

Robert Robinson

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Plymouth Congregational Church, April 22, 2008

Q Tell me a little bit about your earliest experience with music growing up. Was there music in your house or in your school and church? What were your earliest recollections of music, especially vocal music?

A A lot of what I remember was around church. My mother and father were very involved in the church and so when we were young, that's probably the first place we went besides home, was to church. My mother is an evangelist. My father is a minister, a pastor. So they took us to church a lot. So my first memories of music would have been probably my mother singing or humming or my grandmother humming, because they both sang a little bit. My mom sang. She doesn't much anymore, but just hearing her sing old gospel songs or spirituals and then coming to church and hearing it on a much bigger scale.

Q What about school? Was there much music in your school?

A I don't recall much in grade school. I started getting or started hearing more music and the influences of soul, pop, R & B music as I got into high school. That's when I really recall a real strong influence. But by that time I had had many, many years of being really entrenched in gospel. My parents listened to the records they had where the old 78's, you know the Davis Sisters, the Clara Ward Singers, all of these different artists. Mahalia, and Reverend James Cleveland. So this is what we were listening to most of the time at home because we weren't really allowed to listen to popular music, R & B music. We might see it on TV or something like that, on somebody's show you'd see Tina Turner or somebody like that. But I didn't really start hearing and really listening to pop music until I got to high school.

Q Then did you keep singing all the way through high school?

A I sang...I was singing in church pretty much my whole life. We started singing, I was about 6 or so when I started and I sang...at church I was singing all the time. That was...I sang with my older brother, my two younger sisters. We were called the Robinson Children. We would sing...my father would go to different places and minister and we would always sing before he got up to speak. So I've been singing my whole life. So I've been singing all while I was in junior high school, high school. A lot of the kids didn't know because a lot of them didn't go to the churches that we were going to or weren't churchgoers or whatever. It was almost like I had another life going on.

Q I'm sure you had lots of really memorable experiences, but can you recall one experience where music – vocal music of some kind – just lifted you up and just made such an impression that you still remember it today?

A I have a lot of those. I recall a lot of my parents – my mother, specifically – singing a lot when we were kids. And I would hear her and it sounded angelic to me, in a strange kind of way. I guess it was my mom, so.... But I wasn't just being nice to her, in terms of liking her voice. I really loved to hear her, hear her sing. And I loved to hear her – not just when they called her to do a solo at church – but sometimes when she

was not even thinking about what she was doing, I would hear her do different vocal riffs and runs and she was really just enjoying herself. She wasn't performing for us or any of that; she was just being her. And that really turned me on to how freeing music can be and how it just takes your spirit, your attitude, to a higher place.

Q At what point did you decide to make music a big part of your professional career?

A I was in my very early 30's when I made a decision to try to make a living doing what I'm doing. I got a degree and I was working, I had a job – doing that during the day, but at night I was doing concerts and rehearsals and it got to the point where I was burning the candle at both ends. So I kind of said to myself, well maybe God's trying to tell me something. So I figured I better do this now, in my early 30's, while I'm not too old to start over again if I have to. So I quit my day job and I started doing music full time and I started basically with the gospel choir that I direct now and continued doing solo performances – weddings and funeral services and all different kinds of things and later being involved with Lorie Line and her pop chamber orchestra, and then all of that kind of together just kind of began to grow and grow and grow.

Q Talk about the origins of the Gospel Choir. How did you decide that you were going to found this organization?

A It really kind of found me. I mean, I started it, but the opportunity found me in terms of...I was working my day job at Minneapolis YWCA and I was called to come up to MC...what is now MCTC, to do a black history program. So I took my little instrumental tracks, which were in those days cassettes – I'm dating myself a little – and I went up there and I sang a few of the gospel songs that I had on tape, because they didn't have enough for me to afford bringing a pianist so that's why I had to use the tapes. And I sang my three or four songs and clap, clap, clap, thank you very much. And then I got my tapes and I was headed back out the door because I had to get back to work, and a professor – professor Vincent DeLasea? – stopped me as I was walking out and said, young man there's a place for you here at this college. And even though I'd been singing music – gospel – my whole life, I'd never been formally trained, I've never had lessons, I don't read music that well. And at that particular time I was completely foreign to anything scored. I didn't know what was going on with that. So I laughed. I'm like, dude you have no clue what you're talking about. You don't even know me like that. But anyway, he said he wanted my card. I didn't even have cards. So I just gave him my phone number. And I got a phone call from one of the ladies from community education saying they wanted to meet with me and they wanted me to bring my resume. So I did – which was about half a page – I sing at church. That kind of thing. I direct my dad's church gospel choir. That's about all it was, pretty much. But I tried to dress it up and everything and I brought it. And they looked at it and they said, we would like for you to start a community gospel choir. And I told them, well my experience has really just been in church, but I'd be willing to take a look at it and see what happens. So I put all of the flyers together and the press release together and they funded the mailings and the duplication of the flyers and put it into all of the different newspapers. I kind of in my own mind said to myself, OK maybe 15 or 20 people will come and they probably will be just people from the African American church, from the black church, who wanted to do something more than just sing in the church choir. So I opened the door for the first rehearsal, which was actually May 1st of 1990 we had our first rehearsal. I opened the door and there was like 35 people in the room and over half

of them were white. And that's the beginning of my freaking out about...and the beginning of a huge journey for me in terms of learning about the true universal message behind gospel music, within gospel music and how it reaches and touches people from all backgrounds and all walks of life. It speaks to people. It was born out of an African American struggle, but the message speaks to everyone. So that's kind of how that all got started and I've been on a huge journey ever since.

Q I was struck too, when I first saw some photographs of your group and there's a good half of them are white folks, so what's going on here? I sing in the choir at Westminster Presbyterian Church. Periodically we do some spirituals and...well it's fun to sing but we're not probably doing them the way they probably should be done.

Q Well, they've been Americanized a lot. You're doing arrangements of them. I don't think anybody's really doing them in their true, original forms.

A A lot of us wish we could make them sound a little more authentic. Nonetheless, no matter how we do them, it's great material.

Q It really just moves an inner part of you that you don't even expect to be....

A That's the secret to good music. No matter what music it is – whether it's jazz, classical, R & B, whatever it is.....

Q Do you have any kind of part time staff or people with the gospel choir that take care of some of the business affairs....

A Yeah. I have a part time office manager who actually had a car accident and hasn't been working now since the end of January, so basically I've been managing the office all by myself, which is not fun.

Q You mentioned that that first day you opened the door and a good half of the folks there were white folks. Talk about what you perceived as a hunger among some of those folks for music that they perhaps didn't grow up with but obviously speaks to them.

A I really couldn't tell you how they felt, but I can tell you a little bit about what I've learned. What I've learned is that a lot of people who've been lovers of music or just lovers of artistic expression in song have longed for the opportunity to do it in the way that African American music was originally done, which is rote, which is without a lot of rules and regulations, that they can just deliver it from their soul. It doesn't have to be done the same way every single time. You know what I mean? I guess they were just looking for something that was more freeing. And I think for a lot of them, they have found that. Not only is the music gives them an open ended way of being able to express oneself, but it just allows them to just release some of their inner artistic ways of wanting to speak to the world, or just speak about their own lives, and how they choose to live or deal with their lives. I've found this to be just really overwhelming. I tease the choir a lot of times and tell them that I should just drop membership and just charge therapy fees. Because in so many ways I do believe that it does become therapeutic for people to be able to express themselves like that. And to be honest with you, a lot of the people from the European backgrounds, they're whole music and religious expression was always very quiet, it was very beautiful but it was very quiet, very reserved, and that didn't always match the personality of the person that was involved. Some people just

needed to be in a place where they could just belt it out and sweeten it the way they wanted to sweeten it and they didn't have to sing it the way A and B were doing it, they didn't have to blend, blend, blend, so then you have to keep coming down. After awhile you're like, I'm not singing anymore. I'm not saying that gospel music doesn't have those boundaries to it, but they're different. And I think people have just found this way of expression. And beyond that there's the whole sense of community and just being able to reach out to people from different areas of life that are not like yours. And so many people in the choir now enjoy that. They enjoy the artistic expression, they enjoy the community and they enjoy the opportunity to just reach out and be around people who love the same things they love, but may not necessarily have the same backgrounds they have.

Q How many other independent gospel choirs are there in the Twin Cities area that are not church choirs but are open to the community?

A Very few that are just open without audition. Very few. Most of them you have to audition for. Some of them, they would prefer you to be African American. They don't want other ethnicities to be involved.

Q Talk about community. Most people who sing in choruses will say that it's the community that I really appreciate being a part of. Talk about the sense of community that has become the Twin Cities Gospel Choir.

A What I have noticed is that in the world that we live in, everybody struggles to some degree, with all different facets of things in their lives. But to be honest with you, there are very few outlets where we as human beings feel comfortable in expressing our vulnerabilities, our struggles, our problems, our hurts. For all of us, I think we're all searching to try to find who that might be, where that might be. And I think some people have found that sense of community and comfort and love and support within the gospel choir. They've found people who struggle like they struggle, who will accept them for who they are because the choir doesn't discriminate against anything. No matter who you are, where you've been, what you been doing, what you did 10 years ago, the doors are still open and we welcome you. And there are a lot of people who have inner struggles that they probably could never talk about, but yet and still realize that if somebody were to find out what I did ten years ago, would they still love me? Would they still care about me? And I think they have found within the choir a community that's totally accepting of who you are, no matter what you used to be or...they love you like you are. And the music and the message speaks to that. It speaks to this openness of God's love and how He loves us in spite of and all of the things that he did that we might have a true expression of open love for each other. So it become emotional, at times, for people to be in the mix of something that they, in some cases, never thought would be possible. And I'm not saying it's like that for everyone. But for a large majority of choir members I would say that they have that expression, they've had that expression. They've had that opportunity to experience it. And they desire to continue to be around it. And put up with me in the meantime, too.

Q One of the things I read about your choir is the outreach you do – you go into prisons and maybe some tough inner city situations, rural communities. Talk about this part of your mission – the social outreach component.

A I've always felt drawn to doing prison work, shelters, just reaching out for people who are in disadvantaged situations. Or people who've made horrible mistakes, and tried to let them know that it's ok. I've really feel like the gospel message, the good news message is the fact that there is love and acceptance for you in spite of what you've done or where you've been. So to me, my joy is to be able to go to these places and share that. Not just in song, but in my attitude and the way that I accept them. I don't want to go there and portray being this stuck-up individual while I sing about this message of love and acceptance. But I try to portray that in the way that I deal with them and I interact with them and I've gone to lots of different prisons and shelters and places and I've invited the people that were in my workshops or concerts to come and join the choir. A lot of them need a positive expression, a positive outlet, a positive environment to be around when they get away from there. And we want to be a community. That's what a community is – a community has everything in the book in it. So I'm devoted to that. I work hard to share my message everywhere. Lately I've been even doing a lot of senior homes and groups and things like that because I don't want to discriminate. I want everybody to feel welcome at the table.

Q What was the reaction of some of some of your choir members the first time you went into a prison situation or a situation that was something new, maybe a bit uncomfortable for some them?

A I've been blessed from the perspective that very few of my choir members have run the opposite direction in fear. Because I try to walk into the situations with boldness, with clarity, with honesty, with each of them to prepare them for what they might see or might experience, they trust me. And I often tease them about, you know if I had told you all that we were getting ready to sing in Antarctica, you guys would be crazy enough to go with me, wouldn't you? And they laugh, you know. But to be honest with you, if I told them we were going ton Sing Sing, and I don't even know if Sing Sing still exists, but I told them we were going there they'd go. Because they feel that connected to me and the spirit of what I'm trying to portray to the world and to the people that we reach out and touch through our song. And because of that, I believe so many of them have taken on that attitude, too. Because they call me or they email me and they want to know when are we going to do the prison again? They are so rewarded by the opportunity to share that it blesses them so they are like, I want to do that again, I want to do that again. Not only does...it's wonderful how it affects others, but oh my God if I could tell you what it's doing for me you wouldn't even believe it. So they all want that experience. It's harder because prisons are...the security levels and all that is so difficult; it's harder with a big group to do that. But I just took a group of about 25 or 30 into the Shakopee women's facility, which we did a black history concert there not too long ago, back in February. It was an incredible experience. So many women there just totally feeling disconnected. Disconnected from family, from their children, from the men that they have loved and just feeling so disconnected and you could almost sense the healing that was going on in their spirits. The tears coming down their faces. Then when I looked back at choir members – they're supposed to be singing; they're crying. I'm like, I brought you here to sing, I didn't bring you here to cry. But it's beautiful and I think that we all, in some way or another, we want to reach out and touch to that kind of point. It may not all be through music or whatever that we do, but we all look for something where we can make a difference in the world around us.

Q Music has a tremendous power to cross social economic and other kinds of lines. When you're choosing music for a concert or for taking into a nursing home or a prison,

how do you go about selecting what you're going to sing – what the words are, what the musical feeling is? How do you put it all together?

A You know I'm probably a little...I probably cheat a little, put it that way. And by cheating I mean if I know I'm going into a senior home I am not going to go in there and do a bunch of hip hop stuff. That's kind of goofy. So I kind of tend to lean more towards spirituals, traditional gospel tunes, familiar songs because most older people prefer to listen to music that they can relate to. If I'm going to a youth or a juvenile detention home, I'm going to do most of our up-tempo tunes that have raps in them. Actually when I go to some of them, I actually drag some of the kids up there and make them sing because it's pent up in them. They really want to do it; they just need the opportunity. They need somebody to push them. If I'm doing a show where I know that the audience in and of itself are, would be offended if I got up and sang Jesus Died on the Cross For Us All and His Blood Came Streaming Down, I would go in and I would do songs that I would consider to be more inspirational tunes, but yet and still carry a message to them that will push that person's thinking in a positive direction. For me it's all about keeping people, or moving people in a positive direction. And I may not be able to go into a facility and sing all the different kinds of songs I would like to sing in some situations, some of the venues I go to, but I'm doggone going to show up and I'm going to give them some music that they can think about. I'm going to challenge them to love. I'm going to challenge them in my song to care about the people around them. Otherwise, I'm not going to sing that kind of song. I'm not going to sing the song that's rub me up, rub me down or if somebody don't love you kick 'em to the curb. I'm not doing it. That's not the kind of music I do. I'm never going to do it. I'm only going to sing a song that will invoke a presence of love, making a person think about the path that they're on – is it right? Is it right for them? Or do I need to change?

Q There are a lot of lyrics in songs today that are anything but positive...

A Oh my god

Q I grew up in the '60's, and peace and love and beatniks and the whole thing. But most of the messages were very positive and they were counter-cultural but they were in a positive message about peace and understanding and acceptance. How do you think we can reach more of today's vulnerable younger people with the kind of message that your choir obviously understands? How can music affect some positive movement, some positive hope and confidence in kids?

A I think one thing about kids you have to understand is that kids tend to go with the waves of the world. If the world says today that you're supposed to wear...for women, if they say a woman's supposed to wear miniskirts, then all the girls go out and buy miniskirts. If they say it's maxi skirts, then they all go out and buy maxi skirts. If they say you don't wear skirts, you only wear pants, then they all go out and buy pants. Because that's the way young people are. They're easy to be influenced. They're easy to see an image and start trying to emulate that. But you also have to realize that because of their youth, they don't always...they're not going to stay with it very long. It's only going to last a year or two and then they're gone. So what I tend to think about my music and my approach to the music is, number one I have to be who I am and I have to be firm in what I believe. And if it has strengthened my life and it has brought me to a point where I feel at peace with the life that I live, then I feel like I want to share this with them. So when I go before people, I'm going to share the kind of music I do, the way I

do it, and I'm going to share it with so much conviction that they're going to think they're listening to a rap song. Because it's coming across with the level of conviction that a rap artist would do. You know what I'm saying? He feels just as confident telling you to do this, go there, do that, shoot your homeboy and all that kind of stuff. And the kids listen to that and some of them run with it, some of them don't. I don't...I can't...I'm not with that kind of stuff. But I know that I can deliver the message that I have with the same amount of conviction, with the same amount of passion, and I believe and I pray that as I do that, that it will drop into the heart and that it will cause these young people to feel a sense of, maybe I need to start hearing more of this music that has some sanity to it. Pray for me. So that's...you have to have...you have to be confident because you're not going to get to...I might not even get to talk this much in a show. Every show that you do, you don't have this opportunity. So if you have no level of confidence in your music and your message and the passion in which you deliver...because maybe all I'll get to do is sing. Maybe I won't get to talk. So if my message in my song's not right and my passion's not right, if my drive, my person and my spirit is not right in terms of the way I'm trying to go and deliver this message, then I'm wasting my own time as well as theirs. And I'm not going to do that. I know when I walk into a door what I've got to do. And I'm willing to take the music that I've got, no matter what it is, and I'm willing to use that as my power punch to get into the heart of an individual.

Q Do you have any young people in your choir? Any kids?

A You know, I've got a young man that started when he was a kid, being around the choir when he was born. His mom is one of our assistant directors. He's now 18 or 19 and he's a member of the choir. And I've recently had probably three or four young girls, teenage – in fact they're graduating from high school this year – that have come and joined the choir. And other young people are coming. And I've actually been toying with this idea of doing a youth choir, but I don't have the staff. I don't have the staff and even though I'm a large person, there's only so many directions I can be pulled. So it's in my heart to do, but I don't have the staff, we don't have the funding to make it work the way I would love it to work. I don't really want to do a hit and miss or a hit it and quit it kind of thing because kids need consistency. I think that's one of the biggest things that kids lack in a lot of their lives, is consistency. So if we start something, I hate to tell them it's over. I did a small workshop with a youth group a few years ago and it was only for six weeks, that's all. It was for six weeks. And even though they knew the parameters, when the six weeks were up it was almost like their worlds were over. Well what are we going to do? And there are too many kids like that. So the workshop thing scares me a little because kids need that foundation, they need somebody that's going to be consistent with them. So if I'm blessed to do it or blessed to administer something like that, I've got in my mind how I would like for it to work so that it can be ongoing. Kids need that. They really, really need that.

Q So you've got a great gospel choir in the midst of this huge community, dominated by white folks from Europe in the Lutheran tradition, kind of polite, nice, singing traditions, which are all wonderful. How does operating in that environment affect what you do? Or does it? Does it change the way that you go about recruiting singers or doing your concerts? Because there's a lot of competition from different kinds of choirs around here.

A You know a couple of the things that I have done – or we have done with the gospel choir – we have first of all created an ensemble. The ensemble is an audition

group. It's a smaller group. The community choir is about 90 voices, 90 to 100 voices depending upon what season we're in. And the ensemble is about 24 voices. The reason we created it is number one because the funding world is so picky about who they support. They want to support, "professional," singers and they consider a professional singer as somebody who's being paid. Because we were a community choir, we weren't, our fees weren't strong enough to be a paid, 90 people, and a band, and keep our overhead going with the rent and insurance and all those lovely things that you have to pay as a nonprofit organization. So we created the ensemble and we're trying to grow into this position where we can number one be able to offer a stipend to all of our singers, be able to...continue to support our band, and keep going with a lot of our overhead expenses that a nonprofit experiences. So that whole piece of it is a struggle. I'm not going to lie to you. It's a struggle. It's the part I like least about what I have to do. But anyway, that's...I don't discriminate. Other than that, I don't discriminate. I don't...I take people as they are. We don't...the community does no audition. There are some people who honestly tell me up front, I sing like a frog. And I say, welcome. Come on in. I don't know. Does that make any sense? I know it sounds crazy, but to be honest with you, you were in on the community choir rehearsal. And there were some frogs there that day, but in the midst of the frogs, it was a glorious sound. And that's what I'm trying to do. That's what I want to hear. That's what we're shooting for. They're trying, even though they sound like a frog sometimes. They're trying. And I think their efforts to try transcends their ability and takes them to a place where even the frog sounds pretty good. If you can believe that.

Q Have you had occasion to collaborate and join up with other musical groups in the Twin Cities or MN over the years to do something together?

A Yes. We have had the opportunity to work with a group from...actually our old time gospel concert this past year we had a group from...they were basically people who had moved to this country from Africa. The name of the group escapes me right now, but we had them as our guest vocalists for our old time gospel concert. They came in and they did a couple of songs as...from their own repertoire. They taught us a song, we taught them a song. We've also done some collaborations with some of the other community groups like Excelsior Choir. We did a collaboration with them years ago. We've done collaborations with the One Voice Mixed Chorus. We've done collaborations with the gospel music workshop of America. So a few. There are some that I don't know if they trust what we do – the integrity – I don't think they trust the integrity of the music that we do. Or they feel like it's a little too far removed from their custom or whatever. I'm not sure. But I hope to do more of those. I'm reaching out right now and I'm trying to involve the choir into other parts of artistic expression and collaborate with them. Like dancers and spoken word artists. In fact our Mothers Day concert is going to feature spoken word artists. And actually we're doing a musical collaboration with Great Northern Men's Choir in September this year. So we do have another collaboration coming up. And I look forward to it. We've also done a collaboration with the MN Boy's Choir. That was back in the fall of last year, I think. So yeah, we've done a lot. I'm hoping we'll be able to do more. I think it's good for our choir to experience that because a lot of the people that are not from the European American background in our choir don't know anything about that whole structured way of musical expression. My sisters, who are a part of my choir, every time I do one of those kinds of gigs they get the moans and the groans. Like, oh my god, here we go again. You know I don't read this stuff. But it's good to push them as artists because I don't want it to just be about just singing and having a good time and going away. We

must be aware of our surroundings. We must be aware of the artistic world around us and how music is affecting people that's completely different than the music that we do. How can we integrate some of that? How can we learn from that? How can we give them something that maybe they don't have? So I feel like you must, as an artist, you must always be open for not only expressing but also receiving. How can I get something from that? A lot of people tell me that when I sing I sound like an opera singer because they want to know how many years of training I've had. I just giggle because I don't...I've never had any training. The only reason I kind of think I sound like an opera singer is because I listen to opera. I love opera. I just love it. Absolutely love it. I think it's beautiful. I love the way they form their words, I love the phrasings and how they put things together. And I cheat. I listen to it and I figure out how can I put that into my little gospel singing? But I'm learning. That's what that's about. And I want my choir members to be open to it too. So I feel great and very positive about collaborations. I want to do more.

Q Talk about how you organize your rehearsals. These people come back week after week. They spend a lot of time with you, all volunteer, to do something they love. But it's a lot of work. It's a lot of time. How do you organize a rehearsal so that you get the most out of that time together?

A I work in advance of concerts. Like we have our Mother's Day concert coming up. I work in advance preparing music, making sure we get the lyrics typed up, making sure I get piano parts scored for the pianists that read music, listening to the music. Because I don't teach with sheet music. I teach rote. So I've got to memorize all the parts. I've got to learn all the parts. And if I don't memorize them or learn them or have time to do it, then I'll call my assistants and have one of them learn all the parts and teach the parts to the songs to the choir. So there is a lot of prep involved in trying to keep it together and keep it tight week after week, and give them that whole mix of being able to take on something new as well as perfect something that they've had in their repertoire while that they've gotten a little greasy with and they need to tighten it up. So you just have to kind of bite the bullet, sit down, figure out, ok this is what we're going to do, we need to run over this, we've got these upcoming shows, what do we need to do in preparation for those shows, what would I like to pull into the repertoire that we haven't done in awhile. Its just work.

Q Have you had any collaborations or interactions with the Cameroon choir, maybe a fledgling informal group, but have you had any interactions that are formed by folks that recently have moved here from Africa?

A The group that I was telling you about earlier, that performed with us at the Old Time Gospel, a lot of them...that's pretty much a new endeavor. I'm sorry that I can't think of their name right now. But I actually heard them, we heard them at an AIDS benefit for the African American AIDS Task Force. They had all of these different groups come in and perform. That's where we heard them. And it was so gorgeous to hear those true African songs with the tones, the way they sing. Oh my god I was, heaven...this is beautiful. So that's what made me try to work with them to try to figure out how we could get them involved with our group. Othello Collins is the director of the organization. And a lot of those people that are in there, not all of them have been in the US for long periods of time. Some of them are rather new. But they're acclimating and this is kind of a way for them to involve themselves in gospel that's been Americanized as well as sing some of the songs that are more from their own tradition.

Q If you were talking to a young person who had musical gifts, who was thinking of going into music or starting a gospel choir or whatever as their life's passion, what kind of advice might you give them?

A Recognize that there's a lot outside of just being able to sing and/or play a piano that you need in order to be a professional musician. You need to go to school. I would not encourage anybody not to go to school. Just because I didn't go...I didn't go to school because my mom and dad always taught us that my singing and everything was a gift from God and that I would never make money at it. They never thought we would do anything like we're doing now. So there was like...a day job means you go become a doctor or lawyer or whatever. So I was not encouraged to do that. But I encourage young people to do it. I encourage them to go get the foundation, to learn about music, to learn theory, to learn history of music, to learn how to read it well, to learn how to pick up a sheet of music and not be intimidated by it in any way. The other thing is that I encourage them to be involved in other musical groups and musical opportunities that are around them. It teaches you a level of discipline. It teaches you how to communicate with people because as an artist, no man is an island. It takes many, many years to become a Celine Dion or a Whitney Houston or an Aretha Franklin. You're not born that way. Even they had to struggle to get to where they are. And I feel in order to get to a good, strong point and to be there with any level of integrity you must relate to people. You've got to learn how to relate to people. You've got to learn how to be upset and still have your integrity intact and not be offensive to people. You've got to learn discipline. You've got to learn that this is a job. You can't just show up whenever you want to show up. You can't just do whatever it is you want to do and not take into the fact that it affects other people and it affects other facets of the music. There's just so much you have to learn to be a real professional musician and I think so many of our young people just feel like, all I've got to do is have a good rap, or have a good voice, or I play piano like a beast. So consequently that makes me the bomb. But you might play well, but you're not going to stay in here very long unless you have the other parts of your act together. So I try to teach them a more holistic approach to being a professional musician because that's what I had to learn the hard way. I had to learn that I can't be late for everything. And I still struggle with being late. Pray for me. But I had to learn that. I had to learn that I can't treat people any kind of way and expect to have a good rap in this business. I had to learn to be sincere with my music. I had to learn how to sing with people that I didn't always care for. You know what I'm saying? But I...I'm learning. I haven't arrived, and I'm still learning. And I want other young people to learn that too.

Q Any last thoughts you have?

A No, I just appreciate the opportunity to be able to talk about this. I don't get to talk about it very often, all of these different things. So thanks for the opportunity. I've enjoyed it.