



Interview No. SAS03.09.02
Rosalie Walker White

Interviewer: Melody Abedinejad
Location: Baltimore, Maryland
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Q: Mrs. White, could you tell me what your middle name is?

White: Walker.

Q: Could you tell me where and when you born?

White: I was born March 26, 1921. That's what they tell me. I don't know. [Laughter]

Q: And where were you born?

White: In Baltimore, Maryland. I went to school here.

Q: Can you tell me anything about your education, like elementary school, starting there?

White: Well, I went to elementary school No.104, at Presstman and Cary streets, right next to St. Peter Claver. And for junior high school went to 130 down on McCulloh Street, corner of Lafayette. And to high school, I went to Douglass. Old Douglass High School here on Carey and Baker Street. I went to Morgan College, I studied mathematics.

Q: How was your experience at Douglass? You picked up the flute, right, you started playing flute in high school?

White: At times it was the piano. But my nieces started, so I thought I'd teach myself, but my left hand was behind my right. One thing, I say I could read and write better.

Q: Now, when did you pick up the flute? Do you remember what year?

White: I was about fourteen, around 1935.

Q: And you continue playing the flute now, even?

White: Yes.

Q: Are you in any bands right now?

White: I play in the Social Security Band.

Q: And how long have you played there?

White: I started just about twenty some years. More than that. Well, I'll say thirty years anyway. And we also have a church band I play in. O'Neill's Band at Sharon Baptist.

Q: Have you always played in church groups?

White: Mostly church groups, yes.

Q: Why don't you tell me a little bit about the church groups you played in starting as far back as you can remember?

White: I played in Union Baptist Church, and then an East Baltimore Methodist church — Christ Methodist Church, and Sharon Baptist. And my church, we had it one time but they took it away — Trinity Baptist.

Q: So in your years at Frederick Douglass High School, you had a teacher John Bohl?

White: Yes.

Q: Could you tell me anything about your lessons or about your teachers?

White: Well, yes. I think he was German descent. Yes. He seemed to be very good. He was the only teacher I had that was a private teacher. I mean, he was very good also. And I also mentioned Mr. Holloway. He was down, downtown somewhere. He died a couple of years ago too. He taught private lessons. Mr. Bohl was kind of heavy set. The other man was smaller. Well, he was older too.

Q: And did they come into the high school to give you lessons?

White: Mr. Bohl did, yes. He came to the high school. The other man, I went to him, Mr. Holloway.

Q: When did you change teachers from Mr. Bohl to Mr. Holloway?

White: After I left high school, well, I couldn't keep up with the band as well as I thought I could. So then someone was telling me about him, Mr. Holloway. Well, I hadn't had any music before, so it's kind of tough.

Q: How did you feel about that as far as catching up with them?

White: I finally caught up with them. [Laughter] But it was tough.

Q: You played in bands in high school too?

White: Yes.

Q: How many people were in your band?

White: In high school? I would say about thirty some people. There were all instruments.

Q: Who was the director of your band in high school?

White: Mr. Wilson. Mr. Llewellyn Wilson. That was all.

Q: And what kind of a relationship did the kids in the band have with Mr. Wilson?

White: They seemed to like him very much.

Q: So was he really active in the life of the high school? Did you see him a lot or was it just during band?

White: In class. We had class. Each person had different groups. The flutes, I, had to be by myself because wasn't any flute there at that time, but we had several kids that joined later on. There weren't any females there either — I mean in the flute section. There weren't any males rather. [Laughter]

Q: Do you have any other memories from the time you were in high school?

White: Well, I always wanted to play a solo. I had learned the *Star Spangled Banner*, but I never noticed until we got ready to play this solo, that one was written in B flat and another was written in A. And I had learned the one in B flat. I was interested in "and the rockets" — that's the part where the flute comes in — and I was playing the wrong key.

Q: How did that feel?

White: Well, I didn't know until it was over. [Laughter] I didn't know.

Q: So what other types of things do you remember?

White: Well, I liked the William Tell Overture (or the Lone Ranger). There was another song I did — oh, from Halleluluia Chorus, too. And some of the popular numbers too. "Roseanne" I believe it was. And what was the other thing called — Oh, everybody liked the "Tuxedo Junction". I couldn't keep up with that.

Q: So what was it about it that made you want to stay with it even though it seemed like it was hard at first?

White: I liked the music. Yes. And I also liked the way where every instrument almost gets a part to play. I like that part too.

Q: So when you were at Frederick Douglass High School, did you ever go to any concerts that they had there?

White: Yes. They used to have quite a few, at Druid Park, right up the street there and somewhere downtown. Oh, down in Mt. Vernon, down in that area. I can't think of it.

Q: Did you ever go to any of the concerts that the Colored Symphony Orchestra or the Colored Chorus held at Frederick Douglass High School?

White: The chorus and the band?

Q: Yes. Can you tell me anything about them? Anything that you remember?

White: We had to keep up with the main chorus. Of course we're used to doing that in church. That wasn't that bad.

Q: Now, I know Llewellyn Wilson, besides being the director of music at Douglass, he directed a lot of these groups as well, the orchestra and the band.

White: Yes.

Q: Did you ever meet the people in the orchestra or talk to them or even play with them?

White: Yes we played together.

Q: I know the Colored Orchestra played at Frederick Douglass High School especially because they had the children's concerts. Did you ever go to those concerts?

White: Yes. At the high school. We played at the park too at that time. And we used to go to Mt. Vernon — that area.

Q: And how were those concerts?

White: They were very nice.

Q: Did a lot of your family and friends go to the concerts too?

White: My family, yes, they did. Because my father started playing the flute. But he had asthma so he didn't play too much.

Q: Did your father start playing after you or before you?

White: Before.

Q: What about your brothers and sisters?

White: My brother played clarinet.

Q: So at these concerts when your family went, did a lot of your classmates go too or people from your church that you knew?

White: Yes, some. Not many classmates. I don't know why they didn't allow them to come by, but a lot of people I knew. People in the neighborhood too.

Q: Do you think those concerts were the type of thing that a lot of people went to?

White: Yes. They don't have many like they used to have.

Q: What do you mean by that?

White: I think they should have more. That's the way I feel.

Q: Did you say they used to have more concerts like that?

White: Yes.

Q: Was that when you were younger or before you were in high school?

White: Before and after too. Then it stopped. Just around the, when was it? They cut down on it anyway I know. I think they have about six a year now.

Q: After high school, you went into the Park Band. When did you join the Park Band?

White: A year after high school.

Q: Do you remember the year?

White: I don't. No. Somewhere in the '40s. But I hadn't joined the union, see, at that time. But I joined later on.

Q: Do you remember when?

White: Must have been about, possibly 1950, it might be before that.

Q: Were the other members of the Park Band in the union when you joined?

White: Yes. Also I had to get permission to join, I mean to play rather.

Q: Were there other women in the Park Band with you?

White: No, just one. She played the French horn, I think, some kind of horn it was. Ms. Blondea Garner I can't think. She died about two years ago. She didn't live in Baltimore. She had moved.

Q: So what did the Park Band do?

White: They played at most of the squares in the park. And municipal band played on the different street corners like that.

Q: Did you give outdoor concerts mostly then?

White: Yes. It started in June up to end of August. I think we had thirty concerts altogether. This would be on Wednesdays and Sundays.

Q: You had thirty concerts per summer?

White: Yes.

Q: So how did it feel to be one of two women in the Park Band?

White: [Laughter] Well, I went to school with boys so it didn't make any difference.

Q: You were used to it.

White: Yes. Of course, we had men all ages though. 'Cause a lot of the boys had gone to the service — the younger men. I know the one fellow in my class was stationed at Fort Meade, the whole time he was there. He was there four years I think.

Q: Was the band mostly boys in high school too?

White: Yes. Probably is still mostly men and then boys. So we have quite a few girls now playing flute. We have two or three at Sharon [Baptist Church] who play very well.

Q: So overall how do you think playing music in high school and in the Park Band affected your life?

White: Well, I think it helped. One thing too the band became larger, of course, more instruments too. And we didn't have the French horn at school, but after I was out, they had a French horn. What else was there? We didn't have a string bass either. I can't think of any others — only those two.

Q: So besides just having different instruments, what else was different about being in the Park Band versus being in your high school band?

White: Well, I guess the people knew more music. And they were there on time. [Laughter] Yes indeed.

Q: So they were more serious musicians would you say? Were a lot of them from your high school, people that you already knew from high school?

White: No. They were older. Well, see a lot of the men from high school had gone, they were put in the service.

Q: Did anyone close to you go to the service, like your brother?

White: Yes. My brother.

Q: You mentioned that you play now in the Social Security band. What other bands were in between? Did you play in any other groups?

White: Well, the Park and Municipal Band I played in later on. Mr. Gwynn was the conductor then. No, Mr. Dodd.

Q: You said you played in the Municipal Band too?

White: Yes.

Q: Was that something that happened over the summer like the Park Band?

White: Yes. One played one Sunday, the other played the next.

Q: So they traded concerts?

White: Yes.

Q: Was it a different group of people in each band? Very different group I mean.

White: Not the same.

Q: So after the Municipal Band and the Park Band, what other groups did you play in?

White: I played in the Social Security Band.

Q: And do you remember when you started playing in that group?

White: Some of the players helped me very much. But it was the first time I'd been with a group and that was a great help.

Q: How long have you been playing? Do you still play in the Social Security band?

White: Yeah. I go on Wednesday and play there. It's a great help.

Q: And you give concerts?

White: Yes.

Q: I should go to one.

White: Oh c'mon. Invite us to where your place is. [Laughter]

Q: I wonder if I'd fit in with my bass trombone.

White: Yes. You want to come sometime?

Q: Absolutely. I'd love to. Was there any break in between when you didn't play at all?

White: Well, we had rehearsal in the wintertime. No, I played.

Q: So back when you started playing in the Park Band in the early '40s, what was going on in Baltimore?

White: What was going on in Baltimore? The war hadn't quite started.

Q: Do you recall anything going on in the community?

White: Well, they had also a Symphony Orchestra. They would come out and play music, always playing at different schools when I was going to high school. Mr. Wilson had that. And they would play. They'd come for Friday evenings.

Q: What do you remember about those concerts?

White: Well, it was nice. Looked like the whole city was there. It was really crowded.

Q: Do you remember anything that they played that you particularly liked?

White: What did they play? I know they played four parts of it. Different. I can't think of any right now.

Q: Oh, that's okay. You said, a lot of people went to these concerts, so it was really, really full. Do you think it was a good opportunity for people?

White: Yes. I think so. And people all ages came too. A lot of older people I mean would come.

Q: Really? Did they go to other things too, or was this one of those special occasions do you think that people came from all ages?

White: Yes, I think, and older people like the younger ones there. That's the truth. Yes indeed.

Q: So what other types of things went on in the black community? I mean we know there was segregation at this earlier time. So what other community events do you recall, besides church and besides these concerts, that brought people together?

White: Well downtown a lot of people would go to the park in the summer, like fourth of July, holidays.

Q: At these holidays was there one of these bands playing usually?

White: Yes. I know they have a band always to play. And Mr. T. had an associated band over there. He used to play down in the Italian section.

Q: Little Italy?

White: Yeah. Little Italy. Used to go down there. What was that thing they called. Looked like dough. Can't think of it. Oh, I forgot the name of it.

Q: Like funnel cake or something?

White: Yes. It's in grease. It's good though!

Q: So at these holidays, like fourth of July, there was always music there. It was never without music.

White: And Christmas time too. Before the Christmas holiday.

Q: If you had to pick one thing that you think really brought people together, what would you pick at this time?

White: I think picnics bring them together.

Q: And when did people have the picnics?

White: Fourth of July. During the summertime. There used to be boat rides. Oh, where — Brown's Grove they used to call it. I don't know where in the world it was. They had a lot of people on those boat trips.

Q: So you started playing in the Social Security band, do you remember what year?

White: Must be '72. Because I wasn't working at that time.

Q: And the Park Band ended right before you joined the Social Security Band?

White: Before.

Q: The Social Security Band, what kind of music do they play?

White: They play all kinds of music. Definitely. We lost our conductor. He came to rehearsal that day, but he didn't make it upstairs. He died. He died before he got upstairs. It was a sad day.

Q: So going back, how did church music fit into your life?

White: Well, some of the churches had bands, small bands. My church had them. Our pastor cut it out, but I don't know why. I liked it. I think it's nice for the children to get together. I mean all ages. I don't say children, but everybody can play together.

Q: That was like another opportunity for everyone to be together.

White: Yeah. And they can help out, see. The older people can help out the younger ones. Or the younger might help the older. Then you can get with people with your instrument. Like the flute. I was left out a long time before the flute came in. I didn't know whether I was right or wrong, because the trumpet part sounds something like my part.

Q: You weren't involved with jazz music, were you?

White: Yes. Sometime we played with the Park Band and the Municipal Band.

Q: Do you remember what songs you played that were jazz?

White: Oh, they played, what's the thing called? "Tuxedo Junction", I know.

Q: I remember you said you felt like you had a hard time keeping up with "Tuxedo Junction". Why was that? Why was it harder?

White: I think because I knew the song, and sometimes you try to play like you hear. It's not written that way. "Roseanne", they had that too, and also my name, "Rosalie". What's that song they sing at twelve o'clock at night, "Good Night Sweetheart". I don't know if that's jazz or not.

Q: When you played "Good Night Sweetheart" and "Tuxedo Junction", do you think that that was what people really listened on their own? Or do you think that people really enjoyed the other music better?

White: I think they liked both of them.

Q: Okay. So now with the Social Security Band, do you perform concerts for all ages?

White: Yes. We go to different homes, senior citizen homes. The older people, they like it. It's nice to carry something out to them. A lot of them know those songs, those old songs like we play. They really like them.

Q: So do you think music's been as important to you throughout your life as it was when you were younger?

White: Yes. I think so.

Q: Do you have any other memories that particularly stick out, like in rehearsal?

White: Well, this wasn't in high school. This was [laughter] at the Social Security Band. One time, we had been playing a march, the trumpets were playing one march; we were playing another. And the people were ready to clap. [Laughter] Yes, we were playing two different songs. Oh my. But it's funny how, I mean, all the trumpets stuck right together.

Q: Sort of like when you played the solo.

White: Yes. They really, they clapped.

Q: What kind of jobs did you have besides Park Band or anything like that? Was there some other kind of employment that you had?

White: I worked at Social Security.

Q: When did you start working in Social Security?

White: I worked for Social Security during the late '60s I think.

Q: Did the band ever travel anywhere? Like the Municipal Band or the Park Band?

White: I think they went to Washington I think. But mostly here in Maryland.

Q: Were those concerts really crowded too?

White: Yes. They still go.

Q: Does it seem like music played a big part in keeping together the Black community? Just from what we talked about earlier.

White: Yeah, I think so.

Q: Do you think anything else played a bigger role than music?

White: Well, a few ballgames. Yes.

Q: And you said the picnics here were part of it.

White: And the Orioles yes. Especially the Orioles. They haven't been to the top of the list for a long time.

Q: No.

White: Of course, the Yankees and the Orioles, they draw a nice crowd.

END OF INTERVIEW