



Interview No. SAS4.10.02  
Shirley Carter

Interviewer: Jessie McGee  
Location: Baltimore, Maryland  
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Q: We are here today on April 10, 2002. This is Jessie McGee. Please state your full name.

Carter: My name is Shirley Hennigan Carter. I prefer to use Hennigan because it's the name I used when I was a student at Peabody.

Q: And your date of birth?

Carter: My date of birth is New Year's Day, January the 1st, 1942.

Q: And your current residence?

Carter: My current residence is in west Baltimore.

Q: I would like you to talk about your musical experiences as a young child, your instruction, where you went, who you studied with, the good stuff.

Carter: Well, being aware of my own singing, I guess I was about eight years old. I was in grade school over on Howard Street. School No. 136. My first grade teacher was Alice Hershaw. I believe she was the one who mentioned to my mom and dad, Shirley has a very lovely singing voice and why not give her instruction? I used to participate in the Thanksgiving, Christmas type programs at the school, so I guess she heard something worth pursuing.

Q: Yeah.

Carter: I also sang in the choir at my aunt's church. Her name was Marie Taylor and her husband, Reverend John S. Taylor was the founder and first minister.

Q: What church was this?

Carter: Unity Baptist Church in the twenty-two hundred block of Howard Street. If you go through there now, it's become a Firestone building. All those homes have been torn down because we're speaking about the late '40s, early '50s. But anyway, I guess that experience, coming up in Sunday School led to singing before an audience.

Once I started "formal training", my aunt would have me presented in recitals at her church, as well as other churches around town. My first teacher was Mrs. Goldie Green. She also had a daughter who sang on stage, Goldie Theresa Green, and a granddaughter named Veronica Tyler who also were up and coming performers back then. In fact, Veronica is featured in *The Storm is Passing Over* publication.

Q: So you went to her house for lessons?

Carter: Yes. Back then, a dollar was all it cost to study privately. My sister Marjorie and I used to walk to Mrs. Green's house, which was quite a ways. I couldn't tell you in terms of a mile or half mile, but she lived over on Appleton Street near Monroe Street in west Baltimore. We went there every Saturday. My sister and I both studied piano, but my main training was voice. I had to learn to play the piano in order to sing well. We were ever so busy. We sang in churches all up and down the Baltimore region, Virginia, and Washington D.C. I'm a member now of Wayland Baptist Church. Back then, it was located on Franklin and Monroe Streets, under the late Reverend W. Payne. He passed away this year.

One thing I liked about our minister, he always took young people under his wing. He used to have me travel with him, and my Sunday School teacher, Florence Copeland, to Baptist conventions in Virginia. I always sang a solo or two. "It is no secret what God can do" was one of his favorites.

But if truth be told, I cannot really say that singing was my love. I was doing what others felt I should be doing. Of course, as a little child, you are not really aware of what you want to be. But I do know I had the desire to be a ballet dancer. Where that came from I have no idea. I know being born on New Year's Day people think, oh yeah, that's a celebration, partying. So maybe it's that. But to be a ballet dancer? There were no black ballet dancers that I knew of back then.

We had modern dance and what not. But anyway, my mom and dad said, no, you can't dance because if you cannot do it in church, then you're not gonna do it. When I had parties, sometimes my dad would come downstairs to chaperone or whatever. I'd be dancing up a storm. It wasn't ballet, but I was dancing and enjoying it. He would tell me that dancing was the work of the devil, or I was wearing out my shoes!

Q: How old were you?

Carter: I was eight, nine. They let me start celebrating, and actually having peers come over for the New Year, at the age of thirteen. I remember that was my first birthday party. And I've been celebrating ever since. [Laughter] Now I celebrate with my grandchildren!

Q: That's a great day to have a celebration.

Carter: Yes. It is. New Year's Eve at Shirley's house was the place to be. Even now, people still come to my home for food, good company, and do not need an invitation. Some things remain the same.

Q: Right. When you were, eight, nine, what did you sing in church, what did you sing outside of church?

Carter: Oh, the spirituals, hymns, etc. I remember hearing about Marian Anderson back then. I had no idea who she was, and I can't really say I even heard a recording of her voice, but I remember when I would be on programs, people would refer to me as "little Miss Marian Anderson." I know they say she had a contralto voice, and I was told contralto is sort of lower range. However, my voice wasn't. All my life I've studied or was trained as a soprano. But now, in my senior years, I'm in the alto section of my choir, and I'm loving it. Even when I sang soprano, I always sort of had a yearning to sing the alto because it seemed that part of the music was pretty. That's where the harmony is, you know. The soprano carries more of the melody.

Q: Right.

Carter: But I'm satisfied with what I'm singing. Over the years, we moved away from Howard Street onto Fayette Street. I'm still studying, and I guess I'm about thirteen now. I don't know who got the idea, well, let's send her to Peabody for more formal training. But I do know the employer my mom and dad worked for. Her name was Roger B. Williams, and to us she was that rich lady that lived up on Charles Street

She thought the world of my dad. My dad is that type of person. She liked my mom too. But my dad was her chauffeur, all-around handy man. My mom and my aunts were her maids. We looked forward to when they had those theater parties, because we got all kinds of food. I was introduced to caviar, and it was the nastiest thing. [Laughter]

My dad would bring the leftovers home, caviar on crackers or squares of bread. That experience was good for us because we were learning how other people lived.

Anyway, Roger B. found out they had a daughter who was taking private lessons, and I guess she suggested to mom and dad, well, why not let me enroll her in Peabody. Of course, my mom and dad could not afford the tuition. To this day I have no idea what the tuition was, but she paid for it.

Q: Did she have children of her own?

Carter: She didn't have any kids. It was just she and her husband. I believe her husband was a lawyer.

She set up the appointment, and my dad drove us there to Peabody since he was her chauffeur.

Q: Now, I'm curious. You were one of the first black students to attend Peabody.

Carter: You know, I did not know that fact at the time. When I read an article a couple of years ago, I happened to call down to Peabody trying to find out if they had a copy of my graduate certificate. After all these years, I graduated in 1962, I still don't have my diploma. But Miss

Elizabeth Schaaf was kind enough to go into her archives and send me a copy of my record. My school record.

She sent me the copy of the graduation program with the list of the graduates. Just to see my name there meant so much.

Q: I'll bet.

Carter: After forty some years I find I was one of the first at Peabody!

Q: Do you think she [Mrs. Roger B. Williams] had some sort of influence with Peabody?

Carter: Yes. She certainly did. I just felt so special. When we came in, we were, well, more or less interviewed by the lady who was in charge of the enrollment. Her name was Leah Thorpe.

Carter: She was so glad to see Mrs. Williams, and knew Mrs. Williams was bringing me. I started in October of 1955. So I was thirteen.

My benefactress sat me on her lap, so proud of me. I mean, just to see this white woman with this little black kid on her lap. That was a big thing, you know. But evidently her prestige and all made quite a difference.

I was thinking about this the other day. If she had not enrolled me, would I have gotten such excellent grades? Sometimes prestige, knowing someone can kind of boost you here or there. For the first couple of years, she did pay my tuition, but then there came a point when she and my mother had a little disagreement because my mother at the time was studying to become a schoolteacher. I guess Mrs. Williams felt like we were already struggling anyway, so why shouldn't my mother just stay home and raise her children rather than going out in the work force.

Q: So was this an argument from an employer to an employee or friend to friend you think?

Carter: I'll say an employer to employee because by this time my mother was only working for Mrs. Williams here and there. My dad was a steady employee of hers. But my mother was already going to Coppin State College and still trying to work. I can remember, coming up as a child, my mother taking in laundry and doing Mrs. Williams' housework. My mother has nine kids, and I remember her being pregnant all the time.

So the other employees would bring laundry to our house, sheets and linens and undergarments for my mom to do. And here we are under the ironing board with the sheets hanging down, making pretend we're in our own little house. I can remember my mother struggling to earn money, still taking care of her home and her children, but yet she had a goal. She was determined to become a teacher. And did!

I guess Mrs. Williams felt that money could have stayed in the home. Anyway, that was the disagreement between them. So it came to a point where Mrs. Williams more or less told my

mother that if she continued to pursue her goal of going to college, becoming a teacher, then she would no longer pay for me to go to Peabody.

Q: Okay. So what happened?

Carter: My mother sort of challenged her, and told her, well that's okay, Shirley will still go. And I did.

Q: And they paid for it?

Carter: The tuition was paid. So I don't know if my mother paid it or Mrs. Williams had a change of heart and continued to pay. That I don't know, but I know I graduated eventually.

I had a lull in my training in 1958 because I became sick with TB, Tuberculosis of the lower Spine.

Q: Okay.

Carter: I was about fifteen. I missed a good two years out of my life between fifteen and seventeen. I stayed at Kernan Hospital for a good year and a half, recuperating from surgery and in a body cast from my chest down to my knees. I believe it was during this period of illness and rehabilitation that I lost my interest in singing. I had trouble sustaining my breath control. My mother also noticed the difference in my voice. I was becoming a "has been" at the age of 16!

Q: Okay. And you had a tutor come to you while you were in the hospital.

Carter: Right. My education still continued. Just like today. I don't care how sick you are, you still have to get your education. But to tell you the truth, when I got sick and had to be in the hospital for a while, I was homesick at first. I was almost relieved. I was just about to enter the eleventh grade. In order to graduate, we had to take swimming and dive into twelve feet of water, off the diving board. I still have a fear of water to this day!

So when I became ill, it was like a relief, because I didn't have to do that in order to graduate. Even so, they sent a teacher from the Home School No. 510. I don't remember her last name, but I believe her first name was Florence. A little short teacher, used to come to the wards back then in Kernan. All the children had to have tutoring. Some had Polio, Scoliosis. I had Tuberculosis.

Some of them went to the auditorium. But she had to come to my bed and give me homework. I can remember my mother bringing music to the hospital for me to still practice.

Q: Did you?

Carter: No. [Laughter] Nurses were getting wind that I had been a student at Peabody and wanting me to sing. But one thing I discovered about me. I was never really comfortable with singing because coming up as a child, I always had an ugly duckling syndrome.

I had plenty of siblings, but my oldest sister was the one who had the long hair, and strikingly pretty. When people used to come to our house, they'd say oh Rosalie, you have such lovely children. They always talked about Marge. That's the one in this picture. Marjorie. I felt I was in her shadow.

Q: She's older than you?

Carter: Yes. She's just about a year or so. My hair was short, and people used to call me frog eyes. I had kind of poppy eyes. One of my mother's friends would always refer to me that way. So I always felt sort of ugly, and I do believe that was one of the reasons why I did not want to be out in front singing 'cause it was like all the focus was on me.

Q: Right.

Carter: Of course, I've long gotten rid of that feeling. But that's how I felt then, why I was resisting being what my mother wanted me to be.

Q: Do you have any idea why she wanted you to be a singer?

Carter: Yes. Well, back then, we had Marian Anderson, and I think there weren't too many black singers on the horizon. My mother always envisioned me as becoming a world famous opera singer. That was her dream. She'd say, yes, when Shirley gets famous and travels overseas, she'll be rich and taking care of us. That's what I heard as I was coming up as a child and a teenager. And why not? I had the talent, was receiving the training, and even bought into her dream. But did not have her passion.

When I left home to get married, I think I was rebelling against what my parents wanted for me. I entered into a relationship with the first gentleman that came my way. It was like a way for me to get out from under my parent's rules.

Q: And all your siblings.

Carter: Yeah. That marriage was sort of troublesome. We had some storms. The good thing from that relationship, I now have four wonderful children. I have no regrets. And life goes on. During that time, I made use of my musical training by playing for Mount Winans First Baptist Church from 1964 to 1967. My first job!

Once I got married, I just left my whole singing career behind. Now I'm starting to get back into music, and I love it. Yes! I'm with the Heritage Signature Chorale, and they sing the type of music I like. Spirituals, music by black composers, anthems, etc. We're doing an opera this Sunday coming. There are a lot of young black opera singers involved. It just takes me back to where I left off, over forty years ago!

Q: So I want to go back to when you first came to the Peabody Preparatory, and I want to know the environment. Because you said you didn't know that you were one of the first black students.

Carter: Yeah, well I was a very shy person back then, and I think I had class maybe once or twice a week, after schools on Thursdays, sometimes on Saturdays.

Q: Okay.

Carter: You studied your major, voice, piano, ballet, etc. and had a class called ear training. I think they call it theory now.

Q: Did you have music history?

Carter: No. I had those two particular courses to focus on. My teacher in ear training class was George Bellows. He sat at the piano, he'd play, and then you had to write what you heard, identifying major and minor chords, harmonic and melodic sounds, etc.

Q: And was this a class with other students?

Carter: Yes. It was a class with other students, but you know I can't remember having any peers that I felt close to that were friends. It's like I came, practiced, had my half hour session in voice and then my other half hour in ear training. Sometimes on Saturdays, we would have- in order to get our grade- an instructor, Madame Dushak. She was a foreigner with a very heavy accent. She would sit in the audience over in the Preparatory, that's the building there at the far corner of the block, and she would grade us.

She was a hard taskmaster. We had respect and a certain fear of her. We were presented in student recitals for our grade throughout the year.

Q: What kind of other students were here at the time?

Carter: When I looked at this picture of our senior class, I was really surprised at the number of African-Americans in this portrait. In 1955, I never saw me through the halls of Peabody. I never saw Audrey Cyrus, who was the first of us to graduate in 1956. My sister Marge started that year also, taking piano lessons, but did not graduate.

Q: Right. Now is this picture from just one year or is a combination of years?

Carter: It's probably in 1960, when we were featured on TV for a Christmas program.

Q: Right.

Carter: This is me up here. And this was a classmate, Loretta Dorsey. Her father was our gym teacher over at Booker T. Washington. I also remember Renaldo Reyes. I think he's an Oriental, and a fabulous pianist.

I often wonder whatever happened to these people. But as far as the climate or environment back then, I do know that I got a lot of attention. I used to feel uncomfortable, because it was like I was in an environment where sometimes I felt like I shouldn't have been here or whatever. That

was the feeling in the '50s. Because you have to remember that we were still going through the civil rights struggle and getting equal rights for Blacks. So to my community of African-Americans that was a wonderful thing, you know. You're going to Peabody? People looked at you in a different light. Those who understood, you know.

Q: Did you feel resentment from other people?

Carter: Not necessarily. I think as far as my peers around me, my European peers or African-American peers, I was just sort of looked over or through. Nobody got a chance to really talk and know you. Sometimes I would be envious of one young lady here. Her name was Geraldine Martin. She had such a melodic, clear sounding voice.

I used to want to get to know her, but like I said, we came, we did our thing, left and there was no socializing. I'll put it that way. I used to admire her because she had such clear tones, her pitch was right on. We used to sit in the audience and listen to each other as we got critiqued. She seemed to be a very special person. I'm curious as to whatever happened to her over the years. Is she on the stage? Is she teaching? I liked her singing of "The Cuckoo." She liked my "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."

Q: What was the music scene outside of Peabody? Not when you were just a teenager, but in your twenties and thirties. Do you remember what was going on?

Carter: Well, outside of Peabody. I was in my own world. My mother was a person who felt that just because we were poor, we still should have culture. In other words, we could get educated through music, reading, traveling.

Q: Right.

Carter: And that's one thing I liked about Mrs. Roger B. Williams. She would give my mother tickets for Marge, my sister, and me, take us to some of the theaters. I think the first musical we ever saw was Oklahoma. Later, West Side Story.

Q: Okay.

Carter: We did things that were involved in our church, attending Sunday school picnics, went to the beach, parks, museums. At fifteen my life was interrupted with being ill. Once I came out of the hospital, I was still expected to come back to Peabody, which I did. I can't say my heart was really in it, but I did it. It was required of me.

And Mrs. Roger B. was all prepared to send me on to the Conservatory.

Q: Yeah. I'm really interested to hear about that.

Carter: That would have been like college level.

Q: How did you feel about that?



Carter: I can't say I really wanted to go on to the Conservatory. It's like I was still in that period of rebelling. And then I had another bout of what they thought was a recurrence of the TB. They put me back in the hospital for more blood tests, but they found out it wasn't. Thank God. I still had to stay on medication, and nurses had to test my whole family before I came home.

So I really wasn't too excited about going into the Conservatory that September. The day I graduated from Peabody Prep would have been the early part of June in 1962. On June 22nd, I was married, never looked back. I could say maybe there are some regrets, but in a way, not really.

Even though my singing was put on hold, I started centering all my attention to my family.

I remember, over the years, hearing about Leontyne Price in a concert series in Baltimore. I never got to see her, and by the time I was becoming interested in the musical scene again, she was retiring.

Q: What did she do?

Carter: She was a black opera singer who played Leonora in Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* at the Met in 1984. I have a son who is and Off-Broadway actor who met her a few years ago. She actually sent me a lovely note complimenting me on having a handsome, intelligent son!

Well, she preceded Jessye Norman. I discovered there was another black operatic singer back then named Shirley Verrett. This is in the '50s, '60s. I'm just discovering these people through videos. I never got to see them perform on stage, live.

I also saw a video on Marian Anderson. I was so enthralled with her singing. When audiences use to call me little Miss Marian Anderson, it had no real significance to me.

Q: Did you go out to any jazz clubs or other sorts of concerts, you know, later on?

Carter: Sometimes when I was married, my sisters used to invite me out. I was sheltered as a teenager. When I was married, there were only certain things that I could do because none of my sisters were married. I had no married friends. My life was wrapped up in my home and my husband. We went out to clubs to dance occasionally.

In the late 70's, I was hearing about the Left Bank Jazz Society of Baltimore, an organization that has been around for years.

Q: Left Bank?

Carter: Yes. The Left Bank Jazz Society. But I had no love of jazz, other than seeing black and white flicks of Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, etc. on T.V.

Q: You hadn't studied jazz at all.

Carter: Not at Peabody. In the '80s, I took a course on jazz appreciation, and now I'm hearing about Miles Davis, Wynton Marsalis and others. I can't really say that I had a great love of jazz, except through the movies, seeing the dancers and feeling the rhythms.

Q: So it was more tied up in your original love of dance?

Carter: Yes. But when I read *The Storm is Passing Over*, and saw this piece about Audrey Cyrus McCallum being the first African-American student to enter the Peabody Preparatory, I was really amazed. I say, well, wait a minute, and I looked on my report cards Miss Schaaf had sent me. 1955, that's when I was enrolled in Peabody.

So history was happening then, but I was not aware of it. Isn't that something? I'm really pleased about this. I know Audrey was the first African-American to enter, but I couldn't have been too far behind!

Q: But you didn't have any sense that was historical.

Carter: No. No way. Not at thirteen. I knew something was different and special because my benefactress took me there, and I'm sitting on her lap and they're making over me. But other than that-

Q: Were you at thirteen aware of what was going on in the world?

Carter: I can remember hearing about this person named Martin Luther King, and the things that were going on down south, lynchings, etc. I was aware that there were places we could not go even in Baltimore.

To tell you the honest truth, I was not aware that there was a difference between blacks and whites when I was eight, nine, and ten years old. I never had a white friend, you know, but I was not really aware of it. As a child, you're sort of in your own world of play. You see images on TV, you hear your parents speaking about things.

I knew we couldn't go downtown to shop at certain stores, like Hecht and Herschels. I'm hearing people on TV refer to him as an upstart, Martin Luther King, saying why doesn't he just leave things alone as they are? I was hearing about the lady who refused to give up her seat on the bus- Rosa Parks. The assassination of a black man in his front yard- Emmet Till. The opening of Disneyland. Albert Einstein passed away. Eisenhower and Nixon in office. Postage Stamps 3 cents. Milk 23 cents. Bread 18 cents. "Yellow Rose of Texas" and "Tutti Frutti" by Little Richard were the new songs. And Shirley Hennigan enters Peabody!

Q: Do you think parents had an effect on how you perceived yourself?

Carter: Oh yes. Parents really do. As I've gotten older and become a woman myself, I'm seeing my mother in a new light.

When we were coming up, my mother was the disciplinarian in the home because my dad worked all the time. He used to work down Sparrows Point and different places. She was the disciplinarian, and I could remember thinking that I didn't like her because of that. We knew she loved us. My mother would cut an apple in several pieces and give us each a slice before she ate herself.

I can remember running home at recess time from school because I knew she was there, and she'd have sandwiches and cocoa for us for lunch before we went back. I remember her being at home, but not verbalizing expressions of love. You know, like I love you or a hug. I didn't realize until I was older, that she did.

We looked forward to my dad coming home because he used to throw us up in the air, and sit us on top of the upright piano. We always had a piano in the home.

Q: Was that pretty common?

Carter: The piano, yeah. My dad always had a car, and we were the only family that had a TV back then in the early '50s, '48, '49. We used to gather around and watch Milton Berle. Neighborhoods got their chores done early on Saturdays to gather at our house to watch "Hop Along Cassidy," "Roy Rogers," "The Lone Ranger," and Walt Disney cartoons. The radio was also the source of entertainment then.

Q: What radio shows did you listen to?

Carter: "The Shadow," "Helen Trent," "As the World Turns," "Dick Tracy," "Firestone Theatre."

But as far as where music came from in our lives, well, when you're a black kid, you're exposed to music some kind of way just through your church. I had an aunt who sang with the Vashti Gospel Singers, a cousin who studied voice at Howard University, and another cousin who studied voice at Wilberforce College in Ohio.

Q: Okay.

Carter: If my mom didn't go to church, she sure made us go. We only lived two doors from my aunt and uncle. So we were always in church, which was a good experience for me because that's where I was getting my familiarity of music. A lot of Black churches started out in one room, which was the case of Unity Baptist as well as Wayland Baptist, maybe only having a handful of members. The former is now a congregation of hundreds, and the latter, several thousands!

"What a Friend We Have in Jesus", "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms", all those types of songs was beginning my musical experience.

Of course, I wasn't aware of it. I was in church and sang on the choir. Then others started presenting me on programs, and I became the featured singer, oh boy. [Laughter]

I'm loving it now. I really do. I can't say I appreciated it as a child, taking voice lessons feeling like this is what my parents want me to do. I was determined that when I had my children, I wasn't going to push them. My kids had no idea that their mom could sing or play the piano because I didn't expose them to it. What a mistake!

I know now my parents did the right thing when they had all of us nine children study some instrument. It's so lacking in the public schools of today.

Q: Yeah. I know.

Carter: I'm so glad when I sing on the choir that I know how to read music. I travel to D.C. regularly, and some members get so uptight because they can't read music. Their tape recorder becomes a useful tool in studying. I feel privileged and really thank my parents for instilling music in me, having exposed me to formal training. It's paying off now.

Q: And were you unique in that way in reference to your peers?

Carter: Yes. With the people who were around me when I worked at Social Security in 1967, coworkers asked, why are you working here for the government when you are a Peabody graduate? With people of a certain age, Peabody has this prestige about it. I was at SSA because I had to earn a living.

It still makes me feel good when I'm talking or whatever, and the name comes up, Peabody. Oh you went to Peabody? I'm sorry I didn't go further than I did because I was only at the preparatory level which is like junior high school.

Had I been a senior at the college level or conservatory, my training would consist of operas, the history of music. All of that I have not had.

Q: Right. So what did you sing when you were here?

Carter: Spirituals, Folk songs, Old English songs, Italian songs. More specifically, the spirituals were my favorite. "Honor, Honor," by Gaul. "Go Down Moses," and "It's Me O Lord," by Johnson. "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," by Forrest. At 14, in my second year at Peabody, Italian songs were introduced in my repertoire. "Voi chi sapete," by Mozart. "Pur dicesti," by Lotti. "Nel cor non piu mi sento," by Paisiello. "O caro, mio ben," etc. I loved that language.

Q: So you sang in foreign language?

Carter: I learned, but I didn't understand what I was singing about.

Q: Okay. So you studied Italian and German?

Carter: No German at that point, but had I continued.

This opera I'm doing Sunday with the Heritage Signature Chorale is in French, called the Black Code, Le Code Noir. It's a challenge, but I'm liking it.

Q: And learning what it means. Did you study scales?

Carter: Yes, I had to. Even to this day, as much as I love to sing now, I am not very disciplined. I think that goes back to my upbringing at home. There were times when I had to stay in the house and study while everybody else was outside playing in the summertime. I wanted to be out there too. Also, my sister Barbara often told me to shut up, so I hated practicing! Even so, she accompanied me to Peabody quite regularly.

To this day, I'm what you call a procrastinator. I'll wait until the particular day when I have to do something, then study it or whatever. My mom used to always say, practice makes perfect.

My teacher, Mrs. Green, also disciplined. If we hit wrong notes on the piano, we'd get those knuckles cracked or she'd just press down on that hand saying, you have to hold your fingers up!

I was not as disciplined as I could have been. I studied because I was in a program or a concert was coming up and I had to do it. But just to take an hour at least every day to study, even now I don't do it.

I'll set a goal for myself, vocalizing. Then I do it on a whim or when I feel like it, telling myself, I'm in charge. I don't have to do this. Actually I really should because that old idiom, practice makes perfect, is still true.

Q: Yeah. Yeah. Who was your teacher then?

Carter: Miss Josephine McLaughlin.

Q: Did you like her?

Carter: Yes. She was a good teacher. We grew on each other. I had no other teacher to compare. I felt she was in my corner, giving me the grades I earned, in spite of my low self-esteem.

I have a best friend, she's Italian. I showed her my report card a few years ago. She's the one who encouraged me to get back into the music field again. Her name is Paula Villa. She said, Shirley, why don't you start studying again. All these years I've been knowing you, I never knew you could sing. So I have to thank her. We agreed to pursue our chosen talents- acting for her and singing for me, and continue to support one another.

Q: So tell me about what you're doing now?

Carter: What I'm doing now is being the grandmother to eight grandkids, involved in the lives of my four children. I retired in 1997, and was determined to start doing some of the things I like, and lo and behold, I'm singing.

Q: And you like it?

Carter: I love it. Anytime I can go over to D.C. in a storm, sit there an hour and a half because of a flat tire, then go back again. It's simply because I'm singing the type of music I like to sing. I came up in the church choirs. You sing hymns, but not much that's expected to challenge the trained voice.

I'm singing with the choir in D.C., the Heritage Signature Chorale. We have sung in so many places in the two years that I've been involved with them. I also sing with a group called the Municipal Opera Company of Baltimore with Dorothy Lofton-Jones, where I was first turned on to actually performing in operas. Like I said, I feel like I'm going back to where I left off at Peabody.

Q: And tell me a little bit about.

Carter: If I had gone to the Conservatory, I probably would have done all this.

Q: What is the Municipal Opera?

Carter: The Municipal Opera Company is an organization which presents operas. It gives the amateur singer, musician a chance at being on stage. They've been around a few years. Last year we did Carmen. Oh I loved it. Before that, we did La Boheme. I was talking to the director, the founder, Dorothy one day, pronouncing the word, "La Boheem." And she looks at me and says what is that word, Boheem? I say "La Boheem." No dear, it is "La Boheme."

I'm still learning. I enjoy acting through singing. We did Amahl and the Night Visitors a couple years ago for the Christmas season. I'm in the chorus in these productions, but I'm getting so much experience. It's satisfying, opening up another world for me, meeting other people who have aspirations in the music field.

Q: Younger people or older?

Carter: Most of them are younger singers. Some around my age.

Q: So it's a wide range of people.

Carter: It's a wide range from all walks of life. Some have musical backgrounds, some are instructors or trainers themselves. That's what I'm loving about it. I was also introduced to this opera company called Opera Diaspora who asked Heritage in to do the choral work. I was so fascinated with all the young talented African-American opera singers. Their voices are exquisite. It's taken me back to a dream that I did not fulfill.

But I have no regrets. Life goes on. I don't know what will open up to me. I have no aspirations of being an opera singer, per se, but just enjoying what I'm doing right now. Joyce Meyers, a Christian preacher says, enjoy being where you're at until you get where you're going. I love that statement. So I'm enjoying where I'm at.

Q: I'm curious what music means to you.

Carter: Music means so much. I don't know if Shakespeare or whoever said, music soothes the savage breast. I can understand it. I know this sounds so ordinary, but music is so universal. You can sing it, and it doesn't have to be in the language of the person listening to or receiving it, as far as the words. It's the emotion that's involved in music which inspires me.

The only music my kids were exposed to as far as knowing that their mother or grandmother sang is when I hummed Brahms Lullaby. The soothing tones of the music calmed their cries.

I just love all music, from one era to another. Classical, jazz, gospel, opera, some rap. I might not always understand the words, but it's the beat that I'm hearing, that feeling.

When my mom and dad worked for Mrs. Williams, she would send LPs home, long playing. Those big records. We listened to Nat King Cole, Ezio Pinza, Maria Callas, Rosa Ponselle, Lily Pons. We even had that thing you wind up to play the music on.

Q: Right. I know what you're talking about.

Carter: Victrola.

Q: Victrola.

Carter: So that's how I came in contact with opera, just did not understand it.

Q: But you liked it.

Carter: It was something about the sound of it, what I was getting from the emotion of it. The piece we're doing now. In French, *Le Code Noir*. I understand the background, but don't know what every word of it means.

It's the wonderful emotions I'm feeling when I hear opera. Of course, I understand spirituals because those words are sung in English dialect, more common to my African background.

Q: Right.

Carter: I hear people say, oh I can't stand country western music. I used to be one of those idiots, knuckle heads. Then you hear Ray Charles. He certainly sings country western. So I love music from all ranges. As long as it sounds good to me! Music is only in the ear of the beholder anyway.

It makes me feel good. When I come downstairs in the morning, I might turn on the stereo and listen to some classical before I go to bed at night. I want to hear instrumental music. Sometimes I want to be uplifted in my spiritual sense and listen to gospel. When I'm in my wishful mode, like my mother wanted me to be that opera singer, I'm listening to grand opera, the operas that I like, those tragic operas. [Laughter] To me they are really emotional.

Some depict violence, rejection, love, sadness. Are we hearing what these composers went through themselves in bringing this piece to fruition?

Q: So what else do you do besides music?

Carter: Like I say I've always had this love of dance. I attended a few ballets. I saw my son perform when he was a student at Poly [Baltimore Polytechnic High School]. He was a ballet dancer, and that was my dream, seeing him. It was like I was transferred up on that stage watching him lift the young ladies. It was ballet.

When I was in my forties, I started modeling. At Social Security, my two best friends, Paula and Kathy, my sister Charlene and a few of the security guards loved to disco. Also, we liked to shop at the thrift stores. What some people call boutiques. We were wearing outfits people admired. They said, oh, I like that, where did you get it from.

My girlfriend Kathy had a dream of owning her own shop. Somehow, out of her dream of having her own shop of thrift store items and our liking to party and disco, we formed a modeling group called the Kitt Katt Models. First we were called Kathy's Kitt Katts or Kathy's Corner. But we became the Kitt Katt Models,

Q: What did you do?

Carter: We were together for about three years. People would invite us to clubs, churches would invite us to their teas or functions, and we modeled clothes that we actually bought from the thrift store. Our motto was that you could look good without spending a fortune. We had so much fun doing it. We even made a video!

Q: What year was this do you think?

Carter: This was in the early 1980s, to 1985. During that time I had lost my fiancé. He died of lung cancer. Modeling was a therapeutic outlet for me. I was around people who cared about me. I was having fun and dancing. We could sure strut our stuff.

Q: That's very neat.

Carter: I didn't think I could ever model. My children used to model as little kids at the recreation centers. I was a late bloomer.

When I came down with osteoarthritis, it settled in that portion of my spine where I had the tuberculosis as a teenager. So I have another battle to fight. I did make it to my thirtieth year of working, then retired. Right now I'm practicing yoga at the Waxter Center, and singing on their Sacred Singers Choir.

I'm also taking care of family members. I was a caregiver for a couple of aunts and my friend when he was ill. I just ask God if He would help me to get better, I would do something for somebody else.



I've always had, what I call affinity, towards elderly people, and I think that had to do with my upbringing too. When I was learning to sing, it was older people who got me started. My aunt Marie and her daughters, Carol and Elaine. Carol was a schoolteacher and Elaine was a singer studying at Howard University, who became an evangelist. They bought me my first gown. They outfitted me with the gown, and my first heels, my silver slippers as I call them. The elderly lady in their home, Mrs. Lewis, taught me how to hold a teacup. Now Shirley, when you hold a teacup, make sure you raise your finger. To this day if I'm drinking a cup of tea, my pinky finger goes up. Back then, when you went out, you had to wear gloves, your little hat, be dressed for the occasion.

We used to go to what you call teas, sponsored by the Women's Civic League. If it wasn't at church, it was in somebody's home. And, of course, Shirley was invited to give a solo, usually accompanied.

Some of my favorite songs back then were "Let Us Break Bread Together," and "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," "I Love Life," "Only a Rose," "It's No Secret What God Can Do," "Deep River," "On My Journey."

It was a wonderful life, to some degree.

Q: What are you going to do with the rest of it?

Carter: The rest of it? Well, we're scheduled to sing for Mr. George Bush in a couple of weeks. Our choir has been invited to the White House for the national day of prayer.

Q: Oh wow!

Carter: We did a performance at the Kennedy Center with Debbie Allen as guests of the Choral Arts Society of Washington D.C.

Q: She's the dancer right?

Carter: Yes. We did that for the Martin Luther King tribute back in February. I'm finding that wherever we sing, people are hearing about the Heritage Signature Chorale and recommending us to others. God is good!

Q: And that's run by who?

Carter: Stanley Thurston is our director, whom we all admire for his expertise and talent. That's why we make the sacrifice to go to D.C. It's three of us who travel from Baltimore every Friday for rehearsals. Most members are located in the Washington area. We travel because he is so inspirational, knows what he's doing, is a very good director, and we leave having learned.

We've performed with the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Leslie Dunner. We did a piece a few years, Daphnis and Chloe.

Q: Ravel.

Carter: Yes. Ravel. It had no words, just sounds. We were doing like the background. I always thought of Daphnis and Chloe in reference to ballet.

The Annapolis Symphony Orchestra has our choir back every year. We did Vaughan-Williams Sea Symphony and Verdi's Requiem back in February. So, like I said, I'm being exposed to music that I love.

Some people tend to think we Blacks only do gospel music, jazz and hip-hop, where we're shouting all the time. But there are other forms of music. I love the anthems. Most of them are taken from scripture, Romans, Book of Psalms. All types of music that requires you to think and study.

Q: Well, it's nice you have a chance to now.

Carter: I'm practicing Yoga because it's a form of exercise which helps my arthritis, stiff joints. When my girlfriend heard I was studying yoga, she was thinking of it in terms of Buddhism and religion. I said, no, this is just pure exercise, stretching and concentrating, aware of breathing.

I don't know what the Lord has in store for me, but I'm enjoying where I am, thankful to all the people who were involved in my life. I'm thankful there is a place as Peabody. There's such a rich, rich history there. I was really thrilled when I received the letter from Miss Schaaf, telling me about this particular project.

I didn't know what I could contribute, but I'm glad I had the opportunity to come here as a child. And, of course, I'm delighted knowing that I was one of those first, and just not know it.

Q: Set a precedent.

Carter: Yes. I'm aware of it now. It doesn't stay in my mind all the time, but when I do think about it, I smile. It's a smile in my heart. And like I said, my goal is to find that graduation diploma. When I got sick for the second time, in 1962, Mrs. Thorpe, at the Preparatory said, Shirley, when you come through this, come back, and we'll make sure we hand you your diploma. But, like I said, I got married at the end of the month, and never once looked back.

Since I've been retired, I'm trying to fill up some empty spaces, to finish what I started. I'm a Capricorn and tend to be a procrastinator. So what? Even those income tax returns, I file at the end of the year. This year I was ahead of the game. I filed in early March so there's hope for me!

I'm trying to set some goals, finish what I say I'm going to do.

At one time, I was thinking I'll go back to school and finish with my voice studies. I haven't actually registered yet, but I'm getting the experience through singing with the Heritage choir.

I'll get to a few goals, hopefully before I'm ninety. Learn to drive a motorcycle. Take swimming. Get my two-seater convertible. Right now I drive cars where I can accommodate grand kids.

Q: Well, I want to thank you so much for coming here today.

Carter: Well, I thank you. I hope I was able to contribute towards this worthwhile project.

END OF INTERVIEW