



Interview No. SAS7.18.02
William Myers

Interviewer: Elizabeth Schaaf
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Q: Would you please introduce yourself and tell us your full name and where you were born.

Myers: My name is Bill Myers and I was born in Baltimore many years ago.

Q: And you grew up in Baltimore?

Myers: I grew up in Baltimore and in Philadelphia as well, I went back and forth.

Q: Where were you living when you were here in Baltimore?

Myers: I was living in northwest Baltimore. Calhoun Street to be exact. Yes.

Q: And your parents, were they musicians?

Myers: No. My parents were not musicians, but I believe my mom, deep down inside, had this very, very specific love for music and art because I found myself many days going off to art school or piano lessons at five and all of that — anything she could find for me. Of course, we were quite poor, but mama always could arrange a scholarship from somewhere she would find a place for me to go and study the arts and go free.

Q: Do you remember the name of your piano teacher?

Myers: Yes, indeed. Adah Jenkins.

Q: Oh my.

Myers: And I think everyone had Adah Jenkins, you know. What a jewel, what a foundation for me in my life was she! Yes. Yes, indeed.

Q: Tell me a little bit about what you remember about meeting her for the first time.

Myers: Oh, but she was a tall woman, you know, and I was intimidated I guess by her size. However, when she opened her mouth and began to talk with me, I saw this gentle, kind woman.

And she followed me throughout my life. Even when I was going around Europe, I would always write, and she would write to me, and then I would come home and I would stop each time to see her and say hello.

But I remember sitting at the piano and having a wonderful experience, just wanting to do well for her because she was a beautiful woman.

Q: Did you take lessons at her home?

Myers: At her home. Yes. It was in northwest Baltimore. I can't remember now the street. But I used to walk. I used to live near her about five blocks, and I used to walk.

Yes. Every week.

Q: Well, I've heard so many wonderful things about her. She was writing for the Afro-American—did she ever talk to you about the concerts that she went to review?

Myers: Well, you know, I had a chance to read all of her reviews because I would get them in the mail wherever I was. My mom of course knew where I was going to be, and I was just in love with this woman. She was just a jewel. And she kept Baltimore posted, I guess, on my whereabouts. You know? And it was so nice of her to do that.

And she would also ask, always ask for a picture. And so there would be a picture in the paper, and in her column she would say things about where I was working, and especially while I was in Europe.

Q: There was a photograph in the Storm is Passing Over of Miss Jenkins surrounded by her students.

Myers: Oh boy. How about that.

Q: And we'll have to have you get up there to look at it to see if you're among those children.

Myers: How about that. I'd like to see that.

Q: Now she used to do recitals once a year for her students?

Myers: Once a year. Yes.

Q: Did you perform in that?

Myers: I did perform. Yes.

Q: How long were those recitals?

Myers: Well, they were long, you know. You could go out for lunch and come back [laughter] and they'd be still playing, you know. But it was all enjoyable. That's part of it, that's part of it all. I didn't enjoy it right away, but it grew on me. And I kind of knew where my mom was taking me. Mom wanted me to become a musician.

And I was the only one in the family, in the overall family, that was going in that direction, becoming a musician. And so Mom just stayed with me.

Q: Now how long were you with Miss Jenkins?

Myers: Oh boy, I think I studied, I went to her at six or seven, and I was in my teens when I stopped.

Q: That's a good foundation with a wonderful teacher. Now what other music teachers did you work with as a young child?

Myers: Well, you know, in high school I can remember only one name: Georgiana Chester, who was at Douglass High School. And, you know, wow. You know, moving from Adah Jenkins and going into school and having this woman, it was just marvelous.

I'm lucky. I am so lucky that I've worked with so many giants in my life. And I think my life has been preordained in that everything was laid out for me. So there were bumps in the road, horrendous bumps in the road, but I think there was a master plan. I really do believe that. Because I know from Adah Jenkins to Georgiana Chester and then working in my first job with a principal who I just admired so much. She was just so good to us while she was there, and she helped lay out a foundation and a direction for me.

And then I went to Morgan State College, for only a year. And I wasn't satisfied and so I dropped out, and I joined the Army.

Q: In what year was this that you joined the Army?

Myers: This was in nineteen, 1954, '55—something like that. But anyhow, I went to Europe in Special Services, and you couldn't have asked for anything more. It was just beautiful. And it got even better when a warrant officer came in from Florida and looked at my record, and sent for me and said I want you to establish a full kind of operation of musical activities here in Southern France, Captieux, France. And I said, okay, and so we did this. We did this, and we had Franco-American relationship programs going on all throughout Southern France, and eventually I wound up bringing in entertainment for all of the U.S. service clubs straight on up to Paris.

And I was booking these people, bringing them in from other countries and from this country. It couldn't have been any better. That's why I said it almost seems as if my life has been preordained and laid out for me.

While I was in Europe, I met Billy Graham, and I don't know how I made it with all those thousands of people, I found myself up on the stage standing there, and he put his hands on my head, and he prayed. I still don't know how I got to the stage.

So it's been an interesting life — an interesting life from all of that and coming back and coming here to Peabody to work and also to travel with University of Maryland Baltimore County as a Negro spiritual singer, and going to Spain for three weeks.

Q: Now what year was this, what year?

Myers: Oh boy, what year. [Laughter] Somewhere in the '70s, I think, or thereabouts. But another thing happened to me. You know, we did a concert in an open tent, and we arrived there and there was no one there.

Q: Now where was this?

Myers: This was in Spain. And it was up in the mountains, and there was no one there. And so we were there around nine o'clock. We thought that the concert started at around nine-thirty, and I think it didn't start until ten or ten-thirty, or thereabouts, as the people came in. And all of a sudden — and of course they were building, they were building the risers while we were watching them. And we thought wow, is this something. [Laughter]

And so all of a sudden the place was packed, there was no room for a soul. I understand it held a thousand people. So we performed, and it was wonderful. And coming off the stage we were given roses by the people in the township as we came off the stage, all of us. And I heard this woman. Well, the crowd was yelling El Negro, El Negro. And, of course, I didn't know what in the world was going on, and I asked the interpreter what's going on here, what are they saying? And he said, they love you, and my heart got so full.

As I came off the stage, there was a woman and she was yelling to me, and she had this little baby. And I asked the interpreter what was she saying. She said she wanted her child to touch my face. See, all of these things happened in my life.

And now I am smart enough to be able to tie them all together and say, yes, God was walking with me all throughout my life, and he had something in store for me. As the minister said to me recently in my home as I tried to make some decisions about the rest of my life and my career, and he said to me you have been anointed. You have been anointed. And he knows my background. And he said the doors will keep opening for you.

And so I feel very, very good about who I am and where I am at this point in my life. I have a wonderful, wonderful wife, four gorgeous kids, and it's been good.

If I may go back to this, I didn't finish this with the woman in Spain.

Q: Oh, please.

Myers: And so I walked over, and of course the security guards got upset with me and came running, and the interpreter was with me. And the little child put her hands, she cradled my face in her hands. She had to be about five. I didn't understand any of that. It took me a while. I came back to the United States, and I had a conference with a minister and he helped me understand why that happened. He said it's very simple because you know the Moors ruled Spain for so many years and of course Jesus in their minds would have been of a darker skin. And singing these Negro spirituals and being so moved myself and obviously moving them, and the whole thing came together. So what an experience, you know. It still makes me feel, wow! So I feel good.

Coming to Peabody was a major step in my life. Coming here to study after being in Europe for four years, doing my own thing, of course, not this kind of music at Peabody. We were doing contemporary music, pop music, rock and roll, that kind of thing, getting into the clubs throughout Europe. When anything came out here in the United States on the charts and made it to number one, my mom would send me the forty-five. I'd play it and bingo within, that night we were doing that song in a club somewhere.

So I came here and as I said to you earlier, I studied in the Preparatory Department for a year and then made it into the Conservatory.

Q: Who did you study with in the Preparatory? Do you remember?

Myers: Oh boy. I remember the teacher in the main Conservatory, Madam [Alice Gerstl] Duschak. I don't remember the name now, and I spoke this name about a year ago to someone I believe and I can't recall it now. But it was a good training session for me and for an African-American, it was a step up the ladder in my own community, in my own life, living with African-Americans to go to Peabody was the thing to do.

Q: What was the perception of Peabody because we were late opening the doors. It wasn't until 1947 that Paul Brent came and the color bar was dropped here.

Myers: It was tough. We found that it was tough in the Conservatory. I remember that there was a good kind of feeling going on between my frat brothers and I. [Peabody's Kappa Chapter was installed in 1911 as one of the early chapters of Phi Mu Alpha.] And there were about three of us, and I mentioned before to you Percy Brown was one of them, and another African American. And we had our problems, we had our problems.

I remember going to the office one time and standing with another African-American — the other gentleman who was an oboist. And we stood there at the office counter for a while, and then someone came up to us and said, oh, which one are you?

And I bit down very hard on my lip and said my name is Bill Myers. And his name is Walter [Lee]. Anyhow, we went on from that point. And I would just joke about it really because that was the only way to get through it. Sitting in a class and the roll was called, and I was, my name was Myers, and there was a Jerry Myers, and the professor was leaning down like this checking the book, never looking up, and said, oh are you brothers? Just like that. And I said, no, we're

not, I said, but I'm Jewish. [Laughter] You know and the whole class just fell out. We're all frat brothers, you know. And that was the way to get through all of that, you know. Just joke about it. Get in class and study and be the best you possibly could be.

I had to go out and find my own job after graduating, getting the bachelor's, which I didn't particularly appreciate. But that was a part of the thing I guess. And I decided well that's it. I had to pay for a placement organization to find me a job, and you couldn't go to observe in Arlington, Virginia. Because there was two of us, Gloria Chester and I. We couldn't go because that area was segregated. And so I was out that day when it was announced, and the next day I came in with my little shopping bag because I carried my books in a shopping bag. I walked in and I was told the class is going, but you can't go. And I said, I'm sorry, I don't understand that. And I will not accept that. And I said, you need to do something about that. Can we? And I was told, no, we cannot. I said then the school will get a call from the NAACP tomorrow morning, and I turned around and I left.

I didn't go to classes. I just went home. I walked all the way back to northwest Baltimore. I was just upset. And the next day the Dean of the school called a meeting in North Hall, and the whole class was there, and the question was asked why is it that these three students cannot, these two students cannot go? And he was told. Well, then if these two students cannot go to that observation, they have to have credit like everyone else does, then no one goes.

Q: Good.

Myers: And that was his stand. And because, before that of course, one of my buddies who's conducting an orchestra somewhere now in the United States, Murray Sidlin, stood up and said, if Bill can't go, I can't go. Then, one by one, the frat brothers stood up, and so that was the end of it. Nobody goes.

It was a great move. However, I left this institution with a remark on my records because of that. I was a troublemaker. And I know that. Because in my first job I did extremely well. I was a go-getter, and I'm still that way. I did all kinds of after hours working and charts and diagrams and all kinds of things to help kids to learn music — how to sing. And my principal was one of the women in my life who has motivated me to be where I am now, called me in one evening, and said I just need to share this with you. And I may be breaking all kinds of rules, but I have not seen in you what I see written on your records — that you are a trouble maker.

Q: Well, you know all the best Peabody students are troublemakers. [Laughter]

Myers: Well, we got around that.

Q: You should talk to Jim Morris.

Myers: Jim Morris! Yes. Right! Right.

So we went on from there, and she helped me to get into Baltimore County. She knew of someone from Baltimore County who saw me directing a summer musical — a summer

workshop I think in Catonsville [Community College] — and this person called me. And this principal did the negotiating for me because she believed in me.

So I thank a whole lot of people. But first of all my mom. You know? I think in all the lives of African-Americans, Mom is the one. Whatever is needed, mom will do it. And my mom took in wash and ironing just to help pay the bills. How she did all of this I'll never know. But then again too, my wife says to me, that drive is inside of me. I'm always moving.

And I move my students. Now I'm not teaching in a public school. I've been out of there ten years, and I asked her whether I could just hang it up, take an early retirement. But I felt, again, a need. There is a calling somewhere. You see? And I'm trying to shift myself, and when I get these feelings inside, and I hear something happening in my head, I think it's God talking to me: now it's time to do this. I need you here. I believe that. I believe that. And so I stopped, and now I said, I want to just work with gifted kids, just gifted kids.

Because it's something inside of me that when I work with gifted kids they motivate me to do more than I ever dreamed of. So I grow myself as well. And so this has been thirteen years now with Maryland Sings. I'm its chief artistic director, and my wife is the executive director. She handles all the business. Of course we have people writing grants. We're connected with the Baltimore County Arts and Sciences Commission, the Maryland State Arts Council as well, just helping these young people.

And we do shows. We haven't been to Europe now since '94. We were planning to go to Spain in 2003, but it didn't work out. I think 9/11 had something to do with it. So we are planning now perhaps a trip to Canada. Because I think the kids were disappointed. They worked so very, very hard.

We have about thirty-five in the company, five performing groups. And I have a group called Escape in the company, and the boys are outfitted in zoot suits from the '40s and the girls have '40s dresses. There are only five of them, but ah, fabulous sound, just a fabulous sound.

So we try to cover the gamut. One of my best friends, musical friends, is Tom Hall, director of the Choral Arts Society, and Tom and I talk every now and then. I remember Tom saying something to me some years back — that you find your niche and you stay there. Don't try to wander all over the place. And so Broadway, and now country music. Jamie Eisenstadt, I started working with her at nine years of age. And usually we don't teach kids until they're ten, and her mom got to her wife, and my wife got to me. And so the next thing I knew she was standing in front of me in class, and so we began to work.

But thank goodness we started working with this child at nine. What a magnificent voice. Right now as I speak today, on this day, on July 18th, she's in Nashville. Yes. She's in Nashville. And she's only fifteen, but she went down for an audition, and they called her back. And she came back home, and then they sent her new music to learn and some other stuff. And I had the privilege of just working with her in private studio sessions getting her ready for Nashville. And she's there. I haven't heard a word from her yet, but I know the phone will ring and she'll be screaming.

She was here. She sang with Shania Twain at the Arena downtown when Shania Twain, the country artist, was in town. And she beat out three thousand kids for that spot. And so I remember in her lesson prior to going to the Arena, I said Jamie, what if Shania Twain stops singing with you and leaves the stage. What will you do? Her eyes got big. Wow! I said well, let's pretend that she's going to do that, and let's work on a routine. And we worked on a routine and sure enough, she did. She stopped singing and walked off the stage. And Jamie knew what to do so the stage was hers. Well, she brought the house down, and she was on television the next morning giving interviews. I think she was twelve — she was either eleven or twelve at that time, and it was just marvelous. Big voice in a little girl.

So we have done well with the Maryland Sings. I feel very good about what my kids have done. We have a boy now in Dusseldorf, Germany, who's starring in "Starlight Express". He just closed in Germany doing the lead in "Beauty and the Beast". That magnificent fire that I first started when I did a concert of music for William Schaefer who was then Governor in Chestertown, Maryland. I remember, it was a wonderful afternoon.

All those people, and we did a concert, a mini-concert for him that morning at breakfast.

Q: How did that happen: What led to that?

Myers: Oh, Nancy Grasmick, the secretary of education in the State of Maryland. Nancy loves these kids. She talks about the way they communicate to an audience. She said, we were performing at a place over in Bel Air somewhere, and Nancy and her husband, Lou Grasmick, were in the audience. They both came to me afterwards and said we'd like for you to bring some children to the Crab Feast. Of course, I was saying what Crab Feast, right? But I wasn't in the know.

Q: *The Crab Feast*.

Myers: *The Crab Feast*, right. [Laughter] And so I said, okay, we can do that I guess. Select some kids and bring them down, and we will take care of everything. And sure enough I selected five kids. I had a wonderful organization in high school. I had about, oh I had about twenty-five or thirty kids in a chorale in high school. And we went into international competition every other year. And we won two golds, three silvers and four bronze medals while I was in that school, working.

And so they were quite fond of what I was doing there with the kids, and how we all got along, etc. Anyhow, so we put the group together. I selected five kids. Just dynamite kids. And went down to the Crab Feast. We were there, and I told this joke to my son who's fourteen now. We're talking about limousines. Have you ever been in a limousine poppy? He calls me poppy. And I said, yes. I remember that. We were in Ocean City. We were in Chestertown, and I got a call in the motel where we were staying, and it was Lou Grasmick calling and saying that I'm with the Mayor right now and we are on the way to your motel to pick you up so you can see the facility where you're going to perform. I was already in bed. So I quickly got up and put on my clothes and stood outside, and the limousine came up, I got in and we went off.

That was the start of a wonderful weekend, and the kids performed brilliantly. That's of course when they all talked about how we need a group to represent Maryland, to be a good will ambassador for Maryland. And so that was the seed.

Q: And it all started at the Crab Feast. [Laughter] That's such a, that's such a huge thing, and so many important people. What was their response to that crowd?

Myers: They had a ball. They'd been used to working in front of crowds because we had gone into international competition. And these kids had been with me.

Q: So they were veterans.

Myers: They were veterans. Because they were in a small group of mine. We did pop music. And we taught them what to do, how to do it. How to communicate with an audience. My thing was to reach out with your voices and your warmth and bring those people up on the stage with you. Let them sit close and watch you up in person. So it was a marvelous time. Marvelous.

Q: How did the Maryland Sings tour come about?

Myers: Well, I wanted to go take my young people to Spain. I was there many years ago for three weeks and worked with the UMBC Cantata at the time. And I found Spain to be just so marvelous. The people were so warm and friendly and open. And I liked the idea of the siesta in mid-day (although we couldn't take advantage of that because we were on the road traveling to another city, you know, that kind of thing).

We were on the Costa De Sol, and we stayed in a lavish hotel. It was just marvelous. I walked to the wine store once every other day and got a nice bottle of wine. You know, it was just wonderful living, and then we were on the bus traveling maybe for an hour and a half or two hours to another city to perform.

I remember rolling into a city, and actually trying to get to this tent that I talked about earlier to you. The streets were so narrow and the bus couldn't get through, and so some of the people got off the bus and went out and lifted the car up and put it on the sidewalk. [Laughter] One of those little bugs, you know. And the man came out and he was screaming. But the bus got through. And the marvelous and most prestigious thing about that, the man who had booked this tour for us was from Spain. And he had the secretary to the King with us. They met us at a certain point. The secretary got on the bus—I couldn't believe this—and rode with us. We had motorcycle escorts, police, and that was so thrilling.

And so I said, well, this is wonderful. With the success that the Maryland singers have had, going to Europe twice, I said down the road sometime, I've got to get these young people to Spain, just to see the beauty and the warmth and feel the warmth of the people.

And so, we thought about it for next summer, and we thought about it last year and put all the things to work, and contacted the companies, and everything was done. It took almost seven

months to lay it all out as to where we wanted to go. I had been there and I knew what I wanted to see. And then, 9/11.

Many parents still wanted to go, and the kids, of course. But it just didn't work out. It was just that uncertainty hanging over all of us.

Q: So what are your plans now for the group?

Myers: Well, we are booked solid into 2003, and hopefully in the summer of 2003 we can get to Canada.

I worked as a clinician and a conductor for Performing Arts Abroad located in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and they send me out to various places to adjudicate and to conduct, and these people have been so very good to me. I met them while I was teaching in high school, and I went into these international competitions through them. So they knew me.

When I stopped teaching is when I went to them, because it was time now for us to travel and do something on our own. So they set up some things for us. As I teach, I go around the country giving workshops, clinics carrying the name Performing Arts Abroad and have done well even into Canada to adjudicate the choirs. Like we did when I was teaching.

Q: Going back to your youngest years, I'm just fascinated about how fixed you've been on a career and obviously it's carried you very well. Who were the artists you were exposed to growing up? Did you go to concerts? Did your mother take you out to concerts?

Myers: Well, you know, I see my young people now and they have so many opportunities that I did not have. We couldn't afford to go to a concert. We could listen to recordings. You know, there just was not enough money to do that. My ear was glued to the radio and recordings, and, of course, Adah Jenkins would provide reviews of things for me to read and that's how I got involved in this whole thing. Not until I got, really, not until I got past the age of eighteen or nineteen was I able then to get into a concert hall. Now, of course, once it started, you couldn't get me out. [Laughter]

Q: Where was the first concert that you attended? Do you remember your first live concert?

Myers: Oh boy, I think it was in Washington. It was in Washington I believe. A live concert and it was a jazz concert as well. Actually I didn't get into classical music until I went to Europe. And maybe it was time for that to happen to me. Like I say, you know, stages, it has always been in stages getting me ready for what was about to happen.

Q: Well, also when you were quite young, certainly the Lyric [Theater] wasn't a welcoming place at that point, and actually your teacher was instrumental in opening the doors to the Lyric [for African-Americans].

Myers: That's correct.

Q: And did she ever tell you about the trials that she went through to get Marian Anderson on stage at the Lyric? Do you remember that?

Myers: I remember that. Yes. And she would talk about that, and she would tell me that you must prepare yourself, and you must also help to open some doors. I'm glad you said that, you know, because that just popped back into my mind. Opening doors. Yes. She said you will open doors. You must be prepared when the door opened.

Q: You certainly opened a lot of doors. You found a good role model.

Myers: Yes. I was the first African-American to teach drama in the Jewish Community Center on Park Heights. There were a lot of firsts for me.

Q: Tell me about some of those.

Myers: [Laughter] That was funny. That was a wonderful kind of experience for me.

Q: When was this?

Myers: There you go with dates again. Wow. I'm not programmed for that. But I don't know, I was quite young. I probably was in my late twenties. But it was a good experience and I worked with a woman. Oh I can't remember her name. It doesn't come to me right now. But I know she was called Dearie, and all the students called her Dearie. And she was a drama person. She wrote several books on drama and improvisation and stuff like that. And she took me under her wing as well, and got me involved in the theater.

She took me to Washington to work for the school for the deaf over there.

Q: Gallaudet.

Myers: Yes. Gallaudet. And I did workshops over there as well. And so you see there have been people - females.

So I was ready to go into that situation, the drama and music together inside of me, and did quite well for about three years. But then I had to move on. Why I don't know, but it was a calling to keep moving.

Q: Now how did you move on to The Block and when did that?

Myers: [Laughter] Oh my goodness!. Well, coming back from Europe, being involved in just all that good music then. What I called music there Rock and roll. And I was still playing piano at that time, singing, and I needed a job.

And, of course, the military helped pay for my college education, but I needed a job to support myself. My mom left us and went to God in 1955, I believe.

There are times when I think about Mom now, and I wish of course God had spared her to see where I am because she's directly responsible for that.

But I was down there playing piano and singing and having a good time. And there were some other of my frat brothers also playing as well. [Laughter] You know, the money was good.

Q: Martin Berkovsky was down there.

Myers: Oh boy, look out now. [Laughter] I don't recall these names, okay? But anyhow we had a good time. We had a good time. And then somebody found out about it, and it got into the Conservatory. And I was called in for an interview, a meeting rather and said they prefer that we not work on the Block. I got the distinct feeling that if I continued to work there, I would not be in the school. And the school meant more to me at that time. And so what I did was I started taking private students, teaching. .

Q: So you started teaching very early. Spending time in Philadelphia and Baltimore, how did you view the two cities in terms of what was available musically and, you know, what was the climate? How did the climate differ between the two cities for an African-American musician?

Myers: To me, I felt that racism was everywhere. I just had to endure. That's all. In some of our schools where we going and trying to work as an African-American into African-American schools predominately, some curriculums were not strong, not well established. I knew my first experience in college, I was taking junior music courses in my second half of my freshman year, and so I thought that there's got to be something better. I didn't think of going to another university, but I thought of the military. And there was mom again and thinking about tuition being paid by the military.

Q: So, and you were fortunate in that it wasn't Vietnam, it wasn't Korea. You were in this little magic place between the two, and so she could feel fairly safe.

Myers: Right. And I'm so glad she did that. And it was wonderful to get away. I missed Alaska by one name. Once I went in, I read down this roster of people going to France, and my name was the last name on the list, and the next person went to Alaska. And I said, oh gosh, thank you God, you know. [Laughter]

Oh boy, I don't know what I would have done.

Q: Well, perhaps the music scene wouldn't have been quite so rich.

Myers: Right. [Laughter] Oh boy, I was so glad about that.

Q: So you got to see the clubs in Paris?

Myers: Yes.

Q: Tell me about that scene.

Myers: Marvelous. You know, Count Basie came over while I was there. And Count Basie played in Bordeaux, France, near where I was playing with a small group that I had, and we went over to see them, and that was a wonderful experience. And I sat next to Joe Williams. I sat next to Joe Williams at the club after they finished doing the concert. And then Count Basie was on his right hand side. Yes. Amazing! It was just nice. And big Al — Wow, it just was a marvelous experience. There was a chateau outside of Paris. Oh, I can't think of it now. But my aunt knew someone, a singer [Josephine Baker], and I can't remember right now her name. But she adopted children, many, many, many children. I can't think of her name. Oh, I can't think about it.

But I was able to stay there several nights when I was trying to take some voice lessons at the Conservatory and do some studying. I had time on my hands because the job that I had as musical director and bringing entertainment to the service clubs in France to Germany, and to England as well so I was always in a car moving somewhere. And I took time to study. Had a ball.

Q: Oh that's wonderful.

Myers: We had, we went into — below Captieux, France there is this town, right on the edge there — you go across the water and there is Spain. But we did a show there one night, and I was new to it all, and someone said once we finish the show, we're not going to rent a hotel. We're gonna sleep on the beach. And I said really? Really? No, we can't do that! Yes we can. And there were other people sleeping on the beach.

And wow, what an interesting thing that was. We finished the club, and we stayed in the club, and we got paid that night, and by the time we left, we had spent all the money anyhow. [Laughter] Buying drinks, you know, and buying the ladies drinks and whatever, and of course, we slept on the beach. Now I see what they were talking about — why we were going to sleep on the beach. But nobody told me that ahead of time. You see?

Oh it was just fun. And seeing the bull fights, and just traveling, it was just fun. My life has been really, really fun.

Q: Well, it must have been quite a contrast, you know, to be able to travel over there without having to deal with the racial climate.

Myers: You know, saying that, I remember being in a club one night, and there were Communists in this club that night. A little boy here in the United States had just been hung in the South. Anyhow, all this propaganda was going. We were sitting at the bar just having a drink and just before going to another club to perform. And these people were saying — they had these signs with the boy hanging from a tree — see this is what America is like. You don't want to go back to that. Stay in Europe, don't go back to that. And it was hard for me to digest that. But I saw that figure hanging, I got very, very upset. I didn't know about it, for one thing. And I'm saying to myself, why didn't I know about this? And then how to deal with these people shouting, down with America, racism, all of this. And then trying to convert us I guess. And of course it didn't go over too well. A fight broke out. And my job was to drive the car so I told the guys, I said I'll have the motor running. And we just got out of there. We got out of there.

But that was a terrible experience. We went to the club and played, and the next day, I remember the next day in rehearsal. We rehearsed almost all day. Got up late and rehearsed. And we sat and talked about it, and there was a kind of solemn kind of gloom hanging over us about our own country. You know?

And I remember coming home to visit once, and I was in the back of the Chevy daddy had. We were going to buy a kitchen table and chairs. I don't know where we were in downtown Baltimore — east Baltimore, somewhere driving. And a girl came up the street and passed the car, and I looked at her. She was a white girl. I looked at her. And my mama said don't ever do that again. You don't look at white women. And I swallowed hard, and I could not tell her or share with her that, Mom, in Europe they're part of my life. I see them every day. They're friends of mine. We eat together.

I was very discouraged. And I never said a word to her, never said a word because I knew I would hurt her. So all of these experiences shape me and mold me into what I am now. And oddly enough, as we sit here, oddly enough I am married to a woman who is Irish and Hispanic. And so I say, my kids and I have a foot in two worlds.

Q: Very international.

Myers: My little, my daughter, Elise, was in school, and a little Caucasian boy said to her when he saw her mama come to pick her up the next day, that's not your mama is it? That's not your mama. So she turned to him and said, I live in a rainbow family. Isn't that something? She was only about seven.

Q: You've had the struggles.

Myers: Oh yes. I don't mind that. I really don't. It's prepared me for where I am now. I'm conducting — music director at a church in Reisterstown, Maryland, the Reisterstown United Methodist Church. I've been there thirteen years. And we don't have many African-American people there. I mean, you can count them on one hand. It's in an area that two hundred and some odd years ago slaves were held.

And my wife said to me we're going away on a vacation. I didn't want to go because I had a chance to sing at a camp meeting back in that area. I don't remember the name now where all the camp meetings were held [Emory Grove, a Methodist campground in Glyndon, Maryland, founded in 1871.] I had a chance to go and lead the singing at a camp meeting of all white people. For me to stand there on that pulpit and do that — I could not pass up the opportunity, because of history And my son, who is fourteen said to me, poppy, I'm so glad you had this experience.

He's learning and I talked to him about all the things that had happened to bring me this far. And I believe that there's much more for me to do out there. I will continue to speak to kids in schools, in classes, and tell them about my experiences and to make them understand that, listen, the most important thing is to listen to your mama when she talks to you. You think you know everything now.

You know, it's a different world now in which they're living than when I grew up.

Q: Very.

Myers: There are so many, many things now that are bad out there for them, and they're enticed every day to do this or that which is wrong for them. But they must listen to the mother, if the mother is in the home, or the father, if the father is in the home. Because I found that parents want as much as they can get for their kids.

I find that in the kids I'm dealing with now, many of the kids are well off, but still they're involved to the hilt in all kinds of activities that are going to help promote them and help them to have, to do better and better and better.

So I am a taskmaster, and my wife says sometimes I don't see the dead bodies I leave behind. [Laughter] So she comes along and scoops up people. But we're in the business of art, creating art. I tell my kids, I may get up here and yell and whatever, and I'm all over the place, but it's nothing personal at all. I love you all. It's just that I'm obsessed that you are not digesting this art and being able to communicate back the whole thing.

So we feel good about me teaching the whole child, their feelings. I always ask them, who are you? Well, they say, well, I'm a pianist and I've done — and they list all of these things. I said, I don't want to hear what you have done. Who are you? Talk to me about you, the inner workings of you. The aesthetics of you. What happens when a bunny rabbit runs across your lot, or you see a deer, or you see a sunset? I'm after that inner kind of thing. And when you tap that, it's fantastic. You know that? It's fantastic.

I had a young singer just recently who wanted to sing, the 9/11 song, Allen Jackson did, "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning". And I spent two hours with him, talking. Two hours just talking. I prepared a list of questions to make him think of all that happened, all of the emotions involved. How this had affected these people, men and women and children, all of that. Deep emotions. And after two hours, then we started vocalizing and beginning to work. And at the end of four hours I videotaped him and it was priceless. I did that, and he said, it was so funny, he said to me, my mom told me to ask how much would this lesson be. And I said no, this is between us, a gift that I'm giving you. He sat there and looked at me and his eyes got kind of misty and filled with water.

We had a ball. And then in concert, when it was time for him to sing this number, he did it absolutely perfectly. And you could hear a pin drop, and the people didn't want to ever stop clapping once they got started. But these are the kinds of experiences we bring to young people in Maryland singers, and I wouldn't trade it for nothing in the world. I'm so glad I got out of that box in the classroom.

Q: I'll bet you were pretty good in that classroom.

Myers: We had a good time. We really had a good time. [Laughter] I remember building a set in — I taught musical theater. And some of the kids by their senior year, they had put in all of what

they needed to put in to graduate and so they were in my room, in my area sometimes three periods a day.

Q: Now what school was this?

Myers: Dulaney High School. And so we were building a set, and I think it was "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." And so we built sets right in the room, right in the class. And lo and behold when it was time to move the set out of the classroom we couldn't get it through the door. [Laughter] And so we all stood there and looked at the door and looked at the set and then looked at each other. You know? And then they said, Mr. Myers, why didn't we plan this better?

And it was so funny. So we had to take it apart and then move it out. But those are the kind of things that we got involved with and were so much fun. And we taught them that the theater was there home. And one last thing: one of those kids, of that whole group of kids of about ten that were so involved in theater, most of them today are still involved in theater except for one who died of AIDS.

I heard about this in a phone call. The funeral was the next day, and I dropped everything and I got out to the funeral, and I sat in the back of the church. I didn't want to get involved. I just wanted to be present there. Hopefully his spirit would feel my presence, a beautiful child and a good guy. And then everybody went out, processed out, and I was the last person in the church, and I got up and I walked outside and I stood by a pillar of the church.

The cars proceeded to leave. The hearse went on and the rest of the cars had stopped. Doors opened and here come all these kids. They came running up those steps, and they were just blubbering. And I stood there and one young man put his arms around me and said you're the man who opened the doors for all of us.

And we just stood there. Just stood there and we hugged, all of us.

Q: Now before you started opening doors, who were the artists you were listening to, who were the artists that meant? I mean, you had people like Adah Jenkins in your life, and my goodness, and you can't get much better than that. But who were the artists whose footsteps you wanted to follow?

Myers: That was hard for me. I loved the voice of Nat King Cole. I loved the voice of Harry Belafonte, Sara Vaughn. You see where I'm going, you know. I was not schooled in opera at all at the time, but I loved the pop voices.

Q: And they were wonderful voices.

Myers: So I knew I wanted to sing. I knew I wanted to sing. And of course my aunt wanted me to become a doctor, and she was putting money away in a trust fund for me to go to medical school, and mama had different ideas altogether. When I started really pursuing all of this, I

noticed that my aunt withdrew the trust fund. And it was all right with mama because this is what he wants to do, and he's going to be schooled. He'll be taken care of. He'll make it.

I listened to all those pop singers. Rhythm and blues. I liked groups as well. I was so involved in listening to like the Fifth Dimension, groups like that coming along, Platters, and hearing the harmonies. I got involved in a group like that when I was in high school.

We had one job — one job that's all we had, and that was at the Royal Theater on Pennsylvania Avenue. That's where all of the big stuff rolled in there. And I saw Little Richard there. I saw the grand daddy of soul, James Brown. I saw him there. And that one group, we were in high school, but it was a good group. A promoter put us together and we had one job. And two of the boys left to do something else, and said forget this, that was it.

But that group thing is coming back to me now! Because I'm writing for the groups that I have, the five groups that I have. I'm writing.

Q: Tell me what it was like walking out on the stage of the Royal Theater?

Myers: Afraid to death. Knees were knocking, teeth were chattering. Scared to death. But once we got out there, and the lights hit us, you know, and the music started, bingo, bingo. And then to walk off the stage, and to walk around the front and see big artists. We were overwhelmed. We opened, you know.

Big artists, wow, we were just up there. [Laughter] And then when I was at Dulaney High School, I had a group of about ten, and we did some country music. And went to, then Painters Mill. Had one performance there as an opening act. Yeah.

Q: Now was Tracy McCleary still the conductor when, was he the conductor when you were at the Royal, when you performed at the Royal Theater?

Myers: I don't know. I didn't get beyond just walking in the door, rehearsing, and then coming out and coming back for a performance. I didn't talk to anyone. Because of mama, don't talk to a soul. Don't talk to anybody at all. You just follow, whatever his name was, the promotor, I can't think of his name now, but yeah, I couldn't go anywhere but with him, you know, and not talk to anyone.

Q: What a thrilling experience that must have been. Were you ever allowed to visit any of the other clubs on Pennsylvania Avenue?

Myers: No, I couldn't do that.

Q: Sounds like your mother would have been a little upset if you had.

Myers: Right. She ruled the roost. And that kind of thing was not for us, for me. Of course, mom never went to a club in all her life.

Q: What inspired her love of music? What do you think shaped her and her interest in music?

Myers: You know that's a good question. I don't know. There was no one in her family or my dad's family that was musical. No one. No one at all. What I said to you earlier about my life seeming to be preordained, God worked through my mom. That's the only thing I can think. You know? Never thought about that.

Q: Was she involved in church choirs?

Myers: No, she was not.

Q: That is really interesting that she perceived that you had this mission and encouraged you every step of the way.

Myers: Yeah. I found myself as a youngster involved in clay modeling, sculpture, some dance, some painting, voice lessons with Fanny Newton Moragne. She was my first voice teacher. Yes!

Q: Beautiful woman.

Myers: Yes. And was tough. Yeah. She looked very serene, you know, and very beautiful, but she was tough. I remember that, and she told me go home and take a book and put it on your stomach, lay out on the floor, on the bed, and start that breathing process, and you better see that book go up and down. And when I came to the next lesson, did it go up and down? I said yes it did. [Laughter]

Yeah, but she was wonderful. Yes.

Q: Where did you study with her?

Myers: Oh, I had a scholarship.

Q: At Upton, the Institute of Musical Arts at Upton?

Myers: I guess. Yes, indeed it was. Was there a German professor?

Q: Yes.

Myers: How about that?

Q: Professor Schwartz.

Myers: Schwartz, yes. Professor Schwartz. How about that. My mama read about it in the newspaper, about the scholarships being given. And there we were. Got a taxi cab and we went on down. How about that. Yes.

Q: There were some fabulous people on that faculty. Hugo Weisgal who won the Pulitzer Prize in composition taught theory there.

Myers: Right.

Q: You had some good teachers.

Myers: Yeah. Thank God for that!

Q: How long were you with Miss Newton?

Myers: Two years.

Q: Two years. She trained a lot of good voices.

Myers: Yes.

Q: Did you know any of her other students?

Myers: No I did not.

Q: Because several of them ended up coming here to Peabody.

Myers: Oh really? I know I had my lessons and then I was due back home at a certain hour. My mother's tough. You know. There was a routine that I had to follow. I'd go for my lessons, voice lessons, and then I was back home, and I had to change my clothes and do my homework, and go get the food for the dog. You know, all these chores. You know? And then that was it, bedtime. Or practice the piano for Adah Jenkins and whatever. But it was very structured.

Q: And, well, what was the neighborhood like for a kid growing up back then?

Myers: Wow. It was something else. I know in the very beginning we were very poor. Yes. And my mom and dad they had egg crates for tables and stools. Yeah. And then we moved to northwest Baltimore, Calhoun Street.

Q: Now where were you living before Calhoun Street?

Myers: South Baltimore.

Q: Well Calhoun Street was quite a step up.

Myers: It was quite a step. And then Douglass High School was a block or so away from my house. And of course, there were temptations all around me. Belonging to the gang, you know. And I would say, my mama said that I can't leave the steps. You know. And so one smartie told me to tell my mama that I couldn't get the steps to go with me so I had to leave them. You know

this kind of thing. And I thought about that for a while, you know, but I didn't say that to her. I didn't say that to her. [Laughter]

But there were temptations. And belonging with the crowd, you know, the guys — the jackets and all, all of that. But I didn't get involved. I was just afraid of my mama. I really was.

I took a job in a bakery to learn how to bake bread and bake rolls and sticky buns and stuff like that. I was quite young. Really quite young. And my mama kept saying to me: isn't it against the law for you to be doing this? And of course I didn't know. And so anyhow, I would stay hours and hours, and wasn't making any money at all hardly. But still it taught me a work ethic.

And then I worked for Cloverland Dairy around trucks. Early in the morning, five o'clock in the morning I was running out there, and putting milk on the stoop. You know. Running back to the truck. And all of that was good for me.

And I'm trying to teach my children today the same kind of thing. And sometimes I win, sometimes I don't, you know, but I think I'm getting through. They walk with a foot in two worlds, but they're developing. I know my fourteen year old is developing a work ethic. I know that. He has this little thing in the community. We live in a secluded community near Reisterstown, Glyndon, Maryland. And in that community in which we live, he has this little job. And he sits for dogs, cats, babies [laughter]. You know, waters plants or whatever. And so he's doing his thing. He's learning. He's learning.

And so, my daughter, who is, Joelle, who is older and working at a wonderful law office in Washington, has traveled and worked with Jimmie Carter in building houses and whatever all over the place. She just came back from South Africa.

And so she is a role model for my younger one now. You know. They just love her to death. She travels a lot and comes back and they listen to her in the family room on the floor. I never get to talk with her myself. She comes to visit and is my child too, but she's in the middle of my other children. And before I know it, she says, well, dad it's time for me to leave. Oh, yes. Nice seeing you, nice talking with you. So I have to call. I call her on the job and talk with her.

Q: Have any of your children shown a desire to follow your footsteps into the world of music?

Myers: I think my son, my fourteen year old, is playing guitar. And I just thought that he will have it. My wife, Hollie, said buy him a guitar. I said all right. He'll have it for two days and then it will be it in the closet, because my ten year old had a flute and that's in the closet, whatever. And so, lo and behold, my guy, Will, accompanied a youth choir in church. Little ones, ages, what — seven to twelve, something like that. And I'm sitting there on the first pew because I lead the singing, the cantor type thing, and he's accompanying this choir. My goodness.

And so I went to him after the service. I said marvelous. Now what I want you to do is to play with your teacher in church. He said, wow. So he's moving in that direction with the guitar.

Q: That is wonderful.

Myers: When I left home today, he was sitting on his bed. He was picking away. My oldest daughter is also a model. She's done quite well. She has this job in this law office, but yet she models on the side. She's able to go back and forth.

Now, my eight year old, Sean, swears that he is the next Michael Jackson. We have to buy him everything, all the recordings and everything else. He has all the moves. And I was told by a teacher in his elementary school — you know, I've seen a side of him that I didn't know existed. And then the music teacher said that they had to stop class one day, and he had to perform. And it broke everybody up. He sings. So I don't know where we're going with that.

Q: Well, we know where he got it.

Myers: My job I guess is to open doors. And pay the bills.

Q: I know sons don't often go to their fathers for advice, but if this eight year old decides he has a path, or finds out he has a path like you did, and turns to you for advice, what would you tell him?

Myers: Well, I think I would be able to evaluate his skills. You know, I've been out there myself for twenty years. I know enough people around the world, in Nashville, New York and in Paris that are buddies. We can talk. And I will let one of them see him do something. I'll provide that opportunity. And then let that person be the one to tell him — yea or nay.

Q: Very wise.

Myers: But I will support him. I really will. Music has just given me everything. The sensitivity that I have, the love that I have for the outdoors, for colors. I teach my kids, my local students, by using colors. By asking them to paint and imagine a canvas in front of them with their sounds. Thinking about their favorite color and thinking about the warmest color. Because it's all about color.

END OF INTERVIEW