Interviewee: Ernie Brill
Interviewers: Dr. Grace Yoo, Dr. Tiffany Caesar
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Bio: Ernie Brill was born in 1945 in Brooklyn, New York. He grew up in a family that put a very high value on education. Brill earned a BA and MA in English from San Francisco State College and was earnestly involved in the 1968 historic five-month strike at San Francisco State University against racism there that won the country's first department of Black Studies, and an entire college of Ethnic Studies. He is a writer that publishes fiction and poetry widely in the US and Canada. His pioneering collection about race relations among hospital workers, *I Looked Over Jordan And Other Stories*, (South End Press, 1980), was optioned by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee for their PBS television series "With Ossie and Ruby." In his twenty-year teaching career, Brill left a legacy of antiracist and global curriculum in English and Creative Classes with new units on the Civil Rights movement, The Harlem Renaissance, Latin American literature, Middle Eastern literature and Vietnamese-American literature. He based much of his teaching on his intense learning in the history-making strike that gave American democracy one of its greatest victories and changed irrevocably the face of "higher" education.

Abstract: [00:00:05–00:10:13] Ernie Brill narrates how he arrived in San Francisco as a young writer with a history of civil disobedience from his previous enrollment at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, before dropping out in his sophomore year. [00:10:13–00:20:04] His radical Russian Jewish upbringing primed his involvement in the strike, particularly in the English department. Brill worked to transform the English department's Eurocentric curriculum to reflect more voices of color. [00:20:04–00:40:28] He tells stories of using sharp wit to prod and educate professors who criticized and condemned the strike. Ernie expressed profound gratitude towards a few English professors at SF State. Ernie also talks more about his jail experiences in Yellow Springs. [00:40:28–00:55:17] As a member of the Worker-Student Alliance Caucus in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the larger Strike Support Committee, Brill developed extraordinary lifelong friendships with many fellow strikers, including John Levin and Bridges Randall, against a backdrop of the Summer of Love. [00:55:17–01:05:16] He also discusses life after the strike and the optimism that took him back to New York City where he wrote about race and class among hospital workers and patients. Ruby Dee adapted and performed Brill's story "Crazy Hattie Enters the Ice Age" on PBS television. Brill found a new comraderie with multicultural small presses, and authors famous and unknown, including doing readings with Toni Cade Bambara and others. [01:05:16–01:20:01] Ernie recalls one of two mass arrests he was involved in, in which his operations in the sound truck led to his arrest. He was surrounded by police at the speaker's platform in his second mass arrest. In both of these stories, he describes the strike's social milieu, SDS's ideological diferences, and his personal encounters with the tact squad. [01:30:06–01:35:40] Ernie illustrates the command of leadership from BSU (Black Student Union) to get their demands met.

Transcriber's note: Edits, revisions, or additional information made at the request of the interviewee will be formatted in [brackets]. These edits are *for accuracy, clarity and/or additional context*. Appendix contains endnotes written by interviewee *after* the oral interview.

ERNIE BRILL | Transcript, September 26, 2022

(00:00:05)

Ernie Brill: ... But anyway, it wound up and I was just there in New York City, I was just lost. And my best friend's brother said, "Hey, I'm going out to San Francisco. You want to come?"

E.B: And I thought – why not?

G.Y: Right. Right.

E.B: So we got in this 1955 Ford pickup and off we went.

G.Y: Oh, my god. (laughs)

E.B: Across Canada and down to San Francisco.

G.Y: Oh, wow. Like all the way from, like,

E.B: Baldwin, Long Island.

G.Y: And you all were like, "Okay, let's go– let's go to San Francisco."

E.B: Now, we all got money back from having worked, you know? The tax returns?

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

E.B: We said we're just going to stop whenever we want, we can take our time. There's no rush. We're just going to San Francisco.

G.Y: Oh, wow. I love that. You just, like, just picked up and left.

E.B: Well, you know, I was single, [almost 20].

G.Y: Were you thinking you're gonna get a job out there?

E.B: No idea.

G.Y: Wow, wow.

E.B: Well, I thought I might meet some hot woman, which is what happened. (laughs) It was one of the many reasons I stayed there.

G.Y: (laughs) Oh, my goodness. How old were you?

E.B: I was 19.

G.Y: Okay, So, you know, you had been dealing with stuff. You were at home.

E.B: I hated being at home.

G.Y: You hated being at home. And you're 19, you're here in San Francisco. What happens for you?

E.B: I was planning on hitchhiking back to New York.

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: That was a complete joke. I had no idea what I was doing.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah.

E.B: But I was with artists, and shortly after I got there, I met this woman, Carol, a serious painter.

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: I won't say she was out of her mind– let's say eccentric.

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: And she had gone to Carnegie Mellon for art. And she could paint like you wouldn't believe.

G.Y: Where did y'all meet?

E.B: At a party.

G.Y: At a party in San Francisco. Okay.

E.B: There were a lot of people around the Art Institute. My high school best friend George had gotten a job working with a stained-glass artist.

G.Y: Oh, wow.

E.B: She was one of the primo, stained-glass artists, Judy Davis.

G.Y: Wow. Wow.

E.B: And somebody said, "You're a writer? you should go out to San Francisco State College, they have a lot of writers out there."

G.Y: Yeah. Oh, my goodness.

E.B: I went out there.

G.Y: Uh huh.

E.B: And I said—I knew a lot about art because of my friend George—I said this looks like Corbusier after he took a bad acid trip.

G.Y: (laughs)

E.B: The buildings looked like a bunch of petrified egg cartons.

G.Y: Yeah.

E.B: This is [grey] ugly- almost as ugly as Columbia.

G.Y: (laughs)

E.B: But anyway, but I fell in love with it. I took a film class then I started State as a sophomore in the Spring of 1966.

G.Y: You brought your transfer credits from Antioch.

E.B: (nods) Yeah.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, and it was totally different than Antioch?

E.B: Hm?

G.Y: Did San Francisco State feel different than Antioch?

E.B: Well, in some ways. A lot of the classes were just as dull.

G.Y: Yeah. Yeah.

E.B: I did manage to find [three classes**:** I took two classes from one professor, and four from another].

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: He was in the world literature department. Richard Wiseman, a Thomas Mann scholar and Mozart lover.

G.Y: Mm, Richard Wiseman. Okay.

E.B: Quiet guy. Gay.

G.Y: Uh huh.

E.B: Taught himself to play the harpsichord at 50. When I was a junior, he had a class called 'Literature and Phenomenology.'

G.Y: Mm.

[video cut]

E.B: The easiest book was *The Castle* by [Franz] Kafka. And he had *Finnegans Wake* [by James Joyce].[1]

G.Y: Uh huh.

E.B: *The Death of Virgil* is like Gabriel Garcia Marquez; the first sentence is like 80 pages. [And just the vibe—new learning. And we had a whole school like that within SF State. The experimental college, with its own catalog].

G.Y: Yes. Yes.

E.B: It was everything, like "The [Scientific Advantages] of Nude Bathing." It was out there![2]

(00:05:23)
G.Y: (laughs) So it was just like, wow. Like your mind was just like, there's so much is going on here.

E.B: So, you know, "To Which Way Do We Take the Revolution," that's a course? You're telling me that's a course and I'm going to write a paper on this? And it seemed very project-oriented, because I was big on that, because I was trying to do that when I was in high school.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you were at San Francisco State in 1966?

E.B: That's when I started. I finished in 1976. Got my B.A. then my M.A there.

G.Y: Oh, I love that.

E.B: You know, I tell people, I took a little while.

G.Y: I love that. And so you were there in '66. Was there activism you were starting to get involved with?

E.B: No.

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: Because in Antioch I had been in court.

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: And the year before I left, there had been an ongoing protest against a barber that wouldn't cut black peoples' hair.

G.Y: Mm.

E.B: And up the road, there was an all-Black college called Central State.

G.Y: Yeah.

E.B: So the head of the– it wasn't called the Black Student Union, it was called the Negro Students Association.

G.Y: Hm.

E.B: "Negro" was still an acceptable word.

G.Y: Right. Right.

E.B: So, this guy Larry, Larry Baker, can't forget him, he went in there and asked for a shave. [And the barber said, "Get the hell out my place."]

G.Y: Yeah.

E.B: And then the meetings started going from eight or 16 people, to 50 to 60 people.

G.Y: Wow. Wow.

E.B: Two friends of mine, kind of the campus "wild boys of the road," [got tired of all the long meetings and hours of peaceful picketing with no progress. One night, they said, "Forget this!"] What they did was they broke into the barber shop, tied some chains or ropes around two chairs [to their 600cc Harley Davidson motorcycles, revved up, yanked them] through the window, and drove around town.

G.Y: Wow. So where was this again?

E.B: A town, 3,000 people, Yellow Springs, Ohio. And [Danny], was from a miner family in West Virginia.[3]

G.Y: Mm.

E.B: His father was in the union, and you know, very tough.

G.Y: Yeah.

G.Y: But see, there's a consciousness. You were a freshman. You're 18, so.

E.B: Eddie and I had consciousness from high school.

G.Y: Yeah. Where do you think that came from?

E.B: [I don't know where he got it from, probably just from being Puerto Rican. My parents were socialistic]. I was a sort of a pink diaper baby.

G.Y: Meaning like your parents just kind of–

E.B: They'd been around the Communist party or some socialist group.

G.Y: So, they were sort of critical thinkers to begin with.

E.B: Both of them, but especially my mother.

G.Y: Wow, wow. And so, they knew, when they were seeing disparities and inequalities, they were in their world trying to call it out.

E.B: Well, sort of.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah.

E.B: As long as it didn't hurt or involve their kids.

G.Y: Oh, interesting.

E.B: But we got involved, you know.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah.

E.B: When my sister was walking home with a Black kid when we lived in the projects in Brooklyn, we had a neighborhood snoop in the project on the first floor. She'd watch everybody with her friggin binoculars. So she reported my sister walking with this black kid, and my parents sat her down. I have a story about it: it's called "Polka Dots."

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: Because at one point, my educated mother, who was working on her second master's in social work.

G.Y: Yeah– wow.

E.B: Well, she was a psychiatric social worker. The [first] one was in economics.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

E.B: She said, "Well, do you want you really want polka-dotted kids?"

G.Y: Mm. Wow.

[video cut]

E.B: And then I have a poem. I was inspired by a psychologist that wrote this piece in *Tikkun*, a Jewish magazine?

G.Y: I've heard of that. Yes. Yeah.

E.B: So this woman psychologist had this whole thing about how it was this great anxiety. I mean, for a lot of people, but especially for Jews, it's a lot. Before I was born, I was in my mother's womb when they were just finding out all the things in the Holocaust. So, my idea is, what's the effect on the fetus growing in the womb when the mother is anxious 24/7 plus?

G.Y: Yes.

E.B: That poem took me a long time. And sometimes when I read it, well this scenario, this is another one of those whatever areas, there's a lot of liberalism.

G.Y: Yeah. Yeah.

(00:10:13)
E.B: And a lot of times I find it as nauseating as I did when I was out in California. People would be smoking pot and, you know, saying, hey, man, just leave it alone, you know?

G.Y: Oh, wow.

E.B: And that's what drove me to the strike, too. I got sick of that.

G.Y: Oh, yeah, yeah.

E.B: Because I had friends who did a lot of drugs, well, smoke pot.

G.Y: Right, right, right.

E.B: And this and that. But I just had no use for it. I got high reading Virginia Woolf[’s To The Lighthouse][4],

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

E.B: Or reading the Latin American writers, there’s a big bloom in them, but they weren’t being taught at State.

G.Y: Yeah.

E.B: But I want to make this one point real clear because this is how I got people to join the strike from the English department. As you know, our English department says, you only read books by British writers and American writers for the most part. They have to be written in English. We said what about this? What about that? [And they waffled], really? And this was at a meeting. You know, the thing a lot of

people don't mention is the incredible work hundreds of us did, or scores of us did, was going into the classrooms.

And maybe some teachers give you five minutes, some people give you a whole period. But that's where I had a lot of my success because I was a student. I wasn't just a radical. And a lot of radicals did not go to class. Some of them were there to rabble rouse, like okay.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But you were going into class and you were-

E.B. I was a serious student. As serious as you make 'em, almost like,

G.Y: But organizing in the classroom because you're going to class, and–

E.B: No, I'm not– I'm going into the classroom [because we want people to support our demands join us].

G.Y: Yeah, yeah.

E.B: I hadn't started doing that yet, but I'll tell you about that the minute.

[video cut]

E.B: ...It's like, someone who loves you immensely sent you this letter in the mail. It's like, oh, my God. That's the way it was with some of these Latin American guys. A guy from Mexico, Carlos Fuentes, and a guy from Guatemala, Miguel Ángel Asturias, had won the Nobel Prize in 1967 with a trilogy about United Fruit's lethal machinations in Guatemala. It was like the storm when someone screams "cyclone" [and all hell breaks loose]. But then the second one was about a capitalist pirate. And the building of his domain, that was called the Green Pope.

G.Y: (laughs) The Green Pope? That is amazing.

E.B: And the third one is about the rebellion against him and that was called *The Eyes of the Interred.*

G.Y: Wow, wow. (laughs)

E.B: And it featured some radicals escaping through underground caves, magical realism at its finest. Then there's a scene where the mailman is late because of some strike and battles, so he doesn't want to lose his job, so he changes himself into a wolf and delivers the letters.

G.Y: Oh! Okay!

E.B: That was a howl. And um, so we brought this up. And they said, we can only do books in English; we'd love to do it, but it gets lost in translation. 'Lost in translation?' I said, you have a required class here called "Literature and Psychology". It's not an option. It's required. And in that class, guess what you have. You have, a lugubrious, existentialist death curriculum, which is based on some remote stubborn shred of Calvinism about original sin and all that– misinterpreting Hawthorne [complexities].

G.Y: (laughs)

E.B: I mean, where's the comedy? We like to [have a] few laughs, you know, there are some funny books out there.

G.Y: Who did you raise this with? The chair? The department, or–?

E.B: Everybody. Everybody I could talk to.

G.Y: And how did they respond?

E.B: They said, "Ernie, we're talking about classes here." I said, you're talking about someone jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge after they finish their four-year class here.
Anyway. And sometimes I just exaggerate and get ridiculous because they were so stodgy, like calcified.

G.Y: Stuck, kind of. They were stuck.

E.B: Yeah. Like ten-feet-in-the-ground stuck. Like, you see me tomorrow and "you'll find me a grave man," you know, Mercutio?

(00:15:01)
Anyway, I said, look. Here are some of the books in your all-English class: *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by [Leo] Tolstoy, *Notes from the Underground* by [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky, *The Metamorphosis* by [Franz] Kafka! So, two deaths, stuck in the underground and a cockroach, you know?

E.B: And I said, you're telling me that Kafka was from Tallahassee? And Tolstoy was from Wichita? And, you know, Dostoyevsky was from Sacramento, right? And it was total silence, there were 200 people in the room. Total silence. I said, and that's where the hypocrisy is. That's where the bologna is. And I said, you know why I think you don't teach Latin American writers? And this got me in trouble, kind of.

E.B: I said, first of all, there hasn't been a whole lot of secondary criticism written on the books because they've just come out. And you're not comfortable teaching something unless you have somebody's opinion to help you teach the book, so you know what to say. Because you don't have the guts to read it and have your own ideas, even though you're the one that's supposed to be teaching me how to be reading critically.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, wow.

E.B: And it was like, standing ovation. The same thing: Native Americans write in English, and you're telling me, look we don't read [Cherokee], you know, whatever.
But Scott Momaday just won the Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn*.

G.Y: Wow. Yes. What year was this? What year were you really pushing this?

E.B: Well, this was in the strike.

G.Y: Wow, wow. In the classroom?

E.B: In the classroom.

G.Y: Oh, my God, that's crazy.

E.B: In the beginning of the strike, we had these big department meetings: they would shut down school for a day, we'd have a convocation, and then we would go to the classrooms. And we'd go in teams, like me and someone from the BSU. Or man and a woman.

G.Y: Would the faculty welcome the visit? Or would you just kind of go in?

E.B: It was mixed!

G.Y: Okay, okay, you'd be like, hey I'm here to speak!

E.B: No, some teachers would be like, no! They can choose that, I mean, they'd get in trouble probably, because there was an agreement. And some teachers—it was funny—you'd go in a classroom and it feels empty because all the chairs are literally up against the wall. Because teachers were afraid. Initially, someone threw a typewriter through a window in the business building, which had more conservative students.

E.B: And for me, that was such a blast—one time, I ran into a Faulkner class, and I said, Faulkner was a racist and all that, and my political friends, like in the Progressive Labor Party, said why are you even talking about Faulkner? He's irrelevant. But here's thousands of English majors who think he's the cat's pajamas. And the thing is, Faulkner was a racist, but he was a brilliant writer. And I can reach more kids talking that way, then I can if I just call him a goddamn racist. Degenerate, you know.

G.Y: So, were you going in, like the English department, that was your role during the strike?

E.B: Well, I [spoke] in other classes, too.

G.Y: Okay. And you would go with someone else? Or would you just go?

E.B: Both.

G.Y: Okay, and it was during the strike, like fall of '68, that you were going in, 'til?

E.B: [I'd say the first two months of the strike.]

G.Y: And you're just teaching the students of what was going on?

E.B: What?

G.Y: You were kind of informing students what you were trying to do?

E.B: And the demands, we'd have the demands with us.

G.Y: Exactly.

E.B: And you know, in each class, some people've read the demands already, you know, when you went there, and the woman I was with, this woman Patsy Frisch, she was brilliant. She was trained to be a psychologist, and she worked, but she worked about 40 minutes an evening. She was a belly dancer on Broadway.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: And everybody said, you're in SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and you're a [belly] dancer? And she said, "Cut the bullshit. If I work at Metropolitan Life [as a clerk and have to dress up and wear high heels every day], I get about a hundred dollars a week. But if I dance twice for 20 minutes, I make [200] dollars. [Plus whatever the customers stuff in my bra.]"

G.Y: Oh- right, right, right. (laughs) Wow. And she was an SDSer?

E.B: (laughs) Not a full SDSer.

(00:20:04)
G.Y: What affiliation do you feel you had? Or did you have one?

E.B: I was in SDS.

G.Y: Oh, you were in SDS? Okay.

E.B: And in SDS, they were two caucuses, one that was sort of freewheeling, anarchistic and anti-communist in [some] ways. Not quite Weatherman, but just generally [politically nebulous but very antiwar and antiracist. One woman was a radical puppeteer].

G.Y: Right.

E.B: And there were [white students who loved two popular but stupid, crass books-"The White Negro" and "Student as N*****," written by shallow white authors equating student life as being equally oppressive as black people. Bigoted rubbish. Loathed those writings, both as a radical and as a writer.] [The other faction was the Worker-Student Alliance faction] where students made alliances with workers like they were doing in France and Italy.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah.

E.B: Like they published Bob Dylan and Ginsburg, but they got more and more undemocratic, centralist, [and dogmatic].[5]

G.Y: What was your role in SDS? Like, were you the vice president, or was there any kind of like?

E.B: No, there wasn't much of that.

G.Y: Okay, so everyone was like a leader, in a way.

E.B: There were no obvious leaders within the groups, you know.

G.Y: And how often did you meet? Like once a week?

E.B: There wasn't really a schedule.

G.Y: Okay, okay. (laughs)

E.B: There really wasn't. (laughs) I carried around any address book, many addresses in little books I have, it's like, "Thursday @ 4 SDS Meeting," you know.

[video cut]

E.B: Because, like, in SDS, we did not socialize with the other faction much. Each faction did its own thing.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Were you part of the general committee?

E.B: The strike committee? No.[6]

G.Y: Oh, okay.

[video cut]

E.B: I talked to people, I told stories, I hung out. I had friends, lots were writers.

G.Y: Yeah.

E.B: And to different degrees, like one of my best friends—two of my best friends. Steve Lacey was from Chicago, great pool player, and a total cynic. But a lovely guy. And he was out there every day. From six to four, he would fight with the cops.

G.Y: So, six to four, you were out in the quad,

E.B: Yes.

G.Y: You were out in the grassy area, and the police were there constantly.

E.B: By the way, I want to tell you about the other guy. Mark Lapin, beautiful guy, a writer. Steve said he wrote, but he never showed me anything. Oh- Tom, I meant Tom Lacey. But Mark and I exchanged stuff, we criticized each other's work.

[video cut]

G.Y: Speaking of red diaper babies, would you say SDS had a lot of red diaper babies?

E.B: Somewhat.

G.Y: Wow. So, there was that critical consciousness from their own families.

E.B: Yeah, somewhat.

G.Y: Wow, and I know there was that HUAC movement in San Francisco, in '63, were you there?

E.B: (shakes head)

G.Y: But you've heard about it, and you've seen the video footage.

E.B: John Levin helped smash it. He was there. He helped organize the final demonstration, just drove them out of town.

G.Y: Oh, my gosh.

E.B: People's victory.

[video cut]

G.Y: And I think, as we teach about the strike, I think the Red Scare, the red diaper babies, [it] seems like that is so crucial; this consciousness that did emerge, right?

E.B: Finally, people said enough.

G.Y: Yes, exactly.

E.B: Enough.

G.Y: Exactly, exactly.

E.B: And also, I also want to throw something else in here. For us guys, the whole war.

G.Y: Oh yeah, the Vietnam War.

E.B: Actually, before the strike, in the fall of '65 I had dropped out of school, right? So, me not really being too swift on the present, since I'm always living in the past—I get this note for my draft board, "You are hereby summoned," so I had to go back to New York City and go to my draft board.

G.Y: Wow, wow.

E.B: I had a letter from my psychiatrist that I had been seeing, I think that pretty much would've cinched it anyway, but then, because I had been arrested in Antioch– oh, I didn't finish telling you that story.

G.Y: Oh, yeah.

(00:25:06)
E.B: What happened was, the demonstrations increased, and then we were going to have a big demonstration with the students from Central State, and we figured, maybe 50, 100? 300 kids showed up.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: I thought I was standing in the back of the line, because I had a huge paper on Blake and the Romantic period with a very good teacher. It was due the next day, and I'd done a lot of work on it, I just said what if something happens. I had a hunch.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

E.B: I tried to beat the end of the line, but then it turned out I was in the front of the line. Before I could turn back, the sheriff was standing there, saying, "In the name of the people in the state of Ohio." Meanwhile this one woman who was in the Communist Party, a hot shit, radical organizer, shouts, "Look! It's Smokey the Bear!" (laughs) Big hat, you know. Then, she jumps under the police car, and they couldn't get her out for half an hour, while they shot water cannons, took out the fire hoses on us.

G.Y: Oh, my gosh.

E.B: Smoke, you know, fire and smoke bombs–

G.Y: Yeah, yeah, this is '65.

E.B: But I didn't even get any of that because I was one of the first people they grabbed.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: And with me, was this guy who was a real *gung-ho* radical. His name is Steve Miller, I just talked to him a month ago, it was a period of 50 years.

G.Y: Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness. So, were you all arrested then?

E.B: A hundred people were arrested. And they put us guys in this jail in Xenia, smaller town than Yellow Springs, like 800 people in Xenia, Ohio. And the jail is supposed to hold 10 people, so we had 50 guys crammed into this jail.

G.Y: Amazing.

E.B: So, I have a whole, I just found six months ago, I sort of forgot about it, so don't forget this later, 30 pages of a 60-page novella, and most of it takes place in the jail.

G.Y: Wow, wow.

E.B: It's called *The Fever and the Fret*. It's from a poem by Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale."

G.Y: So, this is kind of your first action where you had gotten arrested.

E.B: Yeah, my first arrest.

G.Y: And was it overnight?

E.B: Two nights.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: And the pressure from the college and this and that, we were all released on our own recognizances.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: And, let me tell you this one incident. We were arrested Saturday. Sunday morning, and the thing is you couldn't see because the windows were really high up, we hear this singing at 8 o'clock in the morning, and somebody says, "Get Ernie and Clifford. They're skinny. Lift them up." So, they lift me up, and a Black kid named Cliff, we're both looking at each other, standing up, you know. And these churches came, and a synagogue.

G.Y: Oh, my goodness.

E.B: And they sang to us. And they were singing about trees. And I was crying by the time they got to the part about– well, it's a song I particularly like, I was big on trees, the song became really popular [the song's title is "We Shall Not Be Moved"], you know, (sings) "Like a tree that's standing by the water."

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: But you know, Brooklyn is the land of the trees.

G.Y: Yeah.

E.B: I mean, my grandparents had these huge elm trees, and one of my earliest memories in my entire life, maybe two or three, is the streetlight or the moonlight of the leaves in the trees, made them look like huge, beautiful, [green-gold] grapes.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah. So, you remember the singing, the songs when you were in jail,

E.B: Well yeah, we had a great song—I was trying to get them to use it in the strike, it was, (sings) "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round," you know that song?

G.Y: No, but I'm gonna look that up.

E.B: (sings) "Turn me 'round, turn me 'round. Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round. Keep on a-walkin,' keep on a- talkin', Talkin' about the Freedom Land." And then you take people, you know, (sings) "Ain't gonna let *Sheriff Bradley* turn me 'round," or "I ain't gonna let *Hayakawa* turn me 'round." And the thing is, you can do so many harmonies, and throw in stuff, and that's what this church was doing, they had some singers, and it was like, they were singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me 'round," and as they were singing that, someone was like, "say that again!"

G.Y: (laughs)

E.B: Or "you better believe it!" or "we be serious here!" And it was amazing.

(00:30:23)
G.Y: That is amazing.

E.B: I got down, I was shaking. I got down from there.

[video cut]

E.B: And that's another phenomenon I don't think that's been written about much is the amount of people who dropped out of college during the '60s. A lot of whom never went back.

G.Y: And never went back. A lot of them that got involved in civil disobedience, and the Vietnam War, right?

E.B: That too.

G.Y: Yeah. Yeah. Why do you think a lot of people– what is your take of why people dropped out?

E.B: It was just meaningless. Yeah, but in English I've seen so many stories. So, what do you do? Are you going to go get your B.A. and your M.A. then become an English teacher and continue this nonsense?

E.B: When I was in graduate school, I took a seminar on Joseph Conrad, because I found him kind of interesting. The more I read of him, I said, the Third World is background for white guilt and white agony. I wrote [a paper on "The Heart of Darkness"] and talked about it in class. And the teacher said,

[“We don’t need your shallow Marxist analysis. Can you not realize the incredible Jungian understanding Conrad possessed?”] I said, why, did he sleep with Carl Jung? And the guy just flipped, which is what I wanted him to do.

E.B: He said, "Get out of my classroom.” I said, I'm not getting out of your classroom, what are you talking about?” And all the kids in the classroom were stunned. And he says, “You ought to get out of this room and remove yourself.”

G.Y: Wow, wow.

E.B: I said, if I remove myself where would I put all the bones?

G.Y: Oh, you were so quick with your words.

E.B; It was ridiculous. It wasn't fair. And he was astonished, “Do you understand what I'm saying?” I said, “Perfectly. I'm taking class with you; I'm paying my tuition. And that pays part of your salary.”

G.Y: Right. Right.

E.B: What if all the people who didn't agree with you left your class, would you get a salary? And he says, “I'm going to call security.”

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: I said, go ahead call ‘em. I'll call for you. And I cupped my hands and I went, “Security! Help!” By that time the class was laughing. He said, “Class dismissed.” He gave me a D for the class. I had to go before the Student Senate and argue that he had a personal–

G.Y: Grievance.

E.B: –grudge against me. And I won.

G.Y: Oh, wow. Was this during the strike or after the strike?

E.B: Um, this was after the strike.

G.Y: Okay. Wow.

E.B: But see. Well, I had learned from the strike for myself, and I've been moving towards this. Because I was ready to drop out before the strike.

G.Y: Wow. Wow, wow.

[video cut]

E.B: Asian American and Black American poets are leading the country in a poetry revolution and 99% of the country doesn't even know about it, you know how frustrating that is? Enough of this Elizabeth Bishop [and Robert Lowell]. I mean, Jesus Christ, you know. "Tough Shit Eliot." I mean, you still talking about T.S. Eliot?

G.Y: Right?

E.B: Lame. Can't you push that coffin down a little deeper, dude? I mean, it's sickening.

G.Y: It is. Thank you for bringing that voice, by the way, Ernie, because I was up-and-coming, and I had to read like T.S. Eliot and all that. I was just annoyed; you know what I mean? And because there were other things–

E.B: This is not the way the world ends. Maybe *you* end with a bang and a whimper, but I'm going out in style, man.

G.Y: Exactly.

E.B: None of your stupid ass.

G.Y: So, I appreciate that voice that you had during the strike of, like, pushing the English department.

E.B: They were so out of it. They were so out-of-touch except for people like Eric. And a few others,

G.Y: Oh yeah. What was Eric like? Eric Solomon?

E.B: Oh, Eric was a radical. He had a class, "Literature of the Great Depression."

[video cut]

G.Y: So, when the strike was going down, where was Eric in the midst of it?

E.B: He was one of the leaders. He was one of the big leaders who got those teachers in line. The AFT was a minority.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah.

E.B: And, you know, I was a little pissed at the teachers because they got what they wanted, and then they sort of disappeared.

G.Y: Right, right.

(00:35:07)
E.B: I was pretty pissed off about that. And he knew it. He said Ernie, it takes a lot more than what you're thinking about. I should also add in defense of the teachers—the veteran teachers. During the McCarthy period, there were teachers fired from State who refused to sign a loyalty oath.

E.B: And I had a class after the strike with one of them—Eastman Monroe.

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: Pretty good. But he was like, he was so burned out. But the other guy, I have a book downstairs. I was sort of friends with him. Massive guy named John Beecher.

G.Y: Uh huh.

E.B: Who is the great-nephew of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

G.Y: Oh. Whoa.

E.B: Whose dad had a steel plant outside of Birmingham, Bessemer. And he wrote a book when he was 20, because he worked in the plant of his dad called *Report to the Stockholders*, and he was a Civil Rights activist his whole life.

G.Y: Wow. Wow.

E.B: And he'd been fired. And then [Eastman] Monroe [who headed the Southern California Liberties Union] filed a suit. It took him 20 years, but they got their jobs back.

G.Y: Wow. Wow.

E.B: Beecher came back to State and said, "This is the place that fired me. I'm not coming back here."

G.Y: Oh, my God. State had fired him.

E.B: Oh, yeah, both of them. They lost their jobs. Oh, my gosh. During the McCarthy period, because they wouldn't sign anything.

G.Y: Wow. And San Francisco State didn't back them up.

E.B: No, everybody went chickenshit. They caved.

G.Y: We need to talk more about that, I think.

E.B: They caved in. But some of the Communist Party people, it didn't help that. I also knew two of the Hollywood Ten writers.

G.Y: Okay. Wow.

E.B: One I met through a magazine [*Towards Revolutionary Art*. I was on the staff]. I can get you that. And the other one I wrote to [Albert Maltz] because I read five of his novels that nobody ever talked about. And then he wrote me back a ten-page letter, and he said, "This will be the longest letter I've

written anybody [in the last twenty years] because I've been in retirement. But you sent me a book and I want to comment on it." And then he tore my book apart!

G.Y: So do you feel like your role during the strike was really kind of pushing the English department, and faculty to just have...

E.B: I know I was getting revenge for the two miserable years I'd sat in all those goddamn classrooms listening to gibberish. A teacher was saying, "So, what is it about Dostoyevsky that makes him so universal, so readable?" I raise my hand. I say, well, I think he uses the color yellow better than any writer who's ever lived, for one thing. I don't know, maybe he peed on his wallpaper a lot. The class liked it, but the teacher didn't. And I said, but really, to be serious, he has the best group of secondary characters who were total gossip *yentas*.

And if people love anything, it's gossip. Stephen Vincent Benét has a story about the hunger artist, you know, and basic things. Water, air and something else. But there's a fifth quality people have to have, and that's gossip. And he looked at me and he says, "I am amazed how you can trivialize one of the greatest writers in the world."

G.Y: Oh, the teacher did.

E.B: I said, It's easy, Dr. Josephson. I open my mouth, and I use my vocal cords. One girl at the end said, hey, Ernie, she said—we didn't know each other that well—she says, "You know, this is the second class I've had with you. I think next semester; I'm going to check your schedule to make sure I have another class with you."

G.Y: Well, I guess you're quite a character too, right, in your activism the way you present it. I mean, there's incredible courage, for one, right?

E.B: It wasn't courage. I was so fed up. And then, I went home, and I realized that I'm going to have to keep doing this and be true to myself if I'm going to survive and get my B.A., which I probably should do. I've come this far, let me finish it off and get the hell out of here. And then in grad school, it got a little better. Because then I just said, I'm just going to take courses with the teachers I like. I mean, I might have to take *some* when a jerk is teaching, which turned out to be true, like Gregory, for example. But mostly I didn't have to take these, you know, (snores).

(00:40:28)
G.Y: But Eric Solomon was dynamic.

E.B: Oh. And he would do stuff to get you riled up. Because after the strike, he taught a course, "Literature and Revolution."

G.Y: Oh, he did, okay.

E.B: And he had some good books. But it's interesting. He had chosen books about betrayal; American revolutions are always betrayed. He had a book by Conrad and some other stuff. And he said, "This class is for everybody, and I want people to know that upfront. If you're the Vice President of the San Francisco

John Birch Society," and then he sort of looked my way, and turned away, and he said, "or if you're a pillar of PL..."

G.Y: So funny.

E.B: I said, Eric, don't call me a pillar of PL. "Pillar" [is associated with] like Greek classical.

G.Y: Was he on your thesis committee when you went on to graduate school?

E.B: Yeah, he was my main advisor.

G.Y: Oh, who was your other member?

E.B: His name is Michael Krasny.

G.Y: Oh, yeah! He just recently retired.

E.B: I was very close with Mike.

G.Y: Oh, wow.

E.B: Because I was in one of the first classes he taught called, "Literature in Black and White."

G.Y: Oh, wow. Was Michael a part of the strike too?

E.B: No, he came here afterwards.

[video cut]

G.Y: So SDS couldn't dance– (laughs) What kind of kids were a part of SDS then?

E.B: Like anybody else, I mean, the San Francisco dance, even at the Avalon Ballroom, nobody, you know, people just moved. Not usually dancers there. My first lover, Carol and I, we *danced*.

G.Y: Yeah. Was she part of SDS?

E.B: No, no, no, no. This is earlier. We were done by the end of '65.

G.Y: Were you part of "Summer of Love" in San Francisco?

E.B: (scoffs) What's "Summer of Love?"

G.Y: Wasn't there a summer of love in sixty–?

E.B: Yes, supposedly, that's what it was called.

G.Y: Yeah. Were you there?

E.B: Of course, I was there.

G.Y: What was that like?

E.B: Overrated.

G.Y: Oh. (laughs)

E.B: (sings) “If you come to San Francisco...”

G.Y: Right. So, you were there– you were actually there at the park.

E.B: (sings) ...be sure to wear flowers in your hair. And if you [co-o-ome to San Fran], you should have an extra pair of underwear.”

G.Y: (laughs) That is...

E.B: It’s a joke. Fuckin’ joke. That was another one of these things, building it all up, and people did come, but my friend Dan Georgakas, who had just passed away, a very radical writer from Detroit. Did a great book about the League of Revolutionary Auto Workers. The UAW. You know about that?

G.Y: I had heard about the UAW. Yes. And that black workers were–

E.B: He wrote an incredible poem about that “Summer of Love.”

G.Y: Wow. Okay.

E.B: “You expected wonders of love and flowers, and you got fleas and hepatitis.”

G.Y: That's good.

E.B: “You've been sipping peacock tea while Tibetan peasants perished in the snow.”

G.Y: Oh. Wow. Deep.

E.B: Dan was friggin’ deep. He was my best friend for years. And I lost touch with him. And we did a lot of stuff in New York. And, um, he wrote the greatest poem, it's only about six lines long, about the Russian Revolution. It's something like: “They who had nothing crossed the bridges / of Petrograd to make December. / The moon was so startled, all global tides shifted. / Nothing can ever be the same.”

G.Y: Wow. Oh, my gosh.

E.B: Sometimes brevity is the soul of wit. You know, in any freaking 600-page novel. The people who were working didn't have kids for God's sake. Blah, blah, blah. The 19th century blah blah. I could cut every one of those damn books by 50%.

G.Y: There you go. That's great.

E.B: You could!

[video cut]

G.Y: Ernie, I want to kind of just focus us on what is the lasting impact of the strike on you?

(00:45:03)
E.B: It changed me completely. Well, I mean, I'm still that way but like, I'm still committed to it. I talk about it, I'm writing a novel about it. And in terms of this multicultural education, we were doing that way, way back when. Before that was even a term. Before "diversity" was even a term. And I just feel multiculturalism and diversity are a way of getting away from the phrase "anti-racism."

[video cut]

E.B: Because I found out a couple of things that I have somewhere in there. I have a thing I wrote about, along with the "reassessing the union."

G.Y: Hm.

E.B: Where are my glasses? Did I leave them on the table?

G.Y: Here, I got your glasses.

E.B: It showed that Black Third World students and white students could work together. As long as the white students followed the leadership of the Third World students, and didn't try to take over or have their own demands, because some white students did want to have their own demands.

G.Y: Yeah, yeah.

E.B: And luckily, Roger and Benny said, no, no. This is what the thing is, you want to do the 'save the Vietnamese,' you know, get the Marines off campus, do that later, but we're concentrating right now on this.

G.Y: Yes. Wow.

E.B: And getting George Murray rehired. And part of the reason he was fired was because—people don't know this—a few weeks before the strike happened, a bunch of students had been attacked at Fresno State, a dorm. Black students had been beaten up to the point they were hospitalized. Did you know that?

G.Y: I didn't know that.

E.B: Yeah, a lot of people don't know that. And George Murray responded to that by saying the campuses aren't safe anymore. And if you're Black, it might be a good idea to have something for self-defense.

G.Y: Mhm. Wow.

E.B: They can't be having that, and now you're talking about the Panthers. Campus is no place for guns, and all that. But you let this happen in your dorm. And I was just incensed by that, I was so incensed. And I said yeah. And at one point, a woman, it was my girlfriend at the time, I'd known her since Antioch, I met her at Antioch. She said, "Ernie, I don't know about some of these demands, like why do you need a Black administrator?" Well, they can understand the problem of the black faculty better. We'd argue about the struggle. And then she said, "But Ernie, put that all aside. Are you ready," this is when the cops had pulled guns on us, "to die for Black Studies?"

G.Y: Oh wow.

E.B: That's what Amy said to me. And I looked at her and the answer came to me right away, I said, yeah. I said I'm a literature person and a writer and if you can't have that, there's nothing for me, almost, you know in a way. It's like, I can't not do this. So, people would say to me, well did you do readings in Marxism; have you joined this strike? I said, I wasn't doing any readings in Marxism; I was reading Virginia Woolf and Richard Wright because they're better writers. And I said, this is my life. I'm not just screwing around here. I said my parents were in the good fight. And we fought the good fight. But you lost, you know, you got blacklisted, blah blah blah blah. You lost; you fought the good fight. You think that's enough?

G.Y: Yeah. Yeah. Wow.

E.B: And maybe I'm being really, really cruel here and disrespectful to the previous generation, I can admit that. But when you say we fought the good fight, it's like you're letting it go. It's something you're not taking responsibility for. Why did you lose? And I said because, I said, I can smell that we're going to win this thing. And that's what John Levin said early in the strike with one of the strike leaders and one Black PL member we had on the campus, a guy named Bridges Randall.

G.Y: Mhm.

E.B: You ever heard of him? Bridges Randall was a major leader in the strike. He was one of the most militant. He and Crutchfield were tight.

G.Y: Oh. Okay. Was he part of BSU? What was Bridges Randall's affiliation?

E.B: Bridges worked in the BSU, but he was mainly a member of the Progressive Labor Party. But they respected him because he fought. He was tough as nails. And he was from, like, Indianola, Mississippi. He worked at a movement down there in high school. But you can't get him, he's in a nursing home, dealing with diabetes in a nursing home in Mississippi.

G.Y: He's in Mississippi. Wow. Okay.

(00:50:18)

E.B: But Bridges looked at John, and John said, "This is a beginning, you know. This is going to be big." John said that. He could smell it. I me an, his nostrils would flare.

G.Y: Wow, John–

E.B: Levin.

G.Y: – Oh, Levin.

E.B: Because he,

G.Y: He knew.

E.B: He had a gift.

G.Y: Did you all know you would be part of history? I mean, did you know this?

E.B: (shakes head)

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: No, we were too busy with the details.

G.Y: Yeah, the details. Exactly. Exactly.

[video cut]

E.B: And Bridges said something like, this man, he says, "Not only are we gonna win this, they're going to win this big. It's going to happen. It's going to go to other places."

G.Y: Oh, John said this? Oh, Bridges said this.

E.B: He said we're gonna roll right over them. See, Bridges had the optimism. He had the fire. He had the willingness to do it.

G.Y: Yes, exactly.

E.B: He wasn't just a talker. And I loved him for that, and he was also a budding playwright, but he needed, he wanted to work on his writing, and we've vowed to do that. This was after the strike. So, the lasting thing was like, I was so much more aware of racism, for one thing.

G.Y: Mhm.

E.B: And it just brought together all my mixed feelings about being a college student, being in English– you know all that. And what was I going to do for a living. So, at one point, my parents would be giving me money. You know, a small amount. And at one point, I think this was shortly after the strike—it wasn't during, but after—they'd been threatening here and there, and they said, "You're supposed to go to school, you aren't supposed to be engaged in all this."

G.Y: Yeah.

E.B: Did you read that part? Did I send you that part?

G.Y: Yeah. I read part–

E.B: It was with the sound truck story, and it was the conversation with the folks? Where they call him at midnight and say, "What are you, joining the Panthers?" It was kind of a funny bit. So, when I was in graduate school, I said, look, forget about it. Don't give me any money. I can get a job like that. At the time, there were lots of jobs. Went to the bulletin board, ward clerk: University of California. I said boom. And I was there. Well, I started getting the same $600, $500 money. And I felt much better, too, you know. I just became obsessed about the curriculum thing and then when I was teaching, I brought stuff in.

G.Y: That's great.

E.B: When I was teaching, for example, to give you a quick example. The second year, I taught in Chinatown. I was teaching special-ed kids. I was taking courses because they had no training. I had no teacher training. No courses in teaching at State. But because I worked in hospitals, I got in at this really good middle school because they needed somebody to teach the health classes. Ha! That's a whole 'nother story. I have a whole book of stories about that middle school.

G.Y: No, it's amazing.

E.B: It's called, "Always and Forever, Angela". That's one of my girls. We had this cool thing, we had a "Dear Maria" column with boxes around the school. We ran a little newsletter, like "Advice for the Lovelorn," you know. That was a lot of fun. And I showed all of "Roots" to this class.

G.Y: Oh, wow.

E.B: And I had "Roots" with Black poems by Langston Hughes, and stuff they could work with. And some teacher said, "he's showing movies, what are they doing here?" I'm using film. It was a big success. In fact, the third year I was there, I was showing "Roots". Every year, they had a citywide Reading test and History test. So, the history test that year hit the Underground Railroad pretty big. And there's lots of "Roots" with the Underground Railroad and I had done a lot, you know, published by Robert Hayden and this and that, and my kids, my Special-Ed kids, got among the highest grades in History. And this was a high-powered academic school. But the Special-Ed kids were like, I mean, our classroom was the former supply room for the cafeteria. So you're in there with all these old cans.

(00:55:17)

G.Y: Yeah. So do you feel like the legacy of the strike for you is, not only the work that you did organizing within the English department and outside, but just to say, hey, we as students deserve, like, a non-Eurocentric curriculum.

E.B: Oh, yeah, this is "America," and "American" means the Filipinos, Ukrainians, people from Samoa, Chinese, Japanese. Food's great, and the literature's great. It isn't critical race– I mean, it's beautiful writing. You say, you like American literature and the top three writers: Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald. Are you kidding me? Three lushes. Get out of here. I'd say Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison are the best. No one yet writes a better novel than Beloved.

G.Y: Yeah. Did you go on to become an English teacher right after you graduated with a Master's?

E.B: Oh, no, no, no.

G.Y: You worked in the hospitals or... Okay. Oh, yeah. You were here in New York City doing this.

E.B: No, no. After the strike in graduate school, '76. No, from when I got that job as a ward clerk, I kept it. And all through graduate school, I worked full time and took part-time classes. That's why it took me so long to finish. Yeah, I got married in '71. In 72, we found out my wife was sick with epilepsy she had limited what she could do, so I was taking care of that with her. And then we split up in '76 and I was still working at Kaiser, but my job changed from just ward clerk to, I would interview people who were dying of mesothelioma from working in the shipyards. And that's when I started writing these short poems about it. And then that went into the stories. Which started in '77. '77 to '80.

G.Y: Were you still in the Bay Area then?

E.B: Yeah. And then I left in '79 when I realized I needed to go back to New York because that's where the main publishers still work.

G.Y: Okay. Okay.

E.B: I had half the stories I had projected done. I sent them to a small press, it was just starting out, Lefty Press, but they wanted to have a literature line, you know? South End Press.

G.Y: Yeah.

E.B: You know them?

G.Y: Yeah, I know South End.

E.B: So, I was one of the first fiction writers.

G.Y: Oh, nice. Nice.

E.B: And there's a whole bunch of stories about working with them. I mean, they were great leftist, sweet people, but they didn't know shit about literature. They knew nothing. But it was a good relationship, and

three years later, so I went back to New York and it was great. I met all of these people. I'd been writing to different writers and I knew some names. So someone suggested I send my book to Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, because they had a show on PBS, "With Ruby and Ossie." And that's when TV was still doing these like half-hour variety shows.

E.B: So Ruby Dee loved the book, particularly one story about a conflict between a nurse's aide and a supervisor on the annual evaluation, right? So I wrote this, and I hadn't planned on writing this story, but I worked for four years with this woman So I wrote this story called, "Crazy Hattie Enters the Ice Age." And it's in three parts. It starts, the first part is third person. I'm watching them argue, but I can't quite hear them because they're too far away. The second part is a report that the nurse writes to her superiors about the insubordinate employee, who has refused to sign a performance evaluation.

G.Y: Oh, interesting. Yes.

E.B: And the third part was a raving monologue on Hattie's part about what a bitch her supervisor is. And I knew when I was writing it, I was in the writer's zone and, you know, the basketball players, the zone? I was in the writer's zone, because I wrote it in two weeks, working 16 hours a day, literally, and just stopping to refuel.

G.Y: And you had children at the time too?

E.B: What? No. I wasn't married. That's why I could do it. Yeah, just moved back to New York. And I just heard Hattie's voice and I wrote the story, it carried me.

G.Y: Amazing.

E.B: I was like, high for two weeks.

G.Y: That's amazing.

E.B: I knew I had something really good. I finished the book. You know, a couple of stories I wrote when I finished them, I knew there was something really good, including the title story, which was about an older Black guy who was checking on a biopsy to see if he had mesothelioma.

G.Y: Oh, my God. It sounds like– I can't wait to read that book, by the way.

E.B: I'm gonna give it to you.

G.Y: Oh, I can't wait.

(01:00:20)
E.B: Anyway, Ruby loved it, she and Ossie, optioned the book for Hollywood for further development, and this and that. But anyway, it wound up- they did it on the show. She did the Crazy Hattie story. She adapted it for public television. So it was *on TV*.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: They paid me $3,000 for it, which was more than I made on all my damn 8% royalties. And the thing is, I got to also read it, because around that same time, I won a New York State Writing Award.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: Which was $4000. And part of it was you do a public reading. So I read the story to hospital workers' union meetings. And oh, my God, people were in tears. And yeah, it was great. It was great. You know, there's some things like when I look at all the rejections I've gotten, I cling to those things.

G.Y: That's awesome.

E.B: It's like part of State.

E.B: I have more stories about that particular event and what happened with that book, but it was very satisfying, and for me, it was like one step in the journey, you know? I was part of the strike. And in New York, I was involved with all these writers, and I read at the New School. They had a program called Conversations with Writers. They would have a veteran writer and a brand- new writer. So, like Toni Morrison read with Gloria Naylor, who had just published *The Women of Brewster Place*. I went to that reading. And then Alice Walker was there, and that's when I met Toni Cade Bambara, who loved my book. We became friends. And she is something else.

G.Y: Yeah. That's amazing.

E.B: So. Plus, it's just this milieu, you know? And the Conversation with Writers, afterwards, we'd go to somebody's house and have a big gumbo. So I felt I am home. I'm back home, but *home* home. I'm where I should be.

[video cut]

G.Y: I had asked you this question before, but what did solidarity look like to you during the strike?

E.B: It's the picture with Bridges. You saw that picture, right?

G.Y: The pictures of the kind of fists, yeah.

E.B: It was amazing, it was like an ocean.

G.Y: Oh, wow.

E.B: So I have this phrase, I said, you know, one successful thing we did was we made a poster of the trustees and all their connections with business. And then we put "WANTED" and we put them all over San Francisco.

G.Y: – Oh, wow. Wow.

E.B: And, you know, I have a very funny story about that, but I'll tell you about that at another time.

G.Y: Okay. Okay.

E.B: And also, I'll just read this to you, we can read this quick.

G.Y: Yeah, and we would totally wanna record you.

E.B: This is from a creative piece comparing Bartleby, the Scrivener, the lonely, lonesome guy, with the movie called "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner." It's about rebellious individuals. I'm just gonna read you the first few paragraphs and towards the end, okay?

E.B: "That night, getting out of jail, my friends pick me up, and in court, after getting convicted, Mary said, 'Come over for dinner.' So we all bought some beer and listened to records and had dinner continue the difficulty of going through from 'I' to 'we.'" You know.

"The cops, dark blue, moved slowly towards us. They did not break or charge, but slowly closed in, clubs held waist high. We held the ground, hundreds of us, and began to move back slowly, steady together, and I could see all the people on strike, many of them I knew, slowly moving back. And then the shoving started, and we moved back faster, but not before I could see the cops so close. I saw their eyes and I was surprised to see them scared shitless. And I still felt fear like emotionless landslide. I felt our people in front of me, behind me on my sides. And I was less afraid."

(01:05:16)
G.Y: Wow. It's great.

E.B: Wait, wait, wait. "And later that night at the mass meeting, we packed the church, and the next day, we marched around the campus in the thousands. And I understood that the greatest moments of life were people standing up together and fighting back and struggling, people from two on up, even struggling about staying together, or splitting up, or strengthening our friendship, and most of all, struggling against the state. And I could see there was no longer any place to hide. And more than that, the lone wolf was a dead-end street, like many writers had said outright or broadly hinted at, but which more intellectuals had played down, avoided or watered down into some vague humanitarian model from which no action and no stand was ever taken, at least no playing stand. And at times like these, romantic melancholy was a luxury. And my friend said, I'm glad I'm not on a security trip, or I'll really go nuts. He'd been busted the day before and was on the picket line early, hassling scabs because many people were trapped and stepped on. But there were more people fighting to snap that trap. I hardly ever had a fight in my life. "I understood it more when I met Amy's boss. 'You in school?' Yeah. 'Where at State?' And his eyes narrowed. 'You one of them people causing all that trouble?' I'm on strike if that's what you mean. He sipped his coffee. 'I want to tell you something, buddy. I have three rifles up in my office. You should get one for yourself. Because when the time comes, me and my buddies are coming after you and we shoot real good.' And they said we were destroying the schools and we were rebuilding them because to cure a body, you have to cut a lot of skin. And to cure a society, you might even have to partially kill it, because the whole system's rotten. There's no cure but a new one. They're not like a long-distance runner because one person can do nothing, and many collectively can as we did." This is the part: "Ripping back the veil

of education, pulling up the nerve endings of racism, exposing them and fighting [to change for the better]."

G.Y: Great, good stuff.

E.B: Well, it's a little rhetorical...

G.Y: Yeah.

September 22, 2023

G.Y: So can you talk about all the different arrests during the strike?

E.B: I was only arrested twice.

G.Y: Okay. What was the first one?

E.B: So the sound truck.

G.Y: Oh, good. Sound truck. Okay. What did you do?

E.B: I was in the sound truck. I was arrested for operating a sound truck without a permit because we tried to get a permit. He denied it. You know, for baloney reasons, and we went ahead anyway.

G.Y: What was the sound truck for?

E.B: Oh, they had shut down campus. This was like, early, early, very early in the strike. It was in November. And they said, we're closing the campus. We got to reevaluate stuff and we came back December 6th, I think. And I have this habit from living in Brooklyn where when I'm going into a new territory, I get there half an hour early and I scout around like a six-block radius, you know? It's helped me, (laughs). Anyway, so I scout around and of course, from the corner of Holloway and 19th Avenue, you go down, there's like a duplex housing project, yeah? In the parking lot, there were six paddy wagons. We're talking 6:30 in the morning, so they're planning something.

G.Y: Right.

(01:10:00)
E.B: You know, someone's gonna jump off today. So then I come onto the campus and I hear John's voice, Levin's voice saying, "We're back," you know, "and we're not backing down," you know, "on strike, shut it down. A new person has forced his way into the presidency without even waiting for the faculty hearings that will nominate an elected president, so he's bypassed all the Teachers Association laws and I'm saying he meant both the AFT Union teachers and the nonunion teachers, which is a bigger group than the AFT teachers, by the way. That's a whole 'nother story that hasn't been told too much because the non-AFT teachers are disgusting. I mean, at best, they held the campuses off-campus, which an older woman student who is practically a grandmother coming back to school, she said holding classes

off-campus is like eating grapes in Europe. Because there was the big farmworkers strike and lettuce; boycotting all that.

So I said, John, get out. I'll do that. We're going to need your leadership, you know, we need you later, implying we'll need your experience and your leadership, which I can't give them. And anybody can talk into a microphone. Yeah. I didn't I didn't think about things like, "Oh, Ernie. That was so brave and sweet of you." I just, you know, My friend is needed for something else, for us and this whole thing. I got in. I'm not mechanical, so I had a little trouble plugging in a microphone back in. But then, I said, here we are, you know, And then all of a sudden, there's all this light coming towards me. And it's like the windshield was on fire from all these cameras and glare and, there's this guy reaching in and he's practically spitting at me and his teeth brushed my wrists and he's grabbing at the microphone, he says, "Gimme that, you fucking commie! Gimme that!" And the rest of it I couldn't make out.

And Juan Rivera, who wasn't a student, he was a friend of PL, so he was in one of the trade union groups. Progressive Labor Party was a Maoist-Communist Party. They actually got enfranchised and got money from China. They had also been the first people to defy the Cuban ban and five of their members went to Cuba. So then all of a sudden, it was just bedlam, you know, because Hayakawa, he jumped up on top of the sound truck and started tearing off the speakers. So when I saw that, I plugged the microphone back and I said, Behold, your new president. And no one ever reported that! You know, I had this kind of cool comment. I was disappointed.

G.Y and Tiffany Caesar: (laughs)

E.B: You know, couple of students were laughing, they heard it. And the next thing I know, there were the police tapping into a window, "Get out." I had a window open enough to hear this famous novelist Kay Boyle say to Hayakawa, "Hayakawa Eichmann!" I mean, c'mon! But she was big drama. But, we didn't see how the rest of the strike went, I just wanted to point that out.

E.B: But she did say that and he did say, "you're fired," which made him look even more idiotic. And there were so many cameras and reporters trying to ask me questions, you know, and yelling and all this stuff. I saw this tam o'shantd the paddy wagon came right there and we went to the paddy wagon.

G.Y: When you say "paddy wagon," is it an actual wagon? It's a truck?

E.B: No, no, no. It's like a van.

G.Y: A van. Okay.

E.B: But sometimes it's padded, because if cops beat people up inside the paddy wagon, you can't hear them. And that's what I thought was happening when six tact squad guys came in. You know, these, like 6'5", 280 [lbs]. I mean, you know, And I said, why do you need all these guys in here? And the guy just said, "Shut up."

E.B: So that exposed him and more students joined. Yeah. And one of the cops said, "I can't find the key, where is the key?" And they look, you know, they searched me, they searched him, and they say, Cat, and this old, experienced guy comes in, he says "Take off his boots. Take off your boots, you spic." I said,

he’s Mexican, he's not a spic, he's a fresa. No, I didn't say that. But I said, you don't even have the right terms. That's how stupid you are. And sure enough, the key fell out of the boot. And then they slap Juan around. He says, “Oh, you think you're smart, huh? Hey, we've got a smart one, we got a smart bean picker.”

(01:15:26)

E.B: And they took us off, you know, they took us over to Merced, we got in a regular police car and these two police in between them probably were 200 years old. They were old guys. And they played the nice thing, or they were nice. They just said, “Why are you boys making trouble?” They were obviously partners for years, you know, the guy said, “Frankie, why these guys making trouble?” I said “because this is a racist school. You have nothing for hundreds, you know, scores of kids, and you have nothing for me to learn about my friends”. And the other guy said, “My parents clean toilets, so don't talk to me about going to college.” And that was kind of a jolt.

G.Y: And this is in the police car.

E.B: And, you know, we got there and then we got booked and all that. We went up to this huge room of misdemeanor people and for half the people there, we were heroes, and for half of the people there, we were dangerous criminals. And one sort-of racist guy kept calling me Malcolm X and calling Juan, you know, Bobby Seale. They said, “We're going to take care of you while you sleep.”

G.Y: In jail.

E.B: Yeah.

G.Y: Oh, wow, so you ran into someone in jail that was saying that?

E.B: Yeah.

G.Y: Oh, wow.

E.B: And I said, you can't take care of your left toe, you’re so fucked up, but just go dry out and be quiet. And he didn't know what to do with that, a lot bigger than me. I think my mouth saved me many times. And yeah.

G.Y: So that was December 8th with the sound truck.

E.B: Yeah.

G.Y: Okay. Okay.

E.B: And that day, the “tac squad”[7] ran amok. That's why they had the wagons there. You see those pictures like of Don McAllister, big, burly black guy. They beat the crap out of him. And when they were beating the crap out of him, I got this from John, my creative writing teacher, guy named George Price, is moonwalking to the cops, going, “Let my people go, let my people go.” And everybody said, “That guy’s crazy.” He always was crazy, you know, the people that have had him, but it turns out, his wife is a

Holocaust survivor. So it triggered off this whole thing. Yeah. And they clubbed him to the ground, he was 6'5". So it took him a little while.

G.Y: This creative writing professor? This is all December 8th?

E.B: Yeah.

G.Y: Okay.

E.B: Like that was never reported, what they did to him, you know, and there were teachers there from his own department and watched him and did nothing. Yeah. I mean, maybe they didn't want to get their crap beat, you know.

G.Y: How many people were arrested on December 8th?

E.B: About 30.

G.Y: Okay. But I think what everyone remembers is the police brutality that day, right? Yeah. Well, it was that day or three days later when there was a guy, he wasn't even on strike, he was coming out of the building and they thought he was somebody throwing a rock and they pounced on him and clubbed him up against the administration [building].

E.B: And we had to take him to the hospital and he lost his spleen.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: He almost bled to death. That was probably the worst fatality. Very broken ribs. But here's the thing,

G.Y: What was his name? Do you remember?

E.B: David Gordon. They also beat up our musician, you know, this guy George, the musician? He was our troubadour,

E.B: Did you see him in any of the films?

G.Y: No.

E.B: He had a big banjo and he'd make up songs, you know? After that day, he went around up and down the campus going, (*to the tune of "The Ants Go Marching"*) "The tact squad came to school today, uh huh, uh huh. The tact squad came to school today, uh huh, da da. The tact squad came to school today, and no one wants anymore to play, 'cause we'll all be dead when the tact squad came to school..."

(01:20:01)

And then we all sang that the next day. Like, 500 people sang that when the tact squad came onto campus. Plus, that was the day that the printmakers had gone to town and they had all these incredible prints. Have you seen many of those?

G.Y: Those posters that are archived at the library?

E.B: And the guy who led that was Rupert Garcia. I don't know if he's still alive. It was a name that I gave to Mr. Sanchez and Miguel. I just didn't hear anything about it again.

G.Y: Yeah. Rupert Garcia, I mean, the posters are saved.

E.B: But Rupert is like a major American artist. He's in the tradition of Siqueiros and Orozco, Mexican muralistas. And he trained a younger guy who has a whole gallery now. He's somebody I think you should contact.

G.Y: Do you remember his name?

E.B: Juan Fuentes. He was in Lisa's class, or maybe the class that came after Lisa.
And Lisa was persuaded by PL. Dig this. I don't know how much you want to use that, or maybe we shouldn't, but they said, "Look, you got a Spanish surname, right? Gutierrez? We want you to work in La Raza. 'Cause there's more students in La Raza, that we can recruit into the movement. But Filipino Student Movement, you know, there are three or four people. Don't work there, work over here." So, you know, there's an ethical question here with names. So Shakespeare says, "what's in a name?" And my answer is plenty. But Lisa did it because she was loyal. She was 18, green, fresh out of high school, but committed and dedicated.

E.B: Then, the second arrest, I was part of the mass bust, that was called the mass bust in January. And that's where they tried to, like, say, okay, we can just gonna end this kind of damn thing and really slam them hard. And they planned it really well. They just brought cops in from all over, you know, San Mateo Police, Bolinas Police, Oakland Police, you know, Santa Clara, because they didn't have enough cops to contain us. Now, why they never brought out the National Guard, it's always been curious to me, especially since Reagan was the governor and Reagan would always be talking like, one cop got knocked out, you know, one of the differences in our strike and all the other strikes across the country was we fought back.

E.B: And we had a campus of working class people who weren't about to take any, you know, they weren't going to do that thing of sitting down and not moving, the passivist resistance. I mean, some people did, I was in between that, okay? Because King was one of my idols, and like I was telling you, I told her that I feel a lot of historians and people never talk about that one of the successes of this particular strike was there were many white people who enraged about the assassination of King. And they always say, oh, all these black people rioted and all these people were hurting and sad and mad, But then they never say that the thousands of white people who were upset about that, you know?

[video cut]

G.Y: So Ernie, so you talked about December 8th, can you talk about the second mass arrests?

E.B: They surrounded us. They surprised us at the speaker's platform. And the thing is, there were teachers there, there were black community leaders there that were arrested. Carlton Goodlett, he owned the black newspaper. He was pretty good. He came out a lot of times and brought people from the black community to the campus, Willie Brown, Cecil Williams.

[video cut]

E.B: They surrounded us, And I can tell you, some of the professors. You want to know who was arrested among the professors?

G.Y: Yes.

E.B: There was a young guy from Scotland named Neil Forsyth. He was probably the youngest professor there. He never came back. They got rid of him. There was an older tenured professor who had been in the Holocaust, who had relatives in the Holocaust named Fred Thalheimer and his wife. He came out to demonstrate. They arrested him,but I think he kept his job. There was a firebrand in the economics department named Bill Stanton. And he was a big AFT guy in the union and he didn't take any crap, he was on the strike from the beginning, you know. And he lost his job. It's hard, you know, tenured professor losing their jobs. Big deal, right?

(01:25:07)
E.B: And then some others, you know, and forgetting the other- Oh, I don't know if they were charges or not, you know, but my friendship with Mike Krasny, who came after the strike, said he went to parties and people in the English department would brag how brave they were on the picket lines and all that. And I said, Mike, that is horseshit, because I was out there every day from 6:30 to 4 o' clock and if I had a dollar for every English teacher that I saw out there at once, I would starve to death. You know? I said, Eric, my advisor, Eric Solomon was out there, Yeah, but he was the only one that taught social justice literature, you know, the whole course, "Literature of the Great Depression". And I really loved Eric, I liked him a lot, you know, had real strong feelings about him.

E.B: So they surrounded us, And there's a group of 40 people, a lot of "Joe Hill SDS" people. I have to say that for them, including a guy named Doug Kit and his wife, Jan, Doug and Jan Kit, they're both like 6'5", and they were fighters. They led this bunch of people that broke through the police line and charged the library. Okay, good so far, But what are you going to do with the library? We're going to break windows. Because they were like, the "Weatherman" faction of SDS. They got all this publicity over the years. They had ten movies about these folks and they were like, just, you know, all the juvenile delinquents. They helped ruin SDS.

E.B: They were like, really, really dumb; really stupid things, you know, they thought if they ran through a high school, all the high school kids would come out with them and they never talked to a single high school kid. All right. Although there were people in the Weatherpeople, bigger organization, who were very dedicated leftists and radicals, you know, against the war in Vietnam, Women's Movement stuff, but all those 40 people were pretty much rounded up. But I didn't know a lot of them or I didn't talk to them. And then it took like two years for all those people to go to trials. So this was a whole 'nother thing that happened with the strike where groups of 6 to 8 people went on trial for like, maybe 2 to 3 weeks.

E.B: And my group was on trial. I wasn't allowed to testify, because I was in SDS, and the judges were scared of what I was going to say, or the lawyers were. But John [Levin], he defended himself in court and he called me as one of the witnesses. And I spoke about why I was on strike, and the curriculum was screwed and, you know, made some good points. Now about the jail, and one thing that was really good about PL was when anybody was going to jail, they sat down with us ahead of time and talked about what it was like. From the minute you get to jail, to the minute you take your clothes off and what they do and spray you and whatnot, with the meals were like, with the protocol was like, what you should do and shouldn't do, all of it.

G.Y: Was at the Legal Defense Committee?

E.B: No, that was PL. That's what they did for their members and friends. Legal Defense Committee did a little bit in that, but mainly they got you out on bail or your own recognizance. And that was sort of a long process, too, because you had to prove you never been in trouble, and, you know, it was a lot of writing, but they got hundreds of people, in the course of the strike, out on their OR (Own Recognizance), and nobody had to pay any money. So we saved a lot of money that way. But when some of the felonies built up, it got really expensive. Margaret, for one of the Iranian students, mortgaged her house.

G.Y: Wow.

E.B: That she'd gotten from her parents when they passed away.

G.Y: Oh, my God.

E.B: Yeah. That was her commitment. Irish woman named Margaret Leahy. And she was brought up- she's one of the few people in the strike who was actually born and raised in San Francisco. Courted Danny Glover.

T.C: They dated?

E.B: No. *That* would be a story.

G.Y: But talk about this– okay, back to what Nesbit Crutchfield had said. Can you finish that? Because that was so good.

(01:30:06)
E.B: And then he said, You're going to follow us. Yeah, we're calling the shots here. This is our strike. You want to participate it? You want to learn? You wanna learn about black people? You want to learn about brown people? You want to learn about the whole rest of the world that's out there? Outside the cocoon you grew up in? Crutchfield didn't play. And he said, "And we welcome you. We welcome you as brothers and sisters in the struggle." He is 83. He's got one eye. And every fall, he goes to Cuba and helps with the sugar harvest. So, tell me about it, I've never met a more committed person than Nesbit Crutchfield.

G.Y: I know.

E.B: Very serious, but he has a good sense of humor.

G.Y: What was his role in the BSU?

E.B: He was one of the leaders. It was like him and Bridges, and probably Terry Collins were the soul, with Benny Stewart. I mean, it was kind of sexist because there was a woman. Maryemma.

T.C: A-wadi.

E.B: A-wadi. She was the real deal.

T.C: She was the first president.

G.Y: Can you talk about your memories with her?

E.B: I have very little memory of her. As I said, I have a distinct memory of Pat Thornton.

G.Y: Oh, yeah.

E.B: And when I came to the reunion, I said, whatever happened to Pat Thornton?

G.Y: Talk about Pat Thornton a bit. Tell Tiffany about Pat.

E.B: She was a graduate student at the time in political science, and she had led a committee along with Maryemma and Nesbit, I think, and Terry. For three or four years, they've been meeting with departments on campus saying, look, they were trying to get a black studies department or class, and that was going very slowly. And I said, it might be better if you just add it to all the regular classes and black authors and theorists like, what was that guy's name? Charles Coe, the psychology guy, Black.

G.Y: Joe White?

E.B: No, the author. Very distinguished author. I'm blanking on his name. And in history, how could you not have one of the greatest historians of all time? W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote one of the greatest historical investigation books, *Black Reconstruction*. I could count on two hands the people I love read that book. Most people have only read part of it because to some people it's just dull. Wasn't dull to me. I was fascinated by it. Most teachers just don't have the guts to teach. That's my thing. Like in the field of literature, they're gutless and so I have contempt for them. And I've shown it.

G.Y: Talk about Pat Thornton again.

E.B: Okay.

G.Y (to Tiffany): He had a crush on Pat Thornton.

E.B: I did, she's like, gorgeous. 5"? No, no. 6'5", 6'4". Very sculpted face, you know? And she had fire. And she sometimes she just like this: "Look, we've been at this for four years now and you're just taking us on your little merry-go-round, holding out a ring, I can tell it isn't gold! Every time I see it, it's got a new wave or rust." So she had some images like that were really striking. She said, "I don't think you really want to do anything for us, so we may have to take other, accomplish what we want by any other means." And then one teacher who's a real, practically a Nazi, said, "Are you threatening us with bringing the Black Panthers on campus?"
And she said, "How do you I'm not a panther?" She said, "You don't know. There's not one faculty person on this campus that's ever made a gesture to know me. I've never been asked for coffee or a drink, or come to someone's house or, what you consider to be a barbeque. With your poor, cheap ketchup on your chicken." (laughs)

One time, she said, "You wouldn't know the word 'sauce' if someone poured a bottle over them." But she said, "Look, you've been jerking us around for four years, so what's the story? How long you gonna do this for?" And one guy Larry, I have a thing that I brought to read, he says, "Enough. This is all bullshit. I'm outta here." And ten of the students followed him out. And then 20 students followed out the ten. And the conversation was over. Cause they were lying all along, they had no intention. I mean, Summer Hill, he made up sort of a half-assed black studies curriculum, and then they hired Nathan Hare and he threw the whole thing out. Cause he said the whole thing was baloney. Nathan Hare was tough.

(01:35:40)
E.B: And I was also fortunate that Bridges was in jail at the same time I was so I had protection. But Bridge's roommate who was a member of the Sierra Club. And he brought all of his stealing equipment-mountain climbing equipment from there and stole stuff in the area of Jackson Heights and San Francisco with his mountain climbing stuff.

I said, you must have been good thief. He said, Yeah, that's why I'm here. There was never a fight, ever. Except one time, when... cigarettes were a big deal there. If you put your cigarette butt out before it's done, and you didn't offer it to somebody, people would fight you. So I almost got into a fight with this redneck guy, because I forgot that. But it was okay, because Bridges was there.

G.Y: Oh, God.

E.B: And he just looked at the guy and said, "You got a problem?"

G.Y: Was Bridges really tall?

E.B: No, he was solid. He just has this aura of him. He takes care of business by any means necessary. But he was sweet, he was a very sweet guy.

Appendix: Notes

[1] We also read Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus,* Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. Topflight intricacies.
[2] Other Experimental College classes included "Beginning Midwifery," "World Revolution," "Vegetarian Cooking," "Essential Buddhism," "Everything About the Black Hole You Never Knew," and "Why Anarchism Is Good for You."
[3] One guy, let's call him Elvin, was the one New York City kid aside from me; he was the only Puerto Rican in the school, of about five hundred. They were brilliant and could be totally nuts.
[4] Or Richard Wright's Uncle Tom's Children.
[5] PL (Progressive Labor Party) had started out as a breakaway group from the Communist Party, and they were more freewheeling, publishing works by Ginsberg, Bob Dylan and early poetry by Victor Hernandez Cruz. They defied the ban on travel to Cuba. They organized food and supply caravans to striking miners in Harlan County, West Virginia. In San Francisco, they routed the last poisonous vestiges of the McCarthy period. To me, it seemed that anti-racism with PL was not only going to lots of demonstrations or having endless arguments, but a committed 24/7 way of life.
[6] However, every white student was considered part of the White Strike Support Committee.
[7] Tactical Squad—early version of Swat Teams.