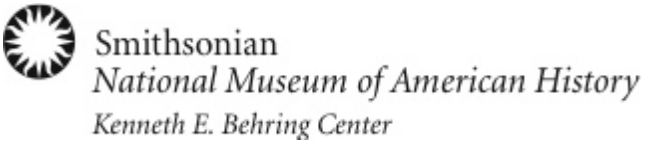

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ABBEY LINCOLN
NEA Jazz Master (2003)

INTERVIEWEE: ABBEY LINCLON **(AUGUST 6, 1930 – AUGUST 14, 2010)**
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SALLY PLAXSON: So, Abbey Lincoln, it's great to have yet another chance to talk with you about your life.

ABBEY LINCOLN: You, too, Sally.

SALLY PLAXSON: Because it's always -- even though it's our third interview, I always learn so much more when we talk. I'm always newly inspired.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Thank you.

SALLY PLAXSON: I thought we could start right from the beginning and just work our way through which is not terribly original, but I think it's the way we should do it. Let's start with Chicago, but I'd like to even look at something that we haven't talked about much before. Some of the prehistory of your family and background of your parents, and you were born in Chicago, but how far back can you trace the family history?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mama was the storyteller at home and she told us about our grandparents and our great-grandparents and she told us about our fathers' grandparents, and in the autobiography that I'm writing, she wrote the first part of the book, 38 pages,

and she told everything about -- I mean, she told about the life that we lived before I was born.
My grandfather was named Charles Coffey and he was a slave until he was 14 and his mother was named Ann Carter and she was a slave, I guess all her life, and she brought five or nine children. One time, mama said it was nine when she got a little older. I think it was five boys she had. Probably by an Irishman or a man who was like an octoroon. He was a slaver anyway, and when slavery was declared illegal, they sent her out of the house with a dime and a couple of blankets and they walked across Missouri and several of them had tent time and ragtime, like that. My mother lived in abandoned street cars with my father and my grandfather and my grandmother because my father -- my grandfather, mama used to complain about it a lot, had lost his zest for achieving anything. Also, I mean, there were awful things that she remembered that he did. He was a degraded man in some ways. I asked her if she thought it was because of slavery and she said some people are just born low, but I know better now, you know.
My mother's mother was a child. She was -- there were 21 children. Her father was an African. Mama said he was never a slave. His name was Roberts, Henry Roberts, but he didn't have an African name, and his wife was named Katherine, and she said Katherine was probably an Indian. She had long hair and she was pale-skinned, she said, because they didn't let them have black women then, and they had 21 children, and my grandmother was a school teacher. She met my grandfather on a boat, one of those gambling boats. They were total opposites, and my father, she told us that his father was mostly Indian and he had some African, but his name was Wooldridge, which is an English name, right? And he went to jail for killing two men, and I think he served some time in Pittsburgh, and my grandmother's name was Nellie, Nellie Wooldridge, who gave birth to my father, Alexander, who was an only child and a genius.
He probably would have been a singer, but he opted to be a family man, and they had the same problems that people have today in marriage. There's not enough room in the house for a man and a woman, let alone a man and a bunch of children, you know. I think a man should have his own house and a woman should have her own house. I really believe in that. After all is said and done, I think I really -- I would like to practice polygamy. I'd like to try it anyway, you know.
So, I think the two of them had the bloodline. Even though, on the one level, we were degraded, on another, we were privileged because we carry all the blood that made us healthy and we don't have dread disease. There's about a 150 of us. When my mother died, there were 84 children. She was 84 years old when she died and there was a child for every year of her life. There had been 92 and some of them had passed away. She left 84 children. There must be a 150 of us now, and I'm really thankful to my mother and father for the lives that they lived and for their spirit.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you said they walked across Missouri, do you know where they started out from?

ABBEY LINCOLN: It might have been St. Charles. In the story, mama said that during the Civil War -- well, at some time in the Civil War, my grandfather would stand on one side of the tree praying that slavery would end, that freedom would come, and the mistress of the house would stand on the other side of the tree praying that it never would be. These are the stories that she told us when I was a little girl, and how her mother worked until maybe two weeks before the baby was born and went back to work really soon after. She said she was worn out by the time she came along.

My grandmother was 46 when my mother was born, and she said she was tired and worn out by then, you know. Mama said she never planned on having all those children. She had 17 births and 12 lived, but even though she says this, when the doctors told her that she shouldn't have any more children, she would have cancer, after she had her sixth child, and I think the doctors experimented with her, too. She believes this. She never -- when she died, it had been 57 years since she'd been to the hospital. She didn't die in the hospital.

But my father midwived her for the last six children. So, I know she wanted those babies, even though she said she didn't. She used to say that I didn't want any of you. It was just my work, you know. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: The other grandmother that was a teacher, where did she teach? Did you know much about that?

ABBEY LINCOLN: She said -- mama said she taught her how to read and write and she taught my father to read and write, but it was his second marriage and so she wasn't a school teacher. She didn't teach school when she was married to my grandfather. She used to do day work, wash. She would wash and iron. Mama said she would pick up bundles of clothes and they'd pick coal off of the railroads. It was an humble life, but they had a sense of themselves. I never heard my father say he needed any money or my mother either. Sometimes we didn't have money. I never heard him say he needed any money. He built everything with his hands and so did she, you know. Makes me feel kind of dewy when I think about them, but it's true, and all of the children learned to get over. They worked and went to universities, my brothers did, and became really outstanding businessmen.

SALLY PLAXSON: Can you tell us the names of all your siblings, maybe starting with the oldest?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. The eldest is named Nellie. She's named for my grandmother Nellie Wooldridge. And then came Evelyn, who's named for my mother. And then came Alex, Alexander, named for my father. He's the oldest boy. And then came Robert Ruland Wooldridge, the one who became the judge. And after Bob was Melvin who was a brilliant man, too, and Juanita, Kenneth, Betty Jean. Bill, William, was born, I think, after Betty. He died before I was born. And then Anna Marie and David and Shirley.

Shirley is the baby.
There was no incest practiced in our house. Mama talked about incest and our grandfather went to jail for abusing his stepdaughters and she never let us forget it and it was a blessing because nobody -- we didn't go through that.

SALLY PLAXSON: You talked about her at one point and you sort of mentioned it. I was just going to ask you to just maybe talk a little bit more about her and the way that she took on so many roles in the family. So, she was the spiritual --

ABBEY LINCOLN: She was just a woman. She was an independent spirit who didn't believe a man was better than a woman and vice versa, and sometimes she and my father would fight. It was before I was born. They had had several by the time I came along. My father didn't beat my mother. They would fight. She would defend herself. You know what I mean? All my sisters are like that. Nobody beats them. They might. I mean, he might get a lick or two, but she takes something and knock him in the head, you know like that, and so there was contention. We didn't have a peaceful -- I mean, it was -- sometimes it was chaos, but mama was a lady.
She knew that she was a beautiful woman, but it didn't mean anything to her in that she didn't use it for anything. She used to say, "Pretty is as pretty does." She was a moral -- she had morals and she was a principled woman. She loved her mother and her mother was like that. She believed in justice and what was fair and so she didn't need any money. My father was more -- he was -- he liked street life. His father killed two men. I think he was trying to live up to that image and mama said one time he was washing cars for the police and he stole a gun out of one of the police cars and it really frightened her and that was, I think, what was between them, the contention, because she wanted to live a spiritual life. She wanted to find her spirituality and dad said, "There is no God," but he acted like he was God. He built everything, made everything, and everybody was scared of him.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was she religious? Did she go to church? Was it that kind of form?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Eventually she did. When I was born, she was studying Christian Science because she wasn't given religion at home, and after she and my father were finished -- well, before, he would go to the beer tavern and she'd go to the Methodist, the African Methodist Episcopal Church with the children, but she never -- she introduced me to the Psalms. She didn't tell me anything about any Messiah or, you know, she didn't worship a Jesus. We would commit the Psalms and I still -- I mean to memory. I still know them and if I'm really in trouble, I remember to say those to myself, you know, the 91st Psalms, the 27th Psalms, the 37th Psalms, the 23rd Psalms, the 100th Psalms. They are affirmations in the scary world that we live in.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you have memories of Chicago at all? You left when you were four?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I remember playing with my brother. He was mowing the lawn and I was giggling and laughing, and I remember that I stuck my hand into the lawnmower. I was only about three or four and going to my mother with it almost severed, and she put some ointment or something on it, I really do remember this, and wrapped it up and it healed. I have a scar to prove it, and my hand is just -- my thumb is just a little out of kilter. Yeah. I don't remember. I was only four or five when my father built this trailer on to the car and brought us to the country.

SALLY PLAXSON: What --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hmm?

SALLY PLAXSON: I'm sorry.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's okay.

SALLY PLAXSON: I was going to say do you know why the family moved out to the country?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. Because my mother was a jealous woman and she didn't want my father to have anybody but her. I believe that's true. I really do. And he was kind of fast. He was fast. So, she insisted that we come to the country and the conversation, my brothers and sisters say yeah, she nagged him until, you know, but we went to the country because I think she didn't want us to be raised in the city. We were in the suburbs anyway.

SALLY PLAXSON: What was your dad's work in Chicago?

ABBEY LINCOLN: He was a handyman, worked in other people's houses. Mama never told any of us to go to college. She would say this every once in awhile. "You know, I only went to the fourth grade and your father only went to the eighth." She would say that just every once in awhile, and everybody got the message.

SALLY PLAXSON: Draw your own conclusions.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: So, it didn't really have much to do with the Depression or the economy. It was more --

ABBEY LINCOLN: I was born the year after the Depression. My father had two cars and he had a house that he built with his hands. But I remember when I was like 10 and we were in the country and we were really in trouble, the whole community was. We were going to a one-room schoolhouse and Calvin Center, Michigan, was the name of the community, and Mr. Roosevelt was here and he told us that we wouldn't starve to death, and they sent us Midland meal to feed the pigs and we ate -- mama made bread out of the Midland meal and we -- yeah. They would send us clothes sometimes and they sent my brother to CCC camp where he could send an allotment home and my father worked on the WPA. They used to laugh about it because they'd lean on the shovels, but how excited can you be about digging a ditch? But I think Mr. Roosevelt was a genius, you know. He saved many people from desperation.

When my mother left my father, she did when I was 10, when she came back to the farm with us and she asked for ADC relief for dependent children because she would not take anything from my father. She knew better to. She was the one who decided she didn't want the marriage anymore. He had always been there and had taken care of us, and she told the judge she didn't want anything because my father was the kind of man, if he had worked and paid for us, why, he'd come and do what he wanted to do. It would have been dangerous for her and she knew it.

So, eventually, after going through really a crucial time because she didn't know how to work and take care of the family, she had been a sheltered woman all her life, she's not going to find a job or anything like that, and we survived the winter. Some neighbors discovered we were starving to death and they brought us some rabbits to eat, some hunters. They were European Americans. I think that our black neighbors were willing for us to die because they said mama shouldn't have let a man with all them children. Anyway, we lived on rabbits for that winter and then they sent from the state the checks for dependent children and my brother started sending allotments because the war was on. It wasn't a lot, but she got an allotment from Melvin. All of my brothers were in the Army or the Navy.

SALLY PLAXSON: They enlisted?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. My youngest brother was in the Korean War and my other brothers were in the Second World War. Kenneth went to the Army and it wasn't a war at that time. He was in the Navy.

SALLY PLAXSON: If we can go back a little bit to Calvin Center and the kind of community it was, you mentioned European Americans that helped you.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was --

SALLY PLAXSON: Who would we find there? Who would be living there? What was

the mix? What was the feeling of the community?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, the people, the majority of the people there had African and Indian and European ancestors and they were olive-skinned people and they didn't want anything to change. They didn't want you if you had too much African blood. You know what I mean? You just didn't belong. And there was one school and two churches and two grocery stores and the lake, Kaufman's Lake. They were Germans. Tubby had the general store and they used to show movies on Mondays in the summer, and we used to dance to the juke box in his store. I remember hearing Glenn Miller's "String of Pearls." We used to dance to that.

There was a town hall and the church we went to was right below the hill from town hall. Dad hung at the tavern that was just there, and it wasn't a progressive neighborhood, it really wasn't, but the school was excellent. From the 1st to the 8th grade, there were maybe 20 children, all in the same room, with these great teachers one at a time. We had one teacher for maybe two years and another teacher for three years, like that, and the young children could sit -- she would see to the 1st grade first. She'd read to them or whatever and then send them out to play. Then the 2nd grade would take the front row and she'd do the same thing, but if you were especially bright, you could sit in on the older children's classes. You didn't have to go out.

I don't remember them telling anybody that, oh, you're brilliant or you're stupid, you know, or anything like that. It was a second home, and there was a big dictionary at the back of the school. I always was fascinated with words and I was singing by then. When I was six, I would sing and in school, on holidays, in church, "Away in a manger, no crib for his head." Yeah. And my folks -- I started -- I gravitated towards the piano when I was about five and I didn't really know I was doing this until my brother Melvin was bragging on me.

One day, we were at some people's house. He said, "Yeah. Anna Marie can play the piano, you know," and his friend Andy said, "You're lying. She's too little to play the piano." He said, "No, she really does. She picks out melodies on the piano." And I was conscious for the first time of what -- if I was doing that, I didn't -- you know. And I'd sit at the piano not for hours and hours. It would have gotten on everybody's nerves if it had been for hours and hours, but for a time, and it was my own space. Nobody told me when to play or when not to play. If I could sing it, I could figure it out on the piano. I'd find the spaces. By the time I was 14, I was accompanying myself and playing. I still can't play.

SALLY PLAXSON: You mentioned –

ABBEY LINCOLN: I play composer's piano.

SALLY PLAXSON: Composer's piano? You mentioned that your father sang. What was his voice? What did he sing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: When he and my mother, during the last years, Shirley was the baby and I think they took advantage of Shirley because dad would hold her in his arms. Dad built the house in the country and he also built the chimney, right? He knew the chimney was crooked, but mama, she rarely used it, because every time you'd put a fire in the stove, it would smoke up the house and everything, but he got into the -- she -- he wasn't going to back down. He said, "There's nothing wrong with the damn thing." So, we'd stand around the stove in the winter trying to get warm and he'd hold my baby sister and sing to her. That's how I knew he had a beautiful side.
My mother used to sing in church, not in the choice or anything, just in the audience, and she had a sound that I have inherited. It's more and more like hers. You could hear her above the crowd. Just a real rugged sound.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you remember what kind of songs you would be picking out of the piano, what you were hearing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes, they were all songs that we learned in church. Mama told me when she was a little girl that she was singing the song in the house one day because some of these songs are really old. "He may be a man, but he sure comes to see me some time" and her mother slapped her and she knew better than to sing such things, you know.
So, we didn't -- they were song that I'd hear at church. By the time I was 19, though, I was -- I went to a church. Mr. -- Reverend Jackson -- no. Reverend Smith brought me to Jackson, Michigan, and I started working with bands, but I was singing like "Don't Blame Me." I started singing like songs that I'd hear on the radio in Kalamazoo in high school. I became a singer really in high school. It's the only way I could stay in school because I really didn't like school. I hated it with all my heart because they didn't tell us anything about our ancestors. They told us we were a bunch of savages and I hated it.
So, when I started singing once a year on the band follies, Mr. Chinnery was a wonderful man who encouraged me to think that I was a fine singer. It was his class and we had band follies every year. That's where I saw Lionel Hampton and Ella Fitzgerald when I was about 17. So, I'd sing Ella's "Sunday Kind of Love," the rendition, and I sang "Don't Blame Me" because I heard Sarah sing that and I sang Lena Horne's "Stormy Weather."

SALLY PLAXSON: I want to go back on to high school in the '40s and all those years, but which church were you attending when you would hear these? Was it the AME?

ABBEY LINCOLN: The AME, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. But none of the images were of African people. That's what's wrong with our people, you know. We really do think that we can worship God in other people's images and have everything. We go to churches and say Jesus, Jesus, and come out of church and hate white people. It's really a paranoid. It's schizophrenic and it's sick.

SALLY PLAXSON: Let's come back to that. I just wanted to backtrack for a minute and

just cover what -- how were you hearing music then? Was there a radio in the house?

ABBEY LINCOLN: There was a victrola.

SALLY PLAXSON: The blues women, did they have any
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ABBEY LINCOLN: I didn't hear blues women as a little girl.

SALLY PLAXSON: That was not -- that was forbidden, right?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mama heard somebody somewhere. No, I didn't hear them. There was a victrola that my father got probably from the houses that he worked with records and books. He built the stairwell under -- he made the bookcase under the stairwell. It was really clever and I heard these songs, "Take them up in the air, boys, take ..." It was about airplanes, you know, flying, taking a girl up into a plane and also there was something maybe Burt Williams did. It was an ugly recording.

SALLY PLAXSON: Nobody?

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was an ugly recording. It reminds me of some of the performers today. The comedians have always done this, I think, made light of their existence to make a living, and I don't know that this was Burt Williams' recording, because I didn't know how to look on the label, you know. I wasn't conscious, really, like that, but it was about a man that came -- a white man that came to a house to see somebody where the blacks lived and he said, "Is the head nigger here?" And the man who answered the door said, "There ain't no niggers here." He said, "Oh, I just wanted to know who the head nigger was because I had $20 to give him." He said, "I's the head nigger, boss. If you don't believe it, you ask all these other niggers. They tell you I is." It's a spirit that's been with us a long time, a greedy, ignorant spirit. I heard that when I was a child.
There was a song about a dog, a man singing to a dog. I thought he was singing to his wife, but anyway, it's called "Little Pal." "Oh, gal, you left me all alone," and I used to sing that song. I can still remember it. It was like that. I can't remember really any of the songs, except for -- I don't remember any of them when I was that age.

SALLY PLAXSON: But by the time you were hearing -- you mentioned Glen Miller. You were hearing this juke box getting towards high school.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was my sisters and brothers, you know. Betty Jean brought a recording home of Coleman Hawkins and she brought a Billie Holliday record when I was 14, just before we left the country, and it changed my life hearing Billie Holliday's sound and Coleman Hawkins was playing "Body and Soul." We never -- I'd never heard of

"Body and Soul," but the spirit and the soul. I'd never heard "Body and Soul" put together like that, you know.

SALLY PLAXSON: How did Billie change your life?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hmm?

SALLY PLAXSON: How did Billie -- hearing Billie change your life?

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was a sound that went right into my soul, in my spirit. She wasn't trying for anything. It was just her sound, and then when I got to Kalamazoo, I started to hear the singers when I was 14 on the radio. You could hear Billie, Ella, Sarah, the music, Dinah Washington, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong. It wasn't categorized as it is now. It was just music and there was space for all different forms. Nat Cole, Frank Sinatra and Johnny Ray, "Little White Plow That Cried." There was plenty of room for the music then. I sang some of Rosemary Clooney's songs. This is when I'm -- well, this is around 23-24.

SALLY PLAXSON: So, did the whole family then move to Kalamazoo? Is that what happened?

ABBEY LINCOLN: When my mother left my father, she brought the kids to Kalamazoo. She brought us to Kalamazoo after awhile because it really wasn't her setting. It wasn't ours either. We weren't farmers and she finally gave it up.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was she trying? I mean, were you trying to run this as a working farm?

ABBEY LINCOLN: My father farmed, you know, as long as he was there. He had a couple cows. He'd butchered a pig every winter, every fall, and he wasn't a farmer. He built the well. He dug out the toilet. He was a dandy man and that wasn't his thing and it really didn't help his spirit or mama's either and eventually it didn't change anything. Dad found the only brothel in town and he hung there. He was always home at night. He was always home at night. Kalamazoo. It was famous for its black dirt. They grew celery there and it was a Dutch town and the blacks were segregated. They lived across the railroad tracks.
I went to Kalamazoo Central High School. It was the best school in Kalamazoo. It was built for the European American students who lived on top of the hill. I lived under the hill in the servants' quarters with my mother and my brothers and sisters, and it's where I learned my -- I established some individuality there since it wasn't my school and they weren't my playmates. I couldn't afford to dress the way they did. They wore woolen skirts and woolen socks and woolen sweaters and I was making my own clothes out of

things I'd find in the attic, you know. I'd put -- I'd take my brothers' pants and make a skirt out of them. We couldn't afford to go to the store and buy fabric, but I knew how to make something with my hands because I watched my mother and my sisters do it. We all knew how to make our own clothes and how to play with our hair. I came from a line of beautiful women. So, Betty Jean was terrible, you know.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was there a sewing machine?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mm-hmm. The sewing machine was the kind that you did with your feet, and I remember by the time I was 18, the last year I was graduating -- well, it had become a style in school for -- Jane Leander was a beautiful queen at the school. Her father was a lawyer and she was blond with blue eyes and she had pretty legs. They were kind of heavy and she wore these shoes, slippers, that you put a nickel in or a quarter in and she'd slap around and she wore the backs of her shoes down. So, the other girls wore the backs of theirs down following Jane, right? Well, I was wearing $1.98 moccasins. I couldn't wear my shoes like that. So, I went to the Salvation Army and I found these pair of riding boots for 75 cents and I wore them all semester and I had to fight two girls because they wanted me to, you know, join the throng, two young black girls who taunted me on the street going home. I persevered, though.
But I remember this young man who was standing over looking at me. I was at my locker room on my way to homeroom and he was standing there looking at me grinning and he said to me, "I come down every morning just to see what you're going to wear." I had become kind of notorious, you know. I was a conversation piece the way I dressed, the way I wore my hair.

SALLY PLAXSON: How did you wear your hair?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, they told me that it wasn't any good. I learned when I was about 12-14 that my hair wasn't any good and that a woman's crowning glory was her hair, right? So, I learned to brush it and straighten it and then I'd make big black rope-grain ribbons. I'd tie them on to each side. I'd wear sometimes four and it'd frame my face just as if I had a full head of hair, I mean, you know. It was like that. I had -- I was an individual.
By the time I got to be 17, I was becoming a pretty girl. I started to fill out. I was skinny. I used to have trouble with my tonsils every year. Mama said to me one day, -- I don't know because we hadn't talked about it. I was about 14-15. She said, "Don't worry, Anna Marie. In a couple years, you're going to be beautiful like your sister Betty." But I did. I became pretty when I was around 17-18.

SALLY PLAXSON: How often were you singing in school, and what did that -- did you have an awareness that you were going to make -- that this would be your life, that music would be your life?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was there any kind of music instruction in school? How were you learning or how were you –

ABBEY LINCOLN: I failed in music. I failed in arts. I failed in home economics. The thing that kept me in school was that I could do this performance once a year with Mr. Chinnery. I was solo singer, and I didn't know I was going to be a singer. It was just something to do. I didn't want to leave school because I didn't have anything to do and mama wouldn't want me -- she wouldn't let me just sit around and -- you know what I mean? I did it to please her. So, I finished high school, and when I was 20, going on 20, my oldest brother came from California to see my mother.
We were living in Jackson, Michigan, by then. I'd already made a debut in Jackson. I was singing at the Elks Club with this band, Benny Poole. Maybe six, five or six times, we were in performance. I don't think it was any more than that, probably less. Battle Creek, Michigan, and the Masonic Club. Jackson is famous for its prison, and I met some musicians there, as I said, Benny Poole, and for the first time, I could see myself as a singer.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you remember what the book was was and what you were singing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hmm?

SALLY PLAXSON: Oh, okay. I was asking you about what you were singing with him, but first if we could talk about how it came about that you got this gig singing with him?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I was -- I had left -- oh, no. I was still in Kalamazoo. I was in Kalamazoo. The minister who used to be in Kalamazoo had moved to Jackson, Michigan. His name was Mr. Smith, Reverend Smith, and he knew I wanted to be a singer. He knew I was a singer, and he invited me -- they had moved into Jackson from Kalamazoo. He invited me to come and sing for the youngsters in the basement of the church, and I did and I accompanied myself. That's where I met Benny Poole and his musicians, and I was still working as a domestic because there weren't that many jobs as a singer and I would work as -- I'd do day work, and I tried to be a housekeeper, but I was a youngster. I didn't know how to keep anybody's house, you know.
I was working for a doctor's wife and she would get dressed up and leave me at home with her baby. She had a brand-new baby and she'd leave me there to clean up the house and take care of the baby. I was 19. So, I'd just sit in front of the TV set because I had never seen television before. It was my first time to watch television. I'd sit and hold the baby and watch television.

She came home one day, she was beside herself because I wasn't working out, you know, and she fired me, and I was relieved.
I was on my way up the street to the bus with my high heeled black boots on and my yellow corduroy coat. It was really a spring coat, but I was aware of pretty. My sisters had given me. You know what I mean? Style. And I remembered her calling after me. "Anna Marie, you forgot your uniforms." I told her that it wouldn't matter because I wouldn't be needing them anymore.
But I did do a few more -- I had a little more time with day work. It's really hard work. I'd come home and just sit on the couch. I couldn't move. You use muscles and things that you don't even know you have, you know. So, it was like that.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you remember -- you were talking about hearing some of the artists on the radio -- where the broadcasts were coming from? Were they live from Detroit?

ABBEY LINCOLN: They were recordings. Sometimes people would come to town, like Wardell Gray, and he called me on the stage and I had a chance to sing a song with him, and Percy Mayfield. The rhythm and blues artists were the ones mostly who came through town. Gene Amans.

SALLY PLAXSON: Where would they play?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Some hall, some place, like we do now, you know. Some -- there's always somebody who'll bring the music.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was there a big theater?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, I don't remember any big theaters. In Kalamazoo, there was state theater. I did amateur night one time there at the state theater in Kalamazoo. I won second place or something. But I didn't grow up with theater. I didn't grow up with the arts. I didn't know anything about any of this. It slowly became my life as I met people over the years. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: So, we're getting you out of high school now and moving along here. Do you -- did you have influences or inspirations that were non-vocalists at that point? Were you aware of jazz as a form in itself or was it really just –

ABBEY LINCOLN: No.

SALLY PLAXSON: -- what you were hearing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I only knew some people's names. I hadn't -- I didn't know there

was Charlie Parker.

SALLY PLAXSON: Tell me how you first met Charlie Parker.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Oh, yeah. When I was 19, when I was working in Jackson, Michigan, I was around 20, is when -- you know how I was introduced to "Bird." The piano player would do his best to see to it that I couldn't hear the introduction. This is how they introduced me to Charlie Parker. It was so out that you couldn't find your way in, right?
But still, I didn't know anything about these great musicians. I knew there were the singers, but I didn't know that the music was so great.

SALLY PLAXSON: How long did you work in Jackson? How long was this gig?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I'd say I lived in Jackson for about a year, and then my brother brought me to California. I got to California when I was 20, and I couldn't work night clubs until I was 21. So, when I became 21, an agent named Johnnie Robinson, I described him in the story, he used to walk on his toes a little bit and with his mischievous smile on his face, with his ruddy cheeks, and he used to book a piano player and a drummer and a singer. The drummer would be a girl, the piano player would be a crazy man and me, and I'd stand and I'd sing songs and while the piano player played, I'd stand and try and look alive and move a little bit. It was like that.
In Roseburg, Oregon, Salt Lake City, Utah. A piano player. It was crucial for me to -- he was a big man. He'd been in the Army, and Salt Lake City used to be a terrible city. You never saw any black people anywhere, and we opened the first night without a rehearsal. We'd never seen each other before and the agent had told the man who owned the club that we were an item, we were together, right? We really got over that first night and we went to get something to eat and we couldn't get served anywhere. We went to maybe three places. The last place was a Chinese restaurant. We thought, oh, we can get some food here. This old Chinese lady stood at the back of the place where the kitchen was and screamed at us, hollered at us, "No service, no service," and all four of us, the piano player, his wife Mattie, Mattie the drummer, and me, we simply turned around and walked away and went back to the hotel hungry.
The next day, we had a rehearsal, and Walter got it off on me. He wasn't brave enough to say to this Chinese woman who hollered at him, who do you think you're talking to, he took it, one man with three women. So, he said to me, "Anna Marie, you're singing the song wrong." I was singing "Let the Good Times Roll," Louis Jordan's "Let the Good Times Roll," and I said to him, "Listen. You just play the piano and I'll sing it." He said to me, "You hainty bitch. I'll knock you down." I said, "No, you won't." And he did. He got up off the piano and pushed me to the floor and I sprained my ankle. I couldn't get up off the floor.
I worked on crutches for two weeks. I wrote a poem about my life called "On Being

High," and I used that incident as -- sure is a noisy house. "On the edge of his tongue he dared not speak father to mother, young and adultness going to and from school, it was spewed out windows of cars to me cruising the neighborhood as I was calling home thusly, want a ride. A leer and a face forcing my head a little higher in the air. On a date, I fought with somebody I thought I knew, bursting with blooming love songs, I was raped. While terror ran rampant in the tearful face, the lawful sheriff investigating questioned him first, then securing me alone to talk leered and said I ought to drop the case. Unsure of rights, I sat my head on higher, I dropped the case. Stagewise, a piano player after being refused a meal in Salt Lake City punched me to the floor after hurling hainty bitch. I worked on crutches for two weeks while a nightclub owner leered. The air was getting thinner. In Honolulu, the sound was so blatant, I became finally deaf, getting higher. By now, I knew I was a singer and sang, getting higher. In Hollywood, press agents reported of my bitchiness and in the thinness of the air, I saw you. Then somebody you said you knew screamed bitch. When I ran to you for cover, you in your fair gave me the just desserts a man gives a bitch. Locked by now into bitchness, I began to see dimly because of blooming love songs where things can lead when people labor under the bitch theory. I finally heard bitch. I am high."
Yeah. Bitch. A dog. You can kick in the face, who will come and lick your feet and your hand. That's not me. I'm not a cat either, not a domesticated one. I think of myself as the lionness, the sign I was born under and the lion will eat you and will get you. You understand? Yeah. That's how I see myself.
I survived my youth. Sometimes it was dangerous, but still I'm not complaining. A lot of things happened because I was pretty. Some of them were negative and some of them were positive. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: When did you write that poem?

ABBEY LINCOLN: In 1970, when I left New York and went to California to live. I used to do lectures when I lived in Los Angeles, at universities and high schools, grammar schools. I'd sing to the children and tell them stories and talk about the music and about life. I taught school for a year at Northridge. I'm not a teacher. I'm not that kind of a teacher, though. I used to think I wonder what I'm doing here. I didn't go to university. I'm not really qualified for this and I wasn't either. I don't care what anybody says. I didn't know there was a -- what is this -- oh, it went right out of my head. A syllabus. I didn't know what a syllabus was. Teaching in PanAfrican studies.

SALLY PLAXSON: You know, when you tell the story about this piano player, --

ABBEY LINCOLN: His wife told me -- she came with me to the hotel and put my foot in a pail of hot water and epsom salts and cried and told me that she was sorry, but that he was -- he had been in the Army and he was shell shocked and that he carried a gun and that I shouldn't say anything to upset him. I told her he wasn't my husband, he was hers.

Still, I called the agent and I told him that I was going to sue him, but he didn't have any money, and I couldn't afford a doctor and so I went every night on his arm into the club and finished my work. Mm-hmm. And the club owner said that if I left, everybody would have to leave. So, I was really doing good even then, you know. Mm-hmm. I was the one. Anna Marie. I have some pictures of myself and also some of the -- a couple of marquees. Well, not really marquees, but, you know, advertising. The lovely Anna Marie.

SALLY PLAXSON: You were called Anna Marie?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: But, you know, this makes me think of like all the dues-paying that you have to do to get through and the non-musical stuff that you have to constantly be dealing with, and I would ask you to talk a little bit about that. You certainly have told us now something about it, but just the non-musical stuff that would have come up early on.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's a residual of the music because the music is -- you know, we don't have -- we don't work in temples or in a protected environment, like the European classical form or like ballet dancers. There's tradition and precedent that goes before it. Well, this is by hook or by crook. You never know who you're going to meet. It's a spirit and it hangs in the corners in the dark and it loves somebody innocent to abuse. I met that spirit when I went to Honolulu. Corruption, you know. The musicians, the saxophone player said to me, "Anna Marie, you're sitting on a million dollars." Everybody was a prostitute and a dope addict and a dope pusher in Honolulu when I got there.
My mother taught me better than that. I never did do that. They used to call me the square broad that works at the Brown Derby.

SALLY PLAXSON: What was the community there like? There were a lot of musicians there, right, at that point? You used to mention that you'd heard Billie Holliday there.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. There was the Tradewinds. I went to the Tradewinds and there was the Brown Derby and there was a place called Lolly Chi's on the beach. I went to the Tradewinds first and that's where -- Billie Holliday came to work at the Brown Derby. Louis Armstrong I met at the Brown Derby. Gene Cooper, Cozy Coles, Helen Humes, Anita O'Day. The room that the stars worked, the people who were better known worked at the Brown Derby. I finally worked the Brown Derby after six months at the Tradewinds. I did. I gained a reputation as a wonderful singer. I worked for about -- well, a few weeks with the Knights, the Four Knights at Lolly Chi's, with the ukelele. It wasn't my thing, and I came back and I worked at the Brown Derby another year with Blinkie Allen.
I went there with the Rampart Streeters. We hadn't been to town three months and everybody was lost. The piano player was an alcoholic because he could get -- I mean,

people would send you the alcohol. I mean, it was like free. The drummer who was the uncle to the saxophone player, they were both heroin junkies. The bass player, who was the band leader, was a cocaine junkie. It was disgusting, and they admired street life. Pimps and whores and I was lonely. I was really alone and I knew it, but it served me because when everybody was busted finally, it didn't take long, the Americans came and they took that place. They came and they busted everybody.
Two young guys from Kentucky, they came and they hung with everybody, did everything everybody was doing, and then they started to bust everybody and they beat them and they sent them to jail and nobody ever came to bother me, to say Anna Marie, because they knew that I was a singer and that was all, but it was the protection. It's what I got from my mother, you know.

SALLY PLAXSON: What year was this?

ABBEY LINCOLN: In '52 and '53.

SALLY PLAXSON: And had you changed your name already at that point?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. My name was Anna Marie. Anna Marie.

SALLY PLAXSON: Anna Marie.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was the name my parents gave me.

SALLY PLAXSON: Were you -- did one of the agents give you a different name?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. My name was changed. I let them change my name in 1954 when I came back from Honolulu. I was working at this joint called the Purple Onion -- no. The LeMadeline, the LeMadeline. It was a real joint, and I was offered a job at the Moulin Rouge through Eddie Beal, who was my coach. I was -- for the first time, I was studying with a coach. Eddie brought me Bob Russell, this great songwriter, and I started -- and I met Benny Carter, all these wonderful people I didn't know before, and -- I lost my point.

SALLY PLAXSON: About -- I think it was going to be about --

ABBEY LINCOLN: My name.

SALLY PLAXSON: -- your name, yeah.

ABBEY LINCOLN: So, they offered me this job at the Moulin Rouge. It was a brand-new show called Salse Paree, and the producer, Bob Lilly, said, "Well, if you do

this show, if we pick you, you'll be a star after this." It wasn't the last time I heard that. But they wanted to change my name to a French name. I already had a French name and I did not know that my name was French and they didn't know my name was French, but it's true about this country. All of us are to some extent alienated from our ancestors. We don't know.
They gave me Gaby which is German, and I already had a French name and kept Wooldridge, which is English. So, I used that name for a year. I worked at the Moulin Rouge, and a couple of times I was introduced as Gabby Hayes. Remember Gabby Hayes?

So, by the time I met Bob Russell, I knew I needed another name, and we used to go and he would take me to lunch and we'd talk and talk. He was brilliant, and he told me that the Jews had created the world. He said yes, Freud, Einstein, Jesus, they're all Jews, and he was proud of his people, and I was, too. I mean, it was -- I didn't -- it didn't hurt him to know that I cared for my ancestors, the same way he cared for his.
So, I was having an act prepared that he had managed with Nick Castle who was a great choreographer at that time in Hollywood, and he came to one of the rehearsals and he said to me, "I've got a name for you." He said, "It's Abbey Lincoln. Abby is spelled like Westminster Abby and it's Lincoln, like Abraham Lincoln. Since Abraham Lincoln didn't free the slaves, maybe you can handle it," and I giggled.
I wonder sometimes, though, what might have happened to me if I'd taken another name. It's not all that funny because I did become over the years socially conscious and I feel responsible for my life. So, Abbey Lincoln has been a good name for me.

SALLY PLAXSON: Which name do you identify with? One name, different --

ABBEY LINCOLN: They're all the same one. I have an African name that Miriam Mkebe was instrumental in getting for me when I was in Africa. She took me to Africa, and the president of Guinea named Aminata for his mother and his sister. It's the female of Amen, Amen, Toutakamen, and Moseka, which is the name of my puppy, is the God of love in the form of a maiden. She comes from Zaire, and for awhile, I used this name. I was going to change my name again. My mother said, "I'll never call it," and she never did.

SALLY PLAXSON: What was, you know, the daily working life like as a musician then when you were in California, when you first were hooking up with Bob Russell and Benny Carter? I mean, how often did you rehearse? How much --

ABBEY LINCOLN: I was rehearsing all the time with the coach Eddie Beal. He said to me -- because I had picked up some habits listening to the other women, some of their habits.

SALLY PLAXSON: Singers, other singers?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington, these people.

SALLY PLAXSON: Okay.

ABBEY LINCOLN: So, Eddie Beal said to me, "You can sing the song as it is written. I don't want you to make a variation, unless you feel it," and I cleaned up my -- it gave me a wonderful chance to be real. Mm-hmm. I didn't sound -- I didn't try to sound like anybody and I was practicing sincerity which is still with me. If you feel it. Eddie Beal is a great coach. He never wanted any money. It wasn't power that he wanted. He loved the money -- I mean the music. He was a friend to Dorothy Dandridge. He was with her when she died. He was a great coach. He was Dorothy's coach. He --

SALLY PLAXSON: When you say habits, what do you mean?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, a lot of singers have them today. They sound like everybody else. Little trills and things that they do. It's not theirs. Aretha Franklin made an impression on these women. I mean, Aretha is a master at this. She doesn't like sound anybody. Neither did Mahalia Jackson. But after Aretha, I mean, I can't tell who any of them are. I don't mean to be unkind, but it's true. They all sound alike. Oh, that's Billie Holliday. That's Sarah. That's Carmen. That's Shirley Horne. That's Betty. That's Abby. They all sound alike. I think it's because they are shortsighted to a great extent. Maybe it's just these times when people are not really trying to be much, except rich in money. They think if they have money, that they did it, but I love this music because it is character-building. It's a craft that encourages you to think and to be unique and to be honest and to be knowledgeable. I was studying with Eddie Beal. Nick Castle was doing an act for me and Bob Russell sent me to designers, people to -- places where I could buy clothes that were designers' clothes, and he secured a film, "The Girl Can't Help It." I wasn't anybody that anybody knew of, and because Lionel Newman was his friend and Lionel Newman was the big man in movies and television, he did all of -- he was the musical director, the number 1 one, and because I was Bob Russell's protegee or whatever you want to call it, he gave me an opportunity to sing a song in his movie, "The Girl Can't Help It."

I hadn't seen the script. I didn't know anything about the film, and the wardrobe master took me into wardrobe and gave me a dress that was worn by Marilyn Monroe, they said, and it was designed to make a woman look like an hour glass. All young girls are beautiful. There's no doubt about it in my mind. They all have beautiful skin. They have nice firm breasts and everything.

Anyway, there was -- they had stuffed the bra with cotton to make it look exaggerated because big breasts were coming for us and rock and roll was coming for us and Frank Tashlyn knew this and did -- it was tongue in cheek. I remember in one of the scenes, Jayne Mansfield had these two outsized milk bottles in her hands with her outsized

breasts. She wore bust pads, too. I know because the press agent told me, who was also my press agent. I got a lot of mileage out of that film. I just sang a song and suddenly I was -- they sent me to Europe and South America. I made the cover of Ebony Magazine. The girl in the Marilyn Monroe dress. I thought they were really rude to me. I got a name, but they were really impressed that a black woman had on this white woman's dress. I knew it was disgusting. So anyway, it was about that time that I met the music. I had met Max Roach before, after I came from Honolulu, before I changed my name, when I was just singing songs at the LeMadeline in Hollywood.

SALLY PLAXSON: Mm-hmm.

ABBEY LINCOLN: And he really made me think that I was marvelous, you know, his comments and everything. Still, I didn't know I was going to be a part of that musical world, and when I came to New York in '56, on the strength of that movie, "The Girl Can't Help It," I was working supper clubs and wearing this dress and bouncing on the stage, so my breasts would jiggle a little, but when you're young, you know what I mean, you're really naive and this is what my -- I was -- people who were helping me, my choreography and like that.
It wasn't funny to me, though. I mean, I didn't feel -- I've always taken it seriously. So, it wasn't easy to make light of my life like that. It was Max that told me "you don't have to do that." He saved me, really, from myself. He helped to save me from myself, from all this that I was involved in.
I was learning. The first album I made with Max -- well, my first album was with Benny Carter, Jack Montrose, and Marty Page, standards, that some of them -- most of them Bob Russell had written. He was helping me and I was helping him.

SALLY PLAXSON: Can you tell us the year and the name?

ABBEY LINCOLN: The name of the album was "Affair: Story of a Girl in Love," and they photographed me upside down with my breasts spilling out in this negligee, this yellow negligee, on a label called Liberty Records. Bob thought that they were going to laugh when they saw a picture of Abbey Lincoln superimposed over Abraham Lincoln looking like a tart, but nobody got it. It wasn't funny to them. I heard one woman at the bank laugh. "Abbey Lincoln." That's the only reaction. They used a picture of a penny and superimposed my image over it in Marilyn Monroe's dress. Nobody got it, and wrote this song for me to sing in "The Girl Can't Help It," "Spread The Word, Spread the Gospel, Speak the Truth, It Will be Heard Wearing this Dress." It was really contradictory, you know. It could have taken me out, too. I got passed that.

SALLY PLAXSON: Were you aware -- did you have an awareness then of how -- what these images were about and what they were trying to do?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. It was my first time. How would I have known? I hadn't wished to be a star. I can honestly say that. I always dreamed of a man. I didn't dream of children, but I was going to meet this god who was going to save me from myself. I didn't dream of being a star or being a movie star or any kind of other star. I still don't care anything about it. But I think it just was my lot because I've had plenty of chances to be a super star. They can give it to their mother. I don't want everybody to know my name.

SALLY PLAXSON: You know, the thing that I was going to ask you before when you talked about learning from this coach about sincerity and don't do it unless you feel it and not putting these, you know, frills and things that other singers are doing. It made me think of the voice as an instrument and the whole idea that less is more and that it's a different kind of artistry.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's the original instrument and it is the spoken word. It's a superior instrument to all other instruments. I know this. I don't try to sound like a horn. A horn was made to imitate the sound of the voice and it's -- yeah. I am the story-teller. The singer is the one who tells the story. That's why she can stand out in front of the musicians who have had years of experience and study and technique and she can take the show, because she has words.
Louis Armstrong was a singer. Most musicians are afraid to sing. It's somehow a step down or something, and a lot of the singers today are imitating the horns. They're jealous of the saxophones, saxophonists, but the saxophone is made. It has a range like the piano has a range. So, what is all this scatting? Ella used to scat after she told the story, after she sang the song exactly as the composer wrote it and the lyricist. Then she would improvise.
The singers, many of them today start out improvising because they think they're singing jazz. There is no such thing as jazz. There's only a song and your spirit and your ancestors. I don't know what I'd have done without Billie Holliday or Bessie Smith or Sarah, all these. I follow in a tradition. Women who never sounded like anybody but themselves.
But then smoking was allowed in public places and you didn't have to fasten your seatbelt. The government wasn't responsible for your life in the car. Even though you owned the car, you can't disconnect the airbags, unless the government says you can. It's another time and the music reflects it, and this is dangerous.

SALLY PLAXSON: What did those women do? What did they leave that made it possible for you to take your place in that lineage?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Just their footprints. That's all. They were all original and they had a philosophy of life that didn't encourage anybody to approach them in any kind of a phony manner. They knew how to be real and I was afraid to go up to any of these queens and say, oh, Sarah, I wish you'd listen to my album or I wish you'd -- do you think I could

take a few lessons from you. I mean, I wouldn't have dared. I wouldn't have dared. Billie Holliday, you listened to the recording. What do you mean, teach you? Who are you, darling? Things have changed. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: Did you ever meet her, talk with her?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Billie? I met her. I never talked with her because I didn't feel like her peer. I didn't know how to have a conversation with Billie Holliday. I was in her presence a couple of times. She came to see me when I was in Honolulu at the Tradewinds. She came a couple of times. I think she was getting away from the atmosphere of where she was. It was only a few blocks away and she brought her little dogs, Mexican Chihuahuas, sat at the bar and drank whiskey out of a glass, and for a little while, I thought it was the whiskey that made her what she was, but I figured that out. It didn't take me long.
She was a great queen without her court, and she would stand on the stage and hardly anything would ever move. Her eyes would slide from side to side and nobody talked. The room was still like that. Nobody talked. That was the only time I ever had seen her perform, but she did come where I was twice, but I didn't go to the bar and say, oh, hi, Billie.
The singers approached me like that, like they really, you know, are my equals now, yes, and I'm friendly, but I wonder about it.

SALLY PLAXSON: What do you think makes for this change in this attitude?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't think anybody knows much about what anything is anymore, you know. It's a funny time that we're living in and you do what other people do. Like in school, Jane was wearing her shoes, her heels down, so everybody else worn them down. That's what they're doing. Whatever is being done, and I'm still -- I've always been an outsider when it comes to this world, too. I'm glad I am. I'm still somebody on the outside. I'm different from the rest of them. So, Abby, you know Abby, you know.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was there much in the way of jamming or after-hours stuff in terms of other in California or when you --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: -- first came to New York? How did that --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, there was always some place you could go. I used to sit in with Jerry Wiggins. It was always -- you could always find a place to go and make your offering. Mm-hmm. I think it still is like that. But I didn't look for managers or anything. I think you have to make a name for yourself without management in all of this.

If you -- if the people talk about you in this little small place where you are, I was a star in Honolulu. I wasn't trying for it or anything, but I had a reputation, you know. So, you had to build a reputation where you are and then somebody will come for you. Sometimes the singers take day jobs because they need money. That doesn't work either.

SALLY PLAXSON: Did being a star mean that you were treated fairly financially and that, you know, made real differences of --

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. It just means you can get a job. If you have a good reputation, you don't have to worry about where you're going to work next.

SALLY PLAXSON: So, this was like post-war, this was early '50s, Korean War time. What was --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hmm?

SALLY PLAXSON: We're jumping back to Honolulu, but we're talking about just the community there post-World War II, but Korean War period.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. I met Johnnie Griffin over there. He came and sat in one night. He was in the Navy with his white suit on, I guess it was a white suit, and he played the saxophone and made the band I was with, I mean put them to shame, you know, the saxophone player. I said, "Robbie." I was -- Robbie and I were like husband and wife. I said, "Robbie, you should practice more. Really. I never heard anybody play the horn like that."
Billie -- Louis Armstrong used -- he would entertain after the show in the dressing room in his shorts and his undershirt and there was no hint of disrespect in it, with a handkerchief around his head to absorb the perspiration, all the energy he'd given. I never saw him but with his wife. I never heard him curse. Women weren't bitches. He was a great man and he liked me, too. Louis Armstrong.
Later on in the music, I heard from other people that he was like supposed to be an Uncle Tom, but people say that. Anyway, Uncle Tom was not a drag. The man -- that story is about a great man, Uncle Tom, and Louis Armstrong left his work with us at the university. He was a great man.
I knew Duke Ellington. He was a great man, great musician, respectful, like a big brother. They were like that. I wouldn't change anything, if I could, in my past. I would -- I like it like it is because it delivered me to wherever it is I am. Mm-hmm. I wouldn't want to change anything.

SALLY PLAXSON: In Hawaii, who was -- what was the instrumentation of the group that you were working with?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Piano, bass, drums, and saxophone.

SALLY PLAXSON: And do you recall the names of the players?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, the Rampart Streeters was the first band. Batman was the saxophone and Ramp Davis was the band leader and Alex was the piano player. I forget his last name, and I forget the drummer's name, too, but the drummer was the uncle to the saxophone player, and then I worked with Blinkie Allen. After the big bust in Honolulu, they wanted another band from the states.
Blinkie Allen and I was the singer with Blinkie. Blinkie would palm the drums and blink his eyes, and Robbie Robinson was a brilliant saxophonist, and I don't remember who was on the piano. I just remember Robbie and Blinkie, and I worked with them for about a year. We came to San Francisco and worked the Say When Club. We shared the bill with Nellie Letcher. The club owner ran off with Nellie's money. Some of it was ours, too, but it was mostly Nellie's. She was making big bucks, you know, and he ran off with all our money. We never saw him again. Yeah. At the Say When.

SALLY PLAXSON: So, this was in the early '50s. How did the music or the arrangements, the repertoire, reflect the rhythm and blues of that time? Was it a part of what was influencing --

ABBEY LINCOLN: We were all -- everybody knew who Percy Mayfield was and Louis Jordan. It's like it is today. You can only show what you know. It's the ones who go before us that make it possible for us to do what we do. I didn't know Dizzy Gillespie yet. This is before I met Roach and the music they called be-bop, but I did meet Billie and Louis and Duke Ellington.

SALLY PLAXSON: How did you -- when you did the album in '56 with the Benny Carter arrangement and Marty Page and Benny Carter, --

ABBEY LINCOLN: That was Bob Russell who did that. It's always been for me like that. After Bob, it was Max and now there's Jean-Philippe Allard, somebody to help me to think because I don't know these musicians. I didn't know who Marty Page was or, I mean, I heard his name, but I wouldn't have thought to ask Benny Carter to do this.

SALLY PLAXSON: How did this -- when you got these arrangements, when you started to work on that, was it different from what you'd done in the past musically?
ABBEY LINCOLN: No.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was it –

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's just the same music, but no, I wasn't overwhelmed or anything.

I had to learn the song and sing it the best I could and that's what everybody else was doing. They played what Benny wrote the best they could, and I was singing. I picked the greatest songs I could find because I was making peace with Bob. He wrote "Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me." He wrote "Crazy He Calls Me." He wrote "No More." He wrote all these songs and including the title song "Affair," and I came up with the idea of the love story of a girl, a love song, a love story that goes bad because all I ever knew was about a love affair that went bad, and so because I've always picked the songs I would sing, people don't pick my material. They may pick the musicians, help me pick the musicians, but I pick the songs.

SALLY PLAXSON: Were you writing yet your own lyrics?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No.

SALLY PLAXSON: Were you thinking about it? Starting writing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I wasn't thinking about it. I didn't know I could write, but because Bob had introduced me to these great writers, I knew what a great writer was. He told me a great song is succinct, it's original, yeah, and he's a great -- he was a great songwriter. "Would I Love You?" Yeah. "No More" with Tudy Camaradi.

SALLY PLAXSON: Were you working in Las Vegas in those years, also?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. I only worked Las Vegas a couple of times, thank God.

SALLY PLAXSON: You didn't like that?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hated it. Las Vegas is a place where people go who don't see themselves as creative. If you're creative, you're like in the manger. At Blues Alley, in the alley. Las Vegas is for show business. I went to Las Vegas, to Caesars Palace once and I went there with John Coletrain's Africa. I had written a lyric to it, and I was singing "Naturally, Live for Life." They fired me, but Oscar Brown told me that they had fired him the same way. So, I wasn't surprised. They fired me in the lobby and American Gilda Variety Artist let them take $6,000 of my money. It was after I had made "For Love of Ivy."
I didn't ask them for the job, but I could have said to them I'm not coming in. I was trying to be cooperative, you know, did my best. I wore some very beautiful garments. I was on a bill with Reagan's daughter, Mickey Rooney's son, Zsa Zsa Gabor, and Hilton's daughter. They had all these names on the marquee. Hilton, Reagan, Rooney, and my name Lincoln. So, I was -- and they had me close the show, right? They had already opened it. It was a disaster. It had been there for about a week and the conductor told Roach, "She can't save the show."

So, I would come on the stage and I would say to them, "Well, it's interesting that Caesar's Palace is featuring the children of famous people this week. It's a very well-kept secret, but as a matter of fact, I am the great-great-great illegitimate daughter of Abraham Lincoln," and they would laugh, but I didn't have anything to follow it with.

SALLY PLAXSON: Who wrote that line?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I did.

SALLY PLAXSON: Oh, you did?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: So, you were writing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I was on the bill. I was on the marquee. My name was on the marquee with all these other people. Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: When did you start writing songs, lyrics, poetry?

ABBEY LINCOLN: On an album called "Abby's Blue." I wrote "Let Up" lyric. My life was really becoming oppressive and I was living with a married man. I was in between my career. I was trying to be seen as a serious performer and there were many people making snide ugly remarks about Abbey Lincoln who wasn't no singer, Max ought to let her go and make some money because she ain't no singer, and I was beginning to be frail, my stomach hurt all the time, and so I sang this -- I was on this -- I made an album called "Abby's Blue."
They put a blue cover on it over my smiling face, and I wrote a song called "Let Up." Max wrote the melody to it and he said that it was mine, but it's not, it's his. After that, I wrote "Blue Monk," Thelonius's "Blue Monk," and he added it to his song, and then I wrote "Africa," John Coletrain's "Africa," and he added it to the song, but it was Thelonius, when the album was re-released, who was quoted. Max asked Ruby and Ossie Davis and Thelonius and some other people to say something, a testimony, and Thelonius said, "Abbey Lincoln." I was already a movie star. I'd made "Nothing But A Man" and "For Love of Ivy." He says, "Abbey Lincoln has to make it because she's not only a great actress and a singer, she's a great composer," and I took him seriously. I thought he was trying to tell me something and he was and I started to take the melodies I heard seriously. "People In Me" I heard in Africa. It's a child's song, but because Thelonius said I was a songwriter, I recorded it. I wrote "Playmate," and then I found "Throw It Away" and "Bird Alone." I thought I was writing it for Miles, but it was for me.
"Down Here Below" and "When I'm Called Home." I think most of my songs are complaints. This is a rotten life to be given to live. The planet's okay. I can't stand this

approach to life. This style of living is disgusting, where you teach a child lies when they're little babies and tell them a fat man comes down the chimney to bring them presents. Why couldn't they say -- I mean, I needed to say to my father thanks, Dad. I don't like this approach to life. I hate monogamy and it's not going to get any better.

SALLY PLAXSON: Is the music a way to make it better?

ABBEY LINCOLN: You have to enjoy it.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you are writing, do you hear the words first? Do you get the melody first? Is it always different?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Usually I hear the words first. I'm talking about the music and the arts.

SALLY PLAXSON: Okay.

ABBEY LINCOLN: When I went to California in 1970, the landlord gave me a set of Encyclopedia Brittanicas that were published in 1957 and two old dictionaries and I started to research the world and I went to Egypt. I looked in the books for everything I could find on Egypt.

The artists without the artists, there is no such thing as a civilization. If the government does not -- cannot afford the arts, all of the great civilizations in the world are recorded through the artists' works and eyes. Sculptures, architecture, and music. Everybody in the world has music, and the ability to dance. It is the only way I know to worship what they call God. I don't belong to any churches or anything. Church is right here. I mean, my sacred life is right here in my house. It's what I bring to the stage with me, and the stories that are told in the Bible by writers.

They say who wrote these stories? Somebody like me who had 360 degrees of knowledge, who's smarter and more privy to information. Some of them were. Some of them stories are not so great, but it is through the artists that we live. When the Africans came here as slaves, they wrote before they learned to sign their name to things because the Africans never signed anything. It was in the name of the king or whoever was ruling.

Somebody wrote "it's me, it's me, it's me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer, not my brothers, not my sisters, me," and they wrote "you got shoes, I got shoes, all our children got shoes." All of these songs are spirituals, spirit that the human being possesses. It's what makes us different from other animals. Other animals do not practice the arts. The human being does and they tell you which way to go, how to see yourself, in what light to see yourself.

Michelangelo. They give us worlds, the artists do, and it's the only world that I really care to live in, the one that we imagine and the one that's based on reality, that tells where we've been and where we're going.

There's a song on the new album that I wrote, the words and music. They both came almost simultaneously. "It was very long ago, but I remember still the house with many, many rooms that stood upon a hill, the life that was surrendered comes to haunt us from the grave, all in pieces, torn asunder, like the body of the brave who used to dance with spreaded wings and worn a bangle and earring, who used to dance, who used to play and do a show and tell a story of long ago and sing and dance and run a mile in hot pursuit and charm a circle with a flute and build some monuments of stone, the ones no longer called our own, who used to dance and now who grinds a way of life, a road that winds, who use to dance."

I think you're born with this spirit and we're chosen. They say there are many are called but few are chosen. If you're chosen to be a part of this work, you are. The men sacrifice a life, a way of life. Is a man supposed to bring home the bacon, right? Take care of everybody and many of the men, the music came first, so they weren't able to be great fathers and husbands and they paid whatever they had to pay to bring this form. They didn't know they were great, but they are.

Paul Chambers didn't know he was great. Wyn Kelly didn't know he was great. The young men will be great, too. When they get to be a little older, they'll talk about them and the contributions they made. Some women are complaining about women in jazz. I say listen, what about the women in classical music? You're not the composer and not the conductor. This is the way music is in the world. The men bring the music. The women bring the babies. The women come to the club to get the guys to take them home like a sandwich. She doesn't come to hear how he approaches the piano or how he approaches the drum. It's rare. It's the men. It's a great spirit and the women sing all over the world and there's nothing greater in the world than to be a singer and they love you, the men do. They will help you.

I've always had a lot of encouragement and help from the men who say yeah, Anna Marie or Abby or Aminata, whatever I call myself, yeah, and I think you should do such and such and such a thing. Max said to me, "Abby, why do you sing everything ligado? It's percussive, Abby. On the beat, on the beat, on the beat." He'd do this on the stage, on the beat, and I learned how to sing on the beat.

There's a lot of information. A philosophy. He'd say, "Oh, I think you're a drag or you're wonderful or whatever." I'd say, "Well, it takes one to know one." You know. I've learned to really love this form because it's free and it's personal and you can be absolutely unique.

Kenny Rogers has a sound that's just his. They don't call him jazz, but they could. He sounds like nobody but himself, like Louis Armstrong. Charlie Parker, the way he approached a song, a melody, he knew the song upside down and backwards, because they used to say that the reason they didn't hire the musicians for things was because they didn't read. Well, Charlie Parker and that crowd put an end to that. They read anything and they work with symphonic orchestras.

It's different. I think it's like we are. It's African-oriented. It's percussive, but it's truly worldwide. I mean, it's the European influences, the classical music, Rachmaninoff.

Melody and theory and harmony, and it can be a lament. You can talk about your life. Billie Holliday said, "My man don't love me, treats me awful mean." Well, she didn't lie. We're really having a hard time here in this world today. I don't know where his loyalty went, but he just doesn't think he owes this woman anything.

SALLY PLAXSON: Why don't we maybe get back to you coming to New York and some of that because that was such a rich community that you came into when you came out to New York in the late '50s? You had -- Max had already heard you sing in L.A., but when you got to New York, there was a circle of young artists.

ABBEY LINCOLN: I was hanging --

SALLY PLAXSON: Oscar Brown.

ABBEY LINCOLN: -- with Maya Angelou, and I met Carl Lee, Canada Lee's son, who gave me a book on the social geography of the country. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know why I would go to this place and I'd see these black depressed neighborhoods. I didn't know why this was. I hadn't even thought about it. I just took it for granted, and I started to meet these people, John Killens, Sarah Wright, writers and painters, Tom Fielings, and musicians, Thelonius Monk, who was a philosopher, and Max, who I was in close proximity to, yeah, and I thought, well, okay.
I started to think about my life in other terms, more than just a person who came from a family, but a people, as a contributor to the world, and I claimed my own natural beauty. I started wearing my hair natural and I started singing songs. They weren't songs I had written, though. They were other people's songs, songs, laments, complaints, and the critics resented it. They thought I should really just do what I had been doing. Said you're a pretty woman, why don't you just sing and leave all this --

SALLY PLAXSON: Which critics? Are you talking about the downbeat thing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: I want to come to that.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Ira Hitler.

SALLY PLAXSON: Yeah.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Who called me a professional Negro. I wrote a lyric to Julian Priester's "Retribution." It wasn't a great lyric, and I sang, "When the Lindy Sings." Oscar Brown, Jr., had set that to music. I can understand somebody thinking me racist from that song, but I'm going to tell you why. The writer, Mr. Dunbar, said you ain't got the natural

organs for to make the sound come right. That's a lie. We transplant organs here. Everybody's got some natural organs and everybody's got some turns and twists to make it sweet and light. When I heard it, though, when I heard that, I stopped singing the song.

Some of us were on the bandwagon. Dr. King, Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammed were making a great impression, and many of the artists came to help forward the so-called revolution, but, you know, there was something that we didn't talk about that we should have and it was somehow against the law to even broach the subject as to how we got here in the first place.
Who were the slavers in Africa? It's still something that the people haven't addressed. They like to blame the white folks for everything. They're innocent. They never did anything wrong and they're victims. It's the worst thing in the world to live the life of a victim. I never thought of myself as a victim, and I really treasure all the things I had to do in the '60s, but I have found my voice today. I don't look to anybody for my life except to that that's been called a God.
I don't petition anybody for anything. I don't think anybody's got anything here to petition for and so I've come a long way. I'm glad I had a chance to do the "Freedom Now Suite." It was a great exercise tribute for a singer and actress, both as a singer and as an actress. It was abstract and to the point, and I finally learned to scream and not hurt my voice. I heard Leontyne Price scream once. Boy, it was brilliant, you know.
But I don't blame other people for my life. I'm God and the devil. I'll take all the weight. Yeah. This is my life and I'm in control of it and if I'm not, I should kill myself. If you have to depend upon somebody else to save you from yourself, you may as well slit your throat. That's not the way the world is and the music personifies it. It is second to none other form here. It's the cap on the pyramid, the musical pyramid in America, what they call jazz. It's the sound track for the country and the people who bring the music live forever.
So, I really feel fortunate that I'm a part of this music.

SALLY PLAXSON: What -- when you started to hang out with Max and meet people like Julian Priester, there were -- not only was there the social consciousness and the new -- this new voice in terms of social commentary and expression, but there were also musical developments, musical ground.
I mean, when we talked to Julian Priester about --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Julian was working at packing records when Max hired him. He was working at Riverside packing records and Max took him under his wing, along with Booker Little and then many musicians. There's something about that crowd that Roach comes from. Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Max Roach, and Bud Powell, and that crowd of musicians. They were all great. They were all great and they brought other people along who were also great. I think that's the true test of a band leader, is what you're able to teach and to pass on. I got information from everywhere.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was this in your mind sort of a -- I don't know that first is the right word, but a major musical learning ground for you?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No.

SALLY PLAXSON: No.

ABBEY LINCOLN: My life was progressing, and I was being introduced to a social philosophy that I hadn't had a chance to investigate before. It was full of holes. It's not really, you know, -- it could use a lot of reworking as a philosophy, but it opened me to another -- to other things to be concerned for, not how old you're getting and if you got wrinkles and you need a face life, but, I mean, what can you do to help to illuminate an approach to life that will help the children to live and that will help you to live, to live and not be burdened and tortured and miserable, all these things which I think I am not. I don't live a tortured life. I don't live a life of jealousy and envy.
There's nothing here that I can think of that I really would like to have. As far as I can see, I got everything. I did.

SALLY PLAXSON: How did "Freedom Now Suite" come about?

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was -- Roach was -- you know, I met Oscar Brown, Jr. I met him through Maya Angelou. I was working at the -- what's this place in Chicago?

SALLY PLAXSON: Blue Angel?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. Black Orchid. Johnny Mathis had been working, was working there, and people like that, and Larry Storch. We were not great stars yet, but we were on our way there, you see, and Oscar Brown came to see my performance when I was there. Sally Blair had worked there before, and he was a poet, but Maya was a little more outgoing than I was and she told me that he was a wonderful poet and I -- anyway, I had a chance to listen to his poetry and he started -- Roach came to Chicago to work and also met Oscar and they decided to write this piece, "The Freedom Now Suite."
They got to a certain point and they couldn't agree on how to proceed with it. So, Max wrote "Prayer, Protest, and Peace," and I didn't have any trouble with "Prayer," but I had a hard time with "Protest" because I had never screamed before in my life. I never heard my mother scream or any of my sisters scream. If anybody came for your life, you'd take something to defend yourself and you didn't scream. You were too busy trying to knock somebody out, right?
So, Roach knew I didn't know how to scream. So, we were on our way to a job and my little nephew was in the car. He was only eight, and he loved Max and Max loved him, too. "Darryl, scream for Abby because she can't scream" and Darryl screamed and Max

was about to say something and Darryl said, "But wait a minute, Uncle Maxie, the reason I can scream louder than Aunt Abby is because I'm a little boy and babies can scream louder than me and Aunt Abby can scream louder than you," and for the first time I understood what screaming was. It's for a woman's protection, and I started screaming. Mm-hmm.
Sometimes really brilliant insights come from a child's mouth. They're innocent and they know things, too. Yeah. He explained it very simply.

SALLY PLAXSON: You had also recorded before "Freedom Now Suite" with Max.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes, the first album that I did with him was called "That's Him." He's the one who was A&R man, really. I made three albums for Riverside. He brought me to the jazz community, and then after "It's Magic," I think -- well, we had been performing the "Freedom Now Suite." We hadn't recorded it yet, and we were getting a reputation for being loony. They said we were both crazy. I had written a lyric called "In the Red". "No account, bank account, can't raise a dime, can't pay the bills I got on time," and Roach set it to music. He said it was the blues, but it was abstract, you know.
All this material and Matt Hantal came for us and offered Max the chance to record "Freedom Now Suite" and then he afforded me a chance to record "Straight Ahead," a song I had written with Mal Waldron. I'd been on the road doing "Jamaica," this play that Billy -- that Lena Horne had made famous, theater in the round. I'd never been on the stage before in a theater piece, and I had gone to Europe, to England, to do a week, and they had given me a week to learn this musical.
Because I'd never done it before, it never occurred to me that you couldn't do it in a week. I went to the hospital after the opening. We got good reviews. It was a really traumatic experience and Leon Baker, one of the singers with the company, and I wrote this lyric, "Straight Ahead, the road keeps winding, narrow, wet, and dimly lit, vainly looking for a cross road where a weary soul can sit." Max set it to music -- I mean, Mal Waldron set it to music and that was the collection. I recorded that.

SALLY PLAXSON: What inspired that song?

ABBEY LINCOLN: That time, yes. On the road. The director didn't direct it. Alvin Ailey finally directed it. I didn't know what a director did, and Albert Popwell cursed the director out. I thought I wonder why he's doing that.
Anyway, it was like that, but Alvin helped. He came to help me. I mean, he was there and he directed the piece and I got good reviews. So, it's always been like that. You can't always count on what you think it's going to be, but you have to trust the life and sometimes it brings you things that you never knew. "Straight Ahead."

SALLY PLAXSON: In that downbeat, it's changed.

ABBEY LINCOLN: That was the album that he attacked.

SALLY PLAXSON: Yes, he attacked that.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: And you made a comment, you referred back to Billie Holliday, actually, and I have it. I'll just read it to you, but it struck me as being so far ahead of its time. Here it is. Okay. He said to you, "Who's a good singer to you?" And you said, -- no. Someone said to him, "Who's a good singer to you?" And he said, "Billie Holliday," and you said, "Tell me why is it that you never censured her for being an obvious masochist. Everything Billie Holliday sang was about unrequited love. Now, why is it nobody got after her about her subject matter? She sang about what was most important to her and I, Abbey Lincoln, sing about what is most important to me and what is most important to me is being free of the shackles that chain me in every walk of life that I live. If this were not so, I would still be a supper club singer. Now, just tell me why you never censured her for this."
Well, a couple of things. How much of it had to do with what was an acceptable image for a female at that time in your art? Nobody would bat an eyelash if you sang about unrequited love, but if you sang about something social and strong, you would be suddenly this intrusive voice. How much of it do you think was that?

ABBEY LINCOLN: That was totally that. It was all right when I sang "Happiness Is Just a Thing Called Joy," right? But to sing about my life, it's always just been taboo. Sarah never did it. Sarah Vaughn. Dinah Washington never approached it. Billie was the only one. I could have said other things about Billie, though. She wasn't only singing about her masochism. She sang "Strange Fruit" when none of the singers would dare come near it. She wrote and sang "God Bless the Child That's Got Its Own." She was a philosopher. That's the truth here. "God Bless the Child That's Got His or Her Own," you better have something of your own.
Yeah. I did for the longest time think why is she -- why does she sing all these songs, but I think, you know, it wasn't only her. A black woman's image was of a masochist. You were in love with a man who has nothing. He's poor. He's ugly, but he's good in the bed. "My Man," which was written for Fannie Brice, I think they said, was a musical prostitute. "Happiness Is Just a Thing Called Joe," "Can't Help Loving that Man of Mine," "Tell Me He's Lazy, Tell Me He's Slow."
I thought why am I digging a ditch for myself. Why am I singing all this dumb stuff? I don't love anybody like that. That doesn't describe my father or my brothers. I never met a man like that in my life who I loved. But that was the opposition that I got. Sometimes, you know, when you're getting ready to do something that's really valuable and important, opposition -- not sometimes, the opposition is always great.
But because Max and I had teamed up, we could survive it. We did survive it. Sometimes

we couldn't pay the phone bills and then rent wasn't so expensive and we would write and practice music in the apartment. Max would go to the piano and find a melody. He'd start out with one line and develop it. I learned from him how to compose a song and he cared so much for the music. Sometimes he would go to blows with the musicians over our principles, you know. They would fight like animals. Mm-hmm. Something that you feel that strongly about.
He told me about Charlie Parker, the kind of person he was and little stories, you know, and I had a chance to meet Dizzy.

SALLY PLAXSON: Looking at both the content of songs and the repertoire and then the images that are projected in the songs and then the visual presentation on record jackets and that sort of thing, just if you look at that historically, who's manipulating those images? Where are they coming from, and how do you see it today?

ABBEY LINCOLN: The industry. Madonna's getting off. She's not a great artist and it's all about degrading the people. The songs that they sing and the stories that they tell, a lot of times you can't hear what they're saying. I don't know what Michael Jackson's saying most of the time, but it's all about your booty and sock it to me, sock it to me, just as if we just discovered that we were sexual people. All the babies and children, all the people on the planet, we don't know where sex -- what sex is.
I believe that Big Brother is doing this on purpose to degrade the people and so that they can handle them. They've already done it. All you need is to be sexy and it's okay. I mean, what happened to the development of your instrument? What qualifies you to stand before the people and you don't even know how to sing? They poured money into the rappers, but there wasn't any money for Charlie Parker or Duke Ellington, but rappers all over the place, what they call rap.
I'll be glad when they learn how to sing, the rappers. They can really dance, but I'll be glad when they learn how to sing and improvise and do this and find compassion for themselves. It's a scary world. They hate the child here and it's not kept quietly either. This is not a place. The innocence was stolen from the children. The Grinch, talk about Christmas, it got the innocence from the children. They don't have time to be innocent anymore. They have to come here walking and running and knowing everything. They don't even know what a baby is anymore.
It amazes me that they don't know what a baby is. See the baby in the carriage and it's cold. The baby has no gloves on, has no hat on, in this battering ram. It goes before the woman or the man. The child can't see your face. All it sees is all these people coming towards you. They stopped making buggies for little babies.
I think it's really a suicidal society. It's not meant to last.

SALLY PLAXSON: You talked about the responsibility of the artist. At what point did you start to identify yourself as an artist with that ability and that responsibility? At what point did that --

ABBEY LINCOLN: When I met all these other artists. Yeah. You talked about the artists. I never heard about it or knew anything about it and I thought okay. Oscar Brown and Maya are the ones who encouraged me to see myself as a writer. I discovered that if you can spell and you can write, you're a writer. If you have any thoughts at all, you can write.
To be wise is another thing. I'd like to be wise. I'd like to be wiser than I am, but I try. I try to work towards that end. I like to live an intelligent life, you know. I don't believe that you die and fall into the void. I believe that life is everlasting, that it's forever. Whether I live forever or not, there are children coming. That's how life is forever, what preceded you, and since there was so much for me when I got here, I'd like to help and leave something for them.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you look at it, what do you -- what's your sense of what you are leaving for --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hmm?

SALLY PLAXSON: What's -- when you look at your work and you see the lineage, what is your sense about what you're leaving for both singers and musicians?

ABBEY LINCOLN: What I'm leaving?

SALLY PLAXSON: Yeah. And for the world in general?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Just the best understanding that I have and the best I could. The people will decide whether it's any good or not and they're always the last word.
Billie Holliday is still queen here because she sang "Strange Fruit" and "God Bless The Child That's Got His Own." Bessie Smith sang "Black Mountain Blues." She was social. Duke Ellington was social. "Cotton ryle is out of style, ain't you glad, jump for joy," you know.
If you leave something, the people never forget it. I'm growing older. I'm in my mature years. I don't know how much longer I'm going to be here. This is the best time in my career and in my life, is right now. Whatever I had to say and do, I've had a chance to do it and I'm prolific in my old age, too. Most people don't start writing at my age. So, I think in a way, I'm a little different. It took me awhile to figure it out. You know, I say that I am a late-bloomer. I am, too. I came into an understanding when most people are on the decline, you know. I'm growing.

SALLY PLAXSON: What about -- speaking of writing -- some of the things that you did with "Low Retribution" with Julian Priester? To go back to that period when you were writing. He talked about the meter, the odd meter in that and how --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Max was the one who introduced the odd meters on an album called -- he did jazz in three-quarter time. He's the one. Max Roach is the greatest drummer the country ever produced and they tried to drive him crazy because he went social. That was the reason. Thelonius. He was the only one of that crowd, just like I was, who went social. What were we talking about, though?

SALLY PLAXSON: Well, we were talking about odd meter, but if you --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. Odd meter. He introduced five four into the music. Roach and Tommy Turrentine and Stanley Turrentine, Max had fired Julian -- no, he hadn't fired Julian. He fired the trumpet player, Booker Little,and he fired the band in Pittsburgh and he brought Stanley Turrentine and Tommy Turrentine and Bobby Boswell to New York for his band, and I remember they were working in Chicago at the Sutherland Lounge and they were experimenting with five four time.
I sang the song that came from that "Long As You're Living," and Dave Brubeck's band came in one night and heard it. Well, Roach and Tommy -- I mean Stanley were having a drunken brawling good time. You know what I mean? Every night, they'd go and get it off, but Dave's band came and they heard it and they went to the studio and recorded it, but nobody could say that Max Roach or anybody else made up five four time. It comes from all kinds of places.

SALLY PLAXSON: Julian had said that when you sang it, it wasn't difficult anymore, somehow it was so natural to you, and I was wondering how that happened. Was it --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Because Roach would play it. You know what I mean? I heard him play all these rhythms. I remember Coleman Hawkins saying when we did "Driver Man" in five four time, he said to me, "You hear that, don't you?" I said, "Yeah." He didn't hear it. So, Max would accent the first one, but after listening to him, I was privy to that. I listened while he played songs and I think I have a good ear, too, you know. I had a hard time singing "In The Red," and after we got it on tape and Nat Hinthoff came, he thought we had just done the verse. He said, "When are you going to do the chorus?" Because it was so -- and Booker Little wrote an arrangement on top of it. It was dissonance on dissonance, and I had to feel my way out. I couldn't hear it. I had to feel and I did literally feel it with the arrangement he had written on top of it.
Musicians were experimenting with me. Max, Julian, Booker, all of them. I didn't say no. I mean, I was there for whatever they wanted to write. Tommy Turrentine on "Lonesome Lover" in five four time, I was trembling when the song was finished, the performance was done. I can sing five four now a lot -- it's easier for me to do all these things.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you are writing your own music, do you -- do some of these things come back to you? I mean, it's a whole learning process, I guess, that you were

talking about. There's a lot by just osmosis, picking up things, being around instrumentalists.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, I've been doing this a long time, though, you know. It's like practicing anything. You learn over the years. It started when I was just a child at the piano and every time I had a chance to work in a night club. All of these things enriched my music and my ability to express myself. "The Girl Can't Help It," you know. Everything I've had a chance to do. So, when I came to the music, I wasn't a beginning. I already had many years of experience, and I knew how to sing in tune, I knew how to sing what I wanted to sing. I'd had instruction from many different sources. So, this was just another -- it was added to what I had.
Well, maybe it was like a graduation. Yeah. I think I'm a good student, though. Really, I do. Because everybody doesn't learn these things. I was a good student. Yeah. I wrote "Lonesome Lover." I wrote the lyric to "Lonesome Lover," Max's "Lonesome Lover." We were living together and he's lonesome. I thought isn't that interesting. You're lonesome and you got Abbey Lincoln in the house. I said okay, and I wrote this lyric. Mm-hmm.
But having a chance to meet Dinah Washington and to meet other people who were individual, which was what I think I've always been. I'm just myself. I don't want to be like anybody else. I don't wish for anybody else's life. I just like what I have. It's enough for me and that's where I find all my fuel, is in my consciousness.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you talked before about making your clothes and having that sense of style, even then, I thought about the whole image historically of the supper club and the glamour image and that and then transitioning into a song like "Naturally" and --

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was social, "Naturally," because I was talking to the women about their hair and about the way they see themselves. "The woman, she vain. She drives the man insane. All day she asks her looking glass if lady's gray, fly in her face, but the mirror replied tell you no lie, the lady's lovely naturally. Everybody's lovely naturally."
I remember somebody -- a man saying you ought to sing that about the men, too. Yeah. It was from there. I was wearing my hair natural and short.

SALLY PLAXSON: And when was -- "Naturally" was what year?

ABBEY LINCOLN: In 1962. I was doing -- "Naturally," '61, '62, and '63 shows in Harlem, and we were changing the world. Jesse Jackson came out with the 'Fro as big as the sun and Angela Davis. Everybody was wearing Afro and I started wearing my hair in braids.
Today, everybody knows what the African strand looks like, even though there are many women who want to be blond and redheaded, which is the most amazing thing.

Sometimes it's really embarrassing to witness it. They look like a bunch of aborigines. And the men are wearing styles they never even had in Africa. I mean, but this is a prolific strand. It doesn't hang. You have to weight it. Its natural thing is like that.
So, we were doing these hair style shows and glorifying the African personality in clothes and hair and everything. That's how that -- actually, it's a Guy Warren song. I wrote that lyric to Guy Warren's song, and I didn't -- I'm telling you I'm so glad I'm not doing that anymore. I didn't ask him if I could write it. I didn't know. I thought it was just a traditional African song.
I wrote a lyric to Villalobo's "Prelude." He didn't ask me to write it. I didn't get any permission to do this, like I did Thelonius Monk and I don't do that anymore. I find my own melodies and write my own songs, you know, but at that time, John Hendricks and Oscar Brown, Jr., there were a lot of people doing that.

SALLY PLAXSON: Doing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Writing lyrics to other people's compositions.

SALLY PLAXSON: And were there consequences to that?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, if the composer wants to be really, you know, taskmaster, he'd say you can't release that. I didn't ask you to write anything. It's not your song. But Thelonius didn't say that to me and neither did John Coletrain. They came to hear it. They said okay, yeah, I like it. You can use it. Their families after they died didn't want me to. They wanted to change the title, so nobody would send me any of their money.

SALLY PLAXSON: Speaking of Coletrain's "Africa," let's talk a little about your trip to Africa, how that came about and what that gave to you musically and otherwise.

ABBEY LINCOLN: I had left New York. I had left my marriage and I left my career. I didn't mean to do any of it. It just was my life, and I was living low to the ground in an apartment over a garage and I didn't have any furniture. I was sleeping on a mattress. It was a pretty apartment, though. I designed it.

SALLY PLAXSON: Where was this? In what year?

ABBEY LINCOLN: In Los Angeles.

SALLY PLAXSON: What year?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Marvin Street. Next door to my mother. I thought, well, if this is good enough for mama, it's definitely good enough for me.

SALLY PLAXSON: This was about 1970?

ABBEY LINCOLN: '70. Well, Miriam came to get me in '73.

SALLY PLAXSON: Miriam Mkebe?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. And she said to me, "Would you like to go to Africa, take a trip to Africa?" I said, "Oh, Miriam." She said, "I pay your ticket, you know," and she did. She took me to Africa first class. She introduced me to the president of Guinea the first morning and he gave me my name Aminata, and she introduced me to a lifestyle. It was all about protocol. I had never hung with government people before, you know, and she took me with her everywhere. I was like her lady-in-waiting. She told them I was an actress. She didn't tell them I was a singer and Hugh Macekala came over. She taught me about polygamy.

She was married to Stokely Carmichael and the president of Guinea was also her patron and Hugh Macekala was her second husband, always would be, you know. It was like that. I learned a lot from Miriam and she would dance. She would dance and the men would go off right -- the president was right there. She'd do it.

So, I started to dance a little after I came from Africa and that's where I found people in me. I thought, wow, nothing happened after all. They know I'm an African woman. They just didn't know where to put me. What are you doing in there? They didn't know where to put me, what country, because I wore my hair in braids. I had nylon. I had braided nylon into it. Some of them were here and some of them were down to there. I was out, you know, and African cloth. It wasn't an African style.

Somebody was making it down the street and I wore pants under -- they'd say where are you from now. I said, "I'm a citizen in America." Oh, like that. And I fell in love four or five times with African men who look you in your eyes and they're not afraid of a woman. That was the way it was then. In Jamaica, too. Then I came home and became celibate. I did. I thought, if I can't have that, I don't want to be bothered. I don't want to be with somebody that I'm afraid's going to rape me or is going to curse me or -- you know what I mean? Changed my life.

SALLY PLAXSON: Is that an American problem, do you think?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes.

SALLY PLAXSON: For a woman?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Men and women hate each other. We got names for each other and they hurt each other, too. Yeah. They hurt each other. I've been raped in the name of love, you know. Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was there any musical inspiration in Africa for you? Did you hear any music there?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Just Miriam and Hugh. I didn't get a chance to see any really African performers. I wasn't with the people. I was in Liberia before it fell. It's a shame. It was a beautiful country and it was peaceful. They didn't know that this was all before them, but you have to be vigilant, you know. You never know who's coming for you and it wasn't an equitable society. Some people had a lot of money and other people didn't have much. People living in mansions and other people living by the fire.
When it's like that, somebody can always come in and get your stuff, but I had been to the White House in Liberia. I had met the president and his wife. They had a collection of greens she did. She was serving us maybe six or seven style greens and they hurt them both. They killed them. If I'd been there, they'd have killed me, too. I was hanging with that crowd. If Miriam had been there, they'd have killed her. Hugh, they would have killed him, everybody. I haven't been back to Africa since, and until things change, I don't think I want to go, but I had a chance to see it once and I knew I was home, I really did, and it felt just as natural, but I discovered I'm the whole world. I'm not only African. I'm everybody on the planet. It's mine.

SALLY PLAXSON: In the early '60s when you were starting to work on "Freedom Now Suite" and other of those musical expressions, were there non-musical ways that this social consciousness was woven into your life as well, and also I'm thinking of the network of people that the NAACP youth conventions --

ABBEY LINCOLN: They didn't like us, the NAACP. They still -- I can't stand them either. I think they're --

SALLY PLAXSON: Was "Freedom Now Suite" --

ABBEY LINCOLN: -- most beaujois -- no. We performed the "Freedom Now Suite" one time for the NAACP in Philadelphia. When I started to scream, the guards broke in to the room with their guns drawn because they thought something terrible had happened, I guess. I worked with -- we would do things for CORE. We did things for the Muslims. I never did anything for Dr. King either. Nobody asked us. We were radical. The NAACP didn't want anybody radical like us. They still don't. I never was a fan of theirs either. I don't care of the organization. Colored people. What color? But it was organizations like that. I never saw myself as a Muslim. I was naked in the sun when they met me and I don't wear shrouds and things. I'm not a Muslim woman.
So, I did know Malcolm X and we did things for him at town hall and sometimes up town.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you say things, do you mean --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Concerts.

SALLY PLAXSON: -- concerts of "Freedom Now Suite?"

ABBEY LINCOLN: Fundraising money. Yeah. "Freedom Now Suite." Mm-hmm. Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: Did the trip to Africa contribute to the development of this social consciousness we're talking about, especially --

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. I was awake before I went to Africa. Somebody just -- my manager in Amsterdam gave me a book that explained slavery in Africa. It was written by a woman from Guadelupe. She said those were her people over there. Secu. Is that the name of it? Secu. Segu.
No, I didn't go there for enlightenment. I had a chance to go and to meet some of my family, some of the people who I came from, but I don't feel any more partial to Africa than I do to Europe or any place else anymore, you know. They don't deserve anything just because they're Africans. They have got to get down and -- you know what I'm saying? Yeah. There's nobody special here. You have to be somebody if you're going to live on this planet and your ancestors can be great, but if you do not emulate them and if you don't, you're nobody. Your tears are no different than anybody else's.
I lost that feeling partial to somebody. I don't and I don't blame anybody for the tragedy of my life or --

SALLY PLAXSON: Did the emergence of Black Power affect musical development at that point?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, a lot of people were on the bandwagon and some people came with -- what do they call? You didn't hear the melody. Avant garde. John Coletrain wrote "Africa." I think it had an imprint. It impacted the music a little, a little, but most people I don't think are that -- well, it didn't impact on Miles Davis's music. Rock and roll did.
If Max and I had made a pile of money and had become rich, that would have impacted on me, but we were carrying mistakes, you know. So, people follow here. If you make money, they'll do what you did if they think you got a lot of money. If you don't have any money, they're not coming anywhere around, which is all right with me because I think that's the way it always has been. If you have something to give to the people, you're blessed. Something to add to your life.
Well, I tell you one thing, Sally. I cry sometimes, but I don't feel bitter or anything about anything. I got a lot more than I ever thought I would get here. I didn't know that all this was before me. I never knew I was going to make a movie. After I made "For Love of Ivy," all I had to do was heel like a dog and I'd have made some other things, you know,

maybe not -- I'd have done that, if I needed some money and if I wanted everybody to know my name. I don't know. I don't want them to know my name. Go find somebody else to take that on.
But there's a wonderful crowd that comes to see me and encourages me to live and they understand everything I say, everything. It's not above anybody's head. I feel accomplished and thankful for my life.

SALLY PLAXSON: We definitely want to talk about Verve and also I want to talk about the films, but I think we should do that tomorrow.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Okay.

MR. WATSON: We've been talking about just the sound of the voice and how that sound communicates something to the audience and how it changes the audience, how --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah.

MR. WATSON: And I'd just like to hear you talk about that.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, it's the sound of the voice that translates also to the sound of the trumpet, the saxophone. It's not the instrument. It's the spirit that uses the instrument. I see myself as an instrument and that it took awhile to make a tunnel through the muse, the one that makes the music and now she -- it's not hard for her to get through. It's open. Well, Billie Holliday was that. Clifford Brown got there at 25, a sound. Charlie Parker. It comes from a spirit and it's beyond us, really, because it's not anything you can say come here, but you can. If you make it welcome, it will come and visit, as long as you know how to be loyal and honest and real. It doesn't visit the spot experience. It doesn't hang there. It comes to the child, to the innocent one, the one -- when I see a Royal Hargrove play, I see that little boy when he was nine or something, who picked up that horn. He still stands like that at attention. You know what I mean? Yeah. It's a wonderful thing to witness. Yeah. It's definitely a spirit and the spirit doesn't care about your need for money or recognition or any of that as much as you do because it doesn't need any of those things.
After you get the music, you can do anything you want to. Sell it, if you want to, but when you practice the arts, it's definitely a spiritual alignment. It's a spirit. It can whistle through the trees and babble in the brook and it doesn't need anybody to express itself. The roar of the ocean.
Yes, I'm proud of my years, the time I spent here on the planet. I was born in 1930. This is my 66th year, and I'm lucid and strong and frail as I always was, and I'm wiser. I really value the years I've spent here.

SALLY PLAXSON: What day is your birthday?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I was born August 6th, 1930, one year after the stock market crashed. It's the way my book opens and my father had two cars. I do not wish for -- I don't even know what youth is, but I have an idea, though. Youth is energy and you lose it here over the years because people say sit down, shut up, and don't and do not and after awhile, you give up your spirit, the child spirit. But she's still with me as a little girl.

SALLY PLAXSON: But did people say that to you? Not around the music?

ABBEY LINCOLN: They say it to everybody.

SALLY PLAXSON: But as a child?

ABBEY LINCOLN: To every child. Sit down and shut up. Cross your legs. I mean, you're supposed to -- all of the energy that the children bring, it's not tolerated here and you're disciplined and you learn how to use it in other ways and some people, the spirit is killed in the person. Sometimes people who want to play the piano, somebody tells them get off the piano, you get on my nerves. This is the way it is here. Nobody did that to me when I couldn't defend myself and now that I can, nobody would dare.
My spirit. So, I'm glad to have lived this long. I don't want to stay forever.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you wrote "Playmate," how did that come to you, because you had a real awareness of that child spirit?

ABBEY LINCOLN: That's how I survived doing "Playmate," that came to visit me. It's a playmate. It's the way of the arts. It's the playmate that comes. If you could see it, it's probably a lot of different lights. It's an energy and you hear a line from a song. It's thought. That's really what it is. It's thought.

SALLY PLAXSON: Is it the same now as it was when you first thought of it?

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's much more intense now because that has developed in me, the spirit has developed in me, is a part of me, and I belong to it. I can't say it belongs to me because I don't know if that's true or not, but I belong to it.

SALLY PLAXSON: Sometimes I've heard musicians say that when they're performing or playing, they feel like something's just coming through them. The music is sort of coming through them somehow. They don't know where it's coming from. Do you feel anything like that?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Of course. It comes through us because we're the human being and we practice the arts. We're made like this. I wrote a song called "Cage Bird." Birds sing

who are in cages just because they're made to do it. They're not inspired. They're caged and their lives are taken from them, but they sing. We're all given a sound here. All the animals. The human being is a world-builder. So, all praises are due to whatever made us. We're made like this.
If you're loyal, if you put it first, it will put you first. Some people want money and some people like prestige. Whatever you're reaching for, it'll bring you a lot of things, but I don't think it comes to rescue people who have violated that spirit. It flies away. It doesn't need anybody.
I said this to Max. It babbles in the brook. It whistles through the trees. It's an oink, oink from a pig. It doesn't need anybody. We need it. People without music and the arts are subhuman. They're not really developed human beings because that's what we do here and we practice the arts and we practice the practical arts. Don't you think that Mr. Einstein was a scientist and an artist?
The world that we have today is through those that practice the arts and sciences. This is what this world is.

SALLY PLAXSON: It's interesting that you mentioned him because I had, in one of the questions I had written for you, it was quoting something Einstein once said to his daughter, which was that if she was ever feeling really bad, to look to nature.

ABBEY LINCOLN: You see. Look to heaven for a sign. Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: And he did play music, also.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hmm?

SALLY PLAXSON: He played music, also.

ABBEY LINCOLN: I'm sure he did. People who practice the arts and the sciences, yeah, practice the sciences, it's the same energy. It makes it possible for us to live on this planet and not have fur all over and live in the ground. You can build your own house. You can make your own ambience. You can do anything you want to do. You can fly, if you know how. You can do anything you can imagine. So, we're not made imperfectly. We're perfect beings.

SALLY PLAXSON: That sounds like the eternal dream.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. We are perfect. Who's so smart that they could say that this is imperfect? Compared to what? It's perfect. Got cracks and holes in it and it's perfect. Thelonius Monk said to me once at this session, "Don't be so perfect." He meant -- I said to Max, "You know what Thelonius said to me? He said don't be so perfect. He means make a mistake." I didn't understand what either one of them were talking about, but if

you're reaching something and your voice cracks, that's not a mistake. Hey, reach for it.

SALLY PLAXSON: Was this at a session?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. A candid session, "Straight Ahead." It became "Straight Ahead." Coleman Hawkins, Booker Little, Mal Waldron, Max Roach, who really was the A&R on that, and Nat Hinthoff produced it. Yeah. Make a mistake. At least you tried for something. It's better than sitting around like a sheep and following the herd and dying however they die.
I saw a movie once, a shepherd put his sheep in a pen and he went into the house and went to sleep, and one of the sheep found a loose slat and opened the slat, opened -- there was an opening and it got out and all of the other sheep followed it and it ran right over the ravine and when the man woke up the next morning, they were all dead. They had all jumped over the ravine, into the ravine. People are like this. Those who do not practice art, who do not practice the arts, who are shortsighted.
Anyway, I'm glad that I was introduced to the arts here.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you talk about Monk and Max talking about making mistakes and when you were talking about "Caged Bird, "I was thinking about taking risks as an artist. Was there a point where you could do that, would do that, and has that -- how has that affected your development, do you think, as an artist?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I never took any risks. Not as an artist. Career-wise, maybe I could say that, but I never took any risks as an artist. I never did that. I didn't go to any other form after I discovered this music and I say okay. I never did that. I'm true to what serves me.

SALLY PLAXSON: In terms of career or business or anything?

ABBEY LINCOLN: To hell with the career. I wasn't born with a career.

SALLY PLAXSON: Just for the record, I will say that it is December 18th, 1996. We've been talking for, I don't know, about 15 minutes and it's still December 18th.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: If we could go back a little bit to some of those things you talked about yesterday, coming to New York in the mid to late '50s. Who was here then? There was a lot of exciting stuff happening. Who was here, who was playing, who would you see, what were some of the big clubs?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra were working at the Copacabana

and the Village Vanguard was the space for developed unknown artists, like Enid Mosier, Abbey Lincoln, Mae Barnes, a chic little room, and Max Gordon also was a part-owner of Blue Angel, a nightclub that also presented people of this type, and it was the first time I saw Lena Horne.
The band leader, his first name was Nat, at the Waldorf-Astoria, he came to visit me at the Village Vanguard and he took me to see Lena Horne at the Waldorf-Astoria, and it was a changing point in my life. I'd never seen her in person, and I'd been compared to her. They compared everybody to Lena then. Barbara McNair, Diahann Carroll.
I saw this absolutely original woman on stage who sang "Evil Spelled Backwards means Live." She was brilliant. Changed my life. I knew that I was never going to be anything like Lena. I was just going to be myself, like she was herself.
It's where -- I was hanging with Max and Maya and all these people around that time.

SALLY PLAXSON: So that's how you kind of got into the New York --

ABBEY LINCOLN: I came to New York to work. I didn't -- I never had to scrounge for a career. I never dreamed of coming to New York. It was the last thing on my mind.

SALLY PLAXSON: Where were you working?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I was living in Los Angeles. I never dreamed I'd come to Los Angeles, let alone New York, and I didn't know what New York was. I'd heard about it, I guess, but I got here and there were no trees and I thought I can't live here. It was weird to me. I was at the Wellington Hotel, and I was offered a job with Cab Calloway in the park, and for the first time I saw Central Park West and I knew I could stay here and that's where I met -- well, I knew them from Los Angeles. Sammy Davis, Frank Sinatra, the Rat Pack they called them. Wonderful men.
Well, Duke Ellington was here and Louis Armstrong, everybody was here.

SALLY PLAXSON: Where were you working then?

ABBEY LINCOLN: At the Village Vanguard. They had a kitchen then and they also had a dressing room right off the stage that was big enough to accommodate myself and Mae Barnes who was a fat woman, heavyset woman. When they decided to bring jazz into the room, they eliminated the dressing room and they finally closed the kitchen and they never scrubbed the floor. I hate jazz rooms.
I heard Sarah Vaughn say that once and I knew a lot of people didn't understand what she was talking about. I hate being treated secondclass in the name of pretending to be romantic. That's supposed to be sexy, that I'm in the corner in the dark. It's part of the grief of being a part of this music.
I couldn't believe the way they -- yeah. We didn't need a dressing room anymore. The jazz musicians. The jazz musicians don't say anything either. They let people treat them

like dirt and I guess they think it's their lot.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you find this is different in other countries?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. They follow the same tradition in Europe. I remember seeing a great musician, I forget, he was a blues singer-player. I'll remember in a minute. He was -- we were in the second or third basement, a place that used -- they used to use for bomb shelter. Yeah. Somehow this is supposed to be sexy and inspiring, that we're in the corner in the dark in the basement where you can -- if a fire happened, we're lucky nobody was toasted because a lot of these joints are in the basement. No.
If it was up to me, I would finish them off, but it's not, and the musicians get a chance, the young musicians and singers get a chance to entertain and test their instruments and things, but I'll be glad when it's different. I'm jealous when I see ballet dancers in their settings and classical musicians in their settings. That's when you bring your best, not when you're in a smoky dark funky room without a dressing room. Okay. I ranted and railed about that.

SALLY PLAXSON: What's your perfect room, perfect venue?

ABBEY LINCOLN: A concert hall, darling, where you present music with dressing rooms and everything that was made for the stage. That's the perfect room for any music.

SALLY PLAXSON: Lincoln Center.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It'll do. Carnegie Hall. Any place like that. I've been to some beautiful halls in Europe. Yeah. They're sacred halls. The music is sacred, but to a great extent, we're seen as the music of the devil. Black churches and things see us like that. We're not good enough for their sanctified hallowed halls. Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: Is that still true or is this just --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes, it's true.

SALLY PLAXSON: -- left over --

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, it's true. They don't -- the black community does nothing to help us live. Nothing. The tabloids, the newspapers, the record companies, they will produce rock and rap. Have you ever seen a picture of Duke Ellington on the cover of Ebony Magazine or Charlie Parker or Billie Holliday, on any of these black tabloids? It's just like Egypt. It's not theirs. Don't know anything about it.

SALLY PLAXSON: You're saying that the ideal setting is a concert hall, --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. You know why it's a concert hall? Because it's built for sound, for one thing. It's built to view. A theater is to see. That's what the word means. To see. Now, how can you see with posts and things around in the dark? Jazz rooms were made, they were brothels where people with shady characters come and pick up each other and it was all that we could afford as a people as a theater. It's not ideal or excellent. A lot of times, the sound is an abomination and the viewing, you hid behind a post. You can't see the drummer. There's nothing romantic about poverty and that's what jazz joints are. They're based on a concept that the people who come there like to see people in degradation. How could it affect my music if I'm on a stage where there are lights and people can see me? You think I don't need to be seen like in the same light that Judy Garland was seen or any singer? An orchestra.
It was Norman Grant that brought the music out of these holes into the theaters and they still persist, these giants.

SALLY PLAXSON: How about --

ABBEY LINCOLN: When I came to the Village Vanguard, I couldn't believe it. I'd been working all these swell rooms all over the place, all over the country and in Europe, too, and the Village Vanguard. I couldn't -- it was in the basement. It's a wonderful place. You know what makes it famous? The people who worked there. It's not the place in itself. Wherever we worked becomes famous.
The Blue Note, any of these joints. If we didn't work there, they wouldn't be any -- it wouldn't be a room. We make the rooms. I think a lot of times, the musicians forget it. We're the ones. You can present us anywhere and the people will come. Sometimes they're rude to the people, like the Iridian, and gouge them for money. No. To me, it's as romantic as a prostitute is. A prostitute is not a romantic character. She's a victim.

SALLY PLAXSON: How about the relationship between the big bands and dance? What do you think of the way the bands in the '40s, particularly, the popular dance music, and it was a venue where that could happen?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, what are you saying?

SALLY PLAXSON: Is part of the reason that it hasn't moved into the concert hall maybe because it was connected with a space where people could --

ABBEY LINCOLN: People don't dance to this music anymore. They listen. When Charlie Parker and Max Roach and that crowd came, it wasn't -- well, some people -- you know, they used to jitterbug. We used to jitterbug. You can dance to anything. If you're in concert, though, you don't want people dancing. You want the attention of the audience

and that's not the reason that we're not presented as we could be.
We're presented like this because we have no support from our relatives. Barry Gordy produced rock and everything, but he never did approach this music. They used Billie Holliday's career to make some money, but they have never given us anything and they lied on Billie. That story they told about her was an absolute aberration. Whether the black people did it or not, if the Jews had made it, they'd have come to the United Nations to protest this.
We do not get any support from our relatives. The Apollo Theater used to bring the people there, all forms of the music. Mr. Shiffman. Well, since it's been owned by the blacks, they don't invite us up there. I came one time. Betty Carter came a little later and we did full houses, but it's nothing to these people. I don't know why it's like this. There's a flaw in our personality.
Harlem was a famous place and it still is one of the most famous neighborhoods in the world and the entrepreneurs brought the music up town. It was up town where we were and now there's no music up town. It's just a desolate place of victims who complain about the world, but they don't use what God gave us. All you have to do is present the music up there. If you could only find the music in Harlem, Harlem would be a rich neighborhood.
Where is our music center that should have been donated by these rich athletes and these rich television stars and movie stars? Where are they? They give us nothing back. They take everything and run from the house and give it to people who they hate, who they accuse of their murder and of their enslavement.
I've really had it socially. I know where I am now and I know who I am. Mm-hmm. It's not that I'm -- that we're not a brilliant and strong people. We embrace the spirit of victimization. We take that position, like a woman with a man who takes everything he brings her and says that it's not her fault. Lets him beat the children. Victims are not decent people. If you're victimized, it's because you're doing something low.
Billie Holliday learned to hear this music in brothels where she was cleaning up after the prostitutes and wasn't made welcome anywhere else. Truth is right. We have to go to other nations of people for our careers. If there wasn't Europe, I don't know what we would do.

SALLY PLAXSON: Maybe we can, for just a minute, jump back to talking about venues. You talked yesterday about Salt Lake City and the whole Northern Pacific. Was it a circuit? What was the --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. It was a circuit.

SALLY PLAXSON: How did you travel?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Denita Joe and Vivian Dandridge, Dorothy's sister, people who were not names. There was a circuit. Salt Lake City, Roseburg, Oregon, and finally

Honolulu, some places in Japan. I never went to Japan, but those were the places I went.

SALLY PLAXSON: Who was doing the booking?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Roseburg, Oregon. Johnnie Robinson was the agent. Yeah. Johnnie Robinson.

SALLY PLAXSON: So, how would you travel? How would it -- how long would you have?

ABBEY LINCOLN: The best we could. By bus, by car. The least expensive way. When I started to make a $100 a week in Honolulu, I thought wow, I didn't know there was all this money in the music, you know. I worked as a maid and I had made like $30 a week which was pretty good for a maid in that time.

But I was making a $100 a week, finally a $150 a week. It's a privileged lifestyle, really, even though I complained about it. We are honored, the ones who come to the stage and have the courage to stay there. The people come and they bring you their money and they give it to the producer and the producer gives it to us and some of us live wonderful lifestyles. It's because of the people. The producers give us nothing. It's an advance on what the people bring.

It's the people who make us rich. I think they deserve a lot more than they get. The people. I don't know why they pay for this garbage. A lot of it's garbage. They could do better themselves in the living room.

SALLY PLAXSON: Did this network go into Canada, too?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. When I became more famous, when I became Abbey Lincoln, and I had this movie, "The Girl Can't Help It," they started to send me to Canada, to England, to Sweden, places like that, and to Miami Beach.

SALLY PLAXSON: Did you travel with your own group? How did that work?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. That was one of the disadvantages. I started to travel with my own band when I became a jazz singer. When I recorded the first album I made with Max and Kenny Dorham and Sonny Rollins and Wynton Kelly and Paul Chambers, I knew I was never going back to doing what I had been doing. I was going to work with these kind of musicians.

SALLY PLAXSON: Why did you know that? What about it made you know that?

ABBEY LINCOLN: It wasn't anything hard to figure out. They were great musicians and they enhanced my abilities on the stage. Yeah. I thought okay, this is what it is. Somebody who knows how to interpret a song, who knows the difference between A flat and C sharp. Yeah. Sophisticated man at the piano or on whatever. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: So, when you were on the circuit before you got to the point you

were, it was the bands at the clubs or whoever?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I would be sometimes the only black person in the room. They didn't want black people to come and visit, like in Miami. A black man would frighten them. You'd see somebody sweeping the floors sometimes. I was surrounded by whites and they were the band leaders and they were the band, the piano player, but they didn't think of themselves as great musicians. It was just a job, you know, and sometimes it was really difficult and sometimes it wasn't too bad, but usually it was a drag, and I started traveling with just a piano player.
I worked with Wynton Kelly for awhile after he left Dinah. Dinah cried about it, too. She really loved Wynton. She really complained when he left.
Anyway, I worked with Wynton in Brooklyn and a few places. Big, Big Nicholas, big Nick Nicholas.

SALLY PLAXSON: Big Nicholas?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I shared the bill with him in Brooklyn and I started working with Phil Wright, Junior Manson, and Phil and I would go out on the road, just him and me, but I started carrying a band when I was with Roach. I worked with him as his girl singer, but every once in awhile, I mean, I had a band. After I made "Nothing But A Man," and I didn't get any calls from anybody to work their clubs, I went to Wells up town and it was supposed to be beneath me, but it wasn't. I did the same thing at the Parisian Room in Los Angeles because I know that if you are somebody, if you work a place, the place is somebody, too.
After I worked at Wells a few times, my trio was Cedar Walters, Reggie Workman, and Jack Dijenette. Jack called me not too long ago and said he found the tapes from one of the performances, and after I worked there, Betty came to Wells and worked a little while and Miles Davis came to Count Basie's to work.
All you have to do is -- all you need is one person to do things and other people will join you. That's why they don't want you to do anything in the first place. That's why they say shut up. You can change things. Just one person. Mm-hmm. I worked Wells maybe three or four times.

SALLY PLAXSON: Would this be like weeklong gigs or stand-up?

ABBEY LINCOLN: For a week. Max would be working at the Five Spot or Jazz Gallery with his band and I worked with mine and it was like that.

SALLY PLAXSON: Were New York audiences different from around the country?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I've never found a different audience anywhere. The audiences were different when I start -- when I first started to sing and I was learning how to conquer

an audience. I have learned over the years that the stage is like a provisional government and you don't let anybody take your stage away from you. I learned that from the women, Sarah and Billie. People don't walk when they sing. Carmen. They don't talk when I sing either, and as I have learned to make this kind of communication direct, no matter where I go, it's the same audience. Even those who don't speak English, they know exactly what I'm talking about. It's what I feel in my heart.
So, it doesn't matter anymore where I work. I don't expect the audience to be quiet because I come to the stage. They will be quiet because I have something to say to them and I'm going to say it. I get paid to do this. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you say you learned it from Billie and Sarah, was it from observing them?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I didn't learn it from them.

SALLY PLAXSON: Yeah. How do you mean?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I learned it witnessing them do this. I knew that it was a possibility. Lena Horne. Yeah. I learned from witnessing these great singers that that's the way it's supposed to be. People are not supposed to talk when you're on the stage. It's rude. So, I don't have any problem with that usually.
I was in Philadelphia not too long ago at a place called Zanzibar, a little -- and the man who owns the place is really not very enlightened, I think, as regards to the music. He had some African ancestors, but this music doesn't mean anything to him, and he encouraged his audience. He didn't say to them while the show is on, please make sure that you keep your voices at a certain -- I heard a man -- I mean, I really struggled. Just one show. I heard a man talking to a friend of his at a table maybe six tables away. "Yeah. She had red hair," he said. I said, "Your mama's red hair." That was how impossible it was and I read the management from the stage.
By the time I finished, for the most part, the audience was mine. Some of them had left and he was insulted. He was impressed with his club, I think, and when he went to the stage and told the people that there wouldn't be a second show, I was really relieved because I thought how am I going to do this on a weekend, you know? Anyway, I was saved from it.

SALLY PLAXSON: You mentioned stage fright. Did you used to have stage fright and how did you --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: -- stop having it?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I think everybody suffers from stage fright at first. Some people, when they get to be older and elderly, still have it. I don't know how.
Yeah. I suffered from stage fright when I began to be presented as a star. Until then, I don't remember ever suffering from stage fright. I worked at Ceros in Hollywood when I was named Abbey Lincoln. Sammy Davis had worked there. Many great stars, but the club was on the decline, and I auditioned for it. He didn't really -- he wasn't impressed with me. I knew that because he said, "I've had it." But my manager talked to him and I opened that night and I trembled, I was so frightened at being at Ceros and I wasn't anybody yet and I knew it and it was hard to sing.
So, I finally said to the audience, "I'm scared to death," and as soon as I said that, it relieved all the tension and I could do the performance, and I remember saying to Max a couple of years later, I said, "You don't suffer from stage fright when you go to the stage." I said, "Why is that?" He said, "Because I'm too busy preparing to be afraid." And I heard that, too.
I haven't suffered from stage fright, I guess, since then. I'm not afraid anymore and I don't come to impress anybody, but it is a preparation that you make when you come to the stage.

SALLY PLAXSON: What is that preparation? How do you do that?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't know if I could explain it. It's a spiritual thing. Sometimes she feels grumpy and she doesn't want to be bothered and she doesn't want any food to eat. It all depends, but I don't come with stage fright, with an attitude. I watched Eartha Kitt with an attitude and I didn't understand it, but I understand it now. Dinah. Yeah. An attitude. You're not alone and sometimes you don't want to do it, but you do, and you don't know what's going to happen. You don't know how it's going to be and sometimes they stand real close to you, the light, and everything you do is just in the pocket and sometimes they're way over there somewhere and you're alone and you can't -- it's not as much enjoyment as you wish it was.
But after awhile, there's a certain level for the music, for your performance, and it doesn't go too far up or too far down. It might -- you know what I mean? It's not ever going to be too bad, but sometimes when the spirit comes and carries you away, you don't have to think about anything. It just uses you and the audience hollers and you understand it.
Mm-hmm. It's a healing process for all of us. They know everything that I know. There's nothing that I bring to the stage that the people don't know about.
Down here below, they're living here. Throw it away, they know all about it. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: I noticed you said she before. You said sometimes she's grumpy. Is she the spirit? Is she --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. I'm a female. My God's a female. I do not worship male Gods. He's my brother. I don't look to him for my life. I look to myself, to my female self.

God is male and female, not a goddess. God. I finally figured that out. Yeah. I don't have to abuse Him and, I mean, expect something from Him He doesn't have to give. He's just like me, you know, and I love Him, but I don't love Him more than I love Her. I'm Her, you know. Mm-hmm. The female god is I represent her. Moseka is a female god in the form of a maiden. That's what the Minister of Information told me in Africa, in Zaire. He didn't say it was a goddess. He said Moseka is the God of Love in the form of a maiden. I'd like to make a monument to her.
Yeah. I named Moseka my puppy. Moseka. She's female. A god of love in the form of a puppy, of a dog. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: Did you feel at any point that your background in theater and on stage became a part of the stage persona and presence that you have?

ABBEY LINCOLN: All of it contributes to the work that I have, experience as an actress or an actor. I don't mind being called an actor. Michael Romer, who was my first serious film, dramatic film, and he made me know, he made me think that I was really a talented and a great actress, and I took his direction, and then I had a chance to make "For Love of Ivy," and I had another great director, Danny Mann, who would give me a direction.
I was fortunate. Those are the only two really films I made. "For Love of Ivy." "Nothing But A Man" and "For Love of Ivy." Well, just like Triptic helped me as a singer and as an actress, acting taught me a lot about what singing was all about and the stage. I'm a storyteller. I use words and sound and music and I know how to act out things on the stage. I'm really a ham.

SALLY PLAXSON: Where do the hats come from?

ABBEY LINCOLN: The hats? I lost my sister in 1989, my baby sister, and my life was really before me. It was critical. Anyway, I spent a little time in the hospital and I lost a little of my hair. I've been wearing hats because somehow it's a comfort and a protection for me. I cover my head. Sometimes I take it off, but I meet all these people in the theater. I don't know who they are, and I need a hat on my head. You never know who's sending you weird vibes.
That's the best explanation I can give because I never wore hats before like this, as I remember, but I have a lot of hats.

SALLY PLAXSON: At what point did you start to use them in the performance when you were on stage? Was it the same kind of thing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't remember. "The World is Falling Down." I don't remember. It was around that time. Since I've been with Verve. But I've changed my style of dressing anyway. I wear black. It covers me. It's a comfort, like the hat. This is a really

-- sometimes I feel it's a really dangerous world. It's my spirit.
I believe that's what it is. I didn't think about it. I didn't plan it or anything. It just -- and usually I need some black, something black on and a hat. But I could be without it and I won't die, but I really like a hat. Mm-hmm.
My life changed in 1989. Jean-Philippe Allard called me from Paris and he knew all of the work that I had brought. He had researched everything, not only me but many other people. He was Stan Getz's producer, and he said to me on the phone, "Abby, what do you want to do?" which was the perfect thing for him to say to me, and I had this material at hand. "The World is Falling Down" and "I Got Thunder" and all these songs, and he suggested Jackie McLean and I asked him for Alain and Jean-Marie from Paris, who's from Guadalupe, and I asked him for Ron Carter as an arranger and we decided on -- I didn't know. It was his suggestion. Charlie Haynes. He sent me Charlie Haynes for a song and I wrote a lyric.
I thought Charlie had asked me, but it was Jean-Philippe. So, we got this first album, and he signed me for three albums. I had never been signed before. With all the things I've done, the Americans did not care if I lived or died. I had only ever done one recording for an independent company. The major labels were not interested in me. They didn't think I'd sell records because I was social.

SALLY PLAXSON: This was especially after "Straight Ahead," right?

ABBEY LINCOLN: After "Straight Ahead" and before it, too. CBS never called and asked me for anything, neither did ABC or anybody else. So, I've been with Verve Polygram France for the last six years and my career has increased. The audience has increased because they got a chance to hear me. They would have come before if somebody had presented me, but I'm glad it's now because I've mellowed in my mature years and I hope that I will be more and more compassionate and I don't want to hurt anybody, but meeting Jean-Philippe has made it all mellow. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: How do you work together on albums sort of across --

ABBEY LINCOLN: The way Max used to work with me. He would suggest people. He knows all these people. I don't know them. I didn't know Hank Jones. I knew who he was, but I'd never -- I didn't know Hank Jones. I never would have thought to call J.J. Johnson or Charlie Haynes or Pat Metheny. He really enhances my life.
He says, "Now, what do you think about so and so?" And if I say, "No," he'll say, "Okay. What do you think about?" He doesn't try to run my life. He has great respect for the music, you know, and he helps us to live, and everybody he's producing is doing very well. He's a young man. He's really a young man who knows all this.

SALLY PLAXSON: Is this about as close to an ideal situation?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. This is as ideal as I need. Mm-hmm. I know that in a year, if I want to, I can record and I can -- so, I've developed as a composer and as a writer, as a musician. Took away a lot of the frustrations, although I've had a chance to record everything I've done over the years. "Talking to The Sun, The Germans Came for "Me.

SALLY PLAXSON: That was Enja.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: What year was that?

ABBEY LINCOLN: In '84. And I recorded it with Steve Coleman, who was a beautiful saxophonist, came to see me at Sweet Basil's when I came back to New York. They didn't have a dressing room. They had a hole behind the bar that you're supposed to go down and tell the musicians did it. I said, "I'm supposed to go there and make magic and then come and fall down and break my neck behind the bar and disappear into the ground, right?" And they sent me outside for an honest to God manhole cover. It wasn't their fault, though. It was this woman who was representing me. I asked her if there was a dressing room. She said, "Oh, yes." I mean, you know, selling me down the river.
Steve Coleman came to see me when I was at Sweet Basil's with his railroad worker's outfit on. He had a big Afro and a railroad worker's cap and coveralls and his big broken shoes and I don't know why I said to him, "Are you a musician?" He said, "Yeah." So, I asked him to come and sit in with us on Saturday. Well, he tore the house down. Brilliant, and I went to the Blue Note with him and his band. I asked him, because I didn't have a band then, I said, "Do you know some other musicians like yourself?" He said, "Yeah." And he brought me James Wyman and the Johnson Brothers, Mark Johnson on drums and Bill Johnson on bass.
At the Blue Note, we did "Sophisticated Lady." I will always remember he did a solo, and the people in the audience, it was like this, like they couldn't believe it. They were applauding. It was like that, and then we recorded for Enja, and I got that. I wrote "People On The Street, Taking All The Heat, Here's a Little Ditty of a Song, Ding, Dang, Dong, Sing A Simple Song, because the people in the houses ain't got long," and they don't. Yeah.
So, I've seen a lot in the world over the years. I've had a chance to witness it. It's another planet. It's another country and it doesn't make me feel good and I'm glad I don't have to stay here forever. I don't know what's going to happen.

SALLY PLAXSON: When you talked about your manager not -- well, not -- telling you there was a dressing room when there wasn't, what about all these layers of management and representation? I was also going to touch on something in the '60s. Was part of that move of civil rights in terms of the music -- I read something about some of the musicians, like Max ad Poppa Joe and Mingus, were trying to, especially around one of the Newport

Festivals -- are you -- do you know what --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. I was there.

SALLY PLAXSON: You were there? Yeah. What was that? They were -- the pay wasn't good enough and they were --

ABBEY LINCOLN: They were fussing at George Wing.

SALLY PLAXSON: They were what?

ABBEY LINCOLN: They were fussing at George Wing.

SALLY PLAXSON: They were trying to start an argument?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, George is only human. He's got a certain group of people he likes. He doesn't like everybody. They didn't care that much for George either, but they wanted him to give them a job.
Anyway, we have it on tape. We were all a bunch of bandits then, Roach and Charles Mingus and --

SALLY PLAXSON: Poppa Joe?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. Well, he was -- he loved Max. There were a bunch of people. That's the first time I sang "Triptic" was at this festival, and we were all sick and crazy. That's true. We were in and out of the hospital. Mingus was bonkers, so was Roach. Billy Joe Jones. Poppa Joe Jones was incensed because of his behavior. So, it was like that, you know.
A bunch of folks, but Roach was the -- Max was the hub or the wheel, you know. We had done something at the East 74th Street Theater, but we didn't have enough peace amongst us. You have to really have peace and understanding to do something original, to bring something new. We were all crazy. I mean, we were too crazy to change things. Frail, you know. We all had our problems. So, we would go from the theater to the hospital and come and get Roach in a straitjacket. You know what I mean? Mingus.
A lot of folks. Monk. It wasn't easy because they make things difficult for us, so that we will abandon the music. People in other forms don't have to go through all this stress and strain. It's knowing that they're being discriminated against and somebody else isn't.
Do you know what it did to us when they sent the Beatles over here and told us they were paying them a $100,000 a night?

SALLY PLAXSON: I was just going to ask that.

ABBEY LINCOLN: And here we were working for -- Miles was making $5,000 a week and he was supposed to be one of the privileged ones. $3,000 a week was good money. This is what they dumped on us, and then after awhile, folks started crossing the barriers and using electricity. People who really knew how to bring this musical form, who were selling out, so they could make some money.
But I think if you are born to the arts, you're not supposed to be influenced by such things. If I wanted some money, I wouldn't have come to this musical form. I've have kept right on doing what I was doing if I wanted some money. I'd have sold my booty like everybody else. You know what I mean? But I took another position. I don't miss money. What are you going to do with it anyway? If I had a pile of money, there would be a center in Harlem for the music. Mm-hmm.
I don't want none of that garbage around me. I didn't ask God for any money. I'd like the world. I really would. I'd like it for all of us, a place where we could be happy and nobody has to worry about not having anything and people don't hurt each other. I would, but I'd never made a world, so what would I know? It probably wouldn't work out anyway.

SALLY PLAXSON: How can you trace your career in terms of hair style, of your hair?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Not my career I can trace but my life. I wrote a lyric in 1970 when I went back to New York and it goes like this, -- I mean a poem called "Coil Strand" because people call my hair natural, they call it kinky. We call it all kinds of things, but what it is is coiled. It's like that.
My life is all in my hair. "The Coiled Strand. Mine is the coiled strand. The follicle is just like the bag I'm in, circling, spiraling ever upward, outward. It is always in. It is tested as my life is and remains itself. Coiled as the spring from which I spring, sprang, sprung. Still coiled, mine is the coiled strand." Mm-hmm.
However I am made, I thank my ancestors and the gods and I wouldn't tell them that they didn't know how to make a human being. It's scary to watch the development of people who deny their ancestors. Well, Michael Jackson who killed his ancestors in his face and in his hair, his skin. The only reason he can sing and dance like he does is because his ancestors were African. I'd be afraid to do that. I'd be afraid. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you have a lot of poetry that you've written that hasn't become music?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mm-hmm. I got a collection of poetry. Now, I sing most everything I write, but I do have a collection. When something really bothers me and it prays on my mind, if I write about it, I can get rid of it. I put it in the drawer with the rest of the pieces and I don't think about it anymore.

SALLY PLAXSON: Does --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hmm?

SALLY PLAXSON: Sorry.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Go ahead.

SALLY PLAXSON: No. I was going to say does painting work in that same way for you?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. I'm painting this little girl who's tired and when I finish it, I'll probably be better. But to admit what it is and not to pretend that it's not there, it heals me, to say okay, ouch, you know, ouch. So, I write about my life. I think about the life I live. A figure made of clay. I think about the things I lost, the things I gave away, and when I'm in a certain mood, I search the halls, the halls of the dictionaries and the Encyclopedia Brittanicas and look.
One night, I found these magic words in a magic book. Echang. You can throw it away. It really changed my life. Mm-hmm. Because you can't lose anything if it's yours. We don't own anything here. We don't own our lives. So, what is this? It's in vain. Why are we spending our times pretending that we have something here? You can't take your body. You have to leave everything here. So, why would you want money?
I can understand wanting health, so you can be comfortable while you're here, and the respect and all these things, but to gather something that you can't take across the street and to tell people that money doesn't grow on trees and they make it out of paper, we all know where paper comes from, trees. It does grow on trees.

SALLY PLAXSON: You mentioned seeing Lena Horne and you mentioned the Echang and you said those moments changed your life. Are there other moments like that you can think of that were real revelations?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. I have many. When Monk's told me not to be too -- so perfect and Roach taught me the principle of order, because when we first started to live together, I used to throw things around sort of. I didn't know where -- I didn't know anything about order, and I was a star and I thought we ought to have a maid to clean the house and do the dishes and everything, right? And he struggled with it because he's a drummer and he's a man and he always did practice order. That's why he's such a great musician. Everything is definitely in order for Roach.
So, he said to me one day, "Abby, if you practice disorder off the stage, you will practice it on the stage" and that was all I needed to hear. I wanted to be great like he was. I learned to practice order. I practiced order in my life and in my house. I know where everything is here. If I have to look for it, I know something's wrong. I know where everything is. It's traveling light. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: I was going to jump back to the films again, to "Nothing But A Man" and to the other. That was in '65, I think, wasn't it?

ABBEY LINCOLN: My first film?

SALLY PLAXSON: Yes, in '65. And it was right -- well, it was -- that was an important film, I think, in terms of --

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was during the time of the so-called revolution. Dr. King, Malcolm X. Michael Romer was affected by the Holocaust in Europe. I think he lived in England, but he had an understanding of what oppression is. "Nothing But A Man" is about oppression and how you oppress yourself after awhile, if you suffer oppression, how you pass it on and you become an oppressor. It was a brilliant film. He wrote it and directed it. He and Bob Young wrote it together and Bob was this camera man.
They all brought something. Michael was the director. Bob Young was the camera man and Robert Rubin was the sound man, and they were dedicated, and he wasn't making a black film. He was doing a film in black face. He said, "This is my story." He just chose to put it in the setting of African Americans, but he knew all about it. He taught me that I was a wonderful actress. Michael Romer. That film lives because it's the truth about things. He teaches school at Yale University. He's a lot like I am. Michael is not motivated by being -- I mean, he's somebody on his own. Nobody ever heard his name before. Michael Romer is a genius. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: Donald Vogel, who writes about film, talks about this film as being important in terms of breaking away from the stereotypes at that time.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was instruction. He said to the people, the character that Ivan Dixon played had a lot of magic and he married a beautiful woman who had a lot of magic, but he didn't know what was happening with his own son. He had a child that he didn't know. He said he wasn't sure was his, who was -- he had thrown away his child, like his father had thrown him away, and when he witnessed his father's death, how tragic it all was, he thought okay, I'm going for myself, and he went and got his child and brought him home, and we knew then that they would get along and that he would defend himself from the people in the community who wanted his life. He would do it for him. He loved his son.
A man or a woman who does not find their way to that, I think that's the whole key. Yeah. His child, he went and got him. He wasn't going to repeat the cycle of his father. So, --

SALLY PLAXSON: And your role in that was who?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I played his wife, who was a school teacher, who was a woman who was bright and who knew her husband was angry and knew to be afraid of him, too,

that he'd take it out on her. She didn't have to worry about that after he brought his child home. He didn't brutalize his family. He would take his hostility where he was supposed to take it, away from home. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Self-destruct. That was what that film was about, how you avoid self-destructing.

SALLY PLAXSON: How was it received when it was first released?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I think it was a very successful film. Some people complained about it, but I thought it did very well. I saw it on television in Los Angeles when I got there in 1970 and it still lives as Evergreen and it made -- it's made its -- it paid for its expenses. He sends me a check every once in awhile for some change. It's out of the red.

SALLY PLAXSON: How did "For Love of Ivy" come about? That was with Sidney Poitier.

ABBEY LINCOLN: I was an actress and a star and the people in the industry knew that "Nothing But A Man" was a significant contribution and Sidney Poitier broke as the greatest actor in the world for the first time, a black man in America, and he wanted to say something about the black woman and the black man because it wasn't permitted for a black man to have a romantic interest with a black woman on television. It still isn't. She's not supposed to have a man and he's not supposed to have a woman. That's what bondage is.
So, Sidney wrote this contrived story. He did this synopsis, 21 pages. He had to go through all these changes to introduce a black woman love interest in film with himself. Everybody thought Diahann Carroll or Barbara McNair or anybody but Abbey Lincoln was going to make this film. He was number 1 and I was this rebellious woman wearing her hair natural and who talked too much and nobody thought, including Sidney, that it was mine, but it was. Mm-hmm. That's all. It just was mine, and it was very successful. I didn't wait too long after that for another film because I remember Dorothy Dandridge dying waiting for a film and now at this time in my life, I wouldn't be on the stage for anything with a film. I already did that. But the films that I made are Evergreen. Even "The Girl Can't Help It." Can't get any better than that. Mm-hmm.
Beau Bridges, Lloyd Bridges and Beau and he's got another son, too, that's a wonderful family. He was there on the set sometimes, Lloyd and his wife and the kids. Mm-hmm.

SALLY PLAXSON: When did you start painting and writing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: When I left New York in 1970 and I went to Los Angeles and I lived with my mother, next door to my mother, I started painting. I'd been writing. I wrote -- well, no. I started writing, too. I went to Japan and made an album after my trip to Africa called "People In Me." I had written a lyric to Ronnie Mattews' "Man With the

Magic," and I had written lyrics to some other composers. I started writing my own compositions. It was in 1970, when I was between careers and I embarrassed my so-called peers when they saw -- when they found out I was living over a garage. They were embarrassed, living in Beverly Hills, and ooh-hooty-hoo. I saved myself a lot of grief.

For the first time I understood really what Billie Holliday was talking about when she said, "God Bless The Child That's Got His Own," and that song, "Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out." I thought but I know you, though. I don't miss any of them. It separated the wheat from the chaff and I don't have much respect for them either. I saw them deliver us to a world that was fifth rate because they didn't know how to handle success.

Dr. King died for them, so did Malcolm, and they're not worth a damn. All they need is a little change. I'm glad I'm not a part of that set. I don't know them and they don't know me either. They have nothing to give back. Nothing to give the people. Making movies that downgrade our existence, and on the television set, there are so many, I mean it's disgusting. Men dressed as women making fun of his grandmother, of his mother, a fool, a butt of a joke.

So.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you think that, you know, the sort of trials that you're talking about, that you faced throughout your life and the way that they get incorporated into your music, does that affect your development in terms of what you're saying? And you talked about how, when you sing to the audience, they know, they know what you're singing, but I think they -- even though we know it as the audience, I think hearing that confirmation from you and the way that you put it together lifts it to some kind of higher level, and I'm wondering if you feel that you use these trials in some way to -- you know, on some level to kind of reach to those higher levels.

ABBEY LINCOLN: I'm not conscious of all of that. I just really put one foot before the other and do my best to live, you know. I'm as surprised as anybody when I hear a song, but I trust it, that it is a song. I think a lot of people hear songs and they just don't write them down. They hear melodies and things and they just don't write it down. I take what I hear seriously, but no, I don't have any formula.

When I'm really miserable and I wake up in the morning and I think I'm still here and sometimes a song will come. "When I'm Called Home" I found on a plane ride to Japan. Looking at my life and looking at what I have to put up with, I was so outraged, I cried all the way to Japan and I got a song out of it, and when Stan Getz played it after we got the tape, the performance on the tape, he said, "Abby, I don't want to put a jinx on this song, but this is a great song" because he knew the same thing I did.

"When I'm Called Home, I'll bring a book that tells of strange and funny turns and of the heart it took to keep on living in a world that never was my own, a world of haunted memories, of other worlds unknown. I'll tell them of the trouble here when they call me

home." That's what it's about. Affirming life, recognition of an experience that we're forced to here. Yeah. Not knowing anything. We don't know where we are. We don't know how we got here, nothing, and people tell us all these stories and lie to children. It's hard enough, I imagine if you were given the truth as a child, but it takes you till you're 40 years old to undo all the lies that were given to you when you were forming. No, I'm not pleased with this and as an artist, I have -- I take leave. I have a right to talk about it. That's what all the artists did and do. We say this sucks here right there. Maybe the politicians can't afford to say it, but the artists can. Yeah. Look what you've done to my song.

So, even though I'm angry and everything, it's only so badly that I can feel because I practice the arts and I'm privileged and people know my name and they come to see me.

SALLY PLAXSON: In terms of healing and this music as a healing form, how do you see it first in terms of healing for yourself as an artist and also in terms of the way the audience perceives it?

ABBEY LINCOLN: When I think about the arts worldwide and totally, they were always in tribute to the gods. All of the great music of Europe is about the gods. Bach, Beethoven and all these great writers and composers, it was about a celestial experience. The same thing in Egypt. All of the monuments are to the gods.

If you have music and it's not to the gods, then it has to be to the devil. I do not sing to the devil. My music is healing to me because I sing in praise of my ancestors and of the people and there's nothing else really to sing about. When I was in trouble when I was looking for myself, I sang these other songs. "Happiness is Just a Thing Called Joe," not a man, a thing.

"Sometimes the cabin's gloomy and the table's bare. What kind of a man can't put food on the table, but when he kisses me, it's Christmas everywhere." A woman who's a tart, a woman who sings these kind of songs about a man it tells on herself. What kind of a woman is this?

No. The stories that I tell are about my life and they do heal me, although I look to herbs and to holy thought for healing and sometimes the doctors help me if I'm sick, but I go to music for praise. I'm in praise of the spirit that is mine, of my ancestors. "Amen." Mm-hmm.

This life, the life of the stage, is so corrupted because we are not protected by our temples and the government. We don't have any protection. So, it's dangerous. Some people die of it and become alcoholic and dope-addicted and they're prey to a world where there's no protection. We do not sing to the gods anymore. We don't ask the gods anything. This is all about hey, get down, and booty butt and you know what I mean? It's totally opposite. I think we're in decline. I don't think it. I know it. This is in decline. You can't have a world like this long.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you think young singers today, young particularly female

singers, have options when they come into the business? Can they say no, I won't be presented that way?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Everybody has options, but it's been made really easy for them to be this. It's like street life. I mean, they're ashamed to not be street life. You wear your dress up to here, so when you sit down, you just barely cover your booty and you're sexy and you have your breasts added to and you lay around and if a baby comes and you don't want to be bothered, you have it aborted. This is the way we live. You don't owe anybody anything. All you're supposed to do is have some money and blame a man for everything low that ever happened to you. Yeah. It's a disgusting world. Mm-hmm.
These are the singers. What are they going to say? A lot of people made money on Billie Holliday after she died. A lot of young singers. They didn't have the slightest idea as to who Billie Holliday was and sang some of her songs and put the flower in their hair, but they're not doing that right now.
Aretha Franklin started with reverence. That's how she got the music. There's a bunch of little scallywags and they imitate people, but they don't have anything to bring us. They don't have anything to give us. They don't even have a sound of their own and they have no morality. A lot of people have lost the sense of morality and principle. It embarrasses them to talk about it.
I think the devil came and got the world, if you want to know what I think, finally. It came and it belongs to the devil, to the lie. You're not supposed to know anything, but things change. It's not a time of great performers. They're in the past. Great individual stylists. Oh, that's so and so. I wish -- I mean, I don't hear that.

SALLY PLAXSON: Do you see any young artists that you think can keep the tradition?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I think a lot of the young men are doing this. I haven't heard anybody who reminds me -- not do songs like Dinah Washington, but who -- you know what I mean? Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah or -- I haven't heard anybody yet. Cassandra Wilson has a song and Diane Reeves, but I'm talking about -- I don't know. It's like the brilliance of Charlie Parker, and I should be the last one because I'm a late-bloomer myself. I didn't get it all at once.
But they are really fine singers, but somebody who is from another dimension, maybe. You know what I mean? We haven't seen anything like that here. Maybe it's the times. So mediocre, yeah, right now. Mediocrity is the -- whew! The active 30 years ago were brilliant.
I'm telling you. I mean, a lot of the folks that are here, I don't even know who they are. Maybe it's me, maybe it's me. I don't know them and they don't leave an impression on me. I think it's like a non-entity and they make a lot of money. Maybe that's what it is. I think that the industry bought the souls of the people. They offered them a lot of money and so they'll just do anything. Models that look like tarts. There used to be street walkers dressed like that, exposing themselves, and in the name of these so-called great designers.

Could be great themselves.
I wonder why the feminists don't say anything about that. I don't get it. Why she wouldn't say what are you doing to us? Why don't you have a decent garment for a woman to wear? Half of her behind exposed. It's embarrassing. This is not about the music, right?

SALLY PLAXSON: Well, it's part of it. It's the business and it's the image, but --

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah.

SALLY PLAXSON: -- you're talking about feminists objecting to that. What about this more sort of interpretation of the music now from different perspectives, of women's history in jazz from more feminists' perspective?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Women don't have a history in jazz. That's just a lot of garbage the feminists have brought to us. Listen, women have the same history in jazz as they do in classical music. Does she -- is she the composer? Does she conduct the orchestra? She sings, just like they do in this form. If we depended on women to bring music, we'd be in trouble. They don't bring music. They bring babies. They become famous being married to a man. It's a rare woman, like Melba Liston, who comes to the music for the music. Rare. Hazel Scott.

SALLY PLAXSON: Why do you think that is?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Because they're women and they make babies. A man doesn't make a child. He doesn't clone a human being. His work is all cut out for him. She makes the people and he makes the world that they come into. What's wrong with this? Why is it all of a sudden she wants to pretend that she's something that she's not? She doesn't build bridges. It's not because the men didn't let her build one. Her mind is not there. This is not who a woman is. I know, I'm a woman. Women do not think along these terms. It's a rare woman who does.

Freud was a man. Everybody who's impacted on the world, on the outside world, it's the women who bring the men and women here and teach them what she knows. What kind of a woman brings a man who's a male chauvinist? What did she teach him when he's a child? She suckles him at her breast and she brings her own worst enemy here? Is this a man's fault or hers?
I think we need to look at this. I'm tired of this feminist crap. How are you going to be a feminist and you bring men and women here? What about the boy? Doesn't his life mean anything? What's he going to do while you're being a feminist? What about being a humanist? What's wrong with that?
No, I have no sympathy for them, I mean, and I think they're really taking disadvantage and the men who were called male chauvinists are really pushovers because he gives her anything she asks for. She doesn't make me feel safe walking around with her dress up

just below her behind. What kind of a woman is this? Old women in their underwear they call tights. Really? Where's her dress?
A man is made to look at a woman and become excited. He has to have an erection. There's a difference between men and women. She doesn't have to have anything to make the baby. She doesn't have to feel anything, but he has to have an erection. So, what is this? And she jumps on the man and pretends that she's hot in the first kiss. What happened to foreplay? What about the little girls who are coming through, who are being assaulted by men who don't know how to treat a girl anymore?
In these movies that they make with them coming at each other with their mouths open in the heat of passion for the first kiss. Give me a break. These are a bunch of frigid people who don't feel anything. Otherwise they wouldn't approach a human being like that. I am female. There's nothing greater than being female, but I'm not greater than a man and a man is not greater than me.
No, I'm not a feminist. She preempted the black movement, the feminist did. She got jobs that she never would have had before. The Secretary of State and the prosecuting attorney. When is it going to be my turn? It's two for her and none for me. The designers make clothes for women that they have no respect for. They don't even finish the garment anymore. They charge you an arm and a leg for something. You can see it in the style what these men think of these women and the men are the ones who design our clothes. Men design our clothes.
I don't care what he does in this world. He dresses himself and he wears his clothes. I'm glad you gave me a chance to get that off.

SALLY PLAXSON: Me, too.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It drives me crazy.

SALLY PLAXSON: What would you say to young artists or young people who want to find their voice, to find their own spirit the way that you found your own?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, it sounds real simple and I think it really is, but it's not really that simple. Mama taught me this and I wrote this song and I said that she did. Mama told me of a beauty that is made of purest gold, one the weather will not tarnish, one that never will grow old. She said beauty comes from understanding, looking at the things we see, beauty of the human spirit, beauty that will set us free.
I think that's really everything. To see your inherent beauty that was given you free, gratis, by that that made us, the ability to think and make choices, and if you find yourself beautiful, you can't find anybody else not beautiful. That's the thing. It takes one to know one.
So, I'm glad. I find that -- I believe that my ancestors were beautiful and somehow that is who God is. I don't know what God is, other than that that made me and who wrote stories a long time ago and told me who I was and where I was. Yeah. The artists, I think

they're the most powerful people on the planet. They always have been. The artists and the scientists, the people who think and steer the course here. Those are the most powerful people in the world who have ever been on the planet.
So, I would say look for understanding. If you know who you are, you can control your life, no matter what anybody else says, you know. Somebody else's opinion doesn't mean anything, but I live on a planet and I know that the sun isn't out all the time. This is constant. There's darkness and there's light and we have no power here. If the elements come to get us, there's nothing we can do about it. It's always been like that.
When the folks went to discover Egypt and Rome and Greece, they found it under sand, didn't they? When the archaeologists -- wasn't it under sand? People don't just -- I mean, cities don't just gather sand. Something has to happen and you never know when destruction will come. I believe that destruction is the beginning of something. I believe that the phoenix rises from the ashes and all that stuff. I do. It all sounds real to me.
I believe that God is great, whatever it is, and our ancestors said that there was such a thing, that we are made like this. We are made perfect and whole and we can do anything we want to do, but you have to reach for understanding and you're not supposed to be a sucker here.

SALLY PLAXSON: How about telling us a little bit about the autobiography you're working on?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes, I've been working on it for 20 or 25 years and I don't have a title for it yet, the autobiography, but I want to tell a story that will describe for youngsters what is before them when they say they want to come to the stage. I want to talk about a country and a world that is difficult sometimes to live in.
Well, I said this before, but I would like it to be just to approach Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre." With "Jane Eyre," you knew in that story, you knew who the English were, what they were socially, who they were socially, how they felt about things. That's what I'd like to write, a story that tells about a world and a people, and to show somehow the value of the work, the value of the music, to be somebody great, like Duke Ellington who's got a street named for him just two blocks up the street. Mm-hmm.
Other than that, and I looked forward. This is my 66th year. If I live to be a hundred, I'm more than halfway through it, you know. I don't want to live to be a hundred, but I'd -- well, I look forward to eventually to the transition, to that thing that happens for all of us. We don't have to stay here forever, and I'd like to leave everything intact. Hopefully somebody will find it useful, the thoughts that I have. I always -- all my life, they told me when I was a young girl, Anna Marie, you talk too much. When I became Abbey Lincoln, Abby, you talk too much. Well, I'm still talking.

SALLY PLAXSON: Is there anything that you hope people will take from this autobiography?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't care. It's for my sake. It's for the sake of my own life. I gave the best I had. If they got something from it, it's okay. I didn't make the world. I'm not God alone. It's okay with me. Just as long as I get a chance to express it, I don't have to swallow it down. If I can say it, it's enough for me. I don't believe that it was left up to me to save the world. I wouldn't know what to save it from or how to save it anyway, but I have a right to sing my songs.

(**END OF AUDIO FILE**)

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