

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO
INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Mary Montague Watts

INTERVIEWER: Sherrie Tucker

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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); Audra Clinard Foil (AF), Class of 1953; Jean Hester McMillan (JM), Class of 1951; and various Unidentified Participants (UP) of the audience.

ST: So do you all know each other?

UP: No, no. No, we don't.

ST: You don't. Okay, so we should start by introducing you. Mary Watts [Class of 1953], I'd like you to meet Audra Foil.

AF: Audra

MW: Okay, glad to meet you.

ST: And Jean McMillan.

JM: Hi, how are you?

MW: Fine, thank you. Glad to be here. You know I don't see a single familiar face—

ST: Okay.

MW: —in the room.

AF: I guess we'll [unclear] [laughter]

MW: These are the ones I wanted to see.

ST: The rest of us are not Darlinettes, but we're people interested in the Darlinettes who were learning how to—We're talking about interviewing musicians and learning about jazz history and women's music history, and we're just happy to learn from you about jazz.

MW: Oh, my. Alright

ST: So we already—Audra and Jean, already shared some of their memories of the Darlinettes. I'm wondering if you could share with us what you remember about the Darlinettes.

MW: Well, I was in the Darlinettes sophomore, junior, and senior years. I played accordion. And it was an adventure to do this with the upper classmen, and so forth. So I was in that three years, and—We had a lot of fun times. We even played at Sedgefield Inn one time when a golf tournament was there.

ST: What class were you?

MW: Class of '53, Senior Class of '53 was what I was in. I had a sister up here at the same time. She was an upperclassman. She was two years ahead of me.

UP: Who was she?

MW: Jaylee Montague [Class of 1951].

AF: Oh, is Jaylee your sister?

MW: That's right. [laughter] Jaylee Montague.

JM: I did not know that.

MW: That's right. Jaylee is my sister. I brought her with me this time.

JM: Well, I want to see her.

MW: I hope you can see her. Were you a music major?

JM: No. No, no, no. Neither was Jaylee.

MW: No. Neither was I.

JM: Jaylee has been a big benefactor to this school.

ST: What was your major?

MW: Primary education. Early childhood.

AF: That was my major, in the Class of '53. I should know you then.

MW: That's amazing. It's a real small world.

AF: Audra Foil, A-U-D-R-A, Audra Foil. I was Audra Clinard then.

MW: Okay. And where are you from originally?

AF: Winston-Salem [North Carolina].

MW: Okay, alright. But I was looking for one or two people from the Greensboro area that were in the Darlinettes.

AF: Mary Elizabeth Sampson [Class of 1953].

MW: Yes, Sampson. I don't see her in the room so—

MF: Mary, could you tell us a little bit more about when you went to—Was this for the Greater Greensboro Open, the golf tournament you played there.

MW: Well, I think it was PGA that was there at that time because I'm sure they have—

MF: They still have it, yes.

MW: Bigger and larger golf tournaments in the—They don't play at Sedgefield [Country Club] too much anymore. They [unclear]

MF: They didn't play at Sedgefield last year.

MW: They did. Oh, they did. Good. And so—And we sometimes played for a Lion's Club meeting and different things like that.

ST: Mary, did the Darlinettes have uniforms or a certain dress code?

MW: No. No.

ST: What did you normally wear when you performed?

MW: A white blouse and a black skirt usually. And the girl that was in Jaylee's class was the leader: Peggie Lambert [Class of 1951]. Peggie Lambert, home economics—

AF: I don't [unclear, both talking] she was made the leader. I had no idea.

MW: She was a home economics major from Kannapolis [North Carolina], I think.

AF: I didn't know her that well. I know the name.

MW: And so—They're probably laughing at my Southern accent.

UP: No, no.

UP: We all have Southern accents. [laughter]

MW: There got to be some other than Southern accents in this room.

ST: So when you played for the golf tournament, was that for a dance? Or was it—?

MW: Yes, it was just an evening event and dance.

ST: Were you paid?

MW: Yes, we were paid. It was very exciting to get paid in that day and age.

ST: Do you remember how much you got?

MW: Thirty dollars to play a one-night stand, one gig.

ST: For each player.

MW: Yes.

ST: Or for the whole band?

MW: No, each player got thirty dollars.

UP: [exclamations]

MW: I think that's a true statement, a true answer to your question. And—

MF: Did you get paid other times?

MW: Sometimes, yes. We went one weekend—We went to South Boston or either South Hill, Virginia, and we were paid. We weren't paid that much but at that time when you worked in the dining hall, you earned fifty cents an hour. That was what you were paid so to make thirty dollars was a lot of money.

UP: A lot of [unclear].

MF: Who was responsible for the publicity of the Darlinettes, seeking those opportunities for you all to perform?

MW: Mainly Peggie Lambert, I think. I think she mostly reached out. I don't how we got involved in some of the things we did. I didn't know I was coming in the room and start

talking immediately so—[laughter] You all take your turn right now, and you all [unclear]

UP: Actually I just have a question: How—How did you start playing accordion?

MW: Oh, when I was in high school and earlier? First I started with a twelve bass accordion and I took a few lessons in Raleigh [North Carolina] at a music store, and then I got a hundred and twenty bass accordion. That's a full-sized keyboard. So that's the way it was.

JM: And you and Jaylee were from a small town. What was it?

MW: Clayton. Clayton, North Carolina.

JM: Clayton, I knew it was somewhere in that area.

MW: Between Smithfield, well Raleigh. Between Raleigh and Smithfield. If I'm shaking it's because I have Parkinson's disease, and I didn't take Requip this morning because that makes me sleepy, and I did all the driving so I take medications so I won't shake; have tremors up here. I've had Parkinson's since 1996.

UP: Well, you're doing very well.

MW: I can tell a change in my physical and my mental. But anyway—

JM: Well, the mental comes with age. [laughter]

MW: You don't show it. But my shaking is a little bad so you just handle it the best you can with Parkinson's. They don't know a whole lot. I've been over to Duke and I've been to Raleigh—a neurologist there, and—But they don't know an awful lot about it, the cause of it or [unclear].

MF: What dormitories did you live in when you were on campus?

MW: Jamison [Residence Hall]: I started in Jamison.

MF: In the Quad.

MW: That's right, and Miss Cunningham [unclear]

UP: Miss Celia's what they called her.

MW: [unclear] and then I moved to North Spencer [Residence Hall] and my sister was the house president over there at Cotten [Residence Hall] the same year I was a freshman.

UP: I was in Cotten.

UP: I was in Cotten.

MW: [unclear] a lot of girls, lot of pretty girls over there in Cotten [unclear]. They would always ask me at reunion time, Why didn't you room in Cotten. I said, Well, I lived with her four—seventeen years. I didn't need that. [laughter, unclear] And I really learned a lot of new girls because I was over in Jamison.

JM: I think this is remarkable: her sister was the first female with NASA, right?

MW: Yes. She had a number ten card like a social security card number: Number ten.

JM: But Weil and Winfield [Residence Halls] were new.

MW: Yes.

JM: And they were the latest ones, and I was in Weil and I felt very fortunate to be able to get into that.

MW: And Mendenhall [Residence Hall] was new, too, I think at that time.

JM: I don't remember that.

UP: And Jean, I lived in Winfield when I was here.

AF: I was in Winfield my senior year. That was my junior and my senior year. I was my junior and senior year.

MW: And my sister had the same roommate all four years, and I had four or five different roommates for different reasons—

JM: And I know her, too.

MW: Because she—You know Marie?

JM: Yes. Marie Averitt [Class of 1951].

MW: You really did know the class members.

UP: Did you keep playing music after you graduated from school here?

MW: Some, but not so much accordion as piano and organ.

ST: Did you play—Did the band arrangements have accordion parts for all—?

MW: Well, I usually picked up on the piano.

ST: But you played in all of the numbers.

MW: Yes, and I played some by ear. I could just listen to the chords and different things.

ST: Do you ladies remember if you had a woman on bass playing a tuba or a string bass, like an upright bass? Do you remember? Did you have either one of those or neither of those?

AF: No, no.

UP: We had trombones and they were playing it.

UP: Oh, yes.

UP: Played the bass part on the trombones and the piano doing the left hand.

MF: We were talking a little earlier, Mary, about the fact that the band operated on their own aside from the university. Can you talk a little bit about how that felt?

MW: Well, we were sort of odd balls because we just weren't connected with the university. What we did, we did on our own, you know. And we had some good musicians. There must have been about eight of us in the group. Has anyone else reported how many were in the group?

AF: We were saying twenty or more.

MW: We never had that many. And I think the Darlinettes were more active during World War II, because there were one or two military bases. One was in Greensboro. Do you remember the name of that?

MF: Overseas Replacement Depot, the ORD in Greensboro.

MW: Anyway we didn't play military—

UP: They were closed by the time we were playing.

UP: Yes. They were closed when I was here.

MW: Yes. Because the war was over in '45.

JM: When did the Darlinettes start? We were talking about it this morning.

MW: That's the hard part, [unclear].

JM: We can't remember when they began.

ST: The documentation that I was looking at that Betty [Carter, University Archivist] has in the archives said it started in '42 and ended in '54.

MF: I think that's right. I'll double-check that tomorrow.

MF: I think that's right because on the list of people that participated, there were very, very few names after '53 in the group.

MW: I was in the class of '53 so that makes sense.

ST: Was it still going when you finished school?

JM: Yes, it was still—

MW: Yes, it was about to give out.

AF: That's why I knew that last [unclear].

UP: Do you remember anything about—? You said you thought it was about to give out.

MW: We just didn't have the participation we had in my sophomore, junior, and senior year.

UP: Any special reason?

MW: I think because when Peggie Lambert graduated in the Class of '51, then—

JM: There was no one to take over probably. I would assume that.

MW: Right.

MW: And these girls were not music majors.

UP: Were there any music majors?

MW: I don't think so. Not in the dance orchestra.

MF: There were a few but predominantly most of the folks were not music majors. Joyce Morgan who is coming tomorrow was a music major.

MW: Was Nancy [Newell, Class of 1949]—? I asked about here and they said she was deceased—Newell—Was she a music major? Do you remember?

MF: I don't know that. [unclear] I've got the list, but a lot of the girls were not music majors but there were a few that were. Which is interesting, I think.

ST: Were you the first accordionist?

MW: I guess so. [laughter, several talking, unclear]

UP: Did you rehearse regularly or did you just rehearse when you had a gig?

MW: We did rehearse. We rehearsed regularly; we tried to. Yes.

ST: What do you remember about rehearsal?

MW: We went to the Music Building. We had to find a corner that some of the professors didn't find us because they wouldn't tolerate that kind of music. You know that. You all know that.

AF: We would find a corner down in the basement somewhere.

MW: That's right and [unclear] had a jazz

JM: Pianist. [unclear]

MW: Yes. Mr. Haines is he still—? Steve.

JM: Yes.

MW: I've met him. Yes. Hmmm. [clearing throat] Sometimes he comes to Raleigh and he plays his bass fiddle at some of the night spots.

ST: All of you all mentioned that it was fun to play in the band, to be in the band. Can you talk about what was fun?

MW: Just getting together. Excuse me. [clears her throat] Getting together and playing music together. We had some talented girls in the Darlinettes. More talented than I. And so they could transpose the music and we had a good vocalist. And I cannot remember her name—she was a very beautiful girl and had a good voice.

JM: Here she is right here. [laughter]

MF: Was it Dottie Francis?

MW: I don't remember.

AF: I wasn't the only one. There was another one that sang in our group.

MF: Are you talking about the Rhythmettes, that group. or just

UP: [several voice at once] The Darlinettes.

MF: I'm talking about the Rhythmettes who sang with the band.

MW: No, we didn't have that. We just [unclear, all talking].

UP: Was that only during the '40s?

JM: It must have been. I don't recall.

MW: No, we didn't.

JM: If you were talking about the Rhythmettes. I—it could have been— but I do not recall that being a part of it.

ST: Was that what was fun for both of you? Because you were here together?

JM: Yes. It was always [unclear]. Not being a music major gave us a chance to keep up with our music.

UP: [unclear]

MW: In freshman year I roomed with a music major from Wilson: Ruth Herring [Class of 1953] who was from Wilson, North Carolina. She was a music major, but she wasn't interested in Darlinettes and things like that. It took all her time doing practice and transposing music and—

JM: That's what I remember about music majors. [laughter] You never saw them. You never saw them. They spent every waking moment and sleeping moments in the Music Building.

ST: So the music majors didn't come to hear you.

UP: No, they didn't

JM: They didn't have time for us.

MW: They didn't have time.

JM: They did not have time.

ST: Mary, do you remember any particular arrangements that you enjoyed playing?

MW: Well, let's see. We had a theme song called *A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody*.

AF: Mary, that's right. I had forgotten that.

MW: That was fun to play. It was our theme song, and it was just fun to play different arrangements and so forth. And this girl that was a soloist—I can't tell you her name, but she was very talented, and she had such good looks. Sort of like Ava Gardner. See, I'm

from that neighborhood that Ava Gardener was from, and she reminded me a lot of Ava Gardner. And Ava Gardner could sing, too. And this girl—I can't remember her name—and I can't look at an annual for the Class of '51 and pick her out because I don't know her name. I remember Peggie Lambert, but—And maybe there's some record around here written record of who was in the last group.

ST: Yes, yes.

MF: I have a list of about thirty-five or forty women in the group. I'd be glad to share it with you.

MW: Okay, I'll see that. That would probably help. Maybe it will ring a bell when I get to her name.

UP: In it there's someone named Anne Shipwash [Class of 1959].

MW: No.

MF: She wasn't on the list that I had, Betty. Because I had the list and I was the one that was in touch with the Darlinettes, calling them and encouraging them to come, and I don't remember that name, Anne Shipwash.

MW: Who was the Darlinette that used to play at the Charlotte ballgames and played the organ?

UP: Doris.

MF: Doris. Doris Funderburke Morgan. She graduated in '46.

MW: Okay.

JM: Is she coming tomorrow?

UP: She's coming.

MF: She's coming tomorrow.

UP: So was the theme song the same from 1942 all the way through.

MW: I don't know about that because I was in high school in '42. No, I wasn't either. It's just I don't know about that.

ST: Do you remember playing *A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody*?

MW: Yes.

AF: I believe each group had their own thing so I don't think we carried it over from the next one.

MW: I don't think so either.

MF: Did you all play some of the class songs at the special days on campus? Did the classes have class songs—?

MW: No, no. We weren't invited to do that. [laughter] That's right. Might as well tell it like it was and all. We weren't invited. We were sort of outsiders.

ST: How aware of that were you, of being outsiders? And how did that feel?

MW: We just went ahead with our—pursuing our music, and we were—

ST: How did you know you were outsiders?

MW: Because we knew we weren't part of the university. We just didn't have ties with them, except all of us went to school here. [chuckles] Don't you think that's about right?

AF: I do not know. I never had the feeling that we were outside. Just played in it and that was it.

MF: When you all preformed, did you ever have a staff or faculty member come over and say what a great job you all were doing?

AF: No, I don't recall that at all, no.

MW: No comments, no.

MF: So you really had no support from—

AF: No.

MW: And I think we sort of realized when we went to the Music Building, we were off-limits going over there and we were like invading their territory because every practice room—and you know the—I won't name the certain professors—

UP: Go ahead and name them. [laughter]

MW: Go ahead and name them. Now they [unclear]. It was a tight ship down there and if they heard any music like jazz going on, then they would want to know who was making that rendition.

UP: Would they like come and arrest you?

MW: I don't know. It was sort of—We must have played it pretty safe. We didn't have a problem down there.

UP: Could you have been wrong. Could you—It's just—they were really—

MW: They just didn't—We dodged them somehow. [laughter] But there were certain professors—and I could name some of them—but they just, you know—

MF: Who were they, Mary. Were they people like [music professors] George Dickieson or [George] "Pinky" Thompson.

MW: "Pinky" Thompson. [laughter and chatter] It was one of those girls; the girl that played the organ [unclear], I told you, at ballgames in Charlotte.

MF: Doris?

MW: Yes, she said that she was up in her practice room and making all sorts of—Well, she was playing boogie-woogie, and he said, "Oh, it was awful just to hear this going through the air." I guess he just, you know, he came up there and told her not to do that anymore. She tried to find a place, a piano that she could use and not meet him.

ST: Were you ever worried about getting caught? Did you have any ideas of what might have happened?

JM: It's wasn't about being caught—because they were aware of it. It wasn't a matter of doing something that—

MF: You weren't music majors so they couldn't really deduct from your grade or—

MW: They had some power, the music—the professors.

UP: And were those professors all men?

MW: No.

AF: No.

UP: Very few, but there were some like Miss Inga Morgan. Just started around that time.

ST: Did you like jazz before you became a Darlinette?

MW: Oh, yes. But at the right time I liked music. I've always—My sister and I have always liked music. We used to sing together and do things like that. We just enjoyed music. Both of us believe to this day that it's a good thing to know. It opens so many doors for you, you know.

UP: Well, how did the audience or the people who danced to the music you played, like react. Like, did they react like Oh, wow! These are all girls. Or like they didn't really care.

MW: Yes, they really opened the doors for us. An all-girl band.

AF: Because that was very unusual.

MW: Yes, that's right.

ST: It was very unusual to have that.

MW: And they were surprised, pleasantly surprised, that we could make that kind of music. Just a group of girls. And there weren't but about seven or eight of us in that group I was in. Don't you think it was eight?

AF: We had a big group, but there were probably getting less and less each year. I don't know.

ST: So your memories of the audience then are that it actually—it didn't count against you that you were—

MW: No.

JM: Definitely not.

MW: It was just an extra-curricular activity.

AF: That's right; that's just what it was.

ST: Did you meet boys that way?

JM: I don't recall meeting any. [laughter]

MW: They came from near and far to this campus because it was all girls, and all the roses were here. All the beautiful girls were here, so they came regularly from Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh.

JM: They bussed us to Chapel Hill, too. Wasn't that right?

ST: To go to dances?

MW: They were the sister school.

ST: Did your families come to hear you play?

MW: Not mine. Did yours?

JM: No.

ST: Why do you think that is?

JM: Well, I think back then you didn't travel like you do today.

AF: And probably it was in the week or something, and everybody was working.

MW: Plus my parents had two in this school at the same time.

AF: So did mine.

MW: And yours had two here?

AF: No, one went to Duke [University, Durham, North Carolina] one year, and then Appalachian [State University, Boone, North Carolina], but there were two of us.

ST: Do you remember making those recordings that we have here from our—?

UP: Those recordings are here.

UP: They're here.

MW: They must be—Oh, yes. [unclear]

MF: Do you know this—? Are you aware of this CD, because this is from 1946?

AF: Doris's [unclear].

ST: These were recorded in 1946 so there are some photographs of—There's very small here but I don't know. Let's look. These are, I believe, from the '40s.

MW: Yes.

UP: Yes.

UP: Do you guys remember? Did everybody in your group take photos of you as you were playing?

JM: I don't recall. I don't recall—

MW: I don't recall that either.

JM: Most didn't have cameras then.

UP: Right, that's one reason.

UP: So you weren't photographed for the yearbook?

JM: Oh, yes. We were—

UP: Separately—

JM: Yes, separately.

UP: Not as the band.

JM: I don't recall. I was telling Audra I meant to get out my yearbook and check to see if there was one in there. But not being associated with the school, you know, we probably were not.

MF: I was tracking that several years ago whenever the CDs came out. I think they were in a couple of years, but I'm not sure about that.

AF: Yes, yes.

ST: We just have a few minutes left and I'm wondering if there's anything we haven't asked you that you think is interesting that you'd like to share with us.

AF: That we haven't [unclear].

MW: You say you have a list of the girls that were—

MF: I'll bring it to you.

MW: Okay, that's fine.

MF: Will you be here tomorrow?

MW: No.

MF: I'll make sure I mail it to you.

MW: Okay, that'd be nice to get.

ST: Do you have a question?

UP: Do you remember feeling like you were doing something, you know, different, and that you were pioneers of some sort?

MW: Yes, there was an adventure in that. There was an excitement in doing that. It wasn't really wrong to do it, but it was something adventuresome.

UP: Like pushing the boundary a little bit.

MW: Yes, that's right. Yes.

UP: I have a question but it's a question as a kind of a stupid Yankee question.

MW: No. Nothing's stupid, there.

UP: Did you run across any of the—Were there any similar women's groups that you ever ran across probably from segregated African American schools?

JM: None that I heard of.

MW: No. And sometimes I would go to Bennett College. That was an interesting place to go to, but I never had any connection with the music part of it.

UP: Okay, thank you.

MW: But Bennett College could [unclear].

UP: Could you explain, what is Bennett College?

MW: It's a predominantly—Well, it's black, and in that day and age before segregation, I mean before integration did exist.

JM: And it was all girls, too, wasn't it?

MW: That's right.

UP: In what town?

MW: Here.

UP: Here in Greensboro.

JM: It still is, isn't it?

MW: Yes, it still exists.

UP: I believe there was a women's vocal group at Bennett during World War II, but I don't know of a band either.

MW: I don't know either.

ST: So we're really just about out of time, and I want to—I want to thank you so much for coming and sharing information about the Darlinettes. [clapping]

[End of Interview]