

NOTICE

Materials in our digital Oral History collections are the products of research projects by several individuals. USF Libraries assume no responsibility for the views expressed by interviewers or interviewees. Some interviews include material that may be viewed as offensive or objectionable. Parents of minors are encouraged to supervise use of USF Libraries Oral Histories and Digital Collections. Additional oral histories may be available in Special Collections for use in the reading room. See individual collection descriptions for more information.

This oral history is provided for research and education within the bounds of U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). Copyright over Oral Histories hosted by the USF Libraries rests with the interviewee unless transferred to the interviewer in the course of the project. Interviewee views and information may also be protected by privacy and publicity laws. All patrons making use of it and other library content are individually accountable for their responsible and legal use of copyrighted material.

Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: A31-00071
Interviewee: Nelson Griffith (NG)
Interviewer: Otis Anthony (OA), Fred Beaton (FB), Herbert Jones (HJ)
Interview date: March 23, 1979
Interview location: Hillsborough Community College, Tampa, Florida
Transcribed by: Kimberly Nordon
Transcription date: March 31, 2009 to April 8, 2009
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson
Audit Edit date: April 20, 2009
Final Edit by: Christine Toth
Final Edit date: May 8, 2009

[Transcriber's note: Recording starts in mid-sentence.]

Otis Anthony: —going to interview Mr. Nelson Griffith. What's your address?

Nelson Griffith: 2314 Tenth Avenue, Tampa, Florida.

OA: Okay, and today is March—

NG: Twenty-third.

OA: Twenty-third, 1979 and it's twelve o'clock. Mr. Nelson Griffith has done some research—assisted us in our research on black music in Tampa. He's talked with a number of people, and he's now going to help us in terms of the history of black music in Tampa.

NG: Okay, thank you. The history of black music in Tampa has taken two phases. One is the entertainment phase, and the other is the educational phase, and I'm going to touch on both of them. The first I'll touch on will be the entertainment phase. Now, we were able, in our research, to go back to the first band that was formed in Tampa that really performed for pay, and that band was The Jazzmen, and the band leader was an individual by the name of Blueshe Cook. The second band that was formed in Tampa was—

Fred Beaton: Excuse me, did they give you—did he give you a general date?

NG: Oh, the date for this band, The Jazzmen, was 1910.

FB: Okay, good.

NG: The second band that was formed as a result of The Jazzmen's success was a group called The Syncopators, and The Syncopators was under the direction of a Mr. Gramble Mingo, and this was also during the early era between 1910 to 1920.

Shortly there afterward, Banjo Boy Hawkins, a prominent musician around Tampa, formed a group called The Nighthawks. Now, The Nighthawks has been the nucleus for the off shot for all other bands that will probably follow after this. Some of the members of The Nighthawks were people like Charlie Brantley, later who formed the band called The Symphony Seven—no, Charlie Brantley had The Honey Dippers. There was also Henry "Red" Clinton, who formed a band later that was known as The Melody Makers. So you can see that The Night Hawks had some very prominent persons in it that later led to further band development, or further entertainment development.

Now, from The Night Hawks, a group was formed called The Florida Collegians. Now, in this group The Florida Collegians—the later end of the group we had persons like Cannonball Adderley and Nat Adderley that played with them, and then later they went on to Florida A&M University [Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University], as you probably already know, and from Florida A&M they eventually went on their own, because—

FB: What was the reason why the group was named Florida Collegians? Was it because they were in college or something, or it's just a name they came up with?

NG: I wasn't able to find out. I think it was just a name they came up with at that time.

FB: Okay.

NG: The bandleader of the Florida Collegians was Jennie B. Glover. Now, from The Florida Collegians, there were several other bands formed, but the main bands formed out of The Florida Collegians was The Honey Dippers, and that was under Charlie Brantley. Now, within The Florida—

Herbert Jones: Um, The Florida Collegians were that band—was that band done in Tallahassee, or was that right here in Tampa?

NG: It was here in Tampa. Florida Colleg—

HJ: It was those people that had gone to Florida A&M University that made up this band?

NG: Some of them later went to Florida A&M University and returned—at that time it was called Florida College—Florida A&M College; it was called FAMC. Some of them had later gone to FAMC, or a couple of them had gone—

OA: So would it be right for us to say that Cannonball Adderley and Nat Adderley grew up in Tampa, had their first musical experience in Tampa, or they moved here and had their musical experience? Do we know exactly?

NG: Well, in here I can tell you that. Now on Cannonball and Nat, their father was one of the original founders of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity here, and they were—they used to live here and they moved. They were living in West Palm Beach and they came to Tampa, and he helped found the chapter Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity and they were—they got their formal education, you know, here in Tampa, then they left here, went to Florida A&M University. And I think what happened here was that Cannonball and Nat were very dominant in the group The Florida Collegians, and it—the name Florida Collegians had some synonymous with them being in it and being students in Florida A&M, but I haven't been able to determine, you know, just what the situation has been there with them. If I could get a chance to run up to Tallahassee, I believe I could find out what the situation was there.

Now, let me see if I can give you some of the members, the persons that were a part of The Florida Collegians, so that you'll be able to see how The Florida Collegians turned out to be the nucleus of some of the other bands that came about.

FB: Wherever you can give us a generalization, that's good.

NG: Now The Florida Collegians was formed in the 1930s. Between 1920 and 1930 or to the middle 1930s, we had The Night Hawks with Banjo Boy Hawkins being the bandleader, and that was when Charlie Brantley and Henry "Red" Clinton got to be members of— Now, in the middle thirties [1930s], The Florida Collegians were formed, and some of the members of The Florida Collegians—where did that—I had a list of them. Okay, the members of The Florida Collegians was Walter B. Watson, Jack Simmons, Henry "Red" Clinton, Jennie B. Glover, Charlie Brantley, Otto Graham, Andy "Gump" Martin.

Now a lot of people know Andy "Gump" around here; he recently passed last year [1978], and he played his horn right up until he was about seventy-seven years old. And he later formed a band, also, that was called The Jamsters—now, right following The Florida Collegians, Andy "Gump" Martin formed this group The Jamsters; he left The Florida Collegians and formed his own band. And they played simultaneously along with The Florida Collegians—when I say simultaneously I mean in time, and that was during the time of the middle thirties [1930s] going into the late thirties [1930s] when they had The Florida Jamsters. Now I was not able to find out who was some of the members in The Florida Jamsters, but I was able to find out that Andy Gump was the bandleader.

Now, from the personnel that was a part of The Florida Collegians, additional—later personnel that came into membership of The Florida Collegians was Frank Sherman—now, you'll hear this name again. Frank has been very dominant in the music development.

Bobby Felder, who is now living in Washington D.C. and has a group called The Blue Notes, out of Washington—Bobby Felder is extremely famous in the northeastern section of the United States now, and he also formed a band as an offshoot from The Florida

Collegians called The Symphony Seven. And at that time, Kenneth Nurse started playing with him, and when Bobby Felder left The Symphony Seven, Kenneth Nurse took it over—but Kenneth Nurse took it over as a result of Bobby Felder having been drafted into the Army, having to fight in World War II. When he returned from World War II, he took over as band director at Booker T. Washington Junior High School. Now, that will show up in the educational end of it. And when he took over there, he was band director there for a period of about two years; then he got the opportunity to form an organization—or join an organization—in Washington D.C., and he left and went to Washington D.C. and later formed this band called The Blue Notes.

FB: So, would it be fair for us to say that Bobby Felder is from this area?

NG: Oh, definitely. This is his hometown. Mr. [Michael] Rodriguez taught him.

FB: All those that are from this hometown, I would just say that, because that way we know—we won't get it wrong. Okay, from the general area in Florida, we'll just say that they're from Florida. If they're from Tampa, we're going to say they're from Tampa.

NG: Okay. Well, now, Bobby Felder is a native of Tampa. Walter B. Watson is a native of Tampa. Jack Simmons, a native of Tampa. Red Clinton is a native of Tampa—in fact his wife now, Miss Gladys Clinton, is living at 1907 Cherry Street, and she is still alive here in Tampa. Jennie B. Glover was from Tampa. Charlie Brantley was from Tampa—everyone knows Charlie Brantley is from Tampa. Otto Graham, also from Tampa. Andy Gump is from Tampa. Fred Sharman, quite sure a lot—I mean Frank Sherman. A lot of people know Frank Sherman Junior and all of them. They live right round here off of Columbus Drive here in Tampa. Now, Bobby Felder—in fact, some of the Felders are still living here in Tampa now. And he returns to Tampa every year during the Christmas holidays, and he brings his band to play; for some reason or other we always manage to get him back. Johnny B. Neil, also a member of The Florida Collegians. Now, Frank Amarro was a member of The Florida Collegians. All of these individuals that I'm talking about here was born here in Tampa, and they received their formal education here in Tampa.

Otto Graham played bass. Jack Simmons and another individual—now, he was not from Tampa, but he came here and was part of The Florida Collegians, fellow by the name of Cotton Kirk. He was about five feet one [inches], and he'd hang around on Central Avenue all the time. Eventually, Cotton Kirk broke away from The Florida Collegians and formed his own band, and he called himself Cotton Kirk and the All-Stars. They jived around down around the Central Avenue area of Tampa for quite some time—never doing anything real pertinent; he'd just pick up individuals from various bands, and that's where he got the name the All-Stars from, because he found out he could use individuals from any band, and they'd sit down and talk things over and have a couple practice sessions and go out and make some money.

And then there was another vocalist that played with The Florida Collegians by the name of Clarence Jolly. Eventually Clarence Jolly went with Charles Russell, and he also teamed up with Rufus Beacham. Rufus Beacham had a band called The House Rockers.

Well, then Jolly left The Florida Collegians and teamed up with Rufus Beacham—this was taking place in the forties [1940s] and the early fifties [1950s]—and they formed the band called The House Rockers; played down round in the Savoy Club and up and down Central Avenue and the Peppermint Lounge and the Apollo Theater across the street in front of the Lincoln Theater for a lot of years in the late forties [1940s] and early fifties [1950s].

Eventually Rufus Beacham got out of it, and his son took over and formed a band that later came about in the seventies [1970s], around seventy-two [1972] up until the present day. His son's name is Rufus Beacham also, and his son formed a band called Plum Nasty; they live out in Port Tampa. Now, you all probably heard of Plum Nasty—well, that's an offshoot of The House Rockers. Now, since that time, Rufus Beacham has performed with his son under the name of Plum Nasty. They have done several engagements around, and he still does performances occasionally, but not nothing as dominant as he used to be.

Getting back to some of the individuals that was in The Florida Collegians, as you can see, Charlie Brantley and Red Clinton are these two individuals, lived right next door to each other; they both formed their own band. Now Red Clinton formed the band called The Melody Makers, Charlie Brantley formed The Honey Dippers. Now, The Honey Dippers was made up of a unique individual—it had at least one unique individual in it, and that was Mr. Michael Rodriguez. He joined the Honey Dippers, he had been off to college at Michigan State and Florida A&M University, had finished his master's degree in music, and he came back home and he teamed up with Charlie Brantley. He played with Charlie Brantley all the way through the late thirties [1930s] into the mid-forties [1940s].

OA: Okay, when we talk about these bands, are we distinguishing between what kinds of bands, or we talking about jazz bands—

NG: Well—

OA: Or we talking about—

NG: During that time in the twenties [1920s], thirties [1930s] and forties [1940s], you know, they were playing swing music. The only band that was dominant in jazz was the first band, Blueshe Cook and the Jazzmen; they played a lot of jazz. But during the twenties [1920s] and the thirties [1930s], they were playing the music of that era.

OA: And that's called what now?

NG: Swing.

OA: Swing.

NG: They were playing swing music. Uh, now Mr. Rodriguez was a keyboard player—playing keyboards—organ, piano; at that time those were the two dominant types keyboards—and he played keyboards for Charlie Brantley and the Honey Dippers. Within the band Charlie Brantley and the Honey Dippers, we had another individual that was real dominant in music; his name is Manzy Harris. Now, Manzy was not a native of Tampa—he came from Gainesville.

And later, Manzy formed his own band called Mombo Combo, and he used to have talent shows at the Elks Lodge that was on Constance Street—right behind the Cozy Corner, which was on Central. The Elks Lodge was there, and on Wednesday nights they would have these talent shows. And he bumped into a person on a talent show that was singing one night. Otis, you know him very well; his name is—we call him Bob Jackson, and later Bob Jackson turned out to be—Manzy Harris taught Bob Jackson to play piano and organ; he found out that he needed one. Bob Jackson and Manzy Harris got to be a team and they worked with each other for years—right up from the middle forties [1940s] all the way into the late sixties [1960s], they worked together on and off.

But in the meantime, Bob Jackson became proficient enough that he ventured out on his own—and now, Bob was the first person to put together a female singing group, and that group was The Miraclelettes, as you probably already know, with Cynthia Anthony, Jackie Williams and Brenda Hilliard. That later—each of those individuals later went their own different ways, and Brenda ended up singing with The Lavelles, that turned out to be a recording artist with RCA; then she went on to sing the lead for Faith, Hope and Charity, which she is presently doing now.

Anyway, Bob also worked with a lot of other bands. He worked with the group called Charles Russell and the Kings. Now, Charles Russell came about as a result of having been in The Symphony Seven. The Symphony Seven was formed from The Florida Collegians. And Bobby Felder, being a member of The Florida Collegians, after he returned from college, had formed this band The Symphony Seven. And Kenneth Nurse was also a part of it; when Bobby Felder left the Tampa area Kenneth Nurse and Charles Russell took over the band The Symphony Seven, and Charles Russell eventually left The Symphony Seven in the late fifties [1950s]. He left The Symphony Seven and formed his own band called Charles Russell and the Kings. Well, playing with Charles Russell and the Kings was Chico Arenas and Charles Kennedy, and they played with him for a while.

In the mean time Mr. Rodriguez, who would be playing with The Honey Dippers, formed a band out in Middleton High School—he was the first band director that Middleton ever had, and he formed a band out there called The Sharps and Flats, basically to play swing music and to do a lot of his original com—a lot of his original numbers that he was writing—compositions. And members of that band, the original Sharps and Flats—a lot of these individuals ventured out to go on to play music that would carry them into the professional end of things. Now, some the original members of The Sharps and Flats

were: Donald Young, Eugene Green, Ellis Moore, Earl Blanchet, James Neil, Evert Miller, Walter Hendrix, James Watkins. And then there was the second group that followed them: Elgin Ellis, myself—Nelson Griffith—Charles Kennedy, Charles Phillips, and Willie Wallace.

From that group, The Sharps and Flats, there were several bands formed. Now, Willie Wallace was not a native of Tampa—all the other individuals were natives of Tampa. Willie Wallace came to us from a town on the East Coast—I can't remember the name of it—but later, he formed his own band called The Love Bones. And they started working with Johnny Taylor, Candice Dayton, and Clarence Carter. Right now he's recording trumpet player for RCA, and he's working out of California. I've had occasions to meet with him and talk with him several times. He played in The Sharps and Flats along with me.

Charles Philips is in New York City now, and he is working as a PR [public relations] man for MCA Records out of New York.

Now Charles Kennedy, he went on to New York. He was responsible for taking the group The Barons to New York with Jerome Dobby; now, he took them there in the late sixties [1960s] and early seventies [1970s]. He took Brenda, Jerome, Zulema, and Albert, to the north and got them an audition with various record companies, and two or three different record companies pick up on them and did some additional work with them. Chico Arenas was also part of that group. Eventually he decided to come back home, and he did. From The Sharps and Flats, you can see that there were several bands that was formed, and individuals actually ventured out on their own and made it.

Now, at the same time, The Sharps and Flats—the original Sharps and Flats—were formed, there was a group that was real dominant in music in the Tampa area from the late 1940s all the way into the early sixties [1960s]—right, 1960 or sixty-one [1961] was when the group began to decline. And the name of this group was The Skyliners. Now, The Skyliners also had individuals that had played in the Florida Collegians, and you can see now if you take the Nighthawks going in to the Florida Collegians, from the Florida Collegians you had various persons to branch off and form their own group. And one of the prominent persons in The Skyliners was Frank Sherman—he was the band leader. He was a trumpet player.

Now also, Frank had played with Charlie Brantley and the Honey Dippers, and in that band with Charlie Brantley and the Honey Dippers and Mr. Rodriguez and Frank Sherman was two pertinent people that went on to make it extremely big. One was a person we referred to as Ray Charles—they called him R.C. at the time. And I was fortunate enough to—my mother and Ray Charles and Frank Sherman were all real good friends when I was a little boy. There was a trumpet player teaching me to play trumpet when I was about four or five years old—I never could remember his name, and last night in researching this information, I found out it was Frank Sherman.

I remember Ray Charles very well—in fact, he lived in the same house with us, and the house was located on the corner of Boulevard and LaSalle, right where the Central Life Insurance Company is right now. That’s where—

FB: Okay.

NG: —we all lived in that same house. It was kind of like a rooming house. My mother had just come to Tampa and she was renting one of the apartments in there. And Frank and Pepper, the bass player for Ray Charles, was part of that unit also. He lived in that house also. So from there, Ray Charles went on and formed his own band. He went to New York, he broke away from them; he and Pepper left here and he stopped singing under the name of R.C. and started using his actual name of Ray Charles. Eventually—you know, he speaks for himself; he’s now one of the most pertinent and prominent blues singers there is in the nation.

Now, as I was saying, The Skyliners formed in the late forties [1940s] all the way to the early sixties [1960s]. Some of the members of The Skyliners were Frank Sherman, the bandleader, Evan Hill, George Hughes, Johnny Manning. Now, Jonny Manning was the bass player. He is still living now, and he lives at 1908 Walnut [Street]. I would suggest that if you talk with him, he could give you even some more information that I may not have picked up in my research—I didn’t get a chance to see him last night. All right, then there was Lonnie Williams, and there was a young lady also by the name of Tiny Williams—she was an extremely powerful vocalist. She was one of the first premier vocalists in the area. And the keyboard player was a young lady by the name of Kitty Washington.

Kitty eventually went on to become a soloist keyboard playing around here in the Tampa area now; her name now is Kitty Daniels, and her son played with a group—The Montereys, The Mighty Good and Strong, and now he’s a trumpet player for Trama. And she also has another son named Keith Bouyard, who’s an alto sax player and a keyboard player who played with The Montereys and The Mighty Good and Strong, also. So the two of her sons now are still into entertainment, and she’s in entertainment also. She has recorded for TK Records out of Miami; they’ve done a couple of albums on her.

Kitty plays such clubs in the Tampa Area as Hawaiian Village—she was at the Page, too, for quite some time—she was at Big Daddy’s, which is Level Three now. She’s very dominant round in the area. She’s not popular that much among the black people, but she is making a good living for herself, and she was the first black female to join the musicians union, Union 720, in Hillsborough County. And I would say that since her, there has probably only been one other female that has joined that union, and that would be Jeri Pilter, who was the music teacher out at Young Junior High School; she’s a keyboard player also, and so she has joined the Union. But those are the only two black females that the records will show that are members of Union 720 here, serving this area.

HJ: What’s the fee for those to join?

NG: Oh, the fee is about a hundred and thirty-five dollars, but the benefits is tremendous. The thing about it is—the benefits for whites, you know, are extremely good, but for black—you know black people, we can play in the black clubs and never have to worry about a union representative coming in to assess your union dues or fees, but it hadn't been like that with Kitty. Kitty has been playing the clubs where the union representatives see her, and they want her to be a part of the—you know what the situation is, so she has been a part of it.

Now, Tiny Williams, as I said was a extremely strong keyboard—I mean, vocalist—and she had a brother that played in the band also, and his name was Lonnie Williams. And we had Richard Allen—Richard was a trumpet player, and he also was part of the Florida Collegians, but he only played with Florida Collegians just for a little bit. Fletcher Davis played saxophone, and right now, we had a fellow that was the first dancer and singer—you know, entertainer—that came out with that group in the Tampa area. His name was Dirt Gibbons, and Dirt is now still working here. He's managing the Soul City Boston Bar for Doc Castelano.

Doc Castelano is the person that put The Skyliners together. He is the only person that is a non-black that had some outright dominancy in black music in the Tampa area. He put in a lot of time with these persons, he bought them all the equipment, he provided them with places to practice, he obtained booking agents for them, he booked them on engagements where they played with a lot of name acts—a lot of these individuals had played with the big bands like Stan Kenton and things of this sort. For instance, Richard—that was one of the reasons he left the group. Kitty was called on several times to play with some of the big bands when she would come to town—I mean, when they would come to town. They would need a keyboard player, and she was an extremely good piano and organ player, so they would call on her.

Later during the time that The Skyliners were formed, there was a group called Ernie Cal, and Ernie Cal formed his band. The dominant individual in Ernie Cal's band was an individual that a lot of people know around here by the name of Zeke; he played alto saxophone. Zeke's name really is Ernie Vann. And he played with Ernie Cal for a long time, and then he left Ernie Cal and went to Charles Russell and the Kings. And Charles Russell and the Kings played right along during the time The Skyliners were in existence. And when The Skyliners broke up, each individual went their own way.

And the person from The Skyliners that turned out to be real dominant in music, as I said, was Kitty Washington Daniels, and she is doing an extremely good job now. If you ever get a chance to, you ought to go by and catch her wherever she be. If you pick up the newspaper, you'll see where Kitty is; when she moves from one club to another her followers follow her. That's why the people book her, and the type people who follow her spend money. And she is one of a few—in fact, I would say right now she's probably the only black female artist that you can walk up and say, "I'd like to hear 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.'" She'll write it down: "Mr. Otis Anthony would like to hear 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.'" It will be coming up in the next five songs. Do I have

any other requests, ladies and gentlemen?" You name the song, she'll play it. And that's one of the reasons why she is so popular in the area now.

Now as I said, as a result of The Skyliners, we didn't have very many off shoots of other bands from The Skyliners. The bands that seemed to have been the feeder bands to create other bands were bands such as The Sharps and Flats, and The Florida Collegians. The Florida Collegians were kind like the forerunner of the nucleus of some of the individuals that went into The Sharps and Flats.

Now, we're going to kind of cross here a little bit into the educational end of it, and show you how a lot of this stuff tied in educationally, how these bands came about. Now, The Sharps and Flats was a band that came about strictly as a result of Mr. Rodriguez's educational efforts and from his—

OA: Tell us about his inspiration—

NG: Yeah.

OA: This instrument.

NG: Okay, now from his efforts he was able to put together a band—like I said, The Sharps and Flats—that later led into The Montereys and The Dolls. The members—the original members of The Montereys and The Dolls were Ben Clark, Isaac Guess, Henry Hart, Irving Hart, Lonnie Jones, Wendell Robinson. Now all these individuals at one time or another—but all of them are from Tampa. Wendell Robinson now is a mathematics teacher, and he is writing music for—he's an independent music writer, and he's been very successful in writing music. He's writing lyrics for TK Production¹—

pause in recording

NG: —favored other groups that wasn't successful and now he's playing with Trama. And as you know, Trama, having been once a part of The Montereys, has signed a recording contract with TK Productions. They have released one album, and another one will be coming out pretty soon. Now, The Montereys did several recordings while some of the individuals in Trama was in the band, and theirs was released on NGC Label. NGC Label is a label that was put together here in Tampa and was distributed by Matchfield Records; it was also distributed by TK Production and was distributed by—out of California—Capital Records. The Montereys never did really get a real good solid strong hit, but they turned out to be a good support act for bands appearing in the area, as well as around the country, and was booked by some other more powerful booking agents for tours for California, for Mexico, Canada and things of this sort.

Now the original members of The Dolls were Jeri Slamkins, Miriam Moins, Constance Beal, and Rosetta Baldwin. Those were girls that actually got The Dolls started. Now, Judy Henry, whose mother and father now run a place in Tampa called Barbecue King

¹ Part of TK Records

down on Main Street, also sang with The Dolls, during the time she was in college at Florida A&M University. Jeri Slamkins left the group, and Constance Beal and Rosetta Baldwin left the group.

Then we picked up two other individuals that were in Tampa, Florida: Sietta Sneed, who is married now to Gregory Douglas, whose mother owns Betty's Restaurant; and Sheryl Pilcher, P-i-l-c-h-e-r. Sheryl—now, Sietta Sneed was a vocal major at Florida A&M University. Sheryl Pilcher is a vocal and piano major at Florida A&M at the time we picked them up. And Miriam had been with the group from the beginning and she majored in—I think it was psychology—at Florida A&M University. So we had a totally professional group here. Those were the original recording artists for The Dolls.

The recording numbers went extremely well was the number that had been done by The Beatles called "Something." Zulema did the number when she was with The Lavelles; they did it over and The Dolls did it, and that number went extremely well. Now it went to number thirty-six, the highest it got on the Soul Chart. As a result, it netted the organization in the neighborhood of about thirty-five, forty thousand dollars—that was gross. The net out of it didn't turn out to be so pleasant. (laughs)

OA: I understand. (laughs)

NG: Then, as a result of The Montereys coming about, we had another group that was called The Mighty Good and Strong. Those were the brothers, sisters, cousins, relatives of individuals that was in The Montereys. The Mighty Good and Strong was composed of Keith Bouyard, whose mother is Kitty; Charles Daniels, also whose mother is Kitty; Gregory Griffith, that's my brother; my sister, Ruby Baker; Andre Walker, who is a distant cousin of mine; Ricky Pringly—his name is really James Pringly, he was the drummer; Lawrence Hires, who was the trombone player, and I think that was all of them—oh, yeah, and what is Tulsa's full name?

FB: Everybody just calls him Tulsa.

NG: I know; that's his middle name. Randolph. Randolph "Tulsa" Hall. Okay, those were the original members of The Mighty Good and Strong, and eventually The Mighty Good and Strong broke—and was put in to The Montereys. They were taken out of The Montereys when they finished college in 1972, and went on to form their own group called Trama. They went to New Jersey, and formed Trama. Upon returning from New Jersey, they picked up a female singer by the name of Donna Allen. Now Donna, as you already know, had danced to third in the world as a dancer on *Soul Train*², along with Willie Current, and she's an extremely good entertainer in terms of dance movements, and as a singer she developed into a real good singer. So that was how we got to the present time where we are now with Trama, The Montereys and—

² *Soul Train* was a television program that ran from 1971 to 2006. Many popular artists performed on the show, which also featured an in-studio group of dancers who danced along during the performances.

Now, one band that had this unique way of getting started was a Mr. T.J. Simpson, who was band director at Blake High School. Now we going back to the time where The Sharps and Flats had been formed. Mr. Simpson on the other side of town formed a band called The Simptones; he named it after himself. And he had—some of the members of that band was Ruben Howard, Chico Arenas, Nathaniel Tucker, and I can't remember some of the other persons, but he had some extremely good drummers in that band. This was—what was unique about that band was that he had some girls in it in the later years, and Zulema played with that band. She played keyboards with that band, and she also played trumpet, with the band in the later year just before the band—Mr. Simpson stopped working with them.

Now, from the Simptones, we had another group that developed, but they developed themselves at Florida A&M University. They were students under Mr. Simpson and they went to Florida A&M University and they started their own band. Now, they picked up one person that has started out with The Montereys years ago when The Montereys were really known as The Astros; his name was Sylvester Pinkly, all right. Sylvester turned out to be the trombone player in a group called The Devastations.

Howard Carol—the Carol Brothers from West Tampa—they grew up right in the West Tampa area right out there in the projects and they formed a band, Govantes. What does—what was Govantes?

OA: Don't know.

NG: I wanted to find out before—

(noise in background)

OA: Oh, okay. Govantes, Govantes, Govantes. I remember that name.

NG: Escalante Govantes.

OA: That's right, Escalante Govantes.

NG: Okay. Escalante Govantes was a trumpet player. Carnell Carroll was the original drummer. Howard Carroll was the bass player. Sylvester Pinkly was the trombone player—now, he had played with The Montereys for a while, and with The Astros. And the sax player, they picked him up from Florida A&M University, I don't know exactly who he was. So they had—and their guitar player was named Billy McCullough. And Billy McCullough is from Tampa; he lives out on Hannah and Thirty-Second Street now. So all the individuals in the band was from Tampa, with the exception of one; that was the saxophone player. So The Devastations went on to be an extremely powerful group. They did tours with George Simon, they put out several recordings, and they are now still in existence in the same vein and fashion as the other bands around town.

Now there have been several bands that have managed to make themselves pretty dominant in Tampa. One of them, like I say, was Plum Nasty; another one now that is doing very well is Unlimited Power.

Now along the educational aspect of things in the musical development in Hillsborough County, the most dominate individual was Mr. Michael Rodriguez—and Mrs. Ruby Aaronton and Ms. Willie Belle Cook. Those three people were the persons that spurred either vocal or instrumental music on in Hillsborough County from an education point of view.

FB: Is Mr. Simpson in that group?

NG: Oh yeah, I forgot Mr. Simpson. I would have gotten to him, and there's no way I could talk without touching on Mr. Simpson. Okay, now, Mr. Rodriguez was the very first band director in Hillsborough County; he worked at Booker T. Washington Junior High School as a Spanish teacher. In 1944—the school year of 1944 to 1945—they built Middleton, and he was transferred to Middleton as a full-time band director. Now, while he was working at Middleton, he taught music at Carver, Booker Washington, and Middleton High School. He was the band director for the entire county, and those were the only black schools in Hillsborough at that time, you know. And so he taught music there. At the time he was teaching at these schools, he taught Mr. Simpson. He also taught other persons that was kind of dominant, Ollie Hunter. He didn't teach Mrs. Cook, but I do know he taught Simpson and Ollie Hunter. And Ollie Hunter and Simpson played an important part in music in the later years.

Now, Mr. Rodriguez worked at Middleton and developed—that was during the time he started developing The Sharps and Flats. Bobby Felder was a member of the group that Mr. Rodriguez taught during the early years of the forties [1940s]—forty [1940], forty-five [1945]. In turn, Bobby Felder came back from college, he was drafted. And then he got out of the service and came back to Tampa, and took over as band director at Booker T. Washington Junior High School.

At that time they had Don Thompson, which was the vocational school, but they did not have a music department there. Later, Don Thompson was abandoned and they discarded it, and they built Blake High School in 1954 and fifty-five [1955]. Mr. T.J. Simpson took over then, and Mr. Simpson and Mr. Rodriguez were the two band directors for Hillsborough County. Now, at Booker Washington—Bobby Felder left Booker Washington in 1950 and Baby Gray took over. Gray Dickson was his name; they call him Baby Gray. He took over as band director for Booker T. Washington Junior High School, and he played an important part in helping to develop some of the students. But he was only there a year, and in turn he left; he got into some trouble and ended up being convicted and served some time in prison for possession of drugs.

At that time, they hired a young lady by the name of Mrs. Birdie Sullivan—her name was Birdie Jones at that time. She eventually got married; her name was Sullivan then, divorced and married again; now it's Simpson. And she worked as band director from

1954 to 1957. Then Mr. Beard took over at Booker T. Washington from 1957 up until integration.

And at Blake High School now, in 1955, Mr. T.J. Simpson, who was a student of Mr. Michael Rodriguez, came into being, and he took over at Blake High School as the first band director that Blake High School had. At the same time, Mrs. Willie Belle Cook took over the chorus at Blake High School, and she taught some of the singers such that we know now, like Brenda, Cynthia Anthony, Zulema, Jackie, and Albert. All of these individuals have since gone on to do something dominant in music. Now Mrs. Cook was later transferred to Young Junior High School during the—when Blake was closed down as a high school in the late seventies [1970s], she was transferred to Young Junior High School. In the meantime, Mr. Rodriguez was still at Middleton High School, and they closed Middleton and Blake the same year and made both of them junior high schools. He has remained at Middleton as the band director. He's been there from the time the school was built, and he is the only person that was there in music education.

Now, during the time Mr. Rodriguez was at Middleton, we had Mrs. Ruby Aaronton, who was the first female band director in Hillsborough County—but she did it on the elementary level. She taught instrumental music at College Hill Elementary School, which is now Lockhart [Elementary School]. She was the first female to teach instrumental music, and she kind of fed Mr. Rodriguez and fed Booker T. Washington. She was the feeder school for Booker T. Washington, for Blake High School and—so she had a good working relationship. She was really in choral music, but she started an instrumental program based on the recommendation of Mr. Simpson. And she talked it over with Mr. Rodriguez and they felt that it was a good idea. So she started out working with them.

Some of her students—I don't know who they were. I do recall that she started instrumental music, because the years she started instrumental music, I was in sixth grade at College Hill Elementary School. Now, Mrs. Aaronton later left College Hill Elementary School and went to Middleton, and she developed that super aid number one chorus that Middleton had. At the same time Blake—Mrs. Cook was over at Blake developing good chorus.

Now, later, in the late sixties [1960s], they built Young Junior High School and they built Just [Elementary School]. Now at Just—Just did not have a band. Mr. Simpson took the students from Just because Just was a result of having the junior high school over to Blake. Blake was a junior/senior high school, and then it split and it became a high school and Just was built for the junior high school. And in turn, Mr. Simpson did the job of both. He took the junior high school band and the senior high school band and combined them together to make them one good solid band. He was very dominant in the West Tampa and Port Tampa area with the students, and then Mr. Rodriguez and Mrs. Aaronton was dominant on the Belmont Heights side of town.

Now later on, after Young was built and Just was built, Fred Bean took over as band director at Young Junior High School. At the same time Walter Beard now was at Booker

T. Washington Junior High School. He was feeding individuals to—Beard was primarily was feeding Blake, and occasionally some of the students were going to Middleton; and Bean—practically all of his students went to Middleton.

And now the choral directors at these schools—Mrs. Cook had to also take on choral music for Just and Blake, but it wasn't the same on the east side of town. Mr. Rodriguez only had to worry about picking up individuals from feeder schools like Booker T. and Young, but Fred Bean was feeding him, and the choral music kind of took a topsy-turvy situation. Mrs. Cook had to handle all the choral music on the West Tampa side of town, but on the east side of town, the choral music was handled at Young Junior High School by Olivia Carmichael, who turned out to be one of the most prominent soprano singers that have ever come of Tampa. She went to Bethune-Cookman College and she got her degree in choral music and piano at Bethune, and she went on to sing with the—she sang at the New York Opera House; she did a tour there for I think about eight months. And then she came back home and started teaching choral music at Young Junior High School, and she was the first choral director they had there.

And following her was Ollie Hunter. Ms. Hunter—no, following her was Ollie Hunter, and Ollie worked there for a while. Now, Ollie was a student of Mr. Rodriguez, and if I remember correctly she was a student of either Ms. Aaronton or Ms. Cook. I can't remember exactly which one it was.

And then Ollie Hunter left there and Ms. Cook took over at Young Junior High School, and Ms. Cook—Ms. Aaronton and Mr. Rodriguez worked out an extremely strong program for the east side of town, and they worked together up until the point when Ms. Cook died. And Ms. Aaronton retired, but she continued to work with Ms. Cook on a one to one basis whenever she needed her, and when she passed away, Sheryl Pilcher took over the choral music at Young Junior High School. She came from Plant and took over the choral music at Young Junior High School.

Now really what had happened was when Blake and Middleton was turned into junior high schools and Mr. Simpson passed away, the band director that took Mr. Simpson's place was—what's his name? Over at, um—Turner. Turner, who's at Plant Junior High School now. Ms. Cook did not go to Plant to teach choral music; they took Sheryl Pilcher, and Ms. Cook went on to Junior High School to teach. So, Sheryl Pilcher taught music at Plant High School until they dropped the course, and Turner had been working with Simpson at Blake. Now near the end of years at Blake they gave Just a band, a junior high school band; they hired a band teacher for it. And that band director that they hired for Just High School was Turner.

OA: Okay, do you know his first name?

NG: I think it's Walter. Right now he's at Plant High School. Now, they hired him to teach music at Just Junior High School. When they hired him to teach at Just, he taught there I think for a year, and then Mr. Simpson died. Now most people—another unique

thing about Mr. Simpson. He always signed his name as T.J. Simpson, and most people did not know that that name stood for Thomas Jefferson.

OA: To this day I did not know that.

NG: Yeah, it's Thomas Jefferson Simpson, and he never would. He might sign his name as Thomas J. Simpson, but he did not like the name Thomas Jefferson.

OA: (laughs)

NG: He just—he didn't like it; he used to tell us all the time that he didn't. So Turner and Mr. Simpson worked extremely close together, and when Mr. Simpson passed away Turner took over the band there and Sheryl Pilcher took the choral end of the music, and they went to Plant with it and it turned—she ended up at Young Junior High School, he's still over there. Mr. Rodriguez is still at Middleton.

Now, another thing about Mr. Rodriguez, too—you know he had the first band to march in the Gasparilla parade. In 196—weren't you in that band?

FB: Yeah.

NG: What year was that?

FB: That was—

NG: Sixty-seven [1967] or sixty-eight [1968]?

FB: Sixty-eight [1968], I think it was.

NG: Okay and it's 1968. I knew it was of the two. He was in the band, the first band to march in Gasparilla. Well, then, what happened was they had a meeting with the—

FB: This was Middleton High School.

NG: Yeah, this was at Middleton. They had a meeting with the band directors. Proff and Mr. Simpson had pushed it. They was mad because they would not let a black band into the Gasparilla. So they had a meeting with the Gasparilla officials and the Gasparilla officials said "Okay, we'll put a black band in there." And Proff and Mr. Simpson agreed to it. Instead of seeing—in other words, they got trapped into a situation. Where they say, "We will put a black band in," it was going to be either Middleton or Blake. So they—Proff said, "Fine, all right, then we'll go get our bands ready." Uh-uh, a band. They were so glad to get it, instead of pushing for two, they got one. So, they tossed a coin, and Middleton won the toss, so Middleton got it. That year Middleton went in—the next year Mr. Simpson had Blake in—see, they'd let one band in each year. And that's what—

OA: Oh, they never worked together?

NG: They (inaudible)—

FB: First chance we went was sixty-seven [1967]. Cause Blake was the next year, then in my senior year, I think both of them went.

NG: I think there was one time where both bands went. But it was—I mean, it started a hassle like I don't know what. And then you know, they was really smart about that. They put the band—

FB: We wasn't even on T.V.

NG: No, they put the band in—the parade route was all set up and everything—put them in and they went—they started this—they told them they was going to lead the parade. So it was unbelievable for Middleton to lead the parade and put them in thirty-five minutes before the parade actually started. Middleton band had marched all the way through the entire parade route and was out of it.

FB: We was out of it when the parade started.

NG: And then the parade started. So Proff then turns to Mr. Rodriguez.

(all laugh)

FB: (laughs) Cold-blooded.

NG: (laughs) Yeah, it was cold-blooded.

FB: Racism affects every part of our lives.

NG: Mr. Rodriguez in turn went and warned Simpson. Well, Simpson already had fined—word had been gotten to him. I mean it was buzzing all over Tampa. So he told Simp what was going on; so Simpson, when they got ready to make the parade line up, surely enough, they had them out front. He said, “I been at the tail end. They put me right in front of the pirates. So, I'll be at the tail end so you'll see me.” So, they jacked it around a little bit, so they put him between the Boy Scouts and the Marines, and they didn't put him all the way back by the pirates, cause they knew the little children was going to want to watch and stay to see what it was. So they put the pirates; band in front of the pirates. And so, I think the year that both of them went in—both bands had pretty good positions.

FB: That was in seventy [1970].

NG: Yeah, so really that's—

HJ: (inaudible) that one time the bands were back behind the horses.

OA: The horses driving—

FB: That was in seventy [1970].

NG: Yeah, you know it's been (inaudible)—

FB: That was in seventy [1970] we was behind the float, pulled by horses.

NG: Yeah, so, they did a few things. So you can see that—now another thing, too. During music education, they had a band called—during the time of the Depression, they had several bands called the WPA [Workers Progress Administration] Band and there was a man named Ralph Duty. He was an older gentleman; he was the director of the WPA band. Now, the WPA bands were formed to give musicians work. And every Sunday, every Saturday and every Sunday they would get together—they were street bands, marching bands, and Mr. Duty would get them together and teach them some marches and stuff like that, and they are marching through the communities playing their horns and stuff like this and they paid them. It was something for them—you know how the WPA situation was, and they paid them. They also had another director by the name of Mr. Spencer. I wasn't able to determine what Mr. Spencer's first name is. A unique thing about the WPA band is that Robbie Gardner, who is now one of the assistant superintendents of public schools of Hillsborough County—little short Robbie Gardner—played in those bands, he played trumpet.

OA: Wow, that's heavy.

NG: Robbie Gardner played trumpet in those bands. Now, he can probably tell you who—what's Mr. Spencer's first name. I wasn't able to find that out. Now, that's as much as I have been able to come up with right now. I hope this will be of some help to y'all. If you got any questions you'd like to ask me in relationship to some of the things that I have talked about, I'd be glad to elaborate on it.

OA: (inaudible)

NG: If you can read this.

OA: Is it possible for her to hold on to those papers?

NG: Yeah, she can hang on to them.

OA: When we get the transcripts together, we'll give you a copy of it.

NG: Okay.

OA: Personally I want to thank you, cause that's a gold mine right there. That's a hell of a lot of research there. We wouldn't have done anything better than that. This—

NG: Well, then, you'll find that when you talk with these people, like Manzy Harris and Red Clinton's wife and Charlie Brantley's wife and all of those, they will—

OA: Wait a minute—I want to excuse me, I want to say who you were interviewed by—interview by Fred Beaton, Herbert Jones, Shirley Smith, and Otis Anthony, interviewing Nelson Griffith.

NG: I also would like to add to this that the information that I picked up in my research was obtained from Frank Sherman, Dirt Gibbons, Mr. Michael Rodriguez, Mrs. Gladys Clinton, who is the wife of Red Clinton, Bob Jackson, and some of the knowledge—some of the things that I put in there was I knew myself and there was one other person. Did I mention Manzy Harris? Manzy Harris, and yeah, those are the persons that I talked to.

end of interview