

TRANSCRIPT - ANN CALDWELL

Interviewee: ANN CALDWELL

Interviewer: KIERAN TAYLOR

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KIERAN TAYLOR: Make sure we're—you know all about this, but it's got to be up pretty close. It's a good mic, but not a great mic. Just to get us started and maybe for the sake the recording?

ANN CALDWELL: Can I hold it?

KT: Yeah, would you prefer to hold it? The only thing—and I might turn this around and just see if there's any kind of scuffle noise. But, I think that should be good. This is a vocalist clearly who wants to hold her own mic. Ms. Caldwell, just for the sake of ID'ing the recording, can you say your full name and where and when you were born?

AC: My real birthdate? My name is Ann Caldwell. I was born in Denmark, South Carolina, November, 15 in the 1900s.

KT: That gives us a lot to work with, we'll leave it at that.

AC: 1952.

KT: Tell me, what was your first musical memory?

AC: My goodness. I wasn't raised in Denmark, but we occasionally attended Springfield Church in Denmark, South Carolina. If you're not sure about where Denmark is, it's in Bamberg County. If you are looking at a map Orangeburg sits at the top of Bamberg County. So, if you are ever wanting to go there, God only knows what for,

that's where it is.

But, in the church there was a capella singing. There was a piano, but nobody ever played that piano. It was still in a heap on the floor when we went back to tend to my mother's gravesite. She is buried in the Springfield Cemetery near the church. So, I think that was kind of my first, if you want to go with a recollection of singing, that's when I kind of started remembering it.

KT: Are there specific memories of being in that church and hearing that music?

AC: Not really, because my family moved away from Denmark and settled in Charleston about 1955. So, whenever we visited it was always in the summer time because I do not remember Springfield Church in the winter. There was no air conditioning and maybe there was heat, but we never had to be concerned about it because we never went back to Springfield in the wintertime. Picnics in the cemetery yard, stuff like that. It was always services at night. We never went in the daytime.

It was always night services. So, again I had one memory of Springfield where everybody was singing. There was a lot of singing going on and all of a sudden, the lights went out. When the lights go out in a place way back in Denmark it gets pitch black dark. I actually thought I had suddenly gone blind. What was interesting was that the music never stopped. They never stopped singing. They kept right on singing in the dark until the lights finally came on again. So, I have that memory of it.

KT: Your memories then of Denmark are not of living there necessarily, but of visiting and being with family. Do you consider yourself a Charleston native or?

AC: I would say yeah, but if anybody asks I'll always go back to well I was born in Denmark, South Carolina and I have to tell you all this because when I get to heaven

momma's going to ask me why didn't you tell them where you were from? So, I have clearer memories of being in Charleston than I do of being in Denmark.

KT: People who were born in Charleston might challenge you on it as well if you're not born here.

AC: They just might.

KT: You were basically three years old or so when you moved to Charleston?

AC: Yeah, my father got a job in Charleston. Denmark is basically a lumber town. At the time we left, it was dirt roads, lots of wooded areas. Nobody had indoor plumbing, everybody had the outhouse. I remember outhouses and chicken coops.

KT: Where did you move in Charleston?

AC: I remember 781A East Bay Street. The Sanders Clyde School was where it is now, but it was all just one story. One story, again dirt yards. There wasn't a whole lot of pavement, but that's where we lived for a while.

KT: I'm thinking about two blocks north of the Cigar Factory?

AC: Yes. In fact, we lived right next door to a lady whose name is Ms. Babe. I'm amazed at my memory because it's really bad. But, I remember Ms. Babe. She worked at the Cigar Factory. I believe her daughter did as well. But, I remember the Cigar Factory as a cigar factory and not what it is now.

KT: It's a place to get a \$4 cup of coffee today. But, that's where many working class Charlestonians, black and white, made a living for the American Tobacco Company. Where there other musicians or musical people in the family?

AC: Not really. The only person that came close to it was my father who whistled. I learned to whistle. My mother wasn't pleased about that because young ladies don't

whistle. I'm sorry, I whistled. That's what I learned from my father.

He never sang, he never played an instrument. He just whistled. I'm the one that picked up the habit of whistling. My brother didn't pick it up, my sister didn't pick it up. I got it. Don't ask me to whistle, I can't whistle on command.

KT: I was about to.

AC: I can't whistle on command, it hasn't happened yet.

KT: At some point, was there a popular music that you identified with and said yeah, that's something that really speaks to my experience as a young person? Something that got you even more kind of involved or interested in music?

AC: I really didn't become interested in music until I was much older. At that time everybody knew gospel, and you knew R&B. They had two major radio stations. One of them was WPAL, that was a black radio station, any artist that was black was played on WPAL. Whether they were R&B or gospel.

And there was TMA, before TMA became talk radio. TMA played everything else. So, I kind of bided my time between both of them. WPAL would play gospel in the morning. Before we would go to school my mother would put on the radio and we'd listen to gospel music.

Of course, by a certain time of the day the gospel stopped and it went to the R&B, so we heard groups like the Mighty Clouds of Joy, Mahalia Jackson, Five Blind Boys, Dorothy Norwood. We heard all those. Even Sam Cooke, if anybody knows of Sam Cooke. When Sam Cooke was doing gospel.

KT: With the Soul Stirrers?

AC: With the Soul Stirrers. Then there was TMA that was playing everything

else. Sarah Vaughn the one pop song she ever did was on TMA. George Maharis that did Route 66. The Drifters. They kind of bided their time between the two different groups, but basically more of the white artists were on PAL.

KT: How about your church experience in Charleston? Was you family a church going family and was there music at the church that had any particular influence?

AC: Yeah, there was music in the church. Everybody went to church except daddy. Daddy had no use for church at that time in life. He went later on, I'm talking years later. Momma would send us to Sunday school and then she'd come on later.

Everybody would sit in the front row in church because you couldn't misbehave with all the kids sitting in the front row because momma could see you acting up in the back and the preacher could see you acting up from the front. There was a lot of singing. In the city, they had organs and pianos. So, there was a lot of gospel music. A lot of gospel and there was probably some spirituals. I didn't participate in any choirs at that time, like I said I was grown I guess when I finally got into a choir. But, for the most part we sat and listened to everybody else sing.

KT: Even through high school, you had no sort of inkling that you might want to be a musician?

AC: Nope.

KT: Tell me about that then, what are the key sort of steps that made you to begin thinking about well this might be something that I have some talent for and it might offer some possibilities?

AC: I was a closet singer. You all wouldn't know it, but record players were almost as big as this thing. It was pieces of furniture. There were no headphones. I would

literally lay down in front of the record player.

At that time, you had records, you could stack them six to a stack and they'd fall down and play them. I was singing along. I do have that recollection it was, I think, my mother that kind of made me do something. Again, I was married, pregnant when I sang my first solo in church. I was singing with a group called the Power of Faith Gospel Singers. It was a quartet, three women, one guy.

They more or less talked me into doing it. They said you've got to sing a solo. I don't want to do that. Yes, you're going to sing the solo. So, I went ahead and did it. I think two or three weeks later I had the baby, but I did my first solo before my daughter was born and she is now forty-one. So, that's how far back that goes.

KT: What church was that?

AC: That was Mt. Zion AME Church. On Glebe Street, it's still there.

KT: Is that still your church?

AC: No, it is not.

KT: That was one of your churches was down at Mt. Zion. Approaching this first solo, did that make you anxious, or by that time did you have the confidence to share your gifts with the public?

AC: I was nervous as all get out, but all the stuff that I had been listening to along and along kind of played into it because I had been listening to R&B. I had been listening to pop. I had been listening to the spirituals. I had been listening to Mahalia Jackson and then there was the Nancy Wilson's and the Supremes and all of that kind of played into it, so I was kind of doing stuff in church that nobody else was doing. Do I remember the first song? Yes.

I was one of the fewest singers who was ending songs a certain way. With my soul (sings) nobody was doing that. Where'd that come from? I'm not sure. I did kind of the ballads in church. I did all the slow stuff. I did not get into the hand clapping thing at that time.

KT: So, that kind of unique dimension to your singing very early on, was that reflective of the pop influences or jazz influences? How would you describe that?

AC: That was more of the pop, R&B stuff I was hearing in churches where improvisation was done. There was a lot of improvisation in the churches. So, I kind of picked that up and pretty much what I say made my own soup and that was my signature to always do those highs and lows and kind of mix it up a little bit. As far as jazz, I really didn't get into jazz until maybe 1990s. I didn't hear that much jazz.

It was still around, it's just that I didn't travel in those circles. It was always the gospel, it was always the R&B, pop things. That's where I was. Pop and R&B, in my mother's house was something you didn't do on Sunday's. You are not going to sing that stuff on Sunday's you have to sing gospel on Sunday's. Don't sing that secular stuff on Sunday's.

KT: How did that go over? Because I'm sure there'd be some expectation at Mt. Zion that the gospel music should sound a certain way, that the spirituals should be sung a certain way. Was there any resistance to your sort of R&B sensibilities?

AC: At that time, there might have been. I was never conscious of it. It was just common knowledge, everybody listened to the stuff during the week, but then you listened to gospel in the churches. I think I have a recollection of Sam Cooke getting in trouble because at the time they called it cross over when he was doing gospel and then

he was coming back with doing the R&B thing, but he was influenced by the pop. He brought that into his gospel singing which is kind of probably got him in trouble. But, the girls thought it was cool. At that time, it's not that case anymore.

KT: But, the lines were beginning to blur between sacred and secular music I guess.

AC: The Winans, I would say erased that line with what they were doing with the contemporary thing. I think the line began to be about invisible about that time.

KT: At what point then do you begin to think about this as a professional career?

AC: I had a regular job and I'd had a regular job for a very long time. I began, later on after daughter was born, and all that. I began working with a party band. I initially took vocal lessons and I studied with a woman who sang with the Metropolitan Opera, [Carolyn] June Bonner. Late June Bonner now. But she understood the importance of all kinds of music.

So, I was working with her afterwards. But, I had the regular job and one of the guys said you might want to do something with June Bonner, the vocal thing, and then somebody else said there's a guy who has a band. I'm probably ahead of it. Prior to that I was doing theatre for about three years. It was the guy who was in charge of theatre said well you might want to get in touch with this guy, he has a party band and he works a lot.

So, I got involved with him and we worked together for quite a few years. I was the chick singer in the band and, I think, that's when I kind of started dabbling into jazz and not knowing that I was doing that. I did something, it was probably scatting or something, and one of the musicians, George Kenny at the end of the gig came over and was bowing to me like this. I knew he was into the jazz scene, so apparently, I had done

something, but it was just a collection of things I hear. Like I said, jazz didn't really make its impact on me until about the 1990s. Then I really started to get into it and be involved with it.

KT: Where were you working and what years are we talking about when you are kind of doing theatre, but then transitioning into musical performance?

AC: Around 1980s, 90s. I was a draftsman. We didn't have the politically correct stuff going on. I was a draftsman on a board, then, when that changed to computer generated drafting I decided I really don't want to do that. It was the strain of going to work in the day, running home, changing your clothes, going out and working with the band until late at night, going back home and getting a nap because it wasn't generally sleep. Getting up, going to work. Hey, we got a gig this weekend. Okay, here we go. We got a gig tonight and then you go and do that.

And I actually sat down and said I can't keep doing this. I called it the Nestea plunge. I don't know if any of you have ever seen the commercial about Nestea plunge where the guy falls in the pool because that's what he likens the taste of iced tea to a plunge. I took the Nestea plunge and I did what they tell you not to do. That is, don't quit your... I quit my day job and the following morning I woke up and looked at the ceiling and said what in the heck did I just do? I've been doing it and never really looked back.

KT: I saw a notice from 1982 in the newspaper in which you're singing at St. Paul AME in North Charleston, I think, and your billed as a kind of singer/songwriter/folk person because it's a singer and guitarist. So, at some point you picked up the guitar.

AC: I did, and I laid it down quite a few times. That was actually my first solo concert at St. Paul and you've got to tell me where you saw that. A lady who worked at

the postal office found out that I could sing and she asked would you come and do something? So, it was a children's concert that I did. I pulled my guitar out, in fact there is a picture, I can't find it now.

A drawing that someone had taken with me holding a guitar in one hand and dragging a cross in the other. So, at that point if I were going to do it for a living I already decided I'm going to be a gospel music singer. So, that's what I'm going to do. It was just like that.

KT: Does that pre-date the party band experience?

AC: Yes.

KT: What was the name of the party band and about when you joined? That's something I want to explore a little bit.

AC: The party band came after. I performed with the Porgy and Bess production that was done in 1990 after Hurricane Hugo. It was the David Archer Band. He is a booking agent as well. He books different artists. It was kind of interesting and fun.

I got to semi-dress up because I didn't do the cocktail dress thing, that was just not me. And I got to play with some very interesting musicians; George Kenny was one of them, David Archer played the guitar, Charlie whatever his last name was played bass, and a really weird strange drummer. So, not only did I learn how to sing with these guys, I learned the nuances in that life. How musicians can be and all that. It was weird, it was funny, it was interesting. I find all that information a lot more interesting than the music itself sometimes because there are stories there. But, I started working with David Archer.

KT: So much I'd like to know about this. Just in terms of your repertoire. I'm

assuming you're doing popular R&B covers of the period. Who are you playing to; clubs, weddings, what are the gigs like? Give us a little bit more of the flavor of the band.

AC: It was a party band. You did the weddings, you did the corporate events. Most of it because John Kenny and I were the only two African American players, but most of what we did was cover stuff. Respect played by a predominantly white band is interesting to say the least, but we were doing that kind of stuff. It was the party music. Whatever was coming out of Motown.

Mostly The Drifters and what you might call beach music, we call R&B. Others call beach music. Dance stuff. It wasn't a performance, we were just playing to an audience that was either eating or occasionally they'd dance or whatever. It was background music. If somebody wanted to dance. You'd have the bride and the groom that would come up and they'd do their first dance. For the most part the kids loved the fact that we had this really slick dance floor and the kids would be sliding all over that while you're playing.

KT: I'm thinking about this from the perspective. You're a mother. You're coming out of a church context and also had a straight corporate job. Tell me about the night life. Did that pose personal conflicts? You've described it as weird and interesting, but say a little bit more about that.

AC: I didn't have much of a night life. Out of high school I didn't date much. I had a guy that I was dating at the time and thought he wanted to marry me, but he came to his senses and decided not. That's fine. Then came the other guy. I was married with a child. There wasn't night life per se.

He was a Marine Corps Sargent, so he did his Marine Corps Sargent stuff in the

day and came home at night. That was life. Hey, I'll see you later I'm going on a gig. Make sure Alisson is in bed by such and such a time, I'll be back. Of course, I'm divorced now, but that was pretty much it. My night life was around the band. If I didn't have the band I probably wouldn't have gone out.

KT: You said there were some stories from those days, tell us a story that kind of gives us a feel for the band.

AC: The drummer, I said was a little strange. He was very meticulous about how he set up his drums. He set them up and then he'd stand back and look at them. Then he'd go and move the snare an inch or so and then he'd sit down and look around again and he'd get up and kind of move something somewhere. Now, we're all standing here waiting for him to get situated and he keeps doing these little things. You could see the guys going oh God. I found it quite comical.

I'm just the chick singer. You're just going to tell me when to sing and I'll just sing, but these guys have to wait for you to get set up. Another guy came in, Charlie - Chuck, we called him Chuck. Chuck was pretty calm, cool, and mild mannered. But, Chuck walked in one day with his guitar and bag that held something, I don't know what it was. Slammed his guitar one place, threw the bag off and it made this really loud crashing sound.

We're going what's wrong with Chuck? What had happened was, on his way there his amp fell out of the back of the car and he had to go back to see if he could find it. He was not a happy camper. It's stuff like that.

KT: I wanted to go back to the influence of June Bonner who is somebody who more people should know about in Charleston, I think. Can you talk a little bit about that

relationship and what that meant to you professionally and personally?

AC: June had a different teaching style or coaching style. I studied with June for about ten years. This was ten years of walking into her studio doing thirty minutes of vocalizing. But, we would also do some vocalizing, we talk, we vocalize, we talk, we talk, we talk, we talk, we vocalize. I think June's style of teaching prepared us to be singers not just to sing, but to be singers.

In fact, whenever there were auditions everybody knew who the June Bonner students were the minute they walked in the room. They just knew who they were. Again, June appreciated the fact that there was more than one kind of music. This is a woman who sang with the Metropolitan Opera and decided to leave because in June's words she didn't want to get so old that they'd have to put her out. She was in her late fiftys/sixties when we first got together.

So, she had most of her singers were active in the theatre. They were doing bands. They were doing all kinds of music. It wasn't unusual to walk into June's studio and hear them practicing something and you hear all this R&B coming out of the room. June, who could not dance a lick, would be moving around in the room. You'd hear that and I appreciate the fact that she was instrumental in making me a singer. In fact, the second major concert I ever did was a gospel music concert at her club called then, the Coconut Club. I did gospel at the Coconut Club which was at the old Seamen's Church on the Market. That's where she was.

KT: You worked with her for ten years? At what point does the teaching relationship end? I'm just wondering how does the mentor say to the mentee "that's it, you're done". How does that work, I'm curious?

AC: Just like that. That's it. You're done. "Ann, you don't need to come here anymore". It ended just like that. I started working which made it a little difficult to go to the vocal training thing.

We began talking about different things. I taught briefly for a little while, but it was about that simple. Ann, she's the only one who could take a one syllable word and make it two. Ann, you don't need to come anymore and away I went. I still saw her. I would still pop by to talk to June because I had to talk to June. If I were having vocal issues I would just June, I'm having this issue, can I come by and let me know what's going on. We would do that. So, we stayed in contact.

KT: Was the end sudden or had you talked about it before? Was it just one day? How did you feel about that?

AC: We kind of knew it was coming. It's kind of like a bad marriage, I guess. The end is coming and again I never stopped seeing June, I just never kept coming as a student anymore. We became friends. She was a mentor friend. I always saw June.

Whenever I was performing anywhere June would come and she was careful never to let us know she was coming. I did a production in Atlanta with a group and the group came to Charleston to do the production. June sent this enormous floral arrangement. It covered wherever it was sitting on. Nobody understood, where'd that come from? Oh, that's from June. I could barely get the thing in the car, but that's the kind of support that June continued to give to all of her students.

KT: You're imitation reminds me that maybe this is one of your lesser known talents is your ear for accents and mimicry.

AC: It's one of the ways that I amuse myself as a child.

KT: How did that develop?

AC: It just did. I spent a lot of time by myself. I didn't consider myself street smart. My brother and sister were. My sister was more street smart than my brother and it just fell by the wayside with me because I didn't spend a whole lot of time doing school activities and such.

I would watch old movies and listening to classical recordings which kind of drove my father crazy because he's into blue thing. But, he tolerated his crazy oldest daughter's passion for listening to different things. I would listen to old movies and characters. My thing is "the calla lilies are in bloom": That's my Audrey Hepburn thing. But, it was how I amused myself. I wasn't thinking about it, I just figured everybody must be doing this.

KT: So, clearly you have an ear for sounds, music, and voices.

AC: A little bit. Just a little.

KT: I might be jumping out of order here.

AC: I have been.

KT: The Magnolia Singers, how does that come about?

AC: That was formed by, to be honest with you, a guy I was dating at the time who thought such a group needed to exist. It was about fourteen people strong. When the relationship came to a close, gladly, I kept the group. It was one of those somebody would fall apart and I'd go get them and bring them back. Then somebody else would leave and I'd go get—and I decided let's not do that.

Let's see how far the group will fall before it stops falling to pieces. We got down to five singers and I left it at five singers. We are now six singers strong, but I left it at

five singers. I could pile five singers into a bus, I could throw them into my car if I had to. But, I think, we're into the double digits now that we've been together.

We were doing a regular production at the Circular Church called Praise House. But, what has happened is that somebody's going to school fulltime, somebody's going into the ministry, somebody else is doing this, that, and the other thing. It got the place where okay, we need to stop right now because there is too much going on. I think we call it burn out. I think there was some burn out and we did our last performances for the season in June. We've been doing things off and on. We've done some festivals, some concerts, but the group is still intact.

KT: But, not doing the regular Circular gig? What was the relationship between that and then Sound of Charleston? Was that the name of the program you did, or was that a whole separate?

AC: That's a whole separate thing. The Sound of Charleston is a production about the history of Charleston. So, they covered the Civil War and I covered the spirituals. The Praise House is mostly the activity that went on in the gathering of the ancestors who composed the music and their praise house experience.

KT: Say a little bit more about that, as we talked about this interview we went back and forth over my phrasing of this question or this idea and I still don't know that I'm there. But, I am curious about the influence of history and culture on Charleston music, specifically gospel and spiritual traditions. Can you talk a little bit about that? To what degree is there a unique Charleston sound with regards to its praise music?

AC: It's kind of hard to explain the unique Charleston sound. It's one of those things when you hear it you know it's unique to our area. The music was actually

influenced by the history, especially with the spirituals. When you look at why the spirituals exist, they had a lot of reasons to exist. They were coded message songs; Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Wade in the Water. Songs like that were coded message songs that were used when the Underground Railroad was in its heyday.

The music expressed feelings, emotions, and conditions. If you listen to it, you'll hear what was going on around the ancestors. The spirituals is the music of an unhappy people. People think that the spirituals were sung because this was a bunch of happy people. They were not. You've got to remember back in those days it was nothing like tranquilizers, Prozac, or Lexapro. They didn't have all that to make themselves feel good.

The phrase was they came together to sing themselves happy and to shout their troubles out. What is amazing to me is after doing that they went right back into the situation that caused them to have to sing and shout. This was their way of surviving. The music is documentation of what's going on around them. Lots of songs did that. There are folks who say oh that's just slave music, no listen to it and find out what they're doing.

If you listen to the blues, the blues does the same thing. The blues describe feelings and conditions. The rhythms were used, sometimes in the fields as work songs and I've seen them used on chain gangs as well, to set the pace of work. When the song was sung fast the pace of work was fast, when the song was sung slower the pace of work was slower. Sometimes, when they couldn't stop they would use the slower pace to rest when they couldn't stop because you could get into trouble if you were not in the right rhythm. If somebody's working too slow and everybody's working real fast.

You'd get beaten pretty severely. What they do is to use that rhythm to 'draw

level the angel I'm coming down' (sings) and when you'd speed it up 'draw member, draw' (sings). Everybody is doing the exact same thing, so if everybody is slow together nobody's getting in trouble. When it was used as coded message songs. Swing Low Sweet Chariot, the chariot was the Underground Railroad and when it talks about the chariot swinging low, if something is swinging low it's close. So, that was the signal that was given whenever it was time to leave the plantation to go up north to Canada which was also referred to in the music as Canaan.

It was either called Canaan, home, promise land, heaven. So, the music had its meaning. I would think that life determined what the music was going to be. It's kind of like feeling bad music, break up music. We know what happens, we break up and we want to hear a song about breaking up. There are artists who write songs about breaking up. It's the activity that causes the music to be born.

KT: Is that African American music? Or is that Low Country music?

AC: It was born in the Lowcountry. When you think the slaves came through here, African Americans created it. A lot of it was created here. The musical activity in Charleston covers spirituals, blues, R&B. It was born here because the ancestors, I took to calling them, created this music out of their own life, their hardship.

The slavery trade was pretty prevalent here. It is said that Amazing Grace, though the lyrics were created by John Newton it is said that the melody sounds like a West African sorrow chant. I asked myself the question, where would he have heard a West African sorrow chant? He was a slave trader. He's going to hear it on that boat. So, they brought that here along with the rhythms.

KT: As you're developing as a vocalist, as an artist, had you had the opportunity

to spend much time in Johns Island churches or Wadmalaw churches to hear—I'm curious whether there were distinguishing characteristics between the Sea Island experience and the peninsula experience.

AC: I've even been told that there are. There was a woman that I knew from a church I attended that when she heard a song sung a certain way she said oh they sing that differently out on James Island, or they sing that differently out on Wadmalaw. Yeah, there is a slight bit of difference in how it's sung on the different islands. Yeah, that does exist. I have sung in those churches where you can kind of hear it. There is a difference.

KT: We're running up against the problem, I think, of talking about music because so much of this is intuitive and you know it when you hear it. You almost hate to reduce it to words. It challenges our ability sometimes, I think, to describe those kinds of nuances. I gather as a musician you feel it instinctively, but it might be hard to actually pinpoint it and say yeah that's why that sounds differently to me.

AC: I think that you kind of want to look at the similarities because when you perform this kind of music in the settings that you do. African American people are very passionate people. They love their power in music, be it spirituals, gospel, R&B, whatever. There's a reason behind the singing. Nobody just stands and sings.

People can relate to the song when it is sung. Even if the former President of the United States sings Amazing Grace people grab hold of that because they connect with the words in the song, the feelings, the emotions, and the activity. We are very animated folks. We have the Usher's March and the stomp and the ring shout and all that. There is movement.

There is a lot of feeling and emotion in it. That's the thing that makes all of it similar. We don't even hardly pay attention to the nuances. We just know. We're just having a wonderful time singing this stuff.

KT: Magnolia Singers bill themselves as presenting and correct me on the wording here, but Gullah spirituals. What does that mean? Are you a Gullah artist?

AC: A lot of it is commercial now where you use the name. Let's throw Gullah in here and draw people into it. Gullah is a language. They talk about Gullah and Geechee. Gullah kind of pertains to the inhabitants of the Sea Islands along South Carolina.

When you say Geechee then we're talking of the inhabitants of Sea Islands along Georgia. They are intertwined. You can interchange them. But, it's the language. When you talk about spirituals as opposed to gospel.

Spirituals had their birth in rural America when they were used in churches that didn't have musical accompaniment. They were out in the fields, you didn't have that as opposed to the gospel that moved into urban America where you had the accompaniment and the message was now different. With the spirituals, we're talking about the hope of freedom. Once freedom presented itself and we had it the plantations went belly up. We're into urban America singing something different.

We have a different hope. The ancestors were people who had a lot of hope. A hope of freedom, that came, then a hope of equality. Hearing the good news in the gospel music because that's what it means good news. The message changed. So, with the Gullah we're using the language. I've heard folks sing Kumbaya. Kumbaya, my Lord, Kumbaya. Lord how come (00:52:14).

When I did the theatre, I did a line that said "sing for the (00:52:21) up the sky.

Sing for the live oak what stands so high. Sing for the people's working the ground, (00:52:26) their music (00:52:27) their music. (00:52:28) the sound". It's the language of the ancestors. That's who sang them. So, you're going to hear that in what you call the Gullah spirituals.

KT: It's a term that changes depending on context. I know that I've spoken with an older person from Johns Island for whom Gullah is an insult. That was something that you were called. If you were Gullah it might suggest that you were country or you weren't sophisticated somehow. But, I think the notion of the term has changed over time and it changes depending on who is talking.

AC: Actually, the word Geechee was the offensive word. If you were called Geechee it wasn't such a good thing. But, then that changed. They are interchangeable.

KT: What is the distinction there? What would it mean to be Geechee as opposed to Gullah?

AC: I don't think there's much of a distinction.

KT: Yeah, but why would that be offensive and Gullah not?

AC: I'm not sure why and I was kind of amazed myself when I was first introduced. Geechee, hmm, you just Geechee which kind of has the connotation that you're probably thinking of.

KT: A little rough too?

AC: It has to do with tribes. The Gullah word possibly comes from the Angola tribe which supposedly was the first tribe that was brought into America for the slave trade. So, it goes back to different tribes. But, it started out being offensive. I don't think it lasted very long. But, again it divides South Carolina from Georgia.

KT: So, you've performed for diverse audiences. I'm thinking about not only white/black, but you've performed for a lot of tourists. I'm wondering if you just speak to the public response to your singing and whether you see difference in the audience reception and contexts. I am thinking that singing at Mt. Zion is different than teaching at Circular, which is different than singing in an African American church on James Island. Can you say a little bit about that?

AC: In regards to the spirituals do you mean?

KT: Really just any of your performing and how it's received by different audiences.

AC: It all depends on the arena. There is performance and then there's background. When you're in a restaurant be it tourists or locals it's background. There are those who would like to hear it, but because of the noise going on in that particular arena. Performance wise is totally different.

There is not much you can tell about being in a restaurant or a party or wedding reception. People are there for another reason which some folks say aren't you bothered that people are making so much noise? It's a restaurant, they have come here to eat, drink, pick up a date, and go home. They are not here to hear me. Where performances are different.

I've been fortunate to perform for various and sundry different types of people and there are listeners. There are those who like to listen to the music. They like to hear music done well and they respond to it. They are very receptive. Most of my audiences are Caucasian, for spirituals, for anything.

People have their style of music. You have your jazz audiences that come out in

mass for the jazz. There are those who like the beach music. I had the pleasure of doing a Pete Seeger concert with a friend of mine. There were people everywhere because they could relate to the Pete Seeger's, so we got to do that music. People like their music.

So, they will come out for their music. We did Women and Bowie, Women and Young. We did all these different tribute shows. The funniest one was the Women and Young where he does a song where somebody's playing a broom. So, they decide I'm the one that's going to play the broom. I had never heard the song before. So, they said you're going to play the broom.

We found a way to get the broom sound. I'm sitting there and it was weird because you can sense in the audience when people are waiting for something. They are sitting here waiting for the broom solo. All I did was—

KT: This was Neil Young?

AC: Yeah, he did a song, I can't remember the name of the song. I didn't even sing it. I was just playing the broom. People have their music that they like. You can sense things from an audience.

KT: I have so many more questions to follow up with you, but I do want to open it up to see if there are questions from the group. Anyone want to jump in there? Because I think we've got about 10-15 minutes. Yeah, Mr. Galloway.

GALLOWAY: You said you have kids, what do your kids do? Did your kids follow in your footsteps at all?

AC: I have a daughter and two grandsons. My daughter is in health care. My youngest grandson fancies himself a rap artist. He has been going into the studio. He's really quite good. The other one is into girls and snakes.

KT: Mr. Rice.

AC: Good morning.

RICE: Going back to what you said when you said the slaves had music. They sung themselves happy and shouted their troubles out and then the chain gang and how their pace determined how fast they worked. Today the singers in this day and age like The Citadel Gospel Choir they sing for the mission of making Jesus famous. We love our Jesus famous. I wanted to ask you what is one of your motivations? What are your reasons for singing?

AC: Mine is a gift, a God given gift and I frankly feel obligated to sing. My mission statement is to encourage, enlighten, enhance, engage. As long as I am doing that with anything I do, especially in singing I am fulfilling my purpose. I think there was a line in Chariots of Fire where one of the runners says “God made me to run fast and when I run I feel his pleasure”. God made me to sing. When I sing, there are moments when I feel his presence and his pleasure. It’s a gift he could have given, and probably has, given somebody else in this room. But, that’s my take on it.

It is a God given gift. I am obligated to do with it what needs to be done. Whether it’s gospel, blues, jazz, whatever and to keep it clean. There was a time when it wasn’t thought wise to cross over, but in order to get into certain arenas, like I said I thought I was going to be a gospel singer, but the pull wasn’t in that direction. Now, I find myself in arenas in the company of people I would not have been in the company of had I stayed in the gospel genre. Did I answer that?

KT: I think of you singing in these tribute shows singing David Bowie and Neil Young. It is my sense that this is something of a new development in Charleston music.

These shows that, I think, bring together artists coming from diverse genres, but also these are racially diverse and often times women led initiatives these shows. I am wondering if you can, in your perception, how has the Charleston music scene changed in recent years? What do you think has brought about some of those changes?

AC: It's changed pretty much in the fashion that you've said. It brings together diverse audiences and its music that everybody can relate to, but I like the fact that we do now have the diverse audiences. Whites as well can come to the gospel concerts. I hear people say all the time man I remember when I was a child I heard black folks singing gospel music and I was afraid to go into the church. What do you think would have happened if I'd have gone in that church? I said they'd have said good of morning, give you a bulletin and tell you to sit down.

But, now they are happening in arenas that are comfortable for people to walk into theatres and music halls. A lot of the restaurants now are introducing gospel brunches for people and people are flocking to them. I like the idea that the audiences are now diverse and we're reaching out to different people that we probably would not have been in the vicinity of. They were listening to them, it's just that they were listening over here. Charleston, on Sunday morning was the most segregated day of the week and that's really not the case much anymore, especially with the mega churches and such.

KT: Other questions or comments? Anyone?

AC: This is your last chance. You're going to wonder.

Woman voice: Ann Caldwell. Ann Caldwell. Then you'll say oh snap.

KT: I have maybe a couple that we can squeeze in. Through the Magnolia Singers, you've had some national television exposure? Or do I have that wrong?

AC: No, we've done the Today Show a couple of times and we sang in the presence of Phylicia Rashad and somebody else who's name I can't remember, it'll happen to you when you get this age. But, yeah, we've had a little bit of exposure.

KT: National TV. I would think more people watch those morning programs than just about anything.

AC: I never do.

KT: I don't either.

AC: It just goes by too fast. Okay, you get a snippet here and you're gone.

KT: Was that just another gig? Were you anxious around that?

AC: Somebody said you're going to do the Today Show, go do it. Kathy Lee was there and all that. We sang and we were gone. It just comes and goes so fast. You've got this many minutes to do something and then get off and go away.

KT: I also wanted to know, how has the Emmanuel massacre reflected in through the musical community or how has the musical community changed or responded to the events of the past year-and-a-half?

AC: I don't believe the music has changed. It's the medicine we lean on. It's the strength in the music. The music is still doing what the music has always done. It's the reason Barak Obama, who is not a great singer, can sing "Amazing Grace" and get the response that he gets.

If you listen to those lyrics "through many dangers, toils, and snares we have already come. It was grace that brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us on." The music is still doing what the music has always done. I think the whole incident has drawn us closer as a people and what happened with the Emmanuel Nine is not unique to us. It's

having things happen and immediately lean on the faith.

That was the first thing that happened when we all heard that. We just went to prayer. We went into what we usually went into when this kind of tragedy strikes. We've been living with this since we set foot in America. You had four little girls that were bombed in a church in Alabama.

People who've been hung and beaten to death, we always went back to the faith because we believe. It's the hope that things will one day get better. Who was it, Sam Cooke, did a song about the time that they signed the Civil Rights bill. Change going to come. You always hear that hope.

You will always hear the hope in the back. Why do we forgive? Because it's better to forgive than not. I believe Mandela that said not forgiving is like swallowing poison and waiting for the other person to die. We have to keep going.

The opposite of perseverance is to stop. When you stop, when you don't forgive you can't move on. There is still the hope, even today. We will always hope because that's the kind of people we are and we keep moving on. We celebrate our little successes along the way.

When we finally got freedom that was something we celebrated 'Free at last. Free at last. Thank God all mighty, I'm free at last' (sings). When we got past that and came up to Civil Rights. They had to sing a bill for us to have stuff we should have been born with.

Then the Civil Rights songs that preceded Civil Rights and came after Civil Rights. Okay, we celebrate that little victory there and then we move onto the next thing. Now, it's justice. Justice, in my mind, seems to be the hardest thing for us to have. We

still don't feel as though justice is equal, but that's a victory again we will celebrate when it's time to celebrate and then move to the next thing.

KT: Thank you very much for coming to class.

AC: Thank you.

KT: Great.

End of recording.

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