

MFP-005

Interviewee: Hollis Watkins

Interviewer: Dr. Paul Ortiz

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O: Okay. We are here with Mr. Hollis Watkins at the 2008 Sunflower County Civil Rights Reunion. Mr. Watkins, I want to start off by thanking you so much for agreeing to do the interview. Could you tell us why you are here today?

W: My major purpose here today as part of the reunion is to share with the people here today background information on music as used as a part of the struggle, sing some of those, and talk about how those songs in the struggle was used and the major purpose for those songs being used. That's the major purpose for my being here.

O: Why was music so important in the Movement?

W: One of the reasons that music was so important was because music in the Movement, as we saw it, could be used as a tool for bringing people together, of introducing yourselves to people and getting close to people, motivating people and inspiring people. When you look at Mississippi in particular, Mississippi is a state where religion is very, very prevalent, so people are used to singing songs. So if you're going to be working with people, it's a lot easier to get people to listen to what you have to say if you come to them with something that they're already familiar with rather than trying to introduce them to something new from the very beginning. So that's one of the reasons that the music, the songs, were so important, is that people were used to singing in the different churches. So if you come doing that, then they can relate to you. Also, music is therapeutic. It is also a bonding device. You can send messages through music. You can also

motivate and inspire through music. You can present different things in music that is not as intimidating, that is not as frightening, when it's presented through music as it would be if you sat down in dialogue or if you gave a speech. Those are some of the reasons that music was so important.

O: What was your musical background before the Movement, or did you have a musical background?

W: I grew up in Mississippi and Southwest Mississippi not too far from McComb and Summit. I'm the youngest of twelve children. I grew up going to the churches. My family was a family that sang. In addition to singing in the church, being a part of the church choir, my family itself had a group of its own, which at that time people called a quartet but it was more of us than four family members who sang so it wasn't exactly a quartet, but that's what it was called. So growing up, going to church, being a part of the church, singing in the church, singing in the choir, also doing a little bit with my older brothers and father in the church. Naturally, singing became a part of me, and as I got into the Movement, I analyzed the singing and realized how important it was as a tool to be able to reach and communicate with people.

O: Now, you mention you analyzed the music, like when you were getting in. Did that mean that you were looking at, say, the lyrics? How did you go about analyzing?

W: In some cases in analyzing music, I listened to the lyrics. In other cases, I just take note of the rhythm. I paid strict attention to how people joined in and participated, you know, in the singing. In other words, I'm looking at how this is really a bonding piece in the church when people would sing songs that people were familiar with, 99 to 100 percent of everybody in the church would be singing. There's not a lot of things you can get 100 percent participation from, so to me, that's an indication that this is a very powerful instrument here as a part of this process. Also, when I looked at how the church service took place, there was some singing going on before anybody began to talk. To me, that is saying to me that this is an attention-getter. This is a bonding force that is taking place. This is getting people ready and prepared to receive a message coming from someone. I'm saying if this can work and has tremendous effect in the church, then I can use that same approach in working with people in the community as a part of our mass meetings. That's how I'm looking at it.

O: Mr. Watkins, when you say music is a bonding force, do you mean that you saw the music as a way to get people to bond with each other in a way?

W: Well, naturally, if something is going on and everybody is participating in it, that within itself, that very act, creates connectivity, a connectedness to everybody else that's participating in that. It's a process of unifying people for that particular moment. In most cases, we as human beings, if we can see or are shown how, we can come together around one thing, that's a good indication that we can come together around other things. Maybe not to the same extent but at least a

certain percentage of us can and will come together, and maybe it will be at the same percentage level. But it, it creates that possibility there. The thing that I realized and discovered is that when people get involved in singing, they throw off their weight that they're carrying around. They forget about whatever their burdens are right then and there. When you're not dealing with your burdens, your troubles, then for that period of time, you're free. If you have the feeling of freedom for that period of time, you're more open and you are more susceptible to listen, to try to get understanding and even more open and susceptible to the possibility of joining on and doing something in relationship to what is being said that need to be done, then you would be—if your mind is completely bogged down on I got to deal with this, I got to deal with that, you can't think about what somebody is saying to you because you are dealing with your problems, that which is weighting you down. Singing is a way of getting people to shed off some of the weight that they carry.

O: When you think back to the Movement years in the [19]60s and in Mississippi, is there one event where you saw music just transform people or one particular—it could be more than one but just one experience that you just, that kind of stands out where music just kind of transformed everything?

W: See, I saw that process happening back then. By me staying in Mississippi continuing to work, I still use that process. I see it happen every day, you know, as a part of the process. For me, there's no one. I can't think of any one or two or three specific events in terms of which that happened because, see, in my case,

you know, you're looking at, what, forty-seven, forty-eight years of all of this. So I've seen a lot of that and, you know, I can't just say, you know, one specific event that was more so than others. I mean, it doesn't register in my brain that way.

O: Do you have a favorite song out of all of the songs that you sung or participated in?

W: Believe it or not, I don't have a favorite one, because to me, to me, the songs are tools that I use to do and reach people that I'm trying to reach. So for different kind of people, you use different kinds of songs. It's just like if you're getting ready to do some carpentry work, you know, you want some hammers, some nails, you want some levels. You're not coming out with the axe and a hoe. Good tools in reference to other things, but not in reference to doing this carpentry work. So what I do is I look at and try to get an understanding of who the people are that I'm dealing with and determine based on that assessment which of the songs that would be best. And if—which in most cases I do—but if there's a chance that I can't exactly figure that out, then I just reach and grab any song that is one that is about bringing folks together and do a test to see how it works. That's it. If, for example, I'm in a certain mood, you know, and I want to do something for myself, I'll think about certain ones that do that. For me, I see them strictly as a tool. So because of that, I don't necessarily have my favorite. Most folks have some little favorite, but, you know, I just say all of them's my favorite. I

put all of them in my bag. I got them to be used at various points in time, depending on what it is I'm doing and who I'm doing it with.

O: What songs are you going to sing today?

W: I haven't figured it all out yet.

O: You're going to kind of wait to see, like, how—

W: You know, I need to—you know, I want to look into the eyes and the faces of people and see how I deal with it. I'll come from that, so I don't know. If I'm going to be singing, very seldom ever do I say I'm going to sing this, I'm going to sing that. Because there have been times that I did that, and when I got there and looked into the eyes of the folks, et cetera, and who was there then, hey, look, that won't work for these folks, got to go somewhere else. As a part of helping me to decide that, in addition to looking, I'll make sure I get a good understanding from McLaurin as to what I'm supposed to do. I think, though, I'm supposed to be talking about some historical stuff as it relates to music, the role it played in the Movement and that kind of stuff. So that's what I do. I'll go from there, might start way back from some real historical stuff and come through. Sometime I do that, sometime I start in the middle, sometime I just deal with an end piece. It also depends on the amount of time and all of that.

O: Yeah.

W: As a part of that process, I'll probably also talk about the history of some of the songs and how they were used because that's part of what, I think, people need

to understand now, is that most folk don't have understanding of the history of songs and how and in what manner they were used. So I try to set that up.

O: This question just occurred to me when I was listening to you talk. When you think about the 1950s, 1960s, were there any musicians or types of music that you think seemed to reflect this longing for freedom that might have had an impact, I mean, outside of the immediate Movement?

W: I'm sure there were. I just can't pull any out of the top of my head right now to go back to the [19]50s and [19]60s, but I'm sure there were. Who knows, if I'm doing that kind of thing, it comes to me, you know, I'll talk about that. But generally there is, and here again, those of us that were deep into the religion and the church thing, you know, other than the spiritual stuff, you know, that wasn't a part of our repertoire, other than that. You know, that was the devil's stuff. So if you were young, then you had to slip off and get involved in that. We stuck strictly to the religious.

O: To the religious music.

W: Uh-huh.

O: Yeah. How did the Movement change your life?

W: How did the Movement change my life? It probably prevented me from venturing off in money-making careers. I don't know how that would have been, so I can't really talk about what change that would have been. But the Movement enabled me to get closer to people and get a better understanding of people as to where

they were coming from, you know, why they did certain things and all of that. I think all in all, the Movement helped to make me into a better person. But in terms of specifically how it changed, I don't really know. If I hadn't got into the Movement, there's a great possibility that I would have been or could have been a great athlete, which I never became. You know, because I was growing up as a child and when I went to high school and even when I went to college, I was very fast. I was an excellent baseball player, you know, and a pretty good basketball player. I could, for example, relatively easy at that time we dealt with yards rather than meters, I could relatively easy do—

Unidentified female: Oh, hi!

O: We're just finishing up.

Unidentified female: Just finishing up?

W: Come on, we'll get you on here with us.

Unidentified female: How are you doing? It's so good to see you.

W: I'm doing okay. Thank you.

Unidentified female: Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt.

W: I could relatively easy do the 100 yard dash in ten seconds.

O: Are you serious?

W: Yeah.

O: That's a good time.

W: I understand that. I say I was pretty fast. My last three years in high school playing basketball, I had between an 18- and 22-point average. In baseball, I was the pitcher's worst nightmare. I played baseball and only struck out three times in three years.

O: In three years?

W: In three years.

O: Wow.

W: The three times I struck out were with the same person, nobody else other than with that person, twice in one year and once in one year. So in three years of playing baseball, I struck out three times.

O: That's amazing.

W: There were times when I came to the bat and the pitcher would have to throw sometime anywhere between fifteen and twenty-something pitches before our duel was decided. I was pitchers' nightmare. So had I not gotten into the Movement, there's a possibility that I had a chance in any and all three of those, and I probably could have even done something in terms of singing. Those were opportunities that was out there—

O: Yeah.

W: —that went by the wayside that being involved in the Movement, you know, I could not look at and only was able to use my talent in terms of singing to enhance a deal with the work that I was doing in the Movement. All of that, don't really know. See, those are just possibilities.

O: Of what might have been, yeah.

W: Yeah, those were possibilities.

O: Okay.

W: And, you know, I don't regret having done what I did. I don't regret not being able to pursue any and all of those.

O: Right. Well, Mr. Watkins, I know you have a busy day, and I think you're next or coming up soon on the program, so I'll just end it here. But I want to thank you again for sitting down with me.

W: Okay.

O: I really appreciate it. It's been an honor.

[End of interview]

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