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Interviewee: Mr. Vincent Astor

Hughes: Dr. Charles Hughes

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Notes: Transcript corrected by Mr. Astor 2017-06-07.

[0:00]

Always leaves a memento behind

Yeah [inaudible] Well that's not a bad memento if you want to leave something behind

No, no. That's not the only thing unfortunately, but that's the one that's obvious.

Right

[Noise]

Charles Hughes : Well um, and before we stop I just we'll go about you know 75 or 80 minutes if you want to keep talking we can always meet up again and do some more. But given everybody's schedules, we'll try to keep it to that amount of time today but hopefully we'll have a wonderful conversation we can always continue it later on

Vincent Astor: And I want to... well no I'll do that later. It has to do with Hunter, but I'll say that later. I did put the community center in the same boat and they asked, they thought a minute before they responded. Its... Who talks more? Who talks longer? It's no such thing as a short conversation with Hunter.

Hughes: Yeah, there you go. That's true. All right.

[1:00]

Hughes: All right. Well, welcome to Vincent Astor, uh, it is April 27, 2017 here at Rhodes College and were interviewing Mr. Astor in relation to the ongoing oral history project that Rhodes College is doing with the support and collaboration of Out Memphis, formerly MGLCC, to document the history of the community and we're so thankful and we're so thankful to have you with us today because certainly you have been a key person and not only in the story but in documenting the story, so we're really thankful that you are here. I guess we'll just start off by if you could just tell me kind of about your early life and where you come from and what your early days were like

Astor: I am born.

[2:00]

I'm a native Memphian. Y'all didn't get that did you? That's the first three words of *David Copperfield*. Anyway, [laughing] anyway, I'm a native Memphian. I was actually raised in this neighborhood. I walked to Southwestern when I went here. The family home is on the corner of North Trezevant and Parkway. Sometimes when I give directions, it's I just say it's 3 blocks east of Rhodes and people know exactly where it is. Although they still cant find it. GPS hates my address. But I'm a third generation actually of immigrants. Both my great grandparents on my father's side emigrated from Germany. Their children were ALL FULL GERMAN but they were all born, most of them were born in this country

[3:00]

after they emigrated. And I knew my Italian grandfather; my mother's maiden name was Garavelli and her father was full Italian and an immigrant and her mother was from Whiteville, TN. The kind of country people that've never left the state. And I knew both of my mother's parents. I didn't know either of my father's parents. But my grandfather's spoke with an accent and spoke in dialect Italian because they were over here before Italian was standardized and in the place, which on this particular date is a Goodwill drop off on McLean and Tutwiler right next to Dino's restaurant, was his grocery store. WeOna, By Ryt, Fairway number 2. He was one of the founders of (WeOna) and the WeOna name actually came from a contest.

[4:00]

But it was a group of small grocery owners a lot of them Italians who banded together and bought in bulk so they were able to offer produce and things at less. And they had you know, the newer self-service grocery stores. But this would be in the 20s I guess. And my grandfather had the store. He knew everybody over here (Southwestern). The Diehls (family name I guess), both generations, were his customers. And a lot of the people who were here when the college was built and then he acquired this house on the corner which is also contemporary to the college. It was built in '26. So all this neighborhood was being built up at the same time that my grandfather was among the first, maybe the second tier of residents and business people. So I grew up, sat on the grass the night

[5:00]

Halliburton bell was rung for the first time. And we could have, you could still hear it at the house if the day is quiet. We always know when it's graduation because it goes on longer. And I grew up being interested in Memphis history and my mother was a kind of a Europhile and I'm a genuine Astor. Let me tell you that in the beginning because everybody says 'are you related to John Jacob Astor. Blah blah blah,' yes. We have a common ancestor in the 17th century. And I intend to visit the towns where they all were. The famous Astors grew up in Walldorf, Germany which is in the province of Baden-Wuerttemberg, next door to Bavaria in the South. And that's where all the Waldorfs (used in Astor names) come from. That was their home town. Walldorf, Germany. And it shares a train

[6:00]

Station with Wiesloch and Wiesloch is where my great grandfather was born. So I'm going over there this summer and I'm going to visit and see what happens. I would love to find where Felix [Astor, the common ancestor] and his wives are buried. He was married twice. His first wife was Eva who is the famous John Jacob's [the fur trader, the first one] grandmother. His second wife's name was Suzanna and that's my branch of the family. So that's the connection... royalty has been based on less. And I grew

up Catholic, went to school at Blessed Sacrament in Binghamton. Pretty much a neighborhood person. And when I was in high school, I fell in love with the Malco theater. And started hanging out around there. And playing the organ there a lot. Of course it's the Orpheum now. And I worked there all the way through its first renovation.

[7:00]

And graduated from here in '75. With a double major of Theater and German. It was called Communication Arts then, but my emphasis was on theater.

Hughes: And how is it...What was it that drew you to the theater? This is something that you've continued with your whole life I mean what was it about theater that spoke to you and speaks to you?

Astor: I just grew into it very easily. I used to lip sync movie and show tunes when I was a child in drag. And although it wasn't complete [drag]. So nobody really noticed. But I just liked it. I like the theater and I was a.. my main major is German, but I had.. I tested out of English, so I didn't set a toe in the English department when I was here. And I finished all my

[8:00]

requirements early so I had two years of electives, so I thought 'well, I'll go to the theater department' and it fit. It just fit.

Hughes 2: Going back to what you've previously said, kind of about being younger and realizing that there was something different? How did you come to understand that you were gay?

Astor : Well. It's like I used to tell people over the switchboard when I was answering the help line. They said 'how do I know I'm gay?' 'Well, when you fantasize, do you think about little boys or little girls?' not meaning children, but you know...as an expression. And when I was down working at the Malco, I was always very interested in the bare chested movie stills and pictures

[9:00]

Like that and I met a person down there in the very beginning stages of the organ being redone before I was even out of high school. We came out at the same time, but not with one another. And one of these days you wonder why you're having all these thoughts and you look in the mirror you say 'honey you're funny. And it .. a lot of things made sense why I was attracted to men, why I fantasized about men and so like 'oh, okay.'

Hughes: Were there, other than you said you knew this person. Did you kind of find other folks? Were you.. Were there ways that you sort of found a community after kind of coming to recognize who you were as a person? How did you.. Did you make community with folks in those days?

[10:00]

Astor : It was through this friend of mine (who I still keep in touch with in Chicago) that we [sorted things out]. He was driving and I wasn't. Or something like that. So we ran around in his car and we talked to one another through it knowing all the pitfalls and what.. Dealing with what to say to parents and family and so forth. And it was only after[wards] I really.. I was in my last year here in '75 when I started going out because I met other gay people on campus. There was no organization, but it was the

theater department after all. And so we started going out and then I started to find the community which mostly took place in the bars in the mid 70s. Although the worst days had really.. Were really over

[11:00]

But the reason I still remember so much is because I talked to all of the people who went through the bad days and I listened to all the stories. You know old people always want to tell stories to young people. And so they told me and I kept all that and that's how it has gotten along further. Because I was not there for the very worst times. I had a little taste of it, but I was never in on a raid and taken to jail or anything like that. That was past. Well, the worst of it was.

Hughes: What kind of stories did they tell you? What.. Such a historian, you know, what were those stories that you heard from those older folks that really that have stayed with you Or resonated with you at the time?

Astor: On Cleveland Ave, near Jefferson, is a little strip mall. One of the store fronts on the end which is now I think an Asian market

[12:00]

contained a little bar called The Psych Out. And it was owned by a woman who still (idk) that bar and who is still alive and remembers everything. Remind me to give you a copy. Someone else working for the community center has made a spreadsheet of every gay bar that ever lived which is extensive and this is in Memphis, in Shelby County. Anyway, she would tell the stories and many others were too. There was always a door person that you went by whether there was a cover charge or not. There were some of these bars that went around as private clubs, so if you charged at the door to get into this club and people carried membership cards as well.. It made it different. If it was a private club, it fell into a different boat than the public owned places.

[13:00]

The Psych Out was just plywood paneling, just a big open room, and a bar. But it had a dancefloor which had not the.. [There was an] ordinance against same sex dancing. (*Gynecandrical*) dancing [two sexes dancing with one another] is what the pilgrims called it, because in their era, dancing with the two sexes.. The two sexes dancing together was frowned upon and was the proper dancing [was] of men with men and women with women. I learned that during my years of [as a] Congregationalist and it's hysterical every year, when we did a Pilgrim thanksgiving service, that would come up. Somebody was, not shunned, was chastened for that. So anyway, so we did lots of [same-sex] dancing back in there,

[14:00]

back in that era. And the doorman had a buzzer. [at] the door if the police were outside or something suspicious was going on. He would hit that button. Within 5 to 10 seconds, the dancefloor emptied, disappeared, and tables were moved onto the floor. The drill was well rehearsed and they walked in there and there were a bunch of people sitting around talking. And when the suspicion.. I don't know.. I don't remember how long it took to put it back, you know how long they waited, but I do remember, but it was less than a minute for the dance floor to disappear and that's one of the ones I remember the most from the earliest days.

Hughes 2: So you speak about all the bars.. Or the gays bars in Memphis. Is that kind of you segue to the LGBTQ community or

[15:00]

what lead you to become so involved in it?

Astor: That *was* the community in the very beginning. And there [were] a handful of bars and a couple of worshipping communities. And that.. And some private clubs. That was.. Remind me to tell you to tell you about the ball clubs. And the first march on Washington for gay and lesbian human rights was in 1979 in the autumn. And in [1979-] 1980, the Memphis Gay Coalition which was founded as a result of that March, it was a political activism group organization and I joined that because I wanted to get to know some people outside the bar. Now, if you get to the bar after it's been open for a while, people have been drinking for a while. It was all first name. That's why up to this

[16:00]

Day I always introduce myself with both names, because back then it was all first names. And you know, it was sort of like what happens at the bar stays at the bar unless you go home with someone. And that was just the way it was and that's when I joined this activist, not because I was such an activist, I became one, but that was why. I wanted to know some people in a different context. It was just like I did drag lifetimes ago, but I was Benefit Bertha, I was.. I worked benefits and special shows and stuff. I was never a regular at a bar and some of these people who were impersonators who people still remember were regulars somewhere. People saw them a couple of nights a week every week. I wasn't. I was out in drag, but I didn't perform

[17:00]

Regularly. So, that put me in yet another category as far as that's concerned. I became notorious for something else.

Hughes: When you did perform, did you have a sort of standard persona that you would adopt? Where you doing different kinds of performances, or as your.. At those benefits or special shows, what would Vincent Astor bring to the performance?

Astor: One time I was over at a friends apartment and it was sort of.. Well, a wig was being passed around the room, and I put it on and said. Oh you look like Endora! That was Agnes Moorehead's (Samantha's mother in *Bewitched*) name and her hair just like went crazy before everybody's hair went crazy. So I took that name and I used to wear a lot of evening gowns and even wedding dresses and so forth out to the bar because I wanted to be pretty. I wanted

[18:00]

people to look at least twice. Because I've never been attractive. I'm not ugly, but there's that little attractiveness that I've never had. And so I wanted them to look at least twice. So that what I did. And Michelle Marie Hays once said 'Oh, you look like Lady Astor! That's what we'll call you!' And so I was Lady Astor after that. And it was a lot of times something old fashioned and something dignified and a showtune because back in the early days of drag in Memphis there was lots and lots and lots of show tunes. And popular music too. When I started performing, it was less of that. It was starting to get into

top 40 music, and the newer pop music in the 70s and that wasn't my style at all. But I always tried to be elegant

[19:00]

I could be homely too. I did Ado Annie and I cain't say no [from *Oklahoma*], which became one of my theme songs. There was a time later on and Lady Astor had a voice way up in the top of her mouth. Now microphones and I don't get along, because no matter how low I pitch it out, it always sounds like this [high and nasal]. And one time at George's, which was the big drag bar, this was many years after the period were talking about, I had just seen *Outrageous* with Craig Russell doing his Carol Channing impersonation, which he was famous for. And I thought, well that's not difficult, I can do that. It's not difficult at all, especially when she was so, so famous as she was back then. It's not hard at all.

[20:00]

And there were a couple of others. Another thing that fell to me naturally a few.. You listened to my answering message. It comes out like this because it is not difficult to do Earnestine [a Lily Tomlin character] at all. So, that's the performer. In fact one of my class projects in the very first.. My very first course in the communication arts department, I did an impersonation of Earnestine as a class project. And I introduced it, scrunched up my face. I don't know whether or not if I got a smile out of Betty Ruffin or not. I might have. Betty Ruffin who was in the theater department when I was here. We called her the Great Stone Face, and I think it was because she was. You know you really had to work

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To get a rise out of her one way or the other. And it may have been very purposeful, but one of those times I cracked her up. I got.. It was always an accomplishment to get a rise out of the Great Stone Face.

Hughes: Kind of piggybacking a little bit off of that, what was Southwestern like in the early 70s? Even beyond the sort of community you found in the theater world and that kind of thing? What was the environment ? 9idk) A time of such significant changes in a lot of ways. What was it like to be a college student here in the early 70s?

Astor: They don't like me to say this, but the air was blue with marijuana, everywhere. But thinking back, I don't recall anything worse. Crack hadn't been invented yet, and this was like minor league getting stoned and stuff. It was very

[22:00]

(idk) this.. Let me. This form you'll understand. This was pre- Daughdrill. Daughdrill became president in, my senior year. So there was.. It was the early 70s at school, it was very much live and let live. There was a lot of everything, and I was in the theater department. The BSA [Black Student Association] was coming into prominence. The theater department had just founded the new Southwestern Players. The.. I came in here when Chapel had been discontinued, and the core things like the Honor System and the Man course [Man in the Light of History and Religion], which is the Search Course now, were very.. Were not new, but the Man course was pretty new. And the honor system was holding

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.. but a lot of the fringe things when I was here, it was the Bellingrath. How many? 7? The people that did the sit-in at Bellingrath. The men that went and [had a] sit in the women's quad and what came of that was the first dorm swap, where men were living in Voorhees-Townsend, and women lived in Bellingrath. They wouldn't do Co-ed dorms, but they did the first dorm swap when I was here. I remember that very plainly. And this is the years 1971 fall of 71 to spring of 75. A lot went on. And we still complained it wasn't liberal enough. But I of course, later it made a little bit of a reversal. But still the diversity in the campus was very great. I met.. We had

[24:00]

Indian professors, Professor [Wasfy] Iskander I believe was Indian. We had native German and Swiss professors, and Asian people, Arabic was taught and I don't know when it was first taught, but it was taught. It was a wonderful place to be, it really really was. And I got a bachelor of Arts, a liberal arts degree, which made me conversant on a wide variety of subjects, that's what it did. Not much else. But it was fun learning all of that. Its one of the reasons I took Man. Because like the Search course still does, it exposes you to a great many, this huge panorama of things and philosophies.

[25:00]

Hughes 2: Just jumping back to what you had mentioned before the .. clubs, I didn't know if you could go into more detail about that and their purpose and what not?

Astor: Those were three of the most prominent social organizations in the early days. Memphis had a Mardi Gras in the 19th century which petered out, believe it or not, because it was too rough about 1904. In 1931, during the depression, some of the same families that had been involved in Mardi Gras in the 19th century decided to do a carnival to promote cotton sales and it was in May, rather than in the winter when Mardi Gras is. Because they could put it wherever they wanted to. So they did it in May in the early [weeks] When it was still pleasant enough to be outside and it was called Cotton Carnival.

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The motto is still the party with a purpose, which was promoting Cotton. So the gay community in Memphis [participated] just like it did in New Orleans. And there were three ball clubs whose major event was a huge fundraising ball. In May, during Cotton Carnival. And there were debutantes and there was royalty and they were always themed. It wasn't quite as high as Mardi Gras with the feathers and the back pieces and stuff, but it was very elaborate. And beautiful professional costumes and different themes every year. It's.. The first one started as the Queen's Men. And the Queen's men had a king and the queen who were [named] Tequemen The [Queen's Men were] first and the second. [Was] A bunch of people got pissed off at the people running the Queen's men, so they went off

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And... [founded] the Memphis chapter of the Mystic Krewe of Apollo which is, or was, a Mardi Gras krewe that was all gay. In New Orleans. Well, a bunch of people got pissed off at all them. So they made another one called GOPS, which is Gays On Poplar Street. And it was a kind of a gentle rivalry among them, but there was lots of stuff to do [with these] because there wasn't a whole lot to do except go to the bar [otherwise]. So these were great, grand social occasions. And oddly enough, they rented the American Legion Hall down on Jefferson, which I think they're going to tear it down. It was just a great

big one story room that was all dance floor with a stage and platforms on the sides for tables left over from the big band era. So they had

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All these balls at the American Legion. And they were themed and scored and rehearsed and so [forth]. Very much like Mardi Gras balls are. And those were the ball clubs and in those days the drags ruled. If you could talk three or four drag queens into doing a benefit show for you, charge a little at the door and they give all their tips and raise \$1000 [just] like that. It was feel-good for the community. And that was an outlet for people, who might be turned down for any number of reasons, to support some kind of good cause. We had a muscular dystrophy benefit in the gay and lesbian community for a number of years in the 70s. One time, everybody was supposed to

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Do all these benefits all over town and bring the money to Liberty Land. And a building that's still there, the family living center. [and] Turn it in on television and a man named Olin Morris who I think was a photographer and had a photography studio would accept it on air, and then everybody got to go into Liberty Land [the local theme park] and party for the rest of the night. The first time such a benefit was thrown, a man named Marvin Haynes, who went by Buddy Haynes, and his drag name was Cass Michaels because he was real big and fat like Cass Elliot. He.. We did this benefit.. Raised a couple thousand dollars. He took it to the fairgrounds and they wouldn't accept it. So, he called Las Vegas

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and when he got in touch with who was doing the telethon, It was the weekend of the Labor Day telethon, They said if they won't take it, we will. The next year, there was no problem. And there is probably footage somewhere, I think it was Channel 5, of Olin Morris looking really uncomfortable taking a check from us. There was one year it was said the only entity that had raised as much as we did was the fire department, several thousand dollars. And that went on for several years, but it ran its course. And petered out.

Hughes 2: So, just going more in depth about fundraising, you talked about a muscular dystrophy organization. Were there are geared towards issues that directly affected the gay community? Like AIDS epidemic hit. I didn't know what organizations were doing during

[31:00]

that time.

Astor: There were various fundraisers for.. That's one of the reasons the first one was muscular dystrophy. Because Buddy knew some people that were affected in the gay community that were affected by MS [MD] because there were always charities. I played (Ado Annie) for the Humane Society. I played someone else for this charity and so forth. There are even pictures of me on stage during one of the telethons. A telethon benefit at Rhodes--At George's. Sorry about that. In 1983, you know its kind of that way when you're talking about big deals, I still remember exactly where I was and what I was doing. I was at a coalition meeting in about '82 when someone who was a pathologist

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In West Memphis, who were talking about gay cancer and so forth. They said now they are calling it AIDS. In 1983, we booked the Circuit Playhouse which was in the Evergreen building. And it looked very much the same as it does now. Although I don't know if we had a runway or not. I don't remember. We did a benefit for AIDS research and development called *Old Hash*. It's the idea.. It wasn't supposed to be anything new, it was supposed to be all stuff we had done before. It sold out. There are..is some video of it. And people came from all over. You know, it was a cast of thousands and lots of group [acts] we called production numbers at the time. And the mid part if the show was very long. I produced it, I directed it. I

[33:00]

Put the sound track in. One of the people at the time who had MC'd many benefits, his name was Dennis Massey was the MC. We had a couple people in that history who used to be good at (haranguing) the audience to get more money. And we all did it and the first couple of thousand dollars that we raised went toward brochures from the Centers of Disease Control that were distributed in the bars at other locations. That was the first one. And of course many, many, many more followed. The Tsaurus Club, which is a Leather-Levi organization, which is down to two members now, but just about everything they did or participated in became AIDS related because they had a number of members who either died or were living with HIV. And they had a wonderful fundraiser

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called Man of the Year where they would honor a community participant every year. And most of those Man of the Years were AIDS related fundraisers since about the. . . I'd have to look it up. You know, you write this stuff, it goes on the page and out of your head. But there are plenty of places to look up Man of the Year. And it was an annual event. But those were mostly AIDS fundraisers. Another very interesting thing: when the Mystic Krewe of Apollo was founded, that was all male. So a group of women got together to found the Mystic Krewe of Aphrodite. And they went to the balls, but all that group did was raise money and give it away. A really unique thing that was founded by them was called Blood Sisters. Because even

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It's only been recently that men who slept with men at all could give blood that would be accepted. So, these women got a fund where they would give blood and donate to this specific account so that gay men could get transfusions. And since it was from lesbians and other women, there was no taint to it. Because it was.. There was.. The possibility was rarer than rare that that blood would be tainted with HIV. And I forget how long it lasted, but it was called Blood Sisters.

Hughes: Definitely want to come back to talking about the AIDS epidemic and the kind of reaction of the community, but to go back just a little bit more, you were also involved

[36:00]

with Bill Kendall and with Miss Gay Memphis. Could you talk a little about that because that was obviously such a pivotal thing and the remains so foundational to the community. What are your memories, experiences of that?

Astor: I think I was on [at] the end of one Miss Memphis (Miss Gay Memphis) and I was not a contestant. I was stage managing at what was the 19th century club ball room, which became the Xanadu ballroom. But it was another one of those big band dance rooms. It was just a dance room, although it wasn't a dance hall. I don't think.. By the time I got here, those rooms were not used much anymore, but this had a stage. It had a huge dance.,[floor] It was a big ball room, and they had a runway. I won costume prize one year for the best costume at Miss Memphis.

[37:00]

And I ran the light board and things like that. Of course I was in drag. And I was Marie Antoinette but they all thought I looked like Martha Washington. I even borrowed an 18th century overlay from the theater department. The whole Martha Washington cut with the half sleeves and so forth and I won the prize. And I was present for a couple of more Miss Gay Memphis. One year, someone who didn't win threw her silver tray at the judges. She placed, and got a silver tray and threw it at the judges. I was not there the year that the plaque of the winners of Miss Gay Memphis, which is at Out Memphis, The person who also ran hit one of the judges over the head with the plaque.

[38:00]

In 1968, there's a house which is now part of the Serenity Centers substance abuse centers. It's on Waldran, right next to where [Hwy] 55 cuts through the middle of midtown. It's a great, gray Victorian pile. Well, it was apartments at the time. So on Halloween night, somebody gave a big party at this big ole house. And they said 'oh, let's have Miss Memphis.' So there was a big staircase of course, so they had this little pageant at the party and crowned somebody Miss Gay Memphis. And it was all fun and part of the party and three or four people including Bill Kendall and Dennis Belski and Ricky Morgan

[39:00]

(who is still around) got around the kitchen table and said 'we oughta do this skit next year.' Well Bill Kendall as the manager of the Evergreen building which at the time was the Guild Movie Theater and it had a lot of scandalous things 'cause it was [showed] foreign and art films. And this is where art films were starting to [be] getting what people would say risqué, a lot of European sensibility. So, Bill was manager. And they decided to have the pageant at the Guild. They built a runway, and it was October 31, 1969. And it was sort of like 'I'll go if you'll go', 'well, I'll go if you'll go' and the vice [squad] were standing outside. They were parked on the street. But two things saved the pageant. It was Halloween. So, you know, it was Halloween!

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Everybody dresses up on Halloween. And there was a large sprinkling of RGs through the judges and the audience. You know what an RG is? A real girl. So, they couldn't do anything. And it was just a coincidence that it was around 5 months after the Stonewall Rebellion in '69. So the pageant continued in different venues. And it was from that point, just like Stonewall, that we start the Gay Liberation, or the Human Rights Movement in Memphis. Through the 70s, after that pageant, and the pageant was always a focal point. And it was the first institution, the first yearly thing that happened in public. And there also was... that's something else.

[41:00]

Through the 70s, the cross dressing ordinance, the same sex ordinance, one by one got overturned. It was actually the pantsuit whenever that started, whenever it became acceptable for women to wear pantsuits in the workplace, right after that is when the cross dressing ordinances were no longer enforceable. Because women were cross dressing on the job. After a fashion, when you had to wear men's underwear no matter what you were wearing over it, but that fell away as well. And this was before we were really getting into transgender issues. People were dressing in drag, you know, and there were some people that lived most of the time in drag, but it was separate from being fully transgendered. And transgender

[42:00]

Wasn't a word that used hardly at all. It was back in the days of transvestite, which is a different thing all together really. Most of the women.. It was a big deal when one of the drag queens who had had gender reassignment surgery came back and did shows at George's where she had worked before and flopped around these real breasts in front of everybody. It was a big deal. And it was during this same period in the mid 70s, same time I was here, not long after I was here. A documentary was filmed, its HBO, I think, called 'What Sex Am I?' And the.. And it was about a person having gender reassignment surgery. And it took place

[43:00]

Right around the time she, as we said, had her plumbing done. Those two.. The two major transgendered women were Memphians. Renee' Williams and Veronica York. Their birth names were Randy Williams and Bland King. Both of them were prime candidates. You know, they could pass with no trouble at all even before surgery, but both of the decided to become fully transgendered. Unfortunately, they got tainted blood and died of AIDS. But they were both fine performers, beautiful women, wonderful individuals. And that's another Memphis thing, because it was two of these women from Memphis who filmed that show. That was all just after I left here.

[44:00]

Hughes 2: Kind of switching gears, If we look to your quote, we see different names of different publications. So I was wondering how you got involved with those? The *Gaze*, or the *Triangle Journal*

Astor: I wanted an article about something to be published in *Gaze* newspaper. And it was sort of like 'okay, you write it.' And that's how it started and I would, it ended up, I would cover news stories, I would.. And I learned a lot.. It was a lot of by the seat of my pants journalism. I.. When *Gaze* newspaper went out out of business, I was covering news, I was writing a history column and I wasn't the first but I was by that time

[45:00]

Many of these clubs [are now gone].. You know, I did 20 years of Miss Gay Memphis, 20 years of the Mystic Krewe of Aphrodite, I did 20 years of George's. Different things, milestone things like that. I wrote and it was one of my columns was about the Psych Out and told some of those stories [see above]. And also a special events column. I don't know why everyone thought it was a gossip column, but they did. And people would [say] sometimes, and don't put that in your column, I got to do some wonderful things for people. There was this guy named Sam Graves. Sweet, bald headed, plain old guy

who ran a couple of bars in his life time. And every time I saw him, he said 'am I in the paper?' So one time, I put him in my column just so he'd be mentioned in the paper and when I wrote his obituary

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He was in my column one last time. And I got to do nice things for people. I got to mention their little bitty tiny fundraiser, which took a lot of work. You know, to do a benefit show, it takes the same amount of diplomacy that would qualify you for the UN to get a bunch of drag queens together in one place and do one benefit. I think that's still the case, but it requires a lot of diplomacy and it will wear you out. So, I was able to..[acknowledge] The little fundraiser at the little bar with the 5 drag queens, or some kind of game night, this was before karaoke too. I could acknowledge all that and when the printed periodical gave way, because both

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Gaze and the *Triangle Journal* and *Family and Friends* were all monthly. And it became kind of difficult, because we had to do New Year's in November, which was the December issue. And all the Christmas stuff was [prepared] in October. It was a little weird, especially getting these bar owners to decide what they were going to do besides hats, horns, and champagne at midnight on New Year's Eve. I once did a whole list of these bars: hats, horns, champagne at midnight. There were like 5 of those that that's what they offered for New Year's and others were doing something special. And I enjoyed it. I took to it. I took to it and I found out that I could write and that's why I'm so delighted to be doing somethings for *Focus*, to be writing again. And one of them was an interview with Hunter Johnston with a little extra research and the next two are

[48:00]

going to be past [historic] things. In fact, it was right before *Gaze* changed managements, and all of us went out somewhere else and founded the *Triangle Journal News*. The Heart Strings issues were right before that. The biggest AIDS fundraiser Memphis had ever seen. And it changed things a lot, because the idea of Heart Strings, and that could be a whole interview, was to go... Heart Strings was a benefit founded by DIFFA, Design Industries Foundation for AIDS, research. They were from out of New York, and they were used to doing big fundraisers with big names and big donors. What they decided to do was really wonderful and altruistic. They put together a tour, and there was this notebook about this thick they booked [the] tour nationwide.

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There was a book about this thick about how to run this big fundraiser. High ticket, corporate sponsor. Because since it was a show that would be in a big public venue, and it was a revue. There was nothing that was going to bother ANYBODY. The catchphrase [was] 'Now there's something we can do. We don't feel comfortable going to a drag show at a bar, but we will support.. Because by that time, by the 90s, you know, things were really serious and lots of people had been touched one way or the other. Most corporations, there were very few that weren't touched. So, they did that. We did in 6 weeks, what was supposed to be 27, in Memphis. I'll let you read that article in *Focus* this past, but it brought the community together like never before. It raised a goodly amount of money used in Memphis

[50:00]

And used elsewhere. But that was the fundraiser of fundraisers when it came through here.

Hughes: Thinking a bit about particularly the period of the AIDS epidemic and crisis, other than the kind of fundraising work which is obviously so crucial, was there other.. You know there were other kinds, other organizations here like the Aid to End AIDS Committee which is on your quilt and other things. Was there a lot of sort of organizing around the AIDS crisis in terms of trying to promote research or advocacy or support for people who were affected by it? What was that world like during that period here in Memphis?

Astor: Strange. At that time, in the late 80s

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And early 90s, HIV was a death sentence. People would get a credit card and load it up, clean it out, because they knew they were going to die. And they didn't have to worry about it. We had to get organized because there were maybe 2 to 3 physicians in Shelby County who would even see AIDS patients. And all that had.. Linda Pifer, God love her, was one of them. And she was one of the earliest ones, but the medical community was still trying to figure it out. They didn't know what was going on. They didn't know why this virus was so virulent and why it triggered these strange conditions in people that shouldn't be prone to them. It was very.. What we were trying to do was take care of our own people.

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I guess the best program was, and it was a nationwide program, was called the Buddy Program, where a healthy person would buddy with an infected person, and it'd be someone to lean on, because you couldn't count on your family. It was begrudging at best in the early days. Couldn't count on the medical community, they were so scared and confused. You might lose your friends, because they..[were scared] We didn't know how it was transmitted, and it was a hard sell to tell people that it couldn't be transmitted except by sex or some other rare conditions. People wouldn't even.. Somebody would go home to a family reunion and everyone else would have china and they had a paper plate. That was not uncommon at all. I knew one of the earliest PWAs (Person with AIDS) that I knew

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Was a bridge player. And it was a lot.. It took a lot of doing for once it came out that he had AIDS. Finally, they allowed him to play bridge in rubber gloves. Because, you know, he's playing cards, and that is like money. Cards, playing cards, are some of the dirtiest things in the world, but he did.. They accommodated him because he was so highly thought of and he got a Grand Master title before he died. But he.. The little old ladies at the Lightman bridge club had to deal with this, because one of their best players and a really highly respected person had this. So, we coped and we had to organize among

[54:00]

ourselves, so people would get what they needed. And that's where it was, I'll say it here too, it was the last and most important thing the Queen's Men did was to organize the town meeting where ATEAC [Aid to End AIDS Committee] was founded. And it went on from there. And the president at the time was a

man named Tommy Stewart. Great big ole redneck Republican queer bar owner, owned the 24 hour gay bar. It [the bar] was everything that goes with that. We used to say 'I had a hamburger at Jwag's and lived to tell the tale'. And patio was notorious, especially because it was a 24 hour bar, everybody else closed. A lot of people went to JWag's if they weren't finished drinking or weren't finished with anything else. And here's this big old hulking redneck

[55:00]

Who's a cocksucker. He went to City Hall, and he got ATEAC places it wouldn't have gone otherwise. Because people couldn't look at him and couldn't believe he was gay, had a lover at home, ran a 24 hour gay bar. And so they paid attention just out of curiosity, and he did very, very well for that. Unfortunately his career ended because of his own prejudices, which was a shame. During that era, we also dealt with quotas in the bars, and this was a racial thing, particularly with African American people. Because it was a fact if the percentage of African American bar patrons grew to a certain percentage, the white people would quit coming. Now, we didn't have that problem here [in Memphis with others]

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We had very few Indians. Asian people was never so much of a problem, but the black quotas were very real. Tommy always had enforced it. In fact, he had been confronted on it more than once. But, it was a fact of life and he did not want to go there. He didn't want to spearhead. The Black community is completely separate. Don't ask me about it because I don't know about it. It's that separate. But, there.. And that was the weird thing and it was because of that, it ended up holding back the organization and he resigned, which was an unfortunate thing, because he did an awful lot for ATEAC.

Hughes 2: With being so involved in some many different organizations as we see on your (quilt), and I know from

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prior interviews you said you brought this to the library with you during the opening of your collection, so I didn't know if you could just go into detail about that, what inspired you to start it, and to eventually give it to the public library.

Astor: Well, I kept things for souvenirs, [to] jog my memory when I got old and senile. And things that.. Events and things that meant something to me, I keep a souvenir. It wasn't until a few years ago that I kept looking at all of this stuff. My mother was in her late 90s, and she had lived in the same house since 1930, and had yard sale after yard sale after yard sale and you couldn't tell. You know when you live in a big place, you save stuff just in case. So I went through that and I got.. I looked at you know.

[58:00]

I forget what came up about it. I think I was talking to some people in the Memphis Room about some sort of gay and lesbian related subject and they said 'we don't have anything like that'. So I wanted to get rid of it [my souvenirs]. And I spent several weeks sifting through it, sorting through it, reliving a lifetime of memories. And took 7 hampers of stuff over to the Memphis Room. And some Interns from Rhodes made sense of it. Now, I had divided it by subject, so I started it [the processing]. It wasn't like this heap of paper, like some of the collections they get. It was sort of started, but I wasn't going to do

the processing. So, they processed it and it became the kernel of what will hopefully become a larger collection of gay and

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lesbian related collections. And I have been pushing it hard as I can. The difference is it'll stay here. The community center, OutMemphis, has an archive. And the Pink Palace has a Pride collection, which very few people know about. It's a chronicle of the years of Memphis Prides from the 70s up until I think 2000 or 2003 when Memphis Pride morphed into Mid-South Pride. And the.. but that's tangible stuff. When you save stuff in Memphis, stuff goes to the Pink Palace. Two dimensional things go to the Memphis Room. The Memphis Room doesn't want a lot of stuff. That's what the Pink Palace does. But anything two dimensional because that's where they're coming from, is a library, and archive.

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That's what they want. And that's why the library got all of that [souvenirs]. And Out Memphis has some and will have more. And they're happy to have an archive over there, but I think even some of their things are going to rotate over to the library, as soon as someone decides what they want to keep and what not. And now Rhodes is involved because of the scans of all the periodicals which the college has done which made me very proud since it was my Alma Mater. And so this thing is now everywhere, because with the present climate, you never know. The Handmaid's Tale is a big deal right this minute. I read it years ago and it was astonishing how easy it was to disenfranchise all of these women and it's just as

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easy now. The person with the right code can transfer every penny in your banking account to somewhere else. And that was used in that story to disenfranchise women across the nation. And it's real spooky and the gay community has a history of our history being repressed, destroyed, rewritten. Richard Halliburton, who you all know well, is a case in point. His biography, except for the latest one, had been sanitized and the whole gay aspect of his life. He was one of the biggest flamers of the 1930s. And his lover was on the Sea Dragon with him when he died. But you don't know about a lot of that because his father, who's responsible for the big phallus over there was.. sanitized a

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lot of stuff. I've always thought that was hysterical. Don't you? The biggest phallic symbol in midtown is dedicated to the biggest flamer of the 1930s.

Hughes: What.. I remember when the collection was dedicated at the library. You gave this very kind of.. very moving remarks about the need to protect the communities history and your role in that and also the charge you gave to everyone to be a part of that . And you mentioned that night and I've heard from other folks as well. The importance of library, the Memphis Public Library has a space of community building and organizing. I was wondering if you could just talk about that. About why the library serves such an important role beyond even just collecting the knowledge and history.

Astor: Because its accessible

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And it can be found.. the People in the Memphis Room, and the people all over the library really. The people in the Memphis Room are historians. They are in the history department. But all the people at the library are trained to find what you are looking for, they are versed in what the library has to offer and nowadays, with everything interlocked so much, they can help people to hone down their searches or they'll remember titles and things like that. That's one of the reasons. And the Library has always been wide open about things like that. The Memphis Gay Coalition first met at the old Main Library on Peabody and McLean. And the reason that we met there is that because it was a public place, it was publicly accessible. Once a month, you could find these activists in the basement. And the library permitted it. There wasn't a question I don't think, because it was a meeting like every other meeting. Nothing..[questionable] we had programs, but they were very mainstream, middle of the road programs. And so it was once again different from what anything.. it wasn't anything sleazy like you might suspect there was at the bar. And so we were relying on the library way back then. In fact, they decided to collect *Gaiety* newspapers in the mid-70s before any of this happened. It was a local periodical. They collected them and they bound them. And they're still there. So anybody in the world can go in there and ask for it, and they will pull it from the shelf and put it on the table for you. It is the importance of that can't be stressed [enough]. I was even the other day, believe it or not, I'm now trained to be a docent at Calvary Episcopal Church among other places.

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And we were talking about there's a big pile of photographs, snap shots at the church that people don't really know much about the event, they don't know what to do with them, they're taking up space. I said 'well, put them together and give them to the library.' If it's the people of Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis, Shelby County, they want it. Because somebody may look for something someday and that's what they do. Shelby County Archives is the same way. They have tons and tons of junk I.. All I had to do was ask, and I got scanned images of the grand jury minutes from the trial of Alice Michell in 1892. That's what they had and they sent me the scanned images just like that. And the library will do the same thing. That's what they live for.

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Hughes: I was wondering if you could actually, You know, you've referenced and talked about a bit about the Memphis Gay Coalition, but one thing I was wondering, you know it's always interesting to talk with folks about.. I'm always interested in the kind of nuts and bolts of these sorts of organizations or moments. What did the Memphis Gay Coalition kind of do? What was the organizing? Where there meetings? Where the other types of campaigns you were involved with? Like how did that pivotal organization kind of do its thing? What was involved with that?

Astor: One of the.. It was to be public. It was to be out and findable and usable. The newspaper, *Gaze* Newspaper, was distributed free and at the time, we also distributed it at all the [adult] movie theaters which is where you could find

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A lot of gay men. And of course in mainstream venues like the library and a couple of tobacco stores that had big, big news stands. There was the Gay Speakers Bureau, where, I don't know if we had any women, I forget. But there were people who were available to go out and give talks on you know

whatever aspect interested whoever. We supported Pride events and activist events in other cities. And at the same.. And we also, before OutMemphis and the Community Center, were a place where the very young could come and find other gay people without going to the bar. And you could find gay people are there, they're not drinking, they're [not]

[1:08:00]

Preoccupied with the quality of life. That's a trouble with gay men. We have always been so preoccupied with entertaining ourselves, and this goes as back as far as you can imagine, that we are a very small percentage of us that organize stuff and are activists. You know, by a small percent by comparison. That's why you'll see a lot of women doing a lot of the organizing at the national level and other things, because they're not preoccupied with entertaining themselves. And it's a stereotype, but it's the truth. I'll tell you this, this is an Astor-ism that [please] let me get on here for immortality. Gay and lesbian.. LGBTQWXYZ Partridge in a pear tree, we cross all boundaries, everywhere. Any boundary there is, we [as a culture] cross it. But there's one thing that we all have in common: we all have to be dealt with. There a certain little extra personality or there another word and I'll get it in a minute, [temperament] we all have to be dealt with. There's certain amount of schmoozing at the... the way you treat people. Do you understand what I'm saying? Okay. All queers have it. You have to deal with them somehow. You have to either use the right pronouns, or you have to be very diplomatic, or you have to speak coming from a specific view point. You know, to get through to people.

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Hughes 2: Just kind of wrapping up. If there was one thing that you would really like audience members who view your collection to take away or take something with them. What would that be?

Astor: We did good stuff. We did good stuff. We helped our own, but not just only our own. And [then] some. For many people, it was a feel-good, but for a lot of people, it was genuine altruism. And there's lot and lots of that among the queers.

Hughes: I just have one more question, then hopefully we can get a look at your great quilt that we've been talking about repeatedly. My last question is: you know, you have spent so much time and thought and effort and passion within this community and

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Building the community and moving the community forward and dealing with challenges and immense challenges, right? What has surprised you the most? Looking back on your career thus far in the community and your time in the community. Either pleasant surprise or unpleasant surprise, what thing are you surprised about that's changed or that emerged?

Astor: That has changed in the community? Or..?

Hughes: Or your relationship.. yeah, yeah to either.. just you know anything come to mind?

Astor: It's very nice to have credentials now. Hopefully, you know, I am taken seriously. And the other day at one of the sing a long fundraisers, somebody much younger than me, who runs, is a waiter at Alchemy said 'oh, I'm so happy to meet you.' It's like I don't consider myself an icon, [like] you know, the poor people that process my collections. One day, I saw the biography. I looked like something between

Harvey Milk and Harvey Firestein. And no, no, no, not that much. I edited it down a little bit, you know. I did not do everything. I chronicled a lot, but its nice to be, wanted, to be listened to, because all old people want to talk, tell their tales to young people. And there are people that want to hear the stories, and I try to make them very interesting and relevant. And that has been a development that I've liked very much. It's interesting to have seen a whole world go away. I remember there were 13 gay bars in Memphis at one time, and Overton park was full of hustlers and rent boys as they call them in England. All that's gone.

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There are like two and a half gay bars and maybe one in the black community that are left. Because people don't socialize the same way anymore, not even at the bar. You know, you don't go to a bar.. you might go to a bar to cruise, but its less often you go to pick up somebody except in specific places in big cities and it's been interesting to see that change. And that did surprise me, actually. I thought there would always be queer bars, but there.. and Queer is not a bad word for me. I take it in the queerest folk sense. Because I'm queer. I'm strange, outside of my being gay. So, it didn't bother me. It doesn't bother me at all. And I've embraced that. My next thing to decide is to whether to embrace an eccentric

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old man that always wears Guayabera shirts and can't get his hair to lie down, and his beard always looks like a bad hair day. I don't know whether to put that off a little longer or to embrace my eccentricity. I do want people to take me seriously though. Did that answer your question?

Hughes: Absolutely. And I think unquestionably people should and will take you seriously or a variety of reasons and obviously one of them is the incredible that you've done over the decades and you continue to do. And so thank you of course for that and thank you for sitting down with us today. And I thought yeah, before we close everything down, if we could just, you might want to say a word about how this incredible tapestry came to be and what it represents?

Astor: Well, this quilt

[1:15:00]

Was created by Debi Robertson, who is the program director for WKNO television and we are dear, dear friends. She is I think my closest friend in life. And she makes t-shirt quilts. And you know, people that collect t-shirts. Because I'm a collector, or was, a collector of souvenir t-shirts. And I never wore them or wore them very little. So they were still in real good shape. So Debi offered to make me this for my 50th birthday in 2003. And it is a sort of a life quilt. The difference is .. you'll see. There is a t-shirt quilt at Molly's La Casita. But those are all logos that are very, much the same size. They're all oblong, but they've been made into a quilt. As this turned out, there was such a variety of shapes and

[1:16:00]

sizes, it looks pieced, rather than like a regular uniform t-shirt quilt which, and she's very proud of this. She's said she's never made another one like it. And let ,me.. how much time do I have?

Hughes: A few minutes. You're good.

Astor: Okay. This is much of everything over here. When I was.. Memphis hosted the Southeastern conference for lesbians and gay men in 1980 or 81. And we took over what was then the Holiday Inn Rivermont, which is now the River Mark apartments down on the river. And I went to several of these. This is the meeting in 84. This is the first

[1:17:00]

Big fundraiser on Halloween for Friends for Life, the name had just changed. This is an AIDS committee. It's a much older t-shirt than this one is. This much more *Gaze* logo. This is the 2000 march. And an event in (idk) which was the second. That band aid, that's what belonged there. Okay, you got that in? Yeah, it moves. An Event in Three Acts was Heart Strings two. And the as far as Rhodes is concerned had a very large quilt display in Mallory Gymnasium. And you know, I'm..

[1:18:00]

I like little touches. So, I have them toll Haliburton Bell when we unfolded the quilt. This is the *Triangle Journal News*, the second newspaper. Here is the embroidered millennial march on Washington. That's Stonewall 25, the Leather community, 1994. There's the Mystic Krewe of Aphrodite. I was an honorary.. became an honorary member, which I don't know if that means I'm an honorary lesbian or not, but I am an honorary member of Aphrodite. That was one of the attempts LGCJ isn't it? Lesbian and Gay Coalition for Justice. Its TEP [Tennessee Equality Project] now, it took the place of this, but this was an early attempt. And another shirt from Stonewall 25. And there is another Southeastern conference, the tan one in the corner. Old community t-shirt. There's a Southeastern conference, what's under there? Oh. That's the two beans, two les-beans who did this t-shirt that little logo was on the sleeve. And I'll always believe in fairies. And the Pipettes was a group of guys who frequented the Pipeline which was in the space where the Pumping Station is now, and they did two or three grand fundraisers, usually on the 4th of July. And that was one of their logos. They were AIDS related. And the red with the liberty, that's another one of those. And those are the ones you probably would.. are not real obvious. Hunter made these one year for me and my

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Co-chair when we were.. when we chaired the pride celebration. Let it slide down a little bit. This is Out magazine from Stonewall 50th, and this is the 1993 March, and this is a world of Passion, one of the Dabbles hair company, AIDS fundraisers. And this is Southern Country Memphis, which was a country and western dance club in the gay community. And other things just have to do with what I was doing with my life up to age 50. That's one of my old scarves there in the middle. Oh, and that photograph. If you want to zoom in on that photograph. That just folds, just let it drop.

[1:21:00]

Get back over under the light. This is me and two friends doing Bette Midler's Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy from *Divine Madness*. And this is the dress. And I was just about as homely as Patty Andrews was. Anything else?

Hughes: That's tremendous. I think a great way to close. Thank you so much and yes, I'm sure we'll have.. we could have many more conversations and hopefully we will at some point. But thank you again.

Astor: Certainly, certainly. I was happy.. I'm so proud to be here.

[1:55:05]

[End]