P.1. Southern Journalism: Media and the Movement

Interview P-0003
Donald Baker
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ABSTRACT – DONALD BAKER

Interviewee: Donald Baker

Interviewer: Joshua Davis

Interview Date: November 9, 2010

Location: Skype

Length: Approximately 1 hour and 41 minutes

Donald Baker was a disc jockey for WAFR (Wave Africa), a black-owned and operated radio station in Durham, North Carolina for 1971-197[?]. Born and raised in Spanish Harlem in New York City, Baker moved to Durham in 1968 to attend North Carolina Central University after spending his senior year of high school at Camden High School in Carthage, North Carolina. Baker was involved in WAFR from its inception, disc jockeying programs that reflected the station's Afrocentric ethos, mixing jazz and R&B with Caribbean and African music. Topics in the interview include: Baker's exposure to jazz, Latin, and R&B on New York City airwaves like Jazz New York out of Newark, New Jersey and through DJs like Symphony Sid; WSHA, black-owned educational station out of Shaw University; people involved with WSHA like Betty Czech, Andre Perry, and David Linton; WSRC, a white-owned, black-oriented station in Durham, North Carolina; Robert Spruill, a NCCU student, and local activist Ralph Williams who operated Your-Own-Thing Theater, a black-centered performance space in Durham; Spruill and Williams also applied for radio license to open WAFR; the Public Broadcasting Act of 1966, which allowed for the creation of stations like WAFR, opening up the airwaves to alternative, noncommercial broadcasting; Afrocentrism; political activities at Shaw University such as the founding of SNCC and visits by Stokley Carmichael; cycles of black migrations; Creed Taylor, Duke University alum and founder of CTI Records; a planned Stevie Wonder performance to benefit WAFR, cancelled after Wonder was in a car accident en route to the venue.

TRANSCRIPT: DONALD BAKER

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START OF INTERVIEW

Joshua Davis: Well, I'll go ahead and start by telling you a little bit about this project. I finished up my Ph.D. this spring at Carolina and I wrote a dissertation about young Americans and consumer culture in the sixties and seventies. And how things like feminism and Black Power changed the way people were thinking about consumer culture. And one of the things I wrote about was black-owned record stores and radio stations in North Carolina. [pause] You there?

Donald Baker: Yeah, I'm listening.

JD: OK. And, so I kind of got into it looking at commercial stations and interviewing people who worked at [We Do] down in Fayetteville, at GIV in Charlotte, WEAL in Greensboro, and record stores. Writing about stores like Snoopy's in Durham, or other ones in Raleigh, all over the state really. And while I was focusing on commercial radio, I began seeing references here and there to AFR [WAFR, a Durham-based public radio station], to VSP [WVSP, a Warrenton-based public radio station], and I got more and more curious about it and for a while now I've been thinking that would

be a kind of good side project because it didn't really fit into the dissertation because it was non-commercial but it seemed like there was a really big story there to be told and there's little things written here and there and a few different histories of black radio but they're usually not that long and what I'm working on right now is there's a book that some of us are trying to put out, it's going to be about music in the civil rights movement, and it's going to be a collection of essays. The essay I am going to be working on is the genesis of non-commercial African American radio. And I'll be focusing on AFR and on VSP, and you know what I think I'm trying to do is talk about what the music meant on these stations. You know, most of what's been written about has been about the news component and the community stuff—which is very important, it's stuff I want to talk about—but I think the music stuff has been a little under-reported on at AFR and VSP.

And I kind of want to think out loud about how these stations came to be and what they grew out of and what they meant, and what they said about radio and about black radio and about African American communities after the civil rights movement, and just all kinds of things really. So that's basically what I'm working on.

DB: OK. [Laughs]

JD: And so I don't know if I said too much.

DB: No, no, no [0:03:23 inaudible]. Are you looking to publish a book from this?

JD: It's an essay that I would be writing and that's going to be in a book, hopefully, that will be published. I won't be publishing it. There's a professor at University of Nebraska who has this whole idea of a music and civil rights book and it would probably be with an academic press and it probably will sell very little, not

because—it's a great topic, but these academic books tend to kind of get bought by university libraries.

DB: They have a different purpose.

JD: Yeah. So there's a hope that we'll get a book out. I'm not leading the publication process. My fate on this is kind of in this guy's hands in Nebraska.

DB: North Carolina has a rich history in public radio.

JD: Yeah. Can I interrupt real fast before we get started just to announce that the interview is starting? I'm Joshua Davis. I'm speaking with Donald Baker. And today is the 10th of November, 2010. And, yeah, sorry to interrupt.

DB: That's OK.

JD: I'll open up the gates, and yeah, have at it. Tell me about public radio in North Carolina.

DB: Public radio in North Carolina started with WSHA. Shaw University. And an instructor named Betty Czech.

JD: Yeah, that's what I've been reading about her.

DB: Yeah, and that was not only the first station in North Carolina. That was the first educational station at a black institution in the country.

JD: That's what I've been hearing, although—well, I hear different things. I've been kind of confused; I wanted to ask you about that. Somewhere I also saw Hampton and even Wilberforce had radio stations, but, yeah.

DB: But if they date back past 1968 –

JD: Right.

DB: – or '67 then they may precede WSHA.

JD: Right. Now SHA, it sounds like a great station but first it had a really small signal, right?

DB: Yeah, well, it was a carrier signal: 10 watt, 10-watt station. Many of the institutions, educational institutions, put out with 10-watt stations.

JD: Right. Yeah. That's been interesting reading about SHA. I've been reading a little bit about that in this thesis that Paul Vandergrift wrote. That's where I learned most of what I know about SHA, and –

DB: Ok. There were several people to come out of the education program that went into the record industry and had an impact on the record industry.

JD: Who were those people?

DB: The person I'm thinking about, his first name is Andre. Andre Perry. Also, David Linton.

JD: David Linton. How do you spell that last name?

DB: L-I-N-T-O-N.

JD: OK. And Andre Perry, P-E-R-R-Y?

DB: Yeah. Andre preceded by a number of years because Andre actually came out of the Shaw, he was one of the first to come out of the Shaw program. Goes back to early seventies, I think. And he went on to do some things in the record industry. He can probably lead you to some other folks as well. David Linton was a station manager at SHA and his whole goal was to move into the, to be an executive in the radio industry and he was able to achieve that. He now is based out of Atlanta. And you can find him on Facebook.

JD: I'll have to look him up. Tell me a little bit about yourself, before we even get to radio. I was kind of curious just about where you're from, where you came up, and kind of your life before AFR.

DB: Well, I'm originally from New York City. Grew up in East Harlem.

JD: When were you born?

DB: I was born in '49, so I'm 61. And I've been around music all my life, listening to just a variety. And not only listening but participating in a variety of musics that were cultural to my environment. OK, so I grew up in East Harlem which also was Spanish Harlem. I grew up listening to jazz, and Latin music, and R&B. And just a really interesting mix of all that. I participated by, from ballroom dancing to Mambo and Tito Puente, and La Lupe, and just all sorts of folks that were actually in that community.

Listened to Symphony Sid, you know, on the radio. Symphony Sid was very interesting because he evolved from the jazz scene as a jazz announcer but in New York everything is mixed, particularly in his later years, so he became very popular in the Hispanic community because he had a program that mixed jazz and Latin music. So you could hear Lou Rawls and then Eddie Palmieri would follow. And that was the pulse during that time in New York, where black people and Hispanic people were dancing at Palm's Garden, and the Palladium downtown. And much of that music was really promoted on Symphony Sid.

JD: You're talking about your high school years, right? This would be the late sixties.

DB: Yeah.

JD: I guess you would have graduated from high school in 1967?

DB: ’68.

JD: And so what radio stations were you listening to in New York?

DB: Well, I was, you know that was one of them. I don’t remember which station Symphony Sid was on, but he was on every night. And we listened, I also listened to WLIV, WBLS. Frankie Crockett. And I listened to WRVR, which was Jazz New York. WRVR one day turned country and western unexpectedly and it later, the jazz music shifted over to New Jersey, to [pause] the station that is there. But it is Jazz New York but it’s based out of Newark, New Jersey. And it is licensed to the public schools in Newark, New Jersey, but it also services now much of New Jersey with repeaters. And until the [World Trade Center] trade towers were cut down, they had a tower on one of the trade towers, so they were really able to service New York. They still service New York now; the signal is not quite as strong. So those were the stations that I listened to. I don’t know why I can’t think of any of the station names. I know it like the back of my hand.

JD: Well we can look that one up. I know WLIV and BLS, but we can look up Symphony Sid.

DB: Symphony Sid was in New York. He was not associated with public radio. He was on a commercial station.

JD: You listened to R&B and soul, too, or were you just a jazz guy?

DB: No, I grew up on R&B, but evolved in my teen years. You tend to, if you have the opportunity to be sent to bed and you listen to the music your parents are playing, that registers with you at some point. So it was a mix of stuff. I hooked up with some guys who became buddies and we had a common interest in listening to the music.

To Harvey Mann, and to Miles Davis, and doing the things that teenagers did in New York in that period: hanging out.

JD: So teenagers were listening to jazz already by then?

DB: If you were into what was happening, then you were into Latin music and if that was the case and you were hanging out at Palm's Gardens and other places, you were also hearing jazz because Symphony Sid was mixing all of it. But you were also listening to Frankie Crockett, WBLS.

JD: Chief Rocker. Where were your parents from?

DB: My mother's from North Carolina, and my father's from New York.

JD: So how did you come down to Central?

DB: It's part of the African American culture that you have the early migration of young people leaving the South and coming to New York. For Mississippi it was Chicago and for North Carolina it was New York. Just stream straight north, and people looking for work and developing opportunities. So their children they would send back South to be educated. And that was a pattern of my family, that you finish high school, OK, you went south. You went back to the family in the South and you went to school. You went to Johnston C. Smith or Fayetteville State or North Carolina College, which is now North Carolina Central University, or Elizabeth City State University. For North Carolina, there are more historically black colleges and universities in just about any state in the union. So there was some migration back.

But that is now today followed by the retirement migration. So my parents for example, it's nearing the end of that migration, but you could move back to reclaim the land and to retire back in the South. And that has helped part of the South to grow.

JD: I grew up in Atlanta and I've spent the last seven years in North Carolina so I guess I've been hearing about those changes and seeing those changes especially in the Triangle and in Atlanta.

DB: Yeah. Coming back, coming back. So that's how I got from New York to North Carolina. I came here to school.

JD: And when did you come? Would that have been the Fall of '68?

DB: Fall of '68, '67, I came to Carthage, my mother's home, and finished high school, and then continued in '68 to go to college here.

JD: So your senior year of high school was spent in Carthage?

DB: Mm-hm, Camden High School.

JD: Carthage: is that down east? Where is that?

DB: Carthage is the county seat of Moore County, which houses Pinehurst.

JD: Oh, right. Gotcha. So you hit Central, or North Carolina College, right after your senior year.

DB: Right.

JD: And that would have been Fall '68.

DB: Mm-hm.

JD: Ok. Now, when did you leave Central?

DB: Well, I finished Central in '73, and went back for a master's in '75, finishing my master's in '77.

JD: Ok. Well how did you get involved? Now AFR started in '71. Were you involved from the start?

DB: Yeah, I was involved from the start, and I had a particular interest in music anyway and in jazz in particular before I left New York, listening to WLIB. WLIB used to be AM and FM, and Ed Williams was one of the jazz announcers. But yeah, I would listen regularly to WLIB-FM and to Jazz New York. And I remember just thinking about how I would say things on the radio, how I would approach it if I were on. So I had that desire, anyway, when I went to college. And it just so happened, I don't know, in 1971 that there was, there started to be a move to start a public radio station for black folks, for the black community. That evolved in part as a result of – well, it evolved from a couple of things that came together at the same time. That's the way things usually happen. [Laughs.]

There was Steve … oh, shucks. There was a young man who stopped, who blocked the application. Let me go – I've got to go back farther.

JD: Yeah. Tell me a little bit about the SRC story.

DB: Yeah, WSRC was AM/FM.

JD: And that was the black oriented station, but it was white owned.

DB: Uh-huh. Yep. And so they were simulcasting and they really weren't using – they were simulcasting the AM onto the FM so the FM really wasn't being used and at the time FM was not looked up as a lucrative channel. It was principally an educational channel and then everything else that was in between that in the band was pretty much empty. Plus all the educational stuff up to 91.9 [0:23:14 inaudible] was commercial.

JD: We're talking late sixties early seventies?

DB: Yeah. Late, yeah, that would be about right because the Public Radio Act was passed in 1966. Ok, so you got WSRC simulcasting and Bob Chapman and Jim

Davis, Duke students, decide that Duke should have a radio station for Duke students. So they put an application together to actually pick up the FM station of WSRC. Steve blocked that effort.

JD: What was Steve's last name?

DB: I can't think of Steve's last name right now. But he single-handedly put in a petition to deny that effort.

JD: The two students from Duke. They were white?

DB: Uh-huh. [affirmative]

JD: And SRC had been a black oriented station.

DB: Yeah. Right. A black-formatted station.

JD: Can you tell me a little bit, before we proceed, tell me a little bit about what listening to SRC was like, what it meant to Durham. Did you listen to it?

DB: Well, yeah. It was a typical black formatted R&B station. They had gospel as part of its programming, either in the mornings or on the weekends, but the rest of it was mainly R&B, you know? And during that time, Stax Records, they were dominant in the South in particular. So there was that music and of course Motown, you know. Typical R&B. It was nothing in particular that I remember about it. Coming from New York, for me it was a bit country. It was just alright.

JD: Now it was popular in Durham, though, wasn't it?

DB: Right, yes. It was popular in Durham. It was popular by default. There was no other black-formatted stations to listen to.

JD: Even though it had a white owner, it was still popular?

DB: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it was all black and the white folks made the money.

JD: Like a lot of the stations.

DB: Yep.

JD: Were they known for serving the community? Did they do anything other than music?

DB: No, they were not known for serving the community. And came under a lot of criticism, too, but that didn't matter.

JD: So they were criticized when they were still on the air?

DB: The owners were criticized because it was clear, their intent was clear.

JD: And their intent was?

DB: Was to make money, and that was it. Not to put anything back into the community.

JD: WLLE, "Willie," in Raleigh? Could you get that in Durham or was that too far away?

DB: That's a daylighter show, you get it during the day but they cut their power back at night. AM stations had to do that because they bounce everywhere, the signal reflects off of a lot of stuff.

JD: After SRC went off the air … well, I don't want to get ahead. You were telling me about Steve blocking the petition.

DB: Yeah. And Steve petitioned the FCC to stop the sale of WSRC-FM to Duke. And an agreement was struck, and the Duke students would help the African American community to get a radio station in exchange for letting this agreement go through with the FCC.

JD: Explain to me just for a second or just for the sake of the interview: Why was Steve petitioning the FCC to block this application?

DB: Because he was pissed. He was just pissed that there was no voice in the black community. It was something he felt needed to be done. And a little bit of information can be pretty powerful sometimes. He knew what the procedure was.

JD: Were there any potential black buyers for SRC? I don't know: maybe NC Mutual or the Mechanics and Farmers, or anyone.

DB: If the resource was there, the interest was not there. So, no. There was no one vying for that. Mutual would later make investments in radio, actually buy some stations in some other communities. But at the time there was not that interest, or foresight, for that matter.

JD: So the deal that was struck was that Chapman and Jim Davis, the Duke students, would help Steve set up a radio station, or help – ?

DB: They made, apparently they made the commitment but Steve – I'm not sure how that went down because when the deal was struck, when the public radio station was actually applied for, Steve was not part of that process. [crosstalk] But Steve stimulated the commitment. He caused the commitment to happen.

JD: Was he a student?

DB: No.

JD: He was just a guy in Durham.

DB: He was a radio guy.

JD: He was a deejay!

DB: Yeah.

JD: AT SRC.

DB: He worked at SRC, yes he did. But he worked in a lot of places. He was also a teacher. He also taught school. Steve's name will come up now that I've mentioned it. It will come up in other references.

JD: Was he envisioning a public station?

DB: He was envisioning a voice in the black community.

JD: Ok, so it could have been commercial.

DB: It could have been anything; it didn't matter. You know, after a while people get fed up. You've got from one side of the fence to say, "Ok, these folks have owned this station for years and now they're getting ready to sell to some more white folks. Well, I can do something about that." It was just that simple in terms of motivation. "I may not get anything about it, but I know how to stop it." Because it had become, it was beginning to become commonplace—that's the wrong term—there were models being set, like Pluria Marshall was doing a lot of that. So there were models to follow.

JD: You mean the models of petitioning challenges.

DB: Petitioning, yeah, right.

JD: So, for example, again this is for the sake of the interview, when black-oriented but white-owned station was changing hands, African American citizens group might pose a challenge, saying "we need to reconsider who this is being sold to."

DB: Yes, sure. If you consider that the airwaves are owned by the citizens, by the citizens of the United States, and the license is an agreement by the citizens to allow and individual or a company to use it. So if there is a significant segment of the citizenry who is not participating in that process or is not being served, it's the FCC's responsibility to

look at that. So it's pretty simple to petition based on the fact that there was no voice, you know? Or the voice that was there would be altered. Then there was with the riots that had occurred, with the Kerner commission report, window-dressing on the set, and the recommendations that came from that regarding ownership for media, the lack of ownership for media, changes that needed to be made. All of that was present at that time.

JD: So after Steve posed this challenge, what happened from there? Ok, so the deal was Duke students would help someone in the black community – [crosstalk]

DB: We would help create a station.

JD: And then what happened?

DB: In comes Ralph Williams and Robert Spruill. They created the community radio workshop, which then submitted application for a frequency and a public educational – a frequency within the educational band.

JD: Now tell me a little bit about those guys. Who were they?

DB: Well, Spruill was a student at Central. And Ralph was a community activist.

JD: Where was Ralph from?

DB: I do no really know.

JD: Now, Spruill was from New Bern.

DB: Yeah.

JD: So Ralph Williams, he was not a student.

DB: No. Ralph in fact was older.

JD: How old was he?

DB: I don't remember but he was older than the rest of us.

JD: So Spruill and Williams got involved, they opened up the community radio workshop. [DB: Um-hm] And so they applied for the station. Was that ’70 or ’71?

DB: They probably applied in ’70. Because the station came on the air in ’71. Probably applied in ’69 or somewhere, something like that.

JD: So were you already involved?

DB: Well, I got involved prior to the station actually coming on the air. It was near, it was in the construction process and I came in probably near the end of construction. And I just started volunteering my time. And just generally got involved helping where I could.

JD: How did you hear about it?

DB: Word of mouth, I am sure. I really don’t remember. Yeah, it was probably word of mouth. That part is vague.

JD: Sure. But you didn’t know these guys before; it wasn’t like you knew Spruill or you knew Williams already.

DB: No, no. Spruill would have been an upperclassman to me.

JD: Ok, so he was an undergraduate but he would have been a junior or a senior.

DB: Yeah, probably.

JD: What was your major?

DB: My major? My major was business administration. I later got a master’s in education. Instructional design.

JD: And so this wasn’t something you had learned about through school. This was something you were hearing from other people.

DB: Well, you know, this again was a passion that I had. A passion for music, a passion for media, that I brought with me from New York. Young people are inquisitive. There was a radio station starting, and I just went to find out about it. And I was looking for something to get involved with anyway. I do remember that. I needed to change my direction from the [0:40:48 inaudible] things that I was doing, and so it was a welcome change.

JD: Now were they having meetings or was the station space on East Pettigrew, that was already open?

DB: I don't remember any of that. The only thing I remember was being at the station, you know? And going back into the studios and starting to learn the equipment and just getting involved with stuff. So all about, you know, that part is a blur.

JD: Did you know what kind of radio station this would be?

DB: I knew that it would be a jazz station. I knew that it would be a community-based station first and that that would prompt it to be some other things. SHA was already formatting, it was already in the jazz format.

JD: WSHA out of Shaw.

DB: Mm-hm.

JD: But you couldn't get that in Durham, right, because it was just a carrier station?

DB: Right. Yeah, that's right.

JD: But see, you know, it's only twenty miles away and those communities are small in terms of students who are interested in specific areas. Generally what brought students together was the whole Afrocentric movement during that period. There was a

lot happening. Stokely Carmichael and various big political underground folks were coming through Shaw and SNCC was created at Shaw, you know? So there was a lot happening. There was a lot of movement happening back and forth. I was hanging out over there, people were coming over here. So the stations, both those stations were impacted by the time.

JD: So you could hear Shaw because you would go over and hang out with people from Shaw. [DB: Yeah.] You would hear SHA, ok.

DB: Yeah. Baba Femi is the guy who you asked about closing the station, saying, "Beware my brothers and sisters for we live in America." He was a Shaw student.

JD: Can you spell his name? I have to bug you periodically for like the transcript.

DB: Adewole: A-D-E-W-O-L—"Adewole"—W-O-L-E. Baba: B-A-B-A. Femi: F-E-M-I.

JD: And that was a name he took on.

DB: Yeah.

JD: So he had worked at Shaw. He had been a Shaw student and later on he worked at AFR.

DB: Not later on. He was on while he was a Shaw student.

JD: Was he also a deejay at SHA?

DB: I don't think so.

JD: Ok. Now were you involved with the movement? What was it like, this time for you politically? What was going on with you?

DB: I was politically motivated, I was politically active when I was in New York, so that just carried over with me. The movement – the majority of students were involved in the movement back then.

JD: At Central.

DB: At Central. And many of the black schools around the country.

JD: What had you been active in in New York?

DB: Not any – I was not active in a, formally, in a political organization. But I supported political philosophies and positions. And generally aware. I am watching television one night and I see the assassination of Malcolm X at the ballroom uptown and when you are a part of history, it may not be formal. But it's developmental. The march that I missed on Washington was in '68 with Martin Luther King but since then I've been a part of the Million Man March, I was a part of Obama's inauguration.

So you accumulate and in the process you accumulate a philosophy, a belief, a position, political position. And when you have opportunity you support that position. And so that's how I was more politically active. Involved with marches in school, that sort of thing. But was I a Black Panther? No. Did I belong to the NAACP? No. Although I supported those positions.

JD: What was your political consciousness like when you were getting involved with the radio? Did you want to be political in radio?

DB: The attraction of WAFR, which is Wave Africa was that it was political. That the majority of people on the station took assumed names because, I mean, the first day, the first morning, the first records that we played coming on the air – we played The Last Poets. We played The Last Poets uncensored, two hours straight up. And that was radical.

That was radical. So that is probably the best reflection of describing the intent of the radio station.

JD: Whose brain child was it? I mean, who had the idea that "we are going to have a public, community, political station." Did it kind of grow over time, like different people had the idea?

DB: Ralph and Spruill had the idea, and then it grew over time. As a public radio station, it grew. It was the first black public radio program in the system so nobody knew. But many if not most things are driven by the time. You look at the time, you look at the riots, you look at "do your own thing." The emphasis on the word black, black people. You listen to the music, both R&B and jazz, and it's what people do reflect that time and that philosophy. So the station was very much part of that. A reflection of it, of what was happening.

JD: Was Spruill, had he been involved in politics?

DB: No. His parents passed away and Spruill was the oldest and he was responsible for seeing that the other five siblings did something with their lives. [JD: Wow.] So he was doing his thing but he also had a tremendous responsibility. That was Spruill's m.o.

JD: One thing that really struck me looking at the *Ebony* article. I don't know how old Spruill is in there, maybe twenty-five or something, but he looks like a grown man. He looks like a guy who's had a career already in those pictures and when I first saw the pictures I thought, "This guy is in his thirties." He cuts a different profile than the pictures of other people in the article, different than Akinwole, or different than McDonald, and different than the other guys who were [0:51:46 inaudible] this article.

DB: Yeah. And his brother Vincent can share more of that.

JD: Where is Vincent?

DB: He's in Greensboro.

JD: Was he involved in the station?

DB: Yeah.

JD: Ok. Tell me about why did you guys go with jazz? That was a big choice.

DB: Again, it was the – that was part of the Afrocentric culture. It was not commercial. [JD: So you're saying it was –] If you look at public broadcasting and the intent of creating the Public Broadcasting Act, it is to create alternatives. It is to broadcast without the influence of commercial operations. It is to bring alternative cultures and information that is not available in commercial radio. Both television and radio. And so those mandates were set. It was all new, by only a few years, so when people were creating it at the time they used those mandates to create it. So if you look at the African American community and what is available, you also look at what is not available, jazz was not being played on the radio.

JD: It was just soul and R&B.

DB: Yeah, but there was Miles Davis and John Coltrane and, you know, you could get the music in New York. That's what I was listening to in New York.

JD: But not really in the South. It sounds like from what I understand is that jazz radio was really a big city thing for the most part.

DB: It was not available. Yeah, I would say you're right and it was definitely not available in Durham, North Carolina. Not on any regular basis. You know, part of

Durham s history because it was a black elite community you had people like Duke Ellington coming through. But that was, that's a whole other story.

JD: It sounds like jazz was important to the station because it was an alternative, like you said. It wasn't what you could find on WLLE, it wasn't what was being played on SRC. So what there a connection between the music and the politics of the station?

DB: Yes, because there was a connection to the politics of the time. And the station reflected the time. That's why it was called Wave Africa. And that's why Steve was concerned about the community having a voice, and Spruill and Ralph were concerned about the community having an alternative to what existed, which was white-owned. These were all new possibilities because it was the late eighties [he may mean sixties], early seventies. The tone was to do your own thing, and looking at the world in an Afrocentric way.

So, again, we are a [0:56:52 inaudible] nation. What we do today is reflective of the time. So that was reflective of, think about that time, you can answer a lot of those questions if – you know, just the time generated ideas and also pushed forward some decisions.

JD: What other music were ya'll playing other than jazz?

DB: We were playing Fela. We were playing Caribbean music. Fela Ransome Kuti, he was just becoming, he had just become really popular in England with Ginger Baker. And I remember playing – a guy called me up and asked, said he was having a party and didn't have a record player and he wanted some dance music and we played a bunch of stuff, but the most memorable—he called back the next day—was us playing

Fela Ransome Kuti. And Fela is considered the James Brown of Africa. Are you familiar with his music?

JD: A little bit, yeah. The long songs and the albums from the early seventies.

DB: We played a variety of music but principally known as a jazz station.

JD: Fela, that was pretty cutting edge then, is that right?

DB: Yep.

JD: And I guess that also fit in with the Afrocentric message.

DB: Yep.

JD: I mean, I would think a the time virtually no black-format stations played Fela. Maybe there were some but I've never heard of that.

DB: No, there weren't any.

JD: So did ya'll play any R&B and soul?

DB: One morning during the week I played Aretha Franklin's "Holy, Holy," and it was off of her double album, it was a gospel album, it's a double album. It was a live recording. And I followed it with John Coltrane's "Love Supreme." The thing about working at AFR is that you could experiment. And if you knew the music, if you knew much of the music: the R&B, the gospel, the jazz, you could mix. You could go a lot of places.

JD: Oh, within a single show.

DB: Yeah. It was not rigid like it is today. Because it was experimental. Remember, FM was not even popular.

JD: This was very new stuff. [DB: Yes] One thing I was curious about was, there was a lot of music. Then there was a lot of community programming. I was wondering:

why that mix of both? Why community and news and music? Why not just music, or just community reporting? Why did you decide to mix it up like that?

DB: WAFR was licensed to the community radio workshop. And they created that term, that title, because it was a philosophy. [JD: Williams and Spruill?] Yeah. It was about opening up the community to media. So in the *Ebony* article that you sent me, much of it was photographs of workshops, people learning stuff.

JD: So the workshop was actually different than the station itself.

DB: It was a philosophy. The philosophy drove the activity.

JD: So the workshop was open to anyone, right?

DB: Yeah. But it targeted the African American community.

JD: Was it mostly students or non-students?

DB: Young people from the community who wanted to learn.

JD: Wanted to learn about … ?

DB: About media. About radio. [Skype noise.]

JD: And that was a key part of the mission, right? Education, it sounded like.

DB: Yeah. Exposure. Creating dialog in the community, Afrocentric dialog.

JD: What did that mean: Afrocentric dialog?

DB: Being aware of your history, of your roots, of African American culture. And how you can take that and use it to progress, to move forward. That is all part of an education experience and in this case particularly as it relates to figuring out how to use media to communicate to the larger community.

JD: Wow. The whole thing is very impressive. I worked for a year or two, volunteered at the UNC student station, XYC, and I know how much work goes into a station. But the whole idea of starting a station from the ground up is kind of amazing.

DB: Yeah it is. It's birth. It's an act of love, of dedication. You've really got to be focused. And want it.

JD: So it sounds like there were people who had shows. Some people were students, some people were non-students. Predominantly African American.

DB: Yeah, it was. Predominantly African American and people and community folks. Community people.

JD: Were there ever any white people who wandered in?

DB: Well, you had Jim Davis was the engineer.

JD: That name is very familiar to me. He has a show! The guy who has a show right now … Eight Track Flashback.

DB: Right. He is the engineer for that station.

JD: If I recall he is from Philadelphia, maybe.

DB: Yeah.

JD: Ok. Did he actually have a show on AFR?

DB: He did not have a show on AFR. He may have had a show on WDBS [?], which later became Foxy.

JD: I didn't realize that. What was the listener response like? What was the community response. I know there were a lot of different responses in the black community to the station but maybe you can break that down for me a bit.

DB: The response was good. Small indicators—when you see young guys walking down the street with Grover Washington records, you know where they heard it.

JD: Because they weren't hearing it on any other station.

DB: No, it wasn't being played anywhere else.

JD: Like *Mister Magic*, that era.

DB: Right. And Mutual would give the station anonymous checks. On one hand, we're too radical to be associated with. But on the other hand, folk understood why, what and why.

JD: So they didn't want to be publically associated with the station.

DB: No, not in that way.

JD: But they wanted to help.

DB: Yeah.

JD: And what about Central? The striking thing is, how many people came from Central but it wasn't a Central station.

DB: I'm not clear on the question.

JD: I guess what I'm asking is, what was the relationship of the College—of North Carolina Central University—what was the relationship between the institution and the station.

DB: There was no relationship until AFR folded and CPB gave the equipment, the station equipment, to Central with the hopes of – with a plan for Central to apply for a license. That was in either '72 or '73.

JD: That Central began to apply for its own license?

DB: That AFR closed its doors. AFR closed in 1972. And we closed in July of ’72. WVSP came on air August ’72. So they picked it up and kept moving. And Central either gave or sold its record collection to VSP.

JD: Sold the AFR collection to VSP?

DB: Yeah. But the equipment was owned by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, so the Corporation gave Central the equipment, which Central put in storage because Central did not have a license.

JD: But Central, how come they weren’t interested earlier? If all the people at AFR—not all of them, but a lot of them—were Central students, somebody would think maybe the College would be interested in the station.

DB: You’ve got to convince administrators and then it has to be a priority of theirs, and you can imagine how long that takes. So, the opportunity presented itself by Steve stopping a process and getting a commitment. So that’s where the opportunity was and that’s how the station got created and Central had nothing to do with it.

JD: So they were indifferent. I don’t know, what was – ?

DB: You’re going down the street. An opportunity comes and you say, “Hey, I am going to go do this.” And you do it. And there was no reason, I don’t think there was a reason for either Ralph or Spruill to go to the administration and say, “Ya’ll come help us with this.” There was a public radio station. CPB was providing the funds. There was a commitment from two Duke students to make it happen, one who had an engineering background, which was critical to the process. And so they formed a non-profit, Ralph and Spruill formed a non-profit, the Community Radio Workshop, and they applied for a license and then CPB funded them for a station.

JD: Were people surprised that it worked?

DB: Yeah. No one knew the ins and outs of all of this. All they know is, "Oh, there's a new station." It's like a new K-Mart: "Well, it's there." And rarely consideration for how it got developed.

JD: I mean this was big stuff. A bunch of kids in college applying for a $50,000 from the CPB for health, education, and welfare administration. When you think about the scale of this stuff, maybe it was better that you guys didn't think about it. I mean, people thought about it but that stuff could be kind of intimidating, too.

DB: Yeah, you're right.

JD: What were the most popular shows? I enjoyed reading your thesis, but one question I still had after reading it was, what were the shows people liked the most?

DB: [pause] That's a question for Oba [Obataiye Akinwole] to answer. Because I don't remember.

JD: Obataiye Akinwole. Now is he in Raleigh or is he in Virginia.

DB: He's in D.C.

JD: Do you happen to have contact info for him?

DB: I'll send you his email address.

JD: Thank you. And before I forget, Ralph Williams. Do you have contact info for him?

DB: I don't have anything for Ralph right now.

JD: But he's in Durham? Where is he?

DB: He's in Durham.

JD: And I can mention your name?

DB: Sure.

JD: Do you have a few more minutes to talk, or how are you doing on time?

DB: I've got about fifteen minutes.

JD: That will work. This has been great so far. I really do appreciate you taking the time. Before I forget: I'll send you a recording when I'm done and also for formality's sake, I'll include a permission form and that will include a self-addressed stamped envelope and you can send it along to UNC because this interview is for the Southern Oral History Program.

DB: Ok.

JD: One thing I was also curious about was the Board of Trustees, if you could illuminate anything about that. What role did they play? What did they do?

DB: I was not involved with the community board at all, and I have no knowledge of how that was handled. Who was on it, or even whether there was a community board. There should have been a mandate for it, probably was, but that I don't know anything about it.

JD: That's not a problem. I'll ask Mr. Williams about that. One thing, let's see. I read the interview you did for the black radio documentary. And you mentioned when Frankie Crocker came to the station. Do you know anything about that? How did he come to the station and what did he think of it?

DB: For the same reason that *Ebony* did a story. The communities are usually much smaller than we think of them as. So word gets around in the black music industry and in radio. Remember there was not all that many black-formatted stations in the country back then.

JD: Yeah, I know there were all these conventions and stuff like that. All the deejays knew each other.

DB: So here are these folk down in Durham doing some unusual stuff on the radio. And as people had time and access, they came by. When Stevie Wonder was in the car accident in North Carolina – do you remember that? Are you aware of that?

JD: I've heard references to that. I think I heard you talking about it in the interview, but I wasn't sure what went down.

DB: Well, he was on his way to WAFR to do a benefit show to raise money for the station. He had done a show at the Greensboro Coliseum and he was in transit and was involved in a car accident. So the concert was canceled. But the station had created that kind of national buzz because it was a radical station. So when people were in the area, like Frankie Crockett, people would show up. I sat on a Saturday morning. I was a production manager at the station and I'm in the back room in production and I look up and Cannibal Adams is standing there.

JD: Yeah, I saw that, too.

DB: So it was like that. Al Green, you know.

JD: He came by?

DB: Yeah. Entertainers came. They would stop by just to see. Because they heard.

JD: So they weren't even doing interviews, necessarily, they just wanted to check out the scene.

DB: Yeah.

JD: Frankie Crocker, he was arguably the top-earning, most famous African American deejay in the whole country. And I'm curious. Do you know what his response was? If he came to AFR he saw something totally different than what he did.

DB: No, I wasn't there that day so I didn't interact with him.

JD: [Skype noises] Was the style of announcing you would hear at AFR different than you would hear at a commercial black station? I know the content was different, but was the way of speaking, announcing, the verbal style: was it similar or different?

DB: That pattern, that difference is so apparent even today. If you turn on WNCU and then toggle over to Foxy 107, you will hear the difference between commercial and non-commercial radio. The delivery of the jazz format is very different than the commercial format, the Top 40 format. So yeah, it was different.

JD: Who were the strongest supporters of the station? If you could talk about the AFR fans – [interruption] We can wrap this up pretty soon. I don't want to take up too much of your time. This has been great so far, though. I was just wondering: Can you tell me some about the typical AFR listener? I am sure there was more than one kind of listener, but maybe there were some patterns.

DB: Well, you know, the demo [demographic] in the Triangle area is different than in most parts of the country in that I think people forget that there are four, let's see, there are three historically black colleges and universities within the Triangle area, just as there are three white institutions. There's Duke, Carolina, and State. You got Shaw, St. Aug [St. Augustine's], North Carolina Central, who are also graduating students who are staying in the area and developing businesses and teaching. So the intellectual prowess, what you find – you know, we often only think of it being white, but there is a

background, if you will, or underground, or base, of African Americans who are educated as well, in the Triangle. So you've got that kind of base of support. No, you have that demo to consider in a reach for African American programming and jazz programming.

Then there's a whole segment of Caucasians and males in particular who are drawn to that music, who listen and support. They were more of a silent group back then, but nonetheless present.

JD: So guys like Jim Davis, maybe.

DB: Yeah. Or people over at Duke. Creed Taylor, CTI Records, he's a Duke graduate.

JD: Creed Taylor? C-R-E-E-D.

DB: Yeah, C-R-E-E-D Taylor.

JD: The guy who founded CTI?

DB: CTI Records, right.

JD: I didn't know he was a Duke grad. Oh, wow. That's interesting.

DB: And that parallels around that period, he was probably listening if he was in town, assuming that he was, because CTI started in the '70s, early '70s.

JD: What do you think AFR was able to achieve that a non-commer – excuse me, what do you think AFR was able to achieve that a commercial station couldn't achieve?

DB: Interesting question.

JD: Maybe that's a loaded question. Another way would be, you could say what AFR didn't achieve, but yeah, that's kind of what I'm wondering.

DB: The intent of the community radio workshop was to bring dialog to, a broader dialog, to the community. The intent of WAFR as a public radio station was to

expose alternatives to what is available normally in a commercial culture, in a commercial society. Goals were achieved. The dialog: there was greater dialog. A broad base of the community was exposed to AFR and listened. They continued to listen to SRC, yes, but AFR broadened their horizons, broadened the base, their knowledge base.

There were young guys, young bloods walking around with Earl Washington records. That was a goal, so that's part of the dialog.

JD: You mean, kind of, street dudes?

DB: Yeah, folks who would normally not possibly take the time to seek out that music. They were exposed to it. The various community programs you referred to had the intent of creating dialog and getting folks to think about some things in alternative ways, or approaching information from a different perspective than you might find in a commercial station. So those objectives I think were achieved.

JD: Yeah. It sounds like it was about opening up people to information, like you said, but also to cultural alternatives. When you have the young dudes on the street buying Grover Washington records, like you're saying, that was a kind of dialog, getting people to listen to something they might not have. [DB: Mm-hm.]

DB: If anything, why do you think the station closed? Some people said money, and that seems like a big issue. Another thing I was curious about in the Vandergrift thesis, he claims that the station didn't have the support of the black community by the end of the time. That's a provocative for him to say, but what's your interpretation?

DB: My interpretation is that there were financial issues. For non-profits in particular—it's not limited to non-profits—but for black non-profits there's always a resource issue, and that resource almost always circles back to financial resource. So

yeah, the station AFR had financial problems. When you have a community that in and of itself is resource-limited, and then you look at commercial radio, which generates its revenue from announcements, paid announcements, versus a public radio station which generates its revenue from direct contributions of listeners who are not used to making those contributions, you have a challenge, a real challenge there for the public station. I think that was at least one of the challenges that AFR had.

Unlike UNC, which serves a resource-rich audience, population, that can contribute and wants to say, "This is my station." They can put their wallets behind that. That's different. It's public radio, but it's got a different outcome. So my comments are not in defense, but in recognition of the dynamic, and there is also the dynamic, there is also racism in giving, too. Because there are people who listen to the station, but who will give to another public radio station. So you've got all this stuff going on.

JD: Could the CPB have done more?

DB: CPB, they did a lot. And over the years past the demise of the AFR, CPB has continued to support stations and set projects up in relationship to the dynamics I was just describing, to address some of that. Various incentive programs for minority stations. I don't know whether they could have done more then, but I feel pretty comfortable that they have over the years made an effort to resolve some of those, right-side some of those issues.

JD: I've got two more questions for you. The first one I forgot. I meant to ask it earlier. What were some of the favorite political or news topics of the station? I know it was Afrocentric, but what were some of the main themes ya'll talked about, some of the main issues?

DB: I'm going to leave that question for Oba. He will have, he will be able to comment on that.

JD: So he's big on the politics.

DB: He took some positions regarding news and regarding how in some cases public affairs, how people should react to certain things like Christmas. So he would be better fixed to comment on it.

JD: I'll ask him then. I guess the last question, this is a real, just a factual question. In the *Ebony* article, there is a picture of the staff standing outside of the station and there is a big marquee behind them that says, "Your Thing."

DB: Your Own Thing Theater.

JD: Your Own Thing Theater, right. Was that connected to AFR?

DB: It was not connected directly to AFR but it was one of the many projects that was typical of the time. Remember, during that time there was "do your thing," "do your own thing." Your Own Thing Theater. And again, reflecting the time. It was a community-based theater. And Karen Rux, who is mentioned in the article as a program director was not the program director. She directed Your Own Thing Theater.

JD: How do you spell her last name?

DB: Rucks, R-U-C-K-S.

JD: So this was an African American community theater. I don't know anything about that. Is she still around?

DB: No, she passed away.

JD: She passed. Are there any people around who can speak more about the theater?

DB: I don't who could speak about the theater. You could go back to the news articles and see what could be done with that, but I don't know.

JD: I'll dig around some. Well, you know what, this has been great? I really appreciate you taking all this time during your day to talk to me about this. I'm just glad we could have this conversation. If you wanted to add anything, just let me know, or if there's any final words or anything.

DB: Ok. No, I don't think so. Nothing comes to mind right now.

JD: Well I do appreciate it and I will send you a recording and I'll also send you a permission form to be sent to UNC. I'll include the envelope. I'll just keep you updated on how this project proceeds. I guess my next move is I'm going to try to get in touch with Oba and with Mr. Williams. I think those are the two guys I would want to speak to most urgently.

DB: Oba can put you in touch with Kwame [1:37:13 inaudible] You should also talk with Bill Lawson.

JD: Bill Lawson. He was in the article also. And tell me a little bit about him?

DB: He did the morning show. He started out with the station. And we have maintained—he and Oba and I—have maintained a relationship over the last forty years. It's been about forty years. It's amazing. Hassan, he was responsible for opening the station and doing a show called "Two Black Women."

JD: Hassan? That's Bill Lawson?

DB: Yeah.

JD: What was his screen name? His on air name was Hassan?

DB: Yeah. H-A-S-S-A-N.

JD: He didn't have a last name on the show.

DB: No, just Brother Hassan.

JD: And did you have a name?

DB: Yeah, my name was Shanga, S-H-A-N-G-A.

JD: Where does that come from?

DB: Well, the full name is Nwanfunsi Shanga Saadiki. Nwanfunsi means "teacher."

JD: Can I burden you to spell that out, just for the transcript?

DB: Yeah. N-W-A-N-F-U-N-S-I. I think it's Z-I. It may be Z-I. [pronounces word]

JD: And Saadiki was? [crosstalk] And where did that come from?

DB: It is Yoruban. Nwanfunsi means "teacher." And Shanga is the son of Shangol, which is the African thunder god. And Saadiki means "student."

JD: That's cool. You had a concept, and –

DB: Yeah. It was serious, folk were very serious about what they were doing. [laughing]

JD: Are there any recordings?

DB: There are. I don't have any. There are some folks who do have recordings.

DB: But no clues as to who.

DB: The other folks may know. I know that there are some out there.

JD: Well, there's just so much to work with here. I appreciate it so much, Mr. Baker, and I'll just keep you up to date. I'll probably come across some other things I'll email your way. [planning conversation]

END OF INTERVIEW: 1:41:20

Transcribed by Seth Kotch, December 2012.