

TRANSCRIPT - LEAH SUAREZ

Interviewee: LEAH SUAREZ

Interviewer: JONATHAN TAYLOR, DENNIS JOYNER, RILEY FRANKS

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JONATHAN TAYLOR: My name is Jonathan Taylor, I am a sophomore.

LEAH SUAREZ: Johnathan, nice to meet you.

JT: Nice to meet you.

DENNIS JOYNER: I'm Dennis Joyner.

LS: Dennis, it's nice to meet you as well.

RILEY FRANKS: I'm Riley Franks

LS: Riley, it's nice to meet you. Good morning everyone, it's nice to be here.

Thanks for having me, Kerry and Marina. I'm very happy to be here.

KERRY TAYLOR: You're good, yeah, take it away.

JT: Awesome. So, I guess the first question that I have is were you always involved in music? Like in your youth when did it really start where you wanted to pursue vocals and jazz?

LS: Vocals and jazz specifically? Or music in general?

JT: I guess we can start with music in general.

LS: Okay, that's a great question. A good place to start. I think music has always been a part of my life. I think it's really a part of everyone's lives in our culture, maybe to some others its more pronounced and prominent. My mom was a gospel singer and piano

player, played by ear.

She always made it a point to have an upright piano in the house, even though my father hated it. Church was very important growing up. I was in the choir and kind of loved sitting at her feet. That was her downtime. She was a nurse really by trade and teacher and worked three jobs and would just come home and play and sing.

She and her sisters had a trio. For me growing up, I think, that was really profound. Musically, I didn't really get started with my formal training until that time. I really honestly dreamed of being in Westside Story. Secretly I wanted to be Anita. I wanted to be her character that was me. But, really you have to tell everybody you're going to be Maria because that was way more digestible for at least parents and the outside world. I also thought I was going to be Aldonza, Dulcinea in Man of La Mancha.

As a young girl, I think that was a really interesting time before I got into formal training in band. And then my interest changed, jazz wasn't really what I — I didn't realize the Tin Pan Alley tunes were what you considered jazz at the time. I actually had a classical background on euphonium which is a tenor tuba. Went to band instead of chorus. I have three older brothers and a half-brother, who I never lived with.

They would hear the sounds coming from my bedroom and tell me some very inappropriate things, as brothers do. It was honestly kind of traumatic in a lot of ways. That was a traumatic time in my life. Music, at that point, became my salvation, my refuge, my point of peace if you will.

JT: Would you say that you working with your mother and also her trio that she had that cohesion with the whole group; would you consider that part of your salvation, just working together? I guess music accomplishes —

LS: I appreciate that question. Let me be a little more clear. She actually got married when she was fourteen to my father and she came from the upstate of South Carolina. That is where she had her gospel trio with her sisters. They were called Page Three because their last name was Page. She was the eldest of the sisters, so when she left that was her salvation and she sort of left that church as well which was a big thing then, especially for Pentecostal Holiness and a lot of interesting things came out of that area of the state especially.

Interesting mixes of people and religion. So, when she left I think that was her way of finding some solace and she definitely passed that down. There was very little said about it, I always remember that being important to her. We would always sing in the car because once we got in the home we couldn't really sing if my brothers or my dad were there. That was also a female mother daughter thing. When we had a relationship that was really the closest we could be to that. I appreciate your questions, thank you.

JT: Other than your mother, were there any other teachers or maybe some peers that influenced your early musical career?

LS: How long do we have? (laughter) I really thought about this question a lot lately. Yes, early on. I think one of my brothers had a great influence on me because he would send me mix tapes. He moved away, all three of my brothers were soccer players and they moved away and were traveling the world.

I was the fourth son that my father never had and that's part of my story. I have twin brothers and a brother who is younger. He would send me postcards and letters. I would wear his jersey when he was gone. I was a total tomboy too. I just missed him that was my way of being close.

Having somebody there for me. He would send me mix tapes and because he was traveling the world I was so infatuated with what he would send me because he was around so many different kinds of people and seeing so many different kinds of places. That's when I first heard Dizzy Gillespie. Then you find out oh my gosh, he's from South Carolina and what is this sound? What is this mix of all these things I love? He's playing horn but he's also singing and he's playing these Latin rhythms with these musicians. He's an ambassador. That all made sense to me then.

I think he doesn't really know it probably, my brother, how profound that was, but when you're nine, ten, eleven and you are going through excuse me, but some shit in life. You like the real stuff. You grasp onto those kinds of things. That was a way to get out and see the world. Other influences, my band director for sure in positive and negative ways.

I say negative, but they were life changing ways, but definitely influenced discipline. I think my father hated that I gravitated to music so much that it was almost a great push for me. He was a great influence for me, in a lot of ways, for me to continue on this artistic path. I was an athlete as well and you chose a different path. It's not always welcomed.

JT: Considering that you stuck around in South Carolina, most of your brothers were traveling around the world and they were exposing you to various cultures, would you say that some of the mix tapes he sent back to you, could you tell any cultural difference? This doesn't sound like South Carolina, this definitely sounds like —

LS: For sure, at the time, they really were mix tapes. They were actual tapes. I guess how you would explain it now is like a Spotify mix that you would send somebody.

But, then you actually have your magnetic tape and you're recording it. It's crazy to think that it's not really a thing now. I never really thought about that. I have them all. I have a cassette player and it's actually a great form of archiving.

Eventually everything wears out and we are trying to figure that out now, but these mix tapes, for me it was also about the packaging. He spent a lot of time in writing everything out, would put the duration of the songs; would curate essentially music for me. Would curate music that he thought I was interested in or that interested him. Some of it would be, of course, I didn't understand it until ten years later, but that's what made it so special. It would be a happy Valentine's Day and it would be Miles Davis, "My Funny Valentine" mixed with Ahmad Jamal.

You are hearing all of these great sounds. So, that definitely helped. We did travel because of soccer as a family. I think just being exposed to other languages too. Music is very much a language and it's such a cultural center of a society and a community and how people gather.

So, when you are in any part of the US or of the world, especially other parts of the world not only are you hearing different languages in speaking and how we communicate person to person interpersonally at dinner, which is a huge part of that too, which is the meal, the food. Whether its food, sports, art; that kind of thing. But, music was always a centerpiece whether we knew it or not. Whether you were staying in a monastery at a church and you hear the bells. All those things, it's music.

JT: For your musical career, did you travel at all, or is your traveling mainly just you around with your brothers for their soccer competitions?

LS: When I was young? We traveled a lot as a family in that way. Always in a

van or on a plane or whatever that was. In band, we did just a lot of state and regional traveling and then national eventually. I went on to George Mason University for my study on euphonium.

I went to North Carolina first and played there and then D.C. and really loved being in D.C. because that's also a mecca where you can meet so many different kinds of people, such an intersectionality. Past that I came back to College of Charleston and then went to Copenhagen on tour. That was really my first experience on my own as a band leader leaving this place. Leaving the comfort of not only Charleston, but I think the US in a very deliberate way. When you go somewhere else, no matter where that is, you can be who you want to be and who you need to be.

I think there is something really special about that and finding your identity as a young person. Musically as well. When I got there it hit me like a ton of bricks. I was like oh right, I'm at the Copenhagen Jazz Festival and I'm representing something. I'm also representing myself, who is that person. I was twenty-four at the time. You're probably twenty?

JT: Twenty.

KT: They are all a little younger.

LS: I think, especially for a woman who was turning twenty-four. I was married at the time and it was just such a profound moment. We were staying in a hotel with some of the greatest musicians in the world. At the prominent hotel where all the jazz musicians stayed at the Copenhagen Jazz Festival and we were the nightly house band. We played in the festival and we had a recording at [00:12:51 Steinway] Hall. All of these things.

What was supposed to be a six-week tour turned into me calling my husband and saying I don't know when I'll be back. Needless to say, we're not together anymore. Six weeks turned into six months for me and I literally cashed in everything I had and I slept on a floor. I was the happiest I had ever been. I needed to heal there and I wrote a bunch of music that a lot of people have not heard yet. These kinds of experiences, that sort of set everything on fire and I just said okay however I can travel playing music that's how I want to communicate and be in the world and move in this world.

JT: Awesome. Well, I think I'm going to pass the mic along.

LS: Thank you.

Dennis Joyner: My questions are mostly going to be mostly around your music career and performances and your recording that you did. I think you touched on it earlier, but could you describe what your first performance felt like, how you felt going in? Just the experience in general?

LS: As an instrumentalist, young or as a professional?

DJ: Professional.

LS: Wow, these are great questions. I was terrified because also singing is very different than performing on an instrument. I remember when I moved back here, I had to move back here because I had surgery on my mouth so I could no longer play my horn at the level, I was going to be in the Marine band that was my goal. Get to D.C., be in the marine band and play. That was my life dream. That's all you can do as a euphonium player to be fair.

There are many service bands you can play it. I have a lot of respect for that and a lot of friends who play. Finding my voice here was really a different thing because you

are also as vulnerable as you can be. Using your singing voice is much different than speaking and public speaking. It's really naked and really raw. That's how I felt.

I don't know that you ever get used to that feeling. I think you learn how to embrace it and learn how to use it for good and channel that energy. Nervous is how terrified, naked, and also really excited. There is something that clicked in that performance that I just knew that this is what I was supposed to be doing.

DJ: Where was your first performance at?

LS: My first pro gig was actually at the Charleston Grill, the Charleston Place Hotel and I got my ass handed to me [laughter]. That was really humiliating. To be fair, I was a student in a lot of ways. You're always still learning. But that gig was— actually I shouldn't say that, I should say this, it was at the Charleston Grill, that's all you should know.

DJ: Out of all the recordings you did, what would be your favorite if you had to pick one?

LS: Recordings that I've personally recorded? The only one that I really did. I technically have two EPs which stands for extended play, extra play; when we used to actually have records. Everyone has seen a record? Now they are making a big comeback. Seventy-eights or forty-fives or whatever you had at the time. But, in CD form it was actually a real physical CD.

There were two physical CDs. The first one was right before I went to Copenhagen and it was just a quick sampler. It was recorded on the fly, overnight, in two hours. I was like alright, well we did that. I am a believer in everything being documented, so whatever you can do to have a live recording; those are my favorites



because that's real time, real life. But, actually releasing my EP ten, eleven years ago when I got back from Copenhagen. Five of eight of the tunes are my original tunes in their infancy. I created also, like the mix tape, this album artwork. I worked with my friend Nathan Durfee, who was a local artist here. We were both at the start of our careers. I was really proud of this album because it was the first thing that I had really created that felt wholly me. Now, I'm excited about what's next, always. But, I am proud that there was an output and there was work to it.

DJ: When you go into the studio to do these recordings of all the music that you are coming up with, what is your approach to going into the studio?

LS: Try to be as prepared as I can be because time is money in the studio honestly. I think it's important to go in with people, I've learned this the hard way too, to go in with people who bring you up and make you feel really good. For me, that's sometimes more important than how technically proficient the music is. At the end of the day people are putting this into their lives and if it doesn't move you whenever you're driving down the road, or running, or washing dishes, or whatever you are doing then what's the point. For me, I think going into the studio with people who at least have a vested interest in your project and in you as a person.

They don't have to love the material, you're paying them to be there. I don't love everything I do all the time either, but at the same time I think that's important. I think the respect of the entire experience. Then the music, that's the gift. That's the part that it should make itself at that point. If you have all the right ingredients; the preproduction, the planning, the arrangements, all of that done so that you can walk in and as an artist just feel like an artist and create.

DJ: This is probably going to be a hard question, but what would you say would be your highest and lowest moments in your musical career?

LS: Oh man. We should have talked at three in the morning this morning. I would have given you some good ones. I think, honestly, they happen at the same times. I'm often up at that time in the morning and in fact I didn't get to sleep until about five and knew I would have a two hour window and pushed it until I could. Let's start with the lowest moment.

They are teaching moments, the moments you learn the most. I think it wasn't necessarily a musically low moment for me, except I had to go out on stage after a dear friend died. Not only was I performing in a show, I was producing the show. I was responsible for the organization that was putting the show on. I found this person dead just two weeks before because then we had to do all the funeral arrangements, do the jazz procession, arrange all the city planning, and all this stuff.

There was something about going on stage, talk about feeling naked, alone, and dry. It was also very much the highest point of my career because I was just crying backstage and people never saw the tears because you hit the stage and you just have to be on. I knew I had some grace in the audience, you never really have grace in the audience. People are still judgmental. They don't want to see you cry. They want to see you cry a little bit, just enough to get a little choked up in the song, but not enough to not hear the song.

I knew that I had some friends in the audience, but it's a packed house and I had to show up and I didn't want to show up. I was numb in so many ways and very raw in so many ways. That was a very low moment, but also a very important moment

professionally because I realized how important it is that no matter what's going on I have a job to do. I went out and did it. I broke down and my body completely shut down after that show because it was everything I had to give. I've been yelled at on stage, I've been demeaned on stage. I've been called all kinds of things off stage. All those things, those are also very low moments. But, at this point you move past those, they are very fleeting. You have to. It used to stay with me.

The highest moment, wow—every moment. I'm just really present. I think I've had a lot of great moments with a lot of great people. For me that's what it's about being in the music, meeting people in the music. I say that all the time with usually the people that I'm working with, the musicians. Before the gig we'll huddle a little bit and I'll say I'll meet you in the music, I'll see you there. I got that from a great friend, Mark Sterbank, he's a great saxophonist here and a great person. There's something really spiritual about that experience and I think every performance is unique in that way. Sorry I don't have anything more profound, like I was playing with Dizzy Gillespie.

I will say that, that was a proud moment. Okay, I'll give you two because I'm here too and this thing is still on. None of you have run out yet. One was being the first headliner for the South Carolina Jazz Festival in its existence in 2006. I came back from Copenhagen for that performance. That was very special to me to have that experience, especially in Dizzy Gillespie's hometown of Cheraw. I've never felt like I really belonged here and I never felt like I really belonged.

I just felt like I was part of the world, that's a whole other story probably for another day. But, there was something really defining about that moment of saying I'm South Carolinian and I'm representing my state whether you like it or not I'm here. The

other one was playing here last year. I headlined a group, I don't know if any of you were at that performance, but it was very special. One it was during Women's History Month, I was working with Tiffany Silverman and she said do you want to do something bold? Always, of course.

We did a tribute to women in jazz. The Citadel commissioned me to write a tune, so I wrote a tune called "City by the Sea" and performed it here. I remember the Citadel when there were t-shirts that were walking around the city that said "save the males". Now, all due respect as a young person living in Charleston who spent a lot of time on the Citadel campus because that's where all the soccer fields were and parade fields for most of the practice fields at the time, that was a defining moment in a young woman's life. That was a special moment last year to be able to stand on stage, to be a woman here, to be a minority to be fair, and to feel like music can bring people together period. We are all here and that's progress.

DJ: How would you say your audiences received your music from back in Mexico and other places you've traveled?

LS: I think well, I hope well. They keep hiring me. I haven't quit yet, again had you asked me at three-thirty this morning I would have said I'm just done. But, I think well. I think I'm a bit of a chameleon. Some artists just are who they are when it comes to I'm not changing for anybody, this is the music I play.

This is what I'm doing and I respect that whole heartedly. I think that's really special. I think for me, I really enjoy playing where I am. I like eating where I am. I like being where I am. If I'm in Charleston and it calls for me to be a little more traditional for a program then that's what I'm going to be. If it's appropriate and it's what I feel like

doing that that's what it's going to be.

If I'm in Mexico and through in some boleros or some other Latin American music that moves people because it's important too for people to have music that moves them, that they can relate to, that they can understand sometimes. I feel grateful to have that ability and sometimes that's a critical point. Sometimes people criticize me for that, so be it. I have to make a decision as an artist and it's my artistic freedom to do so.

DJ: Is there a specific vision you want to put out to the audiences with your music?

LS: Actually, as of late, yes. I think that's been really important to me. I think the past fifteen years have been about building my own voice, listening to myself taking in as much as I can. At some point, just like in your college careers you intake, intake, intake. You're reading, reading, reading and studying, studying, studying. Until you get out into the world really and experience some real life — not that you're not experiencing that now, but in a different way and can really see the intersection of all of that book work and all of that intellectual thinking and all of that mixed with the realities of social issues and justice, especially in the world we are living in now.

I think it's the world it's always been. As I get older and as I grow as an artist, and as I find my unique voice and get more comfortable in my skin. I feel like a completely different artist than I did even a year ago, five years ago, ten years ago. So, my focus now is concentrating on music with a message and sometimes that has to deal with topics that maybe people don't necessarily put at the forefront all the time whether again it has to do with social justice issues, race relations, whatever that means, identity is very important to me, and also empowering young women and young people. Just young

people in general, but I think we have a lot of work to do with making sure people can see themselves in the people that they are mirroring back and influenced by.

I didn't have many people to look up to in that way. I mentioned to you it was mostly a male driven kind of mentality and sort of the antithesis. I was going away from everything I didn't want to be. I think there is room for that, but I also wonder what would it have been like to have had some really strong people early on who could have influenced maybe my voice a little more. I feel like I'm just now able to say things that maybe fifteen years ago I really wanted to say.

The world has changed as well, like I said you guys aren't wearing save the males anymore. I don't want to see what's under your t-shirt. But, that's important and I think it's just important to have that language. I'm on the board right now at the College of Charleston for the Women's and Gender Studies Program. That didn't exist when I was in school. To see people's lives transformed because they have a language to talk about not only to stick up for equal pay and really fight for their right to be at the table, but to just be human.

We're all in this together. We need each other. So, that's the direction where I'm going and of course we could get into more specifics, but a lot of that's not necessarily political, but I do think it's important as an artist to bear witness and to be a voice for those who don't have a voice. I was that person for so long so I know how that feels.

DJ: Throughout your life so far, how would you say your personal journey has shaped your music?

LS: I think we've touched on some of that and I appreciate that question too because I think as an artist it has very much affected who I am. I'll just be really candid

with you because talk about being vulnerable and raw and all of those things. I'm a twice rape survivor. I'm an abuse survivor; physical, mental, and emotional. These things I didn't know at the time. I have been through some really traumatic things in my childhood that shaped me as a person, as a woman, human being, as a daughter, as a sister, as an aunt now to add, and definitely as an artist and a musician.

Those things have come out when I started writing in Copenhagen. I talked about that being a place of healing for me. Well, that was very much where I digested a lot of life that had happened because it was the first time that I could hear that I wasn't any of those labels. I wasn't not enough of one thing or the other, where people saw me who I was as Leah, not as anything but who they saw right in front of them. I think, for me, it has been a very personal journey to get back to. One of the reasons I go back to Mexico is very much for my identity. There was something missing as a young child. My father is Mexican and my mother is American. It was a very interesting time to live in South Carolina especially. There wasn't a culture here. We were very discriminated against. We were socioeconomically poor, middle class poor, but we didn't know it.

We kicked a ball and we played music and we were at the beach, but there were also some very difficult times. Going through Hugo and losing your house. All of those things. Now that I'm thirty-five and at a place where I am finding okay in five years, who am I now. What does she have to say? So much of it is so related to that personal experience, because that's what makes all of us uniquely who we are.

I can't tell your story. I can't tell your story. I can't tell your story. But, I do firmly believe that we have this place that I call sacred ground or common ground where it is the human experience. So, if I can find a way to interject maybe some very deep personal

experience and maybe someone can relate to that and that can help someone and that maybe they can hear themselves or see themselves in that then that is worth every bit of it. It's transcending that time and space and really giving us an opportunity to grow, or maybe it's something that nobody can relate to, but I put it in a way that it can be a more universal experience.

DJ: I'm going to pass the mic on now.

Riley Franks: Can you discuss with us some of your work with other jazz artists in Charleston?

LS: Anything specifically?

RF: Just whatever you want to talk about.

LS: My sophomore year of school, my second year of college I returned to the College of Charleston and they had a relatively new jazz program there. I knew a lot of the guys kind of peripherally that I had lived in North Carolina my last two years of high school and had gone to D.C. after that for school, so I was a little bit removed and honestly had a love/hate relationship with this place. I'm getting to this point where these people in Charleston are what kept me here and this jazz community, I think just the music community in general. Jack McCray who is the friend who died before the performance he was a mentor of mine and had a big impact on me in music. However, we met when I was six years-old and I didn't know it at the time because he was covering my family being here in Charleston for soccer in a roundabout way.

I've recently found the article in the past two years because I'm writing a story about it. He mentions this little girl who is the sister. Fast forward I come back to school, he starts coming to the jazz program recitals and I didn't realize it was him. He was also a



referee and a volunteer, and advocate for the music, he was a writer at the Post and Courier, but he was also on the soccer field at Ebony City Soccer Club teaching young kids values through soccer. He's an incredible man.

People wouldn't realize that he is a historian. They just kind of sidetracked him as oh he's just a copy editor or writer, but he did so much for Charleston and the scene here. At the time, he was writing at the paper, finishing up his work there as a copy editor. Let's see, I think the year was 2000, 2001. The year was 2001 and he is very connected with the same musicians. We all kind of knew each other through band as well growing up in the school systems.

I knew Charlton Singleton because he was ten years older than I was, but sort of the guy at the time, but he wasn't a jazz player; he was very much a classical player. That's what I mean by musicians and I think moving back and kind of getting a different perspective on all of these musicians and then really learning and understanding the history, that was the appreciation coming back. So, here we have such a special history that it attracted, I think, and cultivated a scene here that maybe you feel but I just didn't really know until Jack had encouraged that spark. He would write about it, he created Charleston Jazz Initiative. Started working with Quentin [Baxter], Karen Chandler, but Quentin was also part of the program at C of C [College of Charleston] and so was my combo professor and worked with all of those guys.

We were all kind of the same age so it was real weird. I was definitely ten years younger, but we all hung out. We'd be at the club the night before. The New Moulin Rouge, many a fun night there or what was then [00:40:55 Meziane/ Mezz?) which used to be the hotspot. There would be poetry, jazz, all of that. People like Tommy Gill who

was very young then.

I think everybody was just working. For me, the experience was very impressionable coming in, also finding my voice in that. Tommy was my teacher. All of that made such an impact. It was a magical time that unless you were here it's kind of impossible to really know. People say that all the time about where they are and the places they've been; unless you were there, but that's the importance of things like this and documenting that.

That's one thing that Jack really cultivated as well is that need for archiving. If you didn't document it, it didn't happen. Period. That's true. I think we're finding that it is impossible to know. What kind of footprints are we leaving for the next generation. What do you know about the past to be able to inform the future and how are you going to be a part of that moving forward? Musicians here, I think we are all two degrees of separation.

What I've found though too is that throughout the world we are all about two degrees of separation. That's really the jazz family that I find fascinating and beautiful, but it's a lot like soccer as well. It's kind of like anything the military family. You kind of just at some point you start to find those connections and it's really beautiful. Facebook changed everything. But it's kind of cool to see, I think to have that kind of history in a place and with people.

I've considered moving so many times. It's still a love/hate relationship with this place. Creating the organization, creating Jazz Artists of Charleston was very special. It made it so I came back from Copenhagen. I was either going to go to New York, San Francisco, Miami, or Mexico City. Jack was pulling me back to Charleston. He's like

you've got to come back. We've got work to do Leah, we've got work to do.

Had he not been there doing that I probably would not have ever come back because I hated to love this place and I loved to hate this place. So much had happened here, but it's such a beautiful city that has all these things. It's like anything. Anything that is that beautiful has to have something that is so dark. Right? It just does. You learn that, people included.

There is something really profound about that. Coming back here and creating something that could give me a reason to stay and to love this place, that's why that organization. That's why I just didn't stop. These people I love, this place I love, but I need to create something that can give me what I need here.

RF: What exactly does the jazz organization do?

LS: You'll have to ask them that question now for what their focus is now. When we started the mission at the time was to promote, produce, advocate, present; all of the above. Educate. It wasn't just for musicians. It was for the community. You're educating the community with performances.

We also started the Charleston Jazz Orchestra. We had the Charleston Jazz House which was meant to be this sort of cultural center where people could congregate and also be sort of a jazz loft, sort of Harlem Renaissance-esque, but with the Charleston renaissance because we were experiencing that at the time. We were going through a recession at the time, that's a great time to start a nonprofit and a big band. But, we were successful. That honestly, in history you'll see that is when most of these big bands were started. In war times, it was a form of entertainment. That's where we are now.

I think people want to be entertained, but they also have to work. A lot of it was

that wasn't their full-time job or maybe their hitting the road at the time there was a lot of segregation. We are still facing that in a lot of ways, how people come together in the music and what music they like. So, the organization was really meant to be that common ground. It was a social experiment in a lot of ways. Things like this had existed before, they had tried and tried, sometimes it's just the opportunity meeting the timing, meeting the people, meeting all those things.

Everything is built on what has happened before. It was the right time, the right place and it was sort of this magic time on the heels of really the next step for the energy of the Charleston Jazz Initiative which was research based only. It wasn't meant to be a presenting organization. J.C. was then meant to step in and really be the face of bringing the marketing part of Charleston Jazz to the forefront, give it a face. Give it something that people can relate to. Give them a box office.

Give them people they can talk on the phone with. Give them a program that also brought attention to South Carolina musicians and composers. That gave musicians a calendar to post their gigs on; the jazz around town calendar. That was our premise at the time. It felt like Little Rascals in a lot of moments. But, I think that's how it always feels. I don't know that production ever feels like you've got it in the bag, if it does then somethings not right.

RF: With the jazz community being so dominant in Charleston, would you say a lot of the artist's work well together?

LS: Yes. I think we are unique in that way in a lot of ways. Like anything everybody has preferences on who they work with. I think we have a unique community here. It's small. We need each other.

Also, you have to get past some of that. You don't have to like everybody that you're working with, but you have to respect them. Or you don't and you don't get called again. I think at the end of the day everybody loves the music and that's what is important. Everybody is there for the music. Again, if you can meet in the music, if you can show up there, then what you do on your time is your time. I think as long as you are paying people they'll show up.

RF: My final question, would you say that there is a vision that kind of unifies all the jazz artists in Charleston?

LS: Wow. One vision? No, I think people just want to play. I think some people have a deeper calling for the history. I think some people have a deeper calling for new music. There is a wide genre of jazz. There are so many different sub-genres.

Jazz is such a word I even dare to use that. It's a music and it's an American music. We are defining it, but it's ever evolving. That's the beauty of it. I think it's come a long way. It's funny that you say as prominent as it is in Charleston. That just wasn't the case for a long time and hasn't been the case.

We're at a real nexus of opportunity, I feel like, here. Charleston has seen a boom because of things like tourist dollars and the CVB, the Visitor's Bureau that has done a great job of marketing Charleston. Sometimes it's exploited. Sometimes music and jazz is exploited to be expected. That's what happened in New Orleans. Charleston predates all of that. As Jack would say, we've just been doing it longer.

We share so many common things, the intersection of African, European, Indigenous; the food, the climate, all of these things. The idea that we are surrounded by water. This is no accident. But, what New Orleans was better at doing, what they also had

the freedom to do, they had places like the French Quarter and Congo Square where they were able to meet on Sunday's and come together. They were great at marketing it. There was a much greater potential for people to have this intersectionality across culture.

We didn't have that here. So, when you are segregated, which we still very much are in a lot of ways, socioeconomically, racially. As Malcom X would say, Sunday is the most segregated day of the week, it's true. Especially here in our holy city. I think we are at an interesting time for this place and how the music will sort of shape all of that.

I'm happy to see it at the forefront. I'd like to think that the work that we were just digging, digging, digging because so much of that is due in large part to Jack McCray. But, also, I think to the work that we all did. Sort of everybody who is doing it. If you are a working musician in town you are doing the work.

That's all anyone can ask of you. You are showing up. If you happen to do more than that, that's awesome. That just helps elevate everyone. But, not everyone is called to do that. Not everyone honestly has that skill set, I've learned that the hard way. I would say oh that makes sense, I would love to just be an artist, but that's also not me. I'm an artist and these other things and I'm now okay with that.

RF: I think we're going to take these last fifteen minutes to open it up to the class. If anyone has any questions?

LS: I hope that was helpful. Thank you, gentleman.

JT: I actually have one more question that I wanted to ask before we send it off. Do you have a favorite artist now and is his or her musical style and/or influence on you similar to a favorite artist that you may have had in your childhood or early in your musical career?

LS: Wow. Yes. One of my favorite artists right now is Etienne Charles. He is a Trinidadian born trumpet player, conga player, dear friend. He is doing amazing work. Who he reminds me of is Dizzy Gillespie. So, it's not surprising that I would call his name, but he's such a dynamic band leader and he's young.

I can name so many people, but I just really appreciate what he is doing to bring the world together and educate people about these social issues. He just did a project, he's done several projects, but from bringing the Afro-Caribbean beat to meet jazz to this folk music that is very Caribbean based, but also, I think speaks to people here. It's just this big education. He's done it in a way that he is very academic, but he is also super real. He'll go out get a grant and then he'll go to the street.

He's out there playing and he's out there talking to the people. He plays everything. He's got a photographic memory. I love that he breaks down those barriers and those walls. He makes it simple. So, put that on your radar, Etienne Charles.

KT: Question's out there?

Male Voice: You mentioned you played the euphonium when you were younger, how long did you play that for?

LS: I'd say ten years really at my studying height of my career on the euphonium. I had gotten a scholarship to George Mason and then I lost my scholarship after I had to have the surgery on my mouth. I had to put it down. But, I've since come back and I sold it to stay in Copenhagen which was super painful when I came back because I was like oh my baby. If you know what a euphonium is, it's a tenor tuba.

It's a large brass instrument, super feminine, not at all. I really missed it. I got a valve trombone, an old Conn valve trombone and I enjoy playing that now. I hope one

day—I play in tuba Christmas and I'll borrow a euphonium and that's fun. But, that used to be so painful I couldn't do it.

I think jazz helped me also have a better voice on the euphonium too. Now I feel way more musical and I think just getting old. You grow into yourself. Oh yeah, now I know what Rimsky Korsakov is writing there. I can play that line like a mother.

KT: Other questions?

LS: Oh, come on. Come on, we're friends.

KT: Don't be shy.

LS: No?

KT: I've got a million. Jack was beginning to assert that Charleston had a unique jazz sound which I couldn't replicate his argument. But, I am wondering do you think Charleston has a distinct sound or has had a distinct sound?

LS: That's a great question and I've thought a lot about that as well. I think when you listen to any language and you hear a dialect of a language it's a unique dialect. You hear the Charleston accent when you hear someone. You know when Mayor Joseph P. Riley is speaking that that boy is from Charleston. But, you also know when Jack was speaking that that boy is from Charleston and they are little bit different dialects.

Now, I say that because I think Charleston does have unique rhythm. It's very much built on the rice culture and sweet grass and the field hollers and all of that. That that has come way before us. I think that is uniquely in the language and naturally in our way of life. The way of moving here even though the way people talk, the way people move, the way people play music; yes.

I don't know that many musicians today could identify that like unique like you



can in New Orleans that again has been very identified because it's not been written. Does that make sense? One project that we did was with Porgy and Bess and the reimagination of that was specifically for that reason. To call on the writing of those rhythms. Someone like Quentin can give you those rhythms orally, he can give those rhythms on tape and I'm sure he's got them written in his way, right?

I think we do have a sound that if we aren't careful will not survive. I think it is important that we find that music, that we find that rhythm. Specifically, rhythm. The scales and the sounds. Those you can trace to other places. They've made it up the Mississippi and up the coast through migration.

But, it is very difficult to contain an indigenous language and keep that indigenous language indigenous. We find it all over the world. That also relates to music, very much so because it's such a folk tradition. It's oral. You can find recordings online and you can hear the difference. They are subtle, but you can hear the differences.

Very different tribes were coming from west Africa here and meeting. Then you've still got the indigenous that was here already. That lives in the land. That lives in the culture. That lives in the air and breathes. It's going to be difficult for us, I think, moving forward.

I don't hear it as much as I'd love to hear it, but isn't that part of culture, it evolves. You can also argue things like the Burke High School Marching Band is the Charleston sound. You better believe it. It has still a swing that no other place has. Ask someone to put that on paper and it's almost impossible. It's like asking me to speak in a dialect that's of my father's tongue, I can't.

I won't ever be able to emulate. I can try to sound like this or that. Whatever those

things are, we lose that over time because you are taught to speak in this way. Same thing in music. Speak jazz in this way, it's now jazz. It wasn't ever called that, that's not the Charleston sound, what does that mean?

Well, we can say the rhythm, the Charleston. We all know the dance. We kind of, I feel like, have this story we've made and created in a lot of ways that gives us a great picture of what it should sound like and does sound like. It does in a lot of ways. Those are roots. That is what you would call sort of the output of the roots, but I think a musical anthropologist or ethnomusicologist is going to find that it really has to go way back before that and have to get to the folk music, the indigenous music, and when those collided and that's a Charleston sound. What we have today is also a Charleston sound, it's just different. Come on.

KT: I'll keep jumping in. I was thinking of the role you've playing participating in these tribute shows. The way of forging a stronger musical community in Charleston, which I think those have been tremendously successful, but then also think about the musician's response to the Emanuel massacre and the roll that the music community played. I was wondering if you could say a few things about that, how that came together and what you see as the impact.

LS: The tribute shows, in the way like you mean tributes to artists?

KT: Yeah, because I think you've been a part of some of those?

LS: Oh, definitely. Part of CJO with the Charleston Jazz Orchestra. That was our way of bringing people into the fold. You're getting them interested. People know names like Dizzy Gillespie or names like Motown. So, you are bringing in all these things.

We know Billie Holliday, we know Nina Simone. We know these names. John

Coltrane, Billy Strayhorn, Duke Ellington, Count Basie. We can get into that. We realize that. But, you get them there and then you educate.

You take them a step further. Maybe they didn't realize the relationship to Charleston or the [01:03:25] band, or the music they were playing. You take them to the B side. You really educate people there when you've got their captive attention and you've got that captive audience. I think it is important to go past that and beyond that. But, you've got to have that audience first.

Now, when it comes to Mother Emanuel I had just left the organization June 15th, 2015. Mother Emanuel massacre happened June 16th, 2015. That was very personal and very devastating. Obviously to our city and whole nation. It was very personal as well. I would visit the church many times and have many conversations with Clementa [Pinckney], we were working on a series, that was Jack's church his childhood church, very important to the community historically.

At this point, I can speak now. We are almost two years later. I am about to present a piece called *Sacred Ground* at Circular Church which is in memory and in tribute to the victims and the survivors and our community of Mother Emanuel. It's a song cycle that I've written. As an artist, I am calling it *Sacred Ground*.

It's my name and bare witness because I do believe in the artist's role of bearing witness and the artists role of response and the artists role of healing. But, it's also a role of keeping not just the memory alive, but the essence of something alive. Just like we are talking about these rhythms. If you don't do it as an artist, no one else is going to do it. We have a responsibility as artists, I feel, to do that. There have been many tributes and I feel like there should be many more always to keep that spirit alive.

I have been involved in really high harmony right after. I think people didn't know what to do; artists didn't know what to do. Everybody felt really hopeless, really helpless, really sad. All of those things we feel as human beings. I can only speak personally.

I have spent a large portion of the last two years away and in between here and there. I will spend a couple months here, a couple months going to Mexico City. I was in Germany last year presenting the start of this project, last summer. That's another thing, we are living in a world where this is not unique, something like Mother Emanuel in the way that it affects all of us; globally. It is unique in that it affects a very specific people in our very specific place that has a very specific role in history.

You can't not say that what's happening in London or Syria or Turkey, Mexico, or Brazil, or in China daily is not just as important to what is happening here. I think we have to find a way to act locally, think globally. I really believe that. It also helps us understand world. It helps us move in the world in a compassionate way.

As artists, we can do that. We have a unique role in doing that, in bringing people together. To have an audience full of people who never would have been in the same room together was really uniquely rewarding for me as a producer and presenter, but as an artist's first. That's me first. To see that and to look out on stage from the stage it's such a beautiful vantage point and to see people who it's not Sunday at high noon.

This is my community, these are my people. It's important to have your tribe, it's also important to get out into the world and take that heart with you out there and take your experience out there and find a way to bring that experience back where you are. I hope that answered your question.

KT: Thank you so much for joining us.

LS: Thank you. Thank you for your time. It's my pleasure.

KT: Three AM, huh?

LS: And I've got a board meeting right now. That's a good day. Thank you all so very much.

**End of recording.**

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