

Interview Log

Interviewee: Deloris Blakey **Tape #:** MAAF/KF/DE/FT8.21.108

Interviewer: Kelly Feltault **# of Tapes:** I of 1

Date: 8/21/98 **# of Sides:** 2

Location: Dover DE, in Debris' home

Topic: African American Dance; swing, jive, Af/Arn dance show in Wilmington DE

Corresponding Photography Log #: MAAF/KF/DE/PS8.21.175

Comments: File name: deft108.doc. *Italics* indicate song title or emphasis; "quotations" indicate direct transcription; [brackets indicate additional information not on tape or commentary by fieldworker].

I met Debris at the De State Fair when she performed a song and dance number called GI Jane-Andrew Sisters with traditional hand dancing. When she won the contest this 60 year old did a back flip.

BEGIN SIDE A

[we had a few tape problems before the recording started, this is Debris' second bio inot the mic]

BIO: born in Wilmington DE; prefers living in "slower DE" left Wilmington at 17 to go to college, married moved to D.C.; worked at Pentagon while husband getting MA; then back to DE teaching;

DANCE: club every Sat at St. Mathews comm. Ctr dance club; danced with her brother every sat. night, around house etc; Club 13 at high school, would get all dressed up; brother was partner, loved dancing; 1951 about;

SEGREGATION: everything segregated at time; lived on east side; all teenagers danced; black comm. Ctrs would have dances; had show called Mitch Thomas on Sat. like Dick Clark; go there, had contests; one night she entered and won, prize was a 6 pack of Pepsi; never forget that; that was once a month; only for blacks;

USO CLUB: went in Dover; USO club would come to Wilmington and get a bus of girls and go to Dover and dance with soldiers that segregated too;

No exchanges between wh. & black comm. In dance; how she never interacted with white comm. Until she was grown; Supreme Ct. decision in 1954 she was a Jr. in H. S.

and Wilmington integrated immediately; so had opportunity in 1955 to go to integrated school but decided to finish sr. year at her school and graduate;

Teaching in 1962 in lower DE at Del State; still segregated down here

[how does this mark a place as northern or southern, urban or rural?]

Dr. Poston asked her to be the first to integrate schools; then decided to de-segregate; 3 of them at Star Hill and they were all split up; she went to W. B. Simpson; that was her first time in contact with white people;

Takes it back; first time was at Pentagon when working or around white people; white and black employees working together; befriended by Laura from Mississippi; Deloris was 22; everyone got along very well; there a year and half,

Melinda Marsh, now director of Caesar Rodney music, but did the Kent General Follies, asked Deloris and her husband to Follies; how Deloris did theatre and singing in high school; worked with Comm. Singers and got involved in all theatre guilds; then husband decided to open children's theatre

[shows me the photos on the wall of the living room]

still doing it but ready to pass it on to another adult; how her kids did it when they were little; 150-200 kids in a summer show;

back to segregation of USO clubs; and Pentagon; husband from D.C.;

DANCES IN WILMINGTON: jitterbug; everyone did it; did "lindy" hop [Lindy Hop]; Watussi; swim; twist; mashed potatoes; Madison and Birdland came over from Philly; doesn't remember the Philly Bop;

GENDER IN DANCING: [today, men are to show off the lady] back then evenly distributed girls did twirls and jumps, men do their own thing; shows photos of them doing jitterbug; still doing shows of this for air base etc; daughter is a professional dancer;

Stories of working in the theatre and dance community in DE; performing on the air base as GI Jane;

No difference in dance steps from Wilmington to D.C.

[I am asking these questions because D.C. and Philly were known for their very unique indigenous forms of the jitterbug and hand dance-D.C. Hop and Philly bop.]

the Canteen at Del State; a dance club there; that's where she met her husband; they all did the same dances; easy to follow; was a difference between the way blacks and whites danced; they thought the white's couldn't keep the beat back then;

how dances making come back now; presentation at Jr. high schools now;

LATIN DANCES: when she was 13 mother let her go to NY and stay with Uncle for summer; Puerto Ricans in black comm. Then and she learned how to do Latin dances; rumba, samba, merengue; how they haven't changed either; teaching a men's youth group; in-laws are Latin and talking about how dances haven't changed

Most people don't learn partner dances today; dancing as partners you can still do own creative moves; sometimes there's a competition going on while dancing; work hard to make own stylizations; also competition between couples

Walks through one of the dances; cha cha; step forward on right, back rock; then 1-2-3 to the side or back alternating feet, then step back on right; does some cross steps or side breaks; then does jitterbug; explaining jumps and lifts;

[trying to get physical memory to start here]

decides to do the Pony; could be done alone or with a partner but no touching; hands up in front like holding reins and gallop dance

making up own steps; keeping the basic but working in splits etc;

MUSIC: loved the music; good beat; not monotonous; today's is too hard to dance to; today's slow music doesn't have that "sweet tone" to it like Nat King Cole or Temptations

[sweet tones are a big part of Af/Am aesthetics in music, like a balast to the faster songs]

remaking the older music; changing;

dancing to live music; place in Wilmington that big names came to like Jackie Wilson would come; her mother very strict; only could go at certain times; that's why her brother was her partner; Aretha Franklin, Temptations etc; danced live to the music "it wasn't sitting like today where you sit and listen but you were out there on the floor with the entertainers"

prefers to dance to live; not a sitter; can sit at a jazz concert but when it's dance music need space to dance not sit;

social aspects of dancing; if girl had to go with other couples; how her brother would take her and leave her at the dance, mom didn't know; clean fun; not afraid, could really just have fun; dancing with white people; surprised to see white people dancing same dances; "didn't really know because you weren't at their dances. But they did the same. Some of them were off beat but they did the same."

EFFECT OF DE-SEGREGATION ON AF/AM CTRS OF CULT: good and bad; school systems moved into white schools; if you didn't get involved in something you were left out; extra curricular activities, had to be involved; not done on purpose

"but where ever you are you do things that are familiar. So whites were not familiar with say what blacks were doing so the blacks had to re-establish or rethink and I think it was up to the parents to let the kids get involved with everything so that the white culture could learn from the blacks and the blacks could learn from the whites."

Found when she taught school that black kids would just lay back and not get involved; but this is the time to get involved; her kids got involved; friends were a big mixture;

[how does economics play into ability to participate?]

in black schools, black people are really into church so had things like gospel choirs, concert choir, own band music and when integrated you learned a new culture, had to learn a new culture; doesn't see anything wrong with that; when *first* started kids were leary and that left them out;

[how was this situation a political one; de-segregate and become part of large, white culture and schools; no more black centered activities]

when came home were in own atmosphere and neighborhood so did own thing; at school it was another culture; just learn from one another;

story of line dance class going on a trip and Deloris' first time being without her husband after 40 yrs of marriage; just let some of the hatred go, let it go; mix of races in her family;

as a kid it never dawned on her to go where she was not supposed to go; back of the bus or upstairs in theater; never occurred to her that people were not mixing; story of camping trip to the west during the Detroit riots; how she felt;

exchanges between dancers; sharing steps etc.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

Learned dances in P.E. in school; waltz foxtrot etc;

Dancing as part of social education then; if didn't dance didn't have anything to do; loved to square dance; did it for a while in DE; did some in Dover; being the only minority in the country western dances; only come around in life once;

Senior activities: participating in sr. Olympics, sr. classic beauty competition; how she prefers performing; loves the sr. Olympics; does several events; went to national sr.

Olympics; never seen such physically fit people in her life, running jr. high school kid times; have to be at least 50 years old and divide into age groups; made the finals in her age group; 49 in age group; finals ran against all ages; story of running in finals; seeing 85 and 89 year olds running so fast was amazing; should be televised because it is the opposite image of what most people have of senior citizens

She will participate again playing basketball, volleyball, softball, doing the long jump, 100, 200 and line dancing; other people from DE playing with her; how the women are just really good athletes and doing even more events than Deloris

[should note that women of this age did not have the benefit of the 1970s regulation declaring that girls must have equal sports teams and opportunities]

how dancing has helped her stay in shape

Line dancing at sr. center for exercise; moved into performing; also taking Ki Swahili language at that time; [found other seniors doing line dancing for exercise too] how she loves physical activity; [shows me her medals]

Body memory and learning other dances

Jazz and theatre dancing; doesn't distinguish just wants to keep dancing all styles; how her daughter went into dancing

African dancing; teaching kids in church;

How when they were in Africa saw everyone dancing American popular dances never saw a traditional dance; not in the cities; stories of friends there; talk of the recent bombings in Darsalam; access to American embassy; visiting other places in Africa, Senegal etc; seeing traditional dances in West Africa; how cultures have Americanized and blended with African American musical cult.;

American and African cultural differences; greetings based on age in other cultures but not in America;

END SIDE B

END TAPE