AVERY FISHER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Charles Fisher

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2019

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Charles Fisher conducted by Gerry Albarelli on May 3, 2019. This interview is part of the Avery Fisher Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

ATC	Session #1
Interviewee: Charles Fisher	Location: New York, NY
Interviewer: Gerry Albarelli	Date: May 3, 2019

Albarelli: [unclear]. And this is Gerry Albarelli, talking to Chip Fisher. This is May 3, 2019. Okay. Would you start by maybe saying your name, and inform me a little bit about your role?

Fisher: [00:00:38] Sure. Sure. Sure, I was born in New York City, June 5, 1956. And I lived with my sisters at 1185 Park Avenue, which is at Ninety-Third and Park. That's where my parents moved in 1954, when my sisters were a little bit younger, and they were trying to get more space. They lived there until their death. I've lived in New York all my life, in different parts of the city, but actually never having left the island of Manhattan, except for college.

Albarelli: What are some of your early memories?

Fisher: [00:01:18] Well, of New York, of it's being a really spectacular place, and very interesting culturally, and very stimulating. I grew up in the '60s and '70s, which were sort of a dodgy time for Manhattan. There was a lot of crime, and I remember being very sort of hypervigilant in walking around, because I was a kid, and private school kids got picked on occasionally. That was the worst part. The best part is, the place was very eclectic. All of the retail stores that existed were very personal. It was a very oddball time to grow up here, during the Vietnam War, with everything that was going on. I sort of relived it recently, watching the series *The Deuce* on HBO, which is fascinating, which is about Times Square, at the time when I

was growing up. Not that I hung out there a lot, but the whole sketchiness and dodginess and strangeness and wonder of this place, that has become—it's still very wonderful, but it's, I think, very sanitized compared to when I grew up, was the New York that I remember. I still yearn for parts of that, and trying to find little corners. They're there, they're just a little bit more underground. It's a very special place to live, although I think it's harder now for people to live here than it was twenty or thirty years ago.

So, the city's changed. But culturally, I think this is still an amazing place. I've enjoyed being here, and my kids have enjoyed growing up here, one of them's moved back. The other one is moving to San Francisco. But I really enjoyed growing up here. It was a very special place, and very—but a time of great transition, and also a pain for the city economically and culturally. That's when my father sort of stepped into the picture with Lincoln Center in 1973, in helping out, when the hall had acoustical problems, and he wanted to make his gift. That all came about when I was about thirteen years old.

Albarelli: Before you get to thirteen—I mean, I have memories of the city from the '60s and '70s too, and I sort of have the same yearnings. But before you get to thirteen, tell me some of your early memories of your father, and then also of your mother.

Fisher: [00:03:45] Sure. Yes. Well, I mean, I remember my father was a very disciplined person. He was very interested in classical music. We listened to classical music, especially on the weekends. He found that very relaxing. Of course, on his equipment [laughs]. And we had one of the odder things in our apartment was, when we moved—when my parents moved in, there was a

fireplace. My mother was just saying, “Oh, this is great, we can make fires in the winter,” and my father looked at the fireplace and said, “That’s a perfect place to put a speaker.” That’s where it ended up [laughs], instead of fires. He had a very large record collection. I remember both my mother and father [unclear], they were very cultured, and they really enjoyed—they didn’t read books that much. But they went to a lot of concerts and plays, and I used to go to museums with them, and especially with my dad. It was a very interesting time, and very—sort of lived a very quiet life, even though my father was about to become more of a public figure. But when he was running his company, he was very private. It was really just really very interesting. He was a very disciplined person, as was my mother, and very forthright and strong, and very motivated. Kind of always full of energy, and always pushing very hard. I think he drove everybody crazy certain times, because he was sort of not very empathetic, but he was very precise and very good at doing things well. I think that’s what made him a success in business, is the precision with which he executed things. That was very admirable.

So, I always admired that, and the discipline of how he ran his enterprises. Now that I’m in business, I picked up a lot of stuff at the dinner table. That was sort of my MBA [Master of Business Administration]. I really enjoyed learning from him, and really kind of absorbed everything that he was doing. It’s remarkable to me, I mean, it was amazing that he was able to do what he did, not having—meaning, he had a large company, but he didn’t really have that—from my observation, he didn’t have that deep of sort of really good managers below him. He had people who were good, but not brilliant. The greater burden was on him—I think that’s the way he wanted it. Which isn’t a bad thing, it’s just a very autocratic style. I think people don’t work that way anymore. Or a lot of people don’t.

So, he was pretty stressed, and it was tougher. Especially tougher when he retired, because he then went from having a lot to do with him not having enough to do [laughs]. So that was even more of a challenge. But growing up as a little boy, I sort of absorbed a lot of things that he was doing. I was very interested in understanding his work.

My mother was very cultured. Grew up outside of New York, and enjoyed the same things that he did. They were very compatible in that way, although their personalities were very different.

Albarelli: Tell a story, maybe, or an anecdote about your mother that would illustrate her personality and the difference.

Fisher: [00:07:01] Sure. Well, she was more—I think a lot more joyous than my dad, in terms of liking food and wine, although she wasn't a heavy drinker, she drank mostly beer. And she was very curious about people and would sort of analyze situations. I think kind of understand things from an emotional level, more than my father did. That was sort of an interesting contrast. But she was dealing with the three of us, who were of different ages. I came along much later. I was a bit of a surprise. My sisters were eleven and fourteen years older than me. I was rather—somewhat unexpected. Sort of turned the household down; you know, upside down. She was kind of trying to manage me as a younger kid, even though because her daughters were, by then, teenagers. She had me when she as forty, which was unusual now. and I grew up in a much more adult world than my siblings.

I remember her really instructing me on being a gentleman and being honest, and being strong, but being honorable about things, as was my father. But she, in particular, was very forthright about that. And I had a lot of heartfelt conversations with her. She was from a very different background. My dad grew up very poor, and my father—my mother was from sort of an upper middle-class family, so they were sort of a really—it was a big difference. She had more comfort, growing up. She felt more secure when she was in her stature and being. So, it was a real contrast between the two of them, although they got along well, and were married for, I don't know, fifty or sixty years.

Albarelli: Yes. What did she tell you about being a gentleman?

Fisher: [00:09:05] She just taught me how to treat women and be nice to them, and be out there, but not be a jerk. I thought that was really great, and I really admired that about her. I think most mothers sort of indoctrinated their children that way, or tried to, certainly amongst the world that I grew up, which was sort of the urban bourgeoisie. We didn't have kind of a rough environment, not because we were private school, because we were—you know, we were in a more cultured environment with people who were mannered. I think the city—people dressed up more, they were more mannered back then, and more formal. You were supposed to kind of get your groove on pretty early. That was nice. So, I tried to do that. On top of which, I was the son of older parents, so that was sort of a natural thing. I really wasn't growing up with any kids, and essentially, I was an only child.

Albarelli: Yes. I think you said he would drive everyone crazy with whatever was—

Fisher: [00:10:20] Well, my dad was just so detailed, I mean about everything. I remember one time, he just lost his cool, because—and he was right, but I was an eight-year-old. I had put the wire around the post of a screw in an electric set that I was doing. He said, "That's the wrong way. You have to do it in the direction of the thread." I said, "No, that's not the way it goes." Of course, he just—he was right, but he just blew up. I think he felt like I was one of his employees rather than an eight-year-old trying to experiment with what the right and wrong way was. But I think that was because of the pressure that he was under. I began to understand that over time, and having to run companies myself, I realized the challenges that one faces. It's very difficult to manage things well, unless you really have a good sense of how to become. As his physician said, it would have been good for him to have a martini or two along the way, but he didn't. Anyways—

Albarelli: And where did you go to school?

Fisher: [00:11:31] I was at Dalton. Well, Town School first, and then Dalton after, starting in second grade. So almost a lifer

Albarelli: What are some of your memories?

Fisher: Of Dalton?

Albarelli: Yes.

Fisher: [00:11:43] Grade school, very liberal and very intellectual. It was not as structured as a lot of the other schools, like Buckley or Saint David's, or even Horace Mann or Riverdale. You had to sort of do things on your own. I probably would have actually done better at a more structured school. I did better at Town when I was little, because it had structure. I kind of needed that. But I still adopted and had a wonderful time there. They spoke, taught, I don't know, eleven languages or something when I was there. It was just incredible what was available. What's remarkable now is that Donald Barr, who's—William Barr, the current attorney general, was the headmaster. William Barr looks exactly like him. It's incredible. It's, like, he's Mini-Me, except for the cardigan. It's a little scary. But he was a very smart, really good educator – very, very intellectual. So, he had that intellectual [bent] and that really forced us all to think about things and talk about things, and explore them intellectually, at a less rigid level than I think my friends did at other schools. So that was a very good preparation for me for college. And I had a lot of friends.

And I'm having my forty-fifth reunion soon, here, after we go to Dalton. So, it's going to be nice to see my friends again.

Albarelli: Yes. Yes. What are some of your early memories of your father and music?

Fisher: [00:13:18] Well, my early memories, really, are just of him—primarily of him listening to music, veraciously. He, by that time, I grew up, and I think it's why I sort of had to go backwards, in a way, that he was listening to the most sophisticated and advanced pieces. We

were listening to late Beethoven, quartets, and Debussy, and all of these—and a lot of composers that—of the later stages of their compositions. So, each one was sort of the end of their developmental phase, all of which was great, but all of them height of empire, which was a little—at first, until I got used to it, was a little bit sophisticated—it was a little bit too sophisticated for my untrained ear when I was a young kid. But I began to understand the complexities of these—sort of height of empire of all these classical composers. Then I had to kind of work my way backwards to Mozart, and all of the things that are really quite beautiful. But by comparison, you know, much more ease in listening, so to speak, even though they're fantastic. So, my exposure was to things that were really way beyond my league, which was good because it was very challenging for me to listen, although I did, and enjoyed it. But it was very different, because he had explored that [dog barks]—do I need to silence her?

Albarelli: No, it's okay. It's all right.

Fisher: [00:14:48] I had to kind of get in the groove so that was very challenging. But that was one of my earlier memories. My dad was very formal, and very ordered and structured, and very engaged in the world. But it was interesting. Very disciplined person.

Albarelli: Give me some examples of that.

Fisher: Sure, of his discipline?

Albarelli: Yes.

Fisher: [00:15:20] Well, just in terms of the way he looked at things, and really sort of mapping things out, and having a plan. When we traveled, he would kind of figure everything out and have a battle plan. Not that we really had to execute it, he was just very prepared when he went into—when he prepared for travel or an adventure, going somewhere, he sort of knew how to get things done and do them well, and kind of keep control of the environment. So, at times, it became a little bit unbearable, but I liked that, because it sort of—I've always kind of second-guessed situations to the extent that I can understand and control things that are going on. So, I learned from that and I admired him for doing that.

I wouldn't say at times that he was a lot of fun. I mean, he wasn't a—he wasn't not fun, he did have a sense of humor, but it was kind of his sense of humor, and I think he was much more interested in kind of—it was more Sermon on the Mount with him, and my way or the highway. That was just his personality. But that's one of the reasons he did so well, I think. People who are very focused like that don't need to be interrupted by others. I guess grudgingly, they feel they do learn things from others, and they do read and pick things up. But he pretty much, when he started to nail it, he realized that—or began to think that other people couldn't really teach him that much. I think that that was just the way he was. That doesn't mean that he wasn't studying everything as he went along. I think it just wasn't quite so much in conversation.

Albarelli: In terms of your own memories, though, "my way or the highway," can you give me another—you gave me the screw example. But give me another.

Fisher: [00:17:11] Oh, there were tons of those. I'm trying to think of other examples, just in the way, when he was teaching me how to drive. Well, it was hearing well, and how to move the car, the subtleties—every aspect of moving, braking, and all these little things. He drove people crazy, but at the same time, he was right about most things. And the level of discipline that he applied to his way of being and thinking was actually, I think at the end of the day, was admirable. There was a lot of that. And he was really more like having a grandfather than a father. He was fifty when I was born. That's not young today for having your first child, although I was the third. But it certainly was more like somebody who was, say, sixty or sixty-five. I have friends who have young children, and I know, I can see the general disparities that they have. It reminds me of my own childhood. All my other friends'—my friends' parents were much younger. They were all in their forties. It was a very different time, a very different experience than they had, and they mostly had siblings, which I did not, because my sisters were with me when I was very little, but then they were gone by the time I was—before I was ten. So I grew up pretty much by myself.

And I had a lot of friends who were single kids. That was—we sort of bonded that way.

Albarelli: Yes. What about changes in the culture in the '60s, and how you were experiencing you know.

Fisher: Sure. Well, you mean from just my perspective in New York?

Albarelli: Yes, yes. And you mentioned the war, and so on.

Fisher: [00:19:02] Yes. Well, New York started to come unraveled. As an empire city, sort of everything became more dangerous and dirtier. It was exciting, but at the same time, it was kind of—and we didn't really know any better. I mean, we weren't growing up in Greenwich, and when I went to prettier parts in the world, or the suburbs, I couldn't deal with them because they were so orderly and sanitized that I found that as disruptive as someone coming to Times Square and seeing the chaos that ensued there. So, it's really just a matter of what your perspective is.

But it was disturbing, because there was a lot going on. The Vietnam War was very disturbing to all of us. I missed the draft by only a year, a year or two. That was disturbing, because I watched this go on and on starting in '67, '68. And the war was escalating. We thought it wasn't going to end. I mean, friends were nervous. Not as nervous as the kids who were a little bit older than we were. So, we found it sort of a disturbing environment. It was an interesting time, and there was a lot more interest from students in change, and getting the country back on its feet. I think they did that successfully, in contrast to what's going on today, less so today. In some instances, yes. But the power of a lot of these lobbies, by contrast, especially the NRA [National Rifle Association], things like that, are just overwhelming. Society, drugs, the opioid crisis—things like that—that really didn't exist quite as badly, as much in as bad a way when I was growing up. So, there was wiggle room, and it was easier to live in different parts of the country.

Albarelli: And were you interested in change? I mean, were you of that generation—

Fisher: [00:20:58] I was interested in fairness. I would say conservative Democrat, that people should have to work for what they earn, but at the same time, government was responsible for at least relieving the penury of the poorest people in this country. And I think they did so for a while, they tried. But it also led to a lot of corruption. I think, though, there's so much that could be done now that's not being done. The poor are really being compromised, dramatically. It's going to be a great societal cost by comparison to what was doing on then, when Johnson was trying to effect change, and have programs, and establish Medicaid, which is important. The country really should have a national health policy, but that's never going to happen.

Albarelli: What about your mother and father and politics?

Fisher: [00:21:49] Well, I mean, they didn't really discuss politics that much. They were very much conservative Democrats, I think. They believed in really helping people, but they also felt that people should be somewhat self-sufficient. But they didn't prescribe to—my father was himself a businessman, and didn't prescribe to Republican ideals. I think he felt that was too harsh, and that most people really weren't capable of completely—in a modern society, completely managing their own affairs without some assistance. He was an admirer of Patrick Moynihan, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, trying to understand, helping the working poor, particularly.

Albarelli: Did he talk about his childhood at all?

Fisher: [00:22:34] A little bit. He was really scarred by it, I think. My grandfather came over with two hundred dollars in his pocket, he had five kids. My father was born here, which was, he was, I think, not planned. They had plenty of kids by then. And my grandfather was working as a first—he had been the manager of what was the equivalent of Brooks Brothers in Kiev, and then left because of the the pogroms, And they arrived with very little money and lived in Brooklyn. And my grandfather worked very hard, worked in sweatshops, and then started—he started importing tea from Russia and peddling it door to door, and peddling slacks and making clothing. Then eventually saved him enough money to start his new shop, and then had a tailor shop. The building's still at Ninety-Eighth and Lexington. It's now a bodega. I have pictures of it somewhere, of what it looked like. He was, you know, a really nice man, but really struggled and then lost his business during the Depression, which really scarred my father. Poverty was very hard for him, having grown up in an educated family, where he felt he would have a shot. But then the Depression came and it was very hard for him to find a job, and he finally did, but as a book designer. He was a book designer for Dodd, Mead & Company; he did very well doing that. But it didn't pay very well, and he eventually started his own—his company at thirty-seven, making kits, radio kits, and then designing them himself and hiring engineers, doing it better. And he got some lucky breaks and then moved on during the war to make—do wartime manufacturing, and then restart the company later.

But I think he was really scarred by his poverty. I think there were a lot of things that he did that were really sort of habits that really died hard, in terms of thrift, which I still have. My kids have it to a certain extent, and I've tried to indoctrinate them, but I don't want to push it too hard. But I think that the notion that it's much harder to make money than to spend it is very true. So, it

sort of rung true with me. I think given the amount of time it took him to really build his business, and he prospers, and struggled for many, many years. People don't realize that. They just think it was sort of an overnight success. It wasn't. It took him at least twenty, twenty-five years to really get off the ground.

So, it was hard. So, the early years for him were very tough. His childhood was challenging. I think he got along with his siblings, but none of them were quite as motivated as he was. I'm not really sure why. His sister died in the influenza epidemic, as did my mother, actually, they had that in common. Her mother died, my natural family. They both [dog barks]—is that—can that pick that up?

Albarelli: Maybe that'll stop in a second. No, I think—

Fisher: It may, it may not. You want me to make sure she's put away? I think that might be easier.

Albarelli: Yes, probably. Good idea.

Fisher: We'll start back [unclear].

Albarelli: Yes, thanks.

Fisher: [unclear]. I'll be right back.

Albarelli: Thanks.

[INTERRUPTION]

Albarelli: Okay. You were telling me about your father's sister?

Fisher: [00:27:20] Yes. Well, my father's sister, Lillian, died during the influenza epidemic of 1919. My mother's mother died. She was quite young, she was probably in her twenties then. My mother was only three years old. My grandfather got married, my mother's mother's sister, which was the tradition back then. Then they were married forever. But it was her stepmother, essentially, raised her. And my father was—I think they were both very scarred by that. They really didn't talk that much, it's interesting. It was a very painful time. I think they really never processed it. But they shared that in common, as did a lot of people, because there were three million people who died during that period. Even though their economic circumstances were quite different.

So, my father's poverty was very much on his mind, I think. He never really recovered from that entirely, as did a lot of people, not recover from what happened during the Depression.

Albarelli: So, what are some concrete—well, some habits you think of that were left over from that period?

Fisher: [00:28:45] Well, I mean, he used to save things and reuse things. He was not wasteful, he didn't throw things out, which I think was actually really not—a really good thing, and I'm that way, too. I run a run a zero-sum budget game. I don't buy things until I run out of them. I don't stockpile stuff. A mantra, one of the beautiful things that he did, I have—for his company, the standard size of a memo sheet is three by five inches. Note cards are that size. One day he was in his print shop downstairs, because he also printed brochures, but he used the printing stations to make these sheets for the—he had all these memo pads for people in his plant, so it encouraged them to write their ideas down. So, there were thousands and thousands of these sheets that were made, et cetera. And he was in the printing plant one day, and the guy was finishing cutting the three by five sheets, and then there was scrap on the side, which was only two inches long. And he started putting them in the garbage can. And my dad said, "Why are you throwing that out?" He said, "Well, Avery, you know, the way you set this, these reams are designed so that you can only get X-number of three by five sheets out of it, and then then the scrap on the end is two inches." And my dad said, "Well, don't throw that out. Take the two-inch scrap and make it two by five." So, he happened to have a cabinet shop in his plant then. And so just for himself, he had these custom two by five trays made, which I had one on my desk, and I still use that sort of as a mantra of thrift, and I still have a large supply of them, because we never ran out of them. So, I use a two by five tray. That's kind of a reminder to me of his thriftiness.

Albarelli: What about—

Fisher: [00:30:44] We grew up in a time when people washed those and and would wear them out. We would buy things of quality and they would last a long time. Finally, we would give

them away. But you didn't throw things out, or you didn't buy things if they were not of great quality.

Albarelli: Yes. Talk about the way he dressed, and a little bit about the apartment, I remember you said, "the apartment."

Fisher: [00:31:06] Yes. Well, he dressed, as did my mother, they were both pretty formal. They weren't—it was not a sweatpants and slacks age, but even when he went to the country he always wore a tie and jacket, and when he came back he would put a tie on, on a weekend, which I thought was silly, because he was getting dressed up for the doorman. But he said, "You know, I've got to keep my image up." So, he would buy nice suits and things. When he began to be prosperous, and of course, England was not as flush then, and things were less expensive. He would have suits made in London at a Savile Row tailor. So, he was very elegant. You know, conservative, but very put-together all the time, as was my mother.

The apartment was very comfortable. We bought an apartment. He—it's a co-op at Ninety-Third and Park. He wasn't intending to move there, but a friend of his had done this syndication. And there were a couple of apartments leftover that they owned, and then there were tenants who were just moving out one by one, usually when they passed away. My friend said to my dad, there's apartment left now on the second floor in the back of the building. It's an eight-room apartment, three thousand square feet, or whatever. He said, would you like to buy it? My dad said, "How much are you offering it for?" He said, "Twelve thousand dollars." My father said, "I'll give you nine." And he took it. That was the cost of sort of a not-so-great small house in the

middle of New Jersey at the time. But of course, you had to send your kids to private school, so that was the tradeoff here. And the city was really changing, so people were starting to move to the suburbs in droves.

But he very much wanted to stay in New York because of the nature of his work. So, he bought the apartment. It was a nice apartment, it was rather dark because it was on the second floor, and my bedroom faced a courtyard, from which there was only one ray of reflective sunlight. I'm not saying I didn't—I had a nice sized bedroom, but it was dark. I would rather have lived somewhere else and had a little bit more light. But anyway, I grew up in a dark apartment, and just got used to it. It was very comfortable. That sort of stoic upper East Side kind of solid building, solid people, and very quiet and conservative. That was my memory of it. Then of course there was always music.

We had some funny situations. My dad was on the board and had to deal with all sorts of very strange issues in terms of the super, who was screwing all of the widows in the building. You know, they finally had to get rid of him. He was like a building gigolo. And all sorts of other things happened. We had an upstairs neighbor who had literally married and buried three husbands, one richer than the last. She was tiny, she was about five foot two, and she would go out with some guy to escort to Elm Rock [phonetic] every night. She'd come up at three o'clock in the morning, when my father was working really hard. I don't know, she'd put bowling balls in her bed and roll side to side and they would both crash on the floor. It must have been books, but it sounded like bowling balls. And it would wake up my mother and it would drive her nuts.

Then my mother would get up in the morning, seven o'clock in the morning and start hammering in the ceiling to make sure that my upstairs neighbor was awakened.

Then finally, it didn't stop. My father sent letters, and had a lawyer send a letter, and whatever. That didn't have any effect. Then finally he said—finally he decided to have his engineers build a base-only speaker, which he flush-mounted to the ceiling of the hallway which connected the living room and the bedrooms. And he sent her a list of things that he would play if she wasn't quiet, including E. Power Biggs and the giant Wurlitzer in Chicago, and *Wachet auf*, which means "Wake Up" by Bach, it's one of his famous organ fugues. And she didn't, and so my father would play music we could hear on the tenth floor. After a couple of days it stopped. So, it was rather amusing. So things like that happened growing up in that building. It was a real Peyton Place. There were 170 apartments, so they really had quite a variety of people there, including one fellow who was an upstairs neighbor, with whom I am now friendly still. I was a teenager, but he was in his thirties or forties at the time. Now he's in his eighties. We laugh about some of his interactions with my dad. He was a bit of a playboy and he used to have huge parties, and Bianca Jagger and Mick Jagger were there, et cetera, et cetera, with lots of noise. He would park his Ferrari in the courtyard and block everybody. My father finally had, again, his print shop design these stickers that had superglue on the back of them. He would, whenever he parked his car too long, he would slap a sticker on the windshield, which this fella would have to scrape off with a razor blade. Sot there was just tons of this. My dad was—he's just, like, you don't want to cross me. He got things done, but he didn't like to be messed with.

Albarelli: Yes. Yes.

Fisher: Anyway, that was the nexus of that.

Albarelli: So, what are some other memories of the business?

Fisher: [00:36:57] Well, I worked in the factory after camp, quite a few times. I enjoyed just seeing the—it was just a very orderly, interesting place, very well-lit, beautifully designed. When he moved to his new headquarters, which was from where they sold the company, and they had just a really great range of employees and things going on, and were very dedicated to making people happy. They sold their sets, which were not inexpensive, but people found great value in them, and then really had an enormous affection for the brand, for the quality of what he was doing. He really set a standard that other people couldn't set. He hired engineers who were trained in Germany and from other companies, because after the war it was very hard for the Germans to pay really good wages. They ended up coming here and making ten times what they would have in Germany, and having a much better life. I mean, he was pressured, but they were very—they had a much better chance of success here. It was interesting.

Albarelli: So, did you get to know any of them in particular?

Fisher: [00:38:15] Some of his executives, not all. They were all kind of cautious with me, because they felt that I was probably as much of a KGB spy as my father was. I would question them about everything, and they were just kind of—they liked me, but they were wary of me. One time I remember I worked in the mailroom, and this guy started, you know, you would have

to use tape back then on the Pitney Bowes machines and mailing machines. And this fellow just sort of ran off a whole bunch of, because he was lazy, ran off a bunch of one cent or five cent units, something that was at the end of sort of a run. I said, "Why are you doing that? We're paying for that." So, he sort of made a snide remark or whatever, and said, "You know, I don't really care." And I told my father about this. My father literally called the guy in and said, "My son noticed that you were doing this." You know, "Why are you doing it?" Which didn't do anything for our friendship, but still I just felt like I was right, he was wasting money, and I'd been taught that that was not the way to do things. Anyway, it was an interesting time. But I learned a lot working in the plant and I enjoyed it.

Albarelli: What were some of your responsibilities, working there?

Fisher: [00:39:45] Well, mostly the mailroom, but I did also work in the Advertising Department, just sort of learning how brochures were designed and laid out, and how they did creatively the pattern for the manuals, and also the advertising brochures. So, it's interesting. I questioned everybody. I started to sort all of the common cards by category, and things like that. It was fascinating. I got sort of passed around the fleet.

Albarelli: Yes?

Fisher: [00:40:20] So I became a little bit of a mascot, which was fine. Although I think employees were sort of wary of me, because I was sort of a little too smart for my britches kind

of eight to twelve-year-old. I didn't lord it over them, I just was trying to learn, understand how things worked, which was fascinating. I really enjoyed it. I had a great time doing it.

So that was fun. Then we had a country house in Connecticut, and—

Albarelli: I was going to ask you to talk about that, yes.

Fisher: [00:40:53] So that was great, and that was nice to stay with my father after the company was sold. As part of his collection, he had one of the speakers from the World—which was the centerpiece in the 1939 World's Fair, which we sold, actually. My cousin inherited it, my nephew, and he sold it for a lot of money, because it's a real collector's item. A Westinghouse speaker. It was fascinating how many people literally knew what that was, and it was really amazing, and the sound was incredible. We sold that after he passed. He had a big record collection up there as well, and enjoyed being up there. But my dad was always moving, he was always on the run, kind of. The minute he got up there, he started thinking about going home. He was preparing to go before he left, and then when he got there, he was ready to go home. It was kind of bizarre. He was relaxed at times, and relaxing. And we played Scrabble, so he was very simple, quiet part of the world.

But anyway, so that was interesting. I had, growing up here, we started—I spent a lot of weekends with him when they first bought the house, and then I became fourteen, and I was interested in hanging out in New York, and meeting girls, and whatever. We had a little bit of a

truce that I would come up every other weekend, which was great. So that worked. My sisters were then long gone from the house.

Albarelli: Did you have anything to do with your aunts and uncles, so your father's siblings?

Fisher: [00:42:50] Somewhat. Yes, I mean, we saw them occasionally. I saw a lot of my aunt, who lived in Westchester, who's still alive, remarkably. She is now ninety-nine, my mother's sister. But my parents didn't really get along with their relatives. They were kind of set apart, I think, partly because of their success, and also because they were just very independent. They really weren't, I wouldn't say, they weren't warm and fuzzy people, at the end of the day. And I think they felt like they were being chased for money or favors, or whatever, which is true in some cases, but not all. So, they sort of disassociated with a lot of their family members. So, I didn't really grow up spending a lot of time with my relatives. I liked them, and I always kind of wondered why we never saw them, but we didn't. It was once or twice a year, and that was it. So, I never really did that.

My wife has a big extended family, so happy with that and I just dropped my side of the equation, for the most part.

Albarelli: Polly Kahn mentioned a gelato place that you—did you have a gelato—

Fisher: [00:44:02] I had an ice cream store, yes, in the mid nineties I only owned it for two years, called "Mr. Chips." I just did it for fun, and I really enjoyed doing that. I did it, actually, right

after my father died, because we had a good location. I discovered the ice cream, which was New Jersey, which is where my wife is from. So, I got the ice cream first, and then we built the store. We did well. But the neighborhood was not as advanced as it is now, in terms of traffic and everything else. So, it was a struggle. But these other guys who were actually in the ice cream business wanted an outlet, and it had already been built, essentially, for them, so they bought it, ran it for quite a long time. So, it was a good deal. I sold the store over a squash game.

Albarelli: Yes?

Fisher: So, funny.

Albarelli: Yes. What are some of your memories of your father playing music?

Fisher: [00:45:00] Well, I mean, he taught me violin, for—I played violin from the ages of eight to eleven, so that was something we could really do together. I really enjoyed that, that he taught me how to play. So, I got to the first position, which became much more challenging. Then I moved on to play with Vladimir Graffman, who was Gary Graffman, the pianist's, father. And he was a second violinist from the New York Philharmonic But the woman—the young girl behind me was sort of the next Anne-Sophie Mutter, so she sort of cut fifteen minutes into my hour. I think he just grudgingly had me study with him until he couldn't take it anymore, or I couldn't take it. So as my dad would say, "I retired out of respect for the living." I enjoyed the violin, I'm glad I took it. I actually have taken up the banjo recently, because I like string instruments.

Albarelli: Yes?

Fisher: [00:45:59] But I didn't get past that point where you can really develop a sense of feeling for the instrument, because when you start to get into positions, it just becomes immensely complicated. And your dedication in terms of time, practice, and your natural ability to control the strings is very, very—it's very, very challenging. You, A, have to have the talent, and B, you have to have the focus to continue when you start to go to first, second, third position, and I really didn't have it. So, I'm glad I did it and I enjoyed playing, but I didn't really—I couldn't keep it up.

Albarelli: Yes?

Fisher: [00:46:43] Yes. I don't remember if my sisters—I think they took piano, I can't remember. My sons both took piano. One grudgingly, the other one became quite good. And he still plays occasionally.

Albarelli: So, let's talk a little bit about Lincoln Center now.

Fisher: Sure.

Albarelli: How much more time do you have? So, I can pace-wise—

Fisher: I'm fine. I'm okay. Half an hour, is that—

Albarelli: Yes, yes, that's more than enough. I mean, if there are—

Fisher: So, I'm not a [crosstalk]—

Albarelli: —follow-up questions—

Fisher: I'm looking because somebody's supposed to get in touch with me [unclear].

Albarelli: Yes, sure. But if there are follow-up questions, would it be all right if I—

Fisher: Yes, of course.

Albarelli: —contacted you—

Fisher: Absolutely, we'll do it again.

Albarelli: Okay. Yes, great, okay.

Fisher: If you have a list of things, if everything comes together and you need to cross-reference.

Albarelli: Yes.

Fisher: Yes.

Albarelli: Okay, so—

Fisher: [00:47:30] Memories of Lincoln Center? Well, I mean the main middle hall was amazing, he kept it secret from everybody until the day it happened, he told us the night before.

Albarelli: What do you remember of that?

Fisher: [00:47:42] I remember thinking that it was a wonderful thing to do, it was really a wonderful gift. It was really at a time when the city was really compromised, and I think it was really very much appreciated as a gesture at time when people were not making large gestures like that. So, he became sort of, obviously, a celebrity overnight, and continued to be long after that gift. And liked the attention and didn't like the attention, I mean, I think liked well-wishers, he didn't like the amount of mail that was coming in, asking for donations to everything in the world. But that's part of the package. That's the way it happens. He got some very amusing letters. He used to get a lot of mail addressed to "Mr. Hall," about things like the lines in the ladies' room, and all this bizarre stuff. I wish he'd kept all of that. The funniest thing was that, the Japanese love postcard sets; they loved these accordion postcard sets of places that most Japanese will never visit. This is a time when it was expensive to travel, but they were sort of collector's items, like it had sort of a cultural anime [unclear]. So, somebody sent him a deck of

these cards, scenes of New York City. One of the cards was "Avery Fisher Memorial Hall." So, my father, in his inimitable way, tracked down the publisher—which was not an easy task—and sent him a letter saying, you know, "Contrary to popular opinion, I am still alive. So, could you please change the card to 'Avery Fisher Hall' from 'Avery Fisher Memorial Hall'?" You know, things like that happened that were truly bizarre.

I remember him being very engaged in the management, and with understanding how the board worked, and what they were trying to do, at an earlier time when they were really sort of struggling to maintain and develop audiences.

Albarelli: Mhm.

Fisher: [00:49:46] And he was particularly close to Marty [Martin A.] Segal, who was chairman for a long time, and had a great experience with him. That was a lot of fun. And he enjoyed interacting with a lot of people over there. It was really very interesting. I met a lot of them, I really enjoyed learning about what they were doing, and I'm doing programming and understanding it. And still like that; I'm not really involved at that level at all anymore. I guess I could be if I were interested in being on one of the boards, but it's just—I just haven't had time. I think the involvement is now more financial than cultural, in a certain level.

But it was a fascinating group of constituents and the complexities were there then, and remain now. There were some real characters. He was there when Papp, Joe [Joseph] Papp, was there in public theater. And Papp had an outsized ego, and he would come into board meetings, swinging

an axe. My dad didn't really put up with that very well. So, one time—usually my father wasn't the target, somebody else was. So, Joe Papp let somebody have it. Then before the guy could actually react, he walked out. So, my father turned to the guy, he said, "Well, I guess you've been Papptized." [laughter]

And then there was another incident where—there's another story, but there were things like that. There were big personalities, and a lot of things to contend with. Because the Center was really fairly young. I was about ten years old when he was involved in the board. It was essentially founded in '66, and it's really about just having this collection of buildings in that part of the world.

Albarelli: Who are some of the other characters?

Albarelli: [00:52:00] John Mazzola, who was really a very lively criminal lawyer, and he was president of the Lincoln Center, and he was very forthright. I enjoyed him, I enjoyed talking to him. He was really very out there. Well, Marty Segal, and Amyas Ames, who was part of the original crew with the Rockefellers. I know his son. He's very nice. They were all very, you know, working incredibly hard to keep the place together and get it promoted. It was admirable. It gave me an appreciation for culture and what it takes to get an organization. [bell rings] He gave me an appreciation of what it takes to form an organization and keep it going with its money, and please the board and please the constituents and your customers, and everybody else. It was a package.

Albarelli: Say more about Marty Segal and your father's relationship with Marty Segal.

Fisher: [00:53:05] Sure. Well, I think he admired Marty because they were both able businessmen and very disciplined and very forthright, and Marty really didn't brook—I mean, he loved to hear other people's opinions, and if you had a good idea, he wanted to hear it, and he wanted you to then execute it. He was very good that way, sort of not taking everything—trying to do everything himself. But he was tough. One time my dad said that this fellow was upset about something, and he said—it was some executive in the Lincoln Center, and he said, "If you don't reverse this, I'm going to resign." Marty turned to him and he said, "You just did." [laughter] My dad was in the room, he said, "Well"—that was pretty tough. He ran that place. He was tough. He was tough. Smart, but fair. Tough and fair.

Albarelli: Mhm.

Fisher: [00:54:04] If you were invited to a function of Marty's and you didn't show up, he would send flowers the next day to your office and say to your secretary, you know, "I'm sorry that So-and-So is not feeling well. He must have been sick last night." She said, "No, he wasn't sick." He said, "Well, why didn't he show up to Such-and-Such?" [laughs] So he didn't really give an inch. He was tough, but nice. I'm still very friendly with his son, Paul. We were all in the Century Club together. My dad got me in there early, although I was kind of out of my league at thirty when everybody else was sixty. Now that I'm sixty-two, it's a lot more comfortable. I can understand why people who were thirty—actually, we've got a lot of younger members now, so it's great. But that's where I met him and Marty and a lot of his friends, some of who [have] now

become friends of mine, you know, they're now in their eighties and nineties. So, it's really enjoyable. Still one fella, who was ninety-five and passed last year, he used to come up to me and call me "Avery." He said that I looked so much like him that he couldn't remember that I was his son, or that was one his of friends, which was very nice.

Albarelli: Talk a little bit about your father's relationship with Mary Lou.

Fisher: [00:55:27] Sure. I think he respected her greatly. He knew that she understood what the mission was, and that she would do it and stick with it, and really kind of carry it along for a long period of time. I think that that was really encouraging, to have somebody who really understood the vision and would—but Mary Lou also has very good and strong opinions, but fair in her manner, in terms of disseminating them. I think that was good, stylistically, for my father to really hear her, and to be able to work with her. They were a good couple, especially in the early years. When we were trying to get—you know, the award was—it's not like the award didn't get attention early on, but it didn't get the kind of attention the Leventritt Prize did, because it was young. Now that it's been around for forty or fifty years, well, it's fifteen—well, now it's, yes, it's forty-five. It'll be fifty in five years—that's a long time. Now it's very well-respected because we had so many people gathered, most of the musicians that we've chosen, because we've chosen carefully, all have gone on to careers of different levels, but certainly it gave a lot of people a push in the beginning. They were very happy to get it, and still are.

But they were really trying to sort of carve out what they wanted to be. He also set it up beautifully, because it's not a competition. People don't really realize that, it's unlike—not that

there's anything wrong with competition, what he didn't like about competition is that the person who's number two, who's still a very fine musician, and he didn't want somebody to sort of have to slink away feeling like they were inferior to the person who got the prize, because when you got up to that level of the competition, you were still very, very good, but it made you look bad. So, what he didn't want to do was have this competition.

Albarelli: Mhm.

Fisher: [00:57:44] So we recommend people, and nobody knows what's going on. If they win they win, if they don't, there's no discussion of what their aptitude is, certainly, in public eye, which doesn't mean that a lot of them are not worthy of recognition, it's just that we pick the very best of the best. So that's really, I think, a better way of running the program. It's like the awards program that we have now. Then the Lifetime Achievement award, the prize is really something for somebody who's really well-established and has really taken themselves to a new level.

Albarelli: Yo-Yo Ma, for instance, do you have memories of musicians here, or at the apartment?

Fisher: Yes, in the apartment, yes. Then Yo-Yo—he and I were a class apart in college. And he was, of course, up and coming, even in the mid-seventies. Everybody knew that he was going to be an extraordinary talent. So, he and Manny Ax used to play at my parents' apartment, when they were in their early twenties, which was really nice. Not often, but a couple of times a year, when they had time to tour, or were in New York. It was really very pleasant. It was really nice

to have them. Yo-Yo played when my father was dying, actually, over communication. I don't remember how he did it, and my father woke up out of a coma, actually, hearing music, which was quite something. It was very moving. And Yo-Yo played at my mother's memorial as well. So, it was lovely. Not her memorial, but her birthdays, when she was eighty-five and ninety, and then about to be ninety-five. So, it was lovely. It was a really wonderful time. He's a really great guy, as is Manny. So, and a lot of those musicians now are members of the Century Association. I don't see most of them off when they're all on tour, but I do occasionally. It's a nice reminder.

Albarelli: Yes.

Fisher: [01:00:00] Of his emotional connection to all the artists, too, and not just any way that would be imperious. He really enjoyed meeting them and watching them, and hearing about their progress.

Albarelli: Yes. Talk about his death, your father's death.

Fisher: [01:00:24] Sure. Well, he had a fall, and he was up in Connecticut, and he was walking around in socks on oak floors, fell, and then fractured his hip, and then had to have a hip replacement, because he wasn't—he didn't really work out a lot. He was sort of sedentary. The hip operation went well, but I think a bone fragment went to his brain, and he had a stroke. Then after, shortly after, died. Maybe weeks, or less than a month later [unclear], of a stroke, and an aneurysm. So, we were up in Connecticut, it was just sort of slow going for a while, for a week or two, and then that was it. That was February '94.

Albarelli: What do you remember of the day of his death?

Fisher: [01:01:23] It was snowing very heavily, I remember that. I don't know. It all let loose, it was very much a kind of a winter scene. It was very bizarre. But he was very comfortable, and just slipped out. They gave him morphine, and that was it. It was unfortunate, because I think he would have enjoyed being around a bit longer. You know, he was eighty-seven when he died. But he was comfortable. It was just a freak accident. It's happened to other people. So, we immediately went out and bought socks for my mother that have those little dots on them, make sure the same thing didn't happen to her. She was very grateful for it. But my mother ended up outliving him by twenty years. And she was ten years younger.

Albarelli: She became more involved, or she became involved with the—

Fisher: [01:02:20] She was involved a little bit in music, but she had other charities that she was involved with, young concert artists, young audiences was hers and also [unclear]. She was on the board of the Y for—she was the longest standing board member of the YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association], I think in its history, maybe from 1945 to fairly close to her death.

Albarelli: And then you became involved after your father's death, right, with the Lincoln Center?

Fisher: Right.

Albarelli: So, talk about that.

Fisher: [01:02:49] Well, I mean only to the extent that I'm on the Fisher Awards Board with my sister, and also my nephew, which is very enjoyable. Well, the way my father set up the board was, because he wanted us involved, first I joined, and my sister, my middle sister. My oldest sister lives in France, so she's not that available. But my father didn't really want the family to be meddlesome, so we have suggested nominations, but we sort of have to suggest that to somebody on the nominating board. We don't nominate people ourselves, because he didn't want this to be sort of kind of a pet project situation, where we would be at all—there wouldn't be any sort of form of nepotism or favoritism shown, or that any of the board members would feel pressure to elect someone for the prize in any way. So, we actually sometimes recommend people indirectly, which might or might not be awarded. But that's based on no less or more knowledge than anybody else whose knowledgeable about music, and sees up and coming musicians and talent. But for the most part, we really leave that to people who are on the recommendation board, and the executive board, because their exposure to talent is so much greater than ours, that they can judge the relative talent that's coming through, and what those people are capable of.

Albarelli: How did your father's becoming a celebrity impact—or what kind of impact did it have on your life?

Fisher: [01:04:30] Well, I mean, it was a little bit—it was a big bar for me, in terms of whether I would sort of compete at that level. I decided after a while it wasn't really a great idea to do that, and my father warned me against it. He said, emotionally one time, he said, "You know, I really wouldn't want to"—he said, "Things aren't bad for you. You're comfortable, but at the same time, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes trying to compete against what I've done." He said, "You can try, and I don't blame you, but you should compete with yourself, don't compete with me, because what happened to me happened because of hard work, but also timing, and a whole bunch of things happened that made my business a success." And he said, "You can't necessarily duplicate that." So, I didn't. I went and I ran a bunch of different companies myself, and have done things—some things have done well, some things haven't. I've sort of led kind of a private and quiet life, but doing things that were of interest, or useful.

Albarelli: Such as?

Fisher: [01:05:37] Well, I had a food service and consulting business, I was very interested in food. I had a small advertising agency, then I had these ice cream stores as a side. Then I did some other consulting in consumer goods. Now I'm running a medical device business, which is really terrific. We treat mental health symptoms, so that's been very rewarding for the last ten years, twelve years. We've been doing that for a long time.

Albarelli: Say a little bit more about the device, yes.

Fisher: [01:06:08] Sure. It's a hand-held device, it was invented by two men, MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] guys, engineers, and we got the patents in 2007, I did with a partner. We've been running that, so we manufacture them in New Jersey and sell them on the internet, and sell quite a few of them. So, it's been a very nice, successful product, in an area that I was very interested in.

Albarelli: Just depression?

Fisher: [01:06:31] Yes. I mean, I've been on the spectrum a little bit myself. It's been very interesting, it was an interesting project for me on a personal level. I don't want to be the poster boy for my own product, but it was an interesting thing to do. I like the non-pharmacological side of treatment, which I think is important, and it's up and coming.

Albarelli: Yes? How does it work? Say something about it.

Fisher: [01:07:01] Sure. It's a hand-held device which uses a mild form of alternating current to stimulate key transmitters you wear. There are two wires with sponge applicators and you wear it under a headband, and it basically stimulates serotonin and dopamine, and beta endorphin.

Albarelli: Yes? Yes, great.

Fisher: [01:07:18] Yes, that's the nature of it.

Albarelli: Okay, well, this is, I think, a good place to stop.

Fisher: Sure.

Albarelli: I will have—

[END OF INTERVIEW]