

Interview with John Crisp
March 4, 2006
Interviewer: Cheryl Goza Smith

Smith: We are sitting in Lincoln Library in Springfield, Illinois on Saturday, March 4, 2006, and I am conducting an interview with Mr. John Crisp, a prominent musician and artist in Springfield, Illinois. Mr. Crisp, can you please tell me a little bit about your life and your career in Springfield?

Crisp: All right. I was born here in Springfield, Illinois. I grew up in the John Hay Homes, one of the greatest villages I ever lived in. I miss it very, very, very much today. People took care of each other; we didn't know we were poor. I didn't realize I was poor, until I left mama's house, but everyone took care of each other. Everyone respected each other and when you didn't, any elder could correct you, either with a tap on the butt or a scolding tone. But we were a musical family, and my parents were very community-active. They made sure that the young people had something to do. They gave up their home for activities for us and our friends and sacrificed quite a bit, and most parents, all parents did that. There was a party at someone's house every weekend. There was help with homework, help with learning to do things. I had rheumatic fever at a young age. I spent almost 2 years in the hospital, and that's when I got involved in drawing and the art of drawing, and my sisters were entertainers, and my father was an entertainer, and he worked with people like Lewis Cassidy(??) and we sang and we danced. He went to SIU; he raced against

Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe back in those days. These are all stories that were told by the elders, because I wasn't around. So he was a proud man. Which made me a proud man, but I was angry at education, because my father had education, but drove a garbage truck. You know what I'm saying, it wasn't a good education like this. So I trained myself to do things. And the people when I asked questions, the elders would give me answers and showed me how; and when we weren't doing anything, the elders would say, "what 'cha doin' boy?" and we'd say "nuttin". "Well, you all come over here." They'd put a hammer and a nail in your hand or a saw, and showed you how to use it. "So now you could hit this nail and you sure gonna watch what you're doin', cause if you miss you're gonna hit your hand," and it would hurt. But of course, learning, you had to hit your fingers and say "Ahhh!", and then we'd get mad, but they'd make us put that hammer back in our hand until we figured it out. And this is what young people are missing today. I tell the young people all the time. I said I'm glad I was born in the time when I was born, because black people loved each other more. The church was more involved in community; there wasn't an individual church picnic, it was all the churches through the picnic. We had our own part of the lake; Bridgeview Beach. It was the "Nigger Lake." "Nigger Beach." But there was something out there almost every weekend. There were major, major holiday events out there. And when we got done out there, there was always something happening in town, and when we had a party downtown before they rezoned it and

kicked black folks out to put up Horace Mann and the convention center. We had two hotels, we had a town house. We had night clubs, we had our own grocery stores, we had many different things that we don't have today, you know. And so like this is one of the things we figured, if we had the center, we had a drum and bugle corps, [they] won championships and stuff all over the country. The center was where the Boys and Girls Club is now. That once was ours; they took it. And like they do everything, they take and take and take. And so we had our own barbershops, like I said before, we had our own grocery stores, we had car lots, car washes, detail shops, like that. The Elks Club, and the American Legion, and the Frontiers, and the NAACP, and the Urban League were doing things for black people, for poor people really, but mainly black people. And we were getting things done and here comes integration.

Smith: Thank you, Mr. Crisp. Can you please tell me how did you become interested in music and art, and I would like to say that this interview again is for the oral history project in Springfield, Illinois and is being conducted by Ms. Cheryl Goza Smith.

Crisp: Well, my art came when I was in the hospital. And I lost the use of my legs, and so I could only draw, but my father was an illustrator, and he helped. But I had some of the best teachers that a person could ask for. Harm Jackson, who was one of the first black illustrators for the Journal-Register, took me under his wing. Helen Stokes, who is still painting,

she's probably in her nineties now, and we plan to do a mural with the children. And then I had teachers like Wendell Smith, and Preston Jackson, David Hammons, they were all there for us. There was a group of us that studied under them--Quadene,(??) Pablo Scott(??) I could go on and on, but they took and they taught you. And then in school, art was a major, back in the 1940s and 1950s, and so you got good training there, also, and then I continued on. I took courses at SIU. I took some courses at Ohio State, at Kennedy-King [College], and at Malcolm X [College of Chicago]. And once I got art figured out, and the way I was taught, this is what I do now. I teach and give back to young people the way it was given to me, and it's been quite well. Graduated well over, I say, 7 to 10 thousand students from college, and I'm gonna continue that in our new center, once we get it up and going. And my music career: my family was a musical family. My father sang, and my mother sang and played piano. And we had Miss Winston, she was the music teacher. And so when I got old enough to take lessons, after I got over my rheumatic fever the second time, I went over to take my lessons, and I played the song and she said, "You're not reading music." I said "Yes ma'am, yes I am.", because you had to say yes ma'am and yes sir. And she said, "No you're not, don't you lie to me" and I said, "I'm reading it!" She said, "You didn't turn the page." I got two whippings that day. (chuckle) And so she told my mother that I would never learn to read music, because once I heard it, I played it, and so what happened was my father and the people he knew, like Les

Cansler, Blaidhard(??), Bill Logan Sr., Jimmy Bell, had to dream(??) give me my first professional job at Stevie's Latin Village and I worked with him and Miss Betty Jean(??). But I had Henry Miles and Preston Jackson, and Wild Man Eddy Snow. These people that took you, you know. I always wanted to stay [play?] with Kenny Barton but he would never really do anything with me. But Jimmy Bell, he lived across the street from us when we moved out of the projects, and I had to go over there every day after school and he had that big old 3-tiered organ, man, oh it was great. And so as my career went on, I got to learning music, my music skills were good because I was hungry for it, and it was given to me, it was something that I had to do. If we didn't rehearse, then we didn't play.

Smith: Can you tell me have you traveled extensively and what activities are you in currently in Springfield.

Crisp: Yes, I traveled around the country. My first professional group [that I toured with] was Ike and Tina Turner. Then I hooked up with Fontella Bass and Bobby McClure. In my travels I got a gig and started playing with Albert King. I guess I traveled all over this country. I've been everywhere but out west. The farthest west I got, I guess, was Oklahoma. (chuckle) I guess that's west. Mostly in the Eastern area, and Midwest and South. I played with, oh man, the list is just enormous of the musicians. My most recent, I guess, before I came home, moved home from Chicago, I worked with Big Time Sarah and Koko Taylor, Johnny Dollar, Eddy

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Clearwater, “The Chiefs”, Lefty Diaz, all them cats, man, it was great up there in Chicago. And I wasn’t John Crisp in Chicago; I was Melvin’s brother (chuckle), my brother who’s a drummer. I taught bands back then. The Junior Jive Kings. They derived from a group that I had called the Jive Kings and they seemed to take over our spot, and they are quite the musicians. And they still are today. Most of them are playing in church now.

[pause]

Okay, now I’m teaching for Springfield Art Association, beginning and advanced sculpture, and drawing, and painting. I work with children from 6 to 100. Whoever wants to learn how to, I can teach anyone, I mean anybody, how to draw, or play an instrument, because I played several myself, then I just stopped and got the one, and in the process now, I’m with the Harriet Tubman-Susan B. Anthony Women’s Self-Help Center. I’m the president of that now, and we’re in the process now of opening a center for children to come to seven days a week. We’ve got a location picked out; we’ve just got to raise the money to get it started. Hopefully that will be before winter. We’re not gonna say before summer or spring (or fall I mean), but we hope before winter we can have that up and rolling. We’re going to bring the village back into an active source for the young people. It will be a place where they can come, learn, and be a part of life, because the

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children I work with now, they really have problems with the basics that you need for life: reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Smith: Thank you Mr. Crisp. I really do appreciate the time that you've given to this project. And it has really been informative. So I think that we will conclude this interview for today. Again thank you very much, Mr. John Crisp.