Q: Tell us where you were born and when you were born.

Moss: Okay, I was born in Warren County, Georgia, on November 13, 1949, delivered by a midwife as were my three brothers, born on the family land. If you look at the map of Georgia [Warren County] is central, north central, 50 miles east of Augusta roughly, and about one hundred miles west of Atlanta — just to get it on the map. And red clay would be an understatement — and lots of pine — a very small county. Georgia has, I believe, one hundred and fifty-nine counties. At one time the license plate number, the first digit indicated what county that particular vehicle was from. When you saw one twenty-four, you knew Warren County was number one twenty-four out of the one hundred fifty-nine counties. And there were probably about four thousand people, if you counted the chickens. So I hesitate to think what those other counties on the upper end must have been in terms of population, but they must have had one or two folks in them.

But anyway, it was rural. The main cash crop in that agricultural community was cotton. Then, of course, everyone had corn and peas and beans and livestock, and your vegetables that you would expect any decent southerner to have — particularly okra.

Growing up in Georgia, which was segregated Georgia at the time, my first exposure to music was, of course, going to church which we went to — whether we wanted to or not — every Sunday, and it was an all-day affair. And [we] sung the traditional hymns, "Amazing Grace" and "Fire and Brimstone," typical Baptist-save-your-soul stuff. At age five I started school.

My first year of school was, literally, in one of those one-room schools because the new schools for Blacks had not been built in town, so Blacks were still going to the church schools that were built near the church. And in our case, it was about a four mile walk to school through pastures. But once the new school was built in ’56, my second grade year was at that school, and that was an introduction to a music program all the way through school.

We had the choir, and we had music appreciation, and as soon as I could get to the point where I could join the choir, I did. And, of course, that introduced a much larger variety of music than we got at church, because church was pretty much save your soul. While at the other school [we had], Beethoven and the anthems, and Mozart and Schubert and all of these other folks, and W.
C. Handy, and Duke Ellington, and Count Basie, and Lena Horne, and Nat Cole, and the history of all those people, because of Black History Month. We would get inundated by all of these different people — that being part of the music program. We would learn songs that were significant to those occasions. And so between that and radio that we could get in Warren County, believe it or not — that mixture of things.

And I think it was probably good because we were inundated with country, whether we wanted or not, because it was just kind of everywhere. But in that process I learned to sort through the twang, if you will. That there were some people, you know, the Patsy Clines and the Willie Nelsons and Roy Orbisons and a whole bunch of other people who really did some very fine stuff. And until you learned to say okay, that’s okay, this is okay, and between all of those, the church influence, and the public school influence. While singing with the choir, I got to do some solos which you’d have to learn — songs in Latin and learn the Ave Marias and how to project.

Because it was a small county, there were thirty-one people in my graduating class. At the time, I didn’t quite realize it, but in most of my classes were eight or nine people. And even in the segregated part of Georgia that we were in — I should say the country, which was most of the country then — I realized in many ways I got a very good education.

Because one, we had teachers that told you from day one you had to be twice as good to get half as much. And that was just beaten into you — that you had to be twice as good and work “twice as hard to get half as much” in this society. So you knew from day one that you were expected to work hard at whatever it was that you chose, and you had a responsibility to do that and to do that well, and to put back into the community wherever you could.

And so that music is kind of woven into everything that I do. I guess that’s why it becomes harder for me sometime when people say, well, how do you define the music you do? Because I really — I find a passion for it all. You know there are some days when nothing can quite hit the spot except for good classical music. And sometimes I can listen to Luciano Pavarotti, and well up with tears in my eyes. And there are other times that Shirley Horne can do that same thing. And there are times that Willie Nelson can do it. And there are times that, frankly, Loretta Lynn can do it.

Q: If it sounds good, it is good?

Moss: Right. That’s what Duke Ellington said: If it sounds good, it is good. And he was right. And so I guess if I had to fall into one broad category, it would be jazz because jazz has such a range that you can approach a large variety of genres through that, and have the license or the audacity to approach it in your own humble way.

Q: What about at home? What kind of music did you all listen to at home?

Moss: Well, at home — interesting. Music, particularly growing up, you know, my parents divorced when I was six months, and so my brother and I were kind of inherited, if you will, by a great uncle — we left the farm, the great grandfather’s farm that we were born on. My mother had moved to New York, and my father, well, he was — I guess if there’s character out of
popular culture that would best describe him, it would be Sportin’ Life from "Porgy and Bess," and he fits that to the T. And as soon as my mother, Martha (who happened to be a twin — the other twin was named Mary) left, literally before the red dust had settled, her getting out of Georgia and going to New York, he had married another woman named Martha (who happened to be a twin, with a sister named Mary).

So our great uncle, who we went to live with, was several miles down the road, and that was a sharecropping situation which was very different than being on your own land. It was like ten years of boot camp, I guess, or being sent to slavery. That’s probably the closest I can come to describing it. It was a working farm, a sharecropping farm that we lived on. It was four hundred and fifty acres, about a hundred and fifty to two hundred were under cultivation, and the remainder of it was pasture and woods.

And music there was what you heard at church. At home there was a radio, and you could kind of fool around with the AM dial, because there was no FM at the time. The music that I heard at school, I would bring those tunes back home in my head.

And fortunately in 1956-57, I believe, my mother sent a television to us for Christmas. Of course televisions were rare. And, you know, even most white folks didn’t have it. She knew that if she couldn’t be there for us, so in her own way she did these things for us. And actually later when I went to live in Buffalo, I know I’m getting ahead of the story here, she developed a good taste for jazz, and that’s when I really got to go through a jazz collection, and listen to Jimmy Smith and all these other artists.

I didn’t actually go out and see them. So she introduced me to them later, but back to that part, you know, back several years later, to answer your question, the music that we listened to at home was the local radio, and a lot of the gospel stuff on Sunday morning. It was just on in almost every black home before you went to church on Sunday morning while the breakfast was cooking and the pre-cooking of dinner because church was a whole day affair. So whatever the main course was went on the stove with breakfast and kind of simmered during the day. And while that whole process was going on and the chores were being done and the milking of the cows and the feeding of the chickens and all those things that had to happen every day whether it was Sunday or not. A cow doesn’t give a damn whether it’s Sunday. You know, they got to be milked. She doesn’t care whether it’s Christmas or whatever, you know, it’s okay. I need to be milked.

And then there’d always be this radio station in the background. Or later there would be this Sunday morning quartet singing on television. And so between that and the Lawrence Welk and the Dinah Shore shows, and there were a few shows that I think that really kind of — Andy, "Moon River Man," Andy Williams, and those were ones that I would almost fight with my brothers to watch the Lawrence Welk show. That was music and they were gonna watch some cowboy thing. We’d have to flip a coin.

And sometimes my coin would win. There was just another chance to hear some music and I could just kind of go off into this dreamland that music has a way of taking you on.
I remember wanting to take piano lessons and guitar lessons, but there was no one to teach you. I finally did take guitar lessons in my twenties after I’d been to college, but that’s another part of the story. But there was someone to teach piano, but one, we didn’t have a piano in the home and two, something as simple as taking a piano lesson would have meant a fifteen-mile drive into town, and on a working farm, that just was not in the cards.

And there was no record player at that house. Now later when I decided that at fourteen, okay, I’ve had enough of this. I’ve missed too many days out of school to work on the farm so I simply, at fourteen — at fourteen — I simply just packed my knapsack after working in the field all day — I think it was September 14, 1964, and even my brothers weren’t even aware of — I guess it was just one of those decisions that I’ve made. You know, I’m out of here.

Cause in Georgia, I soon noticed the difference in the way that people lived. People who I used as role models, particularly the black folks in that town — you know, it didn’t take long to notice that the people who were dressed better than other people, who had all of their teeth, the people who dressed better, the people who presented themselves better, even in the segregated system, who had some self esteem, who had that something, even as a child you didn’t quite know what it was — but it soon became clear all the people that had that something about them were educated people.

And so I soon realized that, okay, your ticket out of this is school, is education. And so at fourteen, and I was never ill as a child, but out of one hundred and eighty days and most days that ten years that I lived on that farm, the most days I attended school was a hundred and twenty. And I was in school more than my brothers who averaged one hundred days out of one eighty. So at fourteen, I attempted it. Got my books and a couple of days worth of clothes and I walked across the county at night, and I haven’t been afraid of the dark since. [Laughter]

I reckon that’s really cause I had to walk across the county at night. We’re talking country roads and there are lots of snakes — all kinds — in Georgia. There were no street lights.

Q: And they love getting warm out there.

Moss: Yeah. And so they would stretch across the road at any time. I was smart enough to put on my boots, you know, the rubber boots that you use for a rainy day in case one struck — at least I had a chance. And so I walked the fourteen, fifteen miles across the county to my father’s house, and my stepmother when I got there, welcomed me, wonderful woman, and I don’t think I missed another day out of school since. Perfect attendance. And at that point I was in ninth grade.

Fortunately, my brothers and I were bright enough, and even missing all those days out of school, once we got the books, we could take the books and kind of follow along and keep up. But once you get to ninth grade, you’re dealing with sciences, algebra, biology. You know, those are things that you really need to be there for, because science is hard and you’re exposed to systems of learning that you really have to be there from ground up in order to comprehend it. It’s not the kind of thing that a fourteen year old just picks up and learns Algebra on his own. But even arithmetic, once you got the basics down, you could figure out the rest, and where maybe
you would have been an A student if education had been a priority in the home. They never did not want you to get an education, but it was just this had to be done to live. That’s just the way that it was.

So once I got to my father’s house, and — of course, he was a carpenter, so he worked all across the county, I mean all across the southeast and was gone much of the time (which was probably good because we didn’t get along that well). Anyway, but that was when I really had a chance for the music to begin to flourish.

I could join the choir, because my grades were great from that point on. And I really kind of had a life and got a chance to sing from the inside and outside. My stepmother was great in that if I had a difficult song to learn that required practicing after school, she would always make sure that I got there. Or my music teacher would deposit me or bring me back and forth. And that was the point that I really had a chance to stretch. And I guess perhaps that earlier fourteen years of life of being, you know, somewhat — I don’t like to use the word deprived, but not having access to education and to learning. So it’s like many other things. When you do finally figure out what’s gonna make a difference in your life, and you didn’t have it and you finally do get it, you know what you got and you value it. To the extent that I still take the music lessons now. You know, I take guitar lessons. And I still sing at whatever opportunity, and particularly if it’s one that I feel will further things along because I think that it’s a continuing process.

And so to finish answering your question, once I got to my father’s, I was trying to determine whether I wanted to live with my mother in Buffalo or to stay with my father. So that first summer after I finished that first year of school. I finished the ninth grade, and I went and spent the summer in Buffalo. By this time my brothers had taken my cue and left. They left the farm in December, but they moved to Buffalo.

So I said, well, I’ll finish my school year in Georgia, then go in the summer to Buffalo and make a decision as to which would be best for me. And, of course, when I got to Buffalo, I investigated the school, and then I realized that there were a thousand students in the school and the senior class had five or six hundred people in it. And when I saw where I would have been going to school, I intuitively knew that I was going to get a better education in Georgia. So mother dear, I love you, I caught a flight back to Georgia.

I would spend the summers in Buffalo but go to school in Georgia. And I think I made the best decision. The good part about my mother’s place is she was turned on to jazz, and she had all of these wonderful jazz albums. When she passed, I got some of them. My brother got most of them [laughter].

She had some really some good albums — she had some Ella Fitzgerald, all that R&B that you would expect. You know, Sam Cook and Aretha [Franklin], and a lot of the horn players. You know, Les McCann, the piano player, and just a lot of good stuff that I had not heard before, and so when I would get home from work, I would just listen to it. But in addition to that, in Buffalo — this was pre-riot time — there were many jazz clubs, so I could go and see a Grant Greene, I could go and see regional and local singers in Buffalo. That was really wonderful.
I even took a few music lessons in the summer, then I’d come back to Georgia where I had this wonderful, insular education thing and a chance to sing in church programs and to sing a variety of music at school events. I know that was a long way down to the question, but that set the stage for that variety that I still find important. And I think that’s important, cause a lot of times, if I sing a gospel song, a spiritual, I don’t have to wonder what this lady might have been going through because I have picked cotton. And I have worked from sun up to sun down. And so I don’t have to imagine what it must have been like. I know. I did it, I had calluses on my hands.

So in terms of the blues, I don’t sing that many, but I know how they feel, and when I do sing one, I can get there. You know, I kind of believe that music, at least for me, people have a different road map to get to their art or to get to whatever it is that they do, but the experience informs. You know, what you learn intellectually, I think if you have the two going on there, it certainly allows for the dots to connect.

Q: Absolutely. Now, when you went back to school, the schools were still segregated in Georgia when you went back, weren’t they?

Moss: Yes.

Q: And how long did you stay in Georgia?

Moss: Well, I stayed in Georgia, I completed high school in Georgia. I would spend every summer in Buffalo after that point, and when I graduated from high school, May 29, 1967, then I moved to Buffalo. Yeah, the schools were segregated. They were beginning to integrate. But you know quite frankly, going back and looking at it, twenty or thirty — August 17th I got a call from our class, from some person who does that, and asked if I could do some music for it. I usually write a song for the occasion.

But at the risk of sounding like Clarence Thomas, I don’t think that integration bore up the level of performance in the schools. I think it was good for some reasons — for bigger social reasons — because, obviously we have an integrated society, and I think that we need to, from the earliest [time] possible, learn how to be an integrated society because we are whether we engage one another or not. We still share the same surface. And so it just makes sense to learn to live and to exchange, because everything’s the richer because we did.

But back to Georgia — when the schools were integrated, most of the whites chose private schools as an option, and a lot of the best teachers. You see, because pre-integration you had the cream-of-the-crop black teachers, because they had no choice. After integration the cream of the crop went to private institutions. They went to other places and to richer jurisdictions, because the tax base paid for education, and so for those areas that were not as wealthy (and Warren was not as wealthy), they ended up with the bottom-shelf everything.

And quite frankly, there were a few Whites that attended, but for the most part the Whites that did attend the black school, as one of my aunts put it in Georgia, the only ones that attended were the ones who couldn’t afford water. [Laughter] So as a result, I think that probably the jury’s still
out on whether that was good. But I do know from going back and engaging the young people who were in the school system — and there are members of my extended family as well as the extended family of people that I grew up with who are in the system — I can say quite matter of factly, that from the conversation, from interchanges, from just observing, it was a step backwards, which is unfortunate.

Because there’s no real integration, because the Whites opted to go elsewhere. And the education I was describing to you, that I had the opportunity to have, that no longer exists.

Q: The situation here in Baltimore I think was very much the same. The people I’ve interviewed describe exactly the same scenario here. It’s very interesting.

Moss: And the sad part about Baltimore is that, and it makes my blood boil, to be paying the highest taxes in the state, and Baltimore people do pay the highest property taxes in the state, and we are the wealthiest state in the nation in per capita income, that we are, and to not have, and even during the heyday of the boom economy — the dot com, before dot gone happened — and to still not have music and art in the school as a part of the curriculum, it borders on being criminal, and I think it is.

Q: Well, unless you’re lucky enough to get into someplace like Dunbar or School for the Arts or Douglass.

Moss: But that’s, you know, two percent of the nearly one hundred thousand students that are there. I still say that if Russ Moss can have access to music and art in segregated Georgia thirty-five, forty years ago, in one of the poorest counties in the state of Georgia, why can’t that opportunity be afforded to students in Baltimore now? It is just criminal. And every time when I see the political leadership and educational leadership, I just want to just walk up to them and give them a few swift kicks in the butt. And the only thing I can say is that it’s criminal. And there’s no excuse for it, because I couldn’t imagine having survived my life without the music and the art that was the salve, if you will, and still is.

And to see that people graduating from the school system whose idea of music is rap — and rap in itself is not bad, and there’s some of rap that’s good, but that’s like having a meal of candy. You never get to the vegetables or the greens or your proteins. And because many people haven’t been exposed to a variety of things, they have no appetite for anything else, and everything suffers because of it.

Q: Well, and to have all of those options, and that incredible vocabulary available too, that influences your music.

Moss: Yeah. And it just adds. You know, it’s like going to a smorgasbord where you can appreciate or you have an appetite for all the entrees that are out there — the different courses that are there.

Q: It makes a difference.
Moss: Yeah, it really does. It makes a much tastier meal. [Laughter]

Q: So where did you go? You graduated from high school in Georgia. How did you figure out where you were going to go for the next step?

Moss: Well, I remember thinking when I graduated from high school, there were a couple of things. During school, the teachers sometimes polled the class — what do you want to do? Oh an architect! And so she said, well, I think it’s a good idea, but, you know, there ain’t no black architects. And so I kind of didn’t quite know. I always knew I wanted music to be able to play some role in what I did, and I enjoyed art and enjoyed painting and drawing. But somewhere around the ninth grade, all of the artists that I read about, the Van Goghs and ones that are popular now, but starved while they were alive! There were a few like Leonardo DaVinci that were supported by the royal court or the church in some instances, I was saying well, I’m trying to get out of a poverty situation. The last thing I need to do is be a starving anything. [Laughter]

So I left with a question mark. It was funny. I took a photography test, one of these mail-in photography correspondence courses. I filled it out for the heck of it, but scored well on it. And literally, as I was waiting to take the bus to leave Georgia after finishing high school, a representative from that school came by and said, you know, you really ought to consider photography for a living. You did well, and blah, blah, blah. I had bought a camera as a kid, when I declared there wasn’t Santa Claus, and so they gave me my ten bucks and said do your own Christmas shopping. I bought a $9.99 camera, borrowed a quarter from my brother to pay the taxes on it.

So I filled up the scrapbooks in the places that I had lived with photography. It was just something that I did, and it didn’t occur to me what it was potentially. There were no black photographers. There was only one Gordon Parks. I didn’t know Gordon then. I had a chance to meet him later on a couple of occasions. So photography wasn’t a consideration, because there were no role models. So I ruled out architecture. So I figured okay I would go to school and major in business administration, because I figured that everything has a business component and at least that would get me out of the cotton fields. [Laughter]

So when I left, and, oh, one other option that I had taken: They were having military people come by the school and give the military exam. I scored well, and the Air Force was courting me to do the military.

Q: The Air Force Academy?

Moss: Right, the Air Force Academy. But, of course, I wanted my folks to sign me in. I was seventeen when I graduated from high school, and wouldn’t have been eighteen until the end of the year. And, of course, the Vietnam War was going on. But when you’re seventeen, you’re not thinking of war. So my father wisely said, I’m not going to sign for you. There’s a war going on boy!

Q: Thanks Dad.
Moss: Yeah thanks. So when I get to Buffalo, my mother says I’m not signing for you for the military. There’s a war going on! And, of course, at the same time my second oldest brother was being drafted. He was shipped into Vietnam. So when I got to Buffalo, I knew I needed to work for a year to get resources to go to school. And actually that one year between May, ’67 and June of ’68 is when I started the higher education, was probably the best education in the sense that I worked in factories. You know, I was fibbing a lot about my age then. I was eighteen because when you’re below eighteen in New York State, the most you can get is a McDonald’s job, and I figured instead of being paid two bucks an hour, you could be paid seven. And so it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure that out. And so I worked at a couple of factories. And really, I guess by measure, I was earning like two, three hundred bucks a week, and if you extrapolate the inflation thing, that’s like eight, nine hundred bucks a week which is not bad money. But after I saved enough money to start the wheels in motion for my own education, I knew that — honest to God I just don’t see how people do that dull work today. You’ve got to applaud them. I know someone has to do it, but that was worse than cotton fields. That was just the dregs, that urban labor assembly line.

On the surface it seemed like Buffalo was more pleasant and more racially friendly. You know, people said, hi, Mr. Moss. How are you? But I started to notice after I’d been in Buffalo about three weeks, I was walking near the expressway and it was about five o’clock, rush hour, and I see all this traffic, and I said, oh, traffic jam! I started noticing the cars. And I said I wonder where all those white folks are going? And I realized what was going on. And then in the morning, I would realize they would be coming back. Then I realized this is the same as Georgia. Only there they call it across the tracks. The only thing different in Georgia — I remember making the comment when I started the business school. We had a sociology class, and we were talking about racial politics. Then Professor Thomas, I recall, an old portly Caucasian gentleman asked me, well, Mr. Moss (and in a class of about thirty people and I was the person of color), what difference did I see between the North and the South in that respect. And I said, "Well, in all due respect, Dr. Thomas and fellow classmates, the only difference between Buffalo and Georgia is the temperature." I said, "But the rest of it is essentially the same." And I told them about the traffic story and other things. And I said, it’s much more polite here, but quite frankly if I have to experience these things, I’d just have George Wallace standing in the door or Lester Maddox with an ax handle, because at least you know what you’re dealing with. Buffalo is very camouflaged, but when you sort through, you know, the niceties, you realize that at the end of the day it’s the same thing.

So I worked and went to school, and I finished the business school. During the time, I heard a lot of live music in Buffalo. I got to hear Dionne Warwick the first time, before her psychic connection in the late sixties, and Lou Rawls, and a lot of the local singers at the jazz spots. So I really got to immerse myself in that. I sang with a couple of doo-wop groups that I got a chance to plug into. Finally, after I left Georgia, I didn’t have to do the church thing. I figured that I didn’t need to visit God every Sunday morning.

Q: Done your time?

Moss: Exactly. That whatever concept of God, if He ain’t with me or in me, you know, then I can’t see just going and checking in every Sunday morning. That just never made sense.
So that was after I finished. It was a two-year business school, and I kind of knew.

Q: And which school was this?

Moss: That was Bryant & Stratton Business Institute. And I knew that I needed to go a bit further, and I did. I started summer school at Buffalo State College, and after that point I decided that I really didn’t like the impersonal approach to an education. I’d say it was more like a large factory.

One of my mother’s friends who had attended Fisk University mentioned Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. And so I sent away and got an application and filled it out, and they accepted enough of the credits from the business school that I arrived there as a sophomore. I received some scholarship money for choir, and had an opportunity to travel with the concert choir every year.

Benedict College is a liberal arts college. And actually now, there are about three thousand students there. When I graduated there were fifteen hundred. It’s now the fastest growing college within the traditional black college circuit — and made the top ten list.

The concert choir did a good variety of music. The director during my time there was Mr. Wroten, and he looked like one of the boot camp instructors. And his approach was like no nonsense. You could never be late, and if the attire was dark suit, black shoes, and if anyone had on brown shoes, you didn’t go on stage. Period. And during the rehearsals, especially the dress rehearsals, he would walk around and circulate amongst the choir members. If wrong notes were coming out of your lips, you didn’t want to be that person that the wrong note was coming out of. He was a holy terror, but we had an incredible choir. And it was great.

We traveled and raised money for the college and were ambassadors for the college. And it was just a wonderful experience. We would open the concerts with sacred music: Lachrymosa, Kyrie Eleison, and Ave Marias and the Lord’s Prayer. Usually about mid-program we would do some contemporary music, whatever was currently popular. If it was Burt Bacharach, or during the time I was there, some of the Fifth Dimension tunes, "Up, Up, and Away" and "What The World Needs Now," that kind of stuff. We always finished with traditional spirituals, a capella, which still remain my favorites. There’s nothing quite like it. When thirty-two voices are recalling the history of what the people have gone through and still going through, and when everything was stripped away, that was it! And that was always the way that we ended the program.

After I finished Benedict, I would do a little bit of popular music, some singing in some clubs. I graduated from college in ’72, I think on May 22nd, and on May 23rd I started working at the television station in Columbia, South Carolina, the very next day.

I had turned down a job with an insurance company. You know, the business connection. I had applied three times at this television station during the course of my college because I had to work part time, and I just thought it would be interesting.
When Benjamin Hooks, who I believe was President Nixon’s appointee for the Federal Communications Commission, FCC — I guess that’s it, determined that the broadcasters across the country and the media needed to in some way reflect the community they were serving. of course, before that time there were very few black faces in the television station unless they were on the clean-up detail.

Q: On either end of the camera.

Moss: Right. Either end! And so there were two positions that were going to be available. I knew the placement director at the college, and I had done some art work and sold some paintings to him. So he said, Russ — because I was going to take this job with an insurance company that would be paying three fifty a week, which was pretty good money for ’72 — he said, do you know anyone who might be interested in an internship at WIS-TV? I said, yeah. Me! [Laughter]

So he gave me the information, and I filled it out and I went — that’s one thing about the business school, it taught you how to present yourself. So I Brooks Brothered, and went down. I remember taking to the interview a term paper that I had used photographs, and I took a yearbook — the college yearbook that I had designed the cover for and done some of the layout work for. And I took one of the school newspapers that I’d done cartoons and writing and other things for — that was just kind of an afterthought, along with the resume, of course. There were two people chosen out of two hundred applicants, and I managed to get one of those two slots.

The news director at the time was Dick Edwards. I was curious later as to what had influenced him to hire me. He said, well, you know, you brought something to show. See, of course, traditionally, even now, if you apply for a television job, you take your audition reel, a sample of what you’ve done. But, of course, that’s like a Catch 22. You can’t take what you’ve done if you haven’t had a chance to do a damn thing. So what I had had an opportunity to do was those things that I mentioned. I remember saying during the course of that interview, I’ve dealt with images. I haven’t done the television, the sound portion or the motion portion, because I haven’t had that opportunity. But I think I can do that. Give me an opportunity to learn.

The six-month internship was a probationary period. After two months, I had my first work on the air. And it was sixteen millimeter sound. That was the stock we worked with. I remember practicing in the dark threading the camera because I knew that if I could thread it in the dark, it would be no problem to thread it in the light in a hurry. Because if the president is coming off the plane or in the middle of a speech, you can't have all day fumbling. You’ve got to get the film magazines loaded. You got to get the stock back in the camera and get rolling, and speed was a crucial part of it.

I worked in South Carolina at that station for five and a half years, and during that five and a half years I took graduate courses at the University of South Carolina in broadcasting, simply because they were paying for the courses, and it was right down the street. I could walk right there.

One of the ones [performing groups] that stands out in mind was the group of Lee, Connie and Jim, and later Russ. And it was a folk venue, and I played the conga drum, which I had played during college. I had bongos and a conga. And I really kind of enjoyed that, but it got to the point...
that it wasn’t the kind of thing that you could play alone. You had to have an entourage, at least another instrument in order to make it live.

I learned to appreciate Joni Mitchell and Joan Baez and Bob Dylan and all those folks that I probably had never paid much attention to. And one of the members of the group was Lee Bell. He’s a great song writer, wrote some really good songs. And that inspired me to start taking guitar lessons myself, which I started in my twenties and I still take them.

During that same period I would play congas for a gospel group occasionally. And for the time that I was in South Carolina and whenever I could, I would play with them because they were kind of fun. I started to take guitar lessons and singing with a group called Keystone Coyote, which was a jazz fusion group. They were really into the Chick Corea and that fusion thing. And it was a different kind of place, and it was fun to do that.

After I accepted a job offer to come to Baltimore, to work at Channel 13, that was October 3, 1977, I started working in Baltimore. I got a call out of the blue from the assistant news director at 13 asking me if I were under contract and would I like to consider Baltimore. I said, oh sure. So, you know, took the trip up, and sure enough, the first assignment that I had in Baltimore was with Oprah [Winfrey]. It was funny when I walked in — I looked over and I said who is that sister over there? And what’s she doing with that damn head rag on her head? See they sent her out to get a make over and all her hair fell out. Well, I was entering the scene just as — her hair was too short even for a TWA, we call that a teenie weenie Afro, even for a low cut, and that wasn’t the fashion then. So they had to take it all the way down to the scalp. And so she wore scarves until her hair grew back.

The recommendation to come to Baltimore was from Rod Daniels at WBAL. He and I had worked together in Columbia, South Carolina. He had come from New York, and he had this Puerto Rican woman that looked white. And I was saying, Rod, you know, man, it’s survival 101 — keep a low profile.

So we got along because we were kind of like in this island and in this new process, and we both kept supporting one another and thriving. And so he went to Milwaukee about a year or so earlier with the Hearst Corporation that still owned WBAL, and 13 was trying to hire him, and they were looking for a photographer too. And so he recommended me and so that was how that connection came.

Q: Well, how did Baltimore impress you when you came up here in the seventies?

Moss: First of all, I remember, Baltimore was depressing. My first impression of it was, this is a good opportunity professionally,.and I knew that in order to have a career, I needed to move on from South Carolina because I had accomplished what I could accomplish there. But Baltimore itself was — first of all, when I saw the row houses so close together, being a country boy, I was going like, my God! But beyond that, the place was just so dirty. And I could see the row houses, because some of them are quite attractive and they can be. You know, when you’re in China you do the Chinaman. But it was just such a downtrodden place.
My first couple years here I lived in the county, because the city was almost frightening. And I’m not a person that’s easily frightened. But I didn’t know this city. I figured, well, let me work and get to know the lay of the land, and then after a couple years at least I’ll see. I lived in Baltimore County, Randallstown, that has some of the same problems as Baltimore City. I left my Randallstown apartment after the end of that two-year lease. I moved to Annapolis, which was a dream, a three year dream. The only nightmare was the commute.

I lived two blocks from the Maryland Inn, and at that time they had an incredible music program, and a membership card that you could get I think, for fifty or a hundred bucks a year you had unlimited admission. So I could walk up three nights in a row if I had time, and hear Charlie Byrd whom I probably listened to a hundred times, and Ethel Ennis and Laurindo Almeida and Herb Ellis and Bennie Carter, and Earl Hines. I really got to sit at the foot of the masters and watch them do what they do. Eddie Fat Head Newman — just incredible. And a lot of local and regional performers. But Baltimore, after three years of commuting, I just said okay brother, at this point it’s time to move to the city. I lived in Mt. Vernon Place, right behind Peabody, on East Branch Lane, in one of the carriage houses for a couple of years in ’84. I decided, okay, the interest rate’s down low enough, it’s time to shop for a house. I shopped Federal Hill, Fells Point, Bolton Hill, Charles Village. For different reasons, parking or the houses too small, or they were overpriced for what you were getting, I chose Reservoir Hill. And I still see Baltimore like a beautiful human being that just needs a bath [laughter] and a fix-up.

I mean all of the things are there. It just needs to clean house. And it could be an incredible city, and it doesn’t understand what it has here. You know, the one problem, like Annapolis, you understand that they’re fierce about protecting their history, as it should be. But Dan Henson [then Baltimore City Housing Commissioner] tore down more in one afternoon than Annapolis ever had.

And so, and that’s the best part, the city’s got probably one of the best stocks of period housing in the country for an inner city, and it doesn’t market it. The only place in the world I’ve ever seen boarded-up property on a park front. I just didn’t think that was possible. But it doesn’t know how to market. It’s getting a little bit better, but it really doesn’t know how to market what it has.

Q: Well, you’ve been so instrumental in what’s happened in Reservoir Hill Reservoir Hill and the changes that have taken place here. How long have you lived in your house on Park Avenue?

Moss: Eighteen years, coming up eighteen years.

Q: You’ve headed up the community organizations. You’ve done the sanitation committee, organized garden tours, and hectored people into pulling their act together.

Moss: Yeah, but that is just kind of what you’re supposed to do. You know, you’re just supposed to do that.

Q: And work full-time as a camera man and have another career as a musician.
Moss: Right. [Laughter] But, you know, but I believe that these things I said — that when you’re alive, you’re supposed to be active. You got plenty of time to do nothing when you’re dead.

Q: You’re right.

Moss: And the other part too, Benedict College, one of their mottos is to be a power for good in society. That’s what we’re supposed to do. And in terms of taking on things, I remember the role models that my uncle, the great uncle, Robert Moss — even though I walked away from that place, in retrospect I know that he was doing the best that he could, the best that he knew. Because his father was a slave — Crawford Moss. And so, he was raising us basically as his father had raised him. But even so, when there was something that needed to be done in the community, if someone got burned out, he would just say, okay, you all, pull out your clothes. Somebody needs shoes your size, or a shirt your size. And he expected you to pull out the best stuff you had, not the worst! So it’s just following that example.

And just the fact that he took us in after our parents’ separation — you just step up to the plate and you do what you’re supposed to do. That’s just the way that it’s supposed to be. And if you’re in a community that’s got trash, well, you get in there and you do something about the trash.

Q: Now back to your career as a musician. Your job actually absorbs a fairly significant part of your life, but you’re still out there performing. Now you’re playing at Annapolis at the same Maryland Inn that you used to go and where you used to listen to Charlie Byrd.

Moss: Well, I think that I mentioned that I’ve been taking guitar lessons, because for many years at Channel 13 I was the low man on the totem pole. So now I’m one of the senior photographers. I’ve gotten older, but along with that I have enough time in, so that my schedule is now stable enough to have a community life and a music life. And so that was one of the advantages of staying put in one place, so that those things could happen.

But equally important, during that time when my schedule was fluctuating, I took the guitar lessons, and worked to do the music where I could, when I could. Maybe in some ways I think that probably if some of the things that are beginning to develop now had happened earlier, I think like many of the other musicians, I probably would have burned out early or would have taken some self-destructive route. So I figure that whatever fortune that the music brings now, one, there’s a level of maturity that certainly wasn’t always there, and I think that now I’ve had the chance to really spend some time and work on it, and to kind of get to know who I am, and get comfortable within my own skin.

And incidentally, another point too, I like the community work. A lot of this I didn’t quite realize it at that time, but, you know, there’s an old expression that you can’t out-give God. And I never quite knew what that meant, but I remember one of the most difficult things for me, it wasn’t necessarily to sing the songs, but early on, it was like after you finished the song, then there was this level of discomfort between — you know — communicating with the audience, and having that comfort level to just talk. Because the song — I could go there, but then connecting with the people. After fifteen, twenty years of Reservoir Hill and leading them [the community groups],
sometimes you know they get right unruly so you have to put all that stuff behind you and learn how to just be there and deal with the moment.

I guess, probably my gift out of that, has been that sense of comfort, a comfort level that’s just talking off the cuff, and if something goes awry, which things will do in a live performance, you roll with the punches and land on your feet and just deal with it as it happens. And most of all, to have fun with it.

And that’s something that’s come from the volunteer work and community work — that was kind of a gift back. And I kind of realized it after some point.

Q: You were getting back, too.

Moss: Right. [Laughter] Because that was kind of the gift, you know, the personal growth gift. And I never did [hold] with the idea of enhancing the performance.

Q: So you were saying about how giving to the community has given back to you and actually influenced your music and its performance level.

Moss: Right. It’s given me a comfort level. Because so much of when you make music, then the other part is connecting in a comfortable way with people. Because I think that’s an important piece of it. I can name a few, or maybe I shouldn’t, singers that… Well, I will.

Like in Baltimore City, I think probably of the women singers, no question about it, Aleta Greene is no doubt, I think, the best voice in Baltimore. But Ethel Ennis is the best entertainer. And that comes because Ethel knows how to reach out there and just stroke the folks.

Q: She can pick up a house in the palm of her hand in a second.

Moss: Right. Exactly. And that’s kind of what I’m getting at. And that element, being able to just kind of reach out there and embrace the people and caress them, and roll all of that into the music.

Q: Right.

Moss: As I understand it, it is an important part of it. And I didn’t quite know how to get there, but I knew that it was important to get there and I mean, you could always keep getting closer to there, but now I’m much closer to there than I was. And I think the ticket was I noticed that years of community work and yelling at Miss Minnie and telling her to shut up.

Q: I wonder whatever happened to Miss Minnie? [Laughter]

Moss: I hope it wasn’t my fault. To give you an example, I was doing a show at the Maryland Inn a few months ago, and this guy comes up the street about half tanked. I’m right in the middle of a song, and he walks up, right into the performing area, and he’s singing off key. So without missing a beat, I said welcome. I’m glad you could come, but you’re gonna have to get your own
damn show. I said, you’re welcome to sit down and listen, but if you want to sing, you got to get your own damn show. And so the audience applauded and the guy kind of shrank and he just kind of disappeared.

But fifteen years ago that would have been a derailment.

Q: So thank you, Miss Minnie.[Laughter]

Moss: Yeah, in that sense. As for the song writing, the Baltimore Song Writers Association, and the years of working on the guitar, I’m at a point now where I think I’m really writing some of my best pieces, some of my best songs. And after I finish this CD, Live at the Maryland Inn Project, the next project, I know, will be solo voice and guitar. And it will be called "Simply Russ," including some of my original songs. And after that, I want to take the best of my songs and fold them into a musical set. You’ve got to have another goal down the road. But the song writing is becoming an important part. I don’t know, I think between Georgia and Buffalo and Carolina and the media work, and just living in general, I’ve seen a lot, I’ve experienced a lot. And I think there are a lot of songs in there. Investing in the time to have the tools needed to craft those songs, to extract them from your imagination, from the maker that gives them, and to create that emotional road map for other people to get whatever out of it that music can do — I think it’s just part of that — part of using the gift that we’re given.

So that’s kind of where things are at this point.

END OF INTERVIEW