Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2011

Interviewee: Ms. Jamila Jones

Interview date: April 27, 2011

Location: Artmore Hotel, midtown Atlanta, Georgia

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 49:27

[Sound of sirens in background]

John Bishop: Okay.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Wednesday, April 27, 2011. We're in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Artmore Hotel in midtown Atlanta, with Ms. Jamila Jones, um, to conduct an oral history for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture project entitled "The Civil Rights History Project." My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at UNC-Chapel Hill, and our videographer is Mr. John Bishop. Ms. Jones, good morning. Thanks so much for sitting down.

Jamila Jones: Good morning –

JM: Appreciate –

JJ: And thank you for having me.

JM: Appreciate your effort to get up with us, um, during this Atlanta visit. It's really nice to see you. Thank you. Um, let me start today, um, as we enter into, enter into a conversation about, um, your work in the Southern Freedom Movement, um, in the '50s, '60s, and even thereafter, um, talk a little bit about your family, starting with that. [Coughing in background]. Can you tell me a little bit about growing up in, um, in Montgomery and your family, your parents, and –?

JJ: Okay. I lived with a mother and a grandmother. Um, I grew up with a sibling, my sister, Doris Crenshaw, and a brother, a little younger, about ten years younger, John Allen McCloud.

And I guess key to the Movement is the fact that my sister and I rode the Montgomery bus line. So, we experienced on a daily basis during school the harassment that came from the, uh, bus driver. Uh, and so, I guess that inspired us, or it was something in us that, uh, made us relate to, of course, the Montgomery bus boycott.

JM: Can you talk a little bit about, um, how you came to know, um, Ms. [Rosa] Parks and to join the youth chapter of the local NAACP?

JJ: Uh, yes. In fact, my sister was the one who introduced me to Mrs. Parks, uh, as we joined the NAA youth group, NAACP youth group. Uh, my sister was the vice-president; I was just a member of that group. Uh, she would have us into her home. We would sit on the floor. And she'd give us bits and pieces about life, actually. And people ask quite often if I remember things that she said, and I do not. Uh, but I know she read from, uh, papers, from the, uh, national office of the NAACP.

And she taught us, uh, that we were important – I can remember that – and that, uh, it was key that we, uh, learn our rights, and that, uh, voting was an important aspect

of, uh, our lives. And I can just remember those things about the conversations that she had with us. And she also taught us that, uh, it was important to carry yourself in a good, responsible, uh, way. Uh, after we would meet, she would give us, uh, Kool-Aid and cookies.

JM: [Laughs]

JB: Joe, can we pause for a sec?

JM: Certainly.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on.

JM: Uh, Ms. Jones, you mentioned your sister, Doris Crenshaw. Can you talk a little bit about her? You mentioned she was vice-president, and just describe her a little bit.

JJ: Yeah, she was like a leader of the bunch. And whatever she did, basically, I did. Uh, there was, uh, a difference in us, in that I was, uh, mostly interested in the music portion of things that happened, and she was more of the leadership-fighter type, uh, movement person. But, uh, she somehow had interest from a very young age in, uh, rights and what was right for you. And she led me down that path.

JM: Um-hmm. So, you must have been about eleven years old when the boycott began, thereabouts?

JJ: I was eleven years old when the boycott started.

JM: Yeah. Um, what are some of your – you know, from this distance, what are some of your most vivid, most central, important memories from that experience?

JJ: [Sighs] From that experience, I know that, um, the youth, and Mrs. Knott [?] [nb: spelling of name uncertain] often said, had their own [5:00] kind of individual movement, that we kind of led ourselves around what was happening with the Movement, in that we organized ourselves to get across – what we called across town, uh, when we were no longer riding the buses. And we had to find our own way for survival. My sister, being the leader that she was, wouldn't allow us ever to go and get a ride. Uh, she said we'd be taking up space from an adult and we were going to walk. So, the 361 days there was school, we walked.

JM: Um-hmm. Um, when the boycott concluded and some measure of success was realized, in some measure on that narrow question of busing, what was your feeling?

JJ: It was a joyous feeling, of course. And no longer we felt that we had to take the abuse, uh, that we had experienced on those buses since I was six years old, because I started to ride the bus at age six and had done that to age eleven.

And we found *our* ways to survive through that. Uh, it was piercing to see adults have to leave, uh, the bus and go around to pay their money, and then get off the bus and come to the back of the, uh, bus. Uh, I almost never had to do that, because we were the first stop, so we always found ourselves with a seat.

But curious as we were, there were times we tested to see what would happen if we sat in the front of the bus. And we did, and, uh, then they would ask us, of course – when one white lady got on the bus – I can never forget her. She had red hair, long hair, and when she entered the bus, we would have to get up, even though, um, there were a number of seats, and she was the only white to get on that bus. So, I think that was so piercing to us that it nev – I never forgot it. And, uh, when the bus boycott started, of

course, that lived within me, and I knew that I would walk three hundred and what – however many days, actually, that, uh, it would take. And to a six-year-old, you just basically are so curious about why is it that we have to get up, that often I would sit behind her and, uh, she would choose the same seat each time she got on the bus.

JM: This white woman?

JJ: This white, uh, woman. I don't know her name. I just remember her face and her red hair. But when she got on the bus, I decided, uh, several times to just feel her hair, to see if I could put my little fingers, uh, on the top of the seat to see if it was a difference. What is the difference with her and the rest of us? And I did. I would just kind of feel that hair like it was an accident. I don't know what I concluded from that, except that it just gave me a feeling that, uh, I feel she's really no different. This hair is not so much different from ours. And, um, that was just my little childhood curiosity and how I answered it.

JM: Sure. [Clears throat]

JJ: Uh, so that just that one white lady put such, uh, curiosity in me. And I wanted to answer that so much that I, uh, knew that I was going to walk the length of the time it would take for us to get to, uh, our goal.

JM: Yeah. Um, when and how did you start singing?

JJ: Started singing – we were, um, elementary school students at Alabama State Laboratory High School. And, uh, each Friday we would have a, uh – I would call it a talent show. And we formed this group, uh, three girls – uh, actually it was four of us from the beginning – formed this group [10:00] so that we could compete each Friday in the, uh, talent contest.

Somehow, it was something in us that made us want to do freedom songs. And I can't answer today why we chose that, because we're about the same age as, uh, Diana Ross. But when we went outside to practice, we practiced freedom songs. And that's what we would sing. So, when the Montgomery bus boycott came – we formed this group at, uh, around the age nine and ten – uh, we were kind of ready.

And so because of the songs we were singing, it lent itself to the Movement, we were asked to come to sing at practically every tea that was held in Montgomery. You know, uh, during that time, they had a lot of teas that raised money for the Movement, as well as other things for the churches. And they would invite us to come, and I felt like, uh, it couldn't be a tea, or they felt like, uh, they couldn't have a tea if we didn't come. So, we went all over town to teas on Sunday to participate, and we were kind of carrying the message of the Movement, uh, through our songs. And we were relevant for the time, and that's why they called on us.

JM: So, you were – this was a group of four girls, all eleven or twelve years old, I guess, in that –?

JJ: We were, um –

JM: In that moment.

JJ: In that moment we were eleven.

JM: Do you remember the names of the other girls?

JJ: I do. It was Gladys Carter – because we formed the group and we, uh, all through high school, we kept the group. Uh, Gladys Carter and Minnie Hendricks, now McCants – we were the three girls who lasted among the four. Uh, we decided we were going to not only practice at school, but we would practice at each other's homes. And

that's how the fourth girl dropped out, because her parents wouldn't allow her to come each evening, or the evenings that we had set for practice. And thus, it became the four – three girls.

JM: Did you also – I'm sorry. Did you also sing in church?

JJ: We did. We would sing in church, but we mostly sang at school at first, because, uh, we all went to different churches.

JM: Yeah. Which was your church?

JJ: Uh, mine was Mt. Zion A.M.E. Zion church.

JM: Was any of the other girls, uh, at Reverend King's church?

JJ: Uh, none of us were, uh, members –

JM: Yeah.

JJ: Of Reverend King's church. Minnie McCants was a member of, uh, Reverend [Ralph David] Abernathy's church.

JM: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JJ: I was with, uh, Reverend [Solomon] Seay [pronounces "Say"], Seay [pronounces "See"], Seay [pronounces "Say" again], uh, who was – had the first meeting for the Montgomery bus boycott, uh, and he was very active.

JM: Um-hmm.

JJ: As a matter of fact, the, uh, things in your life that cause you to – I guess the sum total of things cause you to be what – whatever you are in life. And, uh, he taught each Sunday about accomplishments they had made, uh, toward needs of the black community, and I would hear what he had to say. Uh, so that was one of the influences that I had, in terms of my life and, uh, fighting for freedom or struggle.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, let's see, you must have entered high school around '57, fall of '57, fall of '58, I guess?

JJ: Yeah, I finished in '62.

JM: Yeah, okay. Um, and can you describe, um, the –? I think in the late '50s, because at some point if, if, um, – I've read a couple of different accounts, but, um, one indicates that you traveled to Highlander Folk School.

JJ: I did, but that was before high school. It was like junior high, I think it was. But, um, I was singing, and along with the, uh, my sister being very active, we were selected to go to do a kind of like a cultural exchange in terms of our music. We would share the kind of songs that we were singing, and Guy Carawan headed up that, um – the workshops. And people from around the world, actually, because we met people from Africa there, uh, would share [15:00] the kind of movement songs they were doing.

It was because we – our repertoire of songs, of freedom songs, were, uh, great and extensive that he asked that we come to, uh, uh, New York to do, uh, freedom songs to raise money for the Movement, Southern Movement. And that's how we got to Carnegie Hall with Reverend [Fred] Shuttlesworth and others, to do that, uh, fundraiser. And from that came one of the first albums of civil rights songs, uh, to be, uh, used, uh, for fundraising and that kind of thing.

And so, we were, uh, the Montgomery Trio. We did not have a name. We went all over Montgomery before that time, never thought about a name. Uh, they would just say, "The girls," "We gotta have the girls," or "The girls this –." And when we got there, uh, they said, "For this album, you've got to have a name." So, we debated and debated about what could be our name and came up with the Montgomery Gospel Trio.

JM: Um-hmm, um-hmm. How old were you at that time when you went to New York?

JJ: I want to say I – you know, around sixteen.

JM: Yeah. Just into high school?

JJ: Yes.

JM: [Coughs] Um, can you, can you talk me through the – your high school years, because obviously the Movement will shift into a very active phase while you were in high school –

JJ: Right.

JM: And um, uh, the, um, Freedom Singers will come into being towards the end of your high school years. So, I'm interested in how you move through those years singing, protesting, as an activist, young activist.

JJ: Yes. And what happened is that Montgomery – when you have a large-scale movement like that, uh, quite often there are a lot of wounds that occur – so, Montgomery, um, particularly it – adults, it, uh, the adults could not sit down sometimes in the same room, let along talk about [laughs] a movement. And so, the youth were used.

So, when James Bevel and all the people came into Montgomery – and, by the way, we did meet James Bevel and, uh, Bernard Lafayette – were the other group that came to, uh, do the concert at Carnegie Hall, so we had already met them. But they came into Montgomery first with the, uh, Freedom Riders. And so, because we knew them, we had gone to, uh, Reverend Abernathy's house and waiting to get the cue to go pick up the

Freedom Riders as they came in, because at that time we still active in the Movement and still singing.

And Mrs. Abernathy, uh, said, uh, "We don't have anybody to pick them up." Now, a lot of adults will tell you that they did, [laughs] but that day we stole a car. We said, "Well, oh, we got to go, uh, find a way to get the, uh, Freedom Riders!" And, uh, there was a girl, her name was Antonette Carson, and she had her license at the time, and her fath – grandfather would leave his car in the garage every day. So, we schemed together and said we were going to steal his car and go pick up the Freedom Riders.

And we did. But we said, "How in the world are we going to get this car back in here?" So, what we did was we took some chalk, school chalk, and marked where the tires of his car were, and took the car, picked up the Freedom Riders, went back and put that car right in the tracks of those marks that we had made. And it was such an eventful day to see how they were beaten and how they were treated, uh, when getting off of those buses. And we had a carload when we – when we left.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Were you, um, yourself, uh, ever so close to violence that you really feared for your own personal safety?

JJ: [Sighs] It's something about youth, that even when you have fear [20:00], and it's something about having lived that kind of life, that your fear is bundled, and it's there, but it does not outweigh the need to, uh, participate. So that there were times when we had – we feared, we had fear. In fact, the night that the Freedom Riders came in, uh, we went to the church, uh, carried them to the church, and we were there for the mass meeting that night. And when we went in, there were no whites. When we sat there a while, the church was completely surrounded. As far as you could see were, um, white,

uh, mostly males on horses and, uh, carrying long guns and sitting outside, waiting on us to come out. And that was the night that we, in fact, spent the night at the church. So, it was a fearful night, but not enough fear to stop us from doing what we needed to do.

JM: Did you –? Sorry.

JJ: I was just going to say that, uh, Reverend, uh, Seay said that night, uh, to me. We were eating – some food had come in, sandwiches and that kind of thing – and he was sitting on the steps at the church, on the inside. And I said, "Reverend Seay, what what are we going to do?" Because as far as we could see were all these people surrounding us! And he said, uh, "We're going to do like the doodle bug." And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Doodle Bug," because he called me Doodle Bug quite a bit, "we're going to do like the doodle bug."

And I was an adult before I really understood what he was saying, but we played this game in Montgomery, and we would sing the "Doodle Bug Song." It was [begins to sing], "Back-a-back, doodle, back, back. Your house is on afire. Your children's burning. Back-a-back, doodle, back, back." And I had to think about it as I became an adult, because I really didn't know at the time what he was saying. And I thought about how that song said, "Your house is on afire, and you're in trouble," but you're going to be just like the doodle bug. And the doodle bug, when we were singing that song, the doodle bug would *baaack* up, just *back* out of, uh, the sand, and, uh, he was so small, but as if to say, "I'm protecting my own."

JM: Let's pause for just – excuse me just one sec, if we could, John.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: We're back after a short break. Can you tell me about, um – Ms. Jones, can you tell me about the founding of the, um, the Freedom Singers?

JJ: Well, actually, the Freedom Singers, as you know them, I was not a part of that group. I joined after leaving the Montgomery Trio. But remember I went to school at Alabama State University, so that, uh, we kept the group – and so did, uh, the other two girls, and so we kept the group going during the time that we were fighting to, for voter registration and that kind of thing. I may have mentioned that, uh, a lot of that was done by the youth, because a lot of adults no longer wanted to participate for whatever their reasons were. Uh, so, when James Bevel and those people came into Montgomery, they called on us to sing before the meetings that we would have in the rural areas, as well as in the city of Montgomery. So, we would travel around with them, and we'd do the singing, um, at the churches before the speaker would, of course, speak. So, we kept our group, the Montgomery Trio, going up until that time.

And, um – after which I came to Atlanta, uh, got with Bernice Reagon. Uh, it started, I guess – I have to back up to say that, uh, she had asked that I participate in the, what they called the Penny Festival. And that's where the community and the school – there was so much separation [25:00] that they had formed this Penny Festival to come together with the community to put on a performance each year.

JM: This was here in Atlanta?

[Increased microphone noise]

JJ: Yes. And, uh, SNCC did that. And when Bernice Reagon asked me to participate, we did the music for that first Penny Festival that we would, uh, we were doing. And, um, after, I said, "Goodness, I haven't been singing, and this was so good to

participate in this kind of thing." So, myself, along with another singer that, uh, was in the Harambee Singers, Mattie Casey, uh, Pierce now, went to Bernice's house and knocked on the door and said, "We'd like to just continue to sing. Let's continue to sing." And thus, uh, was started the Harambee Singers. So, I wasn't in that, uh, freedom group singers with Bernice, but in the Harambee Singers with her.

JM: Let me take you back. Tell me about – I want to ask about repertoire and what you most liked to sing, say, in the – early in the gospel trio in Montgomery, later in the – when you're in college, and then later with Harambee.

JJ: It depended on what was happening at the time. Uh, that determined what we would sing and what message we would – because we learned at Highlander that these songs not only could carry a message for the Movement in Montgomery, but songs carry, uh, the message of the Movement wherever. And that when we went to, uh, Highlander, we would sing, and, uh, our songs, uh, "This Little Light of Mine," which became one of the famous songs of the Movement. And it's interesting to note that we were singing that for the Movement at eleven years old, um, and became one of the songs on the the, uh, album that we did. But that was one of the important songs. "We Are Soldiers in the Army" was one of the songs we did. "Oh, Freedom." So, we were doing all of these songs at eleven years old for the Movement, songs which later became the bulk of songs and, uh, the basis of the songs for that upcoming Civil Rights Movement.

JM: [Coughs] Would you –? [Clears throat] Excuse me. What part did you sing?

JJ: I sang, uh, basically the melody.

JM: Um-hmm.

JJ: But we did interchange, and I'd do a lot of the lead singing on the, uh, songs, uh, the verse singing.

JM: Um-hmm, um-hmm. Tell me about, um, that work, um, I think with, um, about '66, 1966 forward, the Harambee Singers. Tell me about how that group evolved and, and your work there.

JJ: I will. Um, I do want to say a bit more about Highlander and how our songs began to change as we, uh, attended those workshops with Guy Carawan and all. If you go back to the songs, you'll see that we were singing songs, but basically we didn't write the songs. There is a Montgomery song that represents that movement that was written by one of the professors at Alabama State, which for me for that era was the first actual song that was written for the movement. And I'd like to get that in, because people think it happened later on, but, no, right at that time, he wrote that song.

But when we went to Highlander, we were singing some of the songs, basically the freedom songs, basically as they were done traditionally. And we are traditional singers, uh, and we would add a word in, and a verse or a line, to represent our movement, or sometimes we would change a line. But we weren't actually changing whole songs until actually we got there – to Highlander – and saw others do it. And then, we thought we were equipped. We were going back then, writing songs and doing our own, you know, version of the songs. But we kept it traditional, in terms of how we would sing the songs. So, if you hear our album or any of those things, you will see we kept, uh, the traditional ways of, uh, doing that. I wanted to add that [30:00] because I wanted to give him credit for how songs changed during the Movement and that kind of thing.

JM: [Coughs] Excuse me.

JB: What was the song that –?

JM: In particular – yeah?

JB: Yeah, what was that song that he wrote?

JM: There's one song that your –

JJ: He wrote, uh, uh, "Ain't Gonna Ride No Bus No More." And it's interesting how he wrote that song, because sometimes now when I'm singing it or we are performing that song, people look and say, "Did y'all say 'hell'?" "Yes, that's the way he wrote the song," because he wrote it from a traditional song that, um, I think that that song is "Ain't Gonna Rain No More." And in that song it says, "How in the hell do the *old* folk know it ain't gonna rain no more?" And he said, "How in the hell don't the *white* folk know we ain't gonna ride them buses no more?"

JM: [Laughs] I have read two different accounts for how, uh, you are credited with adding a very important verse to "We Shall Overcome." Can you share that story with us?

[Sound levels vary while Ms. Jones is speaking]

JJ: You know what? I don't know how much light I can, uh, place on that, because you have to remember that I was at Highlander when I was probably fourteen years old. And we weren't thinking at the time, "Oh, I said this; I did this." That was not upon our minds. So that I can remember that, uh, when we went to Highlander, uh, we had workshops to prepare us for different things that we would face.

And one of the things that Reverend Seay, who drove us there, uh, said to us is that we are going to leave by night. And the reason for that is when you get into

Monteagle, Tennessee, the population of, uh, blacks is – the population is just one, and that was Septima Clark. And so, to go in by night, we would not be noticed as we would go in. So we went there by night, and we came back by night.

But one of the things that happened when we were there is the policemen from the city came in. Uh, we were having a movie, I believe, that night, or a song fest, and, uh, they came in. They turned out all the lights – from the city they turned them out. So, we were in complete darkness that night. And, um, we could not see each other. We didn't know where – I didn't know where my sister was. I didn't know where Minnie was. We were just there – wherever we were at the time when the lights went out – careful – that's where we sat.

And so, all these policemen came in. And all we could see, basically, is the billy club, uh, waving, and the, uh, the butts of their guns – you could see it shining on their holster. Uh, and they told us to sit, you know, of course, uh, stay seated, or be quiet, or what have you. And something [pause] said, [begins singing slowly] "We are not afraid," and everybody started singing, [singing] "We are not –," and you could hear people come in. My sister, who is not a singer, I knew she was safe, because I heard her little out-of-tune voice coming in. And I could hear Minnie's bass come in, about, "We are not afraid."

And we got louder and louder with singing that verse, until one of the policemen came and he said to me, "If you have to sing," and he was actually shaking, "do you have to sing so loud?" And I could not believe it. Here these people had all the guns, the billy clubs, the power, we thought [pause] and he was *asking* me, with a *shake*, if I would not sing so loud. And it was that time that I *really* understood the power of our move—of

our music, [35:00] how powerful it was that this – it unnerved him so much that he had to come and ask that I not sing so loud.

And I can just tell you that I got louder and louder. And somehow even the nature out there in that darkness, because everywhere was dark, but it looked like our voices blended that night to the point of complete harmony and beauty. And from then on, I knew exactly how powerful our songs were.

JM: Can you remember singing in a – can you tell a story about singing in a particular place that really stands – in a moment and a place that really stands out in your memory, very vividly?

JJ: Now, that stands out.

JM: I'm sure there are lots.

JJ: But – there are a number of them, but I can say that we were in Montgomery. I was in college at the time. And we were, uh, King was going to take us from his church – uh, he was no longer living there at the time, but he had come back for – I can't even remember what the Movement was all about. But we were going to march to the, uh, capital in Montgomery. And as we, uh – we got to the top of the steps, and you saw all of these white folks. The people had – they had taken – the males had taken off their shirts, and they were just bare-chested, standing up there with, uh, rifles and riding their horses. And, again, I saw – I faced these horses coming down on you. And when I got to the top of the steps, it made me sing [laughs] that verse again, "We are not afraid," and we started singing it.

Now, I can tell you that my knees were actually shaking that day when I looked out to see all of them, and we were going to, you know, try to march to the—to the

capital. But singing that song and that verse helped to kind of steady those knees at that time. And I can remember that particular verse at that time and that particular, uh, movement.

JM: Tell me – let's just, um, shift for just a moment. And I'm interested in your experience in college. Can you describe your –?

JJ: Well, those college days were spent, as I said – SCLC had formed and sent James Bevel and James Orange into Montgomery. And what we worked on at the time was, uh, voter registration again, even though I had handled voter registration at eleven, uh, twelve years old with Mrs. [Idessa] Williams in Montgomery, and, um, uh, during my high school days we just continued that whole thing of, uh, going to Kings Hill. We ventured out into other places besides Montgomery, because Montgomery was so tight at that time, after having gone through that Montgomery bus boycott.

And the other thing we were working on was, uh, sit-ins. And so, we would go to the church and plan, as youth, with James Bevel and James Orange, how we were going to go to the five and ten cent stores. And, um, they taught us at that time – they had gone through training sessions on how to protect your head and that kind of thing, and what happens if someone spits on you. And, uh, really, they taught us nonviolence to a great extent. And so, that's – those were the kinds of things that we worked on.

But let me just go back and say, at twelve years old, uh, Mrs. Rosa Parks and Mrs. Williams, uh, taught us how to fill out twenty-seven-page questionnaires, uh, so that we could go into the homes of adults and teach them how to fill out those questions, uh, to become voters. That's what you had to do at the time, just silly, stupid kinds of questions. We had to learn the preamble to the Constitution. But they set us in a little

shop, uh, behind her house. She was, uh, a hairdresser, and we would – the youth would go in there, sit on the floor, and we'd learn how to fill out these – at eleven – fill out these, uh, and answer the questions. And, uh, we would knock on doors and [40:00] teach adults how to fill it out.

JM: Yeah, yeah. By the mid '60s, the Civil Rights Act has passed, the Voting Rights Act has passed, but there's been tremendous violence and difficulty, and I'm thinking about the founding of the Harambee Singers. And, um, how did your perspective at that time, say '66 maybe, compare to your perspective earlier in the '60s? Were you – what was your overall sense and feeling about the Movement at that point and its progress and its challenges and its difficulties?

JJ: Um-hmm. Uh, personally, I started paying more attention to I guess what we call Black Power and the Pan-Africanist movement. And so, the songs that we performed as Harambee Singers were what we would call very radical type songs, uh, "Move On Over Or We'll Move On Over You," and the songs took a different tone and became also international. We were very in tune to our heritage at the time and, um, as I said, Black Power. And, uh, so, when we went, our hair was Afroed and this kind of thing, and our songs took on some of that same mentality at the time. So, the Harambee Singers' songs – we never did the songs that, uh, were performed by the Montgomery Trio, but in fact, uh, Pan-Africanist type songs.

JM: Can you tell me a little bit more about [clears throat] – excuse me – about the group's repertoire?

JJ: Um, in terms of the songs, um, "Hands Off Nkrumah" was one of the songs that we did, because at that time, as I say, we had a Pan-Africanist perspective to what we

were doing in song. And, uh, so, that was important to us as, uh, the Movement was going on in Ghana. We, uh, did do that song of "Hands off Nkrumah, uh, that's what the people say, 'Hands off Nkrumah.'" Uh, and, uh, we talked about the CIA in the song. So, we start attacking other elements of not only, uh, this country, but the world, in what was happening.

JB: Can we pause for a sec?

JM: Sure.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JJ: I go into things, uh – there are other elements or things that come to mind.

JM: Sure, sure.

JJ: You know, but, um – unless you have some questions about the things – uh, want me to expand on things that have already been said, I'll just kind of think, you know – don't you –?

JM: We've done pretty well, is that what you're saying?

JJ: I would think. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah. No, I think it's been fabulous.

JJ: [Laughs]

JM: I did want to – I did want to maybe go back –

JJ: Um-hmm.

JM: And just ask about, um – the question of whether or not, uh, your mother and your grandmother ever had to try to pull you and your sister and brother back a little bit out of fear for your safety. Did they – is that a good question – because that's just a natural –?

JJ: Yeah, but I'll start with our community and just say [clears throat] –

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on.

JM: We're on, okay. We've had a short break and we're going to come back and talk a little bit more about family and community.

JJ: Yes. Um, our community were, uh, was filled with people who had participated in struggle in some type way. Um, we had Flora Grant, who had one of the large debits in, uh, Atlanta Life Insurance Company and who kept herself close to movement things that's happening in the community, who would come to my home and sit with my mother to talk about those things, as I sat under the table, and they played cards. But, uh – and I would hear a lot at that time, because she was very knowledgeable as to the kind of current things happening in the Montgomery community. So, we had Flora Grant. And we had the young lady who wrote, uh, "See How They Run." Uh, we had Sullivan Rogers, who was one of the first black jockeys, and, uh, we saw him train his horses, and he would tell us stories. Uh, and we had my aunt, who lived with us, and her name – we called her Bessie B. [45:00]

Now, Bessie B was the storyteller in my family, and she would tell us about all kinds of struggles. And the story that I remember from her was about Old John. And when she talked about Old John, she said that he, uh, worked hard from sunup to sundown to take care of his family, of the family, but at the end of the day or the week, he had no meat, he, uh, had very little food, and it would bother him so much that he had taken care and raised the food for his, uh, owner, uh, as he sharecropped, but, uh, he

could not pay his bill at the end of the week. And so, Old John found ways to, uh, every so often, get his family a chicken.

And she told us the story of how John trained his younger son to come with him, as they would get one chicken out of – from the white folks' chicken coop. And he said, "John, this night I'm going to teach you how to pries. And you're going to pries the chicken coop while I go under and get this one chicken," because there's something about black families that told them that they were to get whatever it was to survive, but not more than that. And so, he would get this one chicken, uh, for his family.

So, he carried, uh – Little John, I guess, uh, was about the age of twelve, I think she told us – and they would get this long stick to pry up the chicken coop. And, um, this particular night he was saying, "Pries, boy! Pries, boy," as John was shaking and almost to drop the chicken coop, uh, before John could get the, uh, chicken from the chicken coop. And he did. "Pries, boy! Pries!" And my aunt would just shake all over in her voice as she was telling the story about "Pries, boy!" And, um, he dropped the chicken coop, could no longer hold it. And John said, "Run, boy! Go tell your mama you done drop – uh, you done lost your pries!"

And so, later on in life, uh, from that story – I'll never forget, uh, that John could not feed his family working from sunup to sundown. Something in my head did not, you know, set well with the fact that he couldn't feed his family in that story. So, later on, I wrote a song that says, [begins singing] "Pries, boy! Pries, boy! Pries, boy, pries! Run fast! Go tell your mama John done lost his pries."

JM: Mmm, that's beautiful.

JJ: So, the people in the community – and as I say and tell young people, the sum total of what you select to do in life will determine your life. And I think it was the sum total of these people and their impact on our lives that kept us even today, as I sit here, sixty-seven years old, uh, still involved in, uh, fighting for freedom. So, it is those kind of things, and I tell, uh, even seniors today – I work with seniors – that we have to keep ourselves close to the young people, because it's the older people that had this impact in our lives that caused us to be the people that we are today.

JM: I really want to thank you for joining us this morning. It's been a real pleasure to be with you. Thank you.

[Recording ends at 49:27]

END OF INTERVIEW