Albuquerque Museum Oral History Project

Johnny J. Armijo

November 26, 2002

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STEVENSON: This is Glen Stevenson with Johnny J. Armijo, November 25?

ARMIJO: Sixth

STEVENSON: Sixth. At the Los Padillas Community Center, in the South Valley.

ARMIJO: Two thousand two.

STEVENSON: Thanks, Johnny.

ARMIJO: That was okay?

[Interview starts at 00:22]

ARMIJO: Part of what we were talking about is—or that I was talking about—is that, uh, I'm going to take you back, back, back. My dad was in a band—several bands, actually—he played with the Don Lesman Band, and he was in the 44th Army Band with the National Guard, J.J. Armijo, Johnny Jeremy. Anyway, from him and his band—he was a sax [saxophone] player: alto, tenor, and what's the other one? Clarinet. [papers being shuffled in background] Played a little bit of piano. But anyway. I guess some of my inspiration and my musical ability came from my pop. And I would go with him to some of the gigs that they'd have, with Don Lesman, and they were a larger—at the time, you know—they were an eight-, nine-piece orchestra. That's what they used to call them, orchestras. My inspiration for music came from my dad. And I, for whatever reason, became involved with banging around things at the house. And drums. And during my dad's heyday there were several orchestras. They used to call them bands at the time, orchestras. And I became involved when I was—geez, fourteen years old, and he bought me my first drum set. It was one of those huge 'ole, big 'ole bass drums with the light in it.

STEVENSON: Hm

ARMIJO: You know, way—talk about back in the day. I think one cymbal and maybe a snare. But that's how I started off in music. And we had a group called The Corvells??. So many different groups. And then I—

STEVENSON: When was the Corvells?

ARMIJO: Oh gosh. (pause) Sixty?

STEVENSON: Nineteen sixty, okay.

ARMIJO: Maybe? Nineteen sixty? And maybe fifty-nine. No, forty-seven. You know, maybe around there. But it was just a little kind of put-together band, and that's how I started really liking music. And, I'm kind of going in fragments here, but—I always was banging on stuff, and I liked the sound of different pieces of different objects—wood, metal, and just the different sounds that it would produce as I—I'd use knives. And I was in the seventh grade, I believe, at Ernie Pyle [Middle School], and I was in the PE [physical education] class, and there was a talent show coming up, and the coach said, "The guy who was going to play the bongos—." There was two brothers, the Sigley??/Seely?? brothers, and they played guitar, and they'd been taking lessons forever. They were very, very accomplished on their guitars. And they were going to play with a bongo player.

STEVENSON: Jim Sigley?

ARMIJO: Jim Sigley, exactly.

STEVENSON: Okay. (inaudible)

ARMIJO: You know Jim?

STEVENSON: I know Jim.

ARMIJO: And so they were going to play with a bongo player, and I didn't know what was going on. But anyway, one day, in PE the coach said this so-and-so—whoever it was—was going to play the bongos, came in, and he had a cast on his arm. He broke his arm. And the coach says, "Does anybody want to play bongos? You know, with the Sigley brothers." And da-dat da-dat da-da—I had always banged around, so, you know, reluctantly—because I was always intimidated by the coaches—I reluctantly raised my hand, and I—. We practiced a couple times. After a couple rehearsals, it was talent show time, and I remember backstage, and these girls were singing these beautiful—Black girls singing this beautiful melody. (singing) "He's so fine," and all this kind of stuff, and all of these—and it just, just that atmosphere and everything was kind of like, started the juices flowing in me, and then it was our turn to get up. And we got up, and there were the bleachers, you know, Ernie Pyle. It looked like eight, nine thousand people. Probably 400, there in the bleachers. And we started "Tequila." (imitating guitar plucking) Doot-do-doo, doot-doo doo-do-do. So I started playing, and we finished, and they stood up and "Yeah!" That's it, I was hooked. From that point on I was hooked. And it was after that that I started the groups. Thee Chekkers, T-H-E-E C-H-E-K-K-E-R-S. I'll talk about that in a minute. But started them off in—gosh, it must've been sixty, sixty-three, somewhere around there. [5:00]

And it was all guys that I had grown up with. Jack Ayala, who I grew up with. Jerry Pacheco who I'd grown up with.

STEVENSON: Are they all still around?

ARMIJO: Yep. Um, actually Jack and Jerry are still playing with Thee Fabulous Chekkers, now, currently. Alfred Romero, um, David Nuñez, and David's been around forever. He was a City cop. Just recently retired, well not recently, probably three years ago. But that was the five of us: Jack Ayala, Jerry Pacheco, Johnny J., Alfred Romero, and David Nuñez. We were the original Chekkers. There was a group in Los Angeles that was called Thee—T-H-E-E—Midnighters, when we were coming up, and we always used to like the LA sound, so (clears throat) we copied the T-H-E-E, even though people said, "Well, that's not right." It didn't matter, you know. Hey, Thee Midnighters are Thee Midnighters, and I don't know how I came up with the double "k" in regards to the Chekkers, maybe just different or whatever, but that's how the name originated. And we played for—we used to play the Peacock, the Cole Hotel, the Alvarado, all of the old, old hotels in Burque [Albuquerque]. And, um, of course we played for Albuquerque High, Saint Mary's—. I remember Albuquerque High there, Cordellas??Corvallis?? Tri High Y was a group of girls, almost like a fraternity or sorority in regards to Albuquerque High. And my girlfriend happened to be a cheerleader in that group, so we'd get the gigs. Freddie Chavez was with us. After David left, Freddie was with us for a while. We used to do a lot of the soulful stuff—James Brown, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett. All of the good stuff, you know. (vocalizes) Faam-fam-fam-fam.

STEVENSON: None of which is Hispanic New Mexican.

ARMIJO: Exactly. It was our, our interpretation of how we grew up and where we grew up. I mean, Jack, Jerry, myself—all from the South Valley. Freddie was South Valley-ish, Broadway, you know.

STEVENSON: (inaudible)

ARMIJO: And so our interpretation of what we really liked, because we also—Albuquerque is multicultural. And where I grew up on La Vega and Riverside, it was Hispanic, Black, a few white folk, David Brown, some of the Browns down the street—. So we grew up with multiracial, you know, situations, and we were not even, I was going to say "tolerant," but it's not even "tolerant," that's just the way it was. There was—.

STEVENSON: We've always had that community on Hardy too.

ARMIJO: Yeah. That was—it was never, "Oh he's Black," or "Oh he's Hispanic," or "Oh, he's white—we were all living together." It was the 'hood. There was no thought process about that. We were just all neighbors and friends and buddies, and we'd go have fun together and get in trouble together, and do everything else together. But anyway, part of what I was talking about was in regards to the bands in Albuquerque. There's a culture there—and it started way before Thee Chekkers—that had really inspired many, many people. There was a guy in Albuquerque that wanted to be a Chekker, but never was quite good enough at the time, and his name was Randy Castillo. And Randy Castillo was a decent little drummer, but he sat in with Thee

Chekkers one time, and it was like, I was saying, "Eh, keep trying, buddy. Keep trying, you'll get it going." Randy went in with Nick Luchetti and took lessons from Nick Luchetti for two years, and we didn't know where Randy was. Randy came out after two years of lessons, sat in with Thee Chekkers, and forget it. Talk about a phenomenal drummer. Well Randy then started, he hit the road and went to Denver and stuff. And Randy unfortunately passed away this last year from cancer. But Randy was probably the biggest, one of the biggest musical success stories—played with Ozzy Osbourne, played with, oh gosh, I can't remember all the bands he's played with, but he hit the big time. And unfortunately, the big time also carried big costs in regards to drugs and other negative factors. But, um, Randy was a South Valley guy, you know. There's been a lot of South Valley talent in Albuquerque—not to say that there hasn't been anywhere else, but we're talking a little bit more South Valley. But I think the whole—if someone were to do a piece and talk about just music and talk about what bands were around—do you have pictures? Because I do, I have some pictures. [10:00] We played with the Coasters, we played with, uh, Rick Springfield, we did— (sings) What's their names? Average White Band, we've done it with the Average White Band. We've just played with all of these groups. Back in the day, the Coasters, which were really the more original Coasters with Lionel, came into the Far West, where we used to play six nights a week, and we back them up. The Drifters, you know, all of these groups. Now they're a little bit changed, but back in the day there was a lot of (inaudible). Anyway. If someone could *really* look at that, you know, the development and structure of what, who played what and why and who was influenced by who and what and all that kind of stuff, and take some pictures—that's a whole, whole universe unto itself. Anyway, getting back to South Valley roots—I'm going to, I have this, it's called "The Glider." And this is a story that I wrote, and I grew up—I'm going to give that to you.

STEVENSON: Thanks

ARMIJO: I grew up with a lot of people in the neighborhood, and some of my best friends were the Valdezes: Rocky and Albert Valdez. And we used to live in the jungle. And the jungle obviously was the Bosque and the drain ditch area. We used to swim in the drain ditch. That's kind of what that story is talking about. It's talking about the Bosque and the drain ditch and some of the things we used to do as kids. But that was our forest. That's where we would sneak cigarettes, and you know, you could go over there in the Bosque and smoke cigarettes and cough. Steal green apples from somebody's yard, then go smoke cigarettes, and then throw up. There was all those kinds of fun things. David and Charlie Brown, some of the guys from way back in the day, I can remember vividly how we used to set up ropes on the big cottonwood trees in the Bosque, and we'd get these things, and we'd just (makes sliding sound), slide down, you know? We would build huts. We would kind of pull things out, dig the ground up—not too deep, maybe three or four feet—and then just put the bushes so nobody knew we were there. Even if you did it now, you probably couldn't—well maybe now you could tell a little bit more. But back then, you could pass by, and we could be there, and you wouldn't even know it. I remember very clearly one night we were going to spend the night in the Bosque, and we got our sleeping blankets and everything, and I think we told our parents we were going to spend it at somebody else's house or whatever. I don't think they would've ever let us spend it in the Bosque. But I remember the river, the sound of the river, and we were there, and we said, "Let's move closer,

you know, to the river." And we all moved up, and we were just like—it wasn't quite dark, and it was just beautiful, the shimmer of the light on the water from the sun setting and the Bosque, and it was just the sound and that smell, it was just, you know, it was just so fragrant and it was like, "Wow! This is really life." And I just remember having this thought about: This is really, this is really fantastic, this is really wonderful. And then all of a sudden we were attacked by ten thousand trillion mosquitoes. That we didn't think about, they were not there when we there and it was cool and we were just chillin', then all of a sudden (makes buzzing sound). Ahh! So we had to pick up our stuff and we had to run and move to a different location. But I'll never forget that night. It was one of those things where, you know, it was so, so pristine. I remember there were snakes, there were some big water snakes around at that time. Even to this day—even back then, I should say—I can remember me and my uncle, that's where I first learned how to swim, was the Rio Grande. We would take a bunch of us, family, and my uncle would put me on his shoulders. And who knows how deep the water was or where we were, I don't remember, I was too young. How I learned how to swim was my uncle got me one day and just threw me into the river (clears throat), and I had to learn how to swim. And it was one of those things where I'm sure he was there—he would have been there to help me—but he sure pissed me off, I'll tell ya. I thought, How dare you, throwing me. I was going to drown, or whatever. But I did learn how to swim, I did learn how to swim. I can remember back in the day when several of us would try to cross the Barelas Bridge and we'd get there right into the San Jo [San Jose?] area, and there'd be the guys waiting for us, man. Just waiting for us. And we would always have to give something because we would walk down to the—oh god, what was it—it was the pool there by the park. I can't remember the name of the pool.

STEVENSON: San Jo? [15:00]

ARMIJO: Huh?

STEVENSON: In San Jo?

ARMIJO: No, it was a brand new pool right there by the Zoo and the park.

STEVENSON: Oh, that park.

ARMIJO: Yeah. I can't remember what the name of the—. Anyway, we would have to cross their territory, and so there was always, you know, give up twenty-five cents or whatever to get into so we could do our thing. And I remember Rocky—my buddy Rocky and Albert that I grew up with—was always a tough guy, and he would always fight them. You know, "I'm not paying nothing, I'm coming through." I remember one time I was—me and whoever were by ourselves, and we were walking, and these guys got us. And I remember those guys saying, "My little brother could beat the shit out of you." And I'm like (moaning), and they took one of my shoes off, and they threw it in the river, and I cried. I cried and I went home, and my mom said, "What happened to your shoe?" And I just cried. And I was so angry, I wanted to get back at them. And I don't think I ever did. But it was like you had to stop there because the tough guys wouldn't let you through. Going back, I can remember going to—there was the old Horn Building.

STEVENSON: Is that in the South or Barelas?

ARMIJO: Well it was in Barelas, yeah. (pause) I can—the old Horn Building, I don't know if you recall the old Horn Building? On Isleta. It's—used to be a YDI [Youth Development Inc.] facility, but it's now Los Compadres. That used to be the old Horn Building. And we would walk and, to go to the movie, which was at La Familia Restaurant—

STEVENSON: Los Compadres restaurant right there. Oh, it's Horn Oil.

ARMIJO: Yeah, Horn Oil. Right next to the Tastee Freez.

STEVENSON: Right. Okay, I got it.

ARMIJO: The Horn Oil Building. We would walk there. As a matter of fact, that was that little filling station there, gas station, was where my day would buy—.

STEVENSON: That was Calvin Horn.

ARMIJO: Calvin Horn, exactly, Calvin Horn. God, what is it, white gas. What is white gas? We'd call it white gas. There's a name for it.

STEVENSON: What you put in your Coleman stove.

ARMIJO: Yeah, but anyway, they would sell it there. But I remember when I was a kid, mom and dad would give us some money to go to the movies, which was—we'd pass—excuse me—by the Horn Building on the way to what used to be La Familia Restaurant, by McDonald's there. That was a theater. That's where the theater was.

STEVENSON: That's Boyd's?? Market after the theater.

ARMIJO: Yeah. So we would walk, and at the Horn Building we'd stop and look at the clock to see what time it was, to see how, you know, if we were late for the movie we had to hurry or if everything was cool. And we'd take our ten cents and we'd go watch a movie, and I don't remember the movies that were there, but I remember we used to walk and do that. We had so many things—we had go-carts. Not go-carts with engines, go-carts we made and pushed. And we were firefighters, and we'd start fires and then we'd go put them out. We had a place—Carlos Trujillo and Rocky and Albert, and I—. By the way, Rocky and Albert Valdez—Albert Valdez was Commissioner Valdez.

STEVENSON: Okay.

ARMIJO: And Rocky Valdez is now the department director for facility maintenance for Bernalillo County. Those were my "grow up" buddies. Plus a lot of others, but those were kind of the close guys. And we had a place called the Crow's Nest, and it was Carlos's house, and I remember we would sleep there occasionally, and it was our sanctuary, if you will. So a little club, and it was Carlos, me, Rocky, Albert, the Murphys, god, what was his name. Eddie Murphy?

STEVENSON: He's a comedian. (inaudible)

ARMIJO: I don't know if it was Eddie. Anyway, the Murphys were right close, and they were a large Black family, so we saw—I remember Murphy was always on his bike, and he was always

with Mr. Tough. Anyway, the Crow's Nest. One night—this is what stands out in my mind—we were going to sleep there, but there was no electricity in our little hut. Well, it was actually—a little *guarditos*?? was what it was. There was no electricity. We were going to sleep there, and there was some kind of repair on the road. And back in the day they had these big black—coal or whatever—

STEVENSON: Kerosene

ARMIJO: —kerosene with the little flicker that they put up so that you wouldn't hurt yourself, so you wouldn't drive into it. So we lifted about three or four of those so that we would have some light and a little bit of warmth, and I remember going to sleep and everything—we were talking—it was great. Woke up the next morning, we looked at each other, and we were all black. But we were breathing in all of that stuff, we were all black, [20:00] and we were looking at each other and saying, "What happened to you?" We didn't know. "Oh, it's these things that caused it." I mean, we could have died, you know? But it was—that kind of stands out in my mind. My family, oh gosh, my mom and dad—my dad is the Armijos from Socorro—Magdalena. And my mom is Griego, Jenny Griego. And she was part of the land grant people. My mom had more of the Spanish side to her. My dad had more of the Mexican, mestizo Indian.

STEVENSON: So you're not related to the Armijo (inaudible) Armijo school, the whole neighborhood is—.

ARMIJO: Uh, I don't think so, I don't think so. I mean, I grew up there, but you know—.

STEVENSON: This is the Armijo land grant?

ARMIJO: It was actually the, oh god, the one that—the big one on the west side.

STEVENSON: The Atrisco?

ARMIJO: Yeah, the Atrisco Land Grant.

STEVENSON: How'd it get—why's it called, it's called Armijo?

ARMIJO: The area? I don't know. I really don't know.

STEVENSON: Because Armijo school, and there's a sign up right at the bridge that says Armijo Crossing—.

ARMIJO: Yeah. It's the Armijo area. Who it is named after, I have no idea.

STEVENSON: But not you?

ARMIJO: If you do some research, let me know. (laughs) That would be interesting.

STEVENSON: I was just guessing it was you. Before I came, that you were part of that family.

ARMIJO: I mean, I don't know, I really don't know. I know that my dad, like I said, was more Socorro. My great, well my grandfather—he worked in, oh god, it must have been Socorro, with Conrad Hilton, and the Hilton Hotels. And my grandfather was a carpenter, and the story that I

got was my grandfather helped put the first roof on the first Hilton Hotel that Conrad Hilton built.

STEVENSON: In San Marcial or here?

ARMIJO: The one here in—

STEVENSON: Downtown

ARMIJO: —either here or Socorro, or, this is back before—

STEVENSON: The first one was in San Marcial, I thought. [*NB*: The first Hilton Hotel was in Albuquerque and is now called Hotel Andaluz. Stevenson may be referring to the Harvey House that once stood in San Marcial, New Mexico.]

ARMIJO: Where's that at?

STEVENSON: South of Socorro

ARMIJO: That's probably the one.

STEVENSON: You know where that Black Mesa sits off to the side?

ARMIJO: Oh yeah. That's probably the one. I would imagine—

STEVENSON: It washed away in a flood in the thirties or forties

ARMIJO: Oh wow

STEVENSON: Whole town

ARMIJO: But I remember them saying that, you know, that my grandfather had done that. And this is before Hilton was Hilton, you know? This was just, Mr. Hilton. And he was kind of a big name at that time, but not that big. Not like now. Not even close (inaudible). So that's kind of the two sides of my family. What else?

STEVENSON: Maybe more about the Hispanic culture aspect of growing up in the Valley and how that influenced your music?

ARMIJO: Well again, it's really difficult to say—.

STEVENSON: How would you describe your (pause)? How do I put this—your experience. How would you describe yourself to me?

ARMIJO: Uh, confused? (Stevenson laughs) Actually, when I was growing up, like I kind of alluded to, there was not really a Hispanic-Black-white breakdown

STEVENSON: For example, did your parents speak Spanish in the home?

ARMIJO: My parents spoke Spanish in the home for a while, but my dad was very acculturated and basically told us that he didn't want us speaking Spanish at home. My mom didn't like that, but my dad said no, and these are kind of his words: "It's a white man's world out there, and you

need to adapt, to the white man's culture. And I want you to speak fluent—well, good English." I said that good, didn't I? Thanks, Dad. So he kind of held us back from that. My oldest sister—I have five sisters, no brothers. I'm the only boy. My oldest sister, my oldest, second-to-the-oldest—the first three of the family, the oldest, they speak relatively well. I'm kind of broken Spanish. My two younger sisters, my second, one right under me—she does okay. The youngest one, very little. Understands—I think we all understand—but as far as to be fluent, I would never say that I'm fluent, you know. And part of that was my dad's perception of the world. When he was rearing us, where he wanted us to be in society, and all that kind of stuff. He was, I said, a musician [25:00] and also was in the 44th Army Band, so he was a National Guardsman until the day he died. He was really involved in that. Back in those days, as far as culture was concerned, I have all my *tios* and *tias*, my aunts and aunties. My Auntie Lala who lives in Foothill and my mom Jenny Griego Armijo—sisters, we were very close with them. My—our home was here, my grandpa's home was here, my uncle's home was here, on Riverside and Nashville in the bigger court, so we really were real close to our grandparents and our uncles and aunts. But as far as anything culturally related, my dad talking about the culture, Hispanic, and saying this that—it was always a non-issue, if you will. How I have learned more is through my Auntie Lala, my mom's sister. And actually I've taken a recorder and asked her questions about my great, my great-great-great-great-grandfather was—she says I remember your grandfather telling me that they would sit at the kitchen table, and he was an Apache, and he had the, he'd wear the scarf and whatever. So I learned some stuff about that, and I'm learning a little here and there, but uh—

STEVENSON: Religious-wise, did you go to Saint Anne's [Catholic Church], or?

ARMIJO: Saint Anne's, yeah

STEVENSON: And were there any kind of holidays, special events, that family—

ARMIJO: Well, you know, one of the things that—yeah. Alcohol was a big, big part of me growing up. My dad would have been considered an alcoholic. My sisters say mom was too, and I think she was more borderline. There was a lot of drinking went on. Trips to El Paso, to Juarez to get big 'ole gallons of rum, gallons of rum. Parties at the house. There was—our family (pause) my father was very, very strong-willed, and being a Master Serg—First Sergeant Major in the National Guard—you can kind of know where he was at. He would become violent at times. Spanking—and again, this is back in the day; you never know if, when you're a kid you're thinking, Well, everybody's like this. You don't know. Spanking in the day would be with a belt. And wouldn't be a couple, it'd be until you were severely punished. Throwing a boot or a shoe at someone's head was not uncommon with my dad, especially if he was watching fights, and you were making noise. Mom was always—she was kind of the saint of the family, kind of the glue that held everything together. They were pretty much party animals, and um—

STEVENSON: So there was a lot of people coming over?

ARMIJO: Lot of people coming over. We lived right next to the Castillos—Victor Castillo, Victor's Pharmacy. Actually his father, Victor, his father and mother are my godparents. And I'm their godchild. And she has since passed, but my Nino is still alive and kicking. Still tough.

There would be parties there, there would be parties at our house. Don Lesman—he lived in Old Town, really, really nice house. There would be parties there. Alcohol was always a factor. And I saw a lot of what alcohol did to people, and I (pause) resented it, I guess? Even though when I was young—early, 18, 23—I did my fair share of drinking, I, for whatever reason—well, not for whatever reason—*because* I think of my orientation to what it does and—I've never really been a big drinker. People come over and sometimes you want a beer, and I don't have a beer. You know? If I drink, I'm going to drink some Crown Royal, you know, have me a couple drinks of Crown Royal, and that about does me. When I play, I really don't drink. Occasionally, I might have a Crown here and there, but I don't do it at home. I have not done it with my two sons. My sons are thirty and twenty-two, right now. Both have families. [30:00] I don't serve alcohol to them. If they want to bring a beer over, six pack, whatever, that's fine with me, it's not a big deal. But we don't do like my family did, we don't party hardy. I was also—you change that?

STEVENSON: (inaudible)

[no sound from 30:17 to 30:20]

ARMIJO: —and, you know, trying to prevent young people, old people from getting into situations that were harmful to them. And I became—I mentioned I was in Salt Lake City for twelve years, left in seventy-nine, came back in nineteen ninety-one, November 1991, and started working for Youth Development Incorporated, who was my employers way back in the day, 74 to 79, five years before I left. And my background is varied. I have a—I was a clinician in Salt Lake County mental health, working with the childcare unit. Worked with adult schizophrenics in county mental, Salt Lake County mental health, a program. I have a degree from the University of Utah. You know, graduated old Armijo, not newer, old Armijo, Ernie Pyle, Rio Grande. Started the university here when I was twenty-seven. It took me forever because all my friends said, "You barely made it through Rio, man. How can you—you're stupid, you can't whatever, whatever." And I remember I took three classes: sociology, psychology, and philosophy. And I made a C in every one of them. That was like an A to me. I thought, Hey, I can do this. The philosophy (makes swooshing sound). That was another thing from where I was at. But anyway, it's like the alcohol and being a preventionist and knowing all that stuff, I became actively involved in the DWI Planning Council for Albuquerque, Bernalillo County in nineteen ninety-two. And also the Albuquerque Partnership, which works with communities to rid negative factors. I'm sure you know where Villalobos [Rescue Center], right across the street there used to be a bar there. From Los Comprades, next to the Dairy Queen. Matter of fact, we used to play there.

STEVENSON: The Music Box

ARMIJO: Mm-hm. It used to be Don Lesman's Music Box. He used to own that, and we used to play there way, way, way back in the day. But there was a lot of negative stuff, and we helped shut that down. I was in the DWI Planning Council for three years, and then my last few years I was chair of that, and we were—it was about 3.2 million dollars that we were obligated to put out into the community; roadblocks, you know, those kinds of things. And I was always fighting for prevention: "Let's educate our kids, let's talk about it. Let's do all of that stuff." So my point

is is that I grew up with a lot of alcohol and a lot of violent situations—not only in home but that I could see, and I've always tried to do something about that. And I tried to dissuade and tell my fellow peers, "You don't always need alcohol to have a good time. Look what it's done to our *raza*, you know. Look at the negative stuff." And I'm not even getting into the other types of abuses that have gone on. You know that people are starting to come up at this point and time. The sexual abuse and all those kinds of things. But it's really important to me that we be as balanced as we can, and that we be role models to the young people coming up. So alcohol was very negative.

STEVENSON: Some questions about—you went away for twelve years, and you were living in—.

ARMIJO: Salt Lake City

STEVENSON: No, you were living in the South Valley before that—

ARMIJO: Oh right

STEVENSON: And you come back to the South Valley. Talk about the changes. The South Valley you're living in today isn't quite the same as the one you grew up in. How would you—. Tell me about what you think has changed it.

ARMIJO: Well obviously there's more gang activity. There's more gunshots at night. When I left, there wasn't gunshots—that I recall. When I came back, there's gunshots. I don't think—honestly I think that that goes throughout Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, Valencia County, whatever. I think the negative factor's there. But there was a little bit more of that. It's a little more scary to walk the streets, I think, at night because of people that I see around. I mean, on Nashville I know there's some gang bangers that live right there—I see them.

STEVENSON: Which side of Nashville?

ARMIJO: It would be on the south side of Nashville.

STEVENSON: I'm talking about, between La Vega and Riverside.

ARMIJO: Uh—.

STEVENSON: There was some serious gang banging going on [35:00] on the other side of Isleta.

ARMIJO: Yeah. I don't—well you know, I think that there's—

STEVENSON: I'm just checking. I like to keep up with that too.

ARMIJO: Right on Nashville—here's Riverside—right on Nashville, it's like the second or third. It's a nice house. But you see guys out there, and there's not like one or two, there's between five and ten. And every time you pass, they're like, you know, they're checking you out, kind of mad-dogging you. And I can't say it for a fact that they're gang bangers, but they sure as hell, you know, 28 years in social services, they sure look it to me. I spent eight years in residential (a woman giggles in the background) in the state of Utah with corrections, with kids,

hardcore, and I think I know what I'm talking about. But uh, so that was a negative factor. My son—I was playing up at Our Place [??], and I came home one night, and this was probably in nineteen ninety-six, yeah about ninety-six, and the lights were on at home, and it was like 1:45, and I thought, "Why are the lights on?" And my son, my oldest son Rome—who was 20-something at the time—had gotten into an argument with his girlfriend, and he walked down Riverside, on Nashville, and some guys jumped him, and they broke a beer bottle over his head, and gave him some stitches. So that was a very unpleasant experience to me, and it always made me think, Gee, should you have moved back to this area? And I said, "Hey," you know, to myself, "things are going to happen, they're going to happen." Number one, he should have made a better decision than to go walking at twelve o'clock at night. I don't care where you are—chill out, talk, whatever. Take a drive. But, he did what he did. So that was a real negative kind of thing for me. In regards to the people, the *gente*, everyone's kind of the same. I don't see a real big difference.

STEVENSON: For example, the Music Box is a good example. You played it—I actually even played that bar twenty-five years ago or so. And it was fine, but then by the time you were closing it down it had completely evolved, and there were lots of shootings. There would be a lot of killings there—

ARMIJO: Right

STEVENSON: —knifings, constant fights, and it had changed because it wasn't like that when I played there.

ARMIJO: Exactly

STEVENSON: It was kind of a neighborhood bar.

ARMIJO: Yeah, it was a happening place, it was a happening place. I remember—

STEVENSON: So I'm kind of wondering what changed, why did it change from being a neighborhood to a place where you're afraid to walk down the streets?

ARMIJO: Well you know, I really don't have an answer for that. I can guess. And I think that part of the Don Lesmans of the world, part of the J. J. Armijos, my dads of the world who cared—. Don Lesman cared about what—it was Don Lesman's Music Box. He cared about how he ran that, his business. And when he sold that, whomever it was. God, Cecil was the guy's name?

STEVENSON: When I played there it was Phil's Music Box.

ARMIJO: Phil's?

STEVENSON: I don't remember who Phil was.

ARMIJO: I don't remember either. But it's like, I think the mentality for the business man back then was to make money but run a good establishment, and I think as the years progressed it's like: make money, make money, make money, and not think too much about clientele and establishment. Hell, I can't, I can't ever remember a bodyguard being at the Music Box. And I

remember close to when it was getting ready to be shut down they had to have security guards, and it's just like—oh the one up on the mesa.

STEVENSON: Me Gusto?

ARMIJO: Me Gusto and the DI? The DI Lounge, you know? I mean, that was a drug haven. And they had to have security guards. So I think the population has changed. I know there's—I don't feel this as much as a lot of my friends do, but they really feel like the Mexican people are just kind of taking over the South Valley. Coming from Mexico—. I had a very interesting conversation with someone just last week. And what I was saying was, I was saying, "Well, you know, at least in my mind the people from Mexico are coming over, but they're hard workers, and they have a good work ethic. And they're willing to do this and that and the other." And this guy says—and he lives with a Mexican woman. "No," he says. "They're way different. A lot of the young ones," he says. It's like—. My perception was blown away, because I was just in a different world. He says, "No, they're coming here now expecting—you need to give me this, you need to put me, I need to get on welfare, I need to get on this—." It's a whole different mentality, there's a paradigm shift, I guess, in regards to the way I used to think that the Mexican people were and the way this gentleman is telling me that this is how they are. [40:00] And I said, "You think this is a microcosm? Or is he talking across the board here? Or what are you—?" He said, "No, I think a lot, a lot of them are." My wife is Caucasian, and I met her in Salt Lake City, and she's always loved the South Valley. She just loves the friendliness and just the way it's always been, but she's made comments also. She says, "Man, the Mexican people are just like taking over. You go to Price-Rite—." And she says, "My god." And it's like—. And I said, "Well what? Where do you expect them to go? Isn't this the land of opportunity? Are we going to—?" So we get into these kinds of debates, she and I. And she's a lot less—she's more open than some of my friends are. My friends, "Ah, send them back, man, sum' bitches. Get them asses back there. This is our—this state belongs to us, it's not them." And all that kind of stuff. So it's really—I remember when I was with YDI we went to D.C., and there was a Hispanic leadership conference there, and we were with people from all of the United States, and we got into some squabbles with some of the Latinos from New York. Because they were saying, "You guys don't even let us into your state, New Mexico." And it's like, "You, you this." And we go, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute. What do you mean, what do you mean 'you'? It's not me. You're generalizing, number one. And what is this specifically that you're talking about?" But I started thinking—and of course we had a facilitator and stuff—but I started thinking, We've got Latinos, we have Hispanics, which the federal government gave us the name. We have Chicanos, you know, there's so many. That's why when you said, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm confused." And really, it's how I have evolved has been actually, I think, more in line with the white culture, if you will, more than the Chicano culture because of my orientation to life through my dad specifically. So he kind of geared me towards that. It's been a real potpourri of experiences in regards to that. Do you know Chuy Martinez?

STEVENSON: Mm-hm

ARMIJO: We had a, through the Albuquerque Partnership, through Mark Sestanegas?? And, oh, the people from D.C., the drug people, drug money. Not drug money—

STEVENSON: DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration]?

ARMIJO: Yeah, uh. It was a federal, federal—. They wanted to set up a thing here in Albuquerque, and we did it at Barelas Community Center, talking about the Chicanismo and all of the cultural things and how we related or didn't relate and who were we, and I said, "I want to go, man." I'm confused. I'm a little bit this—it's like that song: "I'm a little bit country, I'm a little bit rock 'n' roll." It's like, Who the hell am I? But I remember very clearly—and that was the first time that I met Chuy, this was back probably about ninety-two. We talked about it, and we talked about alcohol and how it's always a factor in everything we did and why was it? And we talked abuse, and we said, "Well, who are we? What am I? Am I a Chicano? Am I Hispanic? Am I Latino? What is this all about?" I can't relate to being categorized Latino because that, the Latin countries is to me where "Latino" comes from. I'm more—the federal government, I'm sure you're well aware of, couldn't find a term for us so they started calling us Hispanic. Which is, you know, that's okay with me now. It wasn't before, but it's okay now. But the Chicanismo, you know, being the Chicano—you talk to people like I talk to my aunt, Auntie Lala, and she's seventy-something. And I said the Chicanos, and right away she thinks it's like, the Chicanos, those are like, you know, those are the problem. The problem—Spanish people of the world. The Chicanos—in her mind, the interpretation, and maybe it's because of back in the day when Huerta was around and Cesar Chavez, and the Chicanos, she saw that as being negative because they were striking and people were getting hurt and stuff. And in her mind, my god, why are they doing that? She didn't see the big picture of helping people and not being exposed to chemicals and everything that Cesar Chavez was. So it's interesting, like I said, the potpourri of perceptions that we have. And the South Valley, in my mind, has changed (pause) but not that significantly in regards to [45:00] why I still want to live here and that is is that—this morning I went to get the paper at 6:15 a.m., and I'm in my robe and it was cold, but you know what, man, I smell fresh air. I didn't smell pollution like I did in Salt Lake City. You take a breath, and you can taste that pollution. There's no pollution. I heard a (makes a cawing sound) the crows going, you know, to the Bosque. Right at that point there was not any cars on Riverside. The wind was blowing, it was cold, and I looked, it was still a little chilly, but that's what I love about South Valley. I could not live in the Heights, I couldn't. I'm just not there. I am not there. My wife's the same way. And she grew up in Salt Lake City, oh gosh, it's the eastern part right by the mountain. It's a little, I wouldn't, little more pricey homes—her dad was modest, you know, he was a baker. And he worked really, really hard, but he was smart and he bought a nice home in a nice location, and it was beautiful. She grew up with green and the mountains there and big old pine trees and stuff, and then she had to come to Albuquerque and see the semi-arid desert region. But anyway, she loves Albuquerque, and she, like me, says "I couldn't do it—all the traffic up in the Heights." You know, it's like, I was talking to somebody the other day, and they said, "Oh, it's on Eubank." And I said, "I don't go to Eubank." They said, "It's on Eubank and San Mateo or something." I said, "I don't go to Eubank unless I absolutely have to go." There's no reason for me to do that. I don't want to do it. You know, I don't want to do it.

STEVENSON: I have to go up to Juan Tabo later. [??] (both laugh)

ARMIJO: If I have to go, if I have a meeting or you know whatever, if I have to do something I'll do it. But if they say, "Well you know what, there's a really neat store up on Juan Tabo." And I say, "Well it can stay really neat, man. I'm going to stay with my stores here in the—."

STEVENSON: Joseph was interesting, he was talking to me, and he said he went to Del Norte High. But they didn't consider themselves to be the Heights. They refused to admit they lived in the Heights. They called themselves the Upper Valley. (both laugh) I can kind of relate to that. (laughs)

ARMIJO: That reminded me of, you know, for whatever reason popped into my mind. Remember the old A and W, on Central?

STEVENSON: Mm-hm.

ARMIJO: That reminded me of, when you said "Del Norte" I thought of the, oh gosh, it's already been a long week for me. Um—. (pause)

STEVENSON: It's only Tuesday

ARMIJO: But there were the Stompers, the Stompers, the Stompers. Do you remember the term "The Stompers"?

STEVENSON: Cowboys, yeah.

ARMIJO: The cowboys? Stompers? That's what we used to call them?

STEVENSON: We just called them "Stomps."

ARMIJO: Well, the Stompers from whatever school would meet us at the A and W, and that's who we would throw down. And I remember one (laughs) Candido Baca, gosh. I don't know why that name came to me, but. And he was like tough little, you know, meaty guy, man. And we were there, and they came and Candido got out of the car, and these other guys got out of the car, and we're all standing there. And this guy, I remember hit Candido one time, Candido went (makes a low whistling sound), and I remember he hit his head on the bumper of the car, boom! And we're going, "Whoa!" And we're saying, like, "Hey, get up!" And these guys are like, you know. And all of a sudden (makes whining sound) we hear sirens coming, the old sirens. We hear sirens coming, so we all got in our vehicles. Well, not in our vehicles, we all got in to the one or two vehicles that we had and piled in. And I remember Jack, who's our sax player, Jack Ayala, who lives in Adobe Acres now but grew up right there on La Vega, by Roscoe's Drugstore right there, the Ayalas. Anyway, we were taking off, and we stopped and the cops were coming, and Jack took off running. And I remember, I literally saw him jump that fence at the country club. That, whatever is it, eight foot fence? And I remember (makes blasting off sound) he jumped it. I remember he jumped it, I went, "Whoa!" And I remember so many, so many times where the sheriff's deputies were, for whatever reason, chasing us. I don't know why. There was nothing ever that we did, that was really, really bad, other than maybe getting in fights. Dansette?? Do you remember Dansette? Do you remember Sidro Garcia? The Sneakers?

STEVENSON: Yeah, I know who The Sneakers are.

ARMIJO: They used to play Dansette, and I remember we used to go to Dansette, and we used to have—we used to try to sneak in quarts of beer. In our jackets. Tom Barsanti—remember Tom Barsanti? Tom Barsanti had a band (pause) oh gosh. I wonder if that's the same Tom that had that Grammy. That he had an Indian?

STEVENSON: Oh, Tom Bee?

ARMIJO: I wonder if that's Tommy Barsanti. I just snapped out. But anyway, [50:00] back in the day he had a band, and we had a band, Thee Chekkers, and we played a lot. But there was Dansette, Sidro Garcia played—. Sidro Garcia, there was a group that after Thee Chekkers I became involved with, but the name was The Czars, C-Z-A-R-S. The Czars (people chattering in the background)—through Sidro Garcia, who was playing Lake Tahoe, Vegas, and all that stuff. It was Sidro Garcia before it was, yeah, *mala*. [*NB*: "Mala" could also be a band name??]

STEVENSON: Was Sidro from El Paso?

ARMIJO: No. Mountainair

STEVENSON: Because I remember him playing El Paso several times.

ARMIJO: He probably did. He went to the U of A. He graduated from the University of Albuquerque. But Sidro basically opened the doors for a lot of groups because The Czars went to Lake Tahoe, and I was with The Czars, and we backed up this guy named Jim Burgett, and he was kind of a local Lake Tahoe kind of talent, and we played at Harrah's in Lake Tahoe, and then we came back to Burque, and that's when we were playing Leo's La Roque??.

STEVENSON: (laughing) I haven't thought of that in a long time!

ARMIJO: And we changed our name to The Spinning Wheel. So from The Czars we became The Spinning Wheel.

STEVENSON: I remember seeing your name up on the marquis.

ARMIJO: Yep.

STEVENSON: La Roque

ARMIJO: And then I went back to Lake Tahoe, and I left The Spinning Wheel, and I became involved with Sloopy and the Red Baron, a show group. And I was with them, gosh, for three years? And we did it all. Across the United States, Hawaii, Canada.

STEVENSON: Was that Snoopy or Sloopy?

ARMIJO: Sloopy

STEVENSON: That's what I thought. Like "Hang on"

ARMIJO: Yeah, Sloopy and the Red Barons. She was a little petite show girl. She was a hell of a dancer, very good comedienne. Singer, okay. We kind of picked up the slack for that. But she was just a real show girl. And we had, you know, the usual show stuff that we did. We played

here in Albuquerque, at the Sundowner—this is back when it was, you know, it was a nice place, the Sundowner Lounge. How we would do it, is we'd come in and you'd do your first (vocalizes) ba-da, ba-da, ba-da, you know, first set, and then you'd go and you'd change, and POOM the lights would come on and, (vocalizes) pop-pop-pa! you know, you do your show stuff. But we did that, and then my dad was sick. In seventy-three I came off the road, and then he passed away, a fifth heart attack. But that's when I quit the road and came to Albuquerque, and said, "I need to get a real job." So I did my Fuller Brush, and—.

STEVENSON: You went to UNM?

ARMIJO: Actually no. I was twenty-seven when I went to UNM. So seventy-three—I got married in seventy, and I was twenty-three. (pause) It was a year after—. Maybe I was twenty-eight when I started UNM. Maybe—

STEVENSON: Your Fuller Brush, huh—.

ARMIJO: Yeah, I did my Fuller Brush thing, man.

STEVENSON: In the seventies?

ARMIJO: Yep

STEVENSON: Did you know a guy named Clark Hanlon?

ARMIJO: Oh boy, I—.

STEVENSON: My wife's uncle—he was a Fuller Brush salesman in Albuquerque in the seventies. (laughs) I don't know.

ARMIJO: Oh really? Did the Fuller Brush, did the Rainbow Vacuum cleaner thing, did my stint in selling Rainbow Vacuum cleaners. Then with a letter of reference from Al Hurricane, Al Sanchez, because we did a lot of stuff with Al—.

STEVENSON: (inaudible)

ARMIJO: Actually, we were in the National Guard with Al; me and Jack, and all the guys. In the Air National Guard, and Morrie, Tiny Morrie. And brother Gaby—all three of them. And uh, Al used to like, back in the day, they'd have—remember the Palladium??

STEVENSON: Mm-hmm.

ARMIJO: On Central? He'd have dances there so, it would be like Al Hurricane and Thee Chekkers. Kind of a double bill. And then Al Hurricane would bring people in like Fats Domino and Little Richard. I remember Bennie, Bennie Sanchez, the brains behind Al Hurricane, mom.

STEVENSON: I interviewed her about ten years ago. Wonderful lady

ARMIJO: She's, she's such a lady. She got me backstage in nineteen sixty-five when I met James Brown, or sixty-two, I don't remember which. Sixty-two. I mean, that was, James Brown was—still.

STEVENSON: I can relate. When I was thirteen I wanted to be the drummer in James Brown's band. That was my life dream.

ARMIJO: (vocalizing) Bamp-bam, on the one and the three, [55:00] three and. But, um, I met James Brown through Bennie Sanchez, and got backstage and talked to him. Actually, you know what, they did a piece on the band in *Transmission Magazine*. You ever heard of *Transmission*? It's a New Mexico music magazine. (pause) I might, um—.

STEVENSON: Is it new, or old?

ARMIJO: Ours came out in August, I believe. We were the front cover.

STEVENSON: (inaudible) August

ARMIJO: August

STEVENSON: (inaudible) still around, August 2002

ARMIJO: Yeah, it—

STEVENSON: Where are they at?

ARMIJO: I don't know.

STEVENSON: I'll ask around.

ARMIJO: I think it was off of West Central, fifty-six, fifty-ninth street or something. But, uh, Steve is the guy's name. Steve Maase?

STEVENSON: Steve Maase, I know him. Guitar player

ARMIJO: Maybe I'm thinking of something—. I might even have a copy of it somewhere, the article.

STEVENSON: Steve Maase is a jazz guitar player, about our age.

ARMIJO: It may not be Maase. I only spoke with him on the phone. I never really met him.

STEVENSON: But I can imagine Steve doing something like that.

ARMIJO: Yeah. And one of his editorials was people say, "*Transmission Magazine*, is this mechanics, or what?" And he says, "Don't people understand audio? Transmission?" You know? Because my first thought was that, *Transmission Magazine*. And after I read his article, the editorial, thought, Well, yeah, you know, makes sense. But it's a little out there, for me. But anyway, yeah so.

STEVENSON: Well I think I need to wrap up here because I got to get to another (inaudible) the road. Anything you want to add at all to—?

ARMIJO: How are you going to do this, and how's it all coming together?

STEVENSON: Basically, I have to get a release form to you. Basically all these tapes I'm making are going to go into the Albuquerque Museum, our archive, so if anybody wants to come listen to your voice thirty years from now, they can—

ARMIJO: Oh, I see.

STEVENSON: —listen to this. But that won't be available unless you sign a permission, otherwise it'll just sit there on a shelf and just be there. Nobody will be able to listen to it. (laughs)

ARMIJO: Okay, yeah

STEVENSON: What I'm going to do is write up kind of the notes of what you've done, and we're going to write a big report about the Hispanic experience in Albuquerque that we're going to give to the City. About the needs—

ARMIJO: Can we get a copy?

STEVENSON: Sure.

ARMIJO: Yeah, I'd like a copy. Definitely

STEVENSON: It's going to feature all the cultures in Albuquerque. It's going to have a section on the East Indian population, who actually like to be called "Indians," even though they're from India. Which makes sense, actually. Get confused with the Isletans. The Vietnamese people who chose to settle in the Southeast Heights, I interviewed a lot of them to find out what their experience is like.

ARMIJO: Well that's neat.

STEVENSON: And the idea is just to give us a sense of who we are in this place and time and what the community needs are. So I should have asked you what you consider something that, you know—. We've asked a lot of these communities what they need, and they all would pretty much like community centers.

ARMIJO: Well, actually, I've been talking about this ever since I've been here, is I'd like to see community service centers, not just community centers. Because I think we're past community centers, you know. It's 2002, and in a lot of people's minds, the mentality is a community center does, you know, whatever—whatever it is in their mind. A community service center I think should do more for the community. We do recreation here, we do education. I have a life skills class program that we do with the kids where we talk about checkbooks. We talk about therms, wattage. We talk about the Bosque. We talk about words like "flora," "fauna," "meandering." We talk about uplift, we talk about fluvial fans, in a way that the kids can relate. So there's an educational process that happens here, plus recreation, plus safety, plus security for mom and dad to know their kids when they're here in our before- and after-school program are safe and secure. We have a financial program that if you can't quite make it, we'll help you out. Either free or reduced. To be free you pretty much have to be indigent. So there's a lot of stuff that we do here. It'd be nice to have a food sample here??. It'd be nice to have—I want that building next

door, it's a dental building, and they're going to be moving, I think, to Santo Famigal??. I want that to be the Los Padillas Performing Art Center. And it's huge. I'd like to have guitar, piano, keyboard, vocal—

STEVENSON: Percussion?

ARMIJO: Yeah, have that whole thing. Because part of what we've—well not "we." I haven't done it. I won't take responsibility for that. Our code of conduct, "I will take responsibility for my actions." First principle. I'm not going to take responsibility for this one, is that art and music have been pulled from our schools, you know, and where are our kids getting it from? And that's where I try in my little way [1:00:00] to give as much as I can to the community in that. But if we can get that, then, to heck with the school. We'll do our own thing. To me, if the need is there, and the community and whoever isn't fulfilling that need, then it's my responsibility to plug in and—to the best of my ability—to whatever degree or percent I can do fulfill that need for our kids. Our culture, our music is so much a part of our culture, you know, from *rancheras*, to James Brown to the *cordillon*??, which I don't care for personally, but my mom loved it, to the *cordillon*, to all of those kinds of things. And our kids are losing it. It's like I was talking about the Music Box, and the mentality of the businessman. It's like, clean good establishment and then it goes it's make money, make money. Well this is what I see us doing with our music. It's like nobody's really caring that much about it. And they're saying, "Well, it's reading, writing (makes scoffing sounds). Reading, writing? Some of these kids, they come to our center in second grade and can't even write their own name. So don't talk to me about reading and writing, that's another story. By the way, my sister's the APS [Albuquerque Public Schools] board member for the South Valley, Dolores Herrera.

STEVENSON: I know her.

ARMIJO: You know Dolores? Anyway, that's a whole different story.

STEVENSON: She's your sister or mom?

ARMIJO: She's my sister. Yeah, she's right under me.

STEVENSON: So she grew up on Riverside too.

ARMIJO: Yep, well, there on La Vega, La Vega Court, that's where we all grew up. My youngest sister Cecilia has a mansion there, right there on the bigger court with—

STEVENSON: I think she's the one I used to flirt with??.

[Tape ends at 1:01:30]