

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

MARIO SPROUSE INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Mario Sprouse
Musical associate
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time 1 hour, 24 minutes and 38 minutes

START TC: 01:00:00:00

CREW:

Mario Sprouse take 1.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Mario Sprouse

Musical associate

Meeting Gordon Parks

01:00:16:18

MARIO SPROUSE:

I was playing piano for a singer named Donna Zincoough's Cabaret show of December 1984. She wanted to do the song "Don't Misunderstand," which is from *Shaft's Big Score* (1972). And she said I'm going to invite Gordon Parks to the show. I went "You know Gordon Parks?" She said, "No, but I'm going to invite him anyway." Well we did the show. He never did come, I don't even

know if she had the opportunity to invite him, but she was a very persistent person. So she said, "I'm going to meet Gordon Parks." Okay. And so, in April of 1985 she went and she tracked him down, met with him because as a singer, she knew that he had, perhaps, other songs like "Don't Misunderstand" and wanted to know whether or not she could sing them. Well they met, and she said "There's this guy I know who I think would really work well with you." So she asked me to call him, which I did in April. No answer. In May, he's out of town. In June, he's out of town. In July, he's out of town. In August, he's out of town, so I said "I'm going to quit. This is too much. It's just not going to work," but I said, "One more time."

01:01:29:00

MARIO SPROUSE:

September, 1985 I called. "Hello. Oooh. Gordon Parks!" He said, "Oh yeah, you're the piano player. Come on over." So I went over, met him, and he started playing one of his songs on his piano. And because my degree is in theory and composition, I took some notes and I said, "Let me write this down. I can transcribe it." And I did, and he said, "Hey, that's pretty good. Let's make a movie." And that was how we started.

01:01:58:05

MARIO SPROUSE:

I knew him as a photographer, but I also knew him because of *The Learning Tree* (1969). I knew him because of the music and the firsts that happened around *The Learning Tree*, and then, of course, for "Don't Misunderstand,"

which a number of popular artists did including Nancy Wilson, Ahmad Jamal, Arthur Prysock. I said, "Oh, yeah I know that song." So that's how I knew him, but I had never met him, nor did I follow his career so much. I was just very familiar with him as a photographer and as a filmmaker. Didn't know anything about him being a musician, or playing piano, or compositions of larger work, except for "Don't Misunderstand."

01:02:38:20

MARIO SPROUSE:

When you walk into his apartment, and saw the millions of awards and paintings and sculptures and all I said, "Wow, I'm really at home here. I could stay here a while." The interesting thing is I believe he was working on *The Color Purple* at the time as a photographer. And so there were lots of phone calls and lots of people coming by concerning-- involved with that production, and it was just exciting, just very exciting to be in that presence and in his apartment, and seeing all the art work. I just felt really, really at home there.

01:03:16:01

MARIO SPROUSE:

Yeah, he-- not a morning person at all, but once he got going in the afternoon, he could then go all the way you know through the night: writing poetry, answering correspondence, writing music, or just listening. That's-- he didn't have to be active all the time. Course if he was in the kitchen, then we'd be eating, because he loved to cook as well.

01:03:41:10

MARIO SPROUSE:

He was a very, very good cook. At any time, in fact he said, "You know, champ, if I don't make it in this business I can always be a short order cook."

[Laughter]. So, yes we- we ate quite a bit.

01:03:54:19

MARIO SPROUSE:

He had some songs that he wanted to have transcribed on sheet music, and I was able to do that. But he also wanted to know-- he wanted to actually see it in print, so, because he didn't read music. He had another strange way of notation, but at least if I was able-- if I was able to put his music on manuscript paper, then it could be seen, and it could then be delivered to Barbara Streisand or whomever would-- might request a song or he might want to send it to.

Collaborating musically with Gordon Parks

01:04:33:05

MARIO SPROUSE:

I have to laugh because when I looked at them, I said, "What's that?" And he said, "That's the way I write music, champ." I said, "Okay, a whole new system here." So, on a yellow sheet of paper, like a yellow pad, he would have vertical lines with numbers above them. He would have some other sections with other numbers on them with other kinds of lines. I didn't understand the

system, but that's how he works. So he would get to the piano and play something, then he would make a notation on- on- on the yellow pad with a pencil, play some more, make another notation. Ahh okay, so, I'd rather watch his fingers, in which case I could then pick out the melody and put it in manuscript paper, but from his notation, I said, "I have not a clue what you are doing," but he knew and that's all that counted.

01:05:23:00

MARIO SPROUSE:

We were about to do a movie called *Moments Without Proper Names*. And so, our collaboration was such that he would play the piano. He would actually play the score, whatever it is that he wanted to play. I would then record it, literally, on- on tape. I would listen to the themes, listen to the melodies, and then augment them as we went along. I would add whatever other music to it, the way an arranger would or an orchestrator would. But we would collaborate on what music went where. What was he looking for? And then as he played the piano, I could hear basically what it is that he was looking for, and then either record other sections or suggest other kinds of music that could go in a particular part. So it was more, in that sense, like a music supervisor. In other cases, I was more like the arranger, for some of his music.

01:06:20:06

MARIO SPROUSE:

It was really an interesting collaboration because he smoked a pipe. Whenever he got excited about something there'd be a lot of smoke in the air. So I knew I did a good job if it was cloudy in his den.

01:06:32:22

MARIO SPROUSE:

That was for things that he would try to compose. Other things were in his head that he had pretty well organized. So he would get to the piano and he would play a section, as if I were to get to the piano and just play a section. He'd say, "That's pretty good." And he would try it again, and work it through again. And then I would record the whole thing. "Well Gordon, what part do you want to use?" "Well, I'd like to use this part when the plane takes off and I'm going to Europe." I said, "Oh." So it was really his music in context, and then trying to determine where that music would go. When we were doing *Half Past Autumn*, for example, I recorded-- I had all of his music cues. I knew every inch of his music. So then if- if, uh-- If someone said, "I need a ballad to go here, or I need something to go here." I'd go in my notes and go, "Fourteen seconds in, go to this part," and it would work, because I knew his music so well.

01:07:33:13

MARIO SPROUSE:

The first collaboration was a documentary, autobiographical. And it was really to-- to get a fresh look at his life since *A Choice of Weapons*. So it would be-- so this is now recollection, this is now going back as opposed to-- and

decades going back. So he's retelling the story now with his own music, and that's really what he wanted to do. And so the idea of the *Moments Without Proper Names* came in as the title. I think it comes from one of his poems, but that's what he really wanted to do. And he saw in me someone who understood him musically and would be able to move forward. Normally, the process would be: he'll play the piano, he'll tape it, he'll send it to someone to transcribe. When I installed a recording studio in his den that was MIDI, he was able to go to a keyboard, and instead of hearing strings four days later, it was instant. So he-- And that really transformed everything for him because then, he was able to instantly get the notes and the sounds he wanted, hear them recorded that way, and we moved forward really quickly based on that technique, so I was very happy to be able to do that for him.

01:08:55:20

MARIO SPROUSE:

He played in one key: G flat. Well, G flat is just basically (*Mario plays the piano*) all the black notes on the piano, and he loved that key. It's a great key to play in because it's rich, it has lots of harmonics in it, but it's a difficult key to play in because it's just on the black notes. He was very very adept at doing that, and so yes I had to do a lot of transpositions for him. Uh, if we were doing-- if we wanted the same theme in another key, then that's fine. I would just write it in that key or I'd play it myself, but I always loved for him to play. I can tell, "Yeah that's Gordon playing." [laughter]

Music from *The Learning Tree*

01:09:44:18

MARIO SPROUSE:

One of those-- the song 'The Learning Tree' is in D flat, which has 5 flats. G flat is a very rich key. [*Mario plays the piano*]. That would be G flat. D flat is similar. It's a very similar key in terms of richness, and that's where *The Learning Tree* is. And I have a copy of the original lead sheet that was done for *The Learning Tree*. The original is old and yellowed and large and so on, but this one is of [*Mario plays the piano*]. So that key, D flat has the same type of richness. It's a key that Chopin wrote a number of preludes in, so you have that nocturnal, rich feeling to it, and so he liked those kinds of keys. They worked really, really well.

Creative influences on Gordon Parks

01:11:22:08

MARIO SPROUSE:

A lot of his music came out of the Romantic Period. So, when he was born in 1912, the prevalent classical music of the time would have been Debussy Rachmaninov. And so he took a lot of those textures, those very rich textures, and put them in a very rich key, and so you get this wonderful melange of sounds and feelings coming out of 88 notes on a piano. Loved orchestrations is what he did, so yes Romantic, as in terms of not just classical in terms of generally, but specifically the Romantic Period is what he loved about that.

01:12:02:10

MARIO SPROUSE:

I think part of the romance of Gordon Parks had to do with where he came from, out of abject poverty, to be accepted in this world of, not just luxury, but things you didn't see in Fort Scott, Kansas, things you didn't see in the Southside of Chicago. To go to Paris. To go to Washington, DC. To go on a train-- to be a porter on a train, he got an opportunity to see, not just the Southside of Chicago, but the Art Institute of Chicago. And looking at what people painted or the music that they wrote, the process that they went through just was captivating to him. Even when I met him, in 1985, he was still involved with colors and shapes and sides, sounds of how things could be in the world and enhanced.

01:12:59:11

MARIO SPROUSE:

Believe it or not, we had a conversation about how he expresses, and he said sometimes it will come out as a poem, sometimes it will come out as music, sometimes it will come out as a photograph, other times it will come out as a film, sometimes it will come out as just the overwhelming silence in the spaces between songs, between notes, between-- so there was a lot that was going on in the Romantic mind that was a part of his everyday life.

Jazz

01:13:38:14

MARIO SPROUSE:

Duke Ellington, when he came on the scene in the 20s actually late teens and into the 20s, already had a big band, but at that time, what we refer to as big band was just forming. It was coming out of marching bands, out of music halls. So there was no set who's doing what, it just didn't exist, they were like Jazz making it up as you go along. So Duke Ellington's music was richly layered in all different kinds of sounds and textures, and that appealed to him as well. The jazz element was the driving rhythm that was coming from the drums or from the saxophones or from the horns, but remember at that time, no one said trumpets do this, trombones do this, and saxes do-- nobody knew.

01:14:26:01

MARIO SPROUSE:

And the prevalent instrument out of ragtime was clarinet. Clarinet and cornet. So you had Louis Armstrong, small ensembles, but then here comes Duke Ellington with the band, and carrying those sounds from the 20s, to the 30s, to the 40s, to the 50s, to the 60s. So it became more rich, more textured, more layered. And Duke Ellington, in his suites, would always have dancers. Son Geoffrey Holder, Carmen De Lavallade. That crew would be involved with his suites of the 60s and the late 50s. It was really a very complex, textured way that Duke Ellington would put together his music and that appealed to him as well.

Film scoring

01:15:11:21

MARIO SPROUSE:

There's a song that he played that-- I'm trying to think. I can hear it. I don't know the title of it, but he played it one time down. And he was-- this was-- had to do with his being-- his going back-- his going to Europe. Um... Really arpeggiated, very nicely melodic. It has never been transcribed to my knowledge, but I remember when he played it, I was taken away. I said, "Wow, he's doing this first take." You know, this was the way he was. And he would do it in such a way that he was reliving. That's the thing that I was trying to get to. I'm there in his den listening to this, recording this and I'm hearing, and feeling the-- the longing that he felt at that time, and I think it was expressed in "I need to get to Europe." Now that is an interesting part, because in Billy Strayhorn's, and Duke Ellington's collaboration of "Lush Life," there's that 'a week in Paris would solve everything' kind of thing.

01:16:26:05

MARIO SPROUSE:

And for African-Americans going to Paris, was-- that's where you went to relax away from all of the stuff that was happening in America. You could go there and be yourself. That was huge for people at that time. So when he was playing this material on the piano that's what I'm hearing. That melancholy, the longing, not necessarily melancholy, but the longing for something more cultured, an easier way where he could relax into his own music, and into his

being. And once there, he probably didn't do music. He probably wrote poetry or took photographs, that sort of thing, yeah.

01:17:06:17

MARIO SPROUSE:

He surrounded himself with people who were. Kermit Moore, certainly, the brilliant classical cellist, who was a collaborator with him on a number of other projects. Quincy Jones and Tom McIntosh. People who he worked with on other films or on other scores were just wonderful musicians and arrangers and orchestrators. So he would play something, and it would be a theme and then they'd take it and run with it, or as I was describing to someone, he would play the piano, play say, *The Learning Tree*. It's on tape. Someone takes it and listens to all of the notes that he's playing, and might assign that clarinet, flute does this, horn does that. So it's expansive. He wasn't insecure in my presence because he could play whatever he wanted to play. He was never required, as far as I knew, to play something else, which might have made him feel insecure, but he loved his music because it was a way that he could express. He played piano from early on, and like you did in those days, you played in a brothel. You played wherever you could play. The pianos: where are they? They're in the brothel. That's where I'm going to play the piano, make some money. But at the same time, he began to appreciate a lot of other kinds of music. So, for example, a good arranger or a good composer will write beyond their ability to play, so that it's not just confined

to their playing. And Gordon did that in spades. I mean, to be able to write a piano concerto or... the "Tree Symphony" from *The Learning Tree*.

01:18:55:16

MARIO SPROUSE:

To be able to put that together, to have that in his mind, to then be able to communicate to someone: "This is what I'm looking for." Similar to the process that was in the movie *Cloud Atlas*, where some-- there's a composer and then there's someone else sitting next to him, and there's-- this is the, "Ahh that's what I hear!" It's that type of collaboration. So no, I don't think he felt insecure, but I think he felt really good about his music knowledge. He listened to music all the time, and what would drive his family crazy is that he would listen to one song all the time. [laughter]. That drove everybody crazy, but I was used to working with him and I didn't mind that at all.

01:19:38:03

MARIO SPROUSE:

Well, for example, he would play anything-- he would play Rachmaninov's "Vocalise." He loved that, and in fact, that's the end of-- that's the song over the end credits on *Half Past Autumn*. It's 7 minutes long, and it's just gorgeous, but he would play it over and over; after 2 o'clock, he would play it over and over and over again, but it just washes over you, washes over you. "The Look of Love" from Diana Krall he would love. He liked- loved that song. He would play that over and over. It didn't matter what it was, but he had a

very extensive collection of CDs and cassettes even that he played very, very often.

Additional influences

01:20:29:06

MARIO SPROUSE:

Debussy because of his... complex simplicity, his use of harmony and harmonics. Debussy was a big big influence. Another one would be-- I mentioned Rachmaninov because of the complexities, the- the broadness of Rachmaninov's playing. He would also listen to Horowitz on piano because of the technique. In jazz, it would be Johnny Hodges. It would be Duke Ellington. It would be Count Basie. All of his contemporaries. Ben Webster. Lester Young. These are folks that came out of- of- of big band 30s, 40s, 50s, jazz, not bebop so much. So it wouldn't be Miles Davis or Dizzy Gillespie or that crew or Clifford Brown, but it would be more of the bigger band folks who had more complex things going on among the instruments and among the harmonies, and be able to speak on that level.

01:21:35:23

MARIO SPROUSE:

Also Duke Ellington because he went from popular music, which was jazz at the time in its infancy, to writing complex suites 30 or 40 years later. So he was involving-- there was not just a musical, but a spiritual kind of evolution that was going.

01:21:55:13

MARIO SPROUSE:

“Music is my mistress and she plays second fiddle to no one,” is Ellington’s quote. Um, and so and... people who knew Gordon knew that his life was involved with his art, and that played second fiddle to no one. So you had a very compatible philosophy there. His daughter Toni at one point called that, “Well you know he would get that fever.” I said, “Yeah, I know.” [Laughter] He would have to follow it through. It wasn’t something that was a choice. He had to do it. There were a number of reasons for that. I remember him saying once to me-- I remember him saying once to me that he still had nightmares from Fort Scott, Kansas, from all the things that went on there in terms of racial unrest, or discrimination or Jim Crow, and that propelled him on another level. It propelled him to write particular types of poetry or to take particular types of pictures, but to always keep it under control with his camera, but he said, “Sometimes I still have nightmares about that.”

01:23:02:01

MARIO SPROUSE:

I said, “Wow.” All these years later, you know, 70 years later to still be thinking about that, and yet that informed his art so it wasn’t just musicians or composers, but it was his own life. Instances in his own life that came out in *A Choice of Weapons* that continued to influence and inform him.

The Learning Tree

01:23:32:22

MARIO SPROUSE:

If I were to play the theme from *The Learning Tree* I could play it um- [*Mario plays the piano*] Now that's the general melody. I've heard it where it would be- [*Mario plays the piano*] that chord expresses it. So when he would-- when I would play it in his presence I could do- [*plays the piano*] that sort of thing because that has longing, that has a little bit of pain involved there. So, he liked me to play it that way. Because here's a story-- I saw the title for his um... for his movie that has all the pathos in it depending on how you play it. So there are times when I would play it just that way and he would go "Ahhh. Ahhh." I'd say, "Yes ahh!" And the smoke and the pipe and all.

01:24:56:23

MARIO SPROUSE:

That in the key of D flat [*Mario plays the piano*] this is the key of D flat. This is an F 7 sharp 13.

01:25:07:06

MARIO SPROUSE:

I put it in, because of the way of the feeling, that's how we put it together. We were working on a song called "Remember" from *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*. I think that's the title of it. And it has a [*Mario plays the piano*] in G flat again, but he got to one spot and Kermit Moore was there with him, and they're trying to figure out the harmony that would go in a particular place and they couldn't figure it out. But because of my jazz background I said, "Oh, I think

what you're looking for is-" [*plays the piano*]. All of those chords, and he went "Yes, that's right." Because it's just very complex. So my own composition background worked with him and the idea that he wanted, and we were able to put that together. Yes it worked.

Gordon Parks' personality

01:26:21:00

MARIO SPROUSE:

Soft spoken, humble, appreciative, not taking himself too seriously. Understanding his role as a figure in the African-American community, but it was his personality that allowed him to get close to people to photograph them. He would say he would never take his camera into a situation, if he's working with a family, he wouldn't take pictures. He'd put the camera aside and just live with them. Camera comes out later. That's who he was as a person. And so, it wasn't so much his ability to draw himself into a situation, as much as it was his ability to draw something out of a situation. That was based on his personality. And I saw it happen any number of ways, any number of ways. We were walking across 49th street on the way, somewhere wherever we were going.

01:27:29:11

MARIO SPROUSE:

There was a guy on the street who was begging for money, and the guy said, "Hey, you're Gordon Parks." He said, "Yes I am." And he, you know, pulled out

some money and gave it to him. There's no fanfare. No fanfare, just this is who I am walking through. I happen to be who I am, but I'm just walking through. In his apartment, he was very comfortable. Um- When I say he didn't take himself too seriously, if you went into his apartment, it would be crowded with stuff. Awards stuck under couches and under seats and pillows, and you had to go under-- It didn't matter that much to him. It didn't matter. He would say that among all of the photographs that he would have in his den, the one that meant the most to him was when he got his honorary high school diploma, surrounded by those kids. That meant something to him. U, I accompanied him to New Jersey-- A good friend of his was also Dina Merrill. And Dina Merrill and I and Gordon went to a school, they were naming a school after him somewhere in New Jersey, and he was just, "Wow, wow. This is amazing. Not bad for a kid from Fort Scott, Kansas," he would say. So it was that kind of thing. And I mention Dina Merrill because here are stars, and then there are these kids and it was all the same to him, all the same to him.

01:29:03:18

MARIO SPROUSE:

So he was humble in that way. I never ever ever ever heard him say, "I am Gordon Parks. Don't you know who I am?" Never ever. Didn't have that personality. And so even when he was on guard, or when he was worried about something, or concerned about something, he's like any other dad, concerned about his children or his grandchildren. Like any other person concerned about what's going on in the world, any other person concerned

about the uncertainties of things. Like anyone else. And that's what I saw day after day after day. And it was that person who would then out of that uncertainty or out of that, in a sense, insecurity, write a poem, write some music, write a passage of something. So, yeah, that's-- he was just like everybody else.

Gordon Parks' relationship with women

01:30:04:08

MARIO SPROUSE:

How many? There were lots. Well I think it was-- I played with-- at his service at Riverside Church, his funeral. And at that, I think it was Peter Kunhardt Sr. who said "Men loved Gordon, children loved Gordon, but women really loved Gordon!" He was dapper. He had the personality that would attract women, but not necessarily because he was macho. It was because he was learned, an artist, and that aura, that creative aura, was very alluring to people. So, when he would talk, it didn't matter if he saw you for the first time or not, it would be, "Hey baby." I'm hearing Barry White. I'm hearing that kind of voice. "Hey baby, come on in."

01:31:02:10

MARIO SPROUSE:

And I find myself talking that same way because I have that same type of personality, that same type of comfort around people, making people feel comfortable, and I'm comfortable around them, and I saw him- saw that

happen all the time with him. All the time. But I think part of that is... he had it put together in a package where everything worked. So he was called the renaissance man, modern day renaissance person because he was involved in a lot of creative things. Well that's unimaginably attractive to people. It doesn't matter who it is. Male or female. That's a very attractive quality. To be able to quote poetry or to be able to- to have the kinds of art at your disposal, that's a part of who you are. That's very attractive to people. So I would see that all the time in the apartment. Folks flying in and flying out. "Yeah, this is Gordon Parks." "Yeah I know. Let me get back to my studio please." In all the years that I knew Gordon, over 20 years that I worked with him: I only on two occasions did I invite anyone up to meet him. Cause I respected his privacy, and I knew he's not the celebrity that I want for him to be to them. I said, "No, no, no, none of that, no." Just two people, and two people, in order for Gordon to give them advice about something, and the advice worked absolutely, but that was it. That was it.

Family

01:32:55:15

MARIO SPROUSE:

In two ways that I can really pinpoint: One was, coming from where he came, he provided everything he could for his children, which was being there, material wealth, or opportunities I should say, and so that was a big part of what he was able to do for his children. His concern was: is it too much, is it

too little? Is it going-- how is that playing out? The other thing is as a father figure, is he putting forth who he needs to be as a father figure being away all the time? That was a constant, constant battle within him. You know, it's very difficult, because the children are affected by his celebrity, as all children of celebrities are. And, it's hard to shield them from that, but he had to do his art. He had to do that, and that's-- that is, well, like Toni his daughter said, that's the fever. He had to do that, and that's a non-negotiable. So if you're involved with the marriages or the relationships that didn't work, it's not that they didn't work because of the art, it's more they didn't work in that sense because of the artist, because you're always following, you must always follow that path, and I know that myself.

01:34:37:12

MARIO SPROUSE:

So this is something that is a big part of it. Um, and if you're involved in any family relationship, because he wasn't just a father, he was uncle and, you know, brother and all of that, they're very complex. Especially, again, coming from where he- he-- how he grew up, Fort Scott then St. Paul, Minnesota. People all over the country who he's related to, but that art was still there. Very much family oriented. One of the things that I found-- I was in charge of cataloguing his media, his music media. He had a million tapes. I went through each one of them. One of them is a family reunion tape, and he's acting as an MC. He's having a ball with this. He has the microphone, he's introducing people from his family. He's very very proud of family, and that's

the Gordon that I knew as well. And that person is how he wanted to be with his own family, so again, it's very complex, but he loved his family, loved his family.

01:35:51:11

MARIO SPROUSE:

And um, there was a Larry King interview on radio sometime in the 80s I think it was. Larry King gives this 20 minute introduction of Gordon Parks and his achievements, and you know finally, here's Gordon Parks. And Gordon says, "Ha, wow, now if that could only have helped me with my three wives." So you see, all of these accomplishments, "Oh, okay that's nice, but wow, my whole other life fell apart."

Memoirs

01:36:28:05

MARIO SPROUSE:

More like the onion skin, each one has a different layer. And as he got older, he discovered other layers and other layers that he had suppressed or he didn't have time to deal with. And so, if in one autobiography he is talking about his time in St. Paul Minnesota, *A Choice of Weapons*. He'll revisit that and said, "You know, at this point this is what happened, I met that person and that was important." Or going to Paris, or going to Brazil. "I felt this. I did that." Or going to the deep south. "I felt this- ah in retrospect let me go back and visit that again. Let me go back and see." So yes, part of it was

retrospective, but a lot of it was just re-remembering how he felt at the time. I mean just literally as an artist, I've talked to a couple of people who were war correspondents in Vietnam. And, you know, you're there to report, you're there to be the reporter, but you're being shot at. You get the story, and you come home, you deliver the story, then you're onto the next assignment, and 3 years later you're going, "Ahh, what was that?"

01:37:42:14

MARIO SPROUSE:

Same thing with people who were around 9/11. They're documenting-- and then years later it's, "Ahh." So I think part of it was to get that other dimension, that other aspect of his experiences all along the way, but this time, infuse it with new music, things that were just coming out. And that made a big difference to him, to be able to talk about and experience, and then here comes the music out of it just from remembrance, and to put that in. That was different. So it wasn't just the experience or the context. It was now here's something new that's coming, or a painting that he would create, or a photograph he would create to go along with that. It didn't enter his mind before, but at this point he could do it. And that- that was really important, that was really important. In fact it was right after we finished *Moments Without Proper Names*, that he became ill in some-- either his ankle or something was bothering him.

01:38:44:19

MARIO SPROUSE:

Uh, he called me up and said, "Champ I've got something new." I said, "What?" It's 3 in the morning. Oh right, it's 3 in the morning, of course. So, I came over and he was like a little kid, because he had discovered a new way of taking photographs that would go with some of the things from his past, and present, and future. I said, "Wow." He said, "I couldn't have done it before. I couldn't have done it." I said, "You're 80 something." or 70, he said, "I didn't have the knowledge. I didn't have the whatever it was." He said, "Now I can do it," and so with that newfound technique or knowledge, he would then apply it to something that happened in the past that... puts him going forward, and he's able to put it in that context, and that was really important to him. So that's like legacy, within context, but it's really getting as many different... shots of it, as if you were a photographer. As many different shots of that as you can, rather than just one different way of looking at it, and I really appreciate-- I learned a lot from him based on that, yeah.

Gloria Vanderbilt

01:40:02:18

MARIO SPROUSE:

I think we were talking about relationships, of course. He said that with Gloria, at the time, it wouldn't have worked. Just racially, it would've been tough at that time, but they loved each other, and it was that love for one another, not just creatively, but especially in terms of imagination, the muse as it were, they loved one another. And that- that was rare for him with

someone of that class, at that time. Now he had met lots of other people, but to have that relationship. He said, “Nah, wouldn’t have worked, but you know we’re friends.” And I enjoyed and I understand what he meant by that very very much so.

01:40:57:18

MARIO SPROUSE:

Because that’s the context in which it became operable. Other than that it would be, it would be too much for both- both sides of the relationship. But he loved her in that sense, very much so. And that was really important because you could be around a number of people who could influence you: like a Duke Ellington or a Sarah Vaughan or whomever, but when you’re around someone who you have that simpatico with, that makes all the difference creatively. And so traditionally that’s called a muse, but there’s more than that really, someone who gets you. That was Gloria. Gloria got him.

01:41:41:05

MARIO SPROUSE:

But what did she see in him? That’s the important thing. What did she see in him? Because we can all be starstruck with any person who has a celebrity or who is important, comes from that kind of family of Vanderbilts or Astors or whatever. What did she see in him? And that’s- that’s something else. Because whatever she saw, he was. That’s—he wasn’t putting on airs. That’s, that’s him, and she saw it, and he was recognized for that, and that’s where the relationship would be. And that’s the... That’s something that he could never

have experienced in Fort Scott, Kansas, growing up, son of a dirt farmer, born dead. You know, you couldn't experience-- had no hope to experience that, but when he did, it was "Oh!" So Paris was not far away to have that kind of feeling. Or "You can't do that. You're African American. You're Black. You can't- How are you-?" Well, yeah actually, Richard Wright did. James Baldwin did and Langston Hughes. That's why they went there because they experienced all of that.

01:43:05:02

MARIO SPROUSE:

To go to museums, and to see art shows, or to hear concerts in these centuries old buildings and churches. What's he doing there? Absorbing. Absorbing and putting into his art. So yeah, it was a mutual experience. How could you find that? Oh, yeah. That was inside of him. That was a big deal for him. And he didn't flaunt it. This was just who he was. He didn't flaunt it. Found himself in this situation, but he found himself in this situation because of his art, and that complemented who he was. He wasn't just the person, he was the person who was this artist, who, whether it was in Frank Murray Studio in St. Paul or-- "Have you ever done this before?" "No, I'll try it." "You can't do that." "Well let me try it." "Yeah, but nobody's ever--" "I'll try it." That is what people saw, because the results of that, we see today.

Racism

01:44:21:04

MARIO SPROUSE:

We never talked about how angry he was as much as we talked about sometimes his anger. So, it wasn't present. It wasn't contemporaneous with him. He's remembering something because if he's going into (coughs)-- whether he's going into the favelas of Brazil or he's going into Southside Chicago or Watts and you're looking at stuff. You're seeing what's happening. Or you're chronicling the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and there's anger, all around-- he's surrounded by it, but he's chronicling it. He's not expressing it. You probably won't find an interview with him saying, "I'm really angry about--" You won't find it. So, when we talked, it had to do with what is he going to do about it? This is how it's going to express, and so 20 years after Dr. King's assassination we worked on the film ballet *Martin*.

01:45:28:12

MARIO SPROUSE:

And that's where he could see, cause now he's recreating this, he could see the elements that he wanted to put in, and why he wanted to put it in, and what the resolution was, and how he wanted to use the song, "Yankee Doodle" in the midst of-- just before the assassination or why he wanted to use the theme of, "America America" in the middle, right after the assassination. That's how he expressed it. In that form, not from a bully pulpit standpoint. And that was an integral part of it. In the midst of these chords in that particular section, there's a rocket going up, the space program is in

full-- is happening. And there's a scene of Dr. King looking up at the rocket and then you hear "America" in the background and then the gunshot and he falls in the midst of America. That's how it would be expressed which is a lot different from writing it down didactically or speaking about it in front of a microphone because it had a longer lasting impact, not only from the standpoint of the film itself, the film ballet, but those who were on set, who were able, through his experience and his speaking to them, were able to benefit from, this is what happened and this is how I want to express it.

01:46:51:17

MARIO SPROUSE:

The first movement of *Martin* is the music from "The Tree Symphony" that he added to. That's one of the things we did. I would take the original then he would add on top of that, sounds to it. There's "Letters to a Birmingham-- "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," uh, a piece that he composed for Kermit Moore on cello, but then it was another piece... that absolutely fascinated me, and I can't play it, only because it was another 3 in the morning phone call. He wanted to write a piece called, "Letters to the World." Uh, a Rosa Parks character sent him a letter in the Birmingham jail. He received it, he's reading it, and then he wanted to write a letter to send to the world. That piece he played down one time, not on the piano, on a synthesizer. And he was able, I just-- I would set it up so that he could press a button anytime he wanted and just play. I'll figure it out later.

01:48:03:21

MARIO SPROUSE:

He presses the button at 4 in the morning and plays this piece, “Letters to the World.” When I listened to it I was in tears because it was beautiful. All I had to do was add a couple of bell sounds here, and I said, “Gordon, what was that?” And he said he just woke up and it just came through. So the dancers, Rael Lamb choreographed the dancers to this, and he was explaining what this was. This is Martin-- Dr. King’s letter to the world of hope, letter to the world of keep moving, keep going on, it’s a beautiful piece that he did one time down with strings on a synthesizer. So it was really easy for us to catch that sentiment, and- and be able to have the hope of that after the anger. He’s in jail, Dr. King is in jail, hope. If there’s no hope, there’s no hope, and Gordon was about hope, really about hope. So even when he would speak to... young photographers or writers, he would always say, “Do a lot of different things. It’s a big world out there. Do a lot of different things. Don’t get stuck doing one thing. Do a lot of different things. There’s hope out there. You can do it. Yes, you can be a specialist in this, but there’s so much more. That was hope. Keep going. Keep going. There’s more out there.”

01:49:36:22

MARIO SPROUSE:

Those are messages he didn’t get in Fort Scott, Kansas high school which, you know, “Eh, don’t waste your parents’ money.” [Laughter]. After the 41st doctorate, honorary doctorate, “Yeah I guess I’m pretty good now.” He also had a lot of patience. I remember when a French film crew came to the

apartment to interview him about his life. One of the questions they asked was, and I was in the apartment at the time, and I heard it, and I went, “Oh this is going to be an interesting answer.” “So, Gordon why do you think, of the 30 some odd honorary doctorates you’ve received, not one of them was from a Black college?” And he, you know, smoking his pipe, he said, “Well, you know, my people are patient. I guess I have to prove myself a little more before I get that doctorate.” [Laughter]. And the puff and the smoke was coming out, you could see it, but it was from that aspect, you know, of you can be a hero and an icon generally speaking, but he was more concerned about that junior high school kid having hope, that high school kid having hope than getting the 33rd or the 34th or the 35th honorary doctorate.

01:50:54:20

MARIO SPROUSE:

Or most of that score came from his piano concerto and from “The Tree Symphony.” Second movement, third movement of that, of the piano concerto, first movement of “The Tree Symphony.” The music that he composed for other sections were basically done on synthesizer so it’s not something I could reproduce here. And the last movement was done on synthesizers. The epilogue was done on synthesizers. He, at that point-- it was interesting because this is more of... the music of... Berg or Stravinsky, he was more interested in sound. “I need this sound in here.” Not this sound [*Mario plays the piano*], but I need that melange of sounds. So I could get to the piano and do [*plays the piano*] but, okay so that’s a clump of chords, but he was

interested in growls. [Growls] That sort of [growls], and I could get that, but I can't play it.

01:52:02:11

MARIO SPROUSE:

The reason is, in his poetry and in his- his... his creative thought, it doesn't always come out linear. It doesn't come out with words, it might come out with sounds or grunts or groans, and that's what he was interested in. Those types of sounds that he could-- and so when he was working on a synthesizer it was play. Here's a sound, "Oh, what's that? Oh, hey I could use that (bing bong boom)." Whatever it happened to be, he was able to capture that with sounds. So in the epilogue of *Martin* it's just sounds, just-- and he'll have a little melody passing through, but it's sounds. Now that is contemporary modern music, it has nothing to do with Romance, it's not melody, it's not harmony, it's not polyphony if you go back a little further. It is really just sounds. He wanted these particular sounds. I said, "Okay. Here we go." And it was always a trip with him, and that's the thing that I understood. He said, "Let's go champ." I said, "I'm ready." That's just what we had between us and it worked fine. It worked really fine. I think the--

01:53:21:04

MARIO SPROUSE:

Because he was able to capture sounds immediately, I remember one time he said, "Champ, I'm learning a lot from you." And I'm going, "You're learning from me? What, what? Are you serious?" He says, "No, because it's another

way of composing. It's another way of searching for meaning with sounds as opposed to with notes." So I can't play anything from it because a lot of it is just really sounds that he was capturing. But there does exist, "The Letter to Birmingham Jail" and "Letter to the World." Those are two that- that he composed for cello or for strings following it that can be transcribed, they absolutely-- in fact, Kermit Moore did that with, I think it's the Topeka Kansas Symphony that's been recorded both on video and on tape.

Shaft

01:54:19:00

MARIO SPROUSE:

Shaft was the big hero, and I say that because at that time, this was 1970s, there were 3 things that were going on right at the same time. There was the graduating class of 1970, universities around the country. This was the first graduating class of people who went to school, Blacks who went to school, in 1966, 65. So there was this big push of equal opportunity, of- of getting into schools, and then they're graduating from the 60s to the 70s. And the 70s were wide open. So, in colleges, during the 60s you had a lot of, not just integration in terms of racial integration, but you had a lot of people exploring and discovering one another so in-- from all different cultures. That hit the 70s, but in the 70s, urban wise, a lot of American cities were going broke. Here comes Shaft, the detective, he's bad, and here's Isaac Hayes, and there's Gordon Parks, and here's this figure on the stage, on the screen

who is not afraid of anyone. Go into any neighborhood, deal with any kind of cultural situation. I'm like, "Yeah that's Gordon Parks, actually." [Laughter].

01:55:47:06

MARIO SPROUSE:

And there it is right in front. We loved it. We ate it up because on the screen we're looking at a Black superhero, named Shaft. So that became the soundtrack of our lives. The big big soundtrack of our lives and continues to this day really, because whenever I hear the opening music of that, or I hear any music that was written because of that, it's that same, "Okay let's go. We're ready. We're ready for anything." And that's really what- what we felt. In addition to that, we all knew that there were people who were working on film crews who were getting work as a result of this. They're getting a lot of work. Getting that union card. And then well here comes a whole other level of economic importance that was hitting us in the early to mid to late 70s. That whole-- it didn't matter what was on the screen. We couldn't care less whether it was blaxploitation or not. We had our heroes and that was fine. It really made a big big impact, you know.

01:56:55:19

MARIO SPROUSE:

There was a wonderful article written in *Esquire Magazine* in the early 70s called "Why Blacks Aren't Scary Anymore." And the reason why that was important is because just a few years earlier, when Dr. King was assassinated, or Kennedy, Malcom X, Kennedy, Dr-- all of that- that violence. We went from

dashikis and big hair to 3 piece suits because we all got out of college. We got out of school. So you went from Diana Ross, Mahogany, Glamour, all of this happened from 60s to 70s. So now we're seeing Shaft. It's like, "Wow, he can go anywhere." *Shaft in Africa* (1973). *Shaft's Big Score* (1972). It didn't matter. He can go anywhere. He could do anything, and that was a part of it. So, not only did you have people getting out of colleges and having images that were- you could see on a screen, but out of that too came National Black Theatre or Negro Ensemble Company. Groups that had existed earlier, but now were flourishing because of these images. Black theatre, Black film, Black poetry. All of this was going on at the same time, and there was *Shaft* (1971) right in the middle of it with the soundtrack. It was really important, really really important.

01:58:16:04

MARIO SPROUSE:

So Isaac Hayes would be, "Wow this is Gordon Parks." Yeah, you're gonna do the music, but Gordon would always work his influence on the music based on what he felt, and Isaac Hayes would take what he felt and put it into music. And that's, that's the collaboration. That's how it went. The difference is, when I met him, 10 or so years later, it was he could instantly put it into music. And that- so the middle process was cut out. He could instantly put it in, instantly hear it, instantly play it back, add to it, and that became a part of the way he composed, which was wonderful for him, absolutely wonderful.

01:59:02:08

MARIO SPROUSE:

That's Isaac Hayes. That's urban Black pulse. The song that came out of that, that people sang though, and recorded was "Don't Misunderstand" because it was- it's a love piece. "Wait, Shaft in love?" No, this is a love song for *Shaft* that's saying, "Well, you know, I have time, you have time, let's not make this very serious, but if you want to get together it's okay." That song captured people. That's the song that people wanted to- to record. That is... I can play a little bit of that. [*Mario plays the piano*]

02:01:07:18

MARIO SPROUSE:

He wrote the lyrics, he wrote the music, it was harmonized, he probably did the harmonies as well cause he played it. Um. Amad Jamal, Nancy Wilson, Arthur Prysock, and a host of others have recorded it over the years because it's melodic, it's popular, and it's easy to- easy to play. So it became a very popular song. When people hear that they go, "Oh Arthur Prysock" or "Oh Amad Jamal." Nancy Wilson is the one that made a big hit of it.

02:01:38:23

MARIO SPROUSE:

Interesting story, I'm not sure if this would-- if this would ever make it to film. As I was going through his papers, in his den he had file cabinets and music-- stuff in his den. I'm going through and there is a file in the section of *The Learning Tree*. And it's a letter. It's dated 1968 or something, and it is

from an agent who says that the person he's representing has decided not to sing the title song of *The Learning Tree*.

02:02:14:14

MARIO SPROUSE:

Um. Okay. So O.C. Smith wound up singing it. The person who had declined was Sammy Davis Jr., which is the person that Gordon wanted to sing the song, was Sammy Davis Jr., and this was a letter expressing, 'No, can't do it. Too busy,' or whatever the- the reason was. But then O. C. Smith got it, and the rest is history.

02:02:38:03

MARIO SPROUSE:

So when you have an O. C. Smith singing 'Don't Misunderstand' very simply which is the way Gordon was. Basically Gordon was a farm boy. You know, 'Give me a horse in Kansas, I'm fine. I don't need to live in a big apartment building with, you know, 20 doormen or anything. Just give me a horse, put me on the plains, and I'm fine.' And he always retained that. So that spirit was O. C. Smith, and he just went ahead and sang it and that was it, and people went 'That's my song.' And that's how I met Gordon, was through that song. So that's always been one of my favorites because of that.

02:03:16:03

MARIO SPROUSE:

Again, the process was Gordon would get an idea. So he would then record himself, or get somebody else, 'Hey I have an idea. Let's record something.' So I have outtakes of him doing some of that music. It's either called, "Move On Out" or "Move On In" or something or other. And there's Gordon singing with somebody else doing the background stuff. It's really really very rough, but it's just to get the idea across. I said, "Wow if this ever made it out there."

02:03:46:04

MARIO SPROUSE:

But there he is singing, you know, singing "Move-- this is how it goes. I'm just imagining him in the studio with his pipe, rustling of papers in front of the microphone. A quarter track reel to reel tape recorder going by at 7 and a half IPS. "Move on out, move on out. Yeah, Champ, I'm gonna sing it." I just laugh. So it's that sort of thing, or blues that he would do. He loved Johnny Hodges. So, there was a song that he wrote, the title of which I just forgot. I think it was just called, "Blues."

02:04:17:15

MARIO SPROUSE:

Johnny Hodges playing, because he had that heartbeat, the Ellington heartbeat. And when Ellington started that big band, it was called jungle music, back in the mid to late 20s, he had a trumpet player who would play these growls, these sounds that were coming out that people called jungle sounds, but it was really the beat behind it. Big drums going in the background. So a lot of Ellington's music had that pulse, and Gordon's

popular music on that- that he would have for Shaft's big score had that pulse.

02:04:49:17

MARIO SPROUSE:

That's why it was really important. That pulse was the driving thing through Ellington's music. At that time, everything was dance, you'd dance to it, but there was this driving pulse that would... accelerate whatever was in front of it, and that's why he would have that. But some of the other stuff was just funny to me. It was just recorded on a reel to reel tape, "Alright play here we go," and sing it, so I've put some of that on a CD for people to listen to if they wanted to, but it's there.

02:05:19:16

MARIO SPROUSE:

That's urban. It is urban and it's urgent to have that sort of thing. I'm not sure if they knew it at the time, but 16th note rhythms, (*taps out rhythm*) that kind of thing, that has always been behind sports background music, because it's (*scats*). You listen to whatever station, whatever thing, you'll hear this (*taps out rhythm*) in the background because it's exciting, it moves things. It's very subliminal, but that's what he had there. So that set the pace. You hear that, you go, "Uh oh something's coming, and it's not 'West Side Story.' Something's coming here."

02:06:02:20

MARIO SPROUSE:

Not only is it exciting, it's bold. It's not understated. It's in your face. So here's you know... mild mannered Gordon, with put on- take off the glasses, you become superman Shaft which was funny to me, but at the same time, it really meant a lot for the rest of us. Because, whether it was from Scott Joplin's era of ragtime or people putting on the mask, 'We wear the mask.' In this society we have to wear a mask, we have to be this, we have to be that, and it has to be proper, but Shaft: no mask, bold.

02:06:43:12

MARIO SPROUSE:

Well that was dangerous, because this was during a time when theatrically you would- well on film, you would never see a Black male with beard and mustache. "That's too dangerous. We can't-" He has to be clean cut. He has to be this. You know he has to present himself, and then there's Shaft, who takes this image and goes boom!

02:07:08:01

MARIO SPROUSE:

That's why it was so important, because we could be anything at any time in whatever segment of society we wanted to be and we knew how to do it because we've been doing it for 400 years. No problem, we can do this, we can put on as many masks as we want. So at any point in time, you can have the dapper Gordon, you can have the almost invisible with the camera Gordon, you can have the person who's out front Gordon, you can have the person in the deepest darkest ghetto situation Gordon, or the palaces in Paris

Gordon. It's the same person, and we know how to do that, and Shaft could do that, too.

02:07:50:16

MARIO SPROUSE:

So that's why it was so important because we got all of those images, all of those feelings through the pulse of that music. So you have something driving, like the opening segment of *Shaft*, and then you'll have the love song in 'Shaft's Big Score.' All of that was Gordon. It was also one of the reasons why so many different types of African-Americans identified with the music, because there's all different types of African-Americans. We come from all over the place, but we all identified with that. Shaft took off the mask and just was bold and got the job done, because there were a lot of people who were bold who didn't get the job done. He got the job done.

02:08:35:17

MARIO SPROUSE:

So it was not only the experience of being in a theater with people watching that, but those were the same people who just a few years before watched *The Learning Tree*. So you have this full experience from Kansas to Urban. Wow. From this one guy? Yeah... who could have very easily just retired on his photographs, and just said, "Meh, I don't need to do this anymore." Kept on going.

02:09:07:21

MARIO SPROUSE:

(Mario plays the piano) I don't know if that's the key, but that-that- now what that entails, just musically, is again out of the 70s, a couple things happened in the 70s that were different. One was that gospel music changed so you had the uh, you had the *(Mario plays the piano)* Sam Cook stuff. So, this- that style was 60s. Gospel music was about to change. R&B was about to change.

02:09:58:00

MARIO SPROUSE:

So we had the music of... the music of the 70s with R&B was a lot softer, so you had the *(Mario plays the piano)* that kind of sound. That kind of sound. That came out of stylistics, delfonics, sound of Philadelphia, all of those sounds were softer, but in this same key if you had *(Mario plays the piano)* that's gospel stuff. So you have the righteousness of that in the pulse of that opening part of *Shaft*, and it all fit together because everyone understood it. When we heard that we went, "Yes! That's it! Yes, definitely!"

02:10:53:06

MARIO SPROUSE:

The same way that in the mid 60s when we would hear James Brown's music in D minor, it didn't matter what it was. *(Mario plays the piano)*. That was on the one. And it's a very interesting-- Gordon didn't ascribe-- subscribe to this particularly, but he understood the pulse of it. James Brown's music was on the one. So normally, when we're dealing with R&B, it's: *(clapping and counting)* one two three four, one two- whatever it happens to be, that sort of thing, but with James Brown's music it was all about the one. It was that

(scatting and clapping) but where did that come from? Chain gangs. *(scatting)*
So you had that powerful pulse that was always on the one, and it wasn't just
the one. It was the one with sledgehammer one. It was one with axe one. So it
was visceral.

02:11:52:08

MARIO SPROUSE:

So out of that 60s *(scatting)* James Brown and Motown's poppy sound, came
Isaac Hayes, which would have a ten minute introduction of, you know, "By
The Time I Get To Phoenix." Who does that? Woah, this came-- where did
that come from? But it came from all of those other elements in the 60s, that
people were experimenting with, that hit. So when the music of Isaac Hayes
hit the vision of Gordon Parks and the visual of *Shaft* bang! You almost had no
choice, of it really having a big impact.

02:12:31:15

MARIO SPROUSE:

But all of those musical influences came together there. The whole Black
Power movement out of the 60s, and that big one that was coming through,
that was powering. When it got to the 70s, it became broader because our
experiences became broader. And in comes Isaac Hayes and there's Gordon.
He says, "We can work together on this." And it was, it was a beautiful
collaboration.

02:13:00:06

MARIO SPROUSE:

I don't remember the- the song of it, but the context would be right. The context would be right. That was the prevalent Afro-Centric way of expressing, and so you would find it in South America, Caribbean, the call and response part. It's also preacher, congregation part, where if you want to express something is-- that has the element of truth, or is righteous, or spiritually uplifting, you throw in a gospel song, and if you're good you'll throw in a gospel song with a mass choir, and if you're really good you'll have people twirling and dancing, which is why it works so often.

02:13:43:13

MARIO SPROUSE:

It might even sound stock in that sense, but there's a reason for it. It's because that's where you find yourself. If a person is lost, that's where you'll find yourself. If a person is struggling, that's where you'll find yourself. And you'll always have some sort of gospel call and response thing happening at that time. So if you think about it, I played-- when I was setting up Gordon's-- the synthesizer in Gordon's den, I was playing a cello part on the synthesizer. It was an old hymn. It actually is the German national anthem. It just happened to pop into my head. It's (*Mario plays the piano*)

02:14:30:13

MARIO SPROUSE:

That theme, I was just playing it on the cello. I'm in his den and he says, "Hey what are you doing, taking me back to church or something?" Because that's a hymn, written by Joseph Haydn, you know, 18th century 17th century music

that he would have sung in church. It would not have been the gospel of Harlem kind of thing. It was a different- different kind of uh musical expression.

02:14:59:22

MARIO SPROUSE:

So, anytime you could just draw something that has that righteousness in it, it would be through gospel. One of his-- one of the movements-- of it's either the piano concerto or the symphony is called "Hymn," but it's not gospel. It's what would be considered a traditional protestant hymn, but gospel music had a whole other feeling to it. And that's why it's used so frequently, is because it's soulful, spiritual, and *Shaft* fit right into that, absolutely, without any question.

Conversations about death

02:15:45:08

MARIO SPROUSE:

We talked about death from the standpoint of legacy. He was concerned about his legacy, because as an artist he was prolific. It was less concerning to him, from my understanding, how he would be remembered, as much as it is how his art would be remembered in that sense or preserved or conserved. Concerned about his family, but again it was how-- what's going to happen with all of this? What's- what's- what's my life been? Wanted to make sure that that had some significance in terms of teaching others. So, it wouldn't

just be museum, it would be: how can this help others? And so we talked about that, we talked about um... how he- what he wanted to have done with his art. That's why it was so important for him to get as much down, either on tape, or digitized, or in- handwritten, in whatever format, so that people could continue to learn, could continue to be inspired by him.

02:16:56:00

MARIO SPROUSE:

And so the Gordon Parks Foundation certainly has been instrumental in that, but we talked about, not his dying, that was different. His ailments, whatever it is that he had, had more to do with his dying as opposed to his death. So we concentrated, I shouldn't say concentrated... we spoke about his death and legacy, more than just the pain. I remember being on the phone with him when he was in pain. He had just come from some sort of treatment of whatever type. His grandson was with him. And he was just in a lot of pain, but that's different than-- That's dying, or that's being in pain, but how am I going to be remembered? What's my artwork? What's going to happen with all of this? What are you going to do with all of this? This means this much to this generation of people, what's going to happen with it? How is it going to be presented? How's it going to be- That took up a lot of time.

02:17:55:00

MARIO SPROUSE:

I think he had prostate cancer, yeah. And he was 93, I think it was, when he passed away. And so I didn't see him much. He passed away in March of 2006.

I would say the last 3 months of his life I didn't see him much because he was really in a lot of treatment and pain.

02:18:17:16

MARIO SPROUSE:

The last time I saw him was at his-- was at his apartment, and we were just talking about next projects, because that's what Gordon was about, was the next project. In fact, there's a story that I've told about... his thought about that. There was some sort of smoke condition in the apartment above him, and he had to get out quick, he's on the 10th floor. Gotta go! So he called me the next morning and said, "Man, there was a fire upstairs or something." He had to get out quick, and I went: what did he take with him? Oh well he had a Chagall here, he had a this there, he had- wow he had this sculpture or that painting, wow how is he going to manage, you know, to get all this stuff out, he's got to leave right away. I said, "Gordon what did you take?" He said, "The manuscript to my next book." I went, "Wow."

02:19:13:09

MARIO SPROUSE:

Everything else could go. The next project is what was important. Wow did I hold onto that. I said I've told that story a million times because that's what he was about: going forward. What's the next thing happening? How is this going to affect the future? And that's where he wanted to go. He was always moving forward, always moving forward. So with his death, it was moving forward, how is this going to impact, what's going to happen here?

02:19:41:17

MARIO SPROUSE:

He would feel really uncomfortable about a statue of him erected somewhere. I don't mean in- in tribute, but I mean he doesn't need a 400 foot statue, 'I am Gordon Parks.' That would embarrass him to no end, but his work and his impact on people. That's what was important to him.

Relationship with Gordon Parks

02:20:09:16

MARIO SPROUSE:

He was a father figure in the sense that he was probably as old as my father would have been. I grew up with an older father. He was 40 when he got married and 42 or so when I was born. But mentor... for my relationship with Gordon was mentor and friend. We talked a lot about personal stuff the way that a parent would, but also I was old enough so that we could talk as adults, and just friends, just friends.

02:20:46:16

MARIO SPROUSE:

Just a person who was there to help him get his musical artistic work out. That's the sort of the title. In the midst of all of that was this wonderful relationship that we had. That continues to this day because I hear his voice in my head, "Come on Champ! You can do it. Get up. You can-" I hear that voice. I don't hear my father's voice. I hear his voice.

02:21:11:07

MARIO SPROUSE:

But also there's a lot of respect, a lot of respect. And shared moments that we have. Those moments without proper names. One of them was, he had a window in his den that faced the East River. We're eating hamburgers at his table, something he prepared, and he all of a sudden looks to his right, jumps up and grabs binoculars, and looks out the window. I said, "What's up?" He said, "Look at this." It was Malcom Forbes' boat lapping down the East River. He said, "Wow, look, helicopter, this- look at all of this stuff that's going on." And we were just like two kids pressing our noses against the window pane. I share that moment because this is Gordon Parks going, "Wow look at that." That is like huge luxury, just lapping down the East River. And we went back to eating hamburgers later on and worked on something, so we shared a lot of moments like that.

02:22:14:08

MARIO SPROUSE:

And we talked a lot about his expectations, not only of his children, but of himself. Because he realized that he's a spokesperson. You know, the New York Times or whomever would call and say, "What do you think about?" So he had to really think about that. 'Why are they calling me?' Well because you're a spokesperson whether you want to be or not, whether you like it or not. You're going to get the phone call. So he was aware that what he said, had weight, and what does that mean? And we talked about that, that kind of

import, as friends. You know, so we had a wonderful relationship that I will always cherish. Mhm.

Don't Misunderstand

02:23:02:22

MARIO SPROUSE:

(Mario plays the piano and sings 'Don't Misunderstand) Don't misunderstand / we are only strangers / And after that I'm not really sure. (Scatting) Don't mistake my smile / it just means I'm lonely/ love me 'till the something or other I'm not sure. We're just spending time / in this secret place/ don't misunderstand / you are no concern of mine / but in case you're free sometime / to be some time with me sometime / to hold my hand / then I will understand. Something like that.

END TC: 02:24:32:15