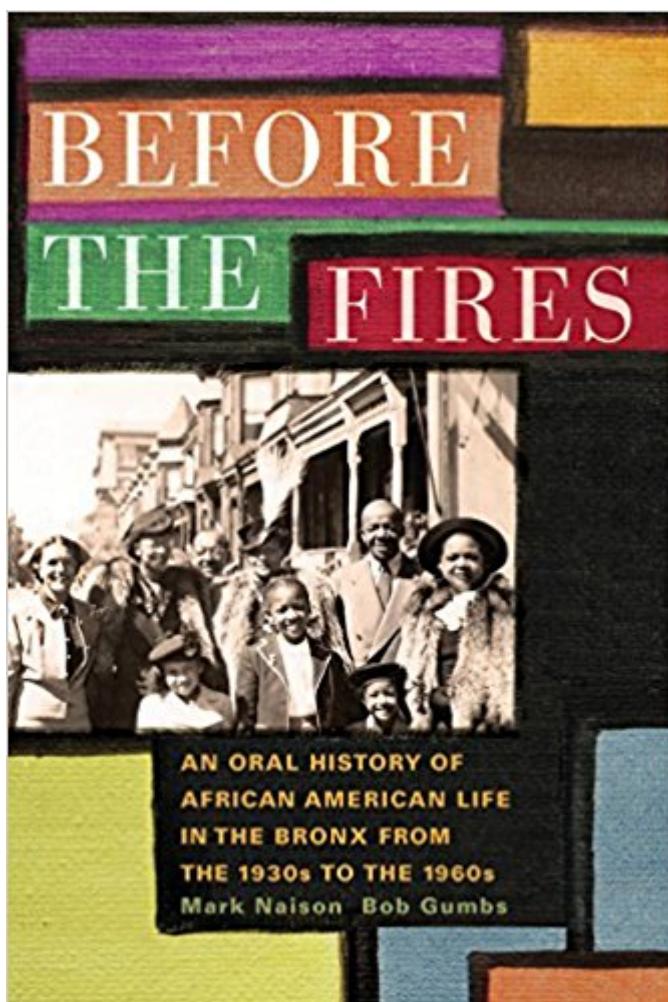


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# Before The Fires: An Oral History Of African American Life In The Bronx From The 1930s To The 1960s



## Synopsis

People associate the South Bronx with gangs, violence, drugs, crime, burned-out buildings, and poverty. This is the message that has been driven into their heads over the years by the media. As Howard Cosell famously said during the 1977 World Cup Series at Yankee Stadium, "There it is, ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning." In this new book, Naison and Gumbs provide a completely different picture of the South Bronx through interviews with residents who lived here from the 1930s to the 1960s. In the early 1930s, word began to spread among economically secure black families in Harlem that there were spacious apartments for rent in the Morrisania section of the Bronx. Landlords in that community, desperate to fill their rent rolls and avoid foreclosure, began putting up signs in their windows and in advertisements in New York's black newspapers that said, "We rent to select colored families," by which they meant families with a securely employed wage earner and light complexions. Black families who fit these criteria began renting apartments by the score. Thus began a period of about twenty years during which the Bronx served as a borough of hope and unlimited possibilities for upwardly mobile black families. Chronicling a time when African Americans were suspended between the best and worst possibilities of New York City, *Before the Fires* tells the personal stories of seventeen men and women who lived in the South Bronx before the social and economic decline of the area that began in the late 1960s. Located on a hill hovering over one of the borough's largest industrial districts, Morrisania offered black migrants from Harlem, the South, and the Caribbean an opportunity to raise children in a neighborhood that had better schools, strong churches, better shopping, less crime, and clean air. This culturally rich neighborhood also boasted some of the most vibrant music venues in all of New York City, giving rise to such music titans as Lou Donaldson, Valerie Capers, Herbie Hancock, Eddie Palmieri, Donald Byrd, Elmo Hope, Henry "Red" Allen, Bobby Sanabria, Valerie Simpson, Maxine Sullivan, the Chantels, the Chords, and Jimmy Owens. Alternately analytical and poetic, but all rich in detail, these inspiring interviews describe growing up and living in vibrant black and multiracial Bronx communities whose contours have rarely graced the pages of histories of the Bronx or black New York City. Capturing the excitement of growing up in this stimulating and culturally diverse environment, *Before the Fires* is filled with the optimism of the period and the heartache of what was shattered in the urban crisis and the burning of the Bronx.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As hip-hop has become a metaphor for the ingenuity and perseverance of a generation of black and Latino/a youth raised in the South Bronx in the 1970s, Mark Naison and Robert Gumbs' oral history of the region is a timely reminder of the brilliance incubated in the South Bronx two generations Before the Fires. (Mark Anthony Neal author of *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*) "Before the Fires is an excellent oral history profound, moving and skillfully executed. It will compel readers to revise their understandings of both the South Bronx and New York City." (Robert W. Snyder Rutgers University- Newark)

Chronicling a time when African Americans were suspended between the best and worst possibilities of New York City, Before the Fires tells the personal stories of seventeen men and women who lived in the South Bronx before the social and economic decline of the area that began in the late 1960s.

great!

When I first started reading this book, I thought the stories were a bit flat. These oral histories weren't as lively as the other recent memoirs I had read about growing up in one place or another. But then I reminded myself that these were memories being told to someone else, readjusted my expectations a bit, and soon was looking forward to each new person being interviewed. What was being stated over and over again was that the Bronx was a good place to grow up, a good place to

live . . . before the fires and before the heroin. From the 1930s-1960s, blacks from Harlem, from the South, from many other places, were moving to the Bronx and discovering there was no violence when they moved into predominantly white neighborhood. The whites would eventually move out; but before that time, the neighborhoods were integrated and the schools were integrated. There were violent gangs, but most of those interviewed said they just learned how to avoid them, learned where not to go. Doors and windows were left unlocked, as well as opened in the summer, and people watched out for each other. Schools even remained open at night with activities to keep children productively occupied. Music was a huge part of life for so many of those interviewed. There was music in the schools, music in homes, music in church, music in clubs, music on the streets. From jazz to doo-wop, music came up over and over again in the interviews. Church was also a big part of life for many, although some families went back to Harlem to attend the churches they attended before moving to the Bronx. Most of those interviewed grew up in homes with both a father and mother, too; many fathers working as building superintendents, Pullman porters or at the post office. There were mentors in the families, mentors in the schools, mentors in the neighborhood. What destroyed the Bronx, according to most everyone, was heroin. People started on marijuana, got addicted to heroin, and it was all downhill from there. Doors and windows had to be locked to keep the drug addicts from stealing whatever they could get their hands on; and, according to one person interviewed, drug dealers were being thrown off roofs. In addition, people had to worry about being mugged, when they used to walk home at night with no fear. Economically, the neighborhoods began to suffer, too, and budget cuts greatly damaged music programs and other activities in the schools. Finally, there were the fires . . . but before the fires, there were a whole bunch of kids growing up in Bronx neighborhoods that they look back on, as adults, with tremendous love and loyalty. (Note: I received a free e-copy of this book from NetGalley and the publisher or author in exchange for an honest review.)

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