

Interview with Frisner Augustin—3/24/1982

East 96th Street, East Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York

Frisner's Life in Haiti

L: This is an interview with Frisner Augustin, Master Drummer from Haiti. First, I just want to get the facts—the day that you were born, where you were born...

F: Okay, the day I born is one, three, forty-eight, right? So, I born in Port-au-Prince. But my mother born in Port-a-Prince, but my grandmother born in Jacmel.

L: Is that your mother's mother?

F: My grandmother, yeah. But my father born in Port-au-Prince, but, you know, my father's father born in Léogane. I come from two parent, you know, two pärent—parent or pärent, I don't know. Because, you know, English is not my language. But in my country they speak Creole. But everybody try to speak French. You're supposed to go to school to speak French. But my parent don't have any money to push me very good in big school, and I try to learn by some friend.

But, in Haiti, my father, you know, time I got to be about six years old, and my father left my mother, and, you know, my mother can't help me to push me in school. Okay, I got all my parent, my uncle play drum and be travel lot. He go to St. Thomas, St. Croix, Puerto Rico, and New York and go back to Haiti, St. Vincent and go back to Haiti. And soon I grow up, I say, I want to learn how to play drum. But, time I got seven, I tell all my family, all my friend, you know, little friend, you know, used to play around, you know, talking and singing with them, and I say, "I'm going to be a big drummer."

L: When you were seven...

F: Yeah, time I seven. And I say, I want to be big drummer, because I want to do same like I see my uncle do, because my uncle be travel. I think if I be travel maybe tomorrow, I'm going to help my family. I'm going to help my mother. Because my father left my mother. I don't see for what he left my mother, and I'm going to be the man in my mother's house.

L: Did you have any other brothers and sisters?

F: I got just one sister, but I bigger than her. She's little. But she can't do the thing I want to do, because she's too little. Right? And time I got to be

around, you know, I grow up, and people helping me, they give me couple of dollars and my mother working, and she can't put me in school because the money she make on her job is only for buy the food and pay the rent. She don't have any money at all to put me in school. But I tell my mother, "Okay, maybe one day I'm going to help you," because I'm going to be the man in that house one day.

And I got my uncle put me in little school, and I go in there, and my uncle going to, you know, St. Thomas, and nobody can pay that school for me. And, you know, I just know how to write my name, and that time, you know, that time I got to be around nine. I got nine, you know, I write my name and, and I tell my uncle, I want to learn something to make money. I want to learn something to make money. My uncle said, "No, you're too young. If I can't put you in school in daytime, I put you in school in nighttime." You know, same like I have to go to school at night. And time my uncle try to put me in school at night, then I got all my friend go to school because their parent put them in school, they try to bug me and they play funny to me. And they say, "Frisner, you're the big man and you go to school at night. You know, your parents are supposed to put you in school in daytime." I so mad! You know? Because I don't think it so funny. But if you born with little parent, you got a lot of problem.

You know, my parent, I love them. All of them, I think all of them love me, too, but they don't have enough money to put me the place I want to go. And I told God and my spirit I want to be a big man maybe one day. And by the dream, you know, time I dreaming, and I see one lady, the white lady, and one black lady. And told me, "Frisner, I want you to be mine. And if you want to be mine, I'm going to help you with everything you want." But I don't know what to write good. I don't know what to read good. But the two lady told me what to help me. I just wait for her, you know, for the two ladies.

And time I got around thirteen, right, and I grow up, and my father come over my house. He wait until my mother go out, and he go by sneak in the house to see me because he know he got a man with my mother, and he think, "My son going to be big one day. But let me go try to see him." And he try to see me. And time this guy come to see me, and he showed me a couple of dollars in his pocket, and he showed me the big-size boot, you know, the same like cowboy boot. You know, the boot is over here, big like that, you know, the big boot, yeah, high boot, and it from Texas. And he say, "Frisner, do you like that boot?" I say, "Yeah, I like this boot. It's good." He told me, "If you like this boot, Frisner, you're going to come stay with me. And I'm going to get you tonight. Today."

And it's around four o'clock, but I don't remember what day it was because that time I be fourteen, I grow up. And I know everything because, you know, the way I see my family sleeping, on the floor, and you don't have no table in the house, you don't have no glass to drink some water...

You don't have nothing in that house. And you don't have a bed. And he told me "okay, Frisner, that's the way you're sleeping?" I say, "Yeah, Father. That's the way I sleeping." You know the big blanket, same like he give, you put that on the floor, same like carpet. But the carpet is more soft than the thing I sleep on. You call that in Haiti, *nat*. *Nat kòlèt*. *Nat kòlèt* is very poor people. Really, really, really poor people sleep on that thing. Really, really poor. Same like you're from the mountain, the country, and you don't have any mattress, you have no box spring, you don't have nothing. You just sleep on the floor. And the thing you sleep with called *nat*, it's flat. It's same like paper, piece of paper. You just put a piece of paper on the floor, and you got a lot of thing on the ground stick in you. Time you turn this way, you say, "Oh! My back hurt!" And I sleep in there same like—what do you call that? *Esklav*. What does *sklav* mean? Same like you beat people...

L: *Slav*. Slave.

F: Yeah. You know, but I stay like that. I say, "Oh, God spirit, I want you to help me." Because sometime at night, time I go to sleep, my mother don't have any food to give to me. You know, I get up in the morning, I don't eat nothing. And same like twelve o'clock, I don't eat nothing, and at night I sleep like that. Because in Haiti, people in Haiti eat three time a day.

L: Like here.

F: No. but not like here. Yeah, it's good thing you ask me. Same like New York, you mean, right?

L: We have breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

F: Oh. But one thing I'm going to make you really write, I was working in the factory. My boss told me, "Frisner, you're going to get lunchtime and you're going to get break time. You, know, same like coffee time. Coffee time and lunchtime. Because coffee time, I used to get it from nine thirty, quarter to eleven—quarter to ten. They say, "Coffee time!" And I drink my coffee, and I eat. I be all right. And whatever. But sometime I don't want to eat, because I sleep late at night and get up early in the morning and go to work, and I don't have enough sleep. Time I got the coffee time, I just take one box and put it on the floor and sleep, because that's the way I used to be in my country. Okay, because it's no problem. Okay, I want you to put it in another way, I'm coming to it after I'm going to tell you all the thing in my past and until I be travel.

So, time I tell God and my spirit I want them to help me, because I want to help my mother and I want to help myself and I want to help my

grandmother. Because my grandmother, she help me lot, and she save my life. My grandmother. Now my grandmother has got one-0-three years old. She's really old. Okay, my grandmother used to be tall. So I want you to tell me what number for the high tall. You know, somebody really high, really tall.

L: Five-foot-ten. For a lady, that's tall.

F: Okay. Okay, put it like that. Okay, five-foot-ten... My grandmother used to be five-foot-ten.

L: Let's make her eleven. that's good. That's almost six feet.

F: Okay, so I want you to tell me what number is really low.

L: For a woman?

F: Yeah.

L: I'd say four-foot-ten.

F: Four-foot-ten? My grandmother going down to four-foot-ten. Yeah, because she really old. She got one-0-three. Yeah, it's really old.

L: Yeah, your bones shrink when you get older.

F: Your bones go down like that. Because time I go in Haiti last year, I see my grandmother like that, I pull her hand like that and talk. "Frisner, you see me? I really hurt now. But I so glad I see you." And the last time my grandmother see me, I got about eleven in New York. After eleven years I go back to Haiti. But, let's put this on another side, and I talk for the teach.

But time I thank God and my mother cry and she say she don't have no money to feed me because she say I'm the man, maybe one day I'm going to help her. And I sleep like that. You know, in Haiti, if you're really hungry and you're really poor, you don't have nothing to eat, you just put some salt on the water and drink it. Drink it and go to sleep. It helps you a lot.

L: That's pretty heavy.

F: All right. So, my mother, even if you don't give my mother one big dinner, same like one plate, same like one plate dinner—right?—and you don't give it to her, just make coffee and give my mother one cup, one cup coffee, and my mother will love you. And she just drink it, drink the coffee,

and she smoke one cigarette and go to sleep. That's the way my mother be in Haiti time I got fourteen years. And soon I got fourteen and a half, and my father come to get me. You see, he leave me in my mother's house time I little little little little kid, I mean, about three six month, he left me. Right? And fourteen and a half years old this guy try to come back get me. You realize how long it is? How long it be?

L: Fourteen years.

F: So, time I be praying with God and my spirit, I think about my father, because to me, I guess my mother can't make me by herself. Right? That's why I think about my father. That's the way I think. I don't know if anyone think same like me. But I think if I be big and I be self and I be put out, I got a father. But I want to see my father, even no matter what my father do with my mother. I don't care. Because I got a father. I don't want people to say, "Oh, Frisner, your father never give you a penny. How come you love your father?" I love my father. Because my father put me in my mother. My mother push me out. So, I want you to correct me if I'm right or wrong. You know, if I'm right and if I'm wrong. I want you to tell me, "Oh, Frisner, you're not supposed to love your father." Because you're my friend. The first time I meet you, I really like you, and you be my partner, and I want you to tell me if everything I told you now, and you don't want me to say something you don't like. And you're supposed to tell me, "Frisner, this thing you say is right, and this one you say is wrong." I want you to correct me.

L: No, nothing you said is wrong. Nothing you said is wrong.

F: You think everything I said is right?

L: Yes.

F: Thank you. But my mother keep telling me in my ear, "Frisner, you don't have no father. Your father died." You know what push her to tell me my father die? Because what?

L: Well, she didn't want you to know that he left.

F: And that's it. That's only reason you think. Okay, you forget. You forget some. Anyways, you forget. Now I want you to tell me—

L: Why your mother said that you father was dead. And one reason is that she didn't want you to know that he walked out.

F: Uh-huh. And the second reason? You forget. Because I can't keep you long in that interview, because tomorrow is a working day, right? My story is big story. Okay, let me tell you the second reason my mother don't want me to know my father. The first reason, she thinks my father has money, my father don't want to help his kid. You understand? But my mother wrong, because my father don't have it! To help me! That's what pushed my father to leave the house. Because he see he got a big kid and he can't help him. And he went out. He don't want to see how his kid is going to do in the future. He don't want to see it.

L: Because it's scary.

F: It's scary because he don't have no money to help him. He don't want this guy die and he put him in the ground in—what you call that?—cemetery. That's why he left the house. He don't leave the house because he don't love the child. He left the house because he don't have no money to take care and he don't want this guy die. Okay. But that's the way I think about my father. I don't care if my father got a million dollars he don't help me. I don't care. Because same like now, I don't see I'm the man now. But I'm still a boy. But not any kind of boy. I'm the boy same like to respect my father, and my mother, and people bigger than me. And if you're bigger than me, Lois, I supposed to get respect for you. You understand? I always got respect for people.

Okay. Time I go to sleep, my mother don't have no money to feed me. I be hungry, and sometime people eating. I just watch you eating and I can't eat. I don't have nothing to eat, and even if I got some friend, and my friend eating, and I can't eat. And I just take it, and I say to myself, "I don't want to steal nobody's thing, I don't want to be faggot." Because in Haiti lot of people get faggot. They do it because they can't eat. You don't do it same like to enjoy yourself. You don't do it like that. Yeah, he just do it to make some money. In Haiti. Time I be kid, that's the way faggot do it in Haiti. But now, if you hear there's any faggot in Haiti I think people do it same like for the fun. People do it for fun now. Now in Haiti. Because time I used to be in Haiti and the people I know is really poor, and he got a big man make love with him and give him some money, give him clothes, give him everything. But now, you know, the people I heard, somebody told me he be a faggot, I say, "Okay, this guy is a faggot, he want to enjoy himself, because he got money." Do you understand what I told you? You understand, right?

L: I'm trying to.

F: Okay. The people I know in Haiti, like, my age, about fourteen, thirteen, ten years old, and the people to be the faggot, he need the money. All

right? So, right now, the people I know, soon I be in New York be they faggot, I say they do it for fun. He do it for love. Yeah. Because he got money. Okay? That's the way I want you to understand.

And time I grow up and I think about my father... One day, I so glad I see my father coming. He got a big boot, and he say, "Frisner, I'm going to help you." He say, "Where you mother go?" And I say, "I don't know." Because I don't eat today. But my mother going out to buy me some food. And I say, "What you got for me to eat, because I don't eat all day today." I get up six o'clock in the morning, and I take the bath, you know, I go to the shower, and soon I go in there and I finish, and I sit in there and I don't eat nothing until five o'clock now. "It's five o'clock, Father, I'm hungry." And this guy cry. And he take me to the restaurant to eat.

And you know if his kid really hungry and he got some money, treat him very good and you're supposed to talk to him. And I told my father how much I love him, and I'm eating, and my father say, "Oh, Frisner, and if I want to take you to go in my house, do you want to go?" I say, "Yeah." But I say "yeah" because I really hungry. You know, I want to feed because I don't want to die. I want to help my family. And I say, "Okay." And if I go on my father's house, eat a little bit, and to put myself together to be big and to go to work, because if you skinny in Haiti, you can't eat and you can't work. You know, you have to stay in bed all day, eating and sleeping. Right? If you don't eat. And I say, "Okay, I go in my father." I don't want my father think I'm going to forget my mother. My mother is still in my head, too. Same like, he left me, and my mother got me, and he still in my head. You understand? And time I go in there in couple months and this guy tell me, "Okay." He going to put me to learn how to do welding.

L: He's going to teach you a trade. Welding is working with iron.

F: Yeah. And to make bed. Like furniture but metal. And soon I go in there, I know how to do welding. And anytime I go to my job, you know, my school for welding, I think about drumming. Yeah, I think about drumming. And I be on the street, and I clap my hand, and I sing. Right? And I got the rhythm together by myself. By myself. I got the rhythm together, and I think about drumming. I'm thinking about the song—and I'm thinking about the welding. You understand? Because sometime I be on my job, I put some pieces together. I got a big *mas* [mask], and I got a torch to put the thing together. And I keep thinking about my drum. I'm working, right? And I be at my drum. And one day I go to Vodou ceremony. I got maybe fifteen. Must have been fifteen. I got a Vodou ceremony, and I watch the way my uncle play and all guy, all like me. And I keep watching.

L: Was that the first Vodou ceremony you went to?

F: Yeah. I be watching. And the second day I told the guy play the bell, "Can I do something?" I'm scared to tell him that because this guy bigger than me. And he say, "Oh, Frisner, can you do it? You think you do that thing?" I say, "Well, let me try." I talk like that because I'm scared. Because I don't want this guy pushing me. And this guy give me the bell, and I play it. And I see this guy don't take it away from me, and he let me still play. And I say, "Oh, I'm good!" I say that by myself. I say, "Oh, I think I'm good, because this guy, if I'm no good, this guy should to take it." But I don't go to school much, but I'm thinking, in a way is good for me and in a way is not good for me. You understand? Because I'm thinking, if he have to put my hand in the fire now. I don't have to be reading and be writing and to put my hand in the fire. You understand. Now, but a lot of people I'm talking to in Haiti think I got the grade in school. The grade. Same like I'm the master in school. But I never went. I go to school maybe about three and four time. And my mother don't have money to put me. And my mother don't want to be prostitute to put me in the school. She don't want to steal nobody's thing to put me in school. That's why I don't have the blood to steal.

L: Because she taught you.

F: Yeah, that's the way I see it. Right? And time I grow up and I be in welding and I know how to play drum. And I play the bell for the guy, and after twenty minute I tired of the bell. I tell the guy on the boula, "Give me the boula." And people say, "Oh, oh, Frisner, are you drunk, too? You play bell, you play boula, and you never drink?" I say, "Listen, I do everything one at a time." Right? And time I say, "Oh, let me get the segon now," the guy say, "Oh, Frisner, you are terrible now. You want to get everything at one time?" I say, "Yeah! I try to help my family!" And he say, "Oh, you want to try to help your family, and you try to play the drum? You can't help your family with the drum. You only play the drum for the spirit, and for alcohol." I say, "Oh, boy! What'd you say?" He say, "Yeah, you're going to play drum for the spirit and for the liquor. You know, to get high and to get yourself together to get happy. And that's it. And get the girl you want." I say, "Well, I'm going to play drum to help my family. I don't want to play drum to get myself 'together.' Because my mother and my father help me a lot." And people say, "Oh, your mother help you a lot? You think your mother help you a lot and your father? And they don't put you to school?" And I say, "It's nobody's fault. Because my mother and my father don't have money to put me in school. And I stay like that, and I'm going to help them." And, you know, I play the drum, and this guy say, "Okay." The guy play manman, and he watching me. He say, "Frisner, you want to play manman, too?" I say, "No, not now, but I'm going to get it, soon."

And soon I tell the guy that, and Ogou's coming—you know, the spirit. He tell this guy, Ogou, because he is the master in the Vodou ceremony. And he's very heavy, the Ogou. But Ogou is my favorite spirit, because Ogou is happy to see me play the drum. And he tell me, "Frisner, I'm going to get you to play for me." And I tell the Ogou, "But you think I play good?" And he say, "Yeah, and if you don't play good, I'll tell you to get out on the drum." And he say, "I don't tell you nothing and you play good. And I'm going to help you, too." And everybody keep watching me, and they say, "oh, this guy must be really a priest, because a little guy like that, and the spirit love him already?" And the spirit, the Ogou told, because if you got the spirit in your head and you got your body and your spirit in your mind and you tell somebody the thing to do for you, for your people, and if the spirit come to me, I don't know nothing I'm going to tell you. But the spirit tell you everything, and somebody hear the thing my spirit tell you, you will tell Frisner what the spirit say. But Frisner don't know what he told you. And the guy and the people around hear what the spirit say. They say, "Frisner, you know, your spirit tell Lois something?" And now you believe it. Right?

But the spirit tell his wife, this guy's wife, "Keep Frisner in this house." Now you try to catch my point, right? You try to understand. And the girl say, "Oh, yeah? Because this guy is young, and he know how to play drum, and maybe I let my husband put him down, same like, you know, maybe ounsi for the drum. For the Ountò. Right?" And the Ogou say, "Okay"—you know, you call that chwal, chwal, horse—"tell my horse I'm going to help him to help Frisner. Because Frisner is my son." You understand? All right. Then he say, "Okay, tell my horse to buy pann [meat] for Frisner, you know chicken to do every ceremony for Frisner. I want Frisner to be a ounsi. I don't want Frisner to spend a penny. I want you to spend the money for Frisner."

And this guy put me for the ounsi. But the time I think that all that happen, time I be ounsi, I don't go to my school. Yeah, for the wedding. I don't go. And the time pass. And I be up, and I play drum very good, and time this guy put me down for the ounsi and Sunday morning I go out, and the guy tell me, "Oh, Frisner, I guess now you play manman—you know, the guy who play manman for the ceremony. Because you got three drummer at the ceremony, for me. Two other people at the ceremony. And the guy on the boula don't say nothing to me. He so happy to see me, I come out. And the guy on the segon don't say nothing. And the guy on the manman, he say, "Frisner, now I think you play manman. Now come do something." And the Ogou come right away. Now the Ogou say, "No, Frisner is not ready for it. Frisner know how to do it, but Frisner not ready. You better keep your ass in there and beat that drum."

And I go, right? And after a couple of months my godfather got a Vodou ceremony, same like Kalfou but because I live in Port-au-Prince...

Kalfou is same like, little bit in the country. And time I go in there and one guy name André Germain, but his guy is in the group. You call that thing Troupe Folklorique Nationale. He call that "*la danse compagne*" for the government. That's what you call the thing, and this guy play in there. And this guy come to me in the Vodou ceremony I be in in the country, and he say, "Frisner, you play drum by yourself for every rhythm?" I say, "Yeah." He say, "Do you know how to play..." You know, this guy try to interview me. Same like interview. Because this guy want to make sure if I'm the best drummer.

L: He was testing you.

F: Yeah, testing me. And I tell the guy, "Well, I know how to play any kind of drum." He say, "Oh, that's the one guy like that I'm looking for. I got a job for him. And if you play like that, I might got a job for you, Frisner." I say, *Well, I'm going to try to help my family now. And if this guy might got a job for me and I got money to pay rent for my mother, then I be all right. Let me try.* And I take the drum, I play for the guy. And this guy happy! You know, this guy so happy.

And this guy tell me, "Frisner, do you drink?" I say, "No, I don't drink because I'm a kid." He say, "Do you smoke?" I say, "No, I don't smoke." And he say, "So what do you want? You want something to eat?" I say, "Yeah, I want something to eat, and I want some soda, if you want to give." He say, "Frisner, okay, give me your address, and give me your name. I'm going to help you, come to your house to get you." I say, "Well, so that's my address, and that's the way you're supposed to get me. But I'm working, you know, I go to school this place for welding. My father put me in there." And time the guy go [he] tell a lot of people, "Yeah, now I got a new drummer be around now. He don't drink, he don't smoke. His name Frisner Augustin." And a lot of people know my name. But I don't know nobody, because this guy keep looking for a job for me.

And I go to welding every morning. And I know how to do welding in Haiti. I know how to fix one bed by myself, and I make doors. Because in Haiti you got a lot of doors beaten metal. Yeah, lot of doors, lot of windows, too. You know, like this thing you see on the street, like a big metal, and you can't break it. Like you've got over your house, and you've got the flowers inside. You know what I'm trying to talk to you. Same like Bonnie have. Same like little door Bonnie have outside, and you open it to go in second door. Yeah, the gate. And you know I don't know the name, because I told you I try to speak English. English is not my language. Okay.

So, I know how to do that, and this guy never pay me. And he only give me about, every week, I be in there Monday until Saturday, and every week this guy give me maybe a dollar fifty. This guy give me a dollar fifty

only to buy some soap to wash my clothes. And I don't have no money to eat in there. And one day I told the guy, you know, the manager, "So, you know, one day I'm going to be big around. All right? I'm going to be big around. And maybe one day you're going to work for me." And this guy say, "Yeah? How come I'm going to work for you? You know, your father don't have no money to put you in school, and your mother can't eat and you can't eat, and you say you're going to be big with me? But I got a business." I say, "Well, maybe one day you will see."

And the guy, you know, he say he got his business, and my guy get the job for me. And he told people my name for Petionville, you know, the big people. And the people supposed to got a show in Puerto Rico. And I supposed to be travel in Puerto Rico. And the guy give the people my address, you know, the big guy, same like white people in Haiti. You call that *milat* [mulatto]. Yeah, but he's real white.

[Side one of the tape ends here.]

I be in welding. And I told the guy, "Maybe one day I'm going to be big." And this guy don't believe it. And the other one I told you see me in the Vodou ceremony, he told me, "Frisner, if you know how to play the drum." I told him, "Yeah." He try to get people for me.

And that time he got one company supposed to go to Puerto Rico. And the manager of the company need a drummer. And he told the manager, "So, I got the best drummer for you. This guy is young, and this guy's only got fifteen years old, and he don't drink, he don't smoke. His name Frisner Augustin. I don't want to go with you to get him, but I'm just giving you the address, his work and the address of his family. You're going to get him by yourself." And the lady take his car. And I call that white, and this guy's a *milat*. White people got a lot of money. And he got private car, special, private car, same like government, because this guy used to be next to Duvalier. And he's a big guy. And his wife got a company. His wife, yeah, his wife got a company. And she go over my house with one guy named Jackie Duroseau, and this guy same like his stepson, same like, he look at this guy, and he say, "I want this boy to be my son." And he help the guy.

And this guy and he come to my house, and both of them white, white Haitian. And time he go to my mother, he say—the way my mother sit down on the floor—he say, *Oh, this family is really poor. I'm going to help Frisner.* Right? And the way my family see this guy! Because this guy is white. And my family say, *Oh, shit! It's crazy!* You know, because they see white people looking for their son! And they surprised. But my mother get happy that time. Because it's black in that neighborhood, and it's really poor in that neighborhood, and white people come to her house to ask her for her son. And she so shocked. She so happy, and get strong. And she say,

"Yeah, uh, my son be so-and-so, and I give you the address to go get him." You know, in the school.

And time the guy come in my school, and I have to fix one bed for one people—and I fix it, I got welding to fix that bed—and this guy say, "Excuse me, are you named Frisner?" You know. I'm scared to say my name, to tell him my name because I see they're white people. Maybe they might come to arrest me, to put me in jail for the government, because he's white. You call that *milat* in Haiti. And I say, "Yeah, I'm Frisner." He say, "Well, you play drum?" I say, "Yeah." He say, "I got a better job for you. I want you to leave that job you do." I say, "Well, you know, my father put me in there..." And he say, "No. You know how to play drum?" I say, "Yeah!" He say, "Well, I got a job for you. You know, I want to be travel with you. Maybe after two week." I say, "Are you really sure what you're talking about?" He say, "Yeah. I got a job for you. Do you know a guy named Germain?" I say, "Yeah, I know this guy." And he say, "Well, the guy sent me over here to get you to be travel with us. And one thing I want you to tell us, how much you want to be travel with me, to go to Puerto Rico for one month?" And I say, "Wow!" This thing, I be thinking about it because I wanted to talk to my family first. And I know my family is very poor. And if this guy give me two dollars, my family will send me in there. In Puerto Rico.

And I tell the guy, "So let me go change my clothes and I'll be with you one minute. He say, "No, Frisner, I'm going to take you right now. I don't want you to go nowhere because I really want you, Frisner. I need you." And he say, "You don't have to put special clothes on. Let's go like that." But that time I got short pants, and I got two big holes on my back, and I don't have no—what do you call that—you know, but I got two big hole in there and short pants. Because you got to put dirty clothes, time you be in welding and time you go home you put nice clothes. And I be out with dirty clothes, and this guy say, "You have to go like that." I say, "Okay." I go in the car, and I'm scared. And he take me to Pétionville. And time I go to "Pétionville, he let me talk to the manager. And the manager said, "Frisner, is that the only clothes you got?" I say, "Yeah, that's the only clothes." And he say, "Okay, Frisner, take that twenty dollars and go buy your clothes. And I talk to you tomorrow." And I say, "Okay." And I go buy me nice clothes with the twenty dollars, because in Haiti twenty dollars is around one hundred gourdes. But a lot of poor call gourde dollar. A lot of really poor people.

L: Then it's like having a hundred dollars.

F: Yeah. In that time that kind of money, for my family, is a lot. And I go to the pawnshop, buy me some clothes, buy my mother something, and I be all right. And the next day, this lady got a rehearsal for the company, and I

do the rehearsal for them. All of them are very happy with the way I play the drum. And they say, "Now, Frisner, we want to know how much you're going to charge us to go to Puerto Rico." I say, "Well, I want you to talk to my family, 'cause my family help me." And I don't have to do nothing after people see my family. I can't do nothing behind her back. Right? And the girl go to my family, tell my family how much money they going to charge them. My mother... My father don't live with my mother. But my father don't know that. My father going to get mad, because I quit the school. I don't go to welding no more. Because I got all that gigs coming on. All that gigs coming on is going to be good for me. Better than the welding school. But...

L: But your father didn't agree with that.

F: My father doesn't agree with that, and he get mad. And he say, "Okay, I don't want to see Frisner no more."

And now, I'm going to help my mother. And soon the guy come to my mother, my mother say, "Well, I don't know how much I'm going to charge you for Frisner's gig, because you tell me Frisner know how to play drum, and I don't trust you because I never see Frisner play drum. And I don't want you to give me your money and Frisner can't play for you. Because I don't want to lose Frisner. Maybe you might kill Frisner if he don't play good for you." And the guy say, "Yeah, Frisner play very good. You never see Frisner play?" My mother say, "No! I never see Frisner play the drum. And you say that—you lie! 'Cause Frisner don't know how to play drum."

L: She never did—

F: Now she know. Because she don't know. She don't know. And she really poor. She need the money.

L: She never thought she'd get it from drumming, though.

F: Yeah. She don't think you can make a lot of money with the drum. Because she think I might make a lot of money with the welding.

L: That's the way most people think.

F: Yeah, because the welding, you know, your father pays school for you to go in there and practice that, and you're supposed to get the diploma. And in drumming you don't have no diploma. How you going to get a lot of money for the drumming? The drumming, you just play drum for the fun. And—and that's it! And the guy say, "Okay—" I see the guy is very smart, and he's a big guy, and he know what to go to school. He really see my

family don't really know what he's talking about. But he just tell my mother, "Okay, listen. I'm going to give you, for Frisner, one thousand dollars to go with me to Puerto Rico."

And time I tell you that, it's around, uh... But I'm not really sure what age is that and what year is that. It's around 1963 or 1962. You understand? Because now I told you I am thirty-four years old. But I really don't know exactly the date. So my mother said, "Oh, boy! One thousand dollars? I'm going to pay two years for the house, I'm going to buy Frisner some nice clothes, I'm going to make a little business around, same like little supermarket. People buy some beer, some soda, maybe something to eat. And to help Frisner. And clothes for my little daughter."

And soon I got to go, they guy need my birth certificate and my picture to make passport for me. And I go to the place with my school, because remember, I told you I told the guy I going to be a big man, and this guy don't believe me. Remember I told you that, the first thing I told you? Yeah, in the beginning? So, time I go to the guy, I say, "Listen, I'm going to Puerto Rico next week." This guy say, "I don't believe you!" I say, "You see my passport"—I showed him my passport with my visa that I supposed to go.

And I go with my job. I go to Puerto Rico. And time I come back, because, in the beginning, time I quit that job, school for the welding, and my father come tell my mother in my face, "You take Frisner, because you want Frisner to be the drummer. And if Frisner be with me, Frisner might be a doctor, an engineer. Because I don't want my son to play the drum, fucking drum." But because all my family talk to my mother—all my mother family play the drum—Frisner supposed to be a drummer.

L: Your uncle was on your mother's side.

F: Yeah.

L: Is your uncle here in New York?

F: Yeah, he's in New York. Yeah, you met him. He say, "If Frisner be with me, Frisner have to be doctor or engineer. But if Frisner with you, he's going to be a drummer. And I'm going to leave you with Frisner." And I take that, and I put that in my mind. I say, *because my father's not supposed to tell my mother that. I'm going to be a big drummer, I'm going to help them, too.* And time I got the contract to go to Puerto Rico, and I don't see my father to tell him that, and I go to that job, that school to tell them because these guys always go there and ask for me. And the boss told my father, "Oh, Frisner told me he's going to Puerto Rico next week. And I think maybe he's going!" And my father try to go to my neighbor and he can't get me because I'm going. And he see my mother change, because

my mother got one thousand dollars and help me. And she feel all right. Right?

And time I come back from Puerto Rico, and I bring some clothes for my father, I buy some shoes, and my father say, "Wow! Frisner, you go in Puerto Rico? And you play drum?" I say, "Yeah! But I can't tell you I'm the master. But I'm trying to be the master maybe one day. But I buy you that clothes, and now, I'm my mother's husband now." My mother don't need no man. She might need some man to do something with her, because I can't do it with her. But, I'm going to help her.

Now I got the feeling I can play in a lot of hotel to help her. And I keep going and a lot of girls love me. A lot of people help me now because they see I've got the talent. And they hear my name on the radio; they see me on the tv, Haitian tv. And the newspaper. And I got a lot of contracts. I do it with Lavinia. Yeah, I play for Lavinia time I was a little kid. Around sixteen and seventeen I play for Lavinia. Maybe time I got to be around twenty-two, twenty-three, I say, "I don't want to play with Lavinia anymore." I go to another place, because I be travel and I know more people than Lavinia. Right? And I got a contract, I got a contract to go to Mexico. And I go to Mexico and I come back and everybody happy. I tell my mother, "Listen, now, I'm your man. I'm going to keep the house, give you the money to pay the house, feed you."

But I'm still thinking, because a lot of people tell me to don't feed you and don't feed my father. Because you don't put me in school. But I see you don't have any money to put me in school. That's why I give you the break. But I still love you and my father. But don't think because you don't put me to school, don't think I'm going to blame you for that, because I understand. Because I see a lot of people in Haiti don't go to school, too. And a lot of people don't go to school and they don't help themselves. They just kill like that, kill and kill themselves. And you don't put me to school and I got the way to use my brain to... I don't put myself in school, but people can't say nothing bad about me. Because you don't see I'm dirty in the street. You don't see I fuck around and steal somebody's thing. And I'm all right!

Because a lot of people, time I go someplace, they don't respect my face because I'm not an engineer, a doctor. But they respect me because I'm the master drummer. Because a lot of places I'm going in Haiti, a lot of people speak good French, a lot of people speak English, and speak Spanish. And I speak Creole, and people say I'm welcome with my Creole. My own language. Because people say, "Oh, Frisner's the master! Frisner can't write good; Frisner can't read good. But Frisner is the master of another thing. And if you need a drummer, who are you going to call? Frisner. And time Frisner finish, you go eat at the same table as Frisner. But how come you think you're the engineer, you're the doctor, and Frisner play the drum and you put Frisner on the floor? You're not supposed to put Frisner on the

floor. Frisner is the master and he is part, because he plays the drum. He know what he's doing with the drum. And he makes a lot of big people love him."

L: That's one of the reasons why I'm writing the thing I'm writing: to help people understand things like that.

F: Yeah, and I'm so glad if you make people understand, because people think time someone don't go to school, they think, "Oh, that people is finished.

L: In our culture here, in Europe and America, they think that the best music in the world is European music, American music, because it's written down, because they write the music down. And what I'm trying to say in this project I have to do for school, to get my degree is that just because music isn't written down doesn't mean people aren't thinking about it, that they don't have ideas about it, that it's not very complicated. So you can help me do that.

F: So, I told you a lot of people know how to read and other people don't read, and he got another thing he can do better. Same like, you don't speak French, and you don't speak *patois*, and you go to a lot of Vodou ceremonies, and if people say, "Ayibobo!," you don't understand what they say. And your head understand.

L: I see what you mean.

F: You understand? What do I mean?

L: Well, you just know by the spirit behind the word.

F: M-hm. Same like, a lot of people be *oungan* in Haiti and don't know what is its name. And he got a spirit. His spirit know how to speak French; his spirit know how to speak English. But the guy...

L: He doesn't know how to.

F: No. Everybody got a different way. I don't know if in New York it's like that, 'cause in Haiti I see everybody got a different way to grow up. You know? Your parents got a lot of money to put you in school and buy, and this guy's parents don't have any money to put him in school and he got good education—same like you go to school. Right? And you think you go to school and you're big, and you go on somebody's face, you say, "Hey, mother-fucker!" And you go to school. And I don't go to school, and I say

that's a bad word, because I don't go to school. I have to keep myself. I don't want to say something dirty to his face. I got better instruction what you are, because you think you're reading and you're writing and you say every dirty word in people's face. But I don't want to do it. I know it's no good. You know it's no good, and you say it anyway. Because you say, "I'm big, I know how to write, I know how to read. I'm—I say everything I want to say." But I don't know nothing, I don't have to say it. Even if I go in your house, I don't have to say, "Shit!" Because I don't know how to read, I don't know how to write, I don't know how to say some dirty word to make you mad at me.

Yeah, because same like I told you, time I be traveling, time I go in Haiti, everybody respect me. You know, I play for the government. The government send Jean Claude go to the hotel with me. But now Jean Claude is the President. Yeah!

L: I saw that on your resume. You did that for a few years. You went around and played at the hotels.

F: Yeah, a lot of hotels.

L: And you went to Africa, too?

F: Yeah. But time I go to Africa, I just go like one day. Just pass. Just pass through Africa. And I just go with the dance company. And I don't teach. And I play at Hotel Oloffson. I play a lot of hotel in Haiti. Because I used to play at a lot of Vodou ceremonies in Haiti, but I ever cared, same like I play for money. I just play, and if I feel like it. I just really loved the drum, and I'd go see that Vodou ceremony. I'd say, "Oh, let me play for maybe two, one hour." And I play the drum, and people want to give me money, just give. And I don't play same like business in Haiti. Because my spirit help me. Because the drum, I don't go to school to learn how to play drum. My spirit help me, and I just watching people. So the second thing I have to do time I go to Mexique. In the neighborhood where I live, I put a lot of power in there. Everybody's happy. To see I'm travel, you know. everybody's shocked.

L: Because someone in the neighborhood's doing good.

F: Yeah. People say, "Frisner, Frisner is the big man now. And he got travel now." People say, "Yeah. You never see Frisner on tv?" People say, "Frisner is big man and he still live in there?" And I live in there because I used to be poor and I stay in there. I don't have to say I got money now; I don't have to do nothing. Because in Haiti, if you used to live someplace and you don't have penny and time you got some money, you say, "Oh,

over there is no good for me. Let me go to another place.” That’s no good. Same like if you don’t have no money in Manhattan, right, and you go live in Brooklyn, and you got money, you say, “Oh, Brooklyn is no good for me now; I got too much money. Let me go someplace else.” You know, that’s a problem.

L: This is when you decided to come to New York?

F: No. Time I decide to come into New York— I come back from Mexico and I go in Haiti, and time I go in Haiti, a lot of people keep talking bad about me. They say, “Oh, Frisner, you come back to Haiti! What you come to do? You come to talk to the prostitute, and you come to play on Vodou ceremony for drinking. You supposed to run to New York, stay in New York, play for money.” I say, “Okay, listen, people, I come to Haiti because I like you. I want to see you. But time I get back to New York, I’m going to stay. Maybe for five and seven years.” Then people say, “Oh, no, Frisner, I don’t believe you, I don’t think you’re going to go nowhere again.” And I say, “Well, you will see.”

And time everything I get, I put it in pawn shop. I got my radio, I put it in pawn shop. Everything is bad for me. And I go in Pétionville. I tell the people I used to play for them, I say, “Well, I got big problem.” And they say, “What kind of problem you got?” I say, “Yeah, I got a problem. Because all my clothes in the pawn shop. And my shoes. And I don’t have no money to eat. I got about four months’ rent to pay.” And they help. And they say, “Well, Frisner, you can play in the band? You know how to play in the band?” I say, “Yeah! I play any kind of drum.” And he say, “Okay, let me see if any band is going to New York.” And time he see in the paper, you know, same like in office, big office, people travel, immigration. And with one dance company, its name, uh— You know, I forget the name, but he got one dance company. He said, “Frisner, okay, you got a contract to play for [Jazz] des Jeunes, and you have to play for the dance company, too.” I said, “Yeah, I’ll play in both.” And he gave me the passport.

And soon I get to New York, I say, *Well—time I be on the plane, I say—well, I don’t speak English. I don’t write English. And I don’t speak French good, and I don’t write French. What am I going to do in New York? You understand?*

L: It’s a little scary.

F: *I say, Well, I don’t speak French, good. I’m Haitian, but I don’t speak French good because I don’t go to school to speak French.*

L: And nobody in New York speaks *patois*.

F: And— Yeah. And what am I going to do? You know, I talk to myself, time I be on the plane. To myself. I don't want nobody to hear that. I talk to myself. I say, *Oh, God, what am I going to do in New York. Now You put me in New York, but now I got a problem. How am I going to work to make some money to send to my family?* And I sleep. Next day I cry about that.

And—I'm all right! Now I think I got around twelve years here. I don't die. I don't got a lot of money. But the spirit and God always make me meet somebody to help me. In the first factory I go, I know how to talk to the people, to say, "Good morning. I'm looking for a job. Blah, blah, blah, blah." I be all right. But I got no writing. But time paper, the first— umm—paper, application I got in the factory, and I sit with two guys, me and another guy. This guy have to fill the application, and I have to fill mine. But I see the way this guy do his thing.

L: And you copied it.

F: I copied it. I just looked at my paper, on top and on bottom, and I looked at this guy. And he got one place, he got N, e, m—no, n, a, m, e. What is that?

L: Name.

F: Name. All right. And I say, *This one's "Name." What does "Name" mean? Let me put my name in there.* And I put "Frisner." Right? I see E, d—A, d, r, e, s, s. "Address." and I keep it. And time I see you, I tell you, "What does this mean?" You tell me, "Address. *Chez vous. Ton adresse.*" I put it in, right? *Oh, that my address, it means?* I put it. And the next day I give in the application. I do it by myself, you see? But that's the way I'm supposed to use my brains. I use, you know, I don't steal it. But I use my brain a lot of ways. You see, if I go to one job and you give me one application, if I can't do it, I'm just thinking, thinking, thinking until I fill it. Even if you don't fill it right, but you say, "Okay, Frisner tries to fill it." You see?

And I get a little job in New York and help myself, play drumming. And I be all right. And until now, I might get tired with the drum. I try to make a little business. But before I make that business, I'm going to try to make a little book. You know? Because the last time I go to Haiti, I see my family is eating now. Because I'm in New York.

L: You send them something.

F: Yeah, I send them something, and they eat very good. Because before, they can't sleep on the bed, and now they sleep on the bed. Before, they can't get a tv in the house, and now they get a tv. Because before, they

don't know what tv means. Because they don't have no money to buy it. But now, she got everything she want. But one thing I want to give her, one house. But she don't have house, but the landlord never talk bad with her, because every month that money goes to pay his house. And the landlord never sees her. She just sends the money. But before, she got about six months to get together, she never pays. That's no good. Now, she don't see no landlord. Her rent is paid, she don't do nothing, and she just lays down. And before, she's just looking, and she never eat in the day.

L: She was sick a little while ago, too.

F: Yeah, but that's all that problem, too. Because if you don't eat for a little while... I told you my mother went seven days, twenty days, never eat good food. Just drinks coffee, and smoking, and thinking. Same like she in jail. Yeah, but I just give you that story. But it's so late. And maybe one day, we'll sit down and talking about my life. And I'm going to push my life until I make my book.

L: Well, we've got up until you came to New York. And you could take it from there some other time. Like, if you want to talk about your life in New York, because that's where we stopped here. But this is a whole story.

F: Yeah, because time I come to New York... I will tell you another time. Yeah, it's late now...