

Ma Jones

.... = Unintelligible

Italics = Sounds like

I: Interviewer

M: Ma Jones

I: Good afternoon, Ma Jones, very wonderful, thank you so much for being willing to do this, because you know it's not only for you, it's for the young people, and we get the benefit of hearing your story, but this way other people are getting the benefit of hearing. So tell me a little bit about your place of birth. Where were you born and what was it like growing up there?

M: Well, I'll start from my parents. My mother and my father were both Jamaicans, but they met here in Panama. And my mother got pregnant here and asked her mother to come when she was to give birth. Her mother told her she was not coming to a....country. And she ordered her, ordered her home. So, when she got to Jamaica, ten days after I got there, I was born. It so happened that she was lucky – she had a cousin that used to run a yacht, and he picked her up in Colon and took her home. Otherwise nobody knows, I might have been born right on the boat if they would have taken me. There goes that part of the story. Well, when I was three months old, or two months, I don't remember exactly, she came back to Panama with my sister and me because my sister was born over there, too, and she took her back here, went back with us, she was a sailor. And when we came back we were here for awhile with my parents. Then she went back again. My mother, she kept traveling up and down to see her parents and took us with her. When we were little, little girls, she took us and left us; when we were five or six years old, she decided that she would leave us with our grandparents. Of course, she ran home every year to see us. And when I was, that picture that I showed you of my parents, I was eight years old. Now my father went home to Jamaica with her at the time to say we were big enough to get into the school, and he put us in a school in a home with a teacher and his wife who kept boarders. Unfortunately, the teacher was all right, but the lady, the teacher's wife, she was a very mean person. She treated us very shabbily. And my mother had a niece and a first cousin living in Cuba. They came home our first Christmas there and they saw us, and the niece wrote a letter to my mother same time, and the cousin wrote the letter, so my mother got the letters the two, the same time, the two different letters. My father turned – that's what they told me, you know, I was too small then – my father turned to her, "Go and bring my children. Just go and get my children." So she came home to Jamaica and took us away from those people because the treatment was too shabby. My grandmother said "Leave the children with us...."

DVD SKIPS HERE

....flogged us. I remember one evening we came home from school, and she let us have our supper and everything, and then she stripped us, stripped us, and she flogged my sister – took her in her bedroom and gave her a proper flogging. I heard my sister crying. When it was my turn, she took me in and she did the same thing. So, that killed the goose that laid the golden egg. Somebody wrote and told my mother about it, no, when my mother's sister came to look for us, she told her, she told the lady how rude we were and....stems from the home we boarded in....got us to keep....because the school was too packed and they didn't have any....My father heard about what this woman....and he said we....by all means....but he didn't leave it to my mother this time....he himself wrote to them....

DVD SKIPS HERE

I: ... proverbs that you remember....like to say....

M: I wouldn't tell....I was, everything I have said, "Hell no." That one comes very quick out of me: "Hell no" or "Hell yes." So, I tell you the truth, you know.

I: Have you ever heard of Louise Bennett?

M: Oh yes, I knew her. But she and Melva's mother were very good friends, yes. I met her, and we talked, but we never got close enough to be friends because she was going to one school and I was going to the other school then.

I: Did you ever see her perform or did you hear any of her poetry? What do you remember?

M: Oh lots. So many of them I wouldn't be able to tell you which now, really couldn't.

I: Did you ever see her perform? When you think of her, what thoughts come to mind?

M: There's one thing that I wouldn't be able to tell you now. I know she and this fellow, I think it was Ronnie Williams, they used to perform a lot together, but so many things I couldn't tell you....Melva's mother....met her again when she came to Panama.

I: So Ma Jones (*tape stops*)

M: Yes, ma'am. This thing bothers me.

I: How would you classify yourself in terms of identity?

M: How would I what?

I: Classify yourself in terms of identity? If somebody said, "How do you identify yourself? How do you define yourself?", what would you say?

M: Just another person, yes. That's all, just another person.

I: Would you classify yourself as Jamaican or Panamanian or not in terms of nation at all?

M: I'd have to say I'm mainly Panamanian or Panamanian-Jamaican or Jamaican-Panamanian. That's what.

I: What comes to your mind when someone says West Indian? What do you think of when someone says West Indian?

M: Well, I'm a West Indian and I accept it; I don't put up any argument.

I: What characteristics or behaviors do you associate with West Indian?

M: Nothing special, nothing special. When some of them make me think so bad that when you hear all they act and see what they do, you just, you don't say....you don't try....try yourself one way or the other.

I: Some of their behavior makes you ashamed?....

M: And sometimes in the....to when it comes to that, sometimes....hear how they carry on it makes you feel ashamed. I'm telling you that now....

M: First Orville's father, and then to my last husband, who died. Orville's father was tall, good-looking, nice-looking. Any girl would like him, you know. But he was not nice, and I know when I got pregnant with Orville, I used to pray to God. I believe in God a lot, you know. I used to pray to God and ask him that the baby would never come like him. Neither in looks nor in ways. Well, he hasn't got much of his ways as you can see, but his whole body, every time I see him, I see his father, his body, you know. I said, after all, we are the parents – something must come from him, and I'm lucky that it's just his body, just his shape. So, one of the most miserable people I have ever met.

I: Tell me about your second husband.

M: Well, he was eight years older than me I think. Yes....and he was a nice guy. We could get along, and I could get him, I could show him, I could....and he could see and calm down, so we got along, we got along nicely. But if he and Orville would....just a little boy, nine months, say a year old, he and Orville became very good friends, very, very good friends. So much so that....when he asked me to marry him, I said I would, and my mother said, "You going to take

that chance again?" I said, "Yes, mom, because look how nice he is with Orville, and Orville is a boy, he's going to need a father." So she said, "Okay, missus, try your luck." But this luck was alright. He was alright. So, number two didn't prove bad.

I: So did you consciously teach Orville to speak English or did you think it was important for him to learn English?

M: Mmm hmm. And when he was quite small, a friend of Orville's that used to be one of the Canal Zone teachers told me, said "Ms. Lil, don't you ever, ever – I am a teacher there – but don't send him to the Canal Zone. Don't send him to the Canal Zone School here, down here." I don't know whether he meant that branch or all the branches. I don't know. I don't think so, for a lot of them came out all right or what he really meant, but that's it, after all. Then it was quite in my favor, because the guy who was the headmaster then at that stage was a little, I can't think of the word right now that I should tell you. He was so, I decided, he had his choices and I feared, I said "I'll keep Orville out," so Orville used to go to a private Spanish school, a little one. But we were far away from that school when we moved and....and my mother left here when Orville was four years old, and she said "Give him to me. Send him home with me." I said, "Okay," and took his passport picture, I have it there. And when I looked at him I said, "If I send away my baby at this age he isn't going to know me." I remember I could hardly know her when she sent me away first. I said, "Uh uh. I'm not sending him with you. If you do him anything," just I told her, I said, "If you rough him up or anything he don't....and tell me. I'm not sending him with you." He was four then, but when he had six years, I have a picture of him there now, I sent him when he was six. He could write and he was a great talker. I don't know how he won't talk. He could tell you anything, and I said, "Now if you spank him, you do him anything, he can send and tell me himself." And I'll send him to you now, and I sent him when he was six. Put him on the plane alone, but I had two friends that were going on the plane the same day. A wife and husband, and I asked them to keep an eye on him for me, and they did. They sent to tell me, they said when the plane stopped, he looked out the window, he said, "There's my grandmother, there's my grandmother waiting for me. See her off there, look, look!" I said, "Good, he's on the ball." And I sent him at the age of six, and I've never regretted it. Came back when he was, he used to come in early days, he would come, but afterwards no. He came home for good when he was fifteen, ready for the States or the university. And I sent him. And I haven't regretted it; I haven't regretted a penny I spent on Orville. So you have my life story.

I: *(Male voice)* We are just going to change cassettes....

M:I like to talk about them though.

I:So, Ma Jones, what specific message do you want to communicate to the younger people of the community, to the other generations, the generations

coming behind you? What would you like to tell them? What would you like them to know?

M: Study hard whenever you have to. Trust God. Never forget God in anything you do. Never.

I: Okay, would you mind telling me your year of birth?

M: My birth?

I: Year.

M: December 29, 1910.

I: And what was the last grade of school that you completed?

M: Last grade of school?

I: Yeah.

M: ABC. Melva, explain to her what ABC mean now.

I: Kindergarten.

M: Kindergarten.

I: So what was the last grade of school that you completed?

M: Let me see now. What should I say? I went to school so, you see how many schools I had to go to, so I can't tell you.

I: What was your official profession?

M: They don't, I don't know what I was supposed to be, but I discovered, what did they use to call it. What should I tell you?....again....nonsense.

I: What city and state in Panama do you live?

M: Hmmm?

I: What city in Panama do you live in?

M: Panama, just Panama.

I: And what is the name of your neighborhood?

M: I don't really know, you know.

I: Is there any other information you want us to include that we have not yet touched upon?

M: I don't think so, for I told you all my school days, no, I didn't tell you, well I suppose, I ended up as a stenographer anyway, so that.