

Oral History of Jeree Palmer Wade - Transcript

Interviewee: Jeree Palmer Wade, class of 1983

Interviewer: Rosalyn Sealy

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-- Begin Part 1, Tape 1, Side 1 --

RS: ...Wade, class of '83. And we're at her office at for Prep For Prep. When did you decide to go to Brown?

JW: I was lucky. I was in the resumed education program. Did you know that?

RS: Yes.

JW: Okay, so I happened to have been married to a Brown professor, so when I got there, I decided, this is really going to be boring if I don't do something. And I always wanted to get a degree in theater arts since that's what I did. Uh, I had an A.A degree, Associate Degree, from Manhattan Community College. And most of my academic background was teaching. I always taught. So, I decided this is a good chance. And I did it. And it was wonderful. Only thing, it opened a lot of doors for me, that when I came back to New York, I was able to produce, which was something I never did before. But I learned all of that while I was at Brown, because I had the opportunity to do it. Under no pressure.

RS: I understand that you finished the program, completed the program in two years. Was it a two-year program, or was it advanced?

JW: No. I had enough credits to enter into Brown, with all my liberal arts done. All that was done. So, all I had to do, was take two years in the theater arts department. So, also I supplemented my teaching ... which I think they call... I created courses. And I taught some of them at Brown and at other colleges. So, I got credit for doing things outside of Brown also.

I was able to finish in two years. I worked like a dog though.

RS: What were some of those courses that you taught at Brown?

JW: Uh...Performance technique, and actually, I taught at Bryant College, and at O.I.C - Opportunities Industrialization Center, which is in Providence. There, I did an internship. So, I got credit for creating the performing arts program at O.I.C. They had just gotten a grant to have a performing arts program. They had gotten a grant of one hundred thousand dollars from the mayor. And the woman there who was in charge, her name was Anne Clanton, worked out my internship so that I could create their performing arts program. So, I hired the teachers, and I found the teachers, and I created a performing arts program there, so that they could have that as

a part of their arts program. And I got credit for it.

RS: Oh, I see. Okay.

JW: Which is what I applied for, you know - credit. She designed the program and she submitted it to Brown. They accepted that. That that would be something that I could be credited for in theater arts.

RS: I understand that you wrote a musical called "Shades of Brown," can you tell us something about that?

JW: Okay. It was called "Shades of Harlem." What happened was, my last year, Julie Strandberg, who is at Brown - I don't know if she's still there. She was head of the dance department?

RS: I'm not sure.

JW: She might not be there, but and I got to talking about...she's from Harlem, and I'm from Harlem. So we got to talking about really doing something that would be representative of African-American culture, on Commencement. We also felt that the Commencement operates for parents to, the entertainment offering. It was sort of boring for African-American parents, and that maybe we could do something that they would like that would be representative of their heritage. We decided, with help from George Bass, and a lot of other people - I mean Dean Harriet Sheridan - I mean a lot of people helped me to raise the money. And Julie helped me to raise the money, to do "Shades of Harlem" which was a tribute to the Harlem Renaissance. And we invited one of the best musical directors, who's still my musical director, a man named Frank Owens, from New York City, to come up.... and I've worked with him at Brown again doing... reviving the Cabaret, the Brown Cabaret. But that's another story. But we decided to have him come up and do the musical direction for the show, so that it would be "A1". I mean it would be just perfect. And we also invited a guy named Tye Stevens, who is one of the members of my production company and works with me all the time now, and we became very good friends, to come up and start in the show. And he was one of the stars of sophisticated names. And then we supplemented the show with Julie's.... students from Julie's dance department, who... I think we had ten of them. Integrated cast. They were not integrated at The Cotton Club. This is one thing that we did that was a little different. We integrated the dancers in the "Shades of Harlem", and they were the chorus line. And then we invited ex-Cotton Club dancers. Older women, to come up and teach them, one of the original dances that they did at the Cotton Club to "Sweet Georgia Brown". The show was a huge success. We did two shows. We transformed the dance studio into the Cotton Club. Don Wilmeth helped, I mean everybody pitched in and helped. We sold out, both shows. And it was one of the most incredible experiences. Now, that show was the beginning of my success in New York, because then when I came to New York, and shortly after I came to New York, my husband and I divorced, and we are still very good friends, and he is probably one of the most brilliant writers and teachers of African-American literature that you're ever going to find. His name's Ba...

RS: Was that his field of study?

JW: That's his field. He taught creative writing and African- American literature. His name was Barry Beckham. Now, he's at Hampton. He left last year to teach at Hampton, I think for a year. Okay. I mean he really is great. We grew up together. And why we thought we had to get married, I don't know. But we did. [RS and JW laugh]. And it, it yielded two wonderful things: I helped him get his two children through high school, and get them... You know, because he was an unmarried man raising two kids. So, I helped with that, and he helped me get my Degree at Brown. So, we kind of look back on it, and said it really worked out fine. And we're still very good friends. But in the meantime, um, "Shades of Harlem"... Where was I? "Shades of Harlem"...right, okay. We did two shows, sold out, I came back to New York, and shortly after, we got divorced. And I then produced a new show that I wrote called "Shades of the Cotton Club". I'm sorry; I'm getting them mixed up. "Shades of the Cotton Club" was the one we did at Brown. [RS: Ohhhh] When I came back, I wanted to tribute Brown by keeping the name "Shades". Because, even though the shows were totally different, it really started at Brown. So, I wrote a new show called "Shades of Harlem", and that show ran at the Village Gate for a year in New York City. And that, so my you know... so in other words, I really, well to come back top New York... to apply, what I did at Brown and make it successful for me here in New York. And that's really the most important thing, I think, out of all of that. You know, that the very seed that started at Brown, I was able to transform into something that gave me artistic success and recognition in New York City. And that meant a lot to me. It really did, and still does. AND, "Shades of Harlem" was chosen to go to Ubria for the Jazz Festival, and because of the success in Ubria, they came to us and asked us to do another show. And the contract of the show based on the success of "Shades of Harlem". And the show was the same exact company that was in New York City. The same people that ties in the show came to Providence. And it's the same company that opened in New York City four years ago. So, now we're doing an entirely new show, with the same people. And there are two Brown graduates in the show. Brent [?] MacKenzie, who joined the show when I came to New York, and who is one of my dearest friends, is also a Brown graduate, I think Class of '78. And Melanie Daniels, who was also, was one of Julie's dancers, stayed with "Shades of Harlem", every time we do it, she does it. And she's also in "Jazz Alley", the new show. And she is a Brown graduate. She graduated with me in '83.

RS: Okay.

JW: Yeah. So, it's nice.

RS: You co-produced a show called "Miss Lizzie's Royal Cafe", with your husband, Mr. Wade. Urn, and that was also a tribute to the Harlem renaissance. Can you tell us a bit about that? How it differed from "Shades of Harlem", somewhat?

JW: "Miss Lizzie's Royal Cafe", which is now being re-written, was different because it had a book. "Shades of Harlem" was a review. "Shades of the Cotton Club" was a review. Okay.

RS: What do you mean by rev...?

JW: A review is, well, "Shades of Harlem" was based on the kind of entertainment that African-American people did during the twenties and thirties. We were very well known for fast- paced [Says clapping], music, dance and comedy. So, if in an hour show at the "Cotton Club".... Did

you see the “Cotton Club?”

RS: No, I didn't.

JW: Okay, an hour show. There were like cotton clubs all over the United States. And, it was a Black company, doing very fast-paced work. Very fast-paced entertainment. It would go very fast. Like... the White counterpart to me would be Burlesque. But, nobody can do this particular kind of work, but Black people to me. Although you can have White people in the show, but the creation ... it's an African-American kind of a creative thing. Let me explain to you: When I was younger, I was raised in Atlantic City during the summers. In the winters, I was in Atlantic City going to school with my grandmother. And there was a club there called “The Harlem Club”, which is another version of “The Cotton Club”, just not so well known. So, I used to go there when I was very little, and I would see.... I mean, it would just be one number after another [says, snapping her fingers]. And it would go so fast, that you had hardly time to blink your eyes. Even when they were doing slow songs, they were going fast. And it's just a way of working. It's hard for an entertainer to explain it. You'd have to probably be in entertainment to understand the creative concept. That's what “Shades of Harlem” was based on. That kind of performing. That kind of really... The only, I mean, I can't even ... there's nothing today like it, even. We're not even doing it today, you know.

RS: Theater arts...

JW: No, we are. But, I mean African-American people aren't doing it really today like they did it then. Maurice Hine still does it. He has a show called “Uptown, It's Hot”, which is similar to our show, where they tribute Harlem. But, it's a tribute to that kind of entertainment. What I did was I took out anything that I felt was a negative stereotype. For example, in “Shades of Harlem”, in Brown, I took, I integrated the line. Okay? At the original “Cotton Club”, you had to be very fair, with long straight hair to be in the line. “Shades of Harlem” in New York, you see, the line... Every girl in the line was jet Black. I mean, Melanie, who's from Brown is ebony. I mean, she's a beautiful, rich Black. Now, I got criticized because some people who didn't know the history, or wouldn't understand why I was doing this, that I wasn't being authentic. But then why would I perpetuate racism... [RS: Right] while wanting to tribute something that is still good? I tried to take out the elements that were bad.

RS: Okay, you mentioned that it was integrated. Do you mean that both White...

JW: At Brown. Right.

RS: Were in the show. Okay.

JW: Yes. There were three white dancers in the show.

RS: And you were criticized?

JW: No, I wasn't criticized at Brown.

RS: In New York.

JW: In New York it was all Black... They were all Black, but they were BLACK! I mean, they were ebony in color. In the original "Cotton Club", the girls had to be like Lena Horn.

RS: I see, so you were criticized for...

JW: My rebuttal, of course was that...

RS: My relatives were...

JW:... Why would I perpetuate racism? You know, why can't I change history? And still keep the authentic and the real good part of what we did. Because, it wasn't our fault. I mean there weren't Black producers at The "Cotton Club". There were White producers. There were Black artists that did the artistic work.

RS: Did they deem that it wasn't authentic in the sense that it wasn't like the first show?

JW: That they weren't light-skinned. They weren't like the "Cotton Club" In other words, what they were saying, The New York Times, which said I wasn't authentic... I wasn't authentic, they didn't come right out and say it was because of the girls, but things that they said, I knew that they meant that I wasn't true to what the Cotton Club portrayed. And one of the main things was that the girls were very fair-skinned, with long, straight hair. They were not, and my girls from "Shades of Harlem" were very, very dark. You know, by the way, I auditioned.... I didn't choose them, but when Tye auditioned all the girls, the three best dancers turned out to be extremely dark-skinned girls. But, I thought it was a wonderful thing, because I thought it would give us a chance to reverse, to wrong a right. If we're gonna pay tribute many, many years later, let's not pay tribute without making a statement about what was wrong about it. So, to me, that's what I felt was really important. It hurt the show ... A lot of things hurt the show, in that the show...the last song I do in the show "God Bless The Child" has four lines in the end, that we wrote specifically, we wrote them at Brown, and we wrote them specifically for this show. And it says "I'm so tired of Leaning on somebody else's shoulder. I know I can make it, I know I can make it if I get a little bit boulder. I know we can get it back, if we pull ourselves together. Harlem's still standing. Harlem's still standing, though it's been through stormy weather." Now, people in New York City really don't want to hear about Harlem still standing. To be honest with you, a lot of people aren't interested in Harlem standing, in the sense that culturally, it's going to stand. And so, the show was hurt. And the producers told me that this would hurt the show. And they were right. It hurt the box office, because I wasn't able to get that \$22 ticket - that's the real very rich theater-goer. Because they really don't want to see that. And they don't want to hear that.

RS: And that was the whole overtone of the show itself.

JW: Of course it was. Of course it was. But, see, the shows..."Bubbling Brown Sugar" was the first show and it was wonderful. The next show like this was sophisticated. I mean there have been shows like this before: "Ain't Misbehavin'" ... all these shows were great. I wanted to go one step further. I just didn't want us to be tapping and singing. I wanted us to make statements throughout the show. The girls would just happen, but to me, you know I used that. And the last thing was the song. To me, it was a song to Harlem. That Harlem was still standing, and if we stuck together, as a people, and continued to create, and continued to grow, and continued to

maybe even create another Renaissance, then we will be alright as a people. You know. And that's what I was saying.

RS: It's the spirit of the Renaissance.

JW: It was the spirit. Right.

RS: A lot of people found it threatening.

JW: A lot of people found it threatening.

RS: Did they see it as a political statement?

JW: They saw it as not an entertainment statement. They just didn't, this is not a part of what they wanted to see when they go to see a "Cotton Club" Review. But, the show did well, because Black audiences loved it. But, the Black audiences were church groups, and they couldn't support the show, because they keep in group sales, they came on T.D.F, so the money...They didn't bring me the money, but they filled the houses every night. And I was fine. I was deeply upset that the show closed, but I anticipated it, and I knew it was going to happen, and it was a choice that I made between being really artistic and commercial, and knowing what the White audience would really want to see, and being true to what I felt I was doing. And that's what I felt I was doing. I mean, I wanted to make a statement. "Shades of Harlem" was a statement for me. And it really was important to me that somebody hear the statement, and the people who heard it, it meant something to. The people who didn't hear it, it didn't mean anything to. So, fine. You know, I'm sorry that it put people out of work, you know, because when the show closes, it puts sixteen people out of work who otherwise would be working. And that was my only really regret, including, myself by the way. <Laughing> I wanted to work too.

RS: Right. So, would you say that it failed because unlike the minstrel shows, it didn't cater to White audiences?

JW: And you'll find that when you watch the shows, Maurice Ashul had the same problem. He was making statements too. Same problem. I mean, it's their preference too. And they have right, but we don't have the money and the economic power to support our own shows, or we would!!

RS: Right.

JW: We'd be there. We'd be paying forty dollars for a ticket, or twenty-two fifty, if it's an off-Broadway show. But we just don't have that economic power. I mean people are worried about other things than going downtown and seeing a Broadway show. So, the shows don't last. And most of them, now, our people are not just throwing stuff out. They're trying to do things that make statements, that say something that are real. And, these shows don't last. The ones that did last, should have. And the ones that were just did entertainment... They were there, or my show could never even had made it at all. You know, so "Bubbling Brown Sugar" and they had to be there. They had to do what they did. And then I think, Maurice and I tried to make -- this is Maurice Hines I'm talking about -- Gregory's brother, tried to make another statement, and both of us... He did his on Broadway, and I did mine off Broadway, and they didn't make it, because I think we were trying to make other...We were trying to say other things.

RS: How long did the show run for?

JW: Which one? “Shades of Harlem”?

RS: No, “Lizzie's...

JW: “Oh, Lizzie's Royal Cafe”. Now, we never did.... Okay. “Missie's...” was mounted in Philadelphia.

RS: Oh, we've been talking about “Shades of Harlem”. I see.

JW: “Miss Lizzie's...” was mounted in Philadelphia. And the reason why it was different from “Shades of Harlem” is that it was a book. It was our first time writing a book-show. There was dialogue. That's how we got to...[RS laughs, interrupts: I thought we were talking about “Miss. Lizzie's” all along. Okay.] [JW laughs].

JW: Okay, umm, “Miss Lizzie's” is very exciting, because it's being re-written now, and it's being re-written by my husband, and a songwriter, my new husband [RS laughs: Stress that]. And the songwriter is a genius. He's White. He wrote “Good morning Heartache”. Okay, so it's being re-written. And we're very excited. They've got a three-year plan that they're going to re-write it, and see what happens. “Miss Lizzie's Royal Cafe” was a tribute to women of that era. I'm always tributing somebody, right? [Laughs] But, it was. Because I read in my “Cotton Club” book, research, I found out that there was a woman named “Pigs Feet Mary” – “Pig Foot Mary”, and she sold pigs feet on a cart. [RS: Pigs foot, pigs feet]. And she made enough money to buy real estate. And, in the same book, I found out that there was a club called The Royal Cafe, on 135th Street, and Fifth Avenue. Now, independent of each other, I put the two facts together, and said “Why don't we write a story about this woman who used to sell pigs feet on a can, and made a lot of money, and owned a nightclub? And my husband said, “That's a good idea. Why don't we have her have a sponsor, or...” what they called in that day a “sponsor”, which meant that she had a man pay for the nightclub. “... and have... Let's tell their love story. And, let's even go one step further. Let's show the friendship between her sponsor, her boyfriend, and someone else. Have another male involved.” This is how we write, you know. [They laugh] so, and that happened because Adam's friend, my husband, his name is Adam, his friend who just died, and they had such a wonderful friendship, and I think he was thinking that this would be a good way to write about his friendship too. And also, he feels very strongly about friendships. He feels that we don't do enough artistically, in the theater about friendships. Black folk don't. I mean, in our theater we need to be doing more, and seeing more about this kind of bonding and these kinds of relationships. So, he wrote the play. It was produced at The Copia Theater in Philadelphia. And it was wonderful! It got great reviews. We knew that it needed some work. First of all, we were using unoriginal music. We were using music that had already been written by other people. So, we knew that to bring it to New York, we would have to write original music. And, Mr. Drake, who was the writer, was a very good friend of ours, and we showed him the script - He loved it! Not only did he love it, but he was willing to work with Adam on the re-writes. So, we're in the midst of.... He's writing all the music, and then that's a secret. [RS laughs]. I'm not telling anybody the... We're in the midst of doing that. So, Adam's doing that now. We have four shows on the boards, in the production company, that are being worked on. “Miss Lizzie's Royal Cafe” - that's Adam and [?] are working on that, “Jazz Alley” which is the show that's going to Italy...

RS: Okay, where is that now? Is it currently playing In New York?

JW: We haven't finished it yet. Right now we're just doing the music. And "Jazz Alley" [says in high-pitched tone] you're gonna hear this word again. [They laugh] It's a tribute to great jazz artists and great jazz musicians. Anyway, it's Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Holiday, Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Coleman Hawkins, James Moodie. It's a tribute to different jazz... So, we're doing all music that's been done. So, right now, it's like a review. That's the difference. "Jazz Alley" is going to be one of those kind of shows [says snapping fingers]. It's going to go fast. And it's exciting because all of us are doing different.... I'm doing Dina Washington which is exciting for me, 'cause I'll have to listen and I'll have to learn her nuances and I'll have to sing as much like her as I can. I'm doing Billy Holiday, which I've already done. So that's exciting. My husband's doing Nat King Cole. Tye is doing several things; He's doing Cab Calloway and I think he's doing James Moodie. So I mean everybody, it's a challenge for us, for this group to move now from doing music from The Cotton Club into a jazzmedium, when most of us - we know jazz because we're musicians, but really Branis [?] is the only jazz singer, pure jazz singer. So, we're all you know, really taking on new music, which is exciting. But Franco, once again, is our musical director. So that's the second show. That show leaves for Italy on the third of July. And we stay for eighteen days. And it's just, it's wonderful. It really is. That's where we took "Shades of Harlem". And the next show, is my baby. And it's called "Easy". And "Easy" is a day in the life of five girl singers, and it was produced by ADELCO, which is the Black theater organization here. If it seems that I do Black shows, that's not primarily true. It's just that I've been sponsored by Black people for so long [laughing], that my shows seem to end up in the Black community. [RS: Okay] But, I'm now trying to move onto universal themes. And it's "Easy". "Easy" is a universal theme. It's a day in the life of a girl singer. She could be any color. And it still would - four girl singers. And, what we did was, five singers met over the course of a year, and we complained about our feelings about being in the business for so long, without, you know, "Rotten club dates" - that's what you call them. You go out and you sing, and people talk while you're singing. [RS laughs: Right, Okay] You know, and how hard it is to make money, and how discouraging the recording industry is if you don't sing like Jodie Watley, or somebody like that. You know, you're not contemporary. And you may be too old. You know, I mean, so we...for a year we complained, complained, complained for a year. After the year was over, we put everything into a computer, took everything out, and scripted it. I did that. I wrote the script. And it was chosen - Oh, we did it at Brown! We did a concert version of it at Brown in '86, I think....'86 or '87. Commencement. [RS: For Commencement? Okay] So, we were chosen by the ADELCO people to do it as a part of their festival. And we did, and we wrote all the songs. And it was just wonderful, but what we realized after...it was well received ... but I am not Neil Simon. I mean we reallyneeded a good scriptwriter to come in and re-write the script. So, we did. We hired a scriptwriter. We hired a man named Bill Harris. And we said "Here. Here's the printout, here's the videotape of what we did at ADELCO. You can meet with Adam and I any time you need to...", and you know, we sent the lawyer to work out whatever negotiations had to be worked out, and he has the script, and he's re-writing it. And we also feel that the script is perfect for a television series also. So, we're excited. So, that's the other show. And then of course, "Shades of Harlem", always still does go out. It's with the federal theater and they send it out for Black History Month. And so we still have that. So, that's it. And it all started because I went to Brown. It really did. I mean, I don't think I would have had the guts to do it her in New York, had I not been to Brown, or I would have done it before I went to Brown. You see what

I'm saying?

RS: Okay. You studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts? Was that very inspiring? Or...

JW: No.

RS: Oh.

JW: I, no, no.

RS: Was that here in New York? Was that a professional...?

JW: Yeah. That was when I was really young. That was at one time, that was like the dramatic arts school. Umm, I didn't, I don't think I got much out of it. I think the acting that I learned, I learned at Brown, ironically, which...and Brown it not known for its theater arts department.

RS: No, it isn't.

JW: Let's face it, you know. But Jim Barnhill, who was the acting teacher that I worked with, was very, very good. I mean he was just as good as someone in New York City. And I know, because I've taken classes in New York City for years. So, I wasn't impressed with The American Academy of Dramatic Arts. I really wasn't. I mean, I think it's overrated. Frankly.

RS: You toured with "The New Christy Minstrels"?

JW: "Christy Minstrels". One of the heaviest [?]s you're ever going to meet. [RS laughs] When I got out of two years of college, I started auditioning all over New York City. I got a job teaching, and I was working as a playschool teacher at a hospital, which was fun. It was very rewarding too. And very sad. I was working with kids who had Leukemia, who were terminally ill. So you'd be there one day, and the next day they wouldn't. So, but I grew a lot. But, in the meantime, I was auditioning all over the place, and one time I went to this audition with a friend. A White guy, who played guitar. And he said "I'm going to audition for 'The New Christy Minstrels'." And I said, "Well, I'll just go with you, you know." I went, and the guy said "Can you sing?" I said "yeah". He said, "Well, sing." So, I sang. And they said "You know, we've been looking for a White male, but we think we're gonna get a Black female." They called me the next day, and they wanted to fly me out to L.A. So I did. I flew out to L.A. And I went, and I never came back. I didn't come back for.... I mean, I came back, you know, in the course, but I quit my job from L.A. It was terrible. I mean it was one of those irresponsible, [RS laughs] most all myvacation pay...But it was worth it. I did join the group. It was quite an experience. It was an all-White group. I had a chip on my shoulder. I had real strong feelings about retaining my Black identity, and probably a little guilt about joining this folk... which was in the sixties. [RS: Oh, really. Ok.] Afros, and their... And I felt guilty, but I learned... I traveled with them for four years. I travelled all over the world. I went to the Far East. I went everywhere. I went to Vietnam. And, only place I didn't go, was obviously, I refused to go to South Africa. Evenat that time, I refused to go. So, I stayed. And they went to South Africa without me. And I, the same manager managed Edwin Hawkins. You know, umm, oh what's his sister's name? You would know the sister. They're a gospel group. You see, [laughing], you're too young. It was a song

“Oh, Happy Day”, that was a hit years ago. [Sings] Oh Happy Day! Remember that? Oh, you must be a BABY! [RS laughs] Well, anyway, Edwin Hawkins is a great Black Gospel singer. Just great! So, they managed him. The same group that managed “The New Christy Minstrels”. How, I don't know. But, you know. They let me stay with them and I learned a little from them while I was....'Cause we were based in L.A. So, I couldn't come home while they went to South Africa. So, I stayed and I learned a lot from him. But, I really did enjoy it. I made a lot of friends. Friends that I have to this day. And there were many talented people in the group. There really were. And we learned a lot from each other. There had never been a Black person in that group.

RS: Oh really?

JW: No. And I sang “Oh Happy Day”. That's what I sang. Edwin Hawkins arranged it specifically [laughing] for guitar. Yes, it was the worst version you've ever heard. But, actually, in the first group I was the best in the band lot. 'Cause the others were, they were talented, but I was stronger. But then people started leaving and the next group that came in, we were all equal. And it worked. It was a much better group. We really, we created a lot together. One girl, Linda Hart, became Bette Midler's background singer.

RS: Oh, really?

JW: The other girl Terry-Anne Musin was “Miss America”. They were really talented. She was “Miss America” ... gee, I don't even remember the year. But, they told... We worked for these people: Sid and George. And Sid and George acted like they were doing you a favor hiring you. They were paying us. They would like, say “None of you can sing. We're helping you.” They'd make us feel so bad. We were young, right? But, Terry, they made her so mad. They told her she was untalented, and that she would never make it and she should go back home and have babies. And it took her two years, but she swore that she would become “Miss America”. And she did. And they sent her flowers. And she never acknowledged that she was even with “The New Christy Minstrels” [laughing].

RS: Why did they try to discourage you?

JW: Oh, that was their way of...

RS: Making you work harder?

JW: Yeah. Yeah. That was their way.

RS: I see. I should mention that this was before you came to Brown. This was in the sixties. Umm, did this prepare you for your acting career? Or...

JW: Yeah.

RS: It did.

JW: And it taught me a lot of the business, because we were on the road constantly. So, I learned a lot about the business, I learned a lot about travelling, I learned a lot about different people. And I just really... I was glad when I left, to go out on my own. I was ready. It was time for me.

But, the time I was with them was the time I should've been with them. It really was. It was a wonderful experience. Just travelling alone. Travelling alone was incredible. You went to Vietnam, and that was during the War. And that was, that was very frightening, and you had very mixed feelings. You know, I mean I had mixed feelings at all times. I mean we would do five and six shows a day.

RS: Did you perform for the American troops there?

JW: Yes, yes.

-- End Part 1: Tape 1, Side 1 --

--Begin Part 2: Tape 1, Side 2 --

JW: We did, oh ok. We did a lot of shows every day, but it was horrible. That was a horrible war. And it was sad. It was a very sad time. You know, because these boys were really over there. They were over there. You know, they were not coming home. A lot of them never came home. A lot of my friends that I went to school with didn't come home. So, it was really hard for me. And the song I sang was called "Bring The Boys Home". And we sang it, and it was sad. It's a great record. But I mean, it was just a sad...and I couldn't, I could barely get through it. Because the whole, you know, it was just...And Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On", was the record at the time. It was just, it was a very...! Felt, of all the things that we did, that was the most meaningful, because we really brought a lot of happiness to them. You know. But, it was just a horrible, horrible thing. It was horrible when you think about it. It was a horrible war. So, we were there, and we were in Korea. And, you know, it was quite an experience. The closest thing I've come to feeling this ambivalence, and these, I mean for me, I can get angry, but I also get so sad, you know at things like this, it was when we went to Haiti, a few years ago. Before Duvalier fell.

RS: With....

JW: We went with "Shades of Harlem". And we went because we belonged to an organization called, and my French is terrible, but it's [?].

RS: Very good.

JW: Is that right?

RS, laughing: Sound right to me.

JW: And we go there, to perform, to raise money for a hospital. And we went out into a church to see how the parents would bring the children... What it is, is we raised this money to support a team, that would be there for you. We do shows over here too, in New York. But we go there, we haven't been of course, in the last year and a half. But, we went twice. But, the first time I went, you see this rich, lush country, then you think New York's streets ... the beggars in New York or homeless in New York are bad, you have to see Haiti. It's just terrible. These people were begging. Some people are living like kings and queens, and some people are...! mean, most of the people are on the streets, really begging. They are a proud people. They really don't want to be begging. There's a little difference than some of the people I see on the subways today. You

know. These are real proud people - the Haitians. And, they would work if they could work. They do work., and still have to beg. You know, so the travelling I think, more than anything I've appreciated in my career. Travelling around. Because it's opened my eyes. And I don't think you can know about other people until you travel. You know? I mean I think you can read about it, but you don't see it, until you really travel. I have not been to Africa. But there are just certain places I think you should go. Because then when you come back, you can re-group can figure out what you can do. Even if it's not a whole lot. You know? But at least you have a reason. You can weigh things and balance.

RS: You umm, you used your experience in Harlem as a springboard for your career, and with travelling, I guess you've learned how to incorporate universal themes or at least use those experiences and you might want to incorporate them into tributes to Harlem Renaissance and so forth, but I guess it's with the new insight, umm, which makes it more universal. In that sense, it might not be explicitly so. But, in the sense, I guess it would sort of....

JW: I think that we as Black people have to be more universal now. I think it was very important for us to explore and get to know our heritage, and understand it and incorporate it artistically in what we do. I'm talking about artists really. But now as artists, in order to make an economic base, I think we have to be universal. Which means that, "Miss. Lizzie" is a universal theme. It's just that it is written about Harlem and about Black people. But the theme, the love story is universal. That's what I want to see writers do. You see, "Easy" is a universal theme. Everybody goes through what these five girls go through, but they are Black, so the music is uniquely Black, you know. I mean it's not "R and B". It's just uniquely Black because it was written by this particular group of people. Just as if you go to a show that's written by Jewish people, you're going to see some Jewish culture, even though the show... The show called "personals", which is a wonderful piece, which was about personal ads in the paper, was just wonderful. But it was written by a Jewish person, so their heritage was a part... You could see the thread. That's what I want. So, I want the universal theme artistically, but then our heritage... We don't even have to work for it. It'll come. It'll be there. But, I don't think we need to bang anybody over the head anymore, right now, as I tried to do with "Shades of Harlem" 'cause I don't think we'll make any economic gains that way, right now. I think we need to go for universality with a cultural acknowledgement in our art for the viewer and for the creator. We have to acknowledge ourselves when we do the art, and not be afraid of that. And the creator has to acknowledge that this was written by an African-American person. So, fine. You know.

RS: What do you mean by "economic games"? Does that mean that the shows would be more accepted and more people will come to them? Therefore they'll be more successful?

JW: I think they'll be more interested in the subject matter. I think, unfortunately, the theater-going public is no longer interested in just Black things. You see. I think that they're interested in talent, though. And I think the only way we're going to really get a hold on the Broadway Stage and Off- Broadway Stage and stay there, is if we do things that are universal. But the work is there. They'll still know it's about Black people.

RS: So, it's not a compromise at all.

JW: I don't think so. You know, there's a lot of universal... There are universal themes that

everybody can relate to, and I think we have to start dealing with those as Black writers. You know, I really do. This write Bill Harris, that's...his work is like that. He deals with a theme, and it just happens to be Black, but White people could play the part too. But it just happens that right now, Black people play it. But, you know "Miss. Lizzie's Royal Cafe" certainly cannot be changed into a White play. Because then they'd have to change.... It is about Harlem. But the theme itself is about a love song, a love story between this woman and this man, and her strength. She could have been Jewish, whatever, you know, but still, it's about this woman, you know and her strength and what she had to overcome, and how she did it. You know, I think we're leaning, I know, as producers, when we don't do the tributes in terms of jazz, but when we're doing the book shows, and things that have a story, we're leaning towards looking towards universal themes. Like child abuse. My husband's writing a book called, not the old husband, the new husband [they laugh].... My new husband's name is Adam Wade, and he's a writer and a singer and an actor, and just...a director, producer.... But, he's writing a book called "God's Last Naming Dam". And it's about a man who was accused of being a child molester, and wasn't. You know, he wasn't. 'Cause some people are accused and they're not. Nobody has looked at that. Most people are accused and they are! !

RS: Right.

JW: But some people are accused and they're not. You know, what ha.... I think there have been a few people who it's been proven that they were not child molesters. I think he started with something he saw on "60 Minutes", and the reporting was very good, and it looked like this was the case. So, he thought he would like to write something about that. Now, that's something that could happen to anybody. You don't have to be Black to be a child molester. And that can happen to...or to be accused of it. So, that's something that he hasn't finished, but that's one of the themes that he's worked on. And he wrote a book, called "The Decent Nubia". "The Decent Nubia" is a story about a mythical land in Egypt. He's been writing it for ten years. He just finished it last month. A mythical land in Egypt, and about these two kids who were banished from the land when they were children. And it's also about cats. In other words, they transform into cats. They are cats, and they transform into people and they go back and forth. It is the most.... I just finished the manuscript. Now, that's another thing, and the only reason I know they're Black is because their hair is woolly. You know. That's where... And I know certain things..... But the book itself could be about anybody. And I think that he's headed in the right direction as a writer. You know. But there should be people writing about issues that pertain to Black people. No doubt about it. But I think as artists, if you're going to mainstream, that there are some of us who need to try now, to get into the mainstream. And I think that we can get into the mainstream, without compromising, if we use universality as the tool. And our own natural work.

RS: Okay, you've worked in the theater, and you've also worked on television. Did you work on television during the 70's, before you came to Brown?

JW: No. Yeah, before. I did extra work, and what they call "Under Five" lines on soap operas. And Extra work is very good. Yeah, you could be an Extra. Anybody can be an Extra. You're lucky if they see your foot or your arm. [RS laughs] An "Under Five" is a little more prestigious - where you have five lines [laughs]. You could see like twenty-five thousand more. My television experience is really limited. I did a lot of singing on television. But, in terms of acting

on television, that's my husband's forte. He's done a lot of television.

RS: You've worked on "All My Children" and "One Life To Live"...

JW: Extra or "Under Five".

RS: Oh, okay. Well, tomorrow, "Johnny Carson Show".

JW: Oh yeah. Now, "Johnny Carson" I did with Bill Cosby. Bill Cosby, I toured with him, on a college tour and he was hosting the "Johnny Carson Show", and he brought me on. And that was wonderful. It was a wonderful experience. For him, it was great. He's very good at trying to push young talent. At that time I was young. That was after "The Christys" though. And before Brown. For me, I was awful. Yes, Child. My first exposure on "Johnny Carson", and I was so bad.

RS: Did you perform or were you interviewed?

JW: Um hum. [RS laughs] I sang fine. I mean my voice sounded.... but I was petrified. I was like this..... [RS laughs: Oh Really.] And Bill Cosby had had his dresser go out and buy me a new dress, and I wasn't comfortable with the dress. She just really was not.... Either she was in a hurry or somethin' but I looked awful. [They laugh] She had bought me this little hair piece, hair comb. I mean, it was just awful. So, I wasn't comfortable with....and it was just, I was awful. I still have a video. [RS laughs] Nobody wanted to tell me. I called my mother, she said "Oh, it was very good". [RS laughs - LOUD] I called my manager and he said "Well, you know you've done better." I mean it was just... I just blew it. I really blew it!

RS: Really.

JW: Yeah.

RS: It was a learning experience at least.... Exposure in television.

JW: Yeah, really... I was just awful. And after I finished the song, I tripped.

RS laughing: To top it all off.

JW: I have the video. I must get that video. Change it to VHS, so I can look at it from time to time. Let's see... My husband was the first Black talk show host.

RS: Oh really?

JW: He had a network show called "Musical Chairs".

RS: Is that where you first met?

JW: Actually, we did, but he didn't remember me. We did meet there. I did a show as a guest. But he didn't remember me when we met again. We met when I came back from Brown the second time.

RS: Okay.

JW: I thought he remembered me. I said "You remember me? I was on your show." And he said "Oh yeah." So about a month I said "Did you really remember?" He said "Yeah, you were a contestant weren't you?" I said "No. I was a guest."

RS: Ooooh nooo. So what would you say was your most meaningful experience on tv? Or did you learn, the show that you learned the most? You did the "Miss America" show.

JW: Yeah. When I was really singing, other than the time I was on "Johnny Carson", there was no problem. I mean it was just singing, and that was fun. My most meaningful experiences have been, after Brown, my husband had a show called "Media Arts Magazine". It was a Cable show. And he interviewed different people every week. And when he couldn't, then I did. And my most meaningful experience was interviewing a woman who now is here with me, her name is Hazel Medina, she's one of the Negro Ensemble actresses, and that's where we met. And, my husband couldn't make it. He had to do a voice- over, and I interviewed her. And it was wonderful. I was wonderful. And then they gave us... We did a Christmas Show, which was nice too. So I think those were the two... because then I wasn't under pressure. I wasn't on network television, and I could sort of learn a little more. But the interview with Hazel was just wonderful. We didn't know each other, and I didn't know I was going to have to do the interview. But she really worked with me. And Hazel is now.... a "Prep For Prep" second performer. She's here too, and she works part-time also. In fact she works for the director. She knows computers. You see, we have to learn all this other stuff, so we can survive.

RS: You were talking about radio commercials you did.

JW: Yeah I did.... My biggest one, my biggest hit was called "Heaven Sent". And I think it was like seven years ago. And they played it. I earned a lot of money off of that, because you get residuals every time they play it.

RS: Every time they play it.... Is that true?

JW: That's right. Yeah. It was a cycle, but I mean I think you get it for the cycle. If I remember, I got it for the cycle. But I made a lot of money on the commercial, because they ran it for an entire year. And even when I do my act, I'd sing the commercial, and people would remember. They didn't know it was me, until I would do it in the act, but they would then remember the commercial. That was my biggest one. And then I did a lot of little tiny ones. Jeans.. I can't even remember them. Beer, banks...

RS: Oh really? These were all before Brown?

JW: I did "In Bank" in Rhode Island while I was at Brown.

RS: And you did film soundtracks?

JW: Yes. Well, okay you know sometimes... That was while I was at Brown, and they called me and they said "Look, we have to do a whole soundtrack and we need a singer. Can you come in and do it?" I said "Okay." And you know, I thought I could use the money. I'll come in. Well, I

did the soundtrack, and the music was peculiar. I mean it wasn't like porn or anything, but it was a little, kind of risqué. I mean it was disco, but it was a little risqué. I said "Well, what is this movie about?", and they said "Oh, it's sort of X-rated." And I said "What?"

RS: After or before you did it?

JW: This was while I was doing it.

RS: While you were doing it.

JW: I said "X-rated? How x-rated?" I said "You mean porn?" He said "Oh no. It's not porn. It's what they call "Soft-core", or something? Well, anyway, I did this whole soundtrack. Now, there was nothing in the music that was dirty or anything. I mean, in fact, one song was very beautiful. But, it was disco, so I thought "Fine." I mean they did things like "Love Emergency". You know "Ha ha, I got a love emergency." It was disco! You know, disco. But it seemed peculiar to me that they would do this "Love Emergency" song. Well!! Should this be on the tape? [laughing]

RS: Uhhhh? Yes.

JW: A few months later, someone calls me and says "Jeree! Do you know that you were on a porn film?" I said "You mean, I said "I'm not on a porn film." She said "No, no, no, no. You're singing on a porn film." It was x-rated.

RS: Did they credit the music too?

JW: Yes, they had the nerve to [laughs] They had the music... They had all the songs sung by Jeree Palmer. [RS laughs: Oh My God!] My friend, I never had the heart to look at her. Yeah. And people were calling me.

RS: Congratulating you, no doubt.

JW: I was so mad. These were producers that I had worked with a lot. And it wasn't a real dirty movie. It was soft porn. It wasn't like porn, but it was still...

RS: Porn.

JW: Porn. Yeah. It was, I guess what they call "Soft core". I mean he said "Look." He said "All they do is you see them kissing, and then you know, it's like, more foreplay than real play, I guess." But he says "It's not real porn." I said "Well, sure." But yes, I'm on this movie.

RS: Okay. Was this the only soundtrack you did?

JW: Yes. No, I did some others, but that was the only one that was like that. The nightclubs are when I'm happiest. That's my forte, or concerts. But, that's what I really am. I'm a cabaret singer. What they call a cabaret singer. That's why at Brown I've tried to revive the cabaret. And I did. And we did Cabaret '82, and they did Cabaret '83. And, that's when I'm happiest. So, I do a lot of nightclub work. Now, I don't do as much, because I'm very particular about where I work, because I have a job. I don't have to work every.... But I am, I'm going to be appearing on June

3rd at the [Background noise drowns out her words]... The next best place in New York City. It's called "Green Street". And then I do a lot of work at a place called "The Jazz Center". The Jazz Center was the interim place I worked between "Sweet Waters", which is where I worked year after year after year, and has a club here in New York, and where I'm going to be going in June. And I still work with jazz. Now The Jazz Center is wonderful. I teach there, and I work there, and I'm very happy there and I'm very comfortable. It's run by an Asian woman named Kobi Narita. And it's just, I can't tell you. It's a place where you can go and perform, and it's not the most elegant place in the world. It's in Soho. You got to go upstairs in this little loft and everything, but it's very big. The sound is exquisite, her lighting and sound, it's all perfect. Where you could work in the most elegant club in New York City, and the lighting and sound can be just next to nothing. And she just has a deep feeling for artists. And so she really works to make everything we do there... We do it well. And she has applied for a grant for me to do a... There's a woman Florence Mills, who was a Black singer in the 1920s, who died at the age of 34. Nobody knows about her, so I want to do her life. And so Kobi has applied for a grant for me to do an artistic piece on Florence Mills. So, she's been a teacher, she's been a friend, and she's just wonderful. So, the jazz center is the place where I teach, and I work, when I don't want to work in clubs, and where I have been working for the last three years instead of clubs.

RS: It must have been hard for you when you were first starting out as a single Black woman. 'Cause I know that a lot of famous singers like Billy Holiday, and well, it could be really lonely on the roads and so forth. What was your main source of support at that time? What really kept you going?

JW: MY mom. My mother. Umm, my mother is brilliant, first of all. She really is. She's a brilliant woman. Umm, she just retired and moved to Hawaii. But, whenever I needed, and it was lonely on the road, especially when I started out with "The Christy Minstrels", because I was in an all-White group. And she wrote me letters, long, like four or five page letters. She was travelling too, because she was speaking. She was head of the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists in... She's an anesthetist. She teaches anesthesia. Umm, so I'd write her and she'd write me long letters and we learned a lot about each other during the time we were both on the road. I was with the "Christys", and she was travelling, doing speaking engagements. She was the President. She had to travel for a year. [Phone rings] So, we'd write long letters to each other, and she told me a lot that I didn't know about her. Because, see, my mother was, first she became an R.N. She and my father were in New York. And I was in Atlantic City, raised by my grandmother, because they were both working very hard. She became an R.N. Then she went back to school, and got certified C.R.N.A. So that made her a certified registered nurse anesthetist. She put people to sleep. Then she went back to school and got her Bachelors. Then she went back to school and got her Masters. And now she's getting a Ph.D. And through all of this, I was growing up - through the R.N, and the C.R.N.A and the Bachelors. And she... So I stayed with my grandma. So, I didn't know a lot about her, although she was there on weekends and holidays. I really didn't. So, we learned, we sort of became really close while we were on the road, because I'd be so depressed. I really did get depressed. I really did. I was bored. I'd go... and this, I'm going to tell you something, I had culture shock. Yes, I did. Because I was raised in a very ethnic environment, in terms of food. I mean I ate certain foods; my grandmother raised me, okay, so you know the kind of rearing that I got. So, first of all, I wasn't eating... I mean I couldn't, I wasn't eating the right foods. I wasn't getting vegetables, because my grandmother, although Grandmother cooked a lot of greasy vegetables, but I still wasn't getting them. You

know, I wasn't getting what I was used to. And also, we were very involved in church. And there was no church on the road. So, after about a year, I was very depressed. I really was depressed. And my mother and I talked and talked, so my mother said "Look, go to the kitchen, and find the cook and ask her to take you home."

RS laughs: Oh oh.

JW: So, that's what I did.

RS: Oh really.

JW: I went to the Holiday Inn kitchen, found a cook, invariably, almost always there was an older Black woman there.

RS: Urn..

JW: And I'd get to know her, I'd invite her to the show first, and get to know her, and I'd talk to her, and she'd take me home and feed me. And that literally I did, and I made a lot of friends. And I keep in contact with a lot of them. But, I mean they were so warm, they were so open, and they'd take me to church, and I'll never forget, in El Paso, Texas, this woman cooked the best meal I ever had. She cooked fried chicken. It was just like my grandmother's. She made iced tea, she cooked greens, and I mean she cooked me a wonderful meal. They would never accept any money or anything. I'd always have to go away and send them something that I thought they would need. Never! It would have been an insult to even offer them money. And I never took the White kids, because that was something I wanted to keep to myself. Not that I was being really nasty or anything, but that was something that I kept to myself. They knew where I was going, but I just never invited anybody to go with me. First of all, I didn't think that the person that I was going to visit would feel comfortable. And second of all, I really didn't want to share. And it happened about four or five times over the course of the time. I would find these people and I'd go. And if we came back to the town, then they'd know I was coming, and I would let them know I was coming, and it was like coming home. My mother told me that. She said, "Go and find a Black that..." she said, "Your instincts are good. You won't just pick up anybody. But go to the kitchen, and there's gonna be a hard-working Black woman there, and if she takes care of you, I'll take care...." You see, my mother has taken care of so many other people's children, and that was her natural response, because that's what she does too. She's like that too. You know, I mean she just adopts people. If you were in my house, and she was there, you know, she'd adopt you. She'd adopt you, she'd talk to you for a little while, and then you'd be adopted. And the next time you saw her, you know, she'd know all about you, and she...You know, that's just the way she is. And that's her orientation. So, it was an easy answer. And she knew that what she had given out to other children, somebody would give back to me. And they did.

RS: And now your husband is your main source of support.

JW: Yes.

RS: Oh!

JW: My husband is so, my husband is one of the most wonderful men in the world. You've seen

him, you just don't remember him. He's been on "Good Times", and I mean, when you see his face.

RS: I have seen him. Yes. I have a picture...

JW: Yes.... And he's real special. Everyone loves him. He is the father of all of us in terms of the production company, and when we go on the road. I mean he takes care of all the artistic... I take care of the business, but he takes care of all the artistic stuff, and we know that he'll make the right decisions. And he has a tremendous talent. I mean he's a wonderful singer, and a wonderful actor. And he's just great. So, yeah... He's super. We live, we have, unlike my first marriage, we have identical lifestyles, where in my first marriage, my ex-husband was very academic... that kind of a lifestyle, which really wasn't good for me, because it wasn't what I do, or who I am. So, you know, hopefully, he'll find somebody a little more academic, and I certainly have been lucky and I found this man. So, it just... you know, we think alike, he's ten years older than I am too, which helps. He really is much more mature than I am. And I do get silly.

RS: Oh, good for you!!

JW: The next day, he'll say, "You were really fretful and restless last night". You know "You were asking to do this, you wanted this..." and I'm so spoiled. I've been a blessed child. I mean I haven't had... I've had a good life, and good people in it. The people around me have worked hard to see that I've been happy, and so in turn I try to work hard to see that the people around me are happy, and it's sort of been really nice. And I think that it's worked out. I think. Yeah, it has. This program here where they identify minorities in the fifth and sixth grade, kids. And it's called [simultaneously with RS] "Prep For Prep". And they put them through a rigorous two-year program. And then they place them in all-White private schools, okay? And then, of course, they go on to college, if they make it through the program. And their biggest problem is the problem that we all will have eventually in life, if we live anywhere in America. We have great counselors here. Some of the kids that went to Brown didn't have people here, like these people here, to really get them through. But, as I said, I feel the main problem is defending that soul force; that inner thing that's inside, uniquely you, and uniquely African-American, or Haitian or whatever you are. But it's uniquely you, and it's.... you have to defend it. If you don't have that built into you, if you don't have that strength, by the time that you get into a situation where there are a lot of people that are going to really do some mind games with you, and that's what it really boils down to, you won't survive, or if you do, you'll be an angry person. You won't be able to cope, or you'll back off and not be as successful as you could have been, because you'll be afraid that you can't do it, because somebody just kind of told you you could on a Q.T. You see. So, I feel my job is to work with young people who haven't been told that, and try to teach it to them. That's why I chose this particular program to work with. I worked with juveniles before in group homes. And that was when I was very young, and I had a lot of energy and I was able to work with them. They have changed now though. And I'm not able to get through.

RS: Have they regressed? Is that what you're saying?

JW: We've regressed, I think, because we've lost our value system. And because we've lost our sense of compassion. A lot of us... I think it happened in the sixties, when Martin Luther King died, and Malcolm X died, there was no one else to tell us, why we were Black and proud. We

were just Black and proud, and so a lot of young parents, that's all they told them. And they also told them that the world owed them a living. We have a tendency not to want to take responsibility for ourselves. I'm not a victim anymore. I mean I'm aware of slavery, I'm aware of everything, but I'm not going to be a victim anymore, and I'm not going to be less than you because you're White. And I'm not going to not get a job because I'm Black, and I'm not going to not go to school because I'm Black, and I'm going to use being Black as any kind of excuse. Being Black is not an excuse! Being Black is a blessing. It's not an excuse. If you are Black, you have this kind of inner magic and fire. You really do, that White people.... They have something else. Whatever it is, let them identify it, but it's not what we have. So, we're unique. So being Black is not... I have a real problem with people not taking responsibility for their own lives. And I have a greater problem with the race not taking responsibility for its own life, and not doing it with a sense of respect and compassion for each other. So that's why I can't protest, and I can't... Because I know we're going to end up in a big argument about who's right and who's wrong, and who believes what, and why won't you believe they're right. You know, and I don't want to argue. I mean, you know... Just give me one or two more Black children and I'll try to make them strong enough, and believe enough in themselves that they can make it in the world today. Because I don't believe that we have.... Just because you are poor, you don't have to have a poverty consciousness. You know, I mean yes. Just because you're poor, you don't have to stay in that state of mind. And if you get out of that state of mind, you'll get out of that state. You know, and I don't believe in this. So, people... some Blacks have a hard time with me, because they say I'm not Black enough. And maybe I'm not, but I... for them. But I'm fine for me. I'm quite happy being just what I am, and I love what I am. Umm, I really have a hard time with all of that. I think you've got to take responsibility for yourself. I have a hardtime when I see young men, strong young men and healthy, dirty and begging, because I'm getting up at 6am, and running a production company and coming here to work, and you aren't sick, so don't ask me for money. Now, that's not to say that there aren't some people who are legitimately homeless and need help, but I have a real hard problem with some of the Black men that I see, in the subway. Because I know by watching their movement, and the way that they move, that they're healthy. And I just think that they think that the world owes it to them.

RS: This is the end of tape 1, this is Rosalyn Sealy, and I'm interviewing Jeree Wade Palmer.... Palmer Wade. Excuse me.

JW: That's all right.

-- End Part 2, Tape 1, Side 2 --

-- Begin Part 3, Tape 2, Side 1 --

JW: Now what's happening, I don't think it's their fault that they're not educated, I really don't. I think it's their fault that they don't do anything about it. But, now I don't know whose the real people that need the help, and who doesn't need the help, because I think a lot of people don't need the help, and are just sliding by on those who do, on their plight. I think a lot of people could straighten up their lives and get a job, but they don't want a job, because they don't want to be a messenger. I have a friend that teaches in Atlantic City, and the funniest thing he ever told me was, he had a group meeting about getting a job... He was in charge of getting jobs for these young people. First of all, they would never show up on time, if they showed up at all. One boy,

he was supposed to be there at nine o'clock, so Hud, that's my friend, went to his house and knocked on his door at ten o'clock, and he was getting out of bed. And Hud said "Why didn't you show up for your job interview?", he said "My mother didn't leave me any money." <Silence> That's his reasoning and he's eighteen years old. He had a little seminar and talked to the kids about what they can do with their lives. You know what they want to do? They want to be President of the Casino. Now, they cannot read or write. I mean their whole conversation, you know this is five or six, seventeen, sixteen, eighteen year-old Black men. And their feeling about their lives was that, if they can't have a job where they could make a lot of money, they don't want a job. They can make more money using drugs or pushing drugs. I mean let's face it. When you see that you can make all this money with Crack, why should you get a job? But, if you had a value system, if you had the Church or something to fall back on, then you would think at least twice. You know, a horrible thing's happening in the Black community. I mean I don't know what's happening in the White community. I'm really not that interested in you know, trying to change things. I'm really concerned about us, though. In terms of what's.... I'm concerned about mothers killing their kids, you know, because of Crack. I'm concerned about Crack which is just, I mean changing people... their entire personality. All their dreams, all their hopes, and I don't know where it's coming from, you know I don't really want to get that far, because I'm not really [?], but if we don't do something about ourselves soon, we're in danger of killing each other. It's our responsibility. That's what Malcolm X said. I mean he said, after he travelled and had come back, and it changed his entire philosophy... not really changed it, but had modified it because he had been able to travel and see other people, and he found they were all different colors. You see. And he comes back, and if he and Martin Luther King had only had a chance, we would have had the greatest leaders, both of them, we would have been soooo together. These two men would have made the Black people, you know, and of course that's why they were killed, but I mean they would have made us queens and kings. They really, I mean I don't mean that in terms of money. I mean that in terms of self-image, and of what we would've done for each other. Because their whole philosophy was based on non- violence and helping each other and helping ourselves. Gandhi, the same thing. These are three men and if we can find another one, boy, I'm really proud of Jesse, not that I think that he knows all the answers, and I do not think he's a Martin Luther king or a Malcolm X, but he's making history, and he's making it with dignity. At least this year he is. As far as I'm concerned, his race has been one, his presidential race, his campaign I mean, has been one of dignity. He hasn't been throwing, he hasn't been name-calling, you know, I mean he has really made that look so bad. And I'm kind of proud of that. And I had different feelings about him the first time he ran. But really, he's no better than anybody else that's running, or worse. You know, I mean none of them... They're all kind of strange, but at least he is doing it in a very positive way this really. And he's making history. I mean when have you seen a Black man up there every day in the news... in a positive way. And then that throws me... I'm just rambling now... to the Tawana [?] case, which I'm very upset about, because I really feel... There are so many kids that are doing things, that we should see in the paper every day. And I'm not understanding what's going on with Tawana [?].

RS: Can you tell us a little about that?

JW: You know, well it's just been the most puzzling thing. I mean, every day there are new accusations, I mean it doesn't... It's not sounding right. I mean the more that goes on and she doesn't talk, the more it sounds like it really didn't happen.

RS: Okay, she's a Black woman who....

JW: Who was uh...

RS: allegedly raped by six white men.

JW: Right, but we have Sharpton and Mattox and Mason[?], who to me are very strange, and also who speak of hate, so I have a problem right there.

RS: They're two Black political leaders here in New York.

JW: They're two Black people [Laughs]. They're not leading ME anywhere. And they're speaking of hate. So, I mean, I sort of judge everything that comes up.... I'm terrible, I just think of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X - Would they have wanted us to react this way, and I don't think they would have. I mean, their statement was, to the District Attorney, "We come to you in hate. We feel hate. We grow hate. We are" you know, we are full of hate for you."

RS: Are you saying that we should channel that hate and do something positive or just try to be...suppress it.

JW: Well, I don't think we should hate. And the worst part of that is, they're talking about Aberent, so they're talking about a White prosecutor, but then they turn around and if a Black person doesn't agree with them, they call them names. "Uncle Tom" you know, and no Black person, everything with a Black person is quoted when they finally did come up and say something, David Dinkens, and a few other Black leaders, has been in a positive way. They always preface it with a [?] statement, in the direction of Sharpton or Mattox or Mason, and then they say "But the facts are...", perhaps Tawana should speak so we could at least, you know, is this an obstruction of justice? When they retaliate, it's calling names. Name-calling of other Black leaders. And I have real problems with this, and I just have problems with the whole situation. It just isn't sitting right anymore. If it did in the beginning, it definitely isn't now.

RS: So you were saying that we should, we as a race, should take control of our lives, and take responsibility for our lives, and we can do that in two ways. We could either look for a leader. We need a positive Black leader, who's gonna help us better our self-image, or we can work with individuals, which is what you're doing here at "Prep for Prep".

JW: I think that the, I don't know how to do it, 'cause I'm getting nervous. I don't know if we're going to be able to do it anymore. I think that the first step would be to be more respectful of each other. I think it would begin with us respecting each other, even if we don't agree with each other, but at least to respect each other. At least to have the decency to acknowledge that another person has the right to their opinion. I think if we can just start that. I think the Kwanzaa the value of Kwanzaa, would be the basis for some kind of sense of community with Black people. If we could live that all year round....

RS interrupts: What is that? Sorry....

JW: Kwanzaa is the African tradition of Christmas... what the African passing of the year, from the old year into the new rights of passage. But it's also how they celebrate Christmas, or it's the

American version of it. I believe, if I had children, and I don't, that I would want them to celebrate Christmas and Kwanzaa consecutively, because Christmas is a wonderful time of giving, and I think it teaches people giving. But I would like... But the Kwanzaa Christmas is more of a ceremony. And the values of unity, community, commitment, truth, you know, all the right, good values, that if we could just begin to live them day-by-day, because our race is from a community. Our people were community-oriented. Africans, the tribes, were very community-oriented. Everybody went and learned what they should do to contribute to the community. I mean they were taught to go off and be initiated and then come back into the community and then learn how to be a part of the community. But it was all about community. And we're away from that now. So far away from it that, that's our one salvation. If we could just get back to that somehow, in small communities... I think the Black family in maintaining it and trying to reinforce it, is one way. And I think we try to do that. But the frightening thing is that our older people... we're losing them, because they're dying and now we're gonna have a generation that live differently, that live very isolated lives. And I don't know what that means. It's very frightening to me. It's frightening to me to see Black people give up. And I think many of them have in terms... That's when I was saying I don't know who the real guys are, because some really have given up. Some of the Vietnam vets who have come back from the war, there's some of them. But now I don't know. But now there's some twenty- one year-old guys out here, and they aren't working because they don't want to work. Because they don't want to take a messenger job, or they don't want to take... You know what their names are? The names are things like Romel, and African names, you know what I mean? My husband said, "I don't understand how you can have an African name and not get a job." [They laugh] How could you have an African name and not get a job, when the tradition of an African is self- responsibility, and responsibility to the community. How could you not get a job? But, so now I don't know who's who anymore.

RS: Right

JW: You can't tell by dreadlocks, you can't tell by afro, I mean who's, but there are some people out there that have given up, and they need to be helped and given faith, and you know, and I think that the Vietnam War yielded a lot of that, I mean a lot of the older men that we're seeing, you know, have given up... people from the Vietnam War. Black and White. I really do. But, then ... they're young. You can't tell they're young because their faces are so dirty, you can't see. But they're really young, they just don't want to get a job!!!! And I have a problem with that. You know, really. And it's not anybody's responsibility but ours. Nobody owes us anything anymore. We owe it to ourselves. And if they do, are we going to wait?

RS: This is a Rosalyn Sealy, and this concludes my interview with Jeree Palmer Wade. This is tape two. The end of tape two.

-- End of Interview --