

**THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO**  
**INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEES: Audra Clinard Foil (AF) and Jean Hester McMillan (JM)

INTERVIEWER: Sherrie Tucker (ST)

DATE: May 27, 2009

The interview took place at the Feminist Theory and Music 10: Improvising and Galvanizing Conference held at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's School of Music. Also present were UNCG Development Officer Miriam Blackwelder Fields (MF) and various Unidentified Participants (UP) of the audience.

ST: We always start an oral history interview by saying this is an oral history interview with Jean McMillan and Audra Foil, and members of the workshop of the Feminist Theory and Music 10 Conference: Improvising and Galvanizing. So—

UP: Date?

ST: Date. Thank you so much. A very important aspect. The date is May 27, 2009. So we're interested in the Darlinettes, and maybe we could start out just by asking you both to say your names before you start talking so we can know who is talking at the beginning of the tape, and then tell us a little bit about what you remember about the Darlinettes. And then afterwards, the people in the room have some questions that we would like to ask as well, so—

JM: Okay. I'm Jean McMillan, and Miriam [Blackwelder Fields] twisted my arm to come. I really don't remember that much about it. I told her it was either in my freshman or sophomore year. I played the saxophone; we did dances on campus. The only out-of-town that I remember was going to Person County to Roxboro [North Carolina] because a friend [Nancy Newell, Class of 1959] of mine who was two years ahead of me was in the Darlinettes, and she got me into this. And that was our hometown, and that's really the only thing I remember. It was not—I don't remember that much. I told Miriam I didn't. That's a long time ago. I graduated in '51 so you can see how long that was.

ST: And what did you play?

JM: I played the saxophone, the alto sax, and I had played this in high school with our band and our marching band.

AF: I'm Audra Foil, and I played in the Darlinettes. I was in the Class of '53. and I think I played in the Darlinettes my last two years. And, as you said, a friend of mine twisted my arm to play with her. She played the trumpet: Mary Elizabeth Sampson Irvin [Class of 1953] from Greensboro, and we were on the same hall in Shaw Dorm, if it's still standing, I don't know. [laughter] Is it? It is, okay. And I enjoyed it; I loved music, and I played the clarinet, and I sang some with the band, and we did mostly concerts around in the school. It was a lot of fun and I enjoyed it.

I took a lot of classical music at Salem College [Winston-Salem, North Carolina] growing up: piano and voice, and played the clarinet and the oboe in the high school band, but I loved the modern music at that time. And I would be practicing my piano at home, and my mother would come in, and I would start playing Bach. [laughter] My brother majored in music and taught for forty-five years from UNC-Chapel Hill, and my parents, of course, kind of wanted me to follow in his footsteps. But I enjoyed the jazz music and the modern music of that time, and I liked to dance—ballroom dancing, shag, and all that kind of doings—and so I when I had a chance to play in that type of band, I was thrilled to death. So it was a lot of fun and a lot of good fellowship.

ST: Does anyone have a follow-up question?

UP: Well, how long were each of you in the group altogether? And did it continue beyond when you left, and you left when you graduated? Was that how that worked?

AF: I think when I graduated, I think that was the last year for awhile, and then I believe they started up again. I'm not sure.

JM: I have no idea. I was only in it for a year, that I can remember. And it was my—either freshman or sophomore year. Why I got out, I don't have any recollection. I have senior moments. [laughter]

ST: Do you think you were still in school when you stopped playing?

AF: Oh yes. Oh yes, oh yes. But I have been back since to hear the band here, the jazz band, and enjoyed it. And later on I found out that my daughter-in-law got her master's in music here, and she sang some with the band here, so we had a little connection that way, too.

UP: I thought it was interesting listening to Audra. She is very musically inclined. In fact she said her boys, they all played and sang together. They are a musical family.

AF: They all played in the Moravian Band until they went to college and, of course, graduated and so forth. And we grew up playing as young people, and I met my husband playing in the band. [laughter] So he's musical, and my mother played piano until she was ninety. She lived to be ninety-eight. And both our sons played in the band. One played—The younger one played drums in the band, and he did not major in music. He played piano and took organ. And our older one majored in organ at [the] university at Elon [North Carolina], and then, when he graduated, he opened a music store in Chesapeake, Virginia. He was there for seventeen years and then came back to Winston and opened Mitchell's

Piano Gallery in Winston-Salem, and he's there now. And his wife teaches there also, so we have him back home.

ST: When you say you liked modern music and jazz, what were you listening to? Do you remember who you were listening to at that time?

AF: Oh, yes. Frank Sinatra [American film actor and singer], Perry Como [American singer and television personality].

JM: Yes, the big band era.

AF: That's right. Oh, me. All those—

JM: Tommy Dorsey [American big band leader], Charlie Spivak [American big band trumpeter and band leader].

AF: Yes. We've got those in the car now, [laughter] the recordings in the car. My husband likes those, too, and we both ballroom dance now.

JM: The Darlinettes were like the Big Band era though.

AF: Oh yes.

JM: They played the same type of music.

AF: Yes, they did.

JM: It was dancing music.

AF: That's right; it was really enjoyable.

UP: So the Darlinettes was a big band. I mean how large was it and so on?

JM: I can't remember how many we had.

AF: I don't either.

JM: I would say probably twenty or thirty.

AF: I was going to say about twenty when we were there.

ST: Do you remember how many saxophones there were?

JM: No idea. I'm sure there was more than one. [laughter]

ST: So do you—How did you start playing the saxophone?

JM: I don't remember. In high school, you know, you join what everybody else joins. I played it in high school, and I was the only one in my family that played an instrument. There were five of us in my—siblings—five of us. But I was the only one who was in the band, but my son followed. He played the saxophone in high school, and my grandson plays saxophone now.

ST: Were the Darlinettes music majors?

JM: Not necessarily, no. I was a business major, business education. I think it was anybody who could—who wanted to play regardless.

ST: Were you a music major?

AF: No, I majored in elementary education—I taught school—but I was able to use my music in teaching. We gave little musical programs and so forth and I played at the church sometimes and different places like that.

ST: Can you tell us about your conductor, your leader? Did you always have a leader?

JM: I'm sure we did, but I don't remember.

AF: I don't remember the name of ours either, to be honest.

JM: I think you would have to have had one. I'm sure.

UP: Was it one of the students who led?

JM: Oh yes, oh yes.

AF: Oh, yes.

ST: A student, not a professor.

JM: Yes, a student.

AF: Oh, no. Not a student. And we played together and chose songs together.

ST: Did you use the music from the library of the music department?

JM: I have no idea.

AF: No.

JM: Since we didn't pick it out, I guess we wouldn't know.

ST: Did you get it from other places?

AF: Yes, I think so.

ST: I came from outside,

AF: From outside, yes.

ST: Did you have stock arrangements, like from the music store, or did somebody write the arrangements?

AF: I think we had the arrangements from the music store.

JM: I would say stock arrangements, yes.

UP: Did you go to a particular place to practice?

JM: All I can remember, we practiced in a room in the old Music Building and I think it was downstairs and it was kind of dark down there. I know we— [laughter] It was supposed to be kind of quiet and not known too well.

ST: Can you tell us some more about that, as to when you say it was supposed to be quiet and not known?

JM: Well, we didn't advertise that we had the jazz band because the school then did not have a program in that, and so—

UP: So you were the only jazz band.

AF: Oh, yes.

JM: Oh, yes. [laughter]

UP: They were THE jazz band.

JM: Yes. And they really didn't think of it as a jazz band.

AF: No, no. Like they call it now.

JM: Or the dance band.

AF: Yes. That's right, a dance band I guess we want to say.

UP: So as you played, generally speaking were people dancing? Or what was the environment, you know, what was it like when you played?

AF: We just played concerts and so forth; no dancing.

JM: Oh, no. We went out of town and we did play for a dance. That's the one I remember because it was in my hometown, and that's how I remember that.

ST: So was there a member of the Darlinettes that handled your publicity as far as you know?

JM: I have no idea. Not being involved in the publicity, I would not know.

AF: The only one I can think of would be Mary Elizabeth Irvin. She was very active in—

MF: She still is.

AF: Is she? I thought she would be.

UP: She is.

ST: Were you paid?

JM: Oh no.

AF: Oh no. [laughter]

JM: What is that? [more laughter]

ST: Do you think the band earned any money when they went and played at these dances.

JM: I don't think so. I've never heard of it.

ST: So they—[unclear] Did they get a little money or—

AF: It was volunteer.

MF: Did you go—When you went to Person County, did you go on a bus?

JM: I do not remember that. I just remember being there, but I don't know—

MF: It would take money to get there.

ST: Did you at least have cars when you were in college?

AF: No, no. You were not allowed to have cars.

AF: No, not a car at all around here.

JM: And there were some who kept cars out in town, because my roommate did. But we were not allowed to have any cars.

AF: Or no guys on campus except certain times, and they had to leave, I think, at ten during the weekday and probably eleven on the weekends.

JM: When I was there they weren't even there on weekdays.

AF: Oh, really. Eleven, you know, on weekends. And we had better be in at that time because the housemother was at the door waiting.

JM: And they'd write you up before the board.

AF: Before the board, that's right. [chuckles] Oh, me.

UP: And then what happened when you went before the board?

JM: Well, you gave them your story, and they either accepted it or they didn't. I only did that once but it was no—It was nothing I could help about it. A storm came up, and I was flying with my roommate's brother, and we got in a storm so we were three o'clock getting back on the bus. But they accepted it, and that was it. But you know you always—[laughter]

ST: I have a question about the needing to be quiet and not—because there's not—Jazz is not offered on the campus, yet you were playing campus events, so how did that—Were there some people that didn't approve and other people who did, or how did that work?

AF: I think that's the way it was, yes. And so—

MF: Was it particular faculty members that were here during that time that frowned upon you all going and performing, or was it folks in the community?

AF: Mostly faculty members because we were rehearsing and playing at school here, you know, and they did not have that.

MF: Do you remember which particular faculty member? Was it [George] "Pinky" Thompson or George Dickieson?

AF: I don't know but I would imagine Pinky Thompson because I had him for music appreciation, and that wasn't the type of music we studied. [laughter] Not in music appreciation.

MF: Do you remember Katherine Taylor [Class of 1928, dean of women, dean of students, and dean of Elliott Hall]?

JM: That name is very familiar.

MF: Dean of women.

JM: Yes, she was here when I was here.

MF: I just wondered if you ever encountered her when you were sneaking back?

ST: So you did get credit for being in the band?

AF: No, no. Oh, no. This is something we did by—

UP: You got discredited. [laughter]

AF: [unclear]

UP: And then I was going to ask you, when you think about your experiences back then, do you feel that that was a privilege to be in the band or a right?

AF: Oh, a privilege.

JM: I'd say a privilege. I don't think a right at all.

AF: Yes.

UP: Can you tell us a little more about that?

AF: No. [laughter]

JM: It was just something you were asked to do and you enjoyed doing it, and I guess privilege is all you could say.

UP: Was there anything in particular you enjoyed about being in that band?

JM: I think the camaraderie probably as much as anything. And it was something different.

UP: This was a women's campus in those days.

JM: Oh, yes.

UP: And I'm just wondering, there must have been—It sounds like the faculty assumed that dance music, dance bands did not belong on campus.

AF: That's right.

JM: Well, see, I never got that perception.

UP: You had that perception. But it must have been much more common on men's campuses.



JM: Well, we had dances here. We had four—We had societies and everybody belonged to one, and we had dances.

AF: They banned the use of cars.

UP: And you didn't play for those.

JM: Oh, no.

AF: Oh, no.

JM: I couldn't tell you who really did that. I don't know who did do that?

UP: Well, so you don't know whether they were bands from other campuses, from the men's campuses?

JM: I kind of believe they may have come from Chapel Hill, from [University of North] Carolina there.

AF: I have no idea.

MF: On that same line, talk a little bit about some of the—I mean, you had certain regulations a far as what you wore off campus and what you could wear on campus. Talk a little bit about that, and that might help us understand the era that you were in.

JM: I don't remember anything we couldn't wear.

AF: I think we wore more skirts and blouses [unclear, both talking]

JM: I don't remember ever anything saying, you know, you can't wear this, you can't wear that. I don't recall anything back then.

AF: I don't think any pants were worn back then.

JM: No, women didn't wear pants.

AF: We wore skirts and blouses.

MF: Bermuda shorts?

JM: No.

AF: No. [laughter]

JM: No capris.

MF: Slacks on front campus?

AF: No. No.

JM: Blue jeans. We didn't even wear blue jeans back then.

AF: Oh no.

UP: Did you have to wear skirts for dinner?

AF: Did we what?

UP: I went to a women's college in more or less the same time period, and we had to wear skirts for dinner.

JM: Like I said, we wore skirts anyhow because pants were not in then.

UP: Okay. I believe we were allowed pants to classes but not—

ST: What did the band wear? Did you have uniforms?

AF: No. I don't recall any uniforms. No.

MF: Did you all wear one particular color, like all white or—?

AF: No.

ST: Was there a university concert band that some of the women played in [or] just a regular band?

AF: Not that I recall. [both AF and JM talking, unclear]

UP: So that's the way it was.

UP: Aside from the one dance you remember playing for. I gather you played several, a number of events on campus, but what kind of functions were you playing for?

JM: I do not recall.

UP: You don't recall.

JM: I just know we played on campus, but I don't know whether—She didn't think it was dances. I don't know.

UP: Okay.

JM: It had to have been some type of concert. I don't even recall where we played. [laughter]

UP: That would have been interesting—

MF: So you all never wore—? During that time at Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina, now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro], they had class jackets. You never wore your jackets when you performed?

JM: I don't remember.

AF: Some of us did, I think.

MF: They were in class colors, so depending on what year you graduated, you had a different color. There were four colors.

JM: They had black, green, red, and navy.

AF: And navy. My class wore navy.

JM: I was red.

MF: And you could tell who on campus was in what year based on—

JM: That was very neat, I thought.

AF: They were very nice jackets. I still have mine.

UP: Do you still have yours?

ST: Did any of the members of the band improvise?

AF: Yes, they did.

ST: Did either of you improvise?

AF: No, I didn't. [laughter] Of course, most of them came, like we did, from high school, and played in high school bands and orchestras and all that and so they were used to playing that way.

ST: Who do you remember who took improvised solos?

AF: Mary Elizabeth. [laughter]

MF: Mary Elizabeth will be here tomorrow.

AF: Yes, she like to get up and play that trumpet.

JM: Yes, I can see her now. [laughter]

AF: Don't tell her I'm saying all this. [laughter]

JM: She'll repeat it tomorrow.

AF: We will have forgotten about that.

ST: Did you talk to your families, maybe parents, that you were playing in this band, or was that something that stayed here at school?

JM: Oh, no. There was nothing to hide on that.

AF: [unclear]

ST: What did your families think of—?

JM: Don't ask me that. I don't know. [laughter]

AF: Mine thought it was great.

JM: Yours were musical.

AF: I said mine thought it was great, except when I was practicing. When I was taking at Salem College, I was always practicing, as I said, Bach and Beethoven and all of the classical pieces and then when my mother got out of the room—maybe outside or something—I would start playing the popular and jazz music of the day, you know, because I loved it. I liked it, I really did. And then when she came back in, I was back on playing Bach.

ST: So you were then playing piano, is that correct?

AF: Yes, and I took voice at Salem College.

ST: And then—But in the Darlinettes did you play piano or did you play another instrument?

AF: No, I played clarinet that I had played in the high school band. And of course then I didn't play oboe, but I played oboe in high school orchestra.

ST: So how was it that you ended up playing clarinet in the Darlinettes?

AF: Well, that was the instrument I played in high school, and grammar school, too. That was my instrument, so to speak.

UP: Did you have—My mother played a clarinet, and she had a silver clarinet. Was yours silver-colored?

- AF: Mine was silver. My husband's was silver, and we were playing in a band one time at a concert on Salem Square, and after it was over, some young people came up and looked at us and said: Well, what kind of instruments are those? [laughter] They were silver and the rest of the clarinets were black, and so we told them, and they could not believe it was a clarinet. And so we decided maybe that was about the time we should get out. [laughter]
- ST: And you still have that clarinet?
- AF: No, we do not. We sold them a couple of years ago at my husband's mother's sale. Because—But now we're kind of sorry, but one time we talked about—Somebody said we could make lamps out of them. [laughter, exclamations]
- MF: I heard the same thing, Audra. Someone at the School of Music—I said I have a clarinet that's silver, and they said, "Oh, you can make a lamp out of it."
- AF: We never got around to it. Now we wish we had kept them. We didn't. Our boys had so many instruments around, we just—They had an organ in the house, the one that majored in organ. We had clarinets and cellos and everything—one played a bass clarinet—and French horns and all the bands in high school, outside bands, practiced at our home because none of the other mothers would have them. [laughter] So they practiced at our house and I would walk the dog around outside while they were practicing. I liked to walk her legs off to be close by to see that they were behaving, and what was going on, you know.
- MF: Audra, in your family growing up, was there the expectation that you would take music lessons or was that something that you shared with your mother and you were interested in. Was that something she asked—she expected you to take?
- AF: Well, they—my father and mother—really expected me to take and to follow along in my brother's footsteps. I would have tried except that he was older than me, but they did. And I wanted to take, but—
- JM: I think back then most all of us had piano. And that was something that was expected of us. Everybody in the family, boys and girls.
- AF: And mother graduated from Salem Academy and College, and she was in music. She didn't major in music. She taught school also, so I had that on her, that I could teach school. In fact I had several auditions at several colleges and UNC, but I just had to tell mother and daddy, "Please let me major in education. I love music but I don't want to major in music," you know. And so they said, "That's fine. That's great. We don't care." That pleased me. And I had a friend come here and so we worked it out to be roommates. So that's how I came here.
- ST: Do either of you have memories of a particular piece that you played in the Darlinettes, that you remember enjoying playing.

AF: Gosh, it's—You don't have one?

JM: I told you, I have very few memories.

AF: I think one was *Prisoner of Love*. I don't know why, but I sang that one. But I liked it. Perry Como had sung that, and that type of music was popular. We called it "popular music" then.

UP: Audra—

ST: Did you—?

UP: Oh, excuse me.

ST: I'm sorry. I was going to ask about—Did you sing a solo or did you sing it—Did you sing in the Rhythmettes?

AF: No, I just sang a solo once in a while in that band.

UP: That was my question.

MF: I just wondered how the Rhythmettes and the Darlinettes functioned. If you crossed over sometimes singing.

AF: The Darlinettes were strictly the one I played in, participated in.

ST: What was your music like compared to the big bands that came and played for your dances? Was it similar?

JM: I'd say yes, yes.

AF: It was partly similar, some of the same music. [unclear, both talking] And we danced to that type of music, popular music. We used to have cards on your wrist, and you would go around and sign up someone to dance with the first dance, the second dance, and all the way through. So we farmed our boyfriends we were out with to other girls, you know.

MF: We have some of those cards in the [University] Archives.

UP: Wow. [laughter]

JM: I have my mother's cards from about 1918.

UP: [unclear]

MF: We would like to have that, too.

ST: In one of the articles that Betty [Carter, University Archivist] has over in the Archives, there was—Or maybe this is also reprinted in the liner notes of the CD—but there was something about how one of the sacrifices of playing in the band, was that you wouldn't be able to dance if you were playing for a dance. And I was wondering if that's something—[interruption]

UP: I'm sorry. Here's Mary Watts [Class of 1953] from Raleigh.

ST: Let me stop this just for a second here.

[End of Interview]