald W.] Reagan was president, and we were there with President Reagan and the first lady, Mrs. [Nancy] Reagan, and we were paying a tribute to Sammy Davis, Jr. And there we were with Jimmy Slyde and Chuck Green, Sandman Sims, and I think that was it. My brother and me, there we were and we opened up with singing "Chattanooga Choo Choo." My brother and I were doing this. And we were looking up there at Sammy Davis, up there in the balcony seat with the President and the first lady, and we were doing the "Chattanooga [Choo Choo] number", and Sammy would stand up and go like this: [makes high-pitched sound]. He gets excited when it's something he likes. He goes to shaking like this. He stands up and lets everybody see him. Walter Cronkite, he introduced us. He said, "Now we're going to talk about dance. Who could be the ones who represent dance, tap dancing? It's the Nicholas Brothers." Then he brought us on out, and we sang this song "Chattanooga Choo Choo" and then we brought out everybody. We said, "Sammy, this is for you. We've got all these wonderful dancers that you know. And we're going to bring them out." And then I said, "Come on out here, Jimmy Slyde." And Jimmy would slide out. And I said, "Okay, Chuck Green, bring it on out here." And he brings it on out. "Okay, Sandman, the man that dances on sand, come on out here, fellah." They would do just a little dance before they would really make their entrance, and each one of

them did a solo. Each one. My brother was the last one. I didn't because I was still recuperating.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

I could dance, but I couldn't get out there and really do a real good solo.

WHITE

Right, this was just two years after your last surgery.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, right. So I just let all the guys do their thing. It was like this. Jimmy Slyde would do his thing. We had to raise the floor, a special floor to tap-dance on, because they sound better with this special floor they had for us. They even had microphones strapped around our legs.

WHITE

Okay. To illuminate the sound even more.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, so the sound would come over. So they wanted to put it around me. I said, "You don't need it around me because I'm not going to tap. No, I'll go through the motions." And then Jimmy Slyde, he would slide over— I'd be standing and he'd slide over here, and then he'd slide so close to me and I'd jump. That got a laugh, because I'm getting out of their way. [mutual laughter] My brother was the last one to do it. And then my brother, for the finish of his routine he did a long sliding split over to where I was. When he was there, and I could see him making the preparations, I said, "Come on over here, fellah." And he came. [demonstrates the routine they do together] And then all of us got together to do this last thing, the finale of us tap-dancing. We did the BS [bullshit] chorus.

WHITE

Oh, right. I know about the BS chorus.

NICHOLAS

All of us did the BS chorus. And as we went we did a thing where we went off, like this. [demonstrates grand finale] Then we came back and said, "That was for you, Sammy." And applause. We said, "See you later." And then we danced off.

WHITE

Oh, what a terrific event.

NICHOLAS

Oh, that was great. That was the first time that we performed for the Kennedy Center Honors.

WHITE

Exactly, that's what I understand. It was in '87. Well, this was quite a busy time for you. A couple of years later you won the Tony Award for choreography for Black and Blue.

NICHOLAS

That's true, yes, in 1989, yeah.

WHITE

How was that experience for you?

NICHOLAS

Oh, it was great. Oh, I had a great time, being one of the choreographers. There were four of us. There was Henry LeTang, Cholly Atkins, Frankie Manning. Cholly Atkins, he would do the soft-shoe. He would teach all of the dancers. And Frankie Manning, the lindy hop and the swing. Let me see, Henry LeTang would teach tapping with all the kids, the different styles they would do. I was teaching them how to use their hands, and style and class. That's what I was teaching. I remember the opening night I'm sitting there in the theater when these three guys came on stage to do this number, called "I Want a Big Butter and Egg Man," and Kerry Smith was singing it. And as they were coming on, some people in the back of me leaned over and tapped me

and said, "I know you did this choreography, Fayard." I said, "How do you know?" They said, "Oh, they're moving their hands."

WHITE

That's your trademark.

NICHOLAS

That was the trademark, see? So I had them doing that. And I was also teaching Savion Glover, who is the great tap dancer of today—and he's so young. And with him and Diane Walker— Have you heard of her?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

She was my assistant.

WHITE

Oh, was she?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, she was my assistant. I asked that she would be because lots of times I'd do a step and I'd say, "I'm going to sit down and rest a little bit. Go ahead, Diane, you saw what I did. You show it to them." Then when I wanted to do another step I'd get up and start showing and have Diane look at it, too. They all look at it. "You got it? Okay, well let me sit down." So that's how she helped me.

WHITE

Right. That's a true master— You can delegate.

NICHOLAS

So I won a Tony Award for one of the best choreographers. It was so funny. I had so much fun. Oh, just before we went on to watch the show as it was progressing— It was live and we were sitting in our seats as they were saying the different shows of different choreographers and all that. Now just before that happened we were in a dressing room there at the theater. I said, "Now,

if we should win, I know all of you will want to say that you thank everybody, thank the academy, thank the audience. Now who's going to make this speech?" They said, "Well, we won't flip a coin to say who will do it. We'll let the one who's the oldest. Whoever's the oldest, let him make the speech." And that's one time that I was the youngest. [laughs]

WHITE

Oh, you were? Oh, okay. Who was the oldest?

NICHOLAS

Cholly Atkins.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

So we said, "Okay." So Cholly, he had that purpose. After he made the speech and we were there accepting the award— We didn't know we were going to win, but we said, "If we do, who's going to make it?" So Cholly Atkins made it. After the show was over, Cholly wasn't satisfied. I said, "What's the matter? Your speech was nice. It was nice, Cholly." He said, "Yeah, but I was bending over. And I know that mike [microphone] will pick up my voice. I don't have to bend over." You've seen that on a lot of shows. They're bending over. They don't have to bend over the mike, that mike will pick up their voice. Just stand up straight and just talk. But they think they've got to do like this because they're so used to having a hand mike that's right in their face.

WHITE

Right, exactly.

NICHOLAS

So they think they've got to stoop. I've seen some when the mike is way low and they do like this, turn their heads and talk into it, and then some of them will say, "I wish they'd make these microphones higher." They don't know that the voices are picking up.

WHITE

Right. So he was a little unsatisfied because—

NICHOLAS

He was a little unsatisfied because he was bending down. He didn't bend down too much, but he did like that and he shouldn't have. Just stand up straight and just talk—the microphone will pick his voice up.

WHITE

So this was a nice closure to the decade for you, when you got your Tony Award in 1989.

NICHOLAS

Oh, of the eighties, yeah.

WHITE

So now, in the nineties this interest in tap is continuing to build momentum. For the last ten years of your life I know that you have been called upon so many times to discuss your life history—for instance, the book by Rusty Frank, *Tap! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and their Stories, 1900-1955* [New York: William Morrow, 1990]. And actually, Gregory Hines did the foreword for that book.

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

It's very interesting.

NICHOLAS

Very interesting.

WHITE

And it really gave me some insight—and I'm sure, of course, a lot of people that have read it insight—about your background and a lot of the dancers that were performing at the same time as you.

NICHOLAS

Yes, yes, yes.

WHITE

Actually, it was interesting because Rusty Frank said at some point in an interview that you had told her how to "pull the trenches." Is that true?

NICHOLAS

I told Rusty Frank how to do it, yes.

WHITE

What exactly is "pull the trenches"?

NICHOLAS

Well, the BS chorus that every dancer knows, like they know the shim sham shimmy. All dancers know, and they will get on stage and they don't even have to rehearse, because they know these two dances, shim sham shimmy and the BS chorus. And we just say, "Let's do the shim sham shimmy." And the orchestra will strike up and we just go right into it— They don't have to rehearse; they all know it. We all know the BS chorus, as well. Now, in the BS chorus there are four steps that we do. First we start off with the time step. The second step is the crossover step that we do. The third step is a wing. You kick up your leg and the right leg makes that tap. And then the fourth step is like the finale of the BS chorus. We do "over the top." Now we're going for the trenches—we go like that. [demonstrates and finishes up with the "shave and a haircut" beat] Now, that's the BS chorus with the trenches, what we call the trenches.

WHITE

Oh, okay. That was interesting. When I read that I thought, "I'd like to get some clarification on exactly what that is."

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh, it's a slide thing like they do.

WHITE

Sure. Well, I'm sure that that book did quite well. Subsequent to that, in 1991, you and your brother actually received the Kennedy Center Honors yourself. I

understand that, of course, the Kennedy Center Honors were created "to provide national recognition to individuals who throughout their lifetime had made significant contributions to American culture through the performing arts." So at this point in time they decided to honor the Nicholas Brothers.

NICHOLAS

Honor the Nicholas Brothers. When I got this letter from George Stevens, Jr. I looked at it and said, "Wait a minute. Is this right?" So I called him.

WHITE

Did you really?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I called him. I said, "Wait a minute. Didn't you make a mistake?" He said, "No, that's true. You will be honored this year." I said, "My, that's a great compliment. It's a great honor that you're going to honor the Nicholas Brothers." He said, "Yes, it's true. Fayard, at the moment when we all were going to vote for who should be honored this year—" And naturally, it's for classical music, it's for dance, it's for motion pictures and television, it's for theater, and it's for popular music.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

That's the five, yeah. And he said, "When we were deciding who it was going to be, I just mentioned to everybody, 'Well, what about us honoring the Nicholas Brothers?'" He said, "All of them said, 'Yes!'" They weren't thinking about the Nicholas Brothers, but when he mentioned it, "Yes, we shall honor the Nicholas Brothers."

WHITE

It's a unanimous decision.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, a unanimous decision. They didn't have to say, "Well, maybe this one or this one." No— "The Nicholas Brothers, right. For dance, yes."

WHITE

Wow, it was a slam dunk.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, right. They didn't have to write down others. Yeah, so this year it's going to be the Nicholas Brothers. When I called him I said, "It's true?" He said, "Yes, it's true." Now, they took care of everything— The airfare, first class. They took care of the hotel, of a special limousine to take us to wherever we wanted to go and to all of the events, like, they picked us up at the airport with a chauffeur and took us to the hotel. We registered there and then that same day, then we went to the Kennedy Center, and that's when the TV people were there interviewing us and they had a luncheon there. The past honorees were there and the present ones, so they introduced all of them. We had a nice luncheon and then we went back to the hotel and rested. Then that evening we went to the state department and that's when we received our award. Many celebrities speak for each honoree. Jack Lemmon spoke for us and he did a magnificent job. Wow, I wish I could get a recording of what he said about us. He was great. Naturally, there were those who spoke for Gregory Peck and Robert Shaw and Adolf Green and Betty Comden and the country and western singer Roy Acuff. This particular year there were seven. See? Because Adolf Green and Betty Comden, they're a team. Fayard Nicholas and Harold Nicholas, they're a team. It's always five, but this particular year it was seven that were being honored.

WHITE

I understand you guys got a standing ovation.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. After that Gregory Hines came out and started talking about the Nicholas Brothers. He said, "Ah, the Nicholas Brothers. Ah. Oh, we love you." This is one of the things Gregory said— He said when he and his brother were younger and they were doing their act together, he said that everybody said that they would be the next Nicholas Brothers. He said, "I never saw the Nicholas Brothers. I thought my brother and I were pretty good, but we never saw the Nicholas Brothers and we were thinking, 'Wow, everybody's saying how great they are.'" So he said, "I never saw them. And

when I saw the Nicholas Brothers I said to myself, 'Nobody's going to be like the Nicholas Brothers.'" He said, "As for my brother and me, nobody's going to be like the Nicholas Brothers." [laughs] And he went on and said more nice things about us, and then he said, "Now watch the screen." And that's when they showed the film clips. They showed all the film clips and they ended with Stormy Weather and coming down those stairs.

WHITE

Oh, of course.

NICHOLAS

And then after it was over we stood up and the whole audience just stood up, just praising us. And then I hugged my brother and then I turned around to shake hands with the first lady, Mrs. [Barbara P.] Bush. She pulled me over and kissed me. My, I didn't expect that.

WHITE

Oh, really?

NICHOLAS

Oh, no. And it was on TV. Did you see it?

WHITE

Yes, I saw the tape.

NICHOLAS

You did see it. And then I shook hands with the president [George H. W. Bush]. And my wife was there, Barbara was right in the back of me. And my brother's wife was there with him, Rigmor [Newman Nicholas]. It was a great night. It was wonderful. Right after that we had dinner there at the Kennedy Center. The Count Basie band was there, directed by Joe Williams, who was singing all these songs, like "Every Day I Have the Blues." So we had this wonderful dinner, and then we went back to the hotel and rested. Then sometimes [during the annual festivities], if we weren't really sleepy, we'd go out to maybe a nightclub.

WHITE

Okay. What a great experience. Sounds wonderful.

WHITE

Oh, yes. It was wonderful.

WHITE

Yeah, and at that time you were obviously feeling quite healthy. There was an article in 1991 in the Warner Center News * in which you indicated that the doctor says you have the heart and the blood pressure of a twenty-one-year-old.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Yeah.

WHITE

In 1991. So obviously you were feeling real good. Your recovery was going fine.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I was feeling good, then. Oh, I was feeling good. Every time I would see a doctor and be examined, that's what they would always tell me. "You have the heartbeat of a man twenty years old."

WHITE

My goodness, that's quite a compliment.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. "You have the blood pressure of a man twenty years old."

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

I said, "Well!"

WHITE

So you must only be about thirty-one now. [mutual laughter] The accolades continued. In 1992 I understand you guys did *We Sing, We Dance: The Nicholas Brothers*. You did that for PBS that following year.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. *We Sing, We Dance*, now let me tell you something about that. Now my brother's wife, Rigmor Newman, was one of the producers of this *We Sing, We Dance*. They went to all the different networks to get them to put this thing on the air, and they were given this thing about "we'll call you"—one of those things. Naturally, they never called. So they said, "Well, let's go to England. See what they say." They went to England and presented the idea, what they wanted to do. And they said, "Yes." Right Away. That's it. "We'll do this documentary on the Nicholas Brothers." Naturally, it showed in England first and got awards. Then they showed it here, and here it got an award from— Let me see, what award was that? Oh, I can't remember it. Oh my goodness, and I think it was on A&E [Arts and Entertainment network].

WHITE

PBS [Public Broadcasting System]. It was on PBS.

NICHOLAS

Well, you'll find out about that. We received the award. I remember we went down to the— One of the producers was here from England, came here because we were nominated in that category of documentaries. And so I'm sitting there with him. It was black tie. And they named all the different shows. Our show was the *We Sing, We Dance: The Nicholas Brothers*. And I'm listening. All of a sudden this lady, who is in competition, said, "Nicholas Brothers." And I said to the guy, the producer, "Did I hear right? Did she say 'Nicholas Brothers'?" He said, "Yeah, let's get on up there and get the award. So I get up there and this tall, beautiful girl presented us with the award and I said, "Oh, my goodness. Isn't she lovely? Isn't she something?" I said, "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking she's too tall for me, aren't you? Ha? Right? But that's all right. I'll make two trips." [mutual laughter] And so I got a big laugh. So now I do that with Catherine.

WHITE

Right, exactly. Oh, that's a nice tribute to you and your brother.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, so just think— The networks here in America didn't want to know. I had to go to England. And then when I come here, we win for best documentary.

WHITE

Isn't that interesting? It happens like that often.

NICHOLAS

Isn't that crazy? And we went to Canada. We went up there and they gave us the award for best [documentary], yeah.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

Then we found out that in Switzerland they gave the best [documentary] award to this documentary, *We Sing, We Dance: The Nicholas Brothers*. I guess after that, then, A&E—

WHITE

They jumped on the bandwagon.

NICHOLAS

They jumped on the bandwagon and said, let's do [an A&E Biography episode on] the Nicholas Brothers and call it [The Nicholas Brothers:] *Flying High*.

WHITE

Right. They tried to take all the credit. Now, a couple of years later then you guys got your star on the Hollywood [Boulevard] Walk of Fame.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, we got a star in—let me see—it was 1994. It's on Hollywood Boulevard between La Brea [Avenue] and Sycamore [Avenue], yeah.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

It's on the same side of the street as [Mann's] Chinese Theater.

WHITE

On the north side.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. On the other side is the Roosevelt Hotel. That's where they had the first Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] Awards. The silent movie, [nominated for] Best Picture, was called Seventh Heaven, starring Janet Gaynor, and she won for best actress.

WHITE

Right. Janet Gaynor, right.

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh, a silent movie. And the best movie was Wings, starring Clara Bow and Buddy Rogers. That was the silent movie [that won Best Picture]. In 1927.

WHITE

Definitely a very historic period. The hotel has just been really remodeled. I saw your star not that long ago. I went down there to take a look at it.

NICHOLAS

Oh, you saw the star? You walked down there? There it is.

WHITE

That must have been very exciting for you and your brother to receive that.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. Let me tell you this— We should have had that star a long time ago.

WHITE

You're absolutely right.

NICHOLAS

A long time ago. See, they charge like \$4000 to give us a star. Now at the beginning of having a star on the boulevard, nobody had to pay.

WHITE

Oh.

NICHOLAS

No, nobody had to pay at the beginning. I guess they thought it was a little too expensive, so they said, "You've got to have a sponsor [and] you'll pay for it yourself." So that's when it happened. And it's like \$4000. So you get a sponsor [and] pay for it yourself. Now in this year, 1994, Johnny Grant called us and said, "We want to honor you with a star on Hollywood Boulevard on the Walk of Fame." So we said, "Okay." That year, they honored thirty celebrities. And nobody paid.

WHITE

That's peculiar.

NICHOLAS

That is, yeah. Sophia Loren, she was there; she got honored at the same time. I talked to Johnny Grant and I said, "Hey, this is wonderful. We've been wanting this star for so many years, [during] that time that we would have had to pay for it. I remember when we worked with MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] and I was talking to Jack Haley, Jr. He said, 'Fellahs, you've got to have a star. MGM will finance you.' But MGM was having trouble during those days and then the studio just closed down, so they couldn't finance us." I said, "Johnny that's wonderful that everybody's getting a star today and nobody's paying. Next year, it will be the same way, nobody will pay?" He said, "Oh, yeah. Next year, everybody pays." It was just this year that they decided that everybody would get their star. So we said, "Well, we waited a long time, but this is the best time. We don't have to pay that \$4000."

WHITE

That's the perfect time. Oh, my goodness, that's a funny story. So you guys continued to receive awards, the Gypsy Award, the Dance Magazine Award in '94 and '95. Then in 1997 I understand that you had some more health

challenges, in that you actually had a stroke in 1997, actually on the same date as the bombing of Pearl Harbor, December the seventh. Is that correct?

NICHOLAS

Yeah, that's true. That was a bad experience in Pearl Harbor and my bad experience with me having this stroke.

WHITE

Right. Do you recall feeling under a lot of pressure or anything like that? Was your life very full at that point in time, before the stroke?

NICHOLAS

Oh, I was feeling good. That year, 1997, they were honoring the present honorees and past honorees [at the Kennedy Center Honors]. So they had all of us to go on stage. And there they were, and Walter Cronkite was calling everyone out. Like say, "Gregory Peck," he'd come out. Sidney Poitier would come out. "Nicholas Brothers," we'd walk out. And at this time I was feeling so good I just put my cane down. I walked out there on stage without the cane. But my brother had his cane. So I walked out first and walked slow and he followed me with his cane, and there, the Nicholas Brothers were coming up. Right after that, everybody was all on stage. The president [William J. Clinton] was coming out. He was going to make his little speech. And he passed right by me, and he saw me and he shook my hand. And then the first lady [Hillary Rodham Clinton] came, and she saw me and she grabbed me and hugged and kissed me. Now you didn't see that on television because the camera was following the president. He was going over there in the middle of the stage to make his speech. And here I was with the first lady. Well, everybody in the theater saw it, that she hugged and kissed me. We became very good friends. After it was all over we went to have dinner there at the Kennedy Center. And we're there and we're listening to the Count Basie band, Joe Williams is singing, and all of a sudden my wife says, "I'm tired. Let's go back to the hotel." I said, "Okay, all right. That would be fine." So we went and we got our coats. The chauffeur was waiting outside in the limousine, and so we get into the limousine and we said, "Take us to the hotel." So he starts driving and all of a sudden something happens to me. My right arm was like this, it was like lead. I couldn't raise it. My wife saw what was happening and she said, "Take

him to the hospital." So they took me to this hospital, and they had me on this gurney and I was going to the room where I was going to be, and I was looking up at the ceiling and I was trying to talk, and I was going— [makes sounds of garbled speech] I couldn't say anything. I was thinking. I had all my faculties. I knew where I was. I was trying to speak, but it wouldn't come out. I couldn't say what I was thinking. So I said, "Oh, the hell with it. I'm going to sleep." I guess I was sleeping about an hour. My wife called my brother and his wife. I woke up and there they were. My wife, my brother, and my brother's wife. I looked at my wife and said, "Hello Mamacita"—because she's Mamacita and I'm Papacito. And I looked at my brother and I said, "Hello, Little Mo." Now, see, he's Little Mo and I'm Big Mo. And then I looked at my brother's wife and I said, "Hello, Sweden." Now, I call her Sweden because she's from Sweden. I couldn't pronounce her name, Rigmor, so I just called her Sweden. After I had learned her name, she said, "You don't like me anymore? You don't call me Sweden anymore?" I said, "It's Sweden from now on." I still call her Sweden, even though I know her name now. I can pronounce it. So as I'm talking to them, then I realized, "Hey, I got my speech back. I'm talking." Then I started to tell them what had happened. That I was trying to talk and I was going [makes sounds of garbled speech]. And they laughed. I said, "But isn't it wonderful? I can talk again." But this arm was still down like that. I couldn't move it, I couldn't move my fingers. The doctor, Dr. Cox, he came by the hospital. I was at the George Washington University Hospital, and he came by to see me. He said, "Mr. Nicholas, the reason why you had that stroke is because you had a tumor on your heart."

WHITE

Right, that's what I understand.

NICHOLAS

And he said, "I'll have to operate." So he cut me down here and spread my rib cage, and he doctored on that and got it back in shape. Then I was going through therapy and all of this, and still couldn't use this arm. So one morning I could raise it, and then I started doing this. [demonstrates] The doctors would come by and see me and they said, "How are you doing, Mr. Nicholas?" I said, "Oh, I'm feeling much better today. Yeah. I don't like the food, but I'm feeling great. Could my friends bring me some food?" They said, "Sure, they

can bring you food. Yes, that would be fine." And I started to tell them, "Bring me some Chinese food. Bring me some Italian food." I was going overboard. "Bring me some nuts." Like those Hawaiian nuts, macadamia nuts. I said, "Bring me those." And ice cream. I wanted everything. Oh gee, I just went— At that time I only weighed— Let me see, what did I weigh then? At the beginning, I was weighing like 110 [pounds]. But I went down. I went down to 95.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yeah. I was real thin, but I was feeling good, though. I was feeling real good. The doctors came in and said, "You look well." I said, "I want to show you something." They said, "Yes." I said, "Look at this." [wiggles his fingers] They said, "What?" They were so surprised when they saw I could move my fingers. I was in that hospital three months, at the George Washington University Hospital, recuperating. I was doing well. I'd go walking, and they would put a belt around my waist and it would be there to hold me, in case I would—

WHITE

Oh, okay, to keep you steady.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. So I'm walking and they'd be right there to catch me if I did get a little wobbly. I'd do that and I'd do the bicycle—I'd be peddling on that. They had stairs where I could walk up and down. The little nurses would bathe me. They said, "Maybe you can do it yourself." So I'd do my face and do this arm. [mimes washing his right arm] But now I can't do this arm because this hand couldn't work. So they'd have to do that. I learned how to brush my teeth with my left hand, because I'm right-handed.

WHITE

You have to improvise a bit.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. And then when people would come to see me and they'd want an autograph, I had to learn how to write with my left hand. And I tried to imitate my right hand.

WHITE

That must have been a little bit of a challenge.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, it was a challenge. So that's what was going on there. I was getting ready to come back to Los Angeles.

WHITE

Right. February, I believe, of 1998.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, yeah. My son was there with me and he was going to bring me back to Los Angeles. And see, every day they would examine me, take x-rays, and give me my medication, take my blood. All those things that they do in hospitals—weigh me. That's when they found out that I went down to 95 pounds. Because I wasn't eating. I didn't like that food at all, so I'd just eat little bits to survive.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

And so they were looking at these x-rays. And I'm ready. I made the reservation. I'm ready to come back to Los Angeles. And they said, "Mr. Nicholas, we have to cancel your reservation." I said, "I'm ready to go. My son's here. He's ready to take me back." He says, "No, you can't go back right now." I said, "Why?" He said, "From your x-rays, we found out you have a hole in your heart." I said, "Wait a minute."

WHITE

Oh, boy.

NICHOLAS

Oh, wow. I said, "Well, whatever you need to do, do it." So they straightened that out. And Valentine's Day, February the 14th, I was ready to come back. Now just before that, I called my wife, Barbara—

WHITE

We're going go ahead and have to end this particular tape, okay?

NICHOLAS

Oh, okay.

**1.17. TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE
JUNE 21, 2000**

WHITE

The last time we spoke you were getting ready to discuss a little bit about when you were about to leave the hospital after your surgery and you had contacted your wife, Barbara January.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Barbara January Nicholas. [laughs]

WHITE

Correct. Correct. Thank you for that.

NICHOLAS

When I talked to her she sounded fine, real fine, so I thought she was getting better with this illness that she had. And I said, "Oh, that's great." I arrived here in Los Angeles on Valentine's Day, and I had presents for her, cards that I wrote for her. I arrived at the hospital, the Motion Picture and Television [Fund] Hospital, out there in Woodland Hills, in the city of Los Angeles. I always put that in because some people don't know.

WHITE

This is true.

NICHOLAS

They don't know that the San Fernando Valley is the city of Los Angeles, so I educate them. [laughs] So I arrived there at the hospital and they had me in a wheelchair and took me to J wing and had a room for me there. And I'm there and they said to me, "Your wife is here." I said, "What do you mean my wife is here?" "Yes, she's in a room here." I said, "I just talked to her and she sounded so good. She didn't sound like she was really ill." They said, "Oh, yes, she is. She's sitting in the room. She's sleeping now." I said, "Well, don't wake her. Let her sleep. I'll talk to her tomorrow." And then they said to me, "But she's not doing well." I said, "Oh no. Don't tell me that." And so they took me to my room and I slept until the next morning. Then I said to the nurse, "Is my wife awake?" She said, "Yes, she is awake." I said, "Well, you can wheel me over there." So I went over to her and she looked good, she sounded good, yeah. Her family would come. All of her sisters would come to see her. She had one sister from the Bay Area and one sister from San Bernardino, and then another one from Philadelphia and one from out here in Los Angeles. They would come and we'd see her and talk to her and naturally she'd talk with us. We were just having a wonderful time. But she was getting worse every day. Weaker. I didn't feel good at all, because, really, I didn't know how sick she was, and she kept it to herself. She didn't tell anybody.

WHITE

She didn't want to worry you while you were recovering.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I guess she didn't want to worry me while I was recovering, because she was there in Washington, D.C. with me. And she said to me, "Do you want me to stay with you?" I said, "No, sweetheart. You go on back to Los Angeles. I'll be all right now. All these nurses, they'll take good care of me. You go back and take care of your health. You go on back." And she did. It was so wonderful. George Stevens, Jr., who produces the TV show The Kennedy Center Honors when you see it on television on CBS— He arranged where we would have an apartment there while I was in the hospital, and she stayed at this apartment. It was a two-bedroom apartment, with a living room and a kitchen and two bathrooms. Oh, it was great. I never did get a chance to go there. I was thinking about maybe I would go there and be at this apartment with my wife, Barbara. And I never did get there, because I was in this hospital

for three months recuperating. And Barbara would come by and see me. And one of her sisters would come— June came by and June's daughter, Linda, whom I call my niece, would come by, and she has a daughter, whom I also call my niece. Her name is— Linda is June's daughter and Laurie is Linda's daughter. Laurie is a ballet dancer. And so they'd come by and see me and make me feel good.

WHITE

Sure.

NICHOLAS

Yes. And then I had a lot of friends who would come by. And the TV people would come by.

WHITE

And Barbara was still coming to the hospital at this point. She was still staying at the apartment?

NICHOLAS

Yes, she was staying at that apartment. Oh, yeah. So I never got a chance to stay there, but her sisters would stay there with her.

WHITE

Sure. So then she decided to come on back to L.A.

NICHOLAS

I told her to. She said, "Do you want me to stay here?" I said, "No, no. Go on back home. Go on back home."

WHITE

Right. So once you got here, you found out she was ill.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, when I found out [she was] in her room, there at the hospital. So they were switching us to different rooms, and the rooms that they were switching us to were better rooms. Yeah. And there she was, and she was having a hard

time eating so sometimes I would feed her. I said, "Come on, sweetheart. Eat this. Eat this." Because she was getting weaker and weaker.

WHITE

What was her illness?

NICHOLAS

Cancer, yeah. And she was a vegetarian. She was always eating fruits and vegetables and just taking good care of herself. She had me on this kick. Loved spinach. Oh, she was throwing that down my throat all the time.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

And we ate fish—protein—and chicken, but not fried chicken.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. But she had this habit of smoking.

WHITE

Oh.

NICHOLAS

See, everything else was great, but she just had to smoke.

WHITE

Did she have lung cancer?

NICHOLAS

Yeah.

WHITE

I see.

NICHOLAS

And she tried not to, because she— When she'd want to smoke when we were in our cottage out there, she would go out on the patio so she wouldn't disturb me with all the smoke, because she knew I didn't like the smoke in my face. So she'd go outside and smoke. And she tried— She cut down on it, but she kept on. Kept on smoking. And that's the only bad habit that she had. But everything else— She took good care of herself, took good care of her body. Everything— But just had to have that damn cigarette.

WHITE

Yeah, that habit, it's awfully hard to break.

NICHOLAS

But everything else she did was wonderful.

WHITE

So her health continued to deteriorate.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, uh-huh. Then, when she decided not to smoke, it was too late. It was there, it was too late for her. I would always go to her room at the hospital and have dinner with her and all these things. That's when Catherine [Hopkins Nicholas] would call me and she didn't know that both of us were in the hospital. So she said, "We're going to celebrate Herb Wills' birthday."

WHITE

Whose?

NICHOLAS

Herb [Herbert] Mills. One of the Mills Brothers.

WHITE

Okay, Herb Mills.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, see that picture up there?

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

There they are. See the one in the middle, right up there? That's him.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

It was his ninetieth birthday. She said, "Would you like to come?" I said, "Yes." I wanted to get out of that hospital. She came and picked me up and took me over to Thousand Oaks, over there with Herb and his family. I didn't tell anybody I was going. It was so interesting. Gregory Hines came by to see me. He heard that I was in the hospital, but he didn't tell me he was coming by, so when he got there I was gone. But he saw Barbara. He saw Barbara. And he wrote me a little note and he said, "Barbara looks wonderful." So I was over there with Catherine and Herb. We were celebrating his ninetieth birthday. After the party Catherine took me back to the hospital, the Motion Picture hospital. And when I arrived there, they said, "Where have you been? We were looking for you. We wondered where you were." I think I didn't get back until one o'clock in the morning.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

We were having such great fun. So Catherine said, "Tell me, what happened—" They said, "You should have signed him out." She said, "Well, I didn't know." And so they said, "Mr. Nicholas, next time let us know when you're leaving. Miss, if you're coming to pick him up, you sign him out."

WHITE

Right, of course.

NICHOLAS

Because they were afraid. They didn't know what had happened to me.

WHITE

Sure, you probably frightened them.

NICHOLAS

A little after that, my wife passed away. She passed away. We had the funeral and a lot of her friends were there, show people. And Barbara's family. And Catherine was there. All this happened. I had the stroke. I lost my wife. And then I couldn't stay in the cottage anymore. They moved me over to the lodge, where it was one room. A small room with a single bed. I wanted to stay at the cottage, but they said, "No, I don't think so. We don't think you can take care of yourself." And they were right. I couldn't have taken care of myself. The maids would only come there once a week, on a Friday.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

So now I'm there by myself. I've got to make up the bed. I had a kitchen there. I could cook if I wanted to and all those different things. It was a nice cottage; it was one of the new ones. We were lucky that we could move into the new cottage. It had a living room, it had a bedroom, a dining room, a kitchen, and the bathroom.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

It was good for two people.

WHITE

And then they encouraged you to move over to the single.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and they were right, that I should move over to the lodge, because I'd be there all by myself and I wouldn't be able to—

WHITE

Uh-huh, you'd get more support at the lodge.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, because the nurses were there. They could give me my medication.

WHITE

More interaction with the other people at the center.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and something in my room, if I couldn't manage, if I couldn't button my shirt, I'd call them and they'd come by and do it for me.

WHITE

Okay, sure.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, because if I was at my cottage, they're busy over at the lodge with the other residents. And they can't come over there to help me, but while I'm there, they can.

WHITE

Sure. So I would imagine that you went through quite a mourning process, getting adjusted from your own surgery and your wife's passing and the move. It must have been a challenging period for you.

NICHOLAS

Right. And Catherine was so wonderful, because she would always call me and come and see me or take me out to dinner. She'd take me to— She was wonderful.

WHITE

Very supportive.

NICHOLAS

Oh, very supportive. She took better care of me than the nurses.

WHITE

That's great.

NICHOLAS

And then— See, we'd been friends since 1971, and so we always kept in touch. I did shows with her and the Mills Brothers. She was a part of the act. And so I would do that. We always kept in touch. Then I asked if she would like to go to Washington, D.C. with me [for the annual Kennedy Center Honors], which was in 1998, and she said, "Yes." So we went there and had a wonderful time. She met the president [William J. Clinton] and the first lady [Hillary Rodham Clinton]. We went to the state department. We had a wonderful time. She met Shirley Temple and Bill Cosby. I introduced her to everybody.

WHITE

So you began to gradually move on with your life, to heal and move forward. I know that back in April of 1998 you were still getting tributes, like you guys [the Nicholas Brothers, Fayard Nicholas and Harold Nicholas] got the tribute at Carnegie Hall with, once again, Gregory Hines and Jimmy "Slyde" Godbolt.

NICHOLAS

Oh, but Gregory Hines wasn't there.

WHITE

Oh, he was not there, oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

His brother was— Maurice Hines.

WHITE

Maurice Hines.

NICHOLAS

Bobby Short was there, Savion Glover, Bill Cosby, Lena Horne—

WHITE

It was quite an extravaganza.

NICHOLAS

Oh yeah. Ben Vereen. To honor us. The place was a sell out. They wanted to see the Nicholas Brothers being honored. It was great. Oh yeah, Bill Cosby was the master of ceremonies. And naturally, they showed film clips. Those things.

WHITE

Another terrific experience.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and so— Let me see, Bill Cosby, he introduced us and brought us out on stage and— Oh, no, here's the way it was. They showed the film clips. The last one was Stormy Weather, coming down those stairs, jumping over each other's heads. And then we just walked out on stage. They didn't have to announce us, because they saw the film clips. We walked out and then I went to the microphone and started talking. Something I always say: "Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. We're happy that you liked that film clip. But if you think we're going to do on this stage what you saw us doing in the movie, forget it." [White laughs]

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

And then my brother says, "Go on, do a split for them." I say, "Wait a minute, man. No way." He says, "Yes, you can." And he says to the audience, "Ladies and gentlemen, you want to see him do a split?" And they say, "Yes." I say, "Wait a minute. I cannot do that anymore. And to tell you the truth, I don't want to do that anymore." Then my brother says, "Why?" And I say, "It hurts." Right then Bill Cosby walked on stage. He said, "Fellahs, there's something I want to do. We have a table for you over here. And we're going to imagine that you're in the Cotton Club. Just walk over there." He walked over with us. And we both had canes; my brother had his cane; I had my cane. We sat at the table and it was all arranged, like they had a little lamp in the middle of the table, the dishes and the silverware, the tablecloth and everything. We were just imagining that we were at the Cotton Club. He said, "You guys stay there. We're going to entertain you." Then everybody came out, like Bobby Short

came out and spoke. Ben Vereen spoke. Maybe some of them sang a song for us. Maurice Hines came out and talked and sang a song. Savion Glover came out and danced for us, and he came right up and danced for us right at the table. He didn't look at the audience at all, just looked at us, and he entertained us. So that was great. Each one would come over and give us a hug and wish us all the best.

WHITE

That was quite a memorable occasion.

NICHOLAS

That was a great night.

WHITE

Yes, it was. I've heard lots of wonderful things about it. Well, you continued on, still busy as ever. Like you said, you went to Washington at the end of 1998. And in 1999 you did the A&E Biography [episode], Flying High.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, The Nicholas Brothers: Flying High.

WHITE

Exactly. And then I believe you went to Sweden for a tap dance festival shortly after that.

NICHOLAS

Oh, yes. Yes, in 1999.

WHITE

Exactly, you've been moving right along.

NICHOLAS

It's wonderful. Always moving and receiving these awards from so many different places. And I'm still active, even though I'm semi-retired.

WHITE

Right, exactly.

NICHOLAS

Not completely.

WHITE

I understand now that your granddaughters have actually moved into this arena and they're— I think you were quoted as saying that they're now taking over, but now they're wearing skirts.

NICHOLAS

The Nicholas Brothers in skirts, are my granddaughters. Nicole [Nicholas], who is fourteen [years old]. Cathy [Nicholas], who is twelve. They're great tap dancers. Oh, yes. I'm so proud of them.

WHITE

You've passed the torch to them.

NICHOLAS

Yes. Well, I thought my two sons, Tony [Anthony Nicholas] and Paul [Nicholas], would be the next Nicholas Brothers, but they gave it up. They used to imitate me when they were younger. But they said, "Dad, that's too hard."

WHITE

It wasn't their cup of tea.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, so I have four grandchildren. Now Tony has my granddaughters, Nicole and Cathy. And Paul has the two boys, Jerry [Nicholas] and Paul [Nicholas]. I thought they would be the next Nicholas Brothers, since my two sons— So I thought my grandsons would be the next Nicholas Brothers, but they like sports. Yeah, they like sports. So my granddaughters are the tap dancers of the family.

WHITE

Oh, that's great. It only skipped one generation. But it's certainly nice to be able to sort of perform vicariously through your granddaughters now. And I've

seen them and have spoken with them and I know how incredibly talented they are.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, I like that videotape that you made of them with the Paul Kennedy kids [the dance students of Paul Kennedy and Arlene Kennedy].

WHITE

Exactly, yeah.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, Tony showed it to me. Yeah, that was good. While I was there watching, Cathy said—Nicole wasn't there—"This is the best video of the Kennedy kids that I have ever been in."

WHITE

Oh, my goodness, that's terrific.

NICHOLAS

And it looked that way, too. They were really having fun and they were dancing the best I've ever seen them.

WHITE

Yes, wasn't it wonderful?

NICHOLAS

And Cathy said the same thing, yes. Tony is going to make a copy of that.

WHITE

Oh, good, good. Yeah, that's great. It's so nice to see them dance. You've made so many contributions in your life, and the latest tribute to you is the book by Constance Valis Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm: The Jazz Tap Dancing of the Nicholas Brothers* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000].

NICHOLAS

Yeah, right.

WHITE

Once again, a sort of retrospective of your life, you know, making sure that future generations have a real sense of who you are, who your brother is, and contributions that you've made to this art form.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and Constance, she did a good job writing this book.

WHITE

Yes, she did.

NICHOLAS

She knows more about me than I do. The way she expresses herself in talking about the way we perform— She starts right at the beginning [and goes] to the end of our performance, right? Like Down Argentine Way— She starts right in the beginning, when my brother is singing this song "Argentina" in Spanish. I'm playing the maracas. From that right to the very end. But she has a gift for words.

WHITE

She certainly does.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and so that's why I say she can say it better than I can.

WHITE

Absolutely.

NICHOLAS

Because she has this gift for words.

WHITE

Sure, a wordsmith.

NICHOLAS

I can say the same thing, but it's not as good as she says it.

WHITE

Right, she has a poetic style of communicating.

NICHOLAS

And she's a dancer, too.

WHITE

Right, I understand that.

NICHOLAS

See, so she understands. And she's been writing this book— Let me see, five years she's been writing.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness, so she's done extensive research.

NICHOLAS

She did a lot of research. She would call me on the telephone and ask me different questions and I would answer the best way that I can. And whenever I was in Manhattan, she'd call me and find out the hotel where I was staying. She would come over and have lunch with me and we would start talking. And it turned out good, it turned out good.

WHITE

Good experience.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, very good experience.

WHITE

Well, tell me, so what are your future plans?

NICHOLAS

Oh, right now we are getting ready to go to Detroit. My granddaughters will be going, my son will be going, I think his wife is going—Vanita [Nicholas]. My

wife, Catherine Hopkins Nicholas, is going with me, too. And Catherine might perform with me.

WHITE

Oh, terrific. My goodness, that's terrific. It should be very exciting.

NICHOLAS

So we're leaving on the twenty-second of this month, June, 2000. We'll be there from the twenty-second till the twenty-fifth. And right after that we come back here, on the twenty-sixth. On the twenty-seventh I'll finish this motion picture that I'm doing, called Night at the Golden Eagle.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

It's about an old hotel, yeah. And my part in the movie is— I'm playing Mr. Maynard. And Mr. Maynard is half of the team called the Maynard Brothers. I'm staying in this old hotel, the Golden Eagle Hotel, and I have my room there, that I've been living in for a long time. I'm eighty years old and I have pictures on the wall of entertainers and all my friends. I have a record player, and I just play classical music and operas. And I have a little dog. His name is Truman, and I fix food for him and for me. I give him half and I eat the other half. So that's my room. I'll look out the window and I will see people passing by. I see prostitutes and I see dope pushers, and I'm looking and I just shake my head. It's like "What is this world coming to?" when I see this. I have an old suit that I've been wearing for years, but I always wear a tie. I have a three-piece suit: trousers, the vest, and the jacket. And it's an old dirty suit. [mutual laughter] And I have a little hat that I wear. Now everybody else, they're in sports shirts and jeans and sneakers, or whatever they wear. But I'm always with my tie.

WHITE

Dapper.

NICHOLAS

I'm dapper, even though the suit is old.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

That's my part in the film. I have a friend whose name is Silvester and I'll come down the stairs with my little dog. I have him on a leash, and I see my friend sitting there in the lobby of the hotel. And I go and say, "Hello, fellah, how are you doing?" And he says, "All right. Sit down." I'll have my little dog right beside me, and we start talking. The desk clerk at the hotel says, "Hey, Mr. Maynard—" I don't think he called me Mr. Maynard. He'd just say, "Hey, Maynard," or something like that. "Get that dog out of here. He's bringing fleas with him." I just look at him and say, "Aah." And then my friend says, "Listen, you don't know who this is, do you? Listen, this is Mr. Maynard of the tap dancing team the Maynard Brothers. You don't talk to him like that. He's been around a long time. He's famous." And then the guy says, "I've never heard of him." [laughs] And he says, "Oh, you've never heard of him, huh? All right. Mr. Maynard, show him something. Go on." I say, "Wait a minute, man. That was a long time ago." He says, "Go on, go on. Show him something." I say, "I don't think I can do that." He says, "Go on and shut this man up. Go on out there and show him." I say, "Well, I'll try." So I'm straining to stand up and I get up and I go out to the center of the hotel [lobby]. And then I say, "Well, let me see if I remember this. Now let me start my motor, shift my gears. Okay, here we go." And I say [hums a stock introductory phrase]. I do the shim sham shimmy.

WHITE

Right, exactly.

NICHOLAS

I do about two choruses. And then I say [hums the "shave and a haircut" beat], and then everybody applauds. The guy at the desk, he applauds too, because I did get out there and do it. Then I bow like this and then all of a sudden I'm out of breath. And so my friend, he comes up and says, "Oh, Mr. Maynard, come on over here and sit down." So I sit down. Then we continue the rest of the story.

WHITE

Oh, okay. Well, we don't want to spoil the rest of the story before we see it. Well, I tell you. This has been such a great experience. I've learned so many things about you and I've basically asked all of the questions that I intended to. Is there anything else that you might like to add?

NICHOLAS

Well, I'm going to appear here in Los Angeles starting June 5.

WHITE

Okay, right, at the Ford [Anson] Theater, right?

NICHOLAS

At the Ford Theater, across the street from the Hollywood Bowl.

WHITE

Yes, indeed.

NICHOLAS

My brother's going to be with me. In fact, my brother is going to be in Detroit with me, too. And he's going to be here in Los Angeles with me at the Ford Theater. And we're going to do a book signing of *Brotherhood in Rhythm*. And Constance Valis Hill, she will be out to sign the book with us.

WHITE

Terrific.

NICHOLAS

That's happening in July, next month. That's what's on the agenda, you might say.

WHITE

Yes.

NICHOLAS

And I'll be doing a master class on the fifth with my granddaughters.

WHITE

Okay.

NICHOLAS

My brother will be singing at the Jazz Bakery club.

WHITE

In Culver City.

NICHOLAS

In Culver City. Oh, Catherine and I will be staying at one of the hotels in Culver City.

WHITE

Oh, okay. Maybe that old hotel, the Culver City Hotel?

NICHOLAS

I don't know.

WHITE

Yeah, it's a neat hotel there.

NICHOLAS

I don't know, but one of the hotels.

WHITE

That's in the month of July?

NICHOLAS

This is all going to be in July. So on the fifth— Oh, I'm going to be interviewed on a television show that same day, on the fifth.

WHITE

Boy, you've got a busy month.

NICHOLAS

In the morning, six o'clock in the morning.

WHITE

Oh, my goodness.

NICHOLAS

I'm going to be doing this television show because, naturally, I'm going to be talking about what's going to be happening at the Ford Theater and all the other things. I think the sixth, that's the day of signing the book. I think on the seventh, this is when my brother's going to sing at the Jazz Bakery. On the eighth we're going to be performing at the Ford Theater with all of the famous dancers. They'll be paying a tribute to my brother and me; they're going to show the film clips. Then on the ninth day of July there's going to be a reception at the hotel where we're going to be staying. All the cast from the show will be there. We'll have food, all of that. And that will be the last day. The fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth. Oh, wait a minute, there's some other place we're going—UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], your place. [laughs]

WHITE

Oh, okay. Right.

NICHOLAS

We're going there for something.

WHITE

What month is that?

NICHOLAS

In July.

WHITE

In July as well?

NICHOLAS

Yeah. So we have these five days, isn't it? The fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth, those five days that something is going to be going on, paying a tribute to the Nicholas Brothers. And UCLA will be one of those days.

WHITE

Well, you certainly have a lot to look forward to in the very near future.

NICHOLAS

I hope to tell you.

WHITE

Very, very fruitful plans.

NICHOLAS

Yes. Well, I like it. It keeps me young. Keeps me alive. It keeps me doing things and not just sitting down and doing anything at all. Because I could really get that way, staying out there at the Motion Picture and Television Country House. I see so many other people there, who— They're just existing. They get three meals every day. They come out and eat and then go right back to their room and watch television, and they watch television until it's time for the next meal. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. So they like when I go out and I'm doing things.

WHITE

Sure. They can live vicariously through you, with all your energy and gregariousness—

NICHOLAS

Yeah, and they like that I do that. They don't have the opportunity to do those things. I think some of them don't want to.

WHITE

That's true.

NICHOLAS

They're happy just being there, eating the three meals a day, going to their room, watching television, and that's it.

WHITE

My goodness, and here you are, flying off to Detroit, you're in a movie, you're going to Paris—

NICHOLAS

I'm going to Sweden, I'm going—

WHITE

St. Louis, etc., etc. You're quite a role model for them.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, so I'm still rolling along and doing my thing. And it's so wonderful, being married to my beautiful wife, Catherine, Mrs. Catherine Hopkins Nicholas.

WHITE

Yeah, that's terrific.

NICHOLAS

See, she's keeping me young. After I lost my wife Barbara and had the stroke, I was really down. Then, when she came into my life more, we got closer and closer. We didn't know that this would happen, that we would get married and fall in love. I guess she told you about why we decided to get married, huh? Did I tell you that?

WHITE

Yes, you did. We talked about that, yeah, that's a nice story.

NICHOLAS

Yeah, isn't that a nice story?

WHITE

Yes, very nice. Well, things are just going along just wonderfully for you. You know, it's been such a wonderful, wonderful opportunity to spend time with you and get to know you a bit better and for you to be able to share your life with so many people that will have access to this material in our library. So on behalf of the UCLA Oral History Program, I'd like to thank you.

NICHOLAS

Well, let me tell you this— Some other things are coming up.

WHITE

Oh, okay.

NICHOLAS

A lady just called me from Chicago and would like for my brother and me to go there and talk about this guy Jelly Roll [Morton], who wrote blues songs. He was from New Orleans, Louisiana. She would like for us to go there and talk about that old show business.

WHITE

Right.

NICHOLAS

And then Catherine and I are planning to go to Washington, D.C. again. And we will see President Clinton for the last time, because this is his last time in office. And we will also see the first lady. Then we're also planning to go to Paris, France.

WHITE

Great.

NICHOLAS

So these are things that are coming up. And if anything else comes up, I'll let you know. [laughs]

WHITE

Okay, that's a deal. I'd like to thank you very personally. I've had a great experience coming to your home. Thank you for your hospitality. It's been a terrific experience for me and I just want to thank you.

NICHOLAS

Thank you.

Date:

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