

Interview of Richard Dedeaux

UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles
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Transcript

Session 1 (June 28, 2007)

PATTERSON:

Okay, June 28, 2007. We're here with Richard Dedeaux, one of the Watts Prophets, one of our American treasures in music and performance and spoken word especially, particularly, particularly. So what I think we should do first is start at the very, very beginning, maybe even before the beginning, and ask you about your family and your parentage and where they originated.

DEDEAUX:

I think that's a good place to start. June 28, 2007. My name is Richard A. Dedeaux, original member of the Watts Prophets, born September twenty-fourth, 1940. From what I understand, it was a very stormy day. There was a hurricane going on, as far as what my dad tells me, but I don't quite remember that. That was a little soon for me. But my parentage, my father, he comes from Mississippi, and he was one of nine children. We had an awful lot of land back there. Our history goes back pretty far and Dedeauxs go back pretty far in Mississippi, and the town was founded in 17[00] something, so it's got quite a history, too.

DEDEAUX:

My mom, she's from New Orleans, but like we say, New Awlins, straight up Nawlins. But her lineage was connected to the Queen of England some kind of way, I don't know. I remember when I was a kid, we got an invitation to go to the ball, to the coronation, so there's some kind of connections there. And I can remember my grandfather, a very patriotic guy. He lived in Chalmette, and every year--I guess that was Independence Day--he would give a great speech. That was the highlight of his life. He gave this great patriotic speech, a real patriot.

DEDEAUX:

And he saw something in me. When I was a kid, I used to like to draw, and he would take me out to Chalmette, which was absolutely nothing. That's an old battleground. That's where they fought the battle of New Orleans. And he would take me out to his little house, which was raised because it flooded out there on a regular basis, and under his house it was full of gallon wine

bottles. He drank wine and back then it was them old gallon jugs. The whole bottom of his house, I can remember, was just full of those. He would bring me out there and he would just tell me, "Look around, just look around and draw. Just draw whatever you see." And I did. I used to do that, and he would really encourage me to do that. That's always stood out in my mind, because I've always liked drawing and every once in a while I'll pick up a pencil and I'll sketch a little something.

PATTERSON:

What was your uncle's name?

DEDEAUX:

That was my grandfather.

PATTERSON:

Your grandfather.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. It was Jeafreau, J-e-a-f-r-e-a-u. I believe that's how it was spelled.

PATTERSON:

Oh, that's an interesting name.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, and he was an artist himself. Well, he was an orator, and he loved speaking. I remember he wore these little seersucker suits back then, and seersucker was already wrinkled, so I can see him in these little short suits, and they were just always maybe an inch or two too short. But he was very proud of his heritage, and he was very proud of being an American, because I can remember his speeches. Like when I was a young man, I used to do something in all my wild careers. That's how it began, and it was just amazing.

DEDEAUX:

And so moving on from him, I guess my next influence was my grandmother. She always

encouraged me. She was always the strength and the backbone of our family. We lived within close proximity of each other. We lived in the New Orleans Seventh Ward, which they called Backatown, and so I lived there with my mother and father. My father was in construction. He was a plasterer and a bricklayer and most of his friends were skilled laborers. They were carpenters and plumbers. So consequently what they did, they got together and they pooled in and they built each other's houses, and he would get a big number-two tub on the weekends, big number-two tub, fill it up with ice and beer, and my mama would cook a nice big meal, and those guys worked until the food and the beer was gone, and that's how they built each other's house.

PATTERSON:

What was your grandmother's name?

DEDEAUX:

My grandmother's name was--I can't remember her name. We called her Momee. Alice, it was Alice Jeafreau. Yes, she was Alice.

PATTERSON:

And your mother's and father's name?

DEDEAUX:

My mother's name was Elvira Jeafreau, and my daddy's name was Willie Dedeaux.

PATTERSON:

My daddy's name is Willie also.

DEDEAUX:

My brother was a Willie Jr., my oldest brother.

PATTERSON:

So your mother would support your dad's work teams with food?

DEDEAUX:

Absolutely. Absolutely. They would take in--and she would cook, she would do the cooking. These guys, it was just a routine thing in different houses. And my dad, he built this brick house. I'm curious as to how it fared with Katrina, because the walls were extra thick because it was his house, and the roof was a slate roof, and he vowed that the hurricane would never take not one slate off of his house. And it did. The first hurricane came through, and one slate came off, and I can remember his buddies just really--that was just the funniest thing to them, because he had the house that the Big Bad Wolf couldn't blow down. He did lose a slate on it.

DEDEAUX:

But another thing that was very unique about him--what he did, when he would go to work he saved his change. He saved all his silver, his dimes and his quarters, and as he was building his house, he put that silver change in the walls. I can remember, it's all in the bathroom, it's all in the kitchen, and he said, "My house would never be without money." And that was one of his things. So even to this day, when they tear it down, or if and when they tear it down, just the silver would probably be enough to build another one, because I can remember he saved all his silver, and he just put it everywhere. It's just embedded in the concrete. Yes, that's the way he wanted his house.

PATTERSON:

And this is Backatown?

DEDEAUX:

This was Backatown, in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans, yes.

PATTERSON:

What was the Seventh Ward like then?

DEDEAUX:

Seventh Ward was a very cliquish Creole, a bunch of Creoles, which were people about my skin color, who were very family-orientated and tried to pretty much stay with their own kind. This was when people were trying to be white. It was no advantage to being black, so the whiter, the lighter you were, the more you thought you were better off and the more you thought you were being treated better. The Ninth Ward was the blacks and the dark-skinned, and that would be like the equivalent of Los Angeles and how we would stereotype Watts. It would be like that kind of

thing. And so for a while we did move to the Ninth Ward, and we never had any problems. But our parents, they really strove to try to get away from there. You know what I'm saying? They were really trying to blend the color out, it seemed like, and invariably the kids would always go--opposites attract. The light-skinned wants to go get a nice dark one, and the dark ones would go get a nice light one, so they canceled. It was a mix up.

DEDEAUX:

And the parents, they dealt with it, but it was something that like--and another thing, too. With my family, the language died with our parents, because of the fact that everybody spoke Creole. Everybody spoke Creole. But what they started doing, they started using it as a second language to keep from the kids when they're doing their contin [phonetic] and stuff. Contin is when you start telling all these little things that's going on in other people's lives. So they'd use that second language to do that in front of us, but our grandmothers always talked to us in Creole, but we answered in English. We never took the time to really--so I really regret that they allowed us to lose the language.

PATTERSON:

Do you remember any of it?

DEDEAUX:

Only if my grandmother was speaking, because I always knew what she was saying, but we always answered in English. We never just really bothered with it.

PATTERSON:

So it was sort of a dialect of French.

DEDEAUX:

It's a broken French, yes. It would be a real ghetto French, I guess you would say, where the words would be like more country and more relaxed than it is in the French language. It's still powerfully spoken in my family in that generation, but it's going to die with them, because they listened to that about, "You should only speak one language," and that kind of stuff. They allowed that to happen.

PATTERSON:

So when you were a kid, your parents moved from the Seventh Ward to the Ninth Ward as it began to integrate there?

DEDEAUX:

We did. We did, in the transitional period. There was a time that we did have to move to the Ninth Ward. As a kid I went to Valena C. Jones School in the Seventh Ward. I don't remember which school I went to in the Ninth Ward, because we weren't there that long.

PATTERSON:

What was the experience when you were there? Because you're now around the dark-skinned children. How did it feel?

DEDEAUX:

It didn't affect us as the kids as much as it affected the parents, you know what I'm saying? They were trying to more or less get away from that, was the sense that I felt. It wasn't any blatant thing. I guess it's like racism today, you know. You don't say anything, but you might throw a couple of little things out, like, "You ought not be going out with that boy," and, "That girl, she can do better than that." You know, little things. But you have to understand the time and place. Like that was during the time where you went into Sears and Roebuck, and if you put a hat on, you had to buy it. You had to know what kids' size was. There was no such thing as trying something on and putting it back. When you wanted to get a hotdog at the 5 & 10-cent store, you stood outside on the little thing, and they passed you your stuff out there as you looked and watched the people all comfortable in there.

PATTERSON:

This is for the black children?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes.

PATTERSON:

And the Creole children?

DEDEAUX:

Oh, well, yes, it was no such thing as Creole children. It was black and white, you know what I'm saying? It was blacks trying to make themselves better, because the Seventh Ward were skilled people, more or less. Ninth Ward was projects. So the Seventh Ward was people struggling, building houses, had a little trade, you know what I'm saying, was trying to--they had their own little clique, that they helped each other.

PATTERSON:

So the differentiation was made between the Creoles and the blacks, but not between the whites and the Creoles? Like the whites, everybody was the same.

DEDEAUX:

Oh, yes. No, it was all the same. It's all the same. I've had experiences with my cousins. I'm the black sheep of the family. I'm really the darkest. Both my brothers, one had blue eyes and blond hair, and the other one had brown eyes and blond hair. We've gotten on the bus with my cousins and stuff, where all of them were fair-skinned, blond hair, blue eyes and stuff. We've gotten on the bus and the conductor's come up like, "You kids need to move up." And we're like, "No. We're where we're supposed to be." And embarrassing him so much that he'd pass up our stop, know what I'm saying, little stuff like that. And I can remember white people getting on the bus with a chip on their shoulder and would move the little ones. It was a sign that black people sat behind, so white people had the right to move it anywhere they wanted to. And sometimes an old, ornery person would get on the bus and move it all the way to the back. The whole front of the bus would be empty, and the black people following that sign would be all crammed up, standing up, bunched up in the back. So all of those things really bothered me, and I never understood why. And it still hasn't been explained to me, you know what I'm saying?

PATTERSON:

So when did you begin to notice that? How old a kid were you--the racism?

DEDEAUX:

When I noticed at the water fountains with two heights, one for black people and one for white people. The one for white people was always higher, so it was more inviting. Ours was always leaking. [laughs]

PATTERSON:

So the first memories you have of racism were the water fountains, because you probably were thirsty, trying to get to--

DEDEAUX:

The restrooms the same way. The restrooms were intolerable. The women refused to use them, you know what I'm saying? They'd have us go around the back most of the time. And then the whites go to the other restroom. It's just clean and pristine. It was just designed--everything was designed like that, to make you want it, just to make you want it. There was a beach called Pontchartrain beach that had everything. Everything was at Pontchartrain beach; it was a white beach. And then there was Lincoln beach. Lincoln beach had a little roller coaster, maybe high as that roof right there, where Pontchartrain had a real one, just a real one. And one day I got the opportunity, because I had a bold aunt who married a Missouri white guy. They got married in New Orleans, and he took us to the beach, to that Lake Pontchartrain thing, and I was about the darkest one. I stood out the most--looking at me, and I felt very self-conscious. But I had a real good time, just got to go really on all of those things. It was just amazing to see how you had the two different cultures. It was just amazing. And how the parents were able to keep that from you, where you didn't realize it. You didn't really realize how segregated you were, because you were shielded by your parents.

DEDEAUX:

My mama was always talking about, "This is going to be my little doctor," you know what I'm saying? So she always was instilling things into me, and never once said that it couldn't happen. Whereas the school was encouraging me to take metal shop and stuff like that, so you could make a good body artist and body painter, something.

PATTERSON:

So the school was segregated, but your mother kept the idea that you could--instilled the idea that you could go further?

DEDEAUX:

Well, we were so young, we had no idea. I didn't realize how bad that I was being treated. I felt it. I saw the two different classes, but they protected us so well with it, it made it seem like, "You don't want to do that." You know, "We'll get something when we get home."

PATTERSON:

Was there a point when you became angry about it?

DEDEAUX:

After the age of fourteen, when I had transferred up here to California. I moved up here when I was fourteen, and then all of a sudden I was into integration. It was even a bigger shock, actually. When I moved up here--well, let's go back to my mother. She died at childbirth, having my baby sister, and I was fourteen at the time. So what happened was, in New Orleans there came a time where there was a big boom on the West Coast, a big boom, and all your skilled labor just packed up and like, "Hell with this. We're going." Because blacks weren't having any kind of luck with the skilled stuff. They always got what was left behind and stuff. So a bunch of them--they started doing it in groups, and they started relocating to California.

PATTERSON:

That's like the mid-fifties?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes. Yes, the mid-fifties, right during the Korean War and stuff. That's when things started looking up for them. But what it did, it divided families so much, and a lot of us were left down there and left on our own devices, because my father, when he got up here, he hooked up with a young schoolteacher, you know what I'm saying? It was like, "Woo hoo."

PATTERSON:

So you stayed with your grandparents?

DEDEAUX:

I was staying with my mother in New Orleans.

PATTERSON:

Oh, this is before she passed on--

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes.

PATTERSON:

--he left and came to L.A.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. And he was reestablishing for us, to send for us, and in the transition, she became pregnant and died at childbirth. The child lived. And he had, consequently, married a young schoolteacher up here and had two additional kids, so that brought us to another level. So now my three brothers--I have a brother that's three years older than me, I have a brother that's seven years younger than me, and I have a sister that's--she was born in '57, so seventeen years younger than me. So now what happened, so my father, he had built this house in New Orleans, so he comes down there and he sells the house, and, "We can sell mama's share," and all that kind of stuff, so we relocate to California, and that adjustment with this young stepmother is just more than she can handle. She's got one kid, she's got a daughter, and then all of a sudden here she's got three teenage sons, just like, oh, that was just too much for her.

DEDEAUX:

So my oldest brother, he wound up in the service real quick. He joined the Air Force, and so that left me and my younger brother to kind of get along with the family. At that time I think she had had one of the kids, but anyway, she had two more kids, and we struggled through that until finally it reached a breaking point, and I got separated from the family. I moved to Watts. I was put in a foster home, and that's when I was transferred to Watts to live with a family there, and I was like sixteen at the time then.

PATTERSON:

The baby sister that your mother had, and she had passed on in childbirth, was she with you all, too? The baby baby?

DEDEAUX:

No. She stayed. She stayed. It's a really ironic story, because my mother's sister had what was called a blue baby back then. That's the baby with a heart condition and the blood pressure is so low, they're blue. They don't have color. So her name was Andrea, and she lived for a few years. But then technology wasn't moving fast enough, so she died. So my mom's--my baby sister went over to her. [Interruption, not transcribed.]

PATTERSON:

Okay. So Andrea was the aunt or was the little baby, the little blue baby?

DEDEAUX:

Andrea was the little cousin, the aunt's baby.

PATTERSON:

The aunt's baby. So they were trying to keep her healthy.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. So Andrea, she was just, oh, man, she just had trouble from day one. So when she died, that was in close proximity to my mom's dying, too, so we passed the baby on to her to fill that void. But then my grandmother decided that she wanted the baby, I guess because of her loss, too, of her daughter, so she ended up with the baby. I can remember, it was just such a weird thing. We had gone--my uncle and I had gone over to visit her, and she lived in one of these old shotgun houses that are so common down South. You just can look straight down the hallway, and the bedrooms go off to the side, and it's just a straight shot. So we were sitting in the living room, and she was telling my uncle, she's like, "I don't feel good today." She just wasn't feeling--was just out of sorts and stuff. And so she told me, she said, "Richie, get me a diaper off of the sewing machine in the hall," which was straight down. I went down and I got the diaper, and she put my little sister down and she changed her diaper and stuff, and when she picked her up and put her right here [demonstrates], she just stiffened. Her legs just stiffened and her arms started coming down, and my uncle grabbed my little sister and handed her to me.

DEDEAUX:

And he was a young man, young, strong man at that time. She had sort of slid off the couch, and he reached down to pick her up, and I saw he was like--you know, and then he had to really dig down, like deadweight, you know what I'm saying? And he told me, he said, "Go get the priest," which was right around the corner, right around the corner from the Epiphany School in New Orleans. I ran around there and got the priest, and by the time I got back she was dead. She died just instantly. She just had a heart attack and just straightened out, and boom. So then, that's when my sister went to--maybe my sister went to my grandmother first. I think that's what it is. She went there first, because there was so much grief with my aunt, and then when my grandmother died, then she went to my aunt, who in turn raised her. But that was something. That was--

PATTERSON:

You were there. This is the first time you witnessed death?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. And from that time, I've been at just about every one of my parents' and grandparents'. It seemed like I'm the one that'd be there with the grim reaper.

PATTERSON:

Really.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes. Just I'm always there when it happened.

PATTERSON:

Do you remember how you felt when you witnessed that? Did it frighten you?

DEDEAUX:

Well, I was, what, thirteen years old, I guess. It was terrifying. It was just terrifying, just to see her stiffen up. She just stiffened up like that, and her hands started relaxing, and he picked the baby up and handed her to me. And then she started sliding off the couch, and I knew she was dead then. When I saw him try to lift her, because he was a strong man, he would have just picked her up, but I saw that deadweight, you know what I'm saying? My little legs was flying. I flew over to the priest then. But I knew it was like, wow. I ain't never seen nothing like that before, but it just happened like that. It was just like instant. Bam.

PATTERSON:

Yes. Well, she didn't suffer.

DEDEAUX:

Not at all. She just wasn't feeling good that day.

PATTERSON:

Your father was with you. This is when you had come back from L.A. back to New Orleans?

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

And your father was with you?

DEDEAUX:

No. This is what happened in New Orleans. My father is in California at this time. We have not relocated. This is where he comes to the funeral, sells the house, then we relocate to California, which was another whole lifestyle, because in New Orleans we had coffee and bread for breakfast, you know what I'm saying? When I got to California, it was like, "Coffee? You're too young for coffee." And I was hooked on coffee and chicory, that real strong coffee. I mean, that New Orleans coffee is terrible, and so I would have terrible headaches not getting my coffee. I had to really adjust to that.

DEDEAUX:

But then when I came here now, when I came to California, I went to my first school. I first moved on 25th and Harvard. It was just a beautiful area up there, and they were just in the throes of destroying Sugar Hill. I moved there in 1953. That's when the 110 was cutting through Hattie McDaniel's home and all of our black heroes. They all lived in that area, Johnny Otis, Hattie McDaniel. Daddy Grace lived right down the street. It was Sugar Hill. I don't know if you know the history of Sugar Hill. That was before we had any kind of say-so. They cut that I-110 right through, cut it right through it. Matter of fact, it went right next to Daddy Grace's house. So I was living in the Toby Apartments right there on 25th and Harvard, a very nice area. That area was still intact over there. It was before they put the church and stuff there.

DEDEAUX:

And so my first impression was just--oh, well, coming here. First of all, my aunt, we packed a great big old shoebox full of chicken. That was the traditional way, fill up a shoebox with chicken for two days to keep you on the train, and we headed for California. I can remember the segregation. We were segregated up until we got to Arizona, some part of Arizona. And then somebody came back, one of the conductors or something came back and said, "You guys can move about on the train." You could see they're sitting anywhere you wanted to at that point. And you know, I'm just a kid. I'm like, I don't know what's going on. And so when I get here, I

see all these beautiful palm trees and stuff just blowing, and it's just so fascinating. And then I got a chance to go to Mount Vernon. That was my first school, and that was my first introduction to integration, and I was like, "Wow, look at this."

PATTERSON:

So what was the mixture there?

DEDEAUX:

Everything. Everything. There was white girls and black boys and Orientals. It was just everything. It was just like, it's culture shock to me. I'm like, "Look at this." I even wrote a poem about it, I probably did.

PATTERSON:

Then? At the time, you wrote the poem? Or you wrote it in retrospect.

DEDEAUX:

I don't know. It had to be in retrospect, because I'm talking about fourteen now. Yes, it had to be in retrospect. But it was amazing just to come in and see that. I'm like, wow. And then in this crowd here that was going to Mount Vernon, were the kids that had just done--ooh, I can't remember that doggone thing. It was a black movie that had just come out back at that time, and it was just a really good thing. It'll come to me. And all of the actors went there. The young actors went to that school, and I was just so taken by that. "Wow, look at this." Dorothy Dandridge and all them was in the movie.

PATTERSON:

Porgy and Bess? Carmen Jones?

DEDEAUX:

Maybe it was Carmen Jones. It was one of them. But the kids that were in the movie went to Mount Vernon, and that really impressed me. I was like, "Wow."

PATTERSON:

So this is your first experience with integration as a young kid, and you're a teenager.

DEDEAUX:

I was not introduced to integration, in other words, because my first introduction was on the train, was when they crossed a certain point. It was like, "Well, you guys can move about the train." And that was the first thing. It's like, we'd better stay put.

PATTERSON:

What was the relationship like between the races at school?

DEDEAUX:

Well, everything seemed normal to them. It was me. It was me coming into the shock thing, like this is how I thought it should be. This is how it really should be. But there's nobody prepared me for this, and there was nobody explaining to me why I had to do it the other way, so it was kind of confounding to me, the fact that this is going on right here and just down the street there's another whole life. They were talking about you had to get off the sidewalk for white people and stuff like that. I can't remember that happening in our area, but I know it did happen and stuff.

PATTERSON:

In L.A.?

DEDEAUX:

No, in New Orleans, in the South. You were expected to get off the sidewalk for white people.

PATTERSON:

And you didn't have that in Los Angeles?

DEDEAUX:

Oh, no. That was a whole 'nother attitude there, which I quickly adapted to, just like, "Okay."

PATTERSON:

Was the neighborhood also integrated?

DEDEAUX:

Well, like I said, where I was on Sugar Hill it was, yes, nice, well-to-do blacks. That was the last little stronghold for your black actors and stuff. That's where they were.

PATTERSON:

So your dad was doing pretty well?

DEDEAUX:

Well, in construction, yes. Yes, he was doing pretty good on that. Construction paid real good in California.

PATTERSON:

And your stepmom was a teacher, so she was bringing in income.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, she was teaching.

PATTERSON:

And now there was, what, four kids in the house?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. Eventually there was five, because she had one and then she had two. Now it was six and then there was three of us, so they got four pretty quick.

DEDEAUX:

How did you and your step-siblings get along?

DEDEAUX:

We got along real good, because they were younger. They were all babies. That was my younger brother's generation. They were around his age. He was seven. I don't know, maybe the kids were born then. I can't remember them just growing up.

PATTERSON:

And you left the house after a couple of years?

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

And then you moved down to Watts.

DEDEAUX:

Absolutely. Well, what it was, I was put in a foster home and then in the foster home I was sent to Watts, which is where I went to another school. Well, first I went to Mount Vernon. Then I was fortunate enough to go to John Adams. Now, see, all of these schools were helping me with my typing. All these schools had linotype machines, which they had. They carried their own newspaper. So a linotype machine was the exact same machine that they used at the press to publish papers, and so we had these in these junior high schools, which was just phenomenal. So I had a chance to do it at Mount Vernon. I worked on my typing skills, because in New Orleans we had typing, but we had typing looking at a board and then typing on a blank thing, you know what I'm saying, a little scratch pad with the keys on it. So when I came to California, we had hands-on stuff, so that really--and the fact that these junior high schools had these things really, really helped me. It helped me in my typing, which helped me later on in my career, because I was able to type.

DEDEAUX:

But first I went to Mount Vernon, then I went to John Adams. Then when I went to Watts, moved to Watts, I was given a special permit to go to Gompers. Gompers was the only school that had a quad. It was the only accredited school in the area that had a quad, and so I was allowed to go there. But I wasn't really trying to do any studying and stuff. I just maintained a D-plus, C-minus mentality, because I didn't do any studying. I didn't do homework. I just got by. I just managed to get by the whole time.

PATTERSON:

Why?

DEDEAUX:

Well, I didn't have any real interest in school. There was nothing that really piqued my interest, and I just developed a D mentality, and I started hanging around with D-minded people, which kind of set me apart from the other people and put a chip on my shoulder, made me like, "What you looking at?" "What's up with you?"

PATTERSON:

Were you estranged from your dad and your stepmom?

DEDEAUX:

My dad and I--I always tried to get closer to him, but he an old Scorpio guy that just--he drank hard and he worked hard, and we were just kind of like the icing on the cake for him. His first love was alcohol. I think he loved that more. But he never--what I saw in him, he never lost a day's work, you know what I'm saying? If he stayed out till four o'clock in the morning and he had to get up at six, he did it. So whatever his activities were, it never affected his working schedule, and I adapted that in my own self, in my own life. Nothing should interfere. It shouldn't interfere with your work. If you want to go out and party, if you want to stay up for three days, fine. But you've got to face the consequences. You can't take a day off because you were stupid and took a day off. So I liked that about him, and I adapted that, and that's a policy that I passed on to my kids, too.

PATTERSON:

Did you miss being with your family when you went down to Watts, or did you adapt to your new surroundings?

DEDEAUX:

Well, when I went to Watts, I had no more family, because it was all broke up. My dad was--my stepmother was about disenchanted with him. She'd about had enough of him and his alcoholism and his lack of parenting, so he pretty much left us on our own, and when I went to Watts, it was a whole 'nother program then. It was just a whole 'nother thing.

PATTERSON:

So you began to, you said, have a D mentality.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes. School, I just didn't really think about it too much. I just got by. I quit school in, what, the tenth grade I think it was, yes, the B-10. Oh, well, what happened was, first of all, I was going to Gompers, and Gompers is an accredited school, and I was doing okay, and I kind of liked it, I guess. But I was always a class clown, so what I did, when it came time to take pictures, we all had our little bowties on and our neckties and stuff, so what I did, I got the bright idea when it came time to take pictures, I took my tie loose and I put it in my pants and made suspenders, and I was rared back like that, you know. And when they found out--they didn't see it until after it was in the book--they were livid. They were just livid. That was the supreme insult there. So what they did to punish me, they sent me to Jordan to get my diploma. They wouldn't give me my diploma from Gompers. So as my punishment I was sent to Jordan, and then I received my diploma from Jordan after doing all my work at Gompers, you see what I'm saying? That was my punishment.

DEDEAUX:

So I quit. I quit. At that time I was sixteen years old, and I was a ward of the court, the county. And the first thing they told me was that I couldn't buy a car, and I bought a car. So now I'm starting to defy them. Then I got this job, and I was making a dollar an hour, cleared \$33.80 a week.

PATTERSON:

Now, how did you buy a car? You bought a car before you had a job?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes.

PATTERSON:

How did you buy a car?

DEDEAUX:

Hustling. [laughs] I can't remember. I must have been working before, but I can't remember how I was getting back and forth to work. But, yes, I must have been working. I must have had another little piece of job. But this was my first good job, making just about a dollar an hour, 33.70 a week. So then they told me I have to start paying rent then. If I'm going to work, then I have to pay rent. So what I did, I just moved out and moved in with some friends, at sixteen, and the county never pursued it. They let me go, and I think they were just glad to get me out of their hair. I never heard another word from them. I took my little car, which I didn't know how to drive. I bought this car and it sat in the yard. I just bought it, and it took me maybe two or three months before I could learn how to drive it, you know what I'm saying.

PATTERSON:

Do you remember where your foster home was, where it was located in Watts?

DEDEAUX:

9330 Success Avenue.

PATTERSON:

Success Avenue?

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

Where was that? Do you remember the big cross street?

DEDEAUX:

It's right there by the power lines. It's between 92nd and 93rd Streets. Success is--it's hard to explain. If you go down 92nd Street, that's where it begins. It begins on 92nd and then it goes all the way up. Success is the one that parallels Will Rogers Park. That's the one, that's Success. It parallels Will Rogers Park from Century, Central, 103rd, and Success. That's the way it runs.

PATTERSON:

But you weren't there for very long?

DEDEAUX:

I was there long enough to--I was there for a couple of years.

PATTERSON:

A couple of years. What do you remember about your foster parents?

DEDEAUX:

I remember Mr. Brooks. He was a kind man. But the one thing that I really couldn't understand is his rice. He always cooked rice, and the rice we didn't eat, he soaked it, and then the next day he put more rice in it and cooked it, so we always had constant rice. [Interviewer laughs.] He never threw away the old rice. He just threw new rice in there and cooked it with the old, so you always had goulash and rice. Mr. Brooks.

PATTERSON:

So was he a single parent, single foster parent?

DEDEAUX:

No. It was a family. It was a big house, and he had several kids in there that he was doing, like it was a business for him. He had maybe four or five that he kept.

PATTERSON:

Where were your other siblings, your brothers?

DEDEAUX:

One brother was in the Air Force. The other brother remained at the house. He was able to-- because he was young. And then I proceeded to go into the foster home and then on my own at sixteen.

PATTERSON:

Did you see your brothers?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, from time to time. But now, what was really so good about it was the fact that the people that I met, which were my relatives eventually, I found out. The people that I stayed with, there was one old guy named Ben Rutherford [phonetic], and he knew two kids whose father owned a machine shop, and consequently, they gave him a job. He grew up with these two boys, and he became the foreman at the machine shop. So what he did, he worked us into the machine shop. This was a time when they were not hiring blacks. You couldn't even get in a machine shop. So what he did, he got us in one at a time. He explained to us that we had to do really well, because it would make it hard on the next person, so I was the third one to go in. It took maybe a year and a half. He hired the first guy, which was Herman, and Herman proved to be really a good worker. Then he hired Herman's brother, who was exceptional, and then I was the third, and I worked out well, and then we got in like that. So we developed a trade. We became machinists at a time when, boy, there weren't any. He taught us how to read blueprints and stuff. So I was real fortunate in that area, that I was able to get work in a machine shop.

DEDEAUX:

Then I was able to take my skill. I moved to Detroit and I got a job there, which nobody would help me. The guys, they were just like--they would just give me the blueprint and the product, and then everybody would just look away like, "Let him do it." And I would.

PATTERSON:

Well, so now you moved to Detroit. When?

DEDEAUX:

Now, this is--I'm moving ahead. This is when I'm with my family. This is when we decided to sell the house and relocate.

PATTERSON:

Oh, so this is several years later.

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

Okay. And so but going back to when you bought your first car and you had your first job, thirty-three-something a week, and you moved out, where did you go?

DEDEAUX:

I moved with the Deroins [phonetic].

PATTERSON:

The Deroins. So that was another family?

DEDEAUX:

That was another family, yes, who eventually married into my family, due to my connection with them.

PATTERSON:

Okay. Okay. So--

DEDEAUX:

The Deroins were also from Louisiana. They're from New Iberia, but we didn't know each other there. So consequently, me running into them led to me getting this machine shop job.

PATTERSON:

With Ben Rutherford.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. And then bringing my family in contact with the boys, the girls, and there was a

marriage in there, so then we became family.

PATTERSON:

You were fortunate, then, because you stayed connected to people that were sort of from the old home.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, it was good. It was really good.

PATTERSON:

So then here you are, you're about seventeen now, and you're working. You're not going to school, you're working, so you have a trade, you're building a trade. Did you still feel like you kept a D mentality? When I say that, I mean your sense of achievement. Did you begin to have ambition?

DEDEAUX:

No, not then, because--well, yes, we started working our way up. But by this time now I'm sixteen, seventeen, working in a machine shop, eighteen, so right between eighteen and nineteen is when I meet my first love. This is the girl that I want to--this is the one. And it was so funny, because I met her sister first, and she seemed just really sweet. So we made a date and I went to the house, and then I saw her older sister sitting off in the corner looking out the window, and I'm like, "Who's that?" She's like, "That's my sister, but she's engaged. She's getting married in a couple of weeks."

PATTERSON:

Were you all the same age, the younger sister and you?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, maybe I was year or two older than her, because I was a year older than her older sister, so maybe I was two or three years older than her, and we're talking about eighteen, nineteen now. So the girl that I looked at was seventeen, had a rock on her finger this big. The boy's daddy owned the building they were in, Archie's. Archie's, right there on Normandie and 47th. They used to sell the best oyster loaves and stuff out of there. So it was called Archie's then, and she was going to inherit one of the stores, because the son had one and stuff. I came on the picture,

and the mama didn't like me at all, because she was peeping under the curtain in the kitchen-- they had one of them little curtains that separate, but they were high, and she could see the holes in my boots. Well, that's because I rode a motorcycle and slid my feet all the time, because I had a suicide clutch on it. So judging from that, she was thinking I was economically poor.
[Interruption, not transcribed.]

PATTERSON:

Home with the younger sister. The mama's in the kitchen, and the older sister is over by the window. The mama's looking under the curtain and saw your shoes that had holes in them, because you were a motorcycle wild boy.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes, yes.

PATTERSON:

And Mama thought you were probably broke, right?

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly. Well, mama was thinking about that they're getting ready to inherit this chicken shack, and the son had his own business, and they were living on top of the other, the daddy's business, so they were really looking at something really nice. And the wedding was so close that how could I possibly--

PATTERSON:

Mess that up.

DEDEAUX:

--interfere. So what I did--she really didn't want to talk to me, because she was just really off to the side, a big, huge ring on her finger, and I guess thinking about her lover guy. So what I did, I managed to talk to her on the phone, and I went out and I bought the top-ten 45s. You know, back then Jesse Belvin was one of them, "You Send Me." That was Sam Cooke, "You Send Me." All those good love songs. That was back in the day where everything was about love anyway. All your songs were love songs, not that crap that you've got going on right now. So I got her all those things that said everything that I thought I wanted to say to her, and I presented it to her in

records. So when her mom found out about that, she broke all the records up, and then said I couldn't come there no more. She just didn't want me over there.

DEDEAUX:

So that's when I came up with a plan. I was like, we hadn't known each other six weeks before I had an eloping plan. So I said, "Well, why don't we just elope and go to Arizona and get married?" And she's like, "I don't know." Now, we ain't had no time to spend no time together, you know what I'm saying? It's just like it's just something happened. That spark hit her, too, and it hit me and I guess the sense of adventure. So now she's going to church. That's the only time that I got a chance to see her, at church. So I said, "Well, after church." I had made reservations, train reservations to go to Yuma, Arizona. See, after church we hop on the train, we go up there. I made arrangements with my aunt for them--she was under age--to call and give consent so we could get married. So we do. She falls for the plan. So we take off and we go. We jump on the train and we go to Yuma, Arizona, but it doesn't work out with my aunt and stuff, and we couldn't get it right to get consent and stuff, so we didn't get married. So we fooled around up there and fooled around up there, and then we came back, came back to Los Angeles.

DEDEAUX:

Now, now I know I'm in trouble. We're not married. But I wasn't so stupid that I would touch her, because she's old school. She's like, she's laying for me. She's going to get me. So we come back and like we hid out for maybe another four or five days, and finally we turned ourselves in. She takes the child straight to the doctor to get her checked, make sure that she's still a virgin, right. She's laying--I mean, she's going to nail me. [laughs]

PATTERSON:

Mama.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes, yes. Everything was intact, so she was finally satisfied. So she decided, "Well, all right, I'll take you guys." So she took us and then we went and got married.

PATTERSON:

So what happened to the old boyfriend? Did she just drop him?

DEDEAUX:

He just got left right out--I don't even know how that happened. Within six week we were married, within six weeks of meeting her.

PATTERSON:

Wow.

DEDEAUX:

And we wound up with two kids. She just recently died of cancer. But yes, that was quite a--it was just like one of those things. I just saw her there sitting at the window. I went to see the sister, and we all laughed about that, because the sister is like, "Well." And that's exactly how it happened. It was just so strange.

PATTERSON:

Would you say that was love at first sight?

DEDEAUX:

I would think so. It really impacted me. It changed me. It just turned me around. I was just like, bam. I was smitten. I guess that's when I should have found out I was a poet then, because I was just rapping. I was putting it out there, like, "This is why we should--." All these reasons came out, that she should not marry this guy, even though all I had was a motorcycle and all, and he had everything. I had nothing. I had absolutely nothing but game.

PATTERSON:

Well, you had plenty of that. She took that rock off her hand for it.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, sir. That's all.

PATTERSON:

Wow.

DEDEAUX:

And we did well. She had a little money put away from an accident, from a bus accident, and I had a good job working in the machine shop, so we were able to buy a house real young. We bought the first house in Compton, one of those on 15519 Haskins, I remember that. At the time, Rosey Grier was living across the street and stuff, and they were furious, because here I come now. I'm not but, what, nineteen, twenty years old, and I've got a house in this beautiful neighborhood that biker was trying to really be proud of, and got my buddies screaming around the corner, burning rubber, [imitates sound]--

PATTERSON:

Were they motorcycle, too?

DEDEAUX:

All kinds, everything. And these people are like, "No. No, you ain't not going to have this." But there wasn't really nothing they could do, because I owned the house, you know what I'm saying? I even bought a big, huge boat. I bought a twenty-five-foot cabin cruiser and brought it home and parked it in the driveway. It looked like Noah's Ark, just a huge thing, and my neighbor got mad, and I threatened to build a big fence. I'm like, "Man, you can go--." I was just insane, you know what I'm saying? I'd say, "I'll build a twelve-foot fence with the concrete dripping on your side," just to make it as ugly as I could. I was insane. I really was.

PATTERSON:

You were just cocky, huh? You're making money.

DEDEAUX:

I was crazy. I was insane. And that very same boat, I blew that sucker up. I had just put a hundred gallons of gasoline in it. It had two fifty-five-gallon tanks, and we had been working on it. We were going fishing the next day. And that sucker, boy, I hit the starter. We were right at the gas station. I hit the starter and I saw the spark. The orange and black flame went from a little spark, and by the time it hit me it was just a huge cloud, and it just picked me up and threw me on the shore. And everywhere I had a wrinkle--I had a T-shirt on. Everywhere there was a wrinkle it caught that heat, and it was smoldering. It was scorched and smoking. I closed my eyes when I saw the explosion, and it melted my eyelids shut. Luckily, when I was hitting the starter I was looking over this arm right here, so the brunt of the explosion caught this arm right here, and I could see--when it blew me on the dock, I rolled on this arm and the skin was just hanging off of here. I was like, "Boy, I messed up." I could feel my skin was burning, and my eyes were welded together.

DEDEAUX:

And my brother, he was at the bow. He was untying the boat. My brother-in-law was in the boat clowning, talking about, "Ship ahoy," or something. It blew him in the water. It blew me on the dock, and my brother, he was in shock. His eyes were big as saucers. And he had the fire extinguisher, and I asked him where he was going. He's like, "I'm going to get the boat." He was getting ready to jump in the water with this big fire extinguisher, because the boat was burning and it had yachts on both sides. And this guy was really heroic, the station attendant. He jumped in a little dinghy, and he would keep pulling it out to the center. It was right after the Watts riot, and we had all kinds of ammo onboard and whiskey that we had got illegally and stuff exploding. Oh, my boat raised Cain.

PATTERSON:

Oh, my gosh. It went out with a bang.

DEDEAUX:

Oh, it was banging and popping and exploding. Oh, my goodness.

PATTERSON:

All right. [Tape change. Resume in new file.]

Session 2 (June 28, 2007)

PATTERSON:

Okay. So your boat--and I need to ask you, how did you manage to have a boat? That sounds awfully expensive. Did you get it right away when you moved into Compton, or over the next five years? But still, you had to be only--okay, so you're nineteen, it's about 1959, 1960, and your machine shop work afforded you enough to go and—

DEDEAUX:

Yes. We worked on average about forty-eight hours a week, so we always had eight hours of overtime and sometimes it's forty-eight, fifty-two, worked a half a day on Saturdays, so that always made for a good check. But how I got this boat is funny, too. It goes back to my godfather. He was working at a place called City Yacht Repair, and he worked himself up to, like, the yard boss. He was the supervisor. So I was a spoiled kid. I could go around there and mess around with stuff. So he found this real good deal on this boat, and he let me know about it, so I got it through him and knew absolutely nothing about it. I was a kid that would go out, I'd have two or three people on it, and we'd get it out in the open sea, and then coming back in everybody was standing on the bow, and when we got close they'd jump off and then start pushing it, keep it from crashing too hard into the thing, so we knew nothing. That's why I blew it up. There was an inquiry about it, a Navy inquiry, because in the Long Beach paper the next day they're like, "Man risks life to avert harbor blaze," because I could have set the gas station on fire, or I could have set those yachts on fire, which was right under the--I don't know what bridge that is, but it's in Long Beach. Oh, it was an inquiry, because they took pictures and they saw that the wires to my blowers--my bilge pump wasn't connected, and I stuck by the lie that they were connected. I'm like, "The explosion blew it off," and they're like, "Sir, if the explosion would have blew it off, they wouldn't be curled around. They would be straight." But I stuck to my story and that's as far as it went.

PATTERSON:

Did they try to prosecute you?

DEDEAUX:

They were considering it, yes. They were very upset about the fact that I had a hundred gallons of gas up under that--at a gas station, with a boat on fire, with ammunition going off. The fire department at first didn't want to touch it, because the ammunition was firing.

PATTERSON:

Okay, now there's a story. Now, there's ammunition on the boat.

DEDEAUX:

It was right after the Watts riots, you know.

PATTERSON:

Okay, so let's back up now.

DEDEAUX:

Everybody [unclear]. Everybody, contrary to what they say, they've all got a little rifle onboard. That's what that was for, shooting [unclear].

PATTERSON:

Okay, wait, wait. So let's roll back to before the riot, because the rebellion was in '65, and so you're in Compton in around 1960, and you're newly married and showing out. You and all your partners are riding motorcycles and cutting up and having the neighbors—

DEDEAUX:

By that time, I got rid of my motorcycle. I got past that phase. I had my motorcycle up until I got married. When I got married, we stayed right across the street from--what's that famous place on Adams and Crenshaw where they sell the—

PATTERSON:

Johnny's?

DEDEAUX:

Johnny's. We stayed directly across the street in that apartment building, directly across the street from Johnny's Pastrami.

PATTERSON:

Oh, this is before you bought the home in Compton?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. This is when we first got married. This is our first apartment was over there.

PATTERSON:

Oh, gosh. That pastrami sounds so good right around now.

DEDEAUX:

Oh, Johnny's Pastrami. It had a reputation way back then. Way back then it had a reputation, and that was, what, fifty-something, fifty years ago at least. It had a reputation way back then.

PATTERSON:

So how did it feel to be married at that time in life, so young?

DEDEAUX:

Well, one of the things that after a while I started feeling cheated, because I never had a chance to go to nightclubs and stuff, and working the shift that I worked, we didn't get out much. But then working with the guys, we formed our little bowling groups and stuff, so we did that a lot. But I missed the nightclubbing and stuff, because I got married too early for that. Yes, so I never got a chance, and I never was really a nightclubber. I didn't particularly care for it too much. Well, I did my share, go out and just look around, kind of see what's going on.

PATTERSON:

Which is--you sort of refer to yourself as kind of on the wild side as a young man.

DEDEAUX:

Well, not in the sense of being wild like that. I was just kind of like just nonchalant, kind of like laid back, didn't particularly have any kind of ambition or anything, just kind of like just going with the flow, which took me around to--well, see, you have to understand that first of all, we had no area of expression. My early experience, when I first started feeling the need to perform, I

started looking around and the first thing I found was there was a group in Hollywood called The Committee, and it was Felton Perry and a bunch of other actors. Felton Perry is the only one that I remember, because he was one of my favorites at the time. So I joined that group, that Committee group, and I learned improvisational theater from those guys. I can't remember if I paid or not, if it was a paid thing or not, but The Committee was where I cut my teeth. That was the first thing, and I learned improvisational theater.

DEDEAUX:

From that, I looked around for an ensemble theater to join, and I found that there was a group called The Donnybrook Players. These were a group--this was an Irish group that owned a theater on Third and Vermont called The Center Theater. It was on Third and Vermont, and what they were doing, they were doing this guy, this playwright's--Bevin [phonetic], his last name was Bevin, and two of his plays--one was "Shadow of a Gunman," and I can't remember the name of the other one. But it was so funny. There were no parts in there for me, because it was Irish plays. So one of the plays that they did was "Molly Brown," [phonetic] so "Molly Brown" and "Shadow of a Gunman" were the two plays that Bevin, I think it's Roger Bevin, had wrote, and that's the two that they did.

PATTERSON:

And that's The Committee were the ensemble?

DEDEAUX:

No, no, The Committee was Hollywood. That was the improvisational group. Now this is maybe a year or two later. This is an Irish repertory theater. This is an all-Irish theater on the other side of town. This is on Third and Vermont.

PATTERSON:

Now, how did it happen that you became involved with it?

DEDEAUX:

Probably through the paper or an ad I heard or something, because right then I was searching. What you have to remember, we as black people had no area of expression back then. All we had was the little "Jet" magazine, which was about that big then. We had a little bit of "Jet." We had no radio stations, we had nothing. We had no area of expression. So I started looking around and there was nothing I could find. So the first thing I found was this Committee theater, with the improvisational.

PATTERSON:

Black people?

DEDEAUX:

Well, only Felton Perry. As far as I remember, he was the only black one at the time. And then the all-Irish theater, but they were the only ones that accepted me. They were like, "Yeah, come on. We ain't got nothing for you, but we'll find something." So then they did the play called "Molly Brown," and "Molly Brown" was a play about an interracial thing. This guy, this Irish dude fell in love with this black girl in the States, and so it was a big controversy as to whether he should or should not marry her. So what they decided to do, what the family had decided to do, they decided to let the bishop decide whether this marriage should go forth or not, and it was the Bishop of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, which I know absolutely nothing about. But it turned out that the bishop from Auckland, New Zealand, was me. You know what I'm saying? So the whole play was predicated on, "Let's see what the bishop says." And the only talking part I had was, "My dear Mrs.--" whatever her name was, and then the whole thing went to black. That was the end of the play, because they saw that it was a black guy who was going to make this decision, so I guess that's it.

PATTERSON:

A black man from Auckland.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. I guess the black people must be in Auckland, because I was the bishop from Auckland, New Zealand, and my only words were, "My dear Mrs.--" whoever the name, and then it went to black. So that was my experience with the Donnybrook Players. We did more heavy drinking than we did acting, because right across the street was a little bar, and we would relate to our problems being parallel, you know, how the British had their foot on their neck and how we had our foot on our neck here, so we'd cry in each other's beer about that kind of stuff.

PATTERSON:

Now, what year was it that you became involved in first The Committee and then Donnybrook?

DEDEAUX:

Let's go--we'll have to say The Committee had to be around in the early sixties, maybe '63, '64. I think it was before the Watts Writers Workshop even had an existence, because--I'm getting to

that. But the Watts Writers Workshop had two groups, where the Watts Prophets came in the second wave. The first wave was Douglass House on 97th and Beach. It was actually a house that was rumored to have been funded by the Kennedys, and from that place, when the Watts Writers Workshop--well, okay, let's start at the beginning with the Watts Writers Workshop. Where was I with that?

PATTERSON:

You had gone from The Committee to the Donnybrook.

DEDEAUX:

Okay. So the Donnybrook Players, okay, I managed to do those two plays, "The Shadow of a Gunman," which they had no part in it for me, because it was an Irish Western, and then "Molly Brown," which I played the Bishop of Auckland in. Okay, so from there, by now I'm hearing about the Watts Writers Workshop, and I'm hearing about the work that's being done over there. So what I decided to do, I decided to take a book of my poetry there. Now, this is in the early days now. What I had done, I wrote a book of poetry, very "Can we get along?" type poetry, kind of just like dealing with the situation and how we should solve it and very soft, easy poetry. I took it to the white community. As a matter of fact, this community, it was a bunch of professors that worked on those ships that sailed around the world, and you actually study the countries you go to. There were some people I knew, and I gave them my work to evaluate.

DEDEAUX:

And what they did, they evaluated it and they gave me a pretty good evaluation, but they said that some of the things in there were a little strong for white people to digest. So then I took that same book to the Watts Writers Workshop, and they looked at it and it was like, "Oh, this is cool, but you've got to put some more 'Kill whiteys' in here, and some more viciousness. This is way too soft for where we're going."

PATTERSON:

Okay. Now, let me stop you there. I've got to go back, because now you have gone from this young machinist who had started working at sixteen, seventeen years old, married at eighteen, nineteen years old, and then bought a home, but you said you were just sort of going with the flow. When did you become a poet? What happened to inspire you to want to become expressive and reflective and all that?

DEDEAUX:

Okay. That's exactly where we are at this point right here, because what I had been doing, I had

been writing poetry, and I had been sharing it with my white friends, with the white community, real educators. These were all professors. Like I said, University Without Walls is the name of the boat, and it was a ship that took the students to all of the countries they study and stuff, so I had those professors evaluate it, and they gave me a good evaluation and stuff, except some of it was kind of--

PATTERSON:

But why did you write it is what I'm trying to get to? What was your motivation to begin to write this obviously passionate—

DEDEAUX:

Creative things started coming out of me then, and I started realizing that I had an ability. Now, I've still got the D mentality at this point. I have not left that level. But now all of a sudden, well, I'm going through some transitions. I'm going through a divorce. Yes, this is by the time of the divorce, yes. When I came back--I moved to Detroit to save the marriage. We stayed there for maybe a month or two. My wife got homesick for her people, so we moved right back here, which put us right back into the same thing.

PATTERSON:

Is this '62, '63?

DEDEAUX:

This is '64, '65. This is just before the riot. So by the time the riots came, we were pretty much splitting up at that time, so shortly--right after the split up is when I started expressing myself. Right. That's when it started coming out, the different things. But then I take it to the Watts Writers Workshop and they're like, "Well, this is kind of soft, and you've got to heat this up a little bit." So I knew I was on track then. As a matter of fact, I got a prologue to one of my books, and if I can remember it, it says, "Yesterday I had many interesting things to say. So I wrote them all down and like a fool showed them to this clown who said my thoughts was nice, but I wasn't projecting them right. I needed to read a few books to enhance my thinking and improve my outlook. Well, this person seemed smart and real nice, so I took their unsound advice, and although I'm much smarter today, in the process of all that reading, my original idea slipped away. So now I've got nothing to say, unless I put everything back the other way." You see what I'm saying? So at that point I realized, like if it's too hard for you, and it's too soft for you, then it's right where I want to be. That's my Libra thing. I want to be right there. So that's the point that I adopted from that decision, and that's when I started dealing with my own work, knowing that you're not going to please both sides.

PATTERSON:

So you made an artist's command decision to be true to yourself.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

And not compromise your work.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. I want my work to be with all the mistakes that I put in it, because I don't want people a hundred years from now thinking that I spoke perfect English. Nobody taught me perfect English. My education came from the street. I came from the hard knocks, so to really take and defile my work and made it etiquette, whatever it is, would not be doing justice to me, because I want it just the way I wrote it. That's the way I wrote it, and that's the way I intended it. I didn't want it cleaned up. I wanted people to understand what we went through.

PATTERSON:

It's your voice.

DEDEAUX:

And so people like you, with an education, what you had to do to get yours, compared to what I had to do to get mine, we both have a terrible struggle. Mine was on the street, yours was in the things, but we had the same problems. We run across the same obstacles. I know they encouraged you to be something less, you know what I'm saying? Like, "Man, you'd make a good painter. Yeah, you'd make a good mechanic, boy. You're good with your hands." Hey, well, if I'm that good with my hands, how come I couldn't be a good doctor? And those kind of things. So we always face that, you and I and everybody else. And so I realized what my mission was. My mission was and is to document exactly where I am, exactly where my material came from. It didn't come from the university. It didn't come from the scholars. It came from the school of hard knocks, working with scholars and opening up certain passages where we help each other.

PATTERSON:

So you're into now a period where the Watts Writers Workshop is just beginning, the first phase of it.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

And so who were the people that were reading for you and reading your work at the Watts Writers Workshop in the beginning?

DEDEAUX:

Well, first of all, you have to understand the picture of the Watts Writers Workshop. It was just a place that--it was established by Budd Schulberg. This guy, he had just received an Academy Award for his film "On the Waterfront" with Marlon Brando. But he was also a guy that was just on the edge of Hollywood, because that communist thing was going through and there was all kinds of stuff about him. Well, he never was one guy to try to justify anything. He was just a man of his own means and stuff. So he was watching the riots on television, and he decided to go down there and take a look for himself, because really what they were broadcasting and what they were saying seemed like two different things to him.

DEDEAUX:

And so when he came down, he came down while it was still smoldering and burning, and the people he met--he met creative people that were looking for an area of expression. And the people he talked to had a completely different story than what was being put on the news. We were people that had been shut in, had been ignored. This riot started because some indignant policeman pushed this boy's mama, you know what I'm saying? It started over absolutely nothing, but it was the breaking point. It was like, this is it. This is it. It ain't going to happen no more. And so it kicked off from there.

DEDEAUX:

So when this man came down and the people he talked to, he talked to people, they're like, "Man, all we want is just try to--in the area of expression, we want to try to get something out." And so he got a whole 'nother view of what was going on. So he founded the Watts Writers Workshop.

He came up with the first money, and then he got all of his cronies and stuff to come in and support us. He got the whole--all of Hollywood behind him. That's how we first came into being.

PATTERSON:

Now, is he from a Jewish background, Jewish heritage?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, he is. Yes.

PATTERSON:

And was he a young man and just very progressive-liberal kind of thinker? Or purely an artist? Or was he politically--

DEDEAUX:

Well, he's a screenwriter and "On the Waterfront" was a very powerful, hard-hitting--

PATTERSON:

About the common man?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. You'd have to go back and check that to see where he was coming from, but yes, he was straightforward with his stuff. And he was at odds with what the people were saying about the riots and stuff. And what it was, it was just people that didn't have an area of expression. So what he brought in--so now when I come into the Watts Writers Workshop, I'm in the second wave. The first wave, now, we're talking about Jimmy Sherman, Johnie Scott, Ojenke, Quincy Troupe. All of these guys went on to become scholars and professors and all of that. They were all given opportunities and they all took them, and they all went on to different ways. Johnie Scott is still around. He does the "Watts Times." Quincy Troupe, he's a famous poet up there in Northern California. Ojenke's still around in the neighborhood. Johnie Scott is still--he was the baby of the group. He's still around doing different projects.

PATTERSON:

And these are all African Americans?

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

And somehow Budd--how did he find you all? How did he find these young men?

DEDEAUX:

He created an area of expression and we came.

PATTERSON:

So he got a location first?

DEDEAUX:

He got a location.

PATTERSON:

And where was the first location?

DEDEAUX:

It was Beach Street, at 97th and Beach, and it was a house. So obviously, the first people he talked to must have been these guys. I'm not just quite sure how that history goes, but it must have been those guys, and they were the forerunners of it. And then so as it became more successful, there was an old Safeway on 103rd Street. Then he bought the old Safeway store that was burned up and refurbished it and stuff, and it became the Watts Writers Workshop. It became the home of the Watts Writers Workshop.

PATTERSON:

Do you know what some of those first activities, what they produced first?

DEDEAUX:

Well, the Watts Writers Workshop was like--it housed a dance theater, it housed acting, it housed singing, and so what happened was in the early days the Watts Writers Workshop would take and send different groups out. They would take requests. We would like send our flyers to all the colleges and universities in the area and the region, selling different programs, and so different schools bought different programs. They might want the poetry thing, or they might want a whole dance review, and so we had all of those things available to them. So they all went out to the different colleges, and that's how we got started, and then that's how we got our reputation, because from different places ordering this and getting that. I, as a poet, I went out with different groups. I also went out solo.

DEDEAUX:

And then finally the Watts Prophets, we went out a couple of times together, and it didn't really gel because once again the Watts Prophets--Anthony, the fire of the group, felt that my poetry still didn't have the fire that they really wanted. And Harry Dolan sat us down and made us realize that our individuality was our most powerful thing, because we all stayed within the framework of how we felt.

PATTERSON:

Wait, wait. I've got to go back. So the Safeway is now open with space.

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

And Budd Schulberg and company, the people that he's meeting from the neighborhood, from the community, are putting their heads together and deciding what to do with that space.

DEDEAUX:

Well, what he did, he got together with Harry Dolan, who's the director of the Watts Writers Workshop--

PATTERSON:

And that was already existing?

DEDEAUX:

No. Harry was a young, upcoming writer, too. He had written a couple of TV shows that caught Schulberg's attention, and Channel 7 aired them. One was called--I can't remember the names of them.

PATTERSON:

Harry Dolan, was he also--

DEDEAUX:

He became the director of the Watts Writers Workshop.

PATTERSON:

Was he like from an Irish background?

DEDEAUX:

No, he's black.

PATTERSON:

He's a black man. Okay.

DEDEAUX:

He was a black mailman. He was a mailman who got his chance, who had these scripts, and through Budd Schulberg they went ahead and they did them. They went ahead and they aired them on Channel 7, which kind of opened everything up for the Watts Writers Workshop then.

PATTERSON:

Okay. And so the production of that, or the collaboration of that, and the materials that came from that collaboration, were really the seed as far as the artistic work that began to grow in this space.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

And then these other people came, Jimmy Sherman and Johnie Scott and Ojenke.

DEDEAUX:

They all came at the same time, with Harry Dolan. They all brought something. They all brought something to the table. Jimmy Sherman was like the guy with the books and the magazines. He's always wanted to get a publication going. Ojenke's a poet. Johnie Scott right now, who's the director over there at Charles Drew doing something, and he's also the head of the paper, the "Watts Times," and Quincy Troupe is poet, a renowned poet up there in Northern California. He's teaching. He's a professor up there.

PATTERSON:

So they began to create products that then they went and recruited artists to join them, to perform?

DEDEAUX:

Well, they became involved in different programs, and like were able to get scholarships to go to college. When the Watts Writers Workshop first started, then the importing of stuff started happening. People were like, "Oh, you want to do this? Okay." And that kind of stuff started coming in. And those guys, being the forerunners, they were able to take advantage of that. Now, what we had to do--this was when it was the Douglass House Foundation. When it became the Watts Writers Workshop, then you had room for everything. Then that's when you had your dances. That's when we started putting on plays.

DEDEAUX:

In the early part of the Watts Writers Workshop, I was in the opening plays of the Watts Writers

Workshop. It was called "The Poor Boy," and it was about a guy collecting his unemployment, so I was in all of the plays and everything that happened from the Watts Writers Workshop.

PATTERSON:

How did you meet them?

DEDEAUX:

I came in just as the building was being put together. I turned my sleeves up and got busy with them, and it started growing with us. We all started growing together, because when I came in there, they had no floor in the workshop yet. We were still putting it together and still scraping up funds.

PATTERSON:

And you knew how to do that.

DEDEAUX:

We just all chipped in and did what we could, and as the building became ready--you know, it was one part ready and we used that, and another part ready, we expanded to that. We just grew with it.

PATTERSON:

How did the community surrounding--like in that space inside the neighborhood that had been through this trauma, how did the community, the neighborhood begin to respond as they watched this happening?

DEDEAUX:

Well, that was such an unusual thing, too, because the first few years of the Watts Writers Workshop you walked past these burned buildings. Nothing was done for years. It just stayed like that. It was just a skeleton of a town, with just a little workshop that was lit up, and across the street a garbage barrel that burned constantly, by what was called the freedom tree. We had a freedom tree across the street, where all the old elders used to gather and sit there and kept the fire going under this big old tree.

PATTERSON:

This is across from the Safeway?

DEDEAUX:

Across the street from the Watts Writers Workshop. They dug it up and put a plaque in its place, as usual, and we fought to keep that tree. But the whole idea was to come to Watts. Watts was like a ghost town. You had white people coming, and we had very few incidents. A few cars got broke into if you parked too far to the perimeter, which was to be expected. But all in all, the race relations were good. They were coming into the projects. The Watts Writers Workshop is in [unclear] Downs. You've got to pass Nickerson Gardens to get into it. Imperial Courts is right up the street. Avalon Gardens is right down there. You know what I'm saying? So you're really coming into a thing, but the creativity overwhelmed all of that, and then we had very, very few incidents with that.

DEDEAUX:

And the community--sometimes drunks would stumble in onstage and stuff, and we'd make them a part of the whole thing. The community was always welcome, was always welcome, and we understood that it was the projects and anything could happen, so we were always ready to accommodate that, you know what I'm saying? We didn't isolate that, we incorporated it.

PATTERSON:

Did you have young artists from the community knock on the door, so to speak?

DEDEAUX:

Absolutely, absolutely.

PATTERSON:

And say, "I want to be a part"?

DEDEAUX:

Absolutely. Word of mouth got out on it. It started getting good press, and then people were coming just in droves, just really in droves. Then you had good people like Ted Lange came in, and he directed one of Harry Dolan's plays, "The Iron Hand of Nat Turner," which was a very

controversial play because it dealt with masters and slaves, you know, Nat Turner. Ooh, that was a hard play, that was just hard.

PATTERSON:

Why?

DEDEAUX:

Tensions were so high, because it was master and slave. There was one scene--Harry Dolan had these women line up, and then one of the slaves, he was supposed to get with each one of them, and one of them was his sister, and he was like, "This is my sister. I can't--." And they cut his thing off, that kind of stuff, just really brutal, brutal. And to have that in the projects and have white people actually acting the part out, it was really, really tense.

PATTERSON:

So were the audiences--this is taking place in the Watts Writers Workshop, in the location in Watts, and you had a mixed audience watching it?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. Yes.

PATTERSON:

Was any of that ever filmed?

DEDEAUX:

I hope it was, but I don't think so.

PATTERSON:

Tapes recorded or anything?

DEDEAUX:

If it is, it would be in somebody's private collection or something. Back then they didn't do a lot of--and it's so unfortunate, because that play was just really, ooh, that was cutting edge.

PATTERSON:

And this was like '66, '67?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

PATTERSON:

So you now were linked to a cultural center, to a place that was producing and expressing, and you're now single again, and still working as a machinist as well?

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

Okay. So how much time did you spend initially, just being around this, lavishing in the environment?

DEDEAUX:

Well, I rushed in. I would rush home. I worked the ten-hour shift. I would rush home, take my shower and come straight to the workshop. It was just a natural thing every day, every day. It just became a part of your life, you know what I'm saying? It was just like you actually had your family here, and at that time I had my two kids with me. I was taking care of them, so I'd have to get them from the daycare, feed them and stuff and then either get a babysitter or run them out here and bring them down to the workshop myself.

PATTERSON:

So you had a son and—

DEDEAUX:

And a daughter. Yes.

PATTERSON:

What were their names?

DEDEAUX:

Denise and Steven.

PATTERSON:

Denise and Steven. So you're being a single dad, taking care of your children, working hard and being now this cultural kind of—

DEDEAUX:

Starting to see some kind of opening, and learning the value of myself, learning that I had an ability to actually speak and to actually write things that people would listen to, which automatically started building up my self-esteem and started making me raising my grade average from a D to a C-plus, and also looking around at my friends and realizing that you are what you eat.

PATTERSON:

What do you mean? [laughs]

DEDEAUX:

Well, you know, if you hang around with D-minded people, then you're going to be D-minded. You've either got to educate them or you've got to educate yourself, so something's got to happen. If you hang around with--or Ds going to hang around with Ds. So you either have to bring them up, or you have to go to another place. And so in this process I started learning the value of words, because now--once I got to the Watts Writers Workshop and I saw what was going on, and I saw what was selling, then I started putting some of that bitterness and hatred into my poetry. You know what I'm saying? So I'm writing a lot of negative stuff. It's like, "Why you do us like this? And we're goin' kill you."

PATTERSON:

Let me ask you about that, because something you said earlier about not tempering the passion of your work based on any outside influence, and that you wanted to speak from your honest feeling; whether it was too hot for some or too cool for others didn't matter. But you're also saying that speaking the anger of the community was what people wanted to know about, wanted to know, "How angry are you? We see that we had a rebellion, so what is this anger?" So anger began to be commodified, in a way. Right?

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly.

PATTERSON:

So how much of that anger actually came from you, and how much of it did you absorb from the environment and then sort of put it back out?

DEDEAUX:

Okay. Well, the way I have my poetry, it's like in four stages. I started with hope. It's like, "We can make things better. Everything's going to be all right," and stuff. Then I went to the next phase of, "Well, why aren't we getting the things that we get? I mean, what's the reason? Who's holding us back, and why?" Started asking those kinds of questions. Then I went through another phase where I tried not to ask questions, I'd try to answer them. So I went through four different stages in my poetry. And so what I decided, it was like when I was mad at white folk and writing all of the vicious things that I wrote down, it was put away. And like black people always do, it was put away and forgiven. You know what I'm saying? Like, oh, okay, white people, they [unclear].

DEDEAUX:

So I started writing other things, but I never got rid of that. And then after I got a little older and got to thinking about it, I'm like, we're always apologizing for ourselves, so I took what I wrote and I published it, and I say, "I make no apologies, because nobody apologized for--because all the things that I said in this poetry was also said to me, and nobody's treated me. I mean, I haven't had any kind of treatment. Nobody's even thought about the kind of damage that was done to me." The first twelve years of your life is the most important time. That's your growing time. I spent my first fourteen under segregation, so that means that I didn't get an education as a child. I got an education as an ex-slave, or what you can be, a second-class person. So something should have been done and still should be done to rectify that. When the Jews went through the Holocaust, they went through treatment to work with that. When we went through all of this

slavery thing twice, nobody's--they just always walk away from us. They're like, "Okay, you free. Go ahead about your business."

DEDEAUX:

But that's why we were back enslaved again. That's why we had to do it a hundred years later and go through the whole thing again, and we're going to have to do it another hundred years from now, because nothing is being done to heal it. It's like, "Okay, yeah, yeah, now y'all got it." I mean, what about all these hundreds of thousands of people that was put in the front of us, put in line in front of us? Who's going to explain that to us, to us and our kids? And how come we don't have any kind of recognition or any kind of compensation?

PATTERSON:

Well, do you think that actually because of the kinds of work that people were doing in the Watts Writers Workshop that you were answering your own question, that you were healing yourself?

DEDEAUX:

I think collectively we all were, yes.

PATTERSON:

And you were responding.

DEDEAUX:

I think it was just a whole--yes, in that environment we had a chance to really mix it up and not get one-sided or lose focus of what it is, because it was always the total picture, because while you were saying how unjust this whole system is, you were dealing with a whole lot of just people in the workshop, who were artists. And then all of a sudden you realized that artists don't have color, and so then how does that happen? How does all of a sudden artists don't have any color? But you can hate white people, or you can hate Chinese or Mexicans or anything like that. But it's okay. An artist, I don't care what they are, they accepted it. So there's a kink in that chain somewhere, and it takes lots of years to deal with that, and seeing the power of words, like I say, to hurt or heal. I could sit here and tell you how ugly you are and make you mad, or sit here and tell you how beautiful you are and make you smile. So why would I want to make you mad? So the power of words to hurt or heal, we put them in a positive direction now, and we use it--we're armed with everything that's necessary.

DEDEAUX:

But even when they give us little racist, skinhead kids teach, and we tell those kids, like, "No matter what happens, you love your parents and you respect your parents, but you don't take that bullshit they feeding you outside. This is a whole 'nother world. You live with them inside, but you realize when you step out of here, you're going to need people, and it's not like that. But you ain't got to say nothing to them. You don't want to disrespect them in any kind of way. You live with that, but when you come out it's a double standard." So that's how we get by with those kids. We let them know, like, "It's fine. Your parents can hate. I'm a racist myself. I don't fool with white people. I don't fool with white women. So that makes me a racist." You know what I'm saying? And guys, when I'm out here, I'm out here in the middle of nowhere, and it's nothing--it's 88.1 percent white. All my friends are white and stuff, and they're like, "Well, let's go here and let's go here." I can't tell them I'm a racist, but I am. [laughs] I can't help it.

PATTERSON:

How are you a racist inside of a situation where you're calling white people your friends? How does that play out?

DEDEAUX:

I'm a racist because I won't fool with white women.

PATTERSON:

Oh, okay. Because they're white, or is it just that they're not attractive to you?

DEDEAUX:

Because they're white.

PATTERSON:

Why?

DEDEAUX:

Because I've seen too much of that. I've seen too much of that. It's a number of us. If I wanted a white woman, I can find one in my own race, you know what I'm saying? I can find one as white as any white woman, and I just feel that you're crossing the line when you do that. I feel it's selling out. I feel that integration is fine, but integration is the destruction of the--integration is

what allowed Wal-Mart to come in and eliminate the mom-and-pop stores and things like that, so integration has done a great deal of harm to us, as well as some good. But when we had integration, it was like, "Boy, you ain't going out there. I'm a bust your head off," and then the beatings you got, you got from your family, not from the police. And it worked, because our people always knew what was out there waiting on us, but with integration it's deceived, and it's the same thing waiting on us. But our kids, under the guise of integration, think that they can go out and do what the next kid do, and they can't. They really can't. So in that sense I call it that. [Interruption, not transcribed.]

PATTERSON:

I wanted to ask you about this idea of the perspective that you had that you developed that was linked to the Watts Writers Workshop, but then also linked to just your personal philosophy. I mean, you were developing your own personal philosophy, but then you had the Watts Writers Workshop that was definitely an integrated operation, actually founded by a white man. Maybe it just happened to be that Budd Schulberg was a white man. Harry Dolan was a black man. So would you say maybe it was a joint--it was a black-white sort of collaboration that got things going?

DEDEAUX:

It was.

PATTERSON:

So to you, is that an argument for the power of integration? Or was that just a haphazard situation?

DEDEAUX:

Well, one of the things that Budd Schulberg did, he opened us up to the white community, and he showed us how--this is kind of funny. He showed us how to raise money. One of the things that Budd would do, one of the interesting stories was that there was a bunch of people there at a fundraiser, a bunch of different artists and rich people and stuff, and so Budd Schulberg got up and did a nice spiel. And he has trouble talking, too, because he stutters a little bit. But he did his spiel, and just as he was sitting down and introducing Harry, he told Harry, he's like, "Harry, cry." And Harry's like, [whispers] "What?" He's like, [whispers] "Cry." So Harry started doing his little speech, and as he got along and got to dealing with it he started getting emotional and kind of welling up and stuff like that, and the money started flowing. The money just came and came and came. So that was a trick that we learned. We learned that emotion will pull money out of a wallet, so a lot of these things were just really contrived and emotional, because tears always brought out dollars, and Budd Schulberg brought that experience to Harry, and the first time it

happened it was just like a rainbow. Money just flowed in because then it's like, "Ooh, okay, okay." And it was genuine feeling and stuff, but it's just the fact that you do that.

PATTERSON:

He let it go.

DEDEAUX:

That's part of your speaking. When you're lying here and dealing and trying to get money, then you've got to make them feel it, and that was the key to really, really feeling it. So as far as answering your question in that respect, yes, yes, it was a lot of things that we needed to know, and a lot of things that we learned, and also a lot of things that we taught. So one hand washed the other. And it was a good mix. All the people that came to the workshop, the people of color and otherwise, got along, because they realized that we wasn't there for our differences. And one of the things that we realized early in the Watts Writers Workshop was that there's always going to be dissention, but if you find too much dissention, too much confusion, then we have to assume that you're an FBI agent, because back in that time COINTELPRO [counter intelligence program] was very prevalent. They had just got through winding down the war, and they had all this new equipment, so they brought it to the Watts Writers Workshop.

PATTERSON:

What? Co--?

DEDEAUX:

COINTELPRO. That was the means that they used for spying at the end of the Korean War, and they brought that into the Watts Writers Workshop, that program, and destroyed the workshop with it.

PATTERSON:

Explain that.

DEDEAUX:

Well, what happened was there was a young black man by the name of--his FBI name was Othello, and what the FBI did--this guy was in the service and what the FBI did, they got him--I'm trying to think of his name--they got him to come into the Watts Writers Workshop. So he came to the workshop and he was just raggedy and just befuddled and stuff, so we brought him

in the workshop and we let him stay there, and he was an FBI plant. So what he did, he began to take the Watts Writers Workshop apart. The first thing he did was, Angela Davis was in jail at the time, and Emily Gibson was her vice president of the Angela Club or whatever it was. She was the second in charge, and Emily Gibson also wrote for the--what's that black newspaper here?

PATTERSON:

"Sentinel"?

DEDEAUX:

"Sentinel." She also wrote for the "Sentinel." Her cause was always for the Indians, and so she was in charge of Angela's papers. What they did, they had this guy to go and to set fire to the garage where Angela's papers were. Ironically enough, it was a wet night, and what he did, he set fire to the garage, and we called the fire department and stuff, and, of course, they didn't show up till the thing was well in flames, and a lot of Angela's papers burned up at that time. That was the beginning of COINTELPRO.

DEDEAUX:

The other thing he would do--our projector disappeared. The movie projector just one day was gone, and he was in charge of filming the activities for the workshop and stuff, and suddenly the equipment was gone and didn't work and stuff, and we weren't able to do things like that. Seats were getting cut up in the workshop and not understood, not explained. Then finally this guy, what he did, he went on this news radio, NPR news, he went on there and he confessed the whole thing. So "Rolling Stone" magazine, they did an article on it. It's called "The dirtiest, meanest trickster that ever lived," and it's the whole story of how they sent him into the Watts Writers Workshop to destroy it and how he succeeded in doing it. He finally burned it down.

PATTERSON:

So how did he defend--did he defend himself? Did he have remorse, when he was on the radio?

DEDEAUX:

Well, he was definitely from the FBI and telling the story at the same time, so they didn't want that story told.

PATTERSON:

He revealed that he was from the FBI?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes.

PATTERSON:

And what did he say his cause was?

DEDEAUX:

They were blackmailing him. There was something that he had done. I'm trying to remember his name. It was Othello was the--you'll be able to research that from "Rolling Stone." But he tells the whole story. And while all these things were happening to us, we're not understanding it, you know. All of a sudden one day the equipment is missing and something's not working and just constantly, and not even once thinking about tracing it to this guy.

PATTERSON:

Because he portrayed himself as a supporter.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes, he was one of us, he was one of us. He was the guy that worked his way in, and he was the guy that worked the equipment, you know what I'm saying, so he did us so much harm, so much harm.

PATTERSON:

So when the Watts Writers Workshop was beginning and you're building it up from the ground, and you're working it as an integrated environment with this one purpose of telling the stories in spite of the differences, you were pretty much spending most of your personal time or your social time here at the workshop, right? How did you meet Amde [Anthony Made Hamilton] and Otis [O'Solomon]?

DEDEAUX:

When I came into the workshop, I came into the workshop as a poet, but also with my acting

experience. I had already had two little plays under my belt that I felt really good about and improvisational experience with The Committee theater. Well, I got with the Watts Writers Workshop, and they were doing improvisational classes, and I joined that. It was a guy named Jonathan running that. Then also all of the plays and stuff, I got involved in the plays and stuff. So Amde was the next one to come. Amde had already had a reputation as a poet. He had been writing stuff, and he had started off at the Mafundi Institute, which was one block down from the Watts Writers Workshop, right over there by the railroad tracks.

DEDEAUX:

The Mafundi Institute is the one that Karenga [Dr. Maulana Karenga] named. That's the one that he and Bradley and all them got together. What it stemmed from--the Mafundi Institute stemmed from the fact that before it was ever built there was the Watts Happening Coffee House, and the Watts Happening Coffee House sort of divided the Panthers from the US organization. This is before they had that incident when the boy got killed over there at UCLA, and so they were in harmony at that time, pretty much so. That's part of that COINTELPRO, too. That FBI thing started that mess and got Bunchy [Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter] involved in that, and Bunchy was the one that got killed at UCLA, which kind of started the rift between the two.

DEDEAUX:

But from that, the Watts Happening Coffee House was born, and what they did, they built the Mafundi Institute, which houses the Watts Happening Coffee House to this day, and they serve a bunch of stuff out of it. But the Mafundi Institute was also built as a foundation. It's a two- or three-story building, but it was built only as as a foundation. It's built to be a skyscraper. It was supposed to house all of the records. They were supposed to do all of the records and videos in there. It's all studios, which they converted into offices now, but there were big plans for the Mafundi Institute that never materialized. They might one day be, because of the rooms, all the downstairs rooms are designed to be theater rooms, for sound and stuff, and then the building is designed to go up, so one day it might happen.

PATTERSON:

Had it already started when the Watts Writers Workshop was being organized?

DEDEAUX:

They came along at the same time. You had Roger Mosley was the guy that was working out of Mafundi Institute, and he was producing plays over there. Roger Mosley is the one that got on the television and came out with a good career. He did real well. But he was the guy, the director over there of the arts part of the Mafundi Institute. And so we kind of had two workshops going

on. We had the Watts Writers Workshop and the Mafundi Institute, and we would go back and forth with our [unclear]. We wasn't at odds with each other.

PATTERSON:

That's interesting. And a block apart, you say.

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

Like walking distance. You could be involved in one production and then--

DEDEAUX:

The Watts Writers Workshop was at the tracks, and the other one is on Wilmington and 103rd, so it's a nice little walk.

PATTERSON:

And some of the same people were involved in both.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

So Amde was working-- [End of recording]

Session 3 (June 29, 2007)

PATTERSON:

So Amde was involved with the Mafundi Institute first.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, he was.

PATTERSON:

And you met him there?

DEDEAUX:

I met him at the Watts Writers Workshop. He was associated with James--I don't want to say the name, because it don't sound right. But yes, he was at the Mafundi Institute, and then he came down to the Watts Writers Workshop. He tells a very interesting story, too, that Odie Hawkins, one of the original members from the Watts Writers Workshop, invited Amde to come down to one of the workshops, and Amde wanted to know if they had any food there. One of the things that we always did, we always did have food, because that's always enticing, when it comes to enticing people. So he went to the workshop and it came time for him to read something, and he told them like, "I don't have anything to read." But what he was doing, he was writing little poems and throwing them away, and Odie was going behind him, picking them up and saving them.

DEDEAUX:

And so this particular day when he went to the thing and he said he didn't have anything to read, Odie handed him those scraps of paper and told him, "Read some of this." And he did. He read one of those and got such a good response, it turned his life around right then. He knew right then he wanted to be a poet. Then he tells how the following week, I guess, he didn't do any homework, and he just came in and come time for him to read something, he just scribbled something out and read it, and they just ate him alive the next time, like, "This ain't nothin' here." So he realized like it wasn't that easy, that it had to have a little more thought.

DEDEAUX:

But when I met Amde, Amde was the poet on fire. His poetry was the fire poetry. He was the one spitting out the real deal. So the poetry I was doing was like very kind of soft, and then Otis was doing some of the love kind of stuff, so we decided to try that. He wasn't too happy with it, because he wanted more fire, but it would have been more of the same. So what kind of made us unique was our diversity, the fact that each one is coming from a different place, but pretty much saying the same thing. And it took Harry Dolan to make us realize that, because we took this problem to Harry, and Harry said, "Well, it's the diversity that you guys really have that you need to work on and really appreciate and understand." And then the light came on from that time on. We realized like, "Oh, okay. It's our diversity that makes us--," saying the same thing, but saying it three different ways, which really, it helps a whole lot.

PATTERSON:

So Harry Dolan then sort of was a factor in helping you coalesce and become a unit?

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly. He was the first to succeed, and he had two successful TV shows under his belt and then a play, "The Iron Hand of Nat Turner." So he had already cut his teeth, so we pretty much listened to what he said and followed his direction, because he was definitely going in the right direction. He was the man of the hour.

PATTERSON:

How was the personal chemistry between the three of you? Obviously, your poetry reflects something of your personality.

DEDEAUX:

Well, we had a chance to really gel, because we spent so much time together. Amde and I, we lived together in the same house, so that helped a whole lot, and then Dee Dee lived with me for a while and that helped a lot. Otis never lived with us, but we just spent--young and early in our career, we spent so much time together, because it was so much work. They didn't recognize poetry, first of all, as music or anything. There was no pay for it or anything when we first got involved with it. We recorded an album with Quincy Jones, his "Mellow Madness" album, and there's one cut on that called "Beautiful Black Woman." It was written by Otis and at the time they didn't give royalties for that stuff, so Otis had one heck of a time going through the process to get paid for that, but he finally did.

PATTERSON:

So would you say then that the poetry and the way that you performed it as what was becoming the Watts Prophets--I don't know if you called yourselves that; let us know if that's what you called yourselves at the beginning--but as this was formulating itself, did you feel like you were unique in the performance of poetry, the way that you began to do it, or was there a prototype?

DEDEAUX:

We absolutely knew we were unique, first of all, because we didn't curse. We didn't use profanity, and everybody at that time was using profanity. We didn't feel the need to have to express ourselves like that. But the interesting point is, okay, so we met at the Watts Writers Workshop. First it was Amde and I and then Otis came in, and Dee Dee was already an accomplished songwriter for Motown music.

PATTERSON:

Dee Dee McNeil?

DEDEAUX:

Dee Dee McNeil. And so Dee Dee was writing the music for Harry Dolan's "Iron Hand of Nat Turner," so her and I were working together already. Before Dee Dee there was another lady that came into our group, and her name was Helen Mingleton. She was an actress. Her whole family was actors. Her son was named Count Mingleton, and then her husband--they were also in real estate, but the whole family acted, and Helen was the first one to work with us. And early in our career she realized, like, "No, I don't want to do this with you guys," because at that time we were still having the fire. We still had the "kill whitey" and stuff, we was going after that. We were on that level. So she decided, like, "This is not good for my career. No, I can't do this." So she got out of the group and then we talked Dee Dee into coming in.

PATTERSON:

Now, Helen, was she playing an instrument?

DEDEAUX:

No. She was strictly a poet, strictly on her voice and actress. She was an actress and poet, but chose not to get involved on the level. Once we started moving up, she's like, "Okay." So now we talk to Dee Dee and we get Dee Dee involved. She's a Motown writer. She's written "What is a Man?" for Motown, which they had on a Four Tops album, several other nice tunes, and so we get Dee Dee to come in. At this time, we don't have a name yet. We're calling ourselves Watts Fire.

DEDEAUX:

So there's a contest. There's a music contest for bands and stuff. Who was giving it was--is that the early days of another workshop? My memory is so bad, trying to remember this stuff. So anyway, we go into this contest. It's all music and the poetry. So a couple of acts went on and then it came our turn. They got ready to introduce us, and they said, like, "Okay, you guys are next. Well, what's your name?" And we said--we were trying to decide what to call ourselves. We say, "Watts fire." And then I think it was Helen who said, "No. Say, you guys are prophets. Call it the Watts Prophets." And we thought about and we say, "Okay, Watts Prophets." But that's how we got the name, right at that point.

PATTERSON:

Now, Helen was still with you then, at that point?

DEDEAUX:

No, it wasn't Helen I'm thinking about. It was Dee Dee. Yes. No, Helen was gone by then. And so that first night we got introduced as--it was the Inner-City Cultural Center, that's where we did the thing, when they used to have the talent shows and all that. So the Inner-City Cultural Center, we go up and we take second place. Now, this is the first time that people have ever seen spoken-word poetry performed the way we did it, you know what I'm saying? So it really caught on really good, because that's how we won second place. The people were like, "Yeah, yeah, I like that," because call and response. We were just doing the whole old call-and-response thing, and by taking second place, it kind of garnered a lot of attention, you know what I'm saying. "What is that?" So we got invited to other things.

PATTERSON:

Had you been exposed to what The Last Poets were doing in New York at all?

DEDEAUX:

We absolutely were. Well, what was happening was around the same time that the Watts Prophets were developing out of the workshop, The Last Poets were developing out of a workshop. They released their album about six months before we did, but we've always been close together. Whenever they come to town we entertain them and vice versa. This last time when we were in New York, we were with them. We did a show--we did the 9/11 show last year with them. But our first show, we did a thing at USC to a standup crowd. I mean, it was just capacity, and that was one of our early shows. That was forty years ago. Then we did another reunion show just maybe three or four years ago, and then we just did this last one in New York. We did the 9/11 thing with them.

PATTERSON:

So all these that you're mentioning were with them?

DEDEAUX:

With The Last Poets, yes, so we've had a good relationship all the way, and whenever we're together, we explain to the young people that there is no East-West rift, never was, and that's a whole bunch of hype. We've always shared our stuff. It's all positive, all positive. We don't have any problems with them.

PATTERSON:

When you worked with Dee Dee McNeil, now, I understand that she was a pianist as well?

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

How did the music begin to come into what you were doing?

DEDEAUX:

Well, Dee Dee never--she never considered herself a singer. She considered herself a songwriter, and we really had to pull it out of her. We really had to really make her sing, and she didn't want to do it. We just loved her voice and we liked the way she sounded, and so she gradually started doing a little something. Then she started taking voice lessons, too, which really changed her range and stuff. Then later on she became a jazz, a cabaret singer, which she does now. She sings in clubs and she's very active. She's got a following that follows her everywhere. She took them to Hawaii not long ago and stuff, and she sings at these clubs.

PATTERSON:

So she was playing the piano and singing with you all.

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

Was she the only musical component at first, or did you start with anything else, like drums?

DEDEAUX:

Every once in a while we had--when we recorded the album, we had a bass player, but we've never had a lot of music. But we've always embraced any music, whatever you had. If you came up with some country and western stuff, we'd put poetry on top of that. Whatever it was, we found that the poetry lays on top of the music, so it really doesn't matter what it is, so we can pretty much do poetry to any type of music, because the kids, they get caught up in the beat. We don't. We lay it on top. Our poetry just fits on top of the music, so it'd go with anything, where the kids, they've got to be right at the beat [demonstrates] and the den-da and the den-da, da, da, da, da, da.

PATTERSON:

Well, yes, let me ask you that about the rhythm now. Speech has its own rhythm. I mean, there's recitation that has its rhythm, but you're saying that the rhythm of the flow of the spoken word as you created this sort of idiom, that was really you all here and The Last Poets in New York, you're creating an idiom that is, of course, rhythmical, but maybe the music takes the rhythm from the spoken word, or do they parallel each other and not necessarily link?

DEDEAUX:

Well, one of the things you have to be careful with is your selection of musicians, because you have some musicians that get so caught up in the music, you're looking at them and their eyes are closed, and they're playing the instrument and they're just in another world, and with poetry, if you're working with musicians, they have to keep their eyes open. That's what we tell our musicians, like, "Watch us, because we're unpredictable, and we never do it the same way twice." Musicians get comfortable and they fall into that same role, and we don't, none of us know one lick about music, so we don't know when to come in on the fourth beat or none of that stuff. That's why we ride on the top of music. We don't get caught up in the beats and stuff, because music is not our thing. Our thing is poetry, and the music is only there to accommodate it. You don't want to get caught up in it. If you get to waiting on the music and that, then that's the music that you're dealing with. We're really dealing with the spoken word with a little music enhancement.

PATTERSON:

Yes, so that music then is an accessory to the word, rather than the word having to be sort of locked and linked to the beat.

DEDEAUX:

Well, you find musicians, some of them get so caught up in their music they close their eyes and they're just gone, and that ain't what poetry--poetry, like you said, is a rhythm, and you change it. It depends on your mood and how you feel, so any musician that's comfortable with thinking he's going to close his eyes and play the [unclear]--you've got to be paying attention, because it's a whole 'nother thing coming this time. That's the difference with music and with poetry and with the Watts Prophets, because we don't rely on the music, so the music has to pay attention to us.

PATTERSON:

Do you say that the ideal musician accompanist then is one that is cued from the color of the word?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, one that pays attention and has an ear.

PATTERSON:

So if you're talking about something explosive, then the music must follow the color of the explosion.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, you can't be thinking about your girlfriend or what you did yesterday and all that other stuff. You've got to be there--

PATTERSON:

Got to hear the word--

DEDEAUX:

just like we do, call and response. We react to certain words, too, and it's not always the same, because depending on how it comes out of my mouth. If I've got some emphasis on something, then they're going to take it somewhere else, so it depends on how I'm feeling that day and what words I emphasize. That will determine which words that they call out. So it's constantly new. It's constantly inventing itself. You can't get comfortable and say, "Well, this is how it's going to be," because it ain't never like that twice, never like that.

PATTERSON:

So even though you've written the material, it's still subject to improvisation.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, always, always. And then when you do something 10,000 times, you don't want to do it the same way every time, so you find other ways to get the point across even better.

PATTERSON:

So during your development personally as a poet, you're now becoming a wordsmith, and you're immersing yourself, I imagine, in language like never before. You talked about the power of language. What did you do to continue to fine tune your relationship with words? Did you start reading more, or did you study other poets?

DEDEAUX:

I did a lot of reading. I studied other poets. I also called upon myself. What I try to do in my experience, my words come from an "I, me, my" perspective. Most of my material is stuff that I've experienced, you know what I'm saying? And questions that I have that should be addressed. Like, for instance, Otis has got this poem he wrote called "Hey, World," and it's an ecology poem, and he wrote this poem thirty-five or forty years ago. If maybe one teacher would have heard this poem and took it to maybe the principal, and the principal could have heard this poem and took it to the city councilman, and the city councilman could have heard this word and took it to a senator, we might not even be talking about the environment right now. We might have most of it corrected, because that was over thirty-five, forty years ago. It's a poem like, "Hey, world, ain't you scared? This fool called man is going to kill you dead. You better hear me, the situation is drastic, all your green grass is turning to plastic. Hey, world, what's going on? You're almost through. Man has damn near got the best of you. He's got big iron birds soaring through your sky, your mountain tall, they ain't so high. Your babbling brooks done lost their bubble, you'd better hear me world, because you're in trouble. Even your four seasons are acting funky and strange. You've got winter in spring and spring in fall. Sometimes summer don't come at

all." So he just goes on and on and on, and had we heard that thirty years ago and paid attention to it, then maybe we wouldn't be leaving these problems.

DEDEAUX:

Because what I found out, it's like everything has been left to the young generation now. You've got the three strikes thing. They say like, "Okay, we're not going to think about it for twenty-seven years, twenty-seven years to life." So that means the little kids right now that's coming through kindergarten and stuff, that's going to be their responsibility, when they get up there. How are they going to house and feed these animals that we're creating in the prisons? The environment, they say, "Well, okay, we'll handle that next year." That's going to come on the young people. Social security, there ain't no more. What are they going to do about that? So it's a lot of problems that we're just passing on to the next generation, and they can't solve it. They really can't solve it, because they're going to be overwhelmed. Just the fact that all these twenty-seven-year-to-life people are going to get out in the next, what, fifteen years now? Twenty years? It's a whole--what are you going to do with those if you don't have the resources?

PATTERSON:

So going back to some of the damage perhaps that I'm getting and beginning to perceive as I hear these stories about Los Angeles pre-civil rights, when the neighborhoods were homogenous and coalesced, and black people took care of each other inside of these more insular communities, and then when there was integration and everything kind of broke apart, you didn't have the same kind of support systems. Do you think that's where the generations began to split apart, and we stopped looking to the elders to learn, or the tradition began to break down so that these messages of wisdom that, of course, obviously come with experience and time, don't get passed into the generation--

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly.

PATTERSON:

--and integration had something to do with it, do you think?

DEDEAUX:

I think integration had a lot to do with that, because integration broke up the little small family thing, and it made it okay to bring other people involved in our personal business. Like before, we had the responsibility of taking care of our children, and we did a good job until they told us

it was abuse. I don't know. I guess it was abuse, but had they not treated their kids like that and beat the hell out of them when they needed it, then they would have been more abused. They would have been more abused by a system that was prepared to strike them down at any time, with no civil liberties or anything. So they had to be strict and stuff like that. That's why when I was a kid coming home in my neighborhood in the Seventh Ward, everybody that was sitting on their gallery, which is the front porch, used to make sure we spoke to them. "Good evening, Mr. So-and-so." "Good evening, Miss So-and-so." Because they'd make an extra trip to your house just to say, "That boy walked by and didn't say nothing to me." You know what I'm saying?

DEDEAUX:

And then also in your system you had your uncles that looked out for you, looked out after you, and you had your parents, too, so you were corrected twice, because your uncles, they stood in place, too, because everybody knew if you got outside that box, you were unprotected. You know what I'm saying? So what they did, with this integration thing they said that all of this was abuse, but a policeman can take and beat your child out in the street and stuff, and you can't touch him. You know what I'm saying? If I thought that my kid was going to go out and get themselves killed, I'd beat the shit out of them first, before I let them just--I don't care what you call it, call it abuse or call it whatever it is, but if it takes that to save their lives, then that's what I'll do, because I can't see no police beating on them. So this abuse thing, yes, sure, yes, they put it on us. But they only had to do one good whipping, if you was a smart kid. All smart kids only had one whipping. That's all, you know what I'm saying? Oh, yes, I got it one time. I knew what was up then. My brother was hard-headed. He got whippings all the time, but he always knew the consequences. He always stepped outside of the box, you know what I'm saying? It was like, "Okay?" "Okay." And he got so big my mama couldn't beat him, so what she had to do, she had to tie his hands up, lay him across the bed, let him roll from one end of the bed to the other, beating him. Sent me out to get the switches. "Go get me a switch out there." I'd get a good strong one, too. I'd be like, "Ooh, yeah." Ain't going to break. Shoot.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, but it worked because you were locked up and you were tied up in this box, and the abuse that you got from home was nothing compared to the abuse that was waiting on you outside. You couldn't put a hat on without buying it. You couldn't sit down and eat a hotdog. You couldn't drink out of--you had to bend your back all the way down to drink out of the faucet, because your faucet had to be lower. You know what I'm saying? That meant the parents had to bend down further, too, all the way down to the kids' level, all that kind of humiliation and stuff. So taking all of those things into effect and looking at that, I'm looking at it like, okay, so yes, yes, they were kind of hard on the kids, but the other factors were even much harder. If you got caught outside of your box, then you were in a whole lot of trouble, because you couldn't cross the tracks. There were just so many things that you couldn't do.

DEDEAUX:

Then when integration came in, then you could do all of those things, but now you can't correct your kid. Now your kid calls 911 on you if you even look at them crazy. Like I've got a little niece that she done called the police so much on her parents, police said, "Next time you call, we're taking you." It's like, "You're playing this. This time we are taking you." But it's gotten to a mockery like you can't really--kids are in charge.

PATTERSON:

So the authority issue became nullified really.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

When I say authority, I mean the family authority became nullified. So now we switch from family authority to governmental and larger legal authority.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. You know, when I was coming up, all they had to do was give you a good look, like, "All right." That was enough, because you know what to do to get to it. When you got to it, you got it, and if you were smart you didn't get to that point. If you was dumb, then you got it.

PATTERSON:

Yes. So then, so the transmission of values came through this authority system that was really the link for tradition and history, is the authority of the past, and it passed on to the children, so that was also the link for culture as well as discipline and values.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly.

PATTERSON:

I see.

DEDEAUX:

That got destroyed. That just all the way got destroyed. The little mom-and-pop stores, the little stores that used to get you through when you didn't have enough money, you had the little books, the little thing on the books and stuff, that kept you going. All that left with integration. Integration took all that out. And it just made it impersonal. It just made it now like, "Okay, I'm your next-door neighbor now. You like me? I don't like you." Whereas before, you were forced, unless you had to deal with the elements that you had to deal with, you had to like each other, because nobody else liked you, and you knew it. So integration brought the hypocrites out, like, "How you doin', child?" And soon as you walk away they're--but you knew where you stood before. You knew exactly where you stood, and you knew there was nobody in your corner. Like there is now--I don't know anybody that's really in my corner that I could really say and trust, because everything's got two faces on it now. But back in the day, I knew which side of the coin it was. I knew it was a [unclear].

PATTERSON:

So the Watts Prophets straddled this time, from when the community was more coalesced, which you grew up, into integration, after the rebellion that things began to be more integrated. All of that whole time in the sixties that integration was happening, and the sort of dissolving of the community. So you all straddled that with the art of the spoken word. So as time went on, say into the seventies and into the eighties, I mean, now we're seeing the results of this breakdown that integration had. How did it affect your production as a poet?

DEDEAUX:

Well, what it did for us, it just gave us more material to really focus on the different things that were going on. The bearing that it had on me personally was just the fact that I just saw the whole system just break down, I mean, as far as black kids and the unity that they had, that we had with our grandmothers and stuff--our grandmothers were always the backbone of any black family, because they were the ones that had the permanent address, you know what I'm saying? And we lost that. We lost that in integration, too, because they brought in other factors, like, "This is your Aunt So-and-so, and this is--." So your real people really got pushed aside and so some fake people were put in their place, and the values just changed. Grandma used to be the one that every time there was a problem, you went to Grandma, and she gave the daughter a chance to get herself straight, and kept the kids and did all that. Now the grandma's beating the daughter out--Grandma's putting on makeup and then talking about, "Don't call me Grandma. Call me Susan." You know what I'm saying? "Uh-uh, all right? Don't call me that. No, no." Grandma's beating the daughter out the door. She goin' shake her butt, because it's too young,

like the daughter done brought it on her, like, "I'm not ready to be no grandma," and that's what a lot of them say. And back in my day, they was all ready to be Grandma, because they knew the responsibility. They knew they had children that didn't understand and who was having children that really needed to understand, so they were there to help them both. But now Grandma's running out the door quicker than the mama. [laughter] "Uh-uh, I'm too young. Uh-uh, I'm not staying home with them kids. No, no, you had them."

DEDEAUX:

So it's a whole 'nother--so I guess the grandmas feel cheated, too, maybe that. I don't know what it is, but--and the grandmas are so much younger now. People, they felt old when they were in their forties and fifties, now, like I thought that was old. I'm sixty-seven and I still don't know what old is, because I ain't felt it yet, you know what I'm saying? So these grandmas, they're not laying down. They're like, "Girl, you crazy? I need [unclear]." [laughs] So they're stepping out, and it's just not like it was. So there's more things available, I guess, to Grandma, too, and she wants to like, "Shoot. You spend some time with these kids, too. I ain't the one. I ain't going to stay here forever and do this. I've still got some years to do that." So consequently the kids, they suffer from that, too.

PATTERSON:

But the shared responsibility, I mean, the grandma was always looked to, but where was the mother?

DEDEAUX:

Well, yes, the mother was always allowed to have some room. Mother could falter. She could stumble, and Grandma was always there to catch her, to make up the slack. Whatever Mama did, Grandma was there to cover it, and the kids was never aware of it, where now they'll tell it. Grandma, "Your mama ain't no good." And back in them days, like in my family, we talk about each other like dogs, but let somebody else walk up on them, oh, everything would stop and go on that one, like, "What? What did you say?" You know what I'm saying? But now that don't happen no more. It's just like everybody's putting salt on everybody. It's like, "My mama ain't about nothing." And then the grandma is like, "You and them bad-ass kids, y'all better go somewhere." [laughs] It's a whole 'nother thing.

DEDEAUX:

And I blame it on integration, because everything dissolved. With integration should have come education, you see what I'm saying? Like every time we do a split and we do something, they never tell us what our part is, or we never figure out what our part is. You know what I'm saying? We just get caught up in it. It's now, okay, everybody's equally integrated now. Well,

damn, we ain't never had a turn yet. How are we equal with everybody, when we're supposed to have some special treatment coming first? We done been through all of these catastrophes and stuff, and there ain't nobody even said, "I'm sorry," gave us any treatment, saying like, "The reason why you're acting like this is because you've been a sub-citizen for 400 years." Nobody's saying nothing. They're just like, "Okay now, get up. Clean yourself up."

DEDEAUX:

They went through Avery's Island, and I came through South Carolina, and I think they owe us a trip to Avery's Island. I think we should all be able to take a trip and see what it was like to come in as a human being and for more emphasis to be placed on what exactly--I mean, man, how long they been doing this to us? And this big old country, how you could just come in and get a square mile. You can come in off a boat and get a whole square mile, and I'm the one clearing the land, and I couldn't get a lot. So all that stuff needs to be explained to me. I want to see institutions. I want to see one of them slave ships like Disneyland. I want to see one of them slave ships opened up where people can walk around and see how people were actually stacked in there. I want you to see that. I want that to be a part of America's legacy, to understand what we did, the Middle Passage, and I want you to see all them bodies that could almost come to the surface from Africa to here that was tossed overboard and stuff, those kind of things that the Jews, they all know their history. They all know about the Holocaust, and they went through it and they've had treatment and everything else, but we haven't.

PATTERSON:

No. I have also heard a lot of African Americans want to forget, and talk about forgetting.
[Interruption, not transcribed.]

PATTERSON:

I've got a major question to ask you. We may have to do it when we get together again, because we don't have any storage space. So we'll wrap it up. [End of recording]

Session 4 (June 29, 2007)

PATTERSON:

2007. We're continuing our session two with Richard Dedeaux. Am I saying that right? You said it differently.

DEDEAUX:

Dee-doh. Ironically, the coach at USC, his name was Rod Dedeaux, and he coached the baseball team for twenty-seven years, and I'd get a lot of his phone calls. He's selling a warehouse up there in one of them cities, and I get a lot of his calls, and he's from down there with our people. He's from down there in Mississippi.

PATTERSON:

When you talked about the Creole language, I imagine that black people took the French and did what they needed to do with it. They [unclear] how they wanted to hear it, how they wanted to speak it, and so some of the vowels changed then.

DEDEAUX:

And then added to it.

PATTERSON:

But to me, it's valid for a culture to--it's a part of the cultural blending.

DEDEAUX:

And it survives. The main thing, it survived to this day. Now, with Katrina coming through there and dispersing everybody, I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know if it'll survive in other areas, because New Orleans people, first of all, they're real cliquish. They've got all kinds of social clubs and they're going somewhere just about every day of the week. They're going to some kind of social benefit. So what they do, they form these groups, and that makes them very cliquish. That's one of the things that's preserved that Creole culture, because like I said, at that time when I was young, light skin meant something, because you were working your way up the ladder. They were trying to color ourselves out of the black thing. You know what I'm saying? So we always--not we, they always--I came from another generation after that. What they was

doing was kind of like saying, "Now, you don't want to mess with that woman." We went through that.

DEDEAUX:

And so in retrospect, when we brought somebody home that was darker than us, then it was like mmm, and it was usually the girl who did it, and it caused a certain amount of despair. But under the circumstances, knowing what it is, knowing that there was just no future--when you look at this, you are second-rated, mandated to a second rate, mandated by your own country to be a second-class citizen, there's no way to get out of it other than to become a first-class citizen, and that was to deny who you are, which they did a beautiful job of doing, and try to be what you're not.

PATTERSON:

And turn on your own.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

It was like, "We'll create another boundary.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

We'll create a boundary within the boundary.

DEDEAUX:

They did the same thing in South Africa. It works everywhere, everywhere. But mandated by your government, you know what I'm saying, for it to be against the law. I sat on those buses and sat in that back seat and know the feeling of it. I mean, it's the humiliation of it, and knowing that my grandmother had to go through the same thing. It's just awful, just awful that I'll die with that feeling, because I'm that last generation. And when the kids nowadays talk about how the old

folks didn't do nothing, they don't really understand what went on back then. We did a whole lot, and the main thing we did, and what they did on an individual basis was to take their family. Black people back then, they was all packing, and white folks had control, but you'd never invade the black man's environment. You wouldn't come there, because that didn't happen. Those lynchings or whatever did, that happened on the outskirts in the country. You're not coming to a black man's house and do anything, because he always protected his family in that sense, and everybody knew he had some kind of weapon. He had to. Because that was our last resource. We couldn't call the police, so we had our own little vigilante thing, always. All my uncles, we had our own police force in case something happened, and it was mobilized quicker than SWAT.

PATTERSON:

When you talk about this, I was thinking how much that is connected to place. This was what had survived based on place, and when you mentioned Katrina and the displacement and whether or not these cultural institutions can even survive outside of this place. Even you coming to the West Coast and Los Angeles, we don't have that history of a coalesced black community in Los Angeles. It happened much later. The South had a hundred, a hundred fifty years or more ahead of us, of setting up community and traditions and language is all part of that. When you began to write, did you bring forward any of those nuances of language? You had heard it when you were a kid. Did any of it survive in your work, the Creole?

DEDEAUX:

Only some of the key words, like I said, sidewalk and gallery and [unclear] and games that we played, kick the can, old man Green, games that we entertained ourselves with, with nothing but two sticks and a brick, only two bricks and a stick, and kick the can was kicking an old beat-up can, games that we didn't create, games that was created that we just picked up along the way. It had been going on for years and years. We made our own toys, [unclear] trucks, little pushmobiles and things like that. We souped up our bikes. We pieced them together. We got our bikes a piece at a time, a piece here, a piece there, so we were really very mechanically inclined. We could make something out of nothing, anything. If we found some wheels we made a go cart, so we were right on top of all that. We really, we made our toys. We made a lot of toys, and right sturdy nice ones. We would take them up hills and run them down. We had soapbox derbies, that kind of stuff. That was a fascinating time.

PATTERSON:

It's interesting how children carry tradition as well. Children's games and stories last somehow, just through the lineage of children, children playing with children and the memory. Did your parents teach you any games?

DEDEAUX:

No. These were street games that the kids--we learned a lot out in the street. My mama sang different songs that were back in the time. "The Frog Went Courtin'" is one of them. [sings] The frog went courtin' and he did write, mm hmm, mm hmm. The frog went courtin' and he did write, a sword and a pistol by his side, mm hmm, mm hmm. He asked Miss Mouse, "Won't you marry me?" mm hmm, mm hmm. He asked Miss Mouse, "Won't you marry me?" "No, kind sir, I can't do that. I have to ask my big Uncle Rat." mm hmm, mm hmm. Uncle Rat laughed and he shook his fat side, mm hmm, mm hmm. Uncle Rat and he shook his fat side, he said, "Yes, Miss Mouse, she'll be your bride," mm hmm, mm hmm. Now what do you think that the they had for supper? mm hmm, mm hmm. What do you think that they had for supper, black-eyed peas and rice and butter, mm hmm. And it goes on and on. I remember those parts of it. She sang those kind of songs to us, and we had all kinds of little games that we played. Listened to the radio. All of the stories were are on the radio, "The Shadow" and all those things that they turned into movies, and the women still listen to the soaps, all of the that, "The Days of Our Lives" and all that. That was still on. And radio was the highlight of our lives back then.

PATTERSON:

Did you listen to radio as a family, or did you each have your own shows?

DEDEAUX:

We had family shows we listened to. There were family shows and there were individual shows. It wasn't like kids--they didn't have all that X-rated stuff. Everything was G-rated and it was for everybody, because there was only one thing accessible. So, yes, it pretty much--

PATTERSON:

When you were listening to the radio as a kid, did you listen to any particular kind of music? Was there any music that you remember loving as a kid?

DEDEAUX:

The running thing about that is we listened to what was available, and in our house it was the blues. Oh, I mean, all of the blues stations, my mama loved it and we loved it, and my daddy coming from Mississippi, he was a blues man, so we loved the blues and we listened to that a lot. But I listened to all music. I listened to country and western. I listened to whatever was available. When TV first came to New Orleans, we only had one channel, Channel 6, and on that channel they just showed whatever they wanted to, so one hour of one of those shows was opera, so we watched that. We watched whatever came on. We would just sit there and watch it in that little round screen. It wasn't even our TV. Our neighbor got the first TV, so they would schedule us to come over at different times to watch this TV, and it sign off at a certain time. When I came to California and had seven channels, I was ecstatic. Oh, my.

DEDEAUX:

And that was a thing, too, to reflect back on where we've gone so far. I was born in New Orleans. I had moved from New Orleans. My mother died from childbirth. My father moved to California, and they both kind of split up over a two- or three-year period. He continued to send money, but the relationship was over with, so she went one way and she had a baby and lost her life having the child. The child lived and is very healthy, with two more children, which is another tragic story that I have to get to. My niece, her daughter was the victim of a drive-by, as was my daughter was murdered here in '86, and my grandson was just recently murdered a couple of years ago. So working in this field, neglecting my family, I've lost three trying to save other people's families, you know what I'm saying? I lost a daughter, a grandson, and a niece. Just the niece and grandson real close, with the daughter in '86.

DEDEAUX:

So when I talk about the kind of stuff I talk about, going to the prisons and when the kids say they don't like me because I'm from a different set, I explain to them, "Your set might have killed one of my kids, know what I'm saying, and I'm here working with you." So that's part of where I come from. That's part of me, and I want to make sure I get to that. And then also, my first impression coming to California, coming out of segregation, knowing that I deserved better and I was supposed to be better--the only one told me that I was as good as anybody was my mom. She always, like, "You're going to be a doctor," that blah, blah, and she always poured that in our heads, "and you're going to go to school, and you're going to go to college. You're going to do these things."

DEDEAUX:

So that was a given. I knew that I was going to have to do that. But coming to California, that whole dream was shattered, so that's when I began to develop the D mentality. I was a pretty good school student in New Orleans in the segregated school, but once I got into the integration and everything mixing up, I was just like I lowered everything. I was like, "I ain't studying." Because I was rebelling. First of all, I was mad because of the fact that my father was up here with a wife, you know what I'm saying? And then my mother had had a boyfriend down there that didn't step forward when she died, so he just disappeared into the thing. So that's part of my development, you know what I'm saying? So what I had, I had a plan to kill him for many years. He died when I was a teenager, and I wept like a baby, because I didn't get a chance to kill him. So that was one of the hateful things that developed in me, being a very mellow kid, you know what I'm saying? I was just a very cool guy, but this is one of the things that's developed in me as a writer, this urge to kill.

DEDEAUX:

Now, with my father, I'm with him, but I'm resenting him because of the fact that he left my mama with three boys to struggle down there by herself. We were living in our own brick house, paid for, and I'm sure everything was fine. I don't know how it was. We didn't seem to suffer financially. So I've got that on him, and eventually I'm going to get stuck with him, and I'm going to be with him until he takes his last breath. I'm going to be with him until he dies. He just dies right there. We're in the hospital, in the emergency room, and I go and I tell the people, I'm like, "He just took his last breath." And they're like, "Are you sure?" I'm like, "Yeah, I just watched him." So they tell me, "Now, you can't go in there." I'm like, "I've been there all the time. When he died, I was standing right there next to him," which is--that's another one that the Grim Reaper follows me. So he was another one of the several that took their last breath with me.

DEDEAUX:

Now, his story is interesting, too, because he was in Mississippi by himself, very sick. He had moved down there, because we kept an extra house, a guest house for people that wanted to go down there, and he was down there very sick on his own. So I went down to check on him and found him in really bad shape, so I took him to the hospital in Mississippi, and they really couldn't do anything for him. So I found out, talking to my aunt, that the best hospitals was in Detroit, which is where they were. So I arranged to have an ambulance take him from Mississippi to the New Orleans Airport and then flew us to the hospital.

PATTERSON:

And this is after he had been to L.A.? He went back to Mississippi.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. I'm getting ahead of myself. This is after he had dissolved his marriage with his wife and then he moved first with his sisters to Detroit, and he managed to stay there for a few years, and then as his health started to get bad he moved to Mississippi, a better climate and stuff.

PATTERSON:

Did he have any people still down there to kind of partner with him?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes, he had people down there. There was one in particular that took care of him. But, yes, the family generally looked out for him, and he didn't give any outward signs that he was just

bedridden or anything like that. He was just really suffering with his back, and he had emphysema. Okay, so getting back to the other part. [Interruption, not transcribed]

DEDEAUX:

So now I'm with my father up here in California. Things work out really bad. I go to the authorities and tell them I can't live under these conditions. This is when my father had separated from my stepmother. I was maybe fourteen, fifteen then. So I went to the authorities and told them, "I can't do this." So they put me in a foster home, put me in Watts, and so now that's when I was going to Gompers and got kicked out for putting my tie on crazy. I had to graduate from Jordan, okay? So then at Jordan High School I went to the tenth grade and quit, got this job making a dollar an hour at age sixteen, was still on the county. County was responsible for me, and I just moved out and they just never even bothered me. They just threw the paper away and stuff. So now I'm on my own, and I manage to get in the machine shop. So now I'm working my way up. I'm nineteen now, and then I fell in love with my wife, my first wife. We got married. We had two kids, so I'm nineteen, twenty, or twenty-something.

DEDEAUX:

Now writing is starting to really take effect of me. I'm thinking about it, but I don't have any area of expression. I'm working ten hours a day. I've got a family. Oh, and also, which encouraged me to write, too, is the fact that when I got married, I decided to go back to finish my education. So I worked ten hours at work, made it home just in time. My wife would have my bath ready and my food. Took my shower, took my bath, ate my food and rushed down to L.A. High School, which is where I went, to L.A. Adult for two years and got my high school diploma. Then I went to the business college. I went down to--I started off at Trade Tech when it was still Trade Tech, because I was also getting my machinist, to be a journeyman machinist. But I also went to the business college that was across the street. I can't remember the name of it now.

DEDEAUX:

So I also got two years of that business. I'm still typing. I'm still typing. I'm learning type, so now I'm able to put myself down, but we don't have spell check yet, so all my girlfriends had to be smart. Know what I'm saying? So I made it a point that if they were smart and we got along, then we hooked up, because they're the ones that did my editing and stuff for me. So now I'm getting to the point where I'm starting to develop some writing, starting to get some ideas. But I don't have any focus or any direction now, because I found The Committee theater. I went in there and got a little improvisational experience, which helped me with my acting, and then I went in with the Donnybrook Players and did those two little things with them, which helped me with my acting. But I still didn't have any development, so all I could do is take my writings and show them to the scholars that I knew and get a critique from them, which like I said was back and forth, which kind of put me on the right path.

DEDEAUX:

So then the Watts Writers Workshop exploded open, and that's when I took my work down there, and that's when the lights started coming on there. I started hearing the maliciousness, the viciousness. I started realizing the things that had been done to me that I didn't know how to express. All of these things started bubbling to the surface, but unedited. This stuff is coming out just the way, raw and vicious and if like I poured it on somebody it would have scalded them to death, those words were so hot and they had been built up so long. Also at the same time now, I also had this real curiosity. When I came to California and got to sit in that classroom and got to seeing all these different people, I wanted a white girl. You know what I'm saying? All these years I've been told, "You don't fool with that. You can't have that." So all of a sudden that's in the back of my head. "I want one of these white girls," because of the fact that I couldn't have it.

DEDEAUX:

So time went on, so nothing happened, because I didn't know how to approach them or anything. I came from another whole culture. Everything was black. Everything was black. My whole world was black, everything. We didn't go outside of black. They didn't allow us. Everything. So now, I mean, all of this stuff here, boy, I'm like, "Wow. I want that Chinese." You know what I'm saying? I'm like, shee, because you could have them.

PATTERSON:

All the doors were opened.

DEDEAUX:

You could have them, you know what I'm saying? And like, wow, I don't know what I want. I want everything. I'm like, hey, and I'm cute, too, but real shy. I don't know how to work none of my magic. I don't know how to do nothing. I'm still at that D mentality thing, trying--want to be halfway of a gangster, but not out there rolling and dealing and none of that stuff, just want to be out there. And at the same time, I'm a good boy. I came from a clean-cut family, you know what I'm saying. We were streetlight children. We played as long as till the streetlight came on. When that came on, they didn't have to come out and call your or nothing. You had to be inside. Otherwise, you were in trouble. That was your time. That was your whistle. You played. When the streetlight came on, everybody dispersed, like, damn. So I came from that. I came from a structured family. I came from a family that when you walked down the street in that neighborhood in the Seventh Ward, like if you didn't speak, they made it a point to walk to the house and tell you, "That boy disrespected me. He walked by and didn't say nothing," or, "He said something smart." So we had that kind of communication, one-on-one, which made me know that I can't really go mess up outside of these bounds.

DEDEAUX:

So coming into this new environment with a new set of rules, too, here it is a whole 'nother thing. It's like it's from Kansas with a whole 'nother culture and stuff. The food is completely different, you know what I'm saying? I'm like them people in Kansas. They eat boiled food. Everything's just boiled.

PATTERSON:

Now, you say Kansas. Now, who was Kansas?

DEDEAUX:

The stepmother, yes, the stepmother. So it was a whole 'nother culture there, like, wow. But they were cultured people. They were real cultured people. So there was an old guy that lived in the complex. His name was Mr. White, and Mr. White was a music lover. He loved going to the amphitheater. That's the one in Hollywood, right, that open one? He would go there for the concerts, for the symphony stuff, and then he started taking us. So here I go, I'm starting to go to these symphonies now, and I'm going on a regular basis now, because every time he went, he took us with him if we wanted to go and stuff, and we wanted to. It was exciting, all that music and stuff. And so that opened me up, too. I'm like, wow, I like that.

DEDEAUX:

And about that same time, there was talk about this old guy on the "Amos and Andy" show, the one that started the playhouse on Washington.

PATTERSON:

Yes, the Ebony Showcase.

DEDEAUX:

Ebony Showcase. He was a young man then, and he was doing things, and I think I went to his place a couple of times. So my creative curiosity was really starting to develop, but I had no place to hone it. I had no place to take it. And so just looking around, looking around, then finally I got the Watts Writers Workshop. So now I've got the elements to really start putting some of the things that I've seen and saw and wanted and stuff, and started putting it on paper. As I looked around and saw things, then I incorporated all of that into my being, into my writing, into my work, and eventually I did get that white girl, and we have a child. I have a child that's

forty-three years old, Justin Joe Peacock. So that was just one of the relationships, and so I found out that it wasn't really what I thought it would be, as the myth was kind of like destroyed.

PATTERSON:

How so?

DEDEAUX:

Well, I think just disappointment, just the fact that I had such high hopes and expectations, because the white girl was supposed to--it was so precious. It was just like they were hanging people for talking to them. You know what I'm saying? I was just like, "Well, what's up with that? They'll hang me for talking to you. Where I come from, I could get hanged for this." So I had to go to the taboo area and just to deal with it, and it was just like it's just another person. It's another person. It ain't no white girl, you know, it's a lady. It's another woman of a different color.

DEDEAUX:

So that takes me back to saying, well, like I said, being a racist. When I say I'm a racist, I don't mean I'm a racist where I hate races. I'm a racist--I'm trying to be the kind of racist that loves my people first. We've always been put second. I want to be the kind of racist that loves my people first, and what I have left over, then I'm going to deal with other people. So what I want to do is kind of set an example. When I say I don't fool with white women, it's not because I never fooled with them. They're lovely people. But now it's time to set an example, even as late as it is. There's so many different flowers, so many different flowers in our race that any color flower you want you can get, and it's readily available, because we've got an abundance of them. We've got an overflow. We've got way more women than we've got men. And so I'm learning that and I've learned that, and a lot of black men are learning that, that our race really needs us, and the more we pull away, then we're taking those minds and we're changing them. We're changing it.

DEDEAUX:

See, I want my thoughts and stuff to be exactly where I'm putting on tape now. I don't want to go into another culture and then get influenced and come back and say, "Well, now, therefore we're doing this thuswise," and just changing the whole thing. I use a very simple number of words to explain what it is, but I've been to a lot of places and I've done a lot using just a very few words, because I get confused with all of them great big old crazy ones and stuff. So I just try to keep it basic and simple, so when everyday people like me deal with me, they can get some kind of understanding and understand that this is just coming from my heart. I'm just coming from my heart. [Interruption]

PATTERSON:

So what I feel like I'm hearing is that racism--of course, being a racist or racism carries the baggage of the pejorative or the negative, right?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes.

PATTERSON:

It carries that baggage. But what I'm hearing from you is you're using it in terms of embracing family first, is what it sounds like you're saying.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly.

PATTERSON:

It's like family comes first, not that I'm rejecting you or I hate you, but my family comes first and I have to protect my family and their needs.

DEDEAUX:

Well, my family, my village, my community--

PATTERSON:

Extended family.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, and it goes out and out and then eventually it's going to get to you. It's going to get to you. But putting you first changes me, and it changes my direction a little bit and then my siblings' direction a little bit. So far, everybody in my family has gone in the same direction, you know what I'm saying, so I don't see any reason to change directions now. Even they would be surprised and shocked, everybody. "What's up?" because they're made their choices, and all their choices were within the flowers in our garden, and so I think that I've got that responsibility, too, because I see too much of it. I see too much of it. And if you're trying to preserve something and trying to preserve it in a state--I'm already polluted enough with different cultures and races from

being a product of New Orleans--French Creole and African and ain't no telling what else. The queen was dealing with my people and stuff, so it's all kinds of things. But the one thing that's undeniable, I'm b-l-a-c-k, period. You can't change that. And all of the years that my family spent trying to transcend that, trying to pass that up, it's all for naught, because we are who we are now, and we're able to be that. But before, just like I was trying to explain before, to try to change yourself to be a part of something you're not, and to not even be wanted, with just trying to fit in, it's such a painful, painful feeling to come from that situation.

DEDEAUX:

So I think I harbored a lot of bitterness against white people when I came, and I've got some poems that maybe we'll get into that express some of those things, some of those poems. But as I developed and as I learned, like I said, the power of words, the power of words to hurt or heal is amazing. And you can only go around hurting so many people and then that hurt comes back to you. It's reflected right back to you, because everything that goes around comes around, and so if that's what you spill, it's coming back to you. So what we found, we found that dealing in the positive then we send out those waves.

DEDEAUX:

And now what we're doing now, the first two days we're doing this residency in Baltimore for [unclear] kids, the Watts Prophets, and the first two days of our residency is teaching teachers, teaching them our technique so they can take it to the next level and take it to teach them, some more teachers, some more teachers. So our little way we work things in our little ghetto style, it's catching on, because it does seem to work. What you have to remember is that most of the time you're fooling with ghetto kids. We're trying to educate ghetto kids, so you've got to have a ghetto style to deal with that, because they ain't going for the ABC route. You've got to make it entertaining. We already know now that poetry is a teaching tool, so if you want to get a black kid's attention, you just put it in poetry and it'll work.

DEDEAUX:

A perfect example is the thing that I remember from way back, and it's learning the parts of speech. It goes something like, "Three little words we'll often see, are the articles A, and, and be. A noun is the name of anything, like house, garden, hoop, or swing. Instead of the noun, pronoun stands, like his face, my [unclear] your hand. Adjective tells the kind of noun, as in [unclear] through the town. Conjunction joins words together--," and through poetry we learned this stuff. We learned this stuff [snaps fingers] just like that. But you sit down there and you take ten semesters trying to teach that to us the old, conventional way. But put it like that and in two weeks you have scholars working on stuff, because they'll be able to break down the parts of speech and tell you what it is, you know what I'm saying, and know why I use an adjective instead of a noun, and this and that, because poetry allows you to throw everything in, so it allows you just to do it. There's no errors in poetry. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't be

wise enough to know that there's an adjective here, a verb over here, and a conjunction right there. You know what I'm saying? You have to be able to back up your stuff and shock the world with that in every [unclear]. "Oh, my god. That jibber-jabber has nouns and adjectives and conjunctions?" Because it's automatically placed in there.

PATTERSON:

Do you ever consider that the old, traditional way you said, that rather than the old, traditional way, you meant the European, English way that the country was founded on as far as teaching, but the old, traditional way when it comes to black folk, it comes out of an older traditional way. In the African cultural setting, teaching was through music and words and drama and rhythm anyway. That was the school.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

So in a way what you're talking about is really calling forward something, a deeper memory that we still carry, but you're pulling it forward, teaching in rhythm and sound and melody.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Well, when they were developing all of these tools for teaching and stuff, they eliminated us. Had they incorporated us into the process, it would be more rhythm and stuff involved in it. You know what I'm saying? But survivors being self-taught, we devised these tools. These are our tools. Ain't nobody teach us that. We learned that ourselves. We heard the rhythms in the language and picked it up. That's how we've been able to do everything. They haven't taught us anything really. We've had to just really be paying attention. Even when you're being taught in school, you've got to be careful, because everybody ain't going to teach you everything they know. They're going to teach you some of what they know, so they can always teach you. So you have to know that. You have to understand that, too, and you have to kind of like go with what the teachers say, but then go a little further and find out some other stuff, too. Teacher ain't going to tell you everything. If you're smart as the teacher, then you don't need the teacher.

PATTERSON:

Sometimes it seems as though with children you find poetry, like we were talking about children's games and how they last and they're based on the rhythm of poetry and the sound of poetry and the beauty of the consonants and the vowels coming together, it's as though they

recognize it as something that is like a language that seems familiar to them, or they immediately respond. It's like the light bulb goes right on, and I'm sure that's what you experience when you do it. It's like they're, "Oh, yes, I understand this. This works. Now I hear the word the way I really live the word," when you're talking about these things that are just in everyday life, huh?

DEDEAUX:

That's exactly right. And the kids, they respond to it. And what's so unusual about it is all kids, all kids respond to it. It's just like it's a basic element that's just connected, and it allows them to unconnect. What I have, I have a little booklet, and it's called the procedures for taking [unclear] in a classroom. One of the things that I teach the kids is their presence, is how they stand, projection, how they talk, how important that part is, and their aura, that's that sense, that particular field that surrounds them. What I teach in poetry is, I'm a poet, I'm not a teacher. I can never tell a student to shut up, be quiet, or anything. But we practice the silence. You take your stand, you take a nice deep breath, and you make eye contact with every single person, which empowers you now, you the student. And when you're perfectly content that everybody's paying attention, take a nice deep breath. Then you do your presentation. When you finish your presentation take a nice deep breath and then you exit. You don't lean on anything. You're not allowed to lean, like teachers allow a student to lean the desk and give answers. You're free from everything there. This is how you go in when you conduct an interview. This is your first stage. And so that's what makes us so successful. We disarm them, first of all, the fact that everybody's going to do it, you see what I'm saying? Everybody has to.

DEDEAUX:

You've got to get up, even if you don't [unclear], but say your name and your birthday and what school you go to and the classes you take. You're going to do something, but you're going to have a chance to stand and do your presence, your posture, your aura, and get that feeling, and having the sense of power that you have. Because some students, they just eat it up. You know what I'm saying? They want to--this is ridiculous. You know what I'm saying? They just use it. And we're like, "Okay, they're quiet." They're just--it empowers them, you know what I'm saying? So it's no shut up. They're already disarmed from that, so now we've got control of the class. The kids control the class, because all I do is stand quiet and have the kids [unclear], because I don't want to hear no, "Shhh," none of that. That's for teachers. That's not with poetry. Poetry is respect. And if you miss one word if you're talking and somebody's doing a poem, the one word that you might miss is the key to the whole poem, so you cannot be rude in any sense. Poetry demands that kind of respect. And if you don't respect yourself when you want to talk, then you can't talk to the person that's listening, because they'll lose the whole point. So that's a completely disarming tool, and it works 100 percent, 100 percent. All that, "Be quiet," and all that is just like--they understand then that poetry is the tool of silence and preparation. And even the scariest one, the most nervous one, when they get up there and feel that sense of empowerment, they use it. You know what I'm saying?

DEDEAUX:

And that goes for teachers, it goes for everybody. If Amde's talking in the back and not hearing what I'm saying, talking to the teacher, we'll straighten them out, like, "Excuse us." And the authorities love that. Everybody's on the same plane, the same note, and then so there's absolute silence, no never disruption of that. So that's one of the tools that I like that I use in mine, the standing part, the projection and the presence, your aura. You've got this light that you have, because what I explain to them is that, "When the audience looks at you, all that energy goes into you and causes you to glow. See, and you're bigger than everybody else, because you're up higher and they're lower. So what they've done, they've lit a beam in you. Now what you have to do is you have to feed that back to the people." You see what I'm saying? And so that sense of empowerment comes from everybody. When everybody's looking at them, then that beam lights up and they're another person. They're another whole individual. So they're ready to do their presentation.

DEDEAUX:

I explain to them, like little girls, they're very fidgety, and so they're rocking back and forth, and people are looking at your feet instead of looking at your face. And some want to scratch, and people are looking at the distractions and stuff. So those are very helpful things, and they pick them up real quick, and once they get it down, they rush back to the seat to try to write something else to get back up again. It's one of those little tools. But I don't know how I got off on that.

PATTERSON:

What I want to ask you about that is--what I'm hearing, too, is that you're--and as a group, as Watts Prophets, you began to become, I won't say teachers, but guides for children, to guide them to teach teachers. You began to use whatever power you were building and had built to systematize it and make it a teaching tool.

DEDEAUX:

Well, that's an interesting point. Let me tell you what happened with that. The Watts Prophets, we've been around for forty-two years now. Okay. We've never had a category. They've never known where to put us. When we did our first album, called "Rapping Black in a White World," they didn't know what category to put it in, especially back then, because there was absolutely no rap out other than The Last Poets. So we went through years and years and years of people trying to find where to put us. We worked nightclubs. We worked all different things. And the nightclub thing was fine, but it's not something that they wanted to repeat.

DEDEAUX:

And finally we got with this agency, David Lieberman Artists' Presentation [phonetic], who we're with now, we've been with for the last twelve or fifteen years, and what he did, he started testing us in the area of the colleges and the schools, and he got us a residency in El Cajon, California. That was our first residency, and that residency lasted several years, that relationship. We would go, maybe stay a week once a month or something.

PATTERSON:

What school was it?

DEDEAUX:

It was El Cajon, all the schools. It wasn't any one. I've got the names in my book, in my portfolio out there. But that was sort of the beginning of it. Then we did a project with Compton College. There's a little school connected to Compton College with smart kids that's destined to be future leaders, you know, the ones that they groom and take them straight to the college. I can't think of the name of it right now. But we also did one with those. And so we started finding out that our area was really working with kids. So we went from the nightclub scene to the college scene, and that's where we started clicking. So we started working with the kids. UCLA came into the picture and they gave us a grant to do our first hip-hop poetry choir. We wrote a grant.

PATTERSON:

What year was that, approximately?

DEDEAUX:

2000. 2000. And so we worked with UCLA and we produced that project, and it was very successful. Then we took that hip-hop poetry choir group with us wherever we went on different engagements, until they reached a point where they could handle themselves, and then they were doing their own engagements, and then finally they started branching off into different professions, because they all became successful to some point. So that established the basis for the hip-hop poetry choir.

PATTERSON:

How did that work, the hip-hop poetry choir? Describe the process of the poetry choir. How did they work?

DEDEAUX:

Well, what we did, we put out an ad to the students for our own poetry choir, our creative writing class. From that class we created material, and some already had material, and some created material. We critiqued it and worked it and got it to where it worked out real nice. I took all of the poems they had and I developed a theme, and I wrote a script for it. So from this theme we started with a little ten-year-old boy. He'd come onstage and he'd some little stuff, and then he'd do a poem, "A Poem to Panic" [phonetic] he talked the whole thing. And so from that theme we just ran through it, and so they were able to do their original poetry and I just incorporated the theme around the whole thing, so it became like a musical [unclear].

PATTERSON:

And it was all poetry? Spoken word?

DEDEAUX:

[unclear]

PATTERSON:

Did you have any musical component?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, we had the musical.

PATTERSON:

Describe the musical accompaniment. What was it like?

DEDEAUX:

I think it was like a trio or a quartet. But the music always--with the poetry the music accommodates the poetry. But with these kids it was a little more--what they had done, they had pre-recorded certain tracks and stuff--

PATTERSON:

Of music?

DEDEAUX:

--of music, and then so when they went out there, they did it live.

PATTERSON:

So drums and--

DEDEAUX:

Yes, the whole hip-hop mess.

PATTERSON:

So it was hip-hop. So this was hip-hop tracks?

DEDEAUX:

Hip-hop poetry choir.

PATTERSON:

So in a way it was a meeting of what you brought to it as the traditional spoken word would do, tradition coming from you all originally, and then them incorporating some of their own innovation as youth that the hip-hop--

DEDEAUX:

Developing entirely off of what they had. We influenced nothing. All we did was got in, showed them what they had, laid all their stuff down, laid it down and looked at it, and this poem led into this poem, and this poem led into this poem, this poem emphasized this poem, and created a whole little thing with it. With the group, when one person was performing, everybody else was acting. They were doing the calls and response, so they had plenty of support, and they had a chance to work out their own little skits with however they wanted to use the crew, and so some of them, the more innovative ones came up with some real creative stuff, had the crew moving around and doing different things to emphasize the poetry. It was a very successful thing, and I think they do have a film of it. Amde would have a film of it, several films. So that was our first one.

DEDEAUX:

So from then on, then we started doing residencies, developing hip-hop poetry choirs, and that's what we're going to end up doing up here in Maryland.

PATTERSON:

Were these mostly college-age children, or not children, college age young adults?

DEDEAUX:

No, no. From ten on up. I think the oldest one was like twenty-seven or something like that.

PATTERSON:

Okay, okay. So this goes from K-through-12 into college age young adults.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. Whoever wanted to show up for the creative writing class.

PATTERSON:

And so you began taking with you for engagements--how did that work?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. First we took them to introduce them, to get them around, and then the reviews became so good that they were able to get gigs on their own.

PATTERSON:

What are some of the offshoots of this? Do they work in L.A.?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. They're dispersed all around. They're all around L.A. and the L.A. area.

PATTERSON:

So what it was is in a way you created or constructed a performance format for them.

DEDEAUX:

It developed into that, yes.

PATTERSON:

And they took that. It's almost another idiom for hip-hop or something in between, isn't it?

DEDEAUX:

They opened up websites, they put their book on it, they have CDs and stuff. They took it to a whole 'nother level that we hadn't even thought about, because all of a sudden you've got a kid that's got a computer that can do all that. So the books started popping out, the individual books, the little group books and CDs, all through this little medium here, and there was one guy who had a media company and stuff, so he helped the other ones and a lot of things developed out of that. Like I said, they were a talented group, and so realizing the success of that, then we went on to--so that's what we do now. We establish hip-hop poetry choirs all over the country in our residency. We'll go, we'll start with a class. Like what we're going to do with these kids, we're going to go in, we're going to start them a journal, have them start a journal--

PATTERSON:

In Baltimore.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. And have them start with a journal, start documenting what's going on, and then from that journal we're going to create something and then they'll perform it with us, all in the span of two weeks. And when we leave, they'll be self-sufficient and they will develop the same thing themselves.

PATTERSON:

They must love that.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, it works. It works real well.

PATTERSON:

So is David--is it Lieberman?

DEDEAUX:

Lieberman, L-i-e.

PATTERSON:

He's booking these residencies for you?

DEDEAUX:

Yes. He was the one that found our niche. He was the one that found exactly where we belonged, because everybody was just searching and we just couldn't find--we weren't big arena guys and we weren't nightclub guys.

PATTERSON:

So there's this partnership. Somehow we come back to that. There does become one community partnering with another, just to facilitate, learn from, and teach as well.

DEDEAUX:

I'd like to just backtrack a little bit, too, on the Watts Prophets, because we haven't covered much on that. But in their early development, like we got to the workshop--I met Amde and the Otis came in, and then we did-- [Interruption]

DEDEAUX:

Getting back to the Watts Writers Workshop days, with Amde and Otis and then our early start. We got our name. We started off with Helen Mingleton, and then Helen Mingleton looked and saw where we were headed, that we were a revolutionary poetry group and she didn't want to be a part of that, so we talked Dee Dee McNeil into becoming part of that. Okay, now we've got a

pretty good little group, and we're getting a lot of attention around town. So John Daniels at Maverick's Flat, good old John, thank God for John--John is the cause of us being the group that we were, that we are. John invited us to Maverick's Flat and we stayed there for sixteen to eighteen weeks, I don't remember, constantly. We were the prime show. And what John did, he completely cleaned his club. He changed the whole clientele of his club. He took that chance, you know what I'm saying? Because poetry was not the thing. But what he did, he sold it over there. And John Daniels, they sold no alcohol there, so all the kids that came there were good kids. They smoked a little weed before they got there, I guess.

DEDEAUX:

But what John Daniels did, he saw something in us. He's got some valuable film. He's got the first original videos of us that we would like to see and get.

PATTERSON:

Oh, really?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes, because he was a very smart man. He was a very smart man. He was videoing stuff way back in--this is '61, '60 or '61. He was videoing stuff back then.

PATTERSON:

Oh, before you all became the Watts Prophets.

DEDEAUX:

While we're in our early days, the early days.

PATTERSON:

So you all came together before the rebellion?

DEDEAUX:

No, no, no, no.

PATTERSON:

Because the rebellion was in '65.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. So we're talking about now, we're talking about '67, '68. But John was one of the earliest ones--he was videoing us, and he saw something in the group. He saw something in us. So what he did, he ran us for sixteen weeks straight. We were doing matinees, two shows, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and he just put it on the people, put it on the people, "Watts Prophets, Watts Prophets, Watts Prophets." And the whole clientele changed to like a revolutionary crew, you know, from the bourgie thing that he had. He's a very clever man, and I don't know if he saw it. There's something that he must have seen.

DEDEAUX:

And so as we were performing at Maverick's Flat, we saw all the newcomers come through. Richard Pryor came through there when he was just getting started. Funkadelic came through there, Earth, Wind, and Fire. All the early groups were developing, and John had the foresight to see them, and he brought that to Maverick's. So Maverick's was the place where we really had a chance to just like--that was our house. I mean, sixteen weeks doing, what, two shows on Saturday and one show on Sunday. I don't know, five or six shows a weekend, and we really got a chance to develop and get sharp.

PATTERSON:

Right there on Crenshaw?

DEDEAUX:

Right there on Crenshaw, which is an institution now. It's a national--so it'll be there, what do they call that? It's preserved. Yes, so now it'll be there forever. And I think John lives in there. I think he's in there, yes.

PATTERSON:

Really. When's the last time you saw him?

DEDEAUX:

I haven't seen him in a long time, but I've seen his assistant, Ken, Kenny, who handles all of the business.

PATTERSON:

So you think he still has video of the Watts Prophets?

DEDEAUX:

Oh, I'm sure he has everything.

PATTERSON:

Do you have any video from back then?

DEDEAUX:

I have it, but it's dispersed all over. I couldn't put my hands on it right now, but I do have it. I have some of the early stuff.

PATTERSON:

Okay. So actually, to become-- [End of recording]

Session 5 (June 29, 2007)

PATTERSON:

Working with John Daniels at Maverick's Flat, you all were able to really expose yourself on a consistent basis to the L.A. audience, so now you were building a following.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, exactly. Exactly.

PATTERSON:

And you were able to transmit your message and people began to be aware of the power of the spoken word. What are some of the first things that you were talking about in those first weeks and months?

DEDEAUX:

Well, all of those poems ran from the "Black and White World" album, and I can't call them to mind right now. I've got them on my list. But it was some of the things that, "Them Niggers Ain't Playing," is one of them, you know, which that's a poem we've not done since it was recorded, and that always seems the poem that people want to sample the most.

PATTERSON:

Why does it come to mind first? Because of the people-

DEDEAUX:

Because recently somebody just called me about sampling that. In France, there's some female DJ who's doing a CD and just has to have that particular sample to make her album or whatever it is. And they're willing to pay a really nice price for it. So that's why it come to mind, because we stopped using it, not because of all the controversy that's been going on around it with the "N" word. The "N" word.

PATTERSON:

Yes, I need to hear your take on that.

DEDEAUX:

[laughs] The "N" word. Well, it's two different views, and people, my people, get mad at me when I express my view. I say the "N" word is cool around black people. You know, that's our word. But also to be so stupid as to eliminate the "N" word is to just also, like, deny what it all meant, to deny what it really, really meant, and to show how clever you are to have our kids thinking it's cool to use. So to take it away would just bring it undercover, because it's always going to be used. We need to never lose that word. We need to always have it there. It's like we have Ku Klux Klan and redneck and all those, that word has to always be there, but the meaning has to be defined. See, the young people, they don't know. It's just a clever word that we use at home in our household and stuff, in the privacy of our home, things we're flipping around a lot, but then everybody think they can do it. They got their words, they'd probably like, "Redneck, you do this. Redneck, you do that," you know, but they do that in the privacy of their own house. So we don't fool with their words and they should leave our words alone pretty much so. What it makes it bad is some people think that they can just do it, they're so much into the movement and so hip. "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, you know, what's up?" Yeah, it's ridiculous.

PATTERSON:

Well, you know, we've got too many words in the English dictionary for you to be playing with that one, unless you're going to put it in its context. You know, if you're going to call me that, then you better know why you're saying it, because it don't mean nothing, but you think what you're claiming that it does mean, and maybe you know, see, because you got the resources and the books. Maybe you know why you're saying that word and maybe my poor innocent people, you know, they don't remember. It's just another word that they like and it rolls off our tongue so quick and then we ain't saying, it we're saying MF. So sometimes we put them both together.

PATTERSON:

In fact, we have taken that word and owned it and made it mean something else. It's a familiar, it's an endearment.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes.

PATTERSON:

But there are many black people, we talk about the controversy, that have been hurt by the other use of the "N" word.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly.

PATTERSON:

And there are so many of those people in our community that are very offended and hate the fact that we use it ourselves.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly.

PATTERSON:

Then there's this whole faction of us who just look at it and we just claimed the word, changed it and done what we wanted to do with it, so we've assigned a different-

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. To make it illegal and to try to take it away is just ridiculous to me. It's utterly ridiculous. Define its meaning, that's all, and then let people decide if they want to say it, because some of the people that are saying it know what it really means. Most of the people that are saying it don't have a clue. We've done turned it around into a colloquial word and it's just like, "What's happening, nigger?" "My nig." It's been around for a long time. When they were calling us that, we were calling us that too, but we were saying it in another way. See what I'm saying? They were saying that word, they were saying their word and we were saying ours, and ours had nothing to do with theirs.

PATTERSON:

The intent was completely different.

DEDEAUX:

Completely different. So that's going to be around, and it's so ridiculous to be arguing a point like that when the whole point should be education. Just talk about what it is and then let the people decide. You know, that old ignorant man [Don Imus] who says, "All those nappy-headed bitches over there," whatever the-

PATTERSON:

Hoes, nappy-headed hoes.

DEDEAUX:

Nappy-headed hoes. Now, what was he thinking? You know, because he had heard it on a rap thing he thought that he could just come and say something like that. I don't agree that they should have fired his old dumb ass, because he's more of a disgrace to white people than he is to black, because I've watched his show and I know he's embarrassing a lot more white people than he is black people. He's an old country boy, rich, can say whatever he want. It was all good to him. He didn't see nothing wrong with it, but why? Well, because a few that say it's okay. But he has to understand that there are some of those white words that we can't say that they say. There are some of these black words that we say that they can't say, especially the colored, because then you get the hue and cry from everybody, like you say. There's some people that that word really hurts, because they're going to the real definition, the real meaning. When you start calling black women, you know, when you start disrespecting them to that level, that's [unclear]. Our men our ignorant, so we have to overlook that, but they're educated. There's a difference in ignorant people saying what they say.

DEDEAUX:

First you check their grade level, you know, like who said that. Oh, okay, just the grade level. Oh, okay. You been to the university or the penitentiary? Well, then you get the education. Oh, okay. Then we get a better understanding of what we're talking about. [unclear] don't represent us. He represent the prison population. "I'm not into making-I'm into making love. I'm into sex. I ain't into making love; I'm into sex. I ain't into making love."

PATTERSON:

That's what he said?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, that's one of his most popular songs. "So come give me a hug."

PATTERSON:

Like we know how powerful words are and how these words that are strung together and maybe even called poetry, you know, rap, rap poetry, the controversy of whether or not it's poetry or not, but these words that he puts together, he and others, are influencing the non-prison population of youth.

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

So there's that controversy of the power of what he's saying as ideas and-

DEDEAUX:

Based on his education, exactly. So he's educating the people as to what it is that he learned. We never had an area of expression, so now everybody's got one and everybody's telling their story. So what's happening now is like they're covering those stories more so than they're covering the other ones.

PATTERSON:

Right. Why is that? It's more exciting?

DEDEAUX:

It's as simple as why wasn't all of the media out to this affair last night, you know, instead of one or two stations? Why didn't it get the kind of coverage it was supposed to be? If it had been in the Jewish community, there would have been full coverage of it, or anywhere else.

PATTERSON:

The first black book-

DEDEAUX:

This was literacy. Yes.

PATTERSON:

The first black book festival in Leimert Park.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. Literacy. So it didn't pique the interest of nobody, other than the councilmen.

PATTERSON:

Why? What is that?

DEDEAUX:

It's black.

PATTERSON:

Do you think it's a-

DEDEAUX:

It's black and white. It's disjointed. It's disjointed. Why in forty-two years the Watts [unclear] never sat down and had a face-to-face with Russell Simmons, one of the most powerful people in the hip-hop thing? Who keeps us apart? Who is it?

PATTERSON:

Have you ever reached out to him?

DEDEAUX:

Who is the people that talks to him? I don't know how to reach out to him. You know what I'm saying? But all these people that surround him connecting and disconnecting things. He's supposed to know the history of poetry and everything else. How can we be excluded? You

know what I'm saying? So that's the disjoining. Why do all of these rappers with all this stuff here, why can't somebody tell them that they need to-if they make more than 20 million dollars, they need to set up a fund to set up a village or something for these kids that they're destroying? Nobody's approached them about doing that, about putting something together. It's the disjointness with the black people. The black people, our leaders, don't have any connection with the rappers, and so that money is just like, you know.

DEDEAUX:

Them boys is making 200 million dollars and stuff. They're buying ballparks and stuff now. They're into the money and nobody's tapping those resources and finding out-I'm sure it's not that I ain't giving you nothing and stuff, it's just it hasn't been approached. Those city approaches are not working. They've got to come from the ghetto [unclear] standpoint. It's got to come from something down here that's going to pique their interest and tap some of them dollars, because for sure right now all that money is just-I don't know where that money's going, but it's not helping, not even the people that they're hurting. It's not going for the people they're helping, it's not going for the people they're hurting, so it's just going into their coffers, evidently.

DEDEAUX:

So how do we have that disconnection? How come our [unclear] ain't connected? How come I can't reach up and call Snoop Dogg when he walks around, when Ice Cube walks around with a-how come I can't hook up with Ice-T and stuff, and they're walking around with our CD in their pocket using it on the introduction and stuff? They know us. Maybe they've been warned about us, because early in our career when we did the sixteen weeks with Maverick's, we had opportunities everywhere, and so we would go to a club and we'd do an audition. The Etcetera Club was a perfect example, which was a very exclusive club downtown in Hollywood, and we went there and we did an audition, and the guy loved us and he booked us and stuff. When we went back for the performance it was like, "Sorry, you guys." What it was, the FBI was coming right behind us with that COINTEL [unclear], telling the people, "You don't want to work with these guys. These guys are under investigation."

DEDEAUX:

So it was a whole thing that was happening, just that we didn't know. So they was killing our career. But after they destroyed the Watts Writers Workshop, then they followed each of the groups out and they kept on [unclear], kept on, you know, and this continued for a long time.

DEDEAUX:

But I think they scared Quincy Jones away from us. We had done a tribute to Quincy when he had just come back from his operation, and it was at the Shrine Auditorium. We wrote a tribute

poem to him. It just blew him away. So Quincy put us on his album. He was doing his album "Mellow Madness," and he put us on that one. We got one cut on it called "Beautiful Black Woman." Then we were scheduled to do an album with him after he did this present album. This is when them two brothers was together, that was with him when he was introducing them two boys that played the guitar.

PATTERSON:

The Brothers Johnson?

DEDEAUX:

Brothers Johnson. He was working on them. They were just coming out, so he was working on them, and he said as soon as he finished his album, he would work with us on an album. So he put us on his thing. The album never materialized, but then later we found out the FBI came behind us just like, "You sure you want to go with these guys?" So that's happened all throughout our career, which we didn't know. It took us time to find out, and that held us back so much, it just did so much to [unclear] poetry and everything else.

PATTERSON:

So all these channels of communications between the generations were broken, between the various communities of blacks were broken. So there were all these barriers, I'm hearing barriers, set up between the traditional and the hip-hop communities, the spoken word. Hip-hop got chopped hard and then the proliferation of spoken word got chopped in another way, based on the government, and that was fear of what? How would you define the fear that the FBI was working with?

DEDEAUX:

Well, let's go back a little further before that, and then don't forget that question because I probably will. Okay, at the beginning of the hip-hop movement and stuff, okay, the way I like to say it, I like to say that poetry and rap got together and had a baby and it was called hip-hop. So it's a child. We're the parent of the child. Whatever name they call it, it's one of our kids, you know. We created this. But earlier I can remember when it was in its infancy. I remember young kids-what was that?

PATTERSON:

I'm hungry. [laughs]

DEDEAUX:

You should have got half of my [unclear].

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

Was that what that was?

PATTERSON:

Yes, my stomach is growling. I'm hungry.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

I thought it was someone knocking on the window or something. [laughter]

DEDEAUX:

I forgot what I was talking about.

PATTERSON:

Yeah, I should have bit your sandwich, huh?

DEDEAUX:

You should have. What was I saying? I forgot. I lost my whole thought.

PATTERSON:

Hip-hop is the child of-sorry about that.

DEDEAUX:

Okay. In the early days of hip-hop, I can remember when the kids, they started developing-she's making me laugh. She's laughing. She laughs, it makes me laugh.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

I have to look around.

PATTERSON:

It's on the tape. Oh, my gosh.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

I looked around because I thought maybe-

DEDEAUX:

Me, too.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

I thought maybe someone was knocking.

DEDEAUX:

I thought it came from [unclear]. I was like, okay.

PATTERSON:

Do you have a strawberry or something I could eat? [laughter]

DEDEAUX:

And so she was so worried about me. I ain't [unclear].

DEDEAUX:

What's that? Anything, anything will do.

PATTERSON:

Yes, we can't ruin a tape.

DEDEAUX:

What is that?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

They've got peanut butter in them. You like them or no?

PATTERSON:

Yes, they're good. That's good. Okay, hopefully that will do it.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

It's something.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, that was funny.

PATTERSON:

Crazy.

DEDEAUX:

Okay. I can remember early in the hip-hop, in the hip-hop days, one kid in particular running around with a little beat-up-he had a little beat-up record player, and what he would do, he would take and put on a little album and he would do some music and he would scratch it. He would scratch it. So this caught on in the black community, and I saw more and more, I saw some kids getting innovative and they had little mixers then, little metal boxes that you'd buy and you hooked up two record players to it and you could switch it back and forth. Then they started doing that.

DEDEAUX:

Then Sony got a look at some of this stuff and [unclear] and all, whoever else, and all, you know who you are. They saw a developing industry and they reached in and they come up with these big super double boom, triple-lock slip-slot this and that thing that the kids had to buy now. But what they did and what goes unsung is the fact that the kids created a whole industry and they don't even know it, because once they saw them scratching on their boxes, the industry leaped on that and created these boom boxes, these triple-setting things, straight from what they saw the kids doing. The kids never knew it or got credit for it. Never knew it or got credit for it or anything.

DEDEAUX:

You can eat and I can sit over here and talk.

PATTERSON:

I'm chewing; I'm not eating.

DEDEAUX:

Okay.

PATTERSON:

[unclear] growling.

DEDEAUX:

But that was the beginning of it. So the kids created an industry that became a multi-billion-dollar thing because once they saw what the kids were doing, now, okay, they didn't realize it. The kids didn't know it. The kids starting cutting their pants off, their big long [unclear] pants off, and cutting them off loopy and stuff like that. The industry caught wind of that, so the industry all of a sudden jumped on those things and bam, bam, bam, bam. Then you had that. Before you know it, the kids had created a whole culture, the way they walked with all the little chains and buttons and crosses and all that stuff on your neck. And industry saw all that, because kids was pulling that stuff off of bumpers and off of Mercedes instead of anything they felt like doing. They'd just grab something and put it around their neck, clocks and everything else. But the industry capitalized on that. Without the kids even realizing it, they were the creators of that. They created that whole culture.

DEDEAUX:

So they were pioneers that lead the way and not even realized it, just by cutting their pants and changing their walk a little bit and putting a split in their shoes or something. The people that were watching got right on that and it became a multi-billion-dollar thing, which has evolved now into a culture. Hip-hop, it's a culture now. It's beyond the music and stuff now, because the kids, they can't afford the clothes, there's other kids that can, so they're into it in that way. They might can wear the clothes, they can't listen to the music, whereas some of them can listen to the music and can't wear the clothes.

DEDEAUX:

But that part I thought was really important, is that the industry stole that from the kids under everybody's nose and nobody was paying attention. They didn't even say thank you.

PATTERSON:

What I think is interesting also is that the hip-hop artists themselves, after making so much money, began to create some of these offshoots in different ways to stay in the game, so to speak, and be part of these industries that were created by what they were doing when they started, so they got their clothing lines and some of the other things they're doing.

DEDEAUX:

Well, you've got to remember, too, you've got to remember, too, that the record industry were paying young rappers to curse and stuff. When Snoop Dogg and them was first coming out and stuff, then they pushed him to do records about drinking gin and juice, because you have to remember Seagram's bought the record industry. See, the Seagram's line bought the record industry. So now, what they're promoting now, they're promoting smoking blunts and alcohol, because now they've got a double whammy going on. They're not only getting records, but now they're getting the royalties off of the stuff that they're selling now, because now they invited me to drink this gin and drink this juice, and it's even gotten to the point now where they're paying these kids to say labels that they're drink now. You know, when you mention the label of a certain that you're drinking, you get a royalty for that.

DEDEAUX:

So Snoop and them was the first ones, because their record label was sold to the liquor industry and that promoted it. That started the whole downward spiral then about drinking and smoking the blunts and doing the whole thing. So that kind of turned everything over until now with the kids coming with their individual stuff, that's really a blessing happening now, because the little kid at home on the computer can go on eBay or someplace and sell his stuff and be successful,

because if you sell twenty records, you've done made all your money, whereas if you sell those twenty records in the industry, you made twenty cents or something. So it's a whole lot better thing going on right now and the kids are benefiting from it.

DEDEAUX:

Prince proved that when he got in that squawk with his record label and they took his name and he was called a symbol. Remember right then he just had a little symbol? He lost his name. But what he did, he took all of his fan base, he took them to the Internet and he was the first man to run his records through the Internet, using the symbol. So all the things he sold then, he got all of his money. Incidentally, he's got a room up there now up in Vegas. He bought the whole doggone room. He does dinner shows.

PATTERSON:

Oh, really?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, for 275 or something.

PATTERSON:

Wow. Wow.

DEDEAUX:

Yes, it ain't no joke.

PATTERSON:

While we're talking about the culture of hip-hop and rap, and this is something I wanted to ask you yesterday, too, something is happening with the relationship in a spoken way, and probably representing something real that's going on, between the black man and the black woman in the language of rap. How does that compare with the way that spoken word, the way you all dealt with male-female relationships?

DEDEAUX:

That's a good question there. That's a real good question, because at the time when we were dealing with the male and female relationship, there was still respect between the two. We still said, "Yes, ma'am," and, "No, ma'am," to our grandparents and to our elders and stuff. Gradually that was eroded away, like I say, when the industry, when the liquor industry bought into the record industry and started really making a decline.

DEDEAUX:

But in our era it wasn't allowed. Well, the women wouldn't allow you to do it in the first place. We couldn't call the girls that we knew their names that these kids call these girls now. Girls wore long dresses like that. If you saw a knee, you got excited back when I was young. You know what I'm saying? These girls, they protected their bodies. You didn't have no clue what was under those clothes unless you married them. So that whole thing is gone. And the whole secrecy about pregnancy. They got pregnant when we were young, too, but it was always, "Sshhh. What are we going to do about this?" You secretly got married or you got the girl out of town. It was a big thing, though. It was a shameful thing. It was a blow on the parents and your whole lifestyle and the whole village that raised your ass. All that had value and it meant something.

DEDEAUX:

Even when the girl was pregnant, she was protected, you know. It was like, "Ain't nobody going to take advantage of you. We'll put you over here and you go over to Grandma's house and you go to Auntie's house. We're going to tell them that you're over here on vacation, going to school. When you have this baby, we want you to-." You know. We had that. And nowadays it's just like, "Come on, bitch. What you want to do? All right, later for you. Screw you. Hey, what's up? Oh, come here." It's a whole other culture, and the girls, they've accepted that because they've put their clothes up to the level now where there's no guesswork. Everything's gone now. If you want to see her ass, you just do that. [laughs] And a lot of them do. You know what I'm saying? It's like yeah, okay. And they don't underwear. You know, it's a whole bunch of things. Nobody can say they brought it on themselves, because a woman has a right to do what she wants to do and not be abused for it, but somewhere along the line, somebody's turned their head and allowed this to happen, and I take it back to integration.

DEDEAUX:

Integration was disintegration, because now all these taboos that wasn't allowed, all of a sudden they're here now. You can say and do anything, and if you won't listen, I'll go to her; she's easy. So black girls trying to comply find themselves by being in a majority of women and in a minority of men, and then competing against other cultures and stuff, has really opened it up more for the black man and it's closed it up more for the black woman. So now consequently, she's reduced to lowering her standards in order just to be accepted by these idiots now. It's like, "You riding or what? You getting in the car? We're going to take off."

DEDEAUX:

She's like, "What am I going to do?" You look around and it's like, "What else is there?"

DEDEAUX:

So they've fallen into that, and our generation, they wasn't going for that. They wore their dresses and their hoop skirts and whatever else. I don't even have a clue what else they had on, but you didn't know, and that was the whole mystique about it. Boy, if you could just know, just to know. But they took it all out now. You know, now hairs are sticking out over their skirts, you know. It's like, damn, you know. It's ridiculous.

DEDEAUX:

But I don't blame them. I blame the culture that allowed them. What they do, they go on TV and they say, "This is what we're wearing this year." So like sheep, we follow and we go buy it and we put it on, and that's what we're wearing this year, and that's what people go for. It's the men that's designing them, so they design them shorter and shorter. It's like the women are going to say something at one point, maybe, but evidently they're not. Women are going to just keep letting it go up until it's just a little strap across the bellybutton or something. But at one point, at some point, they've got to say, "Stop." They got to tell the designers, like, "Nuh-uh. Come on now, drop this shit and go back to the knee the way it was, where it was sensual." You know, you've done took all the sensuality out of it, because it's up too high now. You can't hide it. There ain't nothing you can do. You sit down and you try to cross your legs, you're going to give a little flash. It's always some kind of little flash. You know what I'm saying? Like for the moment it takes you to go from here to there, it's a flash. So it's disturbing moments to me and it's something that should have been thought out a little better and then maybe you would be treated a little better, because when you put it on, maybe you just want to be in fashion, but when you put it on, you're in the same genre as the rest of those that's going to be talked to like that. Maybe you put it on to be talked to like that, because that seems to be the only going conversation.

DEDEAUX:

When you have a book fair like we had over there and nobody shows up, then you have a freak fest and everybody shows up, then that tells you where our morals exist.

DEDEAUX:

So to answer your question about that, it's just that the whole thing has just turned around, and as we start enjoying our newfound freedoms, which we just got in the sixties, we're losing our

values. We're taking these freedoms to another whole point. Maybe other cultures was doing this when we didn't have our freedom. I don't know if that was going on. I don't know if that's the result of getting your freedom and not getting instructions with it. So I don't know. But I do know that it's part of a debilitating plan, like it's always been, and it's not being corrected. You know, with so many going in the prisons and so many going this way, we're just diversified. Our numbers are just really thinning out, our ranks, and it's so important to develop and save at least parts of this, and to know that there were people here really trying to do a good job, trying to put things together, trying to hold it together, but at the same time realizing that our culture and our society is falling apart all around us.

PATTERSON:

Lack of a better word, some measure of damage to our self-respect or the way that we respect each other, but we still have what you all are doing; that is, connecting. You're still carrying on with the work that does connect the generations with your hip-hop poetry choir. So that's very encouraging in the sense that you got the hip-hop culture, which has these other sort of corrupted kinds of messages, but then also this link to the methods that you all are teaching.

PATTERSON:

Now, in the language that they're using, are they beginning to use some of the language of tradition and wholeness? You know, we've kind of in some ways lost our way, you know, the gap between, the respect between men and women and the respect between the generations. Do you believe that there's a way back to it or has integration just left us-

DEDEAUX:

Well, I don't think we've lost our respect. What we've lost is, we don't have any leaders. There's no leaders. We don't have a black leader. We need people to step forward in the community and start taking charge, and it starts with one. Like one of the things that I saw that I thought would be kind of a nice start for a black community, being a victim myself, like I said, but I've had three of my closest relatives murdered, my daughter, my grandson, and my niece. And I think that if people would kind of get together and maybe put a candle outside on their porch of the victims of murdered children to kind of give people-to just start bringing an awareness of how many people that we've lost in our community, as opposed to putting crosses out on the beach or you could go into a park and put the crosses there, but people have to start getting some kind of idea of the numbers of murdered, you know, the victims, just how this is allowed to go on. When we start talking about statistics, we start talking about in one city in California, Los Angeles, six or seven hundred people, a thousand people, in one city, and we've got thousands of cities.

DEDEAUX:

So what we need to do, we need to start putting up some kind of symbol for victims to let the

community see and realize that we have to come together some kind of way to stop the violence. One of the ways, I think, is to put a candle outside your door or in your window or something, and when we start counting the numbers and really, even the ones that don't know will start asking, "What is this? What does this mean?" And it means it's our blood drained, just the way that candle is melting, that's the way our blood is just going into the ground, and all our might-have-been presidents and congressmen and all that is just melting away in the wax of the candle.

DEDEAUX:

But something like that has to happen. What's happening right now, nobody wants to come forward. Nobody wants to be a black leader because they get killed. So we're not finding any real leaders stepping forward to really take charge. These bad kids, the majority of them just need a father. That's all. So if the community would just step forward, the killing would stop. Everybody out there has got a mother. All of those killers out there have got a parent they can call them in and start dealing with the situations. You know, they know. They know who the killers are and we know it. The community knows who the killers are. But we have to draw a line to make a stand and then just start recognizing our dead, first of all, acknowledging that, and then recognize and acknowledge ours in prison, and then recognize and acknowledge how we're disenfranchised, and then just go on with that and then get to our family thing and all of the sad causes that we have and we have to start addressing each and every one of them.

DEDEAUX:

It stems from the leadership in our community. We have enough educated people now, enough educated blacks, to really start taking the helm on things and start making a change, but until they do and until they reach down and connect with the grassroots elements, then we're going to continue to spiral deeper and deeper, because when you find yourself in a hole, the first thing you do is stop digging, and we haven't yet. We're still digging. We're at war with other cultures fighting for the bottom. We're fighting for the scraps at the bottom; we're not fighting for the top. So that kind of fighting is okay. We're having wars in the prisons now because we're no longer the majority now; the Latinos are the majority. So now it's a defense. Where we used to be the offense, now we're on the defensive.

DEDEAUX:

So it's just so many things that has to be addressed, and nobody is stepping forward, it seems like. We don't have any real leadership and nobody's willing to get in front of that scope that they know is out there. They know that real leadership comes with a price. I feel that a lot of black leaders just don't want to do it, just really don't want to do it.

PATTERSON:

Well, leadership, like you said, it starts with just being a good big brother sometimes, or a good auntie to a child.

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

Speaking of leadership, you have gone into the prisons. Talk about your experience with the prison population and the work that you do there.

DEDEAUX:

Well, first of all, when you go into the prison thing, the first thing they make clear to you is that they do no negotiating, that you go in there on the strength of your own, and if you're taken hostage, then you're just a hostage, you're just another prisoner. There's no special negotiations for you.

DEDEAUX:

So first of all, you've got to go in there with a certain grit and a certain attitude, because when you go and deal with a bunch of criminals that all claim that they're innocent and you come in there and something's not right about you, then you're not going to come out of there, because they've done experienced every kind of bull crap that there is. They've been told everything and they're really, really sharp. So you really-and now you're going in with a bunch of-you don't even know what's on their mind. But what you're coming in with, you're coming in with pure positive thoughts, and what you're going to do now, you're coming in with an attitude that all of these big old pieces of iron and steel are bent and cracked and stuff, I'm going in here and I'm straightening all them things. I've got to go in here and I've got to straighten this big old bent beam that could fall on me and crush me. You know what I'm saying? One way or the other, I could say something to this big old animal that triggers something, that he just pulls my limbs apart. You know what I'm saying? But at the same time, I could say something that will maybe prolong his life for a few more years or give him some kind of something that will take him to the next level, and most important, to pass it on. We learn from our mistakes. If you're in here and you're a career criminal and that's what you're going to be doing, then tell it to the kids. Explain it to the kids so they don't become that. Let them know what it is that caused you to get in that position.

DEDEAUX:

So dealing with these guys, you deal with them on a one-on-one basis, first of all, to find out

what they are. Then now you're going to tell them what they're going to do. You know what I'm saying? They've never been told anything in their life. And the first thing, and it goes right back to the basic things, like I said, the first thing you're going to do, you're going to stand with your hands at your side, you're going to take a nice deep breath, you're going to do your posture, projection. So it's disarming the same tool that you use in any way. From there, then you're going to come from your heart, so all that criminal stuff is forgotten for a moment. Now, a lot of bitterness might come out, you know, because writing is like a throw-up process. Once you get the bug, you know, when somebody convinces you to write, it's just like throwing up. The first thing you're going to come up with is all garbage, like, "I hate this," and, "I don't like that," blah, blah, and goddamn and shit. All kinds of things are going to come out. Then after a while the vomit clears up, and after a while it's cleared up and all of the bad stuff is gone;, it's just plain water. Then you start thinking about something to say. Once that's all out it's like, now what can I write about? Then you start thinking about love, relationships, family ties and stuff like that.

DEDEAUX:

That's what gets them. We might go in and say, "Okay, we're going to do a program that you're going to write a letter home to your parents, your mom or your girlfriend or something." But mainly what we did, what I focused on, I always come out with a book. I've got several in my briefcase. We start with a thought, just a basic thought, and then they write that thought down. Then we develop it and that thought becomes a poem or essay or something and then we manifest it into a book and then it's a tangible thing, something that you completed in your life.

PATTERSON:

Do you have one?

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

These are a compilation of works that some of the inmates have done?

DEDEAUX:

Yes, yes, absolutely.

PATTERSON:

So you're teaching them or guiding them in a process to get them to write.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. Well, what you do, writing gets whatever it is you're holding in out, poetry, and a lot of them is holding a lot of vicious things. They might want-they're laying to kill somebody, they're plan to get revenge, they might want to do something to their wife or something like that. What poetry does, poetry is the needle that punctures that little thing and deflates that. Then it becomes, "Man, I was going to hurt that girl, you know, until I got this out of me." "Boy, I was going to kill so-and-so until this bubble was crushed."

DEDEAUX:

This is the one that I use to disarm the class.

PATTERSON:

So this one is how you work with the children, more the youth, with that same process.

DEDEAUX:

Yes.

PATTERSON:

[reading] Watts Prophets Creative Writing Workshop. Engagement rules for writing artists, class structure, outline.

DEDEAUX:

Oh, yes, this is El Cajon. These are projects that I'm working on. I just got the covers on them. I ain't put them together all yet. The Third Annual Watts Festival. This is the beginning of East County when we started working with them. All the time I'm looking for the thing as I'm going. El Cajon residency. Baywood.

PATTERSON:

So these are all school districts?

DEDEAUX:

These are all residences, yes. This is in Springfield, Ohio.

PATTERSON:

Wow. Now, inside of them I've picked pictures of the kids.

DEDEAUX:

Yes. Well, eventually what I'm going to do, I've got CDs that I've taken of all of those, with all the pictures and stuff, and then I'm going to put the information in.

PATTERSON:

Oh, yeah.

DEDEAUX:

I'm going to do brochures. But what I'm going to do, I'm going to do it through Lulu. Are you familiar with Lulu?

PATTERSON:

No.

DEDEAUX:

Lulu is self-publishing. You go ahead and you just do your whole thing, put it in a PDF format, and then you just ship it to them and they do it like for three cents a page. So your whole book is done for like six bucks and they ship it to you and then you sell them for whatever you want, so the whole publishing thing.

PATTERSON:

So they print-

DEDEAUX:

They will publish your book.

PATTERSON:

They'll publish it.

DEDEAUX:

They will publish your book.

PATTERSON:

And do they print it, as well?

DEDEAUX:

They will publish your book.

PATTERSON:

Yes.

DEDEAUX:

You will send them a PDF file, and in the mail will come a hard or soft-cover book with the picture and everything.

PATTERSON:

And they'll reproduce it for you at a cost?

DEDEAUX:

I'll show you a Lulu book.

PATTERSON:

Okay.

DEDEAUX:

This is a Lulu book that I published all by myself and that's the name of it, too. So I'm still looking for the kids [unclear]. Yes, that is a self-publishing Lulu book. They don't do anything, but you do it all, and what they do is send you that. You know, just the way I did it, that's the way they did it.

PATTERSON:

Right.

DEDEAUX:

See what I'm saying?

PATTERSON:

Yes.

DEDEAUX:

So it's trial and error. There's a lot of mistakes in this stuff, but I got the book done. You know what I'm saying?

PATTERSON:

Yes.

DEDEAUX:

Then I worry about the errors later, but that is a Lulu book.

PATTERSON:

I see you all have-and I want to ask you about that, too, you have your African garb on in your

photograph. Your connection with Africa, how do you feel connected or not to Africa and how do you observe others in the African American community being connected or not?

DEDEAUX:

Well, I'm connected to Africans because I've got sickle cell. So I'm really supposed to be living in Africa.

DEDEAUX:

This is one of the books right here, too, that we were talking about. Now, that was done in ten weeks with kids in jail, little bad boys, and all that poetry comes out, how it changed their lives. What I brought out in them is the fact that I know they cry at night. You know what I'm saying? I'm like, "I know you cry," and then they talk about that. They're like, "Yeah, I cry. I cry when it's quiet, you know." They cry thinking about their mama, all these killers and all these things that they were, when it gets dark.

PATTERSON:

This one is called "My Loving Mom."

DEDEAUX:

Yeah, yeah. It's the time when they think about all of that. So what we try to do is keep them on that track, so when they get out they still be at my loving mom.

PATTERSON:

Yes. Have you stayed in touch with any of them?

DEDEAUX:

From time to time, yeah, but actually you're not supposed to.

PATTERSON:

Oh, really?

DEDEAUX:

They don't want you to have any affiliation in case they harbor something against you and want to kill you or something.

PATTERSON:

This one's called "A Gangster's False Dream."

DEDEAUX:

Oh, there's some stuff in there and I got more, but I don't know where. I'm looking for them and skipping over them, I'm sure. But I got three different ones and then I've got a CD. I've got a forty-two-track CD also.

PATTERSON:

This is wonderful. Really?

DEDEAUX:

Yeah, that you would probably want to hear.

PATTERSON:

I'm hoping that you can donate some of this work to the archive.

DEDEAUX:

Oh yeah.

PATTERSON:

This is wonderful.

DEDEAUX:

Yeah, I'll be able to do that too.

PATTERSON:

Okay. "All my life I've been trying to make my name known, but it's kind of hard when your brain is forever stoned. I tried to make my name known by breaking rules and acting like a fool. In junior high school I never opened a book. I got jumped by a gang for reasons unknown. Then I figured out because to others my weakness shown. All my honeys thought I was a little crazy, but deep down inside I was just a little baby. Put in work like everybody else. Then I would put in a little more to prove that I was down by myself. Then one day I got locked up. My roommate's name was Duck. I didn't know him, but he heard stories of me."

DEDEAUX:

That's the truth.

PATTERSON:

"I'm so proud. I thought I finally made my work. Went to court, got sent to Y.A."

DEDEAUX:

Youth Authority.

PATTERSON:

"Now I realize today is a whole different world than yesterday, so like everyone else, I played the game that I began to understand as I thought to myself, 'This fame game is insane.' I finally got my chance to be in the sunshine, away from the chumps who enjoy doing crime. So what I'm trying to say is this, I've had my chance and gangsta life is not for me. So tell yourself the truth, come clean, stop following a false gangsta's dream." Lorenzo P.

DEDEAUX:

This is another one from another cottage.

PATTERSON:

Now, cottage, what does the cottage mean?

DEDEAUX:

Different jail areas, dorms, where they stay.

PATTERSON:

At Youth Authority?

DEDEAUX:

Yeah.

PATTERSON:

This is great. Did you know that they put these books together?

DEDEAUX:

Oh, yeah, they got copies.

PATTERSON:

They got copies. Good.

DEDEAUX:

They got copies. Yes, this was their work. They couldn't get them personally, but they got them mailed to their house for when they get out.

PATTERSON:

When they get out. But they know that it was done?

DEDEAUX:

Oh, yeah.

PATTERSON:

Oh, wow. That's great.

DEDEAUX:

This is the copy of the good kids' work. No, this is the kids-that's the good kids.

PATTERSON:

The Hip Hop Poetry Choir.

DEDEAUX:

Their portrait would be a whole lot different than what you would hear from them other boys. Them other boys got experience. Then if you heard the tape, it would really just break your heart.

PATTERSON:

So when you say the difference, in the other boys in the Youth Authority have experiences, how do you mean that? They all have experiences, but they're just different?

DEDEAUX:

Well, when you open this book up, this book is full of dreams and aspirations. This other book it's like it's full of all of what I've done, I'm sorry. So now what they're got to do, what I make them understand is, like, the world is constantly going while you're in here. Now you've got to catch up. When you get out, you're going to be-however many days you spent in there, that's how many days you're going to be behind and now you've got to catch up to this fast-moving world too. So you've got a lot of work cut out for you.

DEDEAUX:

So you see it in their poetry. You know, they're going places. They know that they're leaving. We've already put it in-our model to them is talk up, not down, and do you know what it means to have self-esteem. So it's a whole other thing. We don't fill them. They got their dose. They're loaded with their self-esteem and they talk up, not down. So you ain't going to find no negativity and stuff. So it's another direction.

PATTERSON:

So these are kids that come from various schools?

DEDEAUX:

That's the residency kids.

PATTERSON:

Okay, they're in a school together?

DEDEAUX:

That's from schools. That's El Cajon in San Diego.

PATTERSON:

Okay, this is in San Diego, this Hip Hop Choir.

DEDEAUX:

The other one was Youth Authority in [unclear] Boys Home.

PATTERSON:

So these are just kids that they never thought of themselves as necessarily poets before this project.

DEDEAUX:

Absolutely. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

PATTERSON:

So writing poetry to them is, like, this is their first voice, so to speak.

DEDEAUX:

Their first experience. And it's like [unclear] experience. You know what I'm saying? Because being incarcerated is the perfect setting for the poetry. We explain to them, like, if you're mad with somebody, if you want to kill somebody, you write it down on that paper and then you can take that paper and ball it up and do what you want to with it. Then you see that in a lot of the books, they'll tell you that, it's like, "I got it out on paper." That saved somebody's life.

PATTERSON:

Yes.

DEDEAUX:

Because they were going to-

PATTERSON:

Takes the tension out.

DEDEAUX:

Well, that knot was still in there and until you get that out, until that comes out, you can talk to them all you want up here, but until they throw that up-and that's what the system don't realize. You talk up here ain't got nothing to do with down here. You've got to get them to throw that up, and once that come out, if they can laugh at it, like, "I was going to kill you. I was going to kill him, but you helped me to put it on this paper and now I don't feel bad." They understand what it is to transfer that. It's called transferring the load, I guess. I haven't defined it with a name yet, but it is transferring in some kind of a way, and with that the anger follows and then you can ball that up and throw it away and never have to go to jail for it. But you've done what you've wanted to do, say anything you want to say, do everything you wanted to do.

DEDEAUX:

So these teachers that you're teaching, you're teaching them that concept of helping the kids pull this out and keep their channels clear so they can go forward.

DEDEAUX:

Exactly. Exactly. And also how to take control of a classroom, you know, because teachers spend more time trying to quiet students down. I mean, you know, the first twenty minutes is gone. I think that the way school-the way I would set up a school, I want a special school, and the way I would set it up, I would have a special room, like the kids have a homeroom, but I

would have a special room that they'd go into to get in the right frame of mind. Because I don't care if your dog died, I don't care what happened to you at home, in this little forty-five minutes that we get ready to work with them. That's one thing that you have to learn. You can't stop twenty people for something that happened to you, so you go in this room and get yourself prepared, and then when you come in this classroom you are a vessel for lessons. That's what you are. I'm here to fill you and your cup, and so when you come in, I want you empty, I don't want you half full, I don't want you dirty. I want you just a nice empty vessel, and I will fill you with forty-five minutes of educational information, and then you will take that and digest as much of that as you can and take it to the next level.

DEDEAUX:

But there has to be a disarming process because we have three elements. We have the mental, the physical, and the spiritual. When you come to my class, I want you to bring the mental, spiritual, and the physical stays outside. There's no place-poetry has no place for what I'm teaching you. I'm teaching nothing physical. You ain't got to touch nothing in my class. There's nothing but the paper, so you don't need nothing physical. So that eliminates, "What you looking at? What's up?" All that's outside. It don't come in. All I want is your spiritual and I want your mental and then I want to see you glowing. I want that smile and I want you in another frame of mind. So now you're ready to do what you can do.

DEDEAUX:

But there's a transition period that you have to go through, and there should be a room for that. It should be just like a transition room, something that the kids will like. Maybe with some incense burning, you know, just something cool. You could just go in and undress all that bull crap that you've got, that you brought to school, and leave it right there, pick it up on your way out, and then go in and do this. They could appreciate that too. It's like it's [unclear]. That stays right there.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

I need to change tapes.

PATTERSON:

Okay. [End of transcript.]