

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Phillip Blanchett

Date of Interview: 10/15/2002

Brief Summary of Interview: Originally from the Yukon Delta Region in Alaska, Phillip Blanchett is one of founding members of Pamyua, a band that uses song and dance to interpret native chants and songs. He talks about going to this family's fishing camp in Bethel, Alaska during the summers and how values are so different there than in rest of the country, for example the elders are the most respected but also the most humble. He talks about the group and how they are not only artists but business people and how they've learned things along the way, especially with each new production.

Phillip: ...we're getting everything prepared with the whole production of the graphics and the music itself. We're really excited to see what, you know, once we put it together and we see it what it's going to look like and hear like and then that's an exciting process, and then we're going to get it out to people, start sending it around and see what people think.

Interviewer: And of course that's when you're starting kind of doing a media list and trying to get some exposure, I guess.

Phillip: Yeah.

Interviewer: Well it looks like that you've done fairly well in the state of Alaska because of, I've seen several articles and I think there's one in *Alaska* magazine and in all the papers I've, I've read some articles. So, so I think you're probably getting close to a household name in the state of Alaska. I guess I'm sure that's, and I know that you're going outside the United States too. Is your, is your target now the lower 48? And I'm sure you've probably already been there?

Phillip: It's, it's definitely one of our targets, you know we've, it's kind of, as artists and business people I guess, we are business people. You know but as artists, is our main role, we, it's hard to keep the targets in mind because then you're just kind of narrowing your, what you can create. So we try not to do that or we actually don't do that. We're just doing, this next CD will be more music from us basically. And that was, that was what our last album was just a reflection of music that we, of songs that we either wrote; it wasn't something that we statically planned out in the way of targeting, how you would target a market or something. But this next one, you know we've learned every step, every time we'd do a new production, especially when you're involved in all the steps, you learn in all those different areas, you can better like hone your skills naturally as opposed to like totally focusing on one, one aspect because you know that's, you know that that's a goal so you want to do that. We want it to just be natural and just to reflect us.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's, that's got to be so difficult starting out because you get into the business because you love music and love the art but you probably don't love business but yet you're, I mean that's vital to survive and it's got to be nice to finally get to the point where you can hire someone who's trained and who loves (unintelligible).

Phillip: Yeah that would be, it would be a, definitely be a treat, you know to have somebody do the dirty work. But, but we made it a point from the beginning to, to, for us for our learning, learning the business and understanding how things work. Just to figure it out, to work at it cuz it makes us, I think it makes us better artists. And of course it's the balance, well you know, it helps us balance both being an artist and focusing on more of the practical things. It definitely is, it's a challenge.

Interviewer: I bet, I bet. That's interesting, I would have missed that point that learning the business makes you a better artist, but I bet you're right.

Phillip: And I'm sure the great entertainers that we all today recognize and look up to, they're; (unintelligible) the heart is such a hard thing to gauge but, you know, those experienced veteran musicians, and artists, and actors, and especially like actors. They go into it all excited but after a while they become experts in the field. And then you see actors like Denzel Washington, who's now directing, you know, his first film. So in the sense directing is like business.

Interviewer: Right.

Phillip: In a way, you know, it's very artistic but you have to have, you know be very structured. There's a lot of those skills involved so you know once you've done it enough, then you can take your art to new level.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Phillip: And say your messages in other ways.

Interviewer: Right, right. And I'm sure, you know, someone like Denzel Washington is probably very, very competitive and if he feels he's kind of master the art of acting, well what's the next step? And that's to direct the big picture and so here's a new challenge.

Phillip: And (unintelligible), he's an individual and you know that's, I think it's, in the entertainment business especially with you know the large popularity that you can get, I think there's some artists for, you know, kind of loose track of their individuality and what makes them (unintelligible) reasons why they're doing what they're doing (unintelligible), you know the image. Because the image is just totally different, can be totally different than who you are.

Interviewer: Oh I can see losing your sense of self.

Phillip: Yeah, yeah totally. So I think that we have an advantage in a sense, in the large scheme of things, considering the (unintelligible) the entertainment business within this whole Hollywood concept because we're so far attached or detached from that, from that coming up in Bethel and a small community in a native society that has different values and the chief, well which we really don't have chiefs but we have the people who have the role of as chiefs and the leaders and the elders. Those are, the elders are the people that you give the most respect and regard to and there's no question of that. But yet the elders, and what we learn from them, is how humble they are in their role and, and that's what I see lacks in like Hollywood for example with, you know those are leaders and they kind of forget that they're just people too just like anybody else and we all have a role. It's just kind of balance.

Interviewer: Yeah. I was reading, well I am reading, a book written by John Muir titled *Travels to Alaska* and he was so lucky to have been able to meet many of the tribal leaders from the, some of the tribes. And he was just so amazed at their nobility and honesty and, and I think wow. And he was comparing their stature to some of the, some

of the gold miners and lots of gold miners that were coming are just ruthless and he saw that and I just think I would to have loved to have been able to meet some of those people. And we're just missing some of that today, but anyway yeah you're right, the elders don't forget who they are, that they put their pants on...

Phillip: Yeah definitely.

Interviewer: ...one leg at a time like the rest of us. I'm sure there's people like Denzel Washington who remember that too.

Phillip: Yeah, and that's also the, I guess the message that a lot of; I don't want to say just minority groups but for like, when you basically when you have a lot of struggle and have to deal with a lot, maybe you appreciate so much more of the things that you have, and I don't know. (Unintelligible).

Interviewer: Yeah I see what you're saying. The artists struggle and they work hard and work two or three jobs trying to, trying to being able to eat while they're trying to get their career started, and hopefully they don't forget those beginnings once they are successful.

Phillip: The fundamentals.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Phillip: Cuz there's the fundamentals of life, of being happy and being true, and being (unintelligible), and loving your family. And those are the things that when you strip everything down in, like for example, in the village where it's, there's very few distractions from the fundamentals of life.

Interviewer: How long were you in Bethel?

Phillip: I was born in Bethel in '74 and I lived there until I was, I think 7 around there. But then I, we would move back and forth, we did a lot of traveling back and forth from Anchorage to Bethel and actually we moved to Seattle and back to Bethel. And then after, while I was growing up in my teenage years we could consistently continue going back to Bethel every chance we could; like any type of vacation, summer or Christmas, any kind of special family event that was going on. We would always; we were really connected with Bethel and our family there throughout our whole childhood, even though we had moved out, out of Bethel from, living there still pretty (unintelligible).

Interviewer: So you never forgot the value of the rural Alaskan way of life and you, the older you got the more you longed for it probably.

Phillip: Well the thing is, is the, when we lived away from Bethel and throughout the year that would assure that we would be back in Bethel for the summer. And that's, you know, one of the most important times to harvest and fish and prepare what you need and gather what you need for the rest of the year. So it's berry picking and fishing and hunting, that was the time that we were back home and I think that was, that definitely was a special connection that we kept not only with our family and the people but with the land.

Interviewer: I know exactly what you mean. When I was a small boy I could not wait to get out of school, and it wasn't because I hated school that much, but it was because that meant I got to go fishing five days a week with my grandfather. And, wow that was, that was just the best times. Those stick out in my mind, I can remember those days just like they were yesterday.

Phillip: And with our family, we had a pretty large fish camp, so we had a fish camp. Our family had a fish camp just outside of Bethel, but it was a place where the, all of our cousins and aunts and uncles and my grandmother and my great aunt and great uncle and all of their kids, we would all be together on one little piece of the river, right on the bank where everybody would work together as a community, as a little community but were all

related; were all completed related. And it was, it gave us a special time together to, to learn from each other and for us to learn from the, our older, you know the elders and our uncles and aunts, who are doing the work, and you know as kids we were there. And enjoying our time at fish camp with no electricity, no running water and we'd only take baths with a steam bath and all that we'd do doing the day is live off the land and fish and we, you know, we'd support that lifestyle and that is our economy at that time; our priority.

Interviewer: Well that's, that's great. And was, was that the, which river was that and was on...?

Phillip: It's right on the Kuskokwim.

Interviewer: And I wonder if that, would that be within the refuge?

Phillip: I have, it's just, its probably like approximately like ten miles down river. It's right, our fish camp where we grew up, was right before Napaskiak and Oscarville.

Interviewer: So that was within the boundaries, yeah it was within the boundary of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge then. I would say, I'm guessing that was, yeah if it's on the Kuskokwim down close to Bethel.

Phillip: Yeah it's right on the Kuskokwim, right downstream from Bethel.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you still go back and do that when you get a chance?

Phillip: We go back in the summers and with Pamyua we're able to, we're really fortunate and we're able to travel back to Bethel during the winter times and to perform. And we also travel to some of the other villages throughout the whole delta region, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area, with all the villages and we're able to connect with the people. And in that way, connect with the whole, in some instances the (unintelligible)

environment and we got, the last time we flew to Chevak we got caught in a big blizzard, which was awesome cuz living in, spending winters here in Anchorage you don't get the blizzards like you get in the Delta, and it's those little things with, with the land and the environment that, that really stick out, and really remind you that they're not little things that these are big parts of life and our existence there with the land. And that its kind of speaking to us in that sense, like those winds, that blizzard that's blowing and it's talking to us, and in the community and we're listening to it. And that's, I was really happy to get caught in that storm and to, you know, for the winds to blow so strong that, you know just going across to the next neighbors house you have to use almost every muscle in your body. It's cool.

Interviewer: I spent two years in **Kozebue** so I...

Phillip: You can relate.

Interviewer: ...yeah. The wind spoke to me a lot!

Phillip: Yeah and it does, I mean in those instances like that you can't ignore the power of the Earth and the natural, you know the natural presence it has and it's just, it reminds us to keep that connection, you know the awareness respecting the land and honoring, in that sense, honoring the, our environment. Which is the most healthy thing we can do as people, as humans, as not just as native people but as people in general, and all people we should honor, not only each other but honor our existence and our environment. Because that's, to break it down to the basic fundamental principles of life, that's all we have.

Interviewer: Yeah. One of my favorite saying from Chief Seattle he said, "Man did not weave the web of life. He is merely a strand in it, and whatever he does to the web he does to himself." And so simple but so true and just...

Phillip: Well Chief Seattle's words are just incredible.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Phillip: I wish, yeah actually I have been wanting to look up so of those, some more of his writing; speeches.

Interviewer: I think, you know that if they ever invent a time machine, I hope I'm still alive because...

Phillip: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...I'd just love to travel back in time to certain places and visit with some people back in the day. Well Phillip you've, I think you've given us some great, some great phrases, some great things to use for the PSA's. I need a couple things from you and I think we can wrap it up. I push the record button long ago, I found that it's, sometimes flows smoother just...

Phillip: I figured that.

(Casual talk)

Interviewer: What we like to do is right at the very beginning have, have you introduce yourself, 'Hi I'm Phillip Blanchett with Pamyua or whatever you'd like to say and that way people know right away who's speaking. And then I think if you just said on or, let's see on or within or on the Kuskokwim River in Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, I think they can just take those words and mix it in with what you were talking about earlier. That way we can get that connection to refuges, which PSA is all about, and then I think you pretty much hit on everything else that I was looking. You did a great job, I had to kind of pull things out of some people and you just went right along and that's, that's what it's all about. And I think you probably know what I'm talking about with your, even with your music getting the right message out should be easy, not hard. And then if you had, if you did have a particular message that you didn't get a

chance to say earlier like, which I think you kind of did, you said, you were talking about respecting the environment. But if there's anything else you want to add in on what Alaskan's can do to insure refuges will be around for generations, or something like that I'll just give you another change if there's anything else you want to say, I can open that up to you to.

Phillip: The Yukon-Kuskokwim, what's the title of the refuge?

Interviewer: Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, that's a mouthful; Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, and it's headquartered in Bethel. And I actually work with a, did worked with a guy that, Gene Peltola Jr.

Phillip: Yeah you mentioned.

Interviewer: Yeah which he worked in Bethel for (unintelligible) and the manager Jim, not Jim, Mike (Name) is married to a lady from there but he also worked at Selawik Refuge in Kotzebue for a few years and then went back down to become the manager of the refuge, but it's Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

Phillip: And you wanted me to say what about it? How did you want me to phrase it?

Interviewer: Well it really doesn't matter because you basically talked about being there but you didn't mention the name and so I thought, if you could just say the name, they can cut and paste that in.

Phillip: The Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

(Casual talk)

Interviewer: And then just an introduction. And I can even say, can you please introduce yourself by saying 'Hi, I'm Phillip Blanchett' so you can do that.

Phillip: Okay. And our fish camp, which is in the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

Interviewer: And that's great, they can cut that right out and then I think they can splice it in. I think that will take care of that part of it and then I think an introduction and I think the rest of it's already done.

(Casual talk)

Phillip: This is Phillip Blanchett, I perform with the group Pamyua. I grew up in the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge in Bethel. (Casual talk.) And I guess the one thing that I was kind of thinking of that we'd leave our, let's see, we'd leave our footprints everywhere we go. And the softer we walk, the more careful and responsible we are, will protect the land that makes our lives complete that will be there for all of our existence.

Interviewer: Awesome, awesome. (Casual talk.) Phillip I really appreciate you time and I wish you the best of luck, and also I hope you get back to Bethel as much possible.

Phillip: (Casual talk) Yeah thank you and thanks for doing what you do to, and you do good work and protect the land, that's definitely, like you noticed, a big part of our kind of our underlying, unvoiced message with our group that we don't want to, we're not preachers, you know, we're not telling people what to do but we just want to express that we do what we do so people can understand and just accept the fact that we have a culture. And we have a different culture than the normal American and even in any other culture. It's a unique culture where we do mostly still live off the land and have a lot of those values that go with that.

Interviewer: Well I think that's a worthy message and I hope the world hears that.

Phillip: We're keep on, keep on doing it.

Interviewer: Good. Well best of luck to you, Phillip.

Phillip: Thank you.