

TRANSCRIPT: Charlie Cobb

Interviewee: Charlie Cobb
Interviewer: Joshua Clark Davis
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START OF INTERVIEW

Josh Davis: Okay. So, just to start over, I'm Josh Davis. I'm meeting here with Mr. Charlie Cobb. We're going to be talking about Drum & Spear, Africa News Service. I started off the interview—it's October fifteenth, excuse me, sixteenth, 2015—and I started off by saying Mr. Cobb is probably best known for journalism that he did later in his career. He's known for books he's written. He's known for SNCC and for activism. But I wanted to ask him about poetry and writing he was doing already, I believe, at the time you were in SNCC.

Charlie Cobb: Yeah. Well, see, in SNCC, like almost all of us were field secretaries, firstly. We were all writing field reports. [Laughs]

JD: Right.

CC: Every month. That's Jim Forman's influence. He was a trained historian, so he was always on us to write field reports. So, there was a whole body of written reports: mine, not just mine, but a number of people that were in SNCC and in the field in southwest Georgia and Mississippi and Alabama. So, there's that.

Then there's a whole strain of poetry in SNCC: Jane Stembridge, Worth Long, myself, others. Now, my first poetry was published by Maria Varela.

JD: Um-hmm?

CC: And she had—she was living in Jackson, well, Tougaloo, then. And she had first published a book by Jane Stembridge, *I Play Flute*, which gave the name Flute Publications. Then she asked if she could publish a collection of my poetry, which she published as *Furrows*. This is in 1966, '65, something like that.

JD: Maria was the publisher?

CC: Maria was the publisher.

JD: Okay.

CC: Maria, well—yeah, publisher, editor. Henry Kirksey, who had a print shop, Henry J. Kirksey, who would later become a state senator in Mississippi—maybe the first black state senator, I don't remember now—but then he had a small print shop.

JD: Hmm.

CC: And he actually printed the books. So, that was my first published work. And I know that's early because it's like '66, '65, something like that. And I never really, aside from the poetry, don't really get back into writing in any kind of regular way until I enter journalism. Then it's the seventies.

JD: Um-hmm. Okay. Now, you also wrote for the SNCC newspaper some, didn't you?

CC: Well, there was a SNCC—the *Student Voice* was the name of it.

JD: That's what I meant, yeah.

CC: Clay Carson published all of the editions, I think, through Greenwood Press, [a] reprint company. I didn't write for it. I mean, it was like anybody could write [laughs]—it was like saying any SNCC person that had anything in it. It was not a reported—it was not a

reported—nothing in there was reported except excerpts from field reports and maybe some poetry. But I didn't *write* for it. Julian Bond was the editor.

JD: Um-hmm. But as someone who was writing, and I assume from what I know people in SNCC read a lot when—I mean.

CC: Yeah, we read a lot. We read a lot because people sent us books. [Laughs]

JD: Right.

CC: [Laughs] And part of the reason people sent us books was to help facilitate the work we were doing. And we read the books, too.

JD: Right. And you had, I think, a key role in organizing or kind of developing the idea of the Freedom Schools?

CC: Yeah, I proposed the idea and wrote the first proposal, which was essentially a proposal to SNCC: "This is what we should do in the summer of 1964. This is why we should do it." I think it's available somewhere.

JD: Yeah.

CC: But I had the—you know, that proposal emerges because you're faced with the question: "Okay, if you're going to have a thousand students or so students, what are you going to do with them? Because they don't have any experience organizing."

JD: Right.

CC: And the logical thing to do with them, it seemed to me, since they were coming off college campuses, was to begin to use them to fill some of these huge gaps that existed in young people in Mississippi, both gaps in the sense of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and gaps of consciousness, because obviously Mississippi public schools [laughs] were not giving a great deal of emphasis to black history or black struggle.

JD: Um-hmm.

CC: So, the Freedom Schools—we had always been concerned about education. What the summer volunteers enabled us to do [05:00] was actually approach in a meaningful way addressing some of the education issues that we had long been aware of.

JD: Um-hmm.

CC: So, that's where that idea—it's an organizer's idea, that's all. I was an organizer. And everybody [laughs] had ideas.

JD: "Gaps of consciousness." That's a great phrase for me. I just think that speaks to a lot of what we'll be talking about today. So, we're obviously speeding through the years—

CC: Yeah.

JD: 1960 through 1967, but—I've heard this, and you can correct me if I'm wrong. You went on a trip through Paris at one point and went to *Présence Africaine*?

CC: Yeah. I went to—I didn't—the trip wasn't to Paris. The trip was to Vietnam.

JD: Right.

CC: Bertrand Russell financed that trip, because he wanted to know what—he was a philosopher and he had a philosophical question, I mean, "What would people doing what we were doing in the deep South, organizing, find was similar and what would they find dissimilar from a group like the Viet Cong?" And the initial idea was to travel with the Viet Cong and see what they did. Julius Lester and I agreed to go on that trip. But the war kept us from going across the border from Cambodia into South Vietnam. So, the Viet Cong people said it was just too dangerous and they didn't want to be responsible for anything happening.

So, Plan B was to go to North Vietnam, and we spent—this was '67—what, maybe two or three weeks in North Vietnam. And then, coming back to the States, I went to Paris and I

visited—and I was aware of *Présence Africaine*, the magazine. My mother was chair of Romance Languages at Howard University.

JD: Right.

CC: So, French and—.

JD: Yeah.

CC: I was aware of *Présence Africaine* for both linguistic reasons and political reasons. I mean, it was a kind of a PanAfrican journal not only around art and literature but around technology, politics, and all of that. So, it was an obvious place to visit [laughs] if you were young and black, and it's 1967. And then Courtland Cox and I decided, because Courtland was the SNCC representative at Bertrand Russell's war crimes tribunal in Stockholm—.

JD: Um-hmm, okay.

CC: And decided before going to the States we would visit Africa. And we wound up drifting down the whole west coast of Africa.

JD: On the same trip?

CC: Same trip.

JD: Ah, okay.

CC: This is the summer of '67, and I'm now thinking about Africa. I'm thinking about African struggle in sort of the same mission that Russell had sent me on to, and Julius Lester on to, Vietnam. I mean, what in the context of African struggle and African independence, because all of these countries are now independent [], what would be similar and what would be dissimilar to black struggle? And then, my visit to *Présence Africaine* is somewhere in that consciousness.

Anyway, at the end of that trip, which took all summer—we went to Guinea and, I forget, Ivory Coast, and Liberia, fourth class on a boat. And when I came back to the States—and remember now the movement in the States in the wake of Black Power’s [shout-out] by Stokely Carmichael is very much involved with issues of black consciousness, black thought, and I’m no less affected than anybody else. And in that framework, the *Présence Africaine* visit pushed to the forefront of my mind. I said, “Well, we could do something,” and that seemed doable.

JD: Um-hmm.

CC: You know? I’m not a person of enormous [] because I want to know what can you actually *do*? [Laughs] And in doing something like the *Présence Africaine*, what I had seen in Paris, with artists coming in and out of a place, political people coming in and out of a place, and books to inform struggle, it kind of seemed doable in a city like Washington, DC, my hometown. [Laughs]

JD: Right.

CC: And so, that’s where the Drum & Spear idea begins to emerge as a body of work. And I’m sort of on the tail end of my involvement with SNCC, although I’m having this discussion with SNCC people. [10:00] All the people I’m talking to about this—Judy Richardson, Courtland Cox, and others—either have been directly involved in SNCC or represent kind of the second—generation is not the right word, but they’re engaged in student activism.

JD: Right.

CC: Tony Gittens, for instance.

JD: He was more with NAG, right?

CC: No, no, NAG—no, Tony was one of the leaders of the Howard University protest of 1968.

JD: Ah, that's right! Right, right.

CC: You know, NAG is not a factor in this. NAG is way earlier. NAG is eight years earlier.

JD: Okay.

CC: So, Tony represents a second generation of campus activists. There were a number of them that we were interacting with and also on other college campuses: Howard Fuller, Owusu Sadaukai, down here in Durham, you know, and others, people up at Cornell, and others.

JD: Um-hmm.

CC: But anyway, the Drum & Spear idea rose out of both the black consciousness movement that has begun to develop in the United States and my own direct experience with *Présence Africaine* and the Africa trip. So, there's this PanAfrican idea that's begun to sink some roots.

JD: Had you ever been to a black-owned bookstore before?

CC: Oh, yeah!

JD: Michaux's?

CC: Michaux's, yeah, in New York. In Detroit, I don't know, I'm drawing a blank on it now. There's another one in Oakland, California.

JD: Vaughn's?

CC: It might have been.

JD: Edward Vaughn.

CC: Yeah. I don't remember now. Oh, yeah, black-owned bookstores were not unfamiliar to us.

JD: Right. Did you have a thought about whether Drum & Spear would be like Michaux's? Because *Présence Africaine*, it seems like, really gave you that—.

CC: Well, in the sense that it would be a crossroads for, if you will, for a range of people engaged in black struggle to meet and would be a source of information, yeah, in that sense, Michaux's. It would be very different in the sense that we weren't as nationalistic as Michaux's Bookstore. I mean, we weren't similar, I don't believe, in Washington, to the scene you had, say, in New York on 125th Street, with stepladder speakers at Michaux's and Nation of Islam. No, we didn't have that sense.

But we did share with Michaux and others the sense that it was important to get information in various forms, in various *written* forms, pre-social media, pre-computers, in written form essentially, out to bookstores. It was a natural and logical vehicle to do that.

JD: Yeah. Where did the name come from?

CC: I don't remember. I came up with it, but I don't remember how I came up with it.

JD: I mean, it's interesting because most of the black-owned bookstores of the era had Kiswahili names or used African imagery. And, you know, I think Judy said the drum was for communication and the spear was for whatever else the revolution—.

CC: Yeah, we had some kind of explanation for it, but as to actually where the name came from, I don't remember.

JD: Yeah. So, you've talked about this a bit already, but going into this, what was it that you all wanted to do? And let me—we're talking about you, Courtland Cox, Judy Richardson, any other—? Tony Gittens.

CC: And Anne Forrester Holloway—Anne Forrester, later Anne Forrester Holloway, who has passed away now, Marvin Holloway, ah, who else was—Ivanhoe Donaldson.

JD: Right.

CC: We formed a core board of directors. Also—oh, boy, I can't think of his name. Don—he's with the New School for Afro-American Thought, you know.

JD: Um.

CC: Out of California.

JD: Not Warden?

CC: No.

JD: What is the guy—out of Oakland?

CC: Yeah, he was somewhere from the Bay Area. But he was living and working with Gaston Neal at the New School for Afro-American Thought in Washington. Anyway, he was on the board, too. So, what we were about was black consciousness, and we didn't feel that that was limited to the United States—black consciousness in the sense of the PanAfrican world or the African Diaspora. We consciously wanted a shop that reflected that kind of interest. [15:00]

And we wanted a shop that warmly welcomed authors and we emphasized *authors*, as distinct from, say, political figures. You know, we wanted a shop that, you know, a range of authors could feel comfortable reading in. And we wanted a range of books. I mean, it was interesting, because there were people who took exception to some of the books we carried. I remember there were some Black Panthers, and they felt we should have Mao's *Little Red Book* in the front, and it was on the side.

JD: Um-hmm.

CC: And we said, “You know, it’s our bookstore. We’ll put the damn books wherever we want.” [Laughs] And there were, you know, people who objected, for instance, to us carrying somebody like Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp*.

JD: Right.

CC: You know. There was mixed feelings about Chester Himes and his Gravedigger Jones/Coffin Eddie books, you know. So, you know, we felt you had everybody. I mean, the whole—what’s the point of having a black bookstore if you’re going to now start to decide who’s too black or not black enough to be in the shop.

JD: Right.

CC: So, we had everybody. And it was supposed to be that kind of place.

JD: To me, I mean, also an important part of the context is DC is such a fascinating place at this time.

CC: Well, DC was very, very active, and you had all of these groups of cultural and political. You know, Stokely was there, and he was organizing the Black United Front. Marion Barry, not yet even on the school board, had Pride and, you know, was doing his own level of agitation. The New School for Afro-American Thought. [Lester McKinney], now Baba [], had another another school, [], or something like that, [a Swahili name]. So, there was a lot of political energy and activity, not all of it associated with SNCC. The Panthers were there, and then you had the agitation for home rule going on.

JD: Um-hmm.

CC: You know. So, there was a lot of political ferment, and the campus protests on the Howard University campus.

JD: What was the store’s connection to the Center for Black Education, because—?

CC: Well, same people.

JD: It's right next door, right?

CC: Well, it's not exactly next door, but it's only a block away. The store was on Euclid Street, I think, Fourteenth and Euclid. And the Center for Black Education was on Fourteenth and Fairmont Street.

JD: Okay.

CC: It's a block up and then to the left, I guess. It basically was the same. What had happened was that after the riots that followed Martin King's assassination, the Congress, or at least some people in the Congress, then decided they would encourage a land grant, *urban* land grant college in Washington, the first urban land grant college.

JD: Right.

CC: This is Wayne Morse—they were liberals.

JD: Right.

CC: And they set up Federal City College, which is now the University of the District of Columbia. And really they were, I think—and the idea, which was a valid idea, you pull in students who were maybe a little older than your typical incoming freshmen. And they would be older because they were Vietnam War veterans, or they had been in jail, or for a variety of reasons. And it would be cheap. I think the tuition was thirty-five dollars a semester. I think they were afraid of this whole class of people, so they basically asked all the SNCC people in town to come onboard as professors. [Laughs]

JD: At UDC, or, I mean, at Federal City College?

CC: At Federal City College, that first year, all of us were invited to be—and we did. I mean, a lot of us, let me put it that way, became—taught there. We taught, you know, various courses from literature, black literature, history, that sort of thing.

However, we clashed with the university over the idea of education, because we made the argument—and it's in writing. Maybe, I don't know—we wrote it up anyway. And our argument was, we said [20:00] that to do Black Studies, in the sense of studying Richard Wright or James Baldwin or John Hope Franklin, or something like that, was inadequate. Yes, it's fine to know Langston Hughes. Yes, it's fine to know Zora Neale Hurston, etcetera, if you, you know, have important figures in literature, or historical research, or something like that. But what we really needed was black education. And the question of black education turned on the question or issue of what you were going to do with your education once you finished. And it didn't matter what you took if you wanted—you might want to be a doctor or an engineer or a teacher, or whatever it was you wanted to be, the question you had to confront as a college student was, "Upon graduation, how am I going to use my education for the black community?"

JD: Right.

CC: Which was depressed, destroyed by rioting, and all of that. That was our argument. We said, therefore, what Federal City College needs is to give us parallel power so that we should have a science department, a mathematics department, [laughs] as well as a history department, a literacy department, everything. And everybody would know that what you're doing with your section of the university is trying to orient the students who were math majors or biology majors—everybody would know you're trying to orient them to use the skills they acquire in college, and perhaps going on to graduate school, for the purpose—I think we used the old Marcus Garvey phrase, "the redemption and vindication of the race".

JD: Hmm, interesting.

CC: That's kind of—was our—and, of course, the school said, “Well, no, we didn't bring you here [laughs] to do that.”

JD: Right.

CC: “We want you to teach a history course here or a—I mean, Jean Wiley, you know, had been teaching English in Tuskegee, and she taught English at Federal City College. Jimmy Garrett came over, I think, from Oakland, and he was teaching a literature course, or something like that, I forget. But that wasn't—that's okay, but that's not what the fight was about. And so, we only stayed there one year, and then we left en mass and developed the Center for Black Education.

JD: Ah-ha, I never knew that as the prehistory of CBE! And it sounds very, very similar—and it makes sense—it's very similar to Malcolm X Liberation University.

CC: Yeah! We were in discussion with Howard Fuller down in Durham. And there's a whole set, which has not been well written about, that precedes these Black Studies departments on college campuses now, but a whole struggle around independent black education in New York and Durham and DC, the West Coast.

JD: Right.

CC: And the Midwest. And we sort of, you know, were part of that.

JD: Yeah.

CC: And we were in conversation with each other.

JD: Yeah. Yeah, that's interesting. That helps clarify some things for me. When you started Drum & Spear, did you all think of it as a business?

CC: No, that was one of the weaknesses of it. I mean, yes, I mean, at some level, obviously, we had to think of it as a business. We had a manager. You know, we had to order books. But we didn't run it as a—so we had, for instance, we felt there were certain books that no one should come into the store and ask for and be told we didn't have them, that we were out of them.

JD: Right.

CC: Which led to, really, a stupid decision business-wise. So, you would say, "Well, nobody should come into Drum & Spear and ask for a copy of *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, and be told, 'I'm sorry, it's out of stock.'" So, you order a hundred copies.

[Laughs] Right? But, you know, but only five people in maybe—.

Unidentified Female: Good morning!

CC: Good morning! How are you? Only five people in a month, if that many, might—which meant that you had stock piled up in the back of books like that, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. People came in the bookstore, probably, I would say, we probably sold—the best-selling book in the bookstore was probably Iceberg Slim's *Pimp*, [laughs] you know. Maybe Chester Himes, [25:00] some of the Gravedigger Jones—but it was books like that. Maybe Langston Hughes. But, you know, there was no huge demand for Frantz Fanon or even Malcolm X in those days, or no huge demand for John Hope Franklin's [laughs] historical work or W.E.B. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction*. Those were books we considered vitally important to always have on [site]. So, no, we didn't run it very well as a business. It was a Movement bookstore. [Laughs]

JD: Right. And it sounded as—well, it's really—what is it? Afro-American Resources, Inc. is the nonprofit that is the—.

CC: Yeah, that was the corporate—yeah. But, you know, it meant that, more or less, we paid taxes and not much else in the way of [business]. Courtland can talk to you better about this. He's more business-oriented than me.

JD: What—?

CC: Or Tony Gittens.

JD: That makes me think. Was there a sense of how to structure labor within the store? Was that something that people were concerned with? Like, were there managers? Or was it more like a collective?

CC: There was one. There was a bookstore manager for the entire operation, []. We gave him input or maybe—we gave Tony input, maybe having an author come into the store. The management of the store was one person, and I think there were maybe a couple of sales people, [Wardeen Henderson], a couple of sales people, [Ivy]—I can't remember now. A couple of sales people, but that's—but we didn't really have a hands-on approach to management as a board that had established this bookstore. And we were doing a lot of other things. We were developing a radio show.

JD: Right, on HUR—no, WOL.

CC: WOL, which at that time was the hot AM radio, primarily music. We had a show on Sundays called “Sa Yaa Watoto”, “Children's Hour”. Judy was [], and she sort of narrated these stories. And then, we all took acting parts.

JD: Right.

CC: [Laughs] And we were a big hit with the taxi drivers. I know that. I don't know how big a hit we were with the kids. [Laughs]

JD: Well, it's interesting because it's—so, did you ever work at the sales counter?

CC: No.

JD: Okay. See, I don't think I actually knew that. It's interesting because this is a Movement storefront that's devoted to getting messages out, but you're doing other things in media. You're having this radio show, which almost everyone doing the radio show is Drum & Spear also, right?

CC: Yeah! See, this is all the same group out of SNCC, primarily: Drum & Spear, "Sa Yaa Watoto", the Center for Black Education, and Federal City College. We're all—there are some people involved that weren't down south, but primarily we're, you know, we're all the same. [Laughs] We're all the same people, but we obviously attract new people. You know, Tony wasn't in the South, but he was a leader of the campus movement on Howard's campus. So, he would naturally gravitate towards us, and we would naturally gravitate towards him. Q.T. Jackson was another leader on the Howard campus.

JD: Q.T.?

CC: Q.—initials Q.T.

JD: Yeah, okay.

CC: Anne Forrester was then either teaching or doing graduate work in African Studies.

JD: Um-hmm.

CC: So, she would naturally gravitate towards us, because we're talking about PanAfrican ideas *and* we have a body of material there that she can access *and* we're attracting Africans to the store.

JD: Um-hmm, diplomats and students at Howard.

CC: Students, mainly.

JD: Yeah.

CC: Students, mainly. We knew a few of the diplomats, the Tanzanians, the Ghanaians, in particular. But we also are attracting representatives of African Liberation Movements, southern Africa, because, remember, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, South Africa—none of them are free of colonial rule. Amilcar Cabral came by the bookstore.

JD: Wow.

CC: Sat in the corner and had a conversation with us about, you know, the liberation fight in his country and his thoughts about what Africa needed. So, it was that kind of place. [30:00]

JD: Were there other prominent guests like that you remember?

CC: That's the only one I remember. That's the only one I remember. I don't—[laughs] so many of them were either in jail—well, the prominent people were, you know, they were either in the field fighting, as Augustinho Netto was, or Dos Santos and the people in Mozambique were in jail in South Africa and Zimbabwe. So, they would be very limited in their ability to get all the way to Washington and make their way to us. [Laughs]

JD: Right. [Laughs] Sort little jaunt to Fourteenth Street.

CC: But they had, you know, I don't know if I would call them "branches" in the United States, but they certainly had people, you know, who represented their various—largely on college campuses.

JD: Right.

CC: I mean, most of the first people I ever met from ZAPU and ZANO and ANC and PAC, I mean, they were our age. [Laughs]

JD: They were students at HBCUs.

CC: Students, yeah, at HBCUs, for the most part.

JD: How and why did Drum & Spear decide to get into distribution and publication?

CC: We decided, I think, and I only have the vaguest [memory]. One, we were always generating ideas. I mean, that's just part of the culture of the Movement. Well, that's one of the things I'm going to be talking about this afternoon, what Movement culture really was like. But generating—generation of ideas. And so, within the context of having a bookstore, having a publishing company would be a natural evolution.

And as I recall, it was specifically triggered from conversation with C.L.R. James and us. Because, again, C.L.R. James, who had been brought into Federal City College, is interacting with us, and we're having conversations with C.L.R. on a number of things: Sixth PanAfrican Congress, which Courtland would eventually head. And somewhere in that context, in some conversation, I think, C.L.R.'s out-of-print book—*History of Negro Revolt* was what it was called—.

JD: About Haiti, right?

CC: No, no, not really about Haiti. It's about PanAfricanism and it's about more than Haiti. It's a history—it's a very slim work called *A History of Negro Revolt*.

JD: You guys renamed it, though, right?

CC: We renamed it *History of Pan-African Revolt*, and that was the first publication of Drum & Spear. And it was in some conversation—the details [laughs], I mean, we're talking damn near fifty years ago.

JD: Right. [Laughs]

CC: [Laughs] The details, which I quite frankly do not recollect—if Anne Forrester was alive, she could talk to you, because Anne had, I think, had that very detail—and wound up being the editor of Drum & Spear Press.

JD: Right.

CC: Anyway, we spun off in order to publish C.L.R.'s renamed [laughs] book. And at the same time we were having a conversation—within the context of doing that, we were having a conversation with the Tanzanians about publishing work in Swahili in Tanzania. And Jennifer Lawson—you might want to—ah, “Children of Africa”, children’s coloring book. And we were having these conversations. I just don’t—I can’t remember them chronologically.

But anyway, we decided to—a guy who, again, has passed away, Bernard Muganda, who was involved with us, was a Tanzanian. And Walter Bgoya, who is in Tanzania, in fact started his own publishing company, Mkuki—I can’t think of it. [Mkuki na Nyoto] But he’s still very—I hear from Walter from time to time.

JD: B-A-G-O-Y-A?

CC: B-G-O-Y-A, Walter Bgoya. We were having this conversation with Tanzanians, and the reason we were having the conversations with Tanzanians was because Julius Nyerere was writing books that interested us.

JD: Right.

CC: *Education for Self Reliance* and all of that. So, there’s this kind of dialogue going on that’s affecting the Press and this decision to do this children’s book and publish it in English and Swahili.

JD: Right.

CC: And ultimately to go to Tanzania to pursue this [idea]. So, you know, the publishing company was just the natural [35:00] evolution from the Movement dynamic that kind of characterized—“Oh, that sounds like a good idea. Let’s try it.”

JD: Um-hmm.

CC: That sort of—[laughs] that’s how we approached everything.

JD: You guys are publishing books in Tanzania also?

CC: Well, not really. We never got off the ground. Walter had gone over to Tanzania, and then he left. And it never really got off the ground, and we didn't have the resources.

JD: Yeah.

CC: And it's complicated.

JD: It sounds very difficult, yeah.

CC: And we published also a book of Palestinian poetry, which is highly—I just got an inquiry about republishing it. [Laughs]

JD: Wow. Yeah, I've heard of that and I brought it up in a talk recently.

CC: *Enemy of the Sun*.

JD: And a Palestinian woman was in the crowd, and she said, "Oh, yeah, I know that book."

CC: Yeah, it was very—you know, yeah. We were in some conversation, [laughs] I forget. Because we were SNCC, you know, and because we had written this thing on the Israel-Palestine conflict in our newsletter way back in the sixties, [laughs] we had this relationship [laughs] with Palestinians.

JD: Interesting.

CC: Edmund Ghareeb, who is still in Washington, I think, had a—you know, a big Palestinian literary figure—had a hand in publishing it. It was arguably the best book we published, in terms of quality, the actual physical quality of the publication, and the quality of the poetry. I would argue it was the best book that we published.

JD: Very interesting.

CC: But we didn't get very far in it, because we are now starting to sink from the weight of our business inadequacies. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] Right.

CC: Then I stayed a year longer in Tanzania, not—it didn't have anything to do with Drum & Spear, really. [Laughs]

JD: Right. Do you remember at all the thinking behind [], the store that opened in—?

CC: No, you'd—Courtland. That was Courtland's idea.

JD: Yeah. That's a very interesting story.

CC: I was living in Tanzania when Courtland decided to do that.

JD: Quick question: Do you know who illustrated this catalogue?

CC: No, I don't.

JD: There's a name at the bottom, [Checks].

CC: I don't know. Jennifer Lawson may know.

JD: Okay. I'd love to reproduce this. And, I mean, maybe the image really belongs to Drum& Spear. It's a Drum & Spear catalogue.

CC: Yeah.

JD: So, you think Jennifer Lawson would—?

CC: Jennifer Lawson would be—I would ask either Jennifer, excuse me, either Jennifer or Judy. But I would guess Jennifer.

JD: Yeah. So, by this time, it sounds like, by '70, '71, the store is more and more in the red.

CC: Yeah. I'm living in Africa now, '70, '71. I don't come back until '72. The store, yeah, is definitely in the red.

JD: Tell me a bit about how your journalism career evolves. I know that—like there's a very interesting—I'm trying to remember the title of it, but you write something on African Americans' views of Africans—.

CC: Oh, yeah, for the old *Negro Digest*!

JD: That makes a splash.

CC: The old Negro—.

JD: *Black World, Negro Digest*.

CC: Yeah. And I wrote a long piece, a very long piece, encouraged by Hoyt Fuller, then the editor of that who died far too young, because he encouraged young black writers. And I wrote a very long piece about being in Africa, and it was kind of a hardheaded, nonromantic [laughs] kind of place—.

JD: Right.

CC: Basically saying, you know, it's kind of hard [digging] in here, and you have to think about a range of things, from language to behavior. And some people appreciated it and some people [laughs] felt it ran counter to their own preferred romance.

JD: Right.

CC: But I actually got started writing in the news business in Africa, writing for the SOBU, Student Organization of Black Unity.

JD: Out of Greensboro!

CC: That came out of Greensboro and Durham.

JD: Ah!

CC: And the editor was Milton Coleman—.

JD: Right.

CC: Who would become an editor at the *Washington Post*.

JD: We also interviewed him for this project, which is—.

CC: Okay. Well, I started writing, because Milton wanted me to write—like I said, we were in conversation, and we're all the same age, and we're Movement activists and stuff. And so, Milton, since I was living in Tanzania, Milton wanted stories for the *SOBU Newsletter*.

JD: Yeah, and I've done a lot of work with that. I didn't—I'd seen you had written stuff for them. I didn't know that was your first [40:00] foray, really, into journalism.

CC: Yes, exactly. That was my first foray into journalism. I came back to the States. And Milton had now finished the Columbia School of Journalism and was working—I'm not sure about the—I think he may have, for half a second, have worked for WHUR radio, which had been really given to Howard by what's her name—*Washington Post*—Graham, Katherine Graham.

JD: Right.

CC: She had to divest the radio station. This has to do with tax stuff, and she gave it to Howard, and it became a commercial. And I think Milton was there, Kojo Nnamdi was there.

JD: Oh, from—right, who's still on the radio.

CC: On the radio. And I, when I came back, was working on Capitol Hill for Charlie Diggs' s Africa subcommittee.

JD: What year is this?

CC: This is '72, '73, something like that.

JD: And do you also—you also go to Gary for the National Black Political—?

CC: No, I'm not in Gary.

JD: You don't?

CC: I'm not in Gary. I think I might have still been in Africa or something.

JD: Okay.

CC: Or I wasn't interested, or something.

JD: Because I know Diggs was there.

CC: Yeah. No, I got hired a whole different way by Charlie Diggs, sort of unexpectedly.

JD: Okay.

CC: I was thinking about going back to school, and Diggs basically hired me so I could get enough money to live if I was going to go back to school. And since I had been living in Africa, and a woman named Goler Butcher, who was the head of his professional staff from Africa, was the one who introduced me to Diggs. So, anyway, I was working for Charlie Diggs on Capitol Hill and I hated it, because if you work for a Congressman, you're his slave, you know. It's not my style. You know, I'm writing speeches, doing research, and it's okay. I was trying to keep in touch in a deeper way with [Africa].

So—no, I think Milton was still at WHUR, and that's when he goes to Columbia. He either goes to Columbia School of Journalism or he goes to the *Milwaukee Journal*. I forget which.

JD: Right.

CC: But he leaves, so there's a spot open at WHUR radio. And I'm complaining about working on Capitol Hill, and I think Kojo says, "Well, why don't your work with us?" And I get hired by WHUR radio with no radio experience whatsoever. [Laughs]

JD: Didn't he have—he worked at Drum & Spear a little bit, I think.

CC: Yeah, Kojo worked—see, we met Kojo because Kojo was a student at Federal City College.

JD: Uh-huh.

CC: That's how we knew Kojo.

JD: So, what are you doing at HUR? You're producing shows?

CC: No, I was a reporter. I was the Capitol Hill and foreign affairs reporter.

JD: Ah, okay. Wow. And how long does that last?

CC: That lasts a couple of years. I get hired away from WHUR by NPR.

JD: Right.

CC: They—you know, Bob Zelnick, who would eventually run the ABC News Bureau, hired me away. I wasn't going to do it, but even my colleagues at HUR said, "Yeah, you need to do this."

JD: What year was that?

CC: It would have been '74 or '75, something like that. I don't remember.

JD: So, what are you doing for NPR?

CC: I was their foreign affairs reporter. I covered the State Department and the Pentagon.

JD: Wow, okay. That's very interesting.

CC: A couple of years there, and then I left NPR towards the end of the seventies, about '78 or '79. I wound up doing stuff for *Frontline*, which was just starting out then. They contracted with me. I think I wound up doing five films for *Frontline* as a reporter.

JD: Interesting.

CC: Jessica Savitch was alive then and the Golden Girl of NBC, but was also anchoring *Frontline*. She died horribly in a car accident. The car slipped off a bridge and wound up upside down in a creek, and everything shorted out, and she couldn't get out of the car. It was a terrible

accident. So, I did *Frontline*. By this time, through a friend of mine who was a photographer, I had made contact with *National Geographic* magazine.

JD: Right.

CC: So, in 1980, I do my first *National Geographic* story. And then I do a couple more, and then *National Geographic* hires me full-time, and I stay there until '98, a long time, a lot longer than I had planned.

JD: So, that's from the early eighties to the late nineties?

CC: I did my first story—appeared in the magazine in '81. [45:00]

JD: Wow.

CC: And I left in 1998 to do Bob Moses's book, *Radical Equations*.

JD: Where does Africa News Service come in in all this?

CC: That all—all the way back to NPR, when Reed—firstly, my father, who was head of the United Church of Christ Commission for—gave them their first money.

JD: On Racial Justice?

CC: Yeah, Commission for Racial Justice.

JD: Right.

CC: My father, who is from Durham, I think he liked the idea—.

JD: Oh, I didn't know you—okay.

CC: I think my father liked the idea of two white Southerners being interested in Africa. So, I think he gave them five hundred—.

JD: Tami Hultman and Reed Kramer for the recording.

CC: Tami Hultman and Reed Kramer, yeah. And he gave them, I think, five hundred dollars to start Africa News Service, a little eight-page printed vehicle that operated out of the bottom of the Regulator bookstore.

JD: Right.

CC: In the basement there. And because of my interest in Africa, I mean, they contacted me—this is in the middle seventies, I'm at NPR—and we began a discussion, and I began involvement with them. I did a couple of stories for them. I, you know, interviewed them for NPR, because Tami was very much involved—in fact, she had traveled with the Polisario people in Morocco and Algeria.

So, that relationship developed. I wound up on their board. And that's the context in which I meet Jim Lee, and he and his wife Valeria had done a radio station here. So, you know, again, it's all a Movement kind of—Reed's—no, Tami's father and my father knew each other, because both were ministers of the United Church of Christ.

JD: Uh-huh, interesting.

CC: And so, they knew each other.

JD: So, you're doing occasional pieces for them. You're—

CC: Yeah, doing occasional pieces for Africa News Service, mainly—and I would come down to Durham from time to time.

JD: Yeah.

CC: But we maintained a friendship through all those years. So, when they decided to start AllAfrica.com, they naturally also engaged in conversation with—they had a whole set of journalists. They had myself, Akwe Amosu, who was at the BBC, Ofeibea Quist-Arcton also at the BBC.

JD: Who was the last name?

CC: Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, A-[R]-C-T-O-N. She's now at NPR and based in Senegal.

Ofeibea and Akwe were coming out of the BBC. Abdul Rahim, who is now with Al Jazeera.

There was—.

JD: They all came out of Africa News Service?

CC: No, no, no. I'm the only one that actually came, aside from Reed and Tami. They were journalists, but they were—you know, if you talked about Africa-oriented journalists, there weren't that many names. [Laughs]

JD: There were very few, right?

CC: Yeah. And so, you knew—I didn't meet Akwe Amosu until AllAfrica.com started, and she becomes the managing editor. But I knew who Akwe Amosu was. I knew who Ofeibea Quist-Arcton was.

JD: Uh-huh.

CC: You know? And there were a couple of others. So, that formed that core group that founded and got AllAfrica.com off the ground.

JD: Okay, so they're involved with that, but not with ANS prior?

CC: No, no, they weren't involved.

JD: I see.

CC: I was the only one that had a prior involvement with Africa News Service.

JD: Okay. And Reed and Tami, who I would like to interview, they also—they are the cofounders of AllAfrica.com?

CC: And Africa News Service.

JD: Right, yeah.

CC: Yeah.

JD: Okay. I'd love to interview—they're in DC, right?

CC: Well, they're in and out. They spend a lot of time in Africa. You know, AllAfrica.com has largely shifted most of its operations to Africa.

JD: Right. Wow.

CC: So, there's a skeleton—I don't even know who is there anymore. I know Tami gets to the States because her son and daughter-in-law just had a baby [laughs], so she's a brand new grandmother with her first grandchild, so. [Laughs]

JD: Yeah.

CC: But they're out in California. But, you know, I talked to her last week, and she was in Durham.

JD: Yeah. I have corresponded with them quite a bit, and it's always just a matter of finding the time.

CC: Yeah.

JD: You know, I guess [50:00] we should wrap up with just a final question.

CC: Uh-huh.

JD: When you were a SNCC field secretary, you were working in the Movement, would you ever have imagined you were going to do a whole career in journalism?

CC: Well, no. I mean, I had a notion of writing and being a writer. I did have that notion. But I had no clear design or marked pathway into a writing life. And like a lot of journalists, at least of my generation, I mean, you kind of fell into it accidentally, you know. It wasn't really—you know, maybe I wouldn't be in journalism if I hadn't worked for Charlie Diggs and disliked it so much that when Milton left WHUR and Kojo said, "Come over here," you know—.

JD: Right.

CC: I mean, none of that is planned.

JD: Right. Yeah. I mean, to me, what's really interesting—one of the most interesting things about SNCC is, well, what did people do after SNCC?

CC: Yeah.

JD: And there's just a lot of really, really interesting stuff and very divergent paths. You know?

CC: Oh, yeah! I mean, people forget, you know, we're not some monolithic group.

JD: Not at all!

CC: I mean, people are all over the map, in terms of their politics, in terms of their careers and lives. You know, there's a basic bond because we share that intense experience of the 1960s, I mean, so maybe Judy is my daughter's godmother, [laughs] you know.

JD: Yeah.

CC: You know, I stay with Ivanhoe whenever I'm in DC. You know, there's that.

JD: Yeah.

CC: But we're very different. But there's a creative impulse, and a lot of the SNCC people—people do stuff.

JD: Yeah, exactly! Doers! Well, I think that's a great note to end on.

CC: Okay.

JD: I'll go ahead and stop the recording.

[Recording ends at 52:01]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council