

Interviewee: Emerson Bell
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Session I
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[Begin Tape 3175, Side A. Begin Session I.]

Barbara Faulkner: This is Barbara Faulkner. Today is June 25, 2002. I'm here at my home in Baton Rouge to talk with the artist Emerson Bell about his life and times in Baton Rouge as an artist. What is your name, please?

Emerson Bell: My name? Emerson Nathaniel Bell. Middle initial is N. Nathaniel Bell.

Faulkner: Where were you born?

Bell: I was born in Baton Rouge and . . .

Faulkner: And when were you born?

Bell: [00:45] I was born in 1930, at the beginning of 1930 [?].

Faulkner: Where do you live now?

Bell: [pause] I live in my studio on Acadian [Thruway].

Faulkner: And can you tell me . . . Can you tell me something about your connections and your affiliations within the South Baton Rouge area?

Bell: Well, the only connections I can tell that are in formative years, South Baton Rouge was very, a very wonderful area. It was very inspiring then and is very much indifferent from what it is today because there was always a lot of talent, great talent, that arose out of South Baton Rouge, such as musicians and artists and . . . A lot of notable people came from South Baton Rouge, who were like internationally known singers and musicians and teachers and professors. It was a haven . . . It was a haven for great knowledge in my day, I remember that. I feel that even today that . . . If the young people would think the way I think, that it would be much greater because I was connected with so much knowledge where I lived, coming up in South Baton Rouge. A whole lot of things that ordinarily that they could have known about, I'm very sure that they missed because . . . I had the opportunity to enhance a lot of things that were being done through the arts and through the music and things like that in my very early, you know, in formative years in Baton Rouge. [03:17]

Faulkner: Can you tell me of any specific memories you have of that time?

Bell: I can regard a lot of things to . . . my household was in Baton Rouge, [?] my mother. As an artist, I begun art in South Baton Rouge at a very early age. I performed a lot of things like murals and things and had voice studies and . . . and different choral groups and things when I was very young, you know. These are the things that as of today that I'm still instilled with and

I'm living . . . it's still my arts. I'm still dealing with things like that. That was one of my final touchstones in life, to begin, you know, coming up in South Baton Rouge. But . . .

Not only South Baton Rouge, but I've done so many things in so many other different areas, you know. Which has very much like the similar liking of my touchstone because of moving around and finding things that was reminiscent to how it was when I was in South Baton Rouge. Places like New Orleans, New York, Chicago, overseas and things. So I had the opportunity to do the same things . . . And later in the years, to do some of the same things that I was able to do in South Baton Rouge. So that gave me a very good feeling. It let me know that coming up in South Baton Rouge was very much like a mecca for the arts and it was . . . It affected me as my touchstones and my creative endeavor. I'm still dealing with that part of life up until this day, you know, through my arts.

Faulkner: Yes.

Bell: [05:50] Expressing, you know, the beautiful ideas and the things of South Baton Rouge.

Faulkner: Yes.

Bell: But I miss . . . I miss that area because there was so many other friends that I had was doing very similar things that I was doing. I had so many friends that were doing so many similar things, which is not there anymore. They're other places, they've branched out. So, like I said, South Baton Rouge, it's my home and as of this period in my life it's just like a reminiscing point because I live in so many other places. I achieved the same value in other

places that I had coming up in South Baton Rouge. That made me more comfortable and found friends also in the same manner. It made me more comfortable to be able to do a lot of the things that I wanted to do by having that background of South Baton Rouge. I did a lot of things in South Baton Rouge also, a lot of things like I came up in a very church . . . a wonderful church environment and that had a lot of impact. I don't know whether you're familiar with it, I came up African Methodist.

Faulkner: Oh.

Bell: And African Methodist has an overtone, very similar to Byzantine, you know. Have you ever visited an African Methodist church?

Faulkner: No. No I haven't. Can you tell me about it?

Bell: [08:04] See that's . . . No, see that's . . . That was one of the views that like I said . . . I remember my parents, my great-grandmother and my mother, they were very similar. They used to tell me when I was young about views in life and so to express or check all the things out. If things is to your liking and to your prevalence in life, check them all out. It made me become interested and so . . . I been . . . I visit all other churches, too. But I've asked of a lot of . . . I've asked a lot of people in America, you find that mainly, in the South, have they visit other churches or the synagogue and they say, "No, I've never been."

Then again, I feel very grateful for having been apt enough to have [?] Catholic churches and visit [?] association with Baha'is, and I have friends that are Baha'is. I have so many

different people and we have similar views and things and so they have done the very similar things that I have done. The similarity of that gives . . . strengthens me also in the heart, because I never did . . . I never was . . . I was speaking to someone yesterday, I never had a one view in life; that was never taught in my household to not to . . . It was always collectively, you know, and those are the things that helped me so much.

With me being . . . Coming up in the environment that I came up in and the church, it helped me in so many other ways because I had choral when I was very young. When I was in Japan in the service I had an opportunity . . . I had a choir director, he just immediately came . . . Well he knew I knew about music because some friends of mine, I told them, had mentioned to him, said "He know about music, he's been in choral, in which he was very young then and had voice." I was selected, I was in choral in Japan. I did so many wonderful things that ordinarily at that present time and living very [?] that I would never have had the chance to do if I was living in South Baton Rouge, nor living in America, you know. So I feel very . . . I feel very comfortable about that kind of stuff also. I'm still dealing with things like that still in my arts and things.

Faulkner: Can you tell me any other memories you have of your early exposure to art, perhaps . . .

Bell: [11:53] Yeah, I had an uncle who . . . In my neighborhood it was like an art commune. I had an uncle who was a draftsman and I had another friend who was a Frenchman, this was in South Baton Rouge. A very good friend of mine who lives in Chicago at the present, Harold Key. We were very young and I had an opportunity to visit him. His father had a drafting room

where he showed me the instruments and things and his drawings and things. I was very young then, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. But all my life . . . all my life has been arts because it was in my household. Like I say, I had an uncle who lived with us. He was . . . He did signs and things and he did drafting and things. They had the only room, the drafting room and thing. So it was . . . that was a tip off.

I used to help him sometimes. He did a lot of things for the church, like designing banners and things. Like I said, and African Methodist was very much like Byzantine. A lot of things that was around, they liked paintings and things and bells and symbolic symbolisms and things in the church and things and voice, and voice. Also in African Methodist, a lot of people just think of Catholics. But I had catechism. So many wonderful things I had that the kids of my age are coming up today, they wouldn't have the slightest clue. All these things came from our household. Like I say . . . and portrait and things such as that. So [?] all those things involved me into art. I was led into art through that, and my mother the connection.

[14:26] I erected the first painting that I have done was for a little [?] church in South Baton Rouge and it was [Greater] Saint Michael [Baptist Church], a very beautiful little church. They had so many little churches in there. A lady came, she was like an usher, they were known . . . ushers was known, they were something like, they used to call them mothers of the church. She came and asked me, I was very young, I wasn't even in high school then. But she knew, everyone in my area, in my friends, that I drew well. I was a good drawer and designer and I was apt for art. She asked me would I do something for the church and I had the opportunity to do a lot of monumental things. Right at the age of about fourteen or fifteen in the church, of the saints. I had a cousin who was from Texas who was very instrumental, he was close to my mother and he used to come and liked to stay with us. My mother encouraged him to come, to

stay and spend the weekends and help me. He helped me throughout the mural. I did all the saints, he and I. And fresco, that was my first introduction thing to doing fresco.

Faulkner: Oh.

Bell: He did all the scaffolds and helped me. He had a lot of ambition. He was a young man, but he worked real hard and we worked hand to hand, so it made things very easily. He painted also, we painted things together. So everything came out very successful and this . . .

Faulkner: Are any of those works in still there?

Bell: [16:33] Oh, no, no. People preference are even . . . People, when they go in a place, even if they have authentic things in places now, as far as architecture is concerned . . . See, it was just like downtown, the theater that they torn down on Third Street. It was one of the most marvelous theaters there were. They had all the Greek goddess and things, it was very symbolic and thing, beautiful. They had furniture and things that was build into the wall, all the wood wall . . . Well, that black walnut teakwood and things. It was one of the most beautiful theaters there was in the . . . and they just torn it down and they made a preference, they made a preference that they wanted to deal with cement and sheetrock. So a lot of people who doesn't know about naturalistic architecture, they do that, so a lot of things be . . . all over the world get destroyed. You've got to remember there's so many years. So I went there one day and the man had torn everything down and they had sheetrock. I didn't say anything. I didn't even . . . it kind of made

me feel bad, but I didn't enter, I just [. . . ?] building a new church. I just walked away and went on. Like they wonder, you poor man. And so I left like that.

Faulkner: How would you describe yourself?

Bell: Huh?

Faulkner: How would you describe yourself?

Bell: [18:35] Well I'd describe myself, I would rather . . . See, I have so many other friends, I wouldn't know how to describe myself. But I have so many great other friends that are . . . that I have worked with and so many wonderful people have supported me in the arts and things like that. Also, a lot of great artists that I've worked around and been in the company of and things. That was mainly in the sixties. See, I did a lot of things in New Orleans. Of course, I came . . . After coming out of the service, I came back home. I went in service in the fifties, but in the beginning of the fifties, being very young and . . . I lived in New York for a period of time, for some years, and then from New York to Michigan. I stayed around that area about a couple of years, and because I had received the Ford's Foundation, I did some civil service work and things. As time passed on, I knew it was coming, I was inducted to the service and I spent a normal tour of duty and then came back in the mid-fifties. In the mid-fifties after doing three years of service.

Faulkner: The mid-fifties was when you returned to Baton Rouge?

Bell: I didn't return to Baton Rouge. Because Baton Rouge was the last thing in my mind after getting out of service. Because, like I said, I had so many friends and things. I went back to Detroit and spent some time around Detroit, sit around, '55. Came home and visit and see how things were around '60 or '61 or '62, and then start packing and then I came and I settled in about the mid-sixties.

I did some studying . . . I did some studying and I knew an old man who taught drafting and metal work and I stayed around and did some studying with him and then . . . When I came back, I extended . . . They had a vo-tech school for design and metal in Baton Rouge. Baton Rouge [Central Area] Vo-Tech at that particular time where they teaching metal work and a lot of math and things. But my teacher was very flexible and he had performed a lot of interesting, modern things in his work rather than commercial things. And he'd taken a great interest in me. I spent a few years with him and then I started doing art, you know, start doing mediums . . . different mediums like wood and stone and metal. I just kept branching off, studying with different people and things like that, and different techniques.

[22:26] But I spent a lot of time . . . I did a lot of showing in New Orleans in the sixties and the seventies and I worked at a little . . . I was working, had a lot of jobs. Around when seventies came around, I was working the State Department, and the grant department. I start teaching eventually. I had a friend from New York came, outside of the seventies, around '72, '73, and I begun . . . We start preparing grants for to enlighten students in all the schools under the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford Foundation for the Arts. That was a good opportunity for me and I dealt with that for four or five years, but in the process of that, I was doing a lot of other things. I was also showing and working, too.

Faulkner: [coughing] Excuse me.

Bell: That was a good step off for me in the arts. I showed very prolifically during that particular time. I showed a lot because they had a lot of galleries in Baton Rouge and people who knew about art and loved art, and art was practically everywhere. They had so many nice galleries. As a matter of fact, I was in Baton Rouge Gallery in the very formative years when it was on North Boulevard, when I first came back home. I came in contact with Frank Hayden and John Payne and men like that. We were doing similar type things and I stayed . . . It was like a family, and I stayed close to that pack along with other artists and I produced a lot of things for the gallery. I stayed in that for some years, even up until the time it moved on Fourth Street. That was a . . . It was an outstanding gallery. I miss the gallery because it was very modern. It had a lot of work there, the membership was beautiful. Everyone was very concerned about the qualities of the art and things like that. I liked it that period.

[25:18] Then from there I showed at a very primitive at Broussard Gallery, which was in the Old State Capitol, which was another fine gallery under the leadership of Mr. [Jay] Broussard. So, I had a great art life in Baton Rouge, a great take off because I had so many wonderful friends and so many people that were interested in art that would pick me up. I appreciate that up until the day. That was a good start. But as far as art, I've been doing art ever since I was a little boy. Art and literature was in my household.

Faulkner: And music, too?

Bell: Oh yeah, music. Yes, voice. See, I had a very nice voice teacher who, she died in France [?], she was my catechism teacher and also my voice teacher. She instilled a great deed in me of music, and because she used to teach us to read real [?], if you miss, if you pause. She were cool with me, because she liked things to be . . . if you read, you read it very clearly and very [?] and then you go someone else. She would teach about vowels and things and punctuation. I was very young then so a lot of her . . . And her singing was so beautiful and she were . . . She performed a lot of music in Paris. She was known in Paris very much like Josephine Baker was known in Paris, as Madame Butterfly. She was from Baton Rouge and she was my church member, and she taught in church.

Those things I miss very much because things like that, and she had not only. . . I'm not speaking of someone just teaching because someone asked her to teach, she'd studied . . . from a young girl, she'd studied at Julliard and things like that. You felt comfortable being in that, there was no wrong. I had that when I was a little boy. So, so many touchstones that I had that helped me, you know. So I'm living off that today. I'm living off so many of those wonderful things today. [laughs] The people that has instilled a great fortitudes of the arts within me that I don't see no way else, so I just live off that. [28:39]

Faulkner: Tell me about when you first started to think of yourself as an artist. How old were you?

Bell: I just mentioned a moment ago about the mural, that's when I started.

Faulkner: Yeah, did you think of yourself as an artist before that, though? You said that friends said that you could draw well. You knew you could draw well before you did. . .

Bell: Well I knew, I knew a lot of things . . . but I had friends, I had other friends, I did everything well. But that was the period. You've got to remember, I came up . . . you've got to remember . . . See, this is a part that a lot of people has not been looking to. You got to remember, I came up post-war. You're familiar with post-war? When I read about people like [Francisco De] Goya and people like that . . . even Frida [Kahlo] and people like . . . and Goya and people like . . . I came up post-war. When you're surrounded by things, you're a part of it. So all you need is . . . Like I said, my mother . . . when I said . . . when the lady asked me about the mural, she said, "Yeah, if someone asks you, go and do it." How would you know whether you do it or not until you do it?

[30:04] Like I said, I was thirteen or fourteen years old. But before then I had read . . . I read a lot as a little boy. All kind of things, like funny books on up to *Macbeth* when I was a little boy. And my friends, too. We used to practice on things like that. You see, we were artistic and even then at twelve and thirteen, and so many other things we were doing. Because they had . . . but you were supported so well and they had a lot of little ladies just like in my day, like you would see in Canada. I lived with an aunt when I was living in Michigan and I went to Canada with her. She told me she wanted . . . she liked Atlanta and she liked everything fresh. We used to live right on the border and she would go early in the morning, she told me she wanted me to go. These ladies was very much like the benevolent society, the old ladies who wore . . . you see them, wear white. They look like nuns and they were very dutiful you know, and my mother had friends like that.

You look in the house and here's this ordinary lady, but they were dressed like Sister Teresa would dress. You would think they're a lady who come meet with you, help you to read, or they would recite something for you and they would give you some indication about some type of book you should read and things like that. They were called in Canada, the Ladies of Job's Tears. You've seen them?

Faulkner: No.

Bell: The ladies that wear their bonnets and they have a little pack on their back with a broom in it and they'd sweep in front. If you lived in this area and something, trash was in your yard, they would come themselves and sweep it and put some plants out and decorate it and things like that. They were good at . . . and they have a lot of ladies like that also in France. So my . . . with my great-grandmother being an ethnic lady, she had a lot of friends like that, benevolent society. They helped musicians and if you were a performer, they would prepare a room so someone could make up and you could be private and things if you performing at the church. You do that at their house and they fix your [?].

[33:17] I came up in a real cool environment. That had a lot to do with my art because very much, I didn't know. I didn't know about very much of the things that would detract that. That helped me so much to be a good artist by dealing with my roots, you understand. A lot of people are mistaken their roots and take over a commercial way of doing something the scientific way. I was never taught that way in my household. In my household, we were always . . . it was like a root progression that someone say, "Well hey, you do this and this in this particular format

and it's clean, you clear, it'll be clear and you don't make it . . . You don't make it technical. You do this in this certain sequence and you'll come out." So that helped me. It was simple.

I had a teacher . . . I had a Buddhist teacher and he used to tell me . . . I was up in age and he used to tell me, "You do things simple." So many things is credit to so many other . . . not myself, very little I can speak. I'm the producer but I'm still . . . a whole lot of things I'm still trying to learn and to see different ways and I can decipher . . . Because right now in life I can decipher things, I can pick and choose very easily now, where being young I didn't know that . . . that part of it. I can simplify things now. I understand now, but . . . In formative years that was a part I didn't understand, to how to deal and select. I'm living off that, that pure beauty, you know. As much as I can present. I deal with my art in that facet. But it's still a ways for me still to go, because I'm always searching for a different . . . different ideas in art.

Faulkner: Can you tell me more about your education as an artist?

Bell: [36:23] I have no art education. That's the thing, I hope not that would never prevail. Because I had teachers who were like monumental men. Men whose minds was great for, you understand . . .

Faulkner: Yes, can you . . . ?

Bell: Than mine, and that was a [?] to them. I would say, "Well, I'm going to school." And he'd say, "Well, what you doing that for?" and all. And, "These things here that I've done as a boy. . ." He told me stories of some certain incidents that happened. So I studied with them. I

had tutors. I had a English teacher . . . I had a English teacher that helped me a lot in school. She knew I was a good drawer and she gave me a break. Because on certain days when they had themes in school, I would do things for school themes. Themes, you know, like banners and things. She was a very classical lady, but as far as modern art and things like per se, a school didn't have nothing to do with that. I taught that to school, yeah, yeah. I was selected to do that because I was . . . Some of my teachers that was tutoring, they gave me the indication that if I would go and spend all my time in the school and would do less art, I would be in a bind. Where if I would stick with them, and I could produce and do so many things and learn so many techniques, and I could do them on the spot, so I could produce art. Why shut myself off? They knew I had the skills and I had the experience, the travel experience, you understand?

I went to school . . . Like I say, I went to design school, I went to school, I went to high school. I did all that, but that's not a preference to my art. To me it's like another kind, an intellectual overtone that I use it for. I don't use it for my art. I use spiritual devices and techniques and things. Things that are never known nothing, and carving techniques and things that I was taught, you understand?

Faulkner: Can you tell me more about that?

Bell: [39:15] The only thing I can say there, I was taught that by older men, by masters. They taught me how to do that in a big way. Everything that I produced and the way that I was taught, I came out successfully with it. I dealt with that. Why go to school? Why go to school for a few hours and come back home and not do nothing? These men were workhorses. They believe . . .

See, like I said, you got to remember I came up post-war. All the men that I'd known were workhorses and they believed that if . . . You know what workhorses is?

Faulkner: Oh, absolutely.

Bell: Yeah. So that was their way . . . Especially men from the [?], that was their way of submitting themselves to dedication, a workhorse. I learned that . . . it's a dedication, it's a certain dedication. So I found out early it wasn't school, it was dedication. It's what you do and how you produce and how you can make others happy through your art. If you just spend some time . . .

But I was fortunate. I guess . . . I guess the Creator led these men to me and I had a old Italian man who I used to carve with a lot; he's gone, he's from Sicily. I love him up until the day because he was a older man, he lived a very beautiful life, but he was close to me. Now he was my teacher and he used to do a lot of things for Queen Elizabeth. I was very young, and he was doing some beautiful things to send to Europe with rosettes. You know, rosettes, like they got in France? He selected me to work with him carving and things. So many opportunities I had that I wouldn't be able to do nothing like that in school. It's just like my teacher said. But when it comes to mannerisms and etiquettes of life and conversation and I chose [?] school, but I was never taught. I always was selected and whoever I was selected under, they showed me that I had to work. I was artist, or not an artist. That was their . . . that's how they could . . . That's how I was confronted. [42:33]

Faulkner: How do you mean?

Bell: You're an artist or you're not an artist.

Faulkner: Yes.

Bell: You're producing work. "That's the only reason I'll take you in, if you show me you can work. If you can prove to me you're an artist . . ." Like I say, these are older men. These are not no one my age, no schoolteachers or nothing like that. These are men who have been glorified all through Europe, all through India and done beautiful things, have done beautiful art or portraits and things of Gandhi and monumental work and things and fountains and all type things. They just [chose?] me. I learned from them, I learned from the mystics. Some of them living today.

Faulkner: Some of them are still living?

Bell: Oh yeah, and working in a very . . . okay. [tape stops] [43:46]

[End Tape 3175, Side A. Begin Tape 3175, Side B.]

Faulkner: Oh, we're going to record the other side now. Is that okay?

Bell: [scoffs] I think that's overdramatizing, isn't it?

Faulkner: [laughs] You know, you tell us.

Bell: That's the whole tape?

Faulkner: You tell us when.

Bell: Yeah, it's . . .

Faulkner: Yeah. You tell us when because I . . .

Bell: You know.

Faulkner: I've got . . .

Bell: This here's [?]

Faulkner: You know, I think you've got . . .

Bell: [44:13] I don't want to feel probed, you know.

Faulkner: Oh.

Bell: Yeah, you know what I mean? That's a whole tape? Just one side?

Faulkner: One side is thirty minutes.

Bell: Yeah.

Faulkner: Yeah, one side is thirty minutes.

Bell: But anyway. See, I live very much off of . . . A whole lot of things I didn't accept in life, as an artist, because I was accepted [?]. It's just like the prophets said, some things you accept . . . I used to hear my mother say some things you accept and some things you don't accept. [laughs] So a whole lot of things in life I didn't accept and they could have been great things. And by right, I should have been living in Mexico City. I had a lot of opportunities to live a lot of places, but I didn't take on that role. I thought . . . and I say [?] now, if I get there and something and I know it ain't like . . . I know it ain't like the States [?] and something would happen, I'd be in the situation. I'd start thinking about that. But I had a very good supervisor, [McDonald? McDonnell?]. I gave you all some papers?

Faulkner: Yes

Bell: [45:46] He was reared . . . and he liked it maybe because he was reared very much like I was reared. He told me, he said, "Oh, you remind me so much when I was a little boy." He always tried to find a place for me because he . . . Me and a man from Ghana taught together and he thought that with us had lived in . . . See I've lived most of my life . . . I'm from Baton Rouge but I lived most of my life in the city and abroad. So I'm not . . . in all true essence I'm not . . . all of Baton Rougers know me, know that. I'm not no Baton Rouge material, I mean, you know, in the mental plane. Because I lived abroad for a long time, over a third of my life,

twenty-some years, from a young man. Then I was associated with so many other painters and things like that, doing things. But I was told . . . Mr. [McDonald?] used to tell me, he'd say, "Anything . . ." He was nice, he came from the MacDowell Colony. You never heard of the MacDowell Colony?

Faulkner: No.

Bell: They were people like the Kennedy family, like Mrs. Kennedy. If it was anything about art . . . He used to . . . if he'd go and [?] . . . his mother was like that. If he say, "I want to start at school and then I'm going to. . ." and he would write up something and I would get [. . . ?] come and did paintings and paint [?]. His mother would just tell him, "Well, okay. Go ahead and do it." You understand? "Go ahead and do it." See, they had money and things so he would start things like that in painting and things like that. He came . . . He was a good painter, Dr. [McDonald?]. He used to . . . He used to thought [laughing] that I wasn't comfortable with me being away which I . . . and had kind of riskily come back home, that I wasn't comfortable. He probably thought maybe still that I would be more comfortable abroad. But through traveling, you get tired sometime. You've got yourself [laughs] . . . and so he . . . he once thought I wanted to go some other place and live other than Baton Rouge.

[48:40] But he was a beautiful man and he thought maybe . . . With me being real spiritual he thought that Baton Rouge was boring to me, because Baton Rouge had its bad side when it comes to ethnic people and things. He thought maybe if I would go to Guadalajara [Mexico] or someplace I would be . . . I would be connected. I would be more comfortable because I had a friend there also who was teaching stone sculpture. He told me that if I . . . If I

wanted I could go and live there. So many things . . . But I told him, “No that’s okay.” So many. Teaching was on my mind at that time, so that was a thing that I had been selected, so that was the thing that I wanted to do. I wanted to teach.

Faulkner: Tell me about your teaching.

Bell: Oh, it was a lovely experience and I produced some nice students. But like I say, I was the first . . . Someone might tell you, I was the first person who the whole idea of teaching . . . artists teaching school, that’s what my teacher . . . “If you want to do that . . .” He told me, said, “If you want to do that . . .” At that time, I was doing a lot of art. He said, “You go ahead and do that. You be credited to that.”

[50:16] I received a grant, the first teacher in . . . visiting teacher, NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] teacher, in all the schools. I’d go with that and I felt very good about that because I had nice students, I instilled a lot of things. Everything in art that I . . . I always like to proceed with things, if I have an idea, follow through. I was fortunate enough to come out with honors. But, a whole lot of people, they just don’t know about things like that. It would never be mentioned. But all things like that is recorded in archives, in the National Endowment for the Arts, Rockefeller [Foundation], because those are my sponsors. I feel good about that. I wish more of that was going on now, this day and time as it was then. So lady . . . had a . . . This about the extent of it.

Faulkner: Well, we wanted to ask you . . . We wanted to ask you about art being used to teach spiritual values.

Bell: Yes.

Faulkner: You talk about . . . You talk about your spiritual life as an artist and I'm very interested in hearing about that.

Bell: The spiritual life?

Faulkner: Yes.

Bell: Of being an artist?

Faulkner: Yes.

Bell: [52:04] Well, that was something . . . Like I say, it was something that was instilled in me. It's nothing I made up or anything.

Faulkner: No.

Bell: It's something that was instilled me. I came up like that . . .

Faulkner: Yeah, I . . .

Bell: . . . and most of my peers. It's just like being an artist: you're connected or you're not, because if you came up in a certain route, you can't be no other way than but what you are. It was a natural thing and it was . . . I didn't have no way out. Because I had . . . Most of my peers and my friends were like that . . . And even up until today, all of my friends are like that. My very close friends, people that . . . People like Mr. Alvin Batiste. [. . . ?] Even people that I've known down through the years, like people like John Coltrane, all those people like that, that when I was coming up . . . Even my identical peers, like friends that I had, we was in the same identical age bracket, we were all the same. That's the thing that's instilled. Just like the man we met Mr. Elliot, he's a man . . . we can . . . What make it so nice, you can say less words, that's what I like about being spiritual and having nice friends. You cannot have . . .

[53:58] I have a lot of clients are like that. Like I've mentioned, a lot of people that you probably just won't see, but I have them. When I go to their home and we talk, when we can say less words and things. But it always be the beauty within them, you understand? That was the thing. That had . . . I knew I wouldn't have gotten that in school, but that was another thing I found. My sculpture teachers used to always tell me, say, "If you can do this beautiful . . . It's the beauty in it that you can come up with. The beauty . . ." After I found out all my friends see the same thing, it was just like I was mentioned about working, you're producing it or you're producing. The spiritual thing is the same way, I found out they was the same thing. I said, "Well let me catch on to this, too, real good." So that's just something instilled. It's like something . . . One of my teachers called it a curse.

Faulkner: Called it what?

Bell: A curse.

Faulkner: Oh.

Bell: You're spiritual or you're not. He simplified my [?] says, "Don't you [. . . ?] is the most beautiful thing there is. Can't no one be just like you." You know what I'm saying? "You did that from . . . I can see that you did this from your heart. It's a beautiful thing, you did it in all sincerity. Everything you do, you do it like that. You're cursed. You don't have no other way out." Like fixing something and making something work, like a mechanic, something some kind of way somebody say, "Put this on. . ." Long as you do it beautiful and simple and be sincere about it and you present it and the presentation, you present it like that. That's all you can do.

[56:12] So that exempt you from being a materialist type person, doing something real quick and going to try and sell it. A child would think like that . . . that's a form of commercial . . . and the commercialism or maybe that's what my teachers . . . but commercialism arise in school a lot. I was swayed from that because they were older men. They knew me. Just like I would look at someone young now. I look at them and I can see their confidence and things. I could talk to them and I would tell them what they were about and they say, "Oh, Mr. Bell, why you say that? How you know that?" They was just like us. They let me know that it was one way. That was the only way. There is no other way from beauty and sincerity and producing. Any other way I would go, I would be wrong. If I just want to make something to sell and fix up and do something, sell it.

That's the thing I learned very much in art. And people who know me . . . And people who knows me, they know that I'm not that way. You understand? [laughs] And so . . . I had

another teacher who was from Chicago, he used to say, "Never sell your soul to the devil."

[laughs] [?] you've heard that before?

Faulkner: Yes

Bell: "Never sell your soul." No, but he would say it . . . He would say [. . . ?] like you're working on something, "Okay, don't sell your soul to the devil. Take your time." That's very important in art, to be sincere and do beauty. See, that's appreciative things that people like about art, that sincerity, because that defines their dedication. People like that. They know you ain't no fake, and so you can tell them, very easily, when I finish this I don't have no time. It's not like . . . See I work for the system, too. The system have times and things, time settings and dos and don'ts. I was never ready for that. I did a lot of civil work. I did a lot of civil service work, but I was never comfortable in that situation. That wasn't me, so that let me knew again that I had to do art.

Faulkner: Was the civil service work in art programs?

Bell: [59:38] I did all types of things. I worked at . . . No, I worked . . . NEA . . . National Endowment, civil service work, state work, National Endowment for the Arts.

Faulkner: The NEA grant?

Bell: Yeah, National Endowment, I was the recipient for the National Endowment, like of a colony. I had a colony, I just didn't go . . . I wasn't working for no one, I would just do like . . . I perform my own colony, I perform my own student. I just go to a classroom, said . . . [?] I didn't go . . . It wasn't like me going to school, teaching a whole lot of people, some people wasn't interested and things. I selected in all my school. After one see the progress in things coming, and they become acquainted they are . . . I would select them also. But for me to go in a classroom and teaching a whole bunch of people . . . the National Endowment and the Ford Foundation, they don't put nobody in no situation like that. Therefore, they wouldn't do that. But they're doing that now, so somebody could go to school with some scissors and a piece of paper and cut something out and put something down. It wasn't like that.

[1:01:13] I always taught the same way I was taught. I had artists that were sculptors, I had painters, I had little ladies who were designers I had [?], I had watercolors, and it was a colony. The whole classroom was selected. Everywhere I went, I selected. Even the Catholic schools and things, I selected people and I would work around the nuns. They knew just how to set them up, and I worked like that. Not like no school teacher, like a colony. We did murals, we would go out. I would select that, four or five people say we're going out tomorrow to [?] and we do a graph and go and do with that. As we progress, if there is any participant, want to participate, and if you sincere, I select him to join in with us. We're not like no schoolteachers, it was like a form of teaching the old way, each one teach one. I learned a lot from that.

Faulkner: Tell me about how you would select . . . how you would select somebody.

Bell: What?

Faulkner: Tell me about how you would select somebody. What would it be about them that would make you select them?

Bell: Oh, I wouldn't know. All these years, I don't have no problem with that. I know whether a person is sincere or not. Or if they have art attributes or not. If I wanted them, I would know that. See that's a part of spiritualism that helped me a lot. I would know that. My little student used to come and tell me, "Mr. Bell," say, "You know what?" Some of the most wise ones that was connected with me say, "You know what? I really enjoy doing things with you and things." You understand? "Well such and such . . . you see him? He don't understand. He may pretend, he don't have the attributes to understand well." I say, "Well, I know that."

[1:04:09] That's why teaching helped me a lot. It helped me a lot. I had a lot of parents that would come, the people that I selected. Their parents said, "I'm so glad." A matter of fact, I saw one last year. She's a designer up in New York, doing well and everything, she was one of mine. She told . . . The same thing I'm saying about my teachers, it was like when I was teaching at LSU [Louisiana State University], I selected her. I selected her so she ain't never looked back. She notable now up in New York. She live a good life. But [. . . ?] she told me, she told me about a couple of months ago said, "If it wasn't for you . . ." You teach? Yeah, I know. [laughs] You know, but see . . .

Faulkner: That's why I'm asking. That's why I'm asking you about it.

Bell: Everyone is not creative and everyone is not sincere. But a sincere person would know that. So . . . It's a way of being direct, too. You don't let nobody fool you. You tell them,

“Okay, I see you here, but you have a preference for something else and a desire for something else, and you go ahead and do what you want to do instead of having a hard feeling.” What you might would call coming down on him in front of his friends or something like that. He could have been a very . . . like a [?] type way. “So you go ahead and do what . . . You have your way and . . .” They’re going to do this and you’re going to do what you want to do . . . then eventually you’ll . . . he’ll let you know. He’ll surrender and tell you, “Mr. Bell, you’re right. I’m glad [?].” [laughs] [. . . ?] See I have a big old essays of my former teaching and I used to teach a lot of teachers a lot of things about classrooms and things like. Because I used to lecture on that a lot, things like that. But I don’t do that no more, because it’s too hard now. Like I say, I was about [?], a lot of people gets a lot of things now and I like to be clear, I like to be clear from something that starts something right along now in my life. How long is this? This is . . .

Faulkner: You know, any time you want to stop . . .

Bell: Yeah, I’m ready. Yeah.

Faulkner: Okay.

Bell: Okay.

[1:07:41]

[End Tape 3175, Side B. End Session I.]