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*Nguyen:* Crossroads to Freedom and Rhodes College. I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. My name is Nguyen Pham, and I'm a junior at Rhodes College.

*Anne Rhynes:* And I'm Anne Rhynes, and I'm a senior at Rhodes.

*Nguyen Pham:* We're honored to meet you and learn your inspirational story today, and today's interview will be archived online on the Crossroads to Freedom website.

*Anne Rhynes:* So first, we want to start with some basic biographical information to just get us started. So for the record, could you please tell us your name?

*Morris Cummings:* My name is Morris Cummings.

*Anne Rhynes:* And I know that you also have a stage name. Could you state that for us and tell us what influenced that name?

*Morris Cummings:* Blind Mississippi Morris is my stage name, and what brought that name about, my people say I don't look blind, and I always ask them how do you look blind.

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You know? And so I had to start putting blind in front of that name so they know I was actually blind. Because a lot of people who have that title, and they're not actually blind.

*Anne Rhynes:* Interesting. If you don't mind telling us, what year were you born?

*Morris Cummings:* '55.

*Anne Rhynes:* And where were you born and raised?

*Morris Cummings:* Clarksville, Mississippi around the Delta, from Prize Point to Alligator to Greeneville, all through the Delta.

*Anne Rhynes:* So what drew you to Memphis and when did you arrive?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, I've been coming to Memphis ever since the '50s since I was born in the world because my aunt Mary, she married a guy named Mary – she married a guy named Beverly Tanner. Her maiden

name was Mary Diggs. She was actually one of the Mississippi Sheikhs, and she also played in the Memphis Jail Band.

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*Anne Rhynes:* Cool. So let's talk a little bit about your experiences growing up. Can you tell us about the neighborhood that you grew up in, what it was like?

*Morris Cummings:* Oh, God. Well, you know, when I was coming up, we was mostly imported out in the country after my uncle had moved from Clarksdale to Briden's Point, Mississippi. They took us out there most of them when we were small. We wasn't of school age, and we stayed out at his house. Robert Diggs, my aunt Rosie, and that's when I was first introduced to music. He was the player – he was one of the Mississippi Sheikhs, and I got a chance to hear people like AC Reid, Sonny Boy and all those people. I mean in the yard. You know what I mean? I didn't know what it meant at that age, but it was a real good time.

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I cherished those times. I tell people about them a lot, how different it – when come the good time versus today, back then, because back then, you had – people got together to have a real good time. There wasn't no violence. It was a lot of eating and story telling and joking and good music and dancing, and that's what it was all about. They had respect for children when the sun was going down. People were getting too intoxicated on the homemade beverages. They would put us to bed real early, and we hated it.

*Anne Rhynes:* So I noticed you mentioned music when you were younger. What kind of activities were you involved in?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, before I started school, I used to listen to my uncle play a lot. You know, Robert Diggs. He's got a lot of stuff on \_\_\_\_\_ and all those different things.

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I used to listen to him play in – I wanted to play that music because it made people happy. Looked like when they were dancing and singing, look like that's the most peaceful time it was, and most of the time when they wasn't doing it, you hear people walking through the houses, complaining about bills and this and that, and

arguing about different things. Something as simple as a pot of beans. You know, somebody got the last bowl, something simple as that.

When you're making music, that wasn't a problem. You didn't hear all that. People dancing and laughing and having a good time.

*Anne Rhynes:* I know from research that you were blind as early as four.

*Morris Cummings:* Four and a half, yeah.

*Anne Rhynes:* So what challenges or special issues have you had to address as a person with a disability?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, starting the first time, it took a while for me to overcome being blind because it happened all of a sudden.

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I was in the yard. You know, I could see everybody, and all at once, it went night. But the only difference was night vision, you know, you could see your people. You know what I mean? There just wasn't no light. But this particular time, it wasn't no people. You couldn't see anything, and I was so afraid. I could hear my momma talking. I could hear my brothers and sisters and stuff. I couldn't see them. I thought they was playing a game with me. You know? I went to walking, and it scared my momma worse than it did me because when I was walking, I was running and tripping and falling. She thought I was playing.

I said, "Momma, where are you? Where are you? I can hear you. Where are you all at?" And you know momma said, "Boy, stop acting silly." I said, "Momma, I can't see you." And it scared her so bad, she stopped from filming and even started crying.

*Anne Rhynes:* So did you ever try to have an explanation for what happened all of a sudden like that?

[0:06:03]

*Morris Cummings:* Well, it was kind of like a congenital glaucoma. You know, it ran in the family. My grandma had it. My great grandma. My grandmother's mother had it. \_\_\_\_\_ Shreveport, Louisiana. She had it, and back then, they didn't know too much about glaucoma. People went blind for different reasons.

*Anne Rhynes:* Can you share some more memories of your childhood that influenced you later in life?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, when I actually got the chance to go to school, that's when I was really, really introduced to music. I got into music appreciation as a little kid because I was fascinated by the little sticks and triangles and so on, and they graduated from there to band. I played brass. I played trumpet, first chair, five years.

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And that was my first introduction. I know at that time, they didn't have but the – in Mississippi, they had one school for the blind, and so wherever you lived in Mississippi, you had to be transported to that school. If you didn't live in the same town, you had to stay there full time on campus. And you only got to see your parents maybe two or three times a year. That's kind of hard when you're a kid. You know? So you're five-and-a-half, six years old, and you only get to see your parents three times a year. You just about don't know them really.

When you see them again, you'd be glad to see your brothers and sisters. It's just like Christmas every time you get to come home.

**CUT at 0:07:52**  
**– Begin Segment 2**

*Anne Rhynes:* Was this school both a grade school and a high school?

*Morris Cummings:* Yes, at that time, it was the only school for blind people. Black blind kids. You know, you had two schools.

[0:08:10]

You had one and Pineywood, Mississippi and you had one in Jackson, Mississippi. I went to the one in Jackson, Mississippi.

*Anne Rhynes:* What was the school called?

*Morris Cummings:* Mississippi School for the Blind.

*Anne Rhynes:* So how did you cope with being away from your family for so much of the time?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, you don't have a choice because back then, if you didn't go to school, all your aid and stuff – you know, while you're being

poor, your aid and stuff that you was getting, they would cut it off and possibly try to arrest your parents for not trying to put you in school.

*Anne Rhynes:* Was there a point at which integration or segregation impacted your educational experiences?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, yeah, it was a big issue back then, but you didn't start really locking into that until you started getting into junior high and stuff like that.

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You find out, "Oh my God, this is different." Then you find out it's two schools for the blind. You've got a white one and a black one, and you say it's really a problem here because you know, you're blind, you don't know who is white and who is black. You know what I'm saying, these people got really some issues here. You know? We all running into each other. You know? Yeah, it was kind of crazy, and what so killed me about the school for the blind, you've got secondary material. You've got the material they had 20 years ago. That's what you was learning. So you was in very – you stayed behind. You know? It's kind of sad, but that's the way it was. Now it's only one blind school there, and it's over on the – oh, shoot. I can't think of the name of it. But anyway, it's only one blind school there now.

[0:10:02]

It's not just a black and white issue now. It's just one school for everybody, and I like that. It's on Eastover Drive. That's it. That's the only school there is on Eastover Drive.

*Anne Rhynes:* That was interesting. Could you like elaborate on how your being blind influenced your understanding of racial issues when you were growing up?

*Morris Cummings:* Yeah, well, I never saw it then, and I can't see it now. I think all people are created equal. You walk upright, and you only learn what you're taught, so it shouldn't be an inferior problem there. You know, if you're exposed to ignorance, you're going to learn ignorance. If you're exposed to secondary materials, you're going to have secondary knowledge. It's basically all people are the same. You've got slow learners and fast learners in all races. You've got chances in all races.

[0:11:03]

So I don't understand. And right today, people are still trying to use segregation to points where when they put it in value sense now. What have you, how much money you have, can you move into this neighborhood, and they just keep moving farther and farther and farther until somebody going to back into the ocean. You can't run from who you are and what you are. You have to sometime in life deal with yourself. Somehow, racism is insecurity to me. What are you losing, what are you gaining? What means something, what don't mean nothing? You know? People have to look inside themselves. What are you running from? What are you afraid of?

[0:12:01]

All people are created equal.

*Anne Rhynes:*

So could you tell us what you did after you left school?

*Morris Cummings:*

After I left school, I played music. Oh, God. You know, went through the marriage thing, all kind of stuff, and kids thing, but always managed to play music and make a living, did some other things and made a living. Like wreck houses, they let me do that, lower ceilings in the bigger houses and stuff like that. You know, blind people can tap a lot of stuff. You know, but that's basically it, and I did a lot of learning stuff on my own, like mechanics and stuff like that. Anything to make a living because anything better than working in a sweatshop. You know? Where it's almost like slavery in a sense.

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And I really feel sorry for the kids that's mentally retarded kind of. You know? And they have them working in these places and give them like \$20.00 a month, if that. I'm saying my God, how could you do that and look them in their face? You know? That's all over the world, even including here.

*Anne Rhynes:*

Could you tell us what role religion played in your life growing up?

*Morris Cummings:*

Well, coming up, I was a Catholic. I guess I'm just a person that believed in God today, you know, a higher power. But as a child, I was exposed to religion. The Catholic church to the little country

Baptist church on the side of the river in the woods. You know? Where you'd go down there and baptize in the river.

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Yeah, that kind of thing. But you know, when you get older and you start looking at things a little more serious about religion and how people worship God and how they worship themselves more so than God and put themselves in God's place as far as making decisions in one's life, that can get kind of hectic. Where is God in that church? God supposed to be in you. You know, where you can do things and you can't help the world that needs your help, that's calling on you, unless you're a member of a church, I don't understand. You help where it's called.

*Nguyen Pham:* So did you belong to a church growing up, and did you play at the church at all when you were?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, I used to belong to – as I got older, I used to belong to Belleview Baptist Church and step up in Memphis here.

[0:15:00]

But you know, I used to go to the little Baptist church. In the country, I never was really a member. You know? Because I don't really go there because that was the only church to go to right down the road. You know? You wanted to hear something about God and see was God in that church. You know? There's a lot of people and a lot of good cooking. Church people can fry up some chicken.

**CUT 0:15:23**  
**– Begin Segment 3**

*Nguyen Pham:* Speaking of church, can you describe to us a little bit more of the church that you went to?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, in the country, you have this little church, and it's not too much bigger than probably this room here, not too much bigger. You know, and everybody knew everybody because everybody was right around the same plantation area, little country area, and everybody knew, and they was right there for one another on the real loving side. You know, if somebody got sick, they knew it. They would go wash for you, the ladies would if there was a lady sick. If it's a man sick, they gonna come down there and try to console the brothers or the church.

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You know, see what he needed, see did he need a haircut and whatever he needed assistance with. They tried to work that out. If he didn't have food, they had hogs they done killed or stuff in the garden they done gather up. They gonna bring it and share it with you. You can't find it in the city today. It's kind of mean out here today.

*Nguyen Pham:* If you don't mind telling us a little bit about your family at this point in your life.

*Morris Cummings:* Well, I still have a few of them left. I got sisters and brothers. Got one sister here, and the rest of them scattered abroad, Chicago, Florida, East St. Louis area, all of them areas like that.

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You know, I got a decent little, I guess, \_\_\_\_\_, you know? We visit sometimes. We call each other all the time.

*Nguyen Pham:* Are you married, and do you have any children?

*Morris Cummings:* I'm married. My wife you've seen, came in, Melody. Got 12 kids.

*Nguyen Pham:* Do you remember their names, and did any of them follow in your music career?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, I remember their names, sure. But I want to say about maybe three of them may be interested in music, but they ain't pursuing it like they should, and for as long as I was at their age. One 15, but he turned 16 in November. That's the \_\_\_\_\_ boy.

[0:18:01]

And I have one 21, he just turned 21 in July. No, June, June. Sorry. And I have a daughter that's interested in music. Gosh, she's 32, getting ready to be 33. I told her rap is way out of her bag. You know? Ain't too many rapping grandmas making money. You can't tell them anything. That's their world. You know?

*Nguyen Pham:* So now, I'd love to hear a little bit more about your story and how that intersects with the story of Memphis in Memphis music. So let's talk a little bit about the role that you place in this story. First,

do you remember how you realized that music was important to you?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, music was always important to me because it made me feel so good.

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It always took me away from my sorrow and my thinking about my mom and all them and my brothers and sisters when they were way away. You know, until I got to see them when they went back home. And I played my music, and they took me away from all those thoughts of them, you know, and I was able to not be sitting there probably sulking and crying sometimes. I missed them so bad. You know?

*Nguyen Pham:* Yeah. So how old were you when you realized that music was important?

*Morris Cummings:* I was small. About I guess about six, seven. Yeah. I had my harmonica, you know, a gentleman had bought me back home. Before I started school, I always kept it, and it's somewhere in a box now somewhere. That's an old harmonica, probably rusted. It was the first harmonica I'd ever had.

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When I'm sitting lonesome and all that stuff like that, I could always take it with me. I could sit and play and fascinate myself about all the different noises I could make.

*Nguyen Pham:* So I got to know that you not only play harmonica, but you also sing. So do you start singing the beginning, or you just picked it up later in life?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, I sang in the choir and all that. I can sing, I just hate singing. I used to hate being in the choir, and I would get – I would do stuff. I used to tease my wife about that. I said, "I know how to get into choir." A girl will be standing in front with her pony tails. All I do is reach up there and pull one, and she hollered, "No, stop," and they'd throw me out. So I got away with a lot of stuff, but I always knew the way to get out of something if I didn't want to do it. But they got hip to me.

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And they started putting me out in the cold, that changed things. Then I start acting right. You out there shivering, and they had the nerve to turn your face to the wall and make you stand on one foot. That get results, I tell you.

*Anne Rhynes:* Yeah, can you tell a little bit more of who were some of your earliest influences?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, my aunt and my uncle were some of the best players around. They played, oh my God. They played – recording people, Cousin Willy Dixon and all. Just so much music around you, you know, and then you heard the radio, you know, in Clarksdale. The funny thing about Clarksdale when you went home, they didn't have basically no really blues. You know, you had country and some kind of else little music going on.

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But on a Sunday night, Sunday night, WLAC Nashville used to have the Horse Man. You know, you ever heard of that guy? The Horse Man. And he had all the lady's 45s of all the blues artists. Man, I be laying on the floor listening to the big old radio. It was a big wooden radio, like a vendor. It'd light up. You know? I would be laying around the floor listening to all that, and I hear the guy say, "We got all dadadada. You get ten records, and all for \$9.95." Whoa, I never had \$9.95. Then they do the commercial about the chickens. You can get 500 chickens for \$4.00. I was like, "Wow, that's a lot of chickens."

You know? Yeah, but they be biddies, and half of them be dead when you get them. My folks used to order them.

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But that's basically how I got really into the blues, you know, the different – out of all the music I heard, blues was it. I'm telling you, I heard the gospels and all that. Like the blues was part of me in the beginning I guess because of the way I lived or where I lived, all that into one. Pulled me toward that. You know, from going down to the commodity houses or – with your parents or my mom to get commodities, you know, back then. They had peanut butter and beef and gravy in cans, meal, and flour, et cetera that the governor gave you for free. Kind of like life in different places now.

Then we had – what else did we have? We had clothes pantries that the welfare office had, you know, and different things like that. So you know you was poor. Mom couldn't afford to buy nothing. You know?

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And they gave you those clothes, and you were so glad to get some nice clothes that didn't have the knees out because when you're a kid, you crawl a lot of knees out your clothes, trying to play and stuff. So when you got nice things, you was happy, whether they were used or new. You was very happy.

**CUT – Begin Section 4**

*Nguyen Pham:* So I've heard your Willy Dixon a couple times. Can you tell us how he's related to you and how close were you?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, that's my uncle's cousin. That's two brother's kids. He's a distant cousin.

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I only got to meet him back in the '80s. When I found out all this, I said, "Wow, we got all this power in the family, and nobody done nothing." Then when I called him, he said, "Well, I didn't know about you," and then he came down with Mr. Joe Saverin and give them instruments in the schools here. We wrote around and stuff, and he tell me he gonna help me. And then my music career, before he could do it, he got sick and died.

*Nguyen Pham:* So could you tell us a little bit more about some of your earliest music experiences?

*Morris Cummings:* Oh, God. Well, we've covered Memphis here. My brother and myself, we would always hang out at Stacks. We'd witness all these cats pull up in these big long cars and busses and stuff, man. They'd let us stand around in there, and man, you'd get to see people I mean cut a rug. I'm telling you, you say, "Wow." You'd be so amazed. Say, "Wow, I want to be just like those dudes, man. They dress sharp. They got jewelry, and they got everything. Girlfriends, and all kinds of stuff." We were hallucinating. "Wow, that could be us, man." I'm the only one that carried it on.

I'm the only that carried on the music. You know? My brothers kind of lost it on the wayside because I actually played drums and

different things. Later in life, they just didn't care for it anymore. I carried it on. I said, "Well, somebody gotta carry the torch." By them not teaching me, it made me want to play more because I thought they had a problem with me, and give them – the other kids instruments to play, let them play with the instrument, their own private instruments, and they wouldn't let me play with them.

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I guess I was too small. But I was the only one serious. I guess they didn't know that. But that would put the fire in me to learn. So it motivated me to learn, and I kept on doing it and doing it until I got where I wanted to be, and I've been all over the world. I played the presidential yachts, played on the grounds of the White House, played in about 12 countries all with that little harmonica that man gave me, 50 cents. That's my ticket around the world. Without that, I never would have gone because I never would have had the finances to do such a thing.

*Nguyen Pham:*

So I've read that used to play in the band, could you tell us a little bit more about the band that you played in?

[0:28:00]

*Morris Cummings:*

I used to play in a band called The Pocket Rockets. I used to play in one before that called The Blues Connections. Both of them was quite an experience. I still got to play with some of the major headliners and different stuff like that. You know? You know, I played for The Pocket Rockets. That consist of Brad Webb, Tony Adams, Dan Cochran, Russell Wheeler, David Daniels at one point. Wow. Man, \_\_\_\_\_, oh, man. I'm trying to think of everybody that was in that band at one point. David Fowler played in the band, played drums on something. A few people played. We used people out of Hank Junior's band, played in my band, played keys for me.

[0:29:06]

I thank him for that. Oh, God. And Don Cook. He was also a guitarist in the band of The Pocket Rockets. In The Blues Connection, you had Steve Cochran. His name was Steve Kaplan. That's it. Steve Kaplan like Gabe Kaplan. That's him. Yeah, Steve Kaplan. Lawrence Hopper was on drums, and Nathaniel Mitchell on bass. And you had Willie Earl on guitar. We had one more. God, \_\_\_\_\_. He was a pretty popular guy.

[0:30:02]

He was an endorsee of Gibson. I can't think of it, doggone it. But he was a great guitarist. We had – most of those guys are dead now. They was great players. I mean top notch. We had a pretty popular band at the time.

*Nguyen Pham:* Speaking of the rocket pocket – The Pocket Rockets band, sorry, my bad, can you share a little bit – do you have any particular stories with the band that you have?

*Morris Cummings:* A lot of stories. They was quite characters. The funny thing that ever happened – we was going, I think, up to New York or somewhere, and this friend of ours, Wakefield is his name. I know last name. Well anyway, his aunt had some rental vans she was in charge of ever since she \_\_\_\_\_.

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A new band, you know, so we was rolling down the road. We had stopped at a service station, I think, a food joint or something. But anyway, had the emergency brake down. And so we got ready to leave. They forgot to release the emergency break, and we were going down the highway, boy, and the tires were smoking. And so there's a lady pulled up beside the van and said, "Hey, your tires are smoking." They couldn't hardly hear. They had music going. They're doing the wacky tobaccy, you know. "Your tires are smoking."

And he let the window down and said, "No, it ain't the tires that are smoking." I think that's one of the funniest things.

[0:32:00]

There's been quite a few \_\_\_\_\_.

**CUT 0:32:03**

**Begin Section 5**

*Nguyen Pham:* Yeah, we also learned that you got a chance to play with BB King. Can you share a little bit more about that?

*Morris Cummings:* Oh, that's great. Yeah, I played with B and Rufus, all of them. We played his birthday here at the Orpheum. It was a great one, Amelia Jackson, all those blameless people there. William Bell,

all those people were there. It was quite a time. I think most of them are gone. But any time you're around Mr. BB King, you're around a real person. I mean down to earth. Through all of his hard knocks and everything, he never forgot. He never forgot them hard knocks that powered him where he is now. He never forgot it. He loves and treat everybody just like family. If you ever get to be around him, he treats you like he been knowing you 1,000 years.

[0:33:03]

*Nguyen Pham:* So also, if you were doing something non-music related, can you tell us a little bit more about your path in life and where it led you?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, if I was doing something a little bit different, I guess I could be in a sense a motivational speaker in a sense because where I came from and where I am now, it would tell the story. I had to keep on. I had to believe in myself that I could achieve anything I set out to do. I got to be in movies and all that. As a matter of fact, I was in one of the last movies that Mr. Michael Clark Duncan done. It's called Redemption Road. I was in that movie. I was Walter, the character. So – and many, many documentaries I've done. I did some stuff for Turner Broadcasting.

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Just so much, you know, documented my existence, my contribution to the music, and to life basically of a poor boy from the cotton fields. You know, the plantations to living up over 360 \_\_\_\_\_. All that.

*Nguyen Pham:* And let's talk a little bit more about the city of Memphis. What does Memphis, Tennessee mean to you, and how did this city influence your work?

*Morris Cummings:* Memphis is a broader place for talent. You know? You've got so many talented people down in Mississippi, it's not as many as it used to be, but back during that time, there was a lot of talented people down there.

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But you couldn't make no money because there was so many of them doing the same thing that you did. People didn't mind undercutting you in needing a bag of groceries or a dollar something to go to a job or something or get out of town. You

know, so it had a lot of different avenues what it meant. But in Memphis, you got such a broad horizon or places to play, and Beale Street was the Mecca. You know? You could come down there, set up on the street, and make a decent living because people come here from all over the world to see what Beale Street is like. What kind of musicians out there or what make Beale Street tick? It's the musicians. It's not the drinks. It's not the food.

[0:36:00]

They come to see the musicians play. And I tell you, if you got any kind of skill, if you can play probably an accordion, somebody will pay you a little tip in your bucket. You know?

*Nguyen Pham:* Did any contemporary events shape or inspire music at that time?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, yeah, civil rights. You know, back the days had a lot to do with it. But blues was the thing that drew people. You know? That was spending money, and even the older people that had people to spend. Most young folks don't got no money to spend, especially school like that, spend it all there. But you have the elderly people coming out, middle aged people like that. They coming out, they having a good time on Friday and Saturday night. You know, and Beale Street, what they play back then, you could take \$5.00 and have a ball with your whole family with dime hot dogs and 15 cent ice cream and all that.

[0:37:07]

You could have a great time seeing all the little exhibits there. Like Abe Schwab is one of the oldest stores down there. You know? You can go in there. They can tell a whole history of poverty all the way up to the islands where black people come from. Culturally, you know, they had all kinds of stuff about voodoo and different things that most elderly black people believed in. You could see all that at Abe Schwab, you know. Abe Schwab had it. They had fancy hats, fancy little clothes you can get, and you can also buy harmonicas there.

*Nguyen Pham:* In what ways did you think that the music you were making affected your generation and – or even the younger generation?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, it's hard to impress the young generation with that type of music because right now, the young generation, I'd say 75 percent of them is into that hip hop world.

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And that's violence, sex, and money, you know, fancy car, fancy clothes, all these things. Here where the music I play is from the root sides of things, it's my heritage. That's the link that I play, and I try to – you know, when I get a chance to speak to kids that come, I used to speak in this center, and they would have kids come from all over the world bussed in, and I would talk to them and tell them stories, Brad Webb and myself, about the history of blues and where it came from and how it affects us and why we sing it. We love it because it's a link that if don't nobody continue, it will be forgotten.

[0:39:00]

And for us black people, music for us, gospel and blues is the only thing close to a heritage that we have.

CUT 0:39:05

Begin Section 6

*Nguyen Pham:*

So in talking to other musicians through the program, we've found that the assassination of Dr. King has a really major influence on them. So do you feel any things were different in Memphis or in the country in general before and after the assassination?

*Morris Cummings:*

Well, I tell you what, it brought about a change. You know, a lot of times, when change comes, you know, it ain't always for the better. You know? Let me explain that. When Dr. King was assassinated, you look at the point before he was assassinated. He was trying to get people to band together for righteousness and put down the ignorance and pick up books and get educated about things and stop being ignorant and selfish toward one another and move toward one cause.

[0:40:05]

But then after he passed, it was easy for people to come together because it brought about anger. See, that's the difference. You know, and ain't nobody really carrying it strong like he did when he was alive. It looked like almost the movement done died, which is basically – it's not on segregation right now. You know? Education was the big factor. Not getting you to vote, not enabling you to be educated. That's when all the emphasis was on that because that was the way of holding the minority back. But now

that you can get an education, you can go anywhere you want to go. You can do all these things. Education not no part of it no more because it was a shackle for most disabled black people of minority. They made – you go through a lot of hoops to get an education, even to vote.

[0:41:01]

You know, we wasn't even counted as a human being to able to us to vote. So that's pretty sad any time you have to fight for your rights, which they should be given to you according to the bible. And everybody around Memphis, it's 5,000 churches here, but nobody really living according to what's going on. You know, you look at what's going on versus what's in the bible. What church is correct? Why is there so many? It don't take but one church to put everybody on one accord. If everybody claim they believe in God, if that the case, why can't everybody band together and worship God? Why do there have to be 5,000 churches?

*Nguyen Pham:*

Were there any other events that you can think of that you feel like you have made a profound impact on the music community?

[0:42:03]

*Morris Cummings:*

Well, I think a lot of kids nowadays seeing that the only way you're going to make it, it's not like there's a lot of opportunities as far as jobs in your city because most of the jobs nowadays packing up and leaving. You know, you can see on the news and everywhere else that all these jobs are shut down and moved out of the whole United States, moved over somewhere else. So what you gonna do? You only have two things that are gonna work for you. You gonna either be a musician or an athlete, and it's gonna be rough for you trying to be a doctor because you're going to have to have money to pay for your tuition, go to school to be a doctor.

So you got two things out there. Work hard shooting at basketball, running in football, and too many Tiger Woods. You know? You know, but that's basically where it's at right now.

[0:43:01]

You have to go with reality. You know, a lot of things is too far out to view, but you can see being a great athlete. You can see being a great musician. You know? Those are things that most

minorities are born with, the ability to sing, dance, act. The only thing missing is opportunity.

*Nguyen Pham:* So do you think it were changed as a result of the assassination as well as any other events?

*Morris Cummings:* Say that one more time.

*Nguyen Pham:* Do you feel that you were changed personally as the result of the assassination of Dr. King and any other events that you mentioned?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, me knowing those things, it puts you in a certain perspective. Why did it have to be like that? You know? Dr. King ain't around now, so how can you continue to motivate what he done?

[0:44:02]

You know, how many people even think of Dr. King? You look at a young generation now, you ask them who Dr. King is. Half of them don't even know. They have to go back and look at a documentary or take a walk through the civil rights museum because their parents ain't teaching them. Negro history, nowadays, sometimes be on about athletes most of the time instead of people that tried to make equality for everyone.

**CUT Begin Section 7**

*Nguyen Pham:* So as a major Bealee Street musician, do you observe any changes that are displayed over time?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, I've seen Beale Street slowly become commercial, like New Orleans or somewhere. See, it used to be a time when they were just coming together with Beale Street. I would say Mr. Miller, he was one of the first people that attacked it. You know, he was doing pretty fair, and then nothing happened there, and then Mr. Joe Saverin got it, and somehow money has disappeared.

[0:45:11]

You know, they was supposed to been renovating Beale Street, and oh, once they tearing the black of buildings down, leaving the front standing. You know? Like you know, this is crazy, man. How is this going to benefit Beale Street? How is it going to be here for the next generation? That's what grants do. So Mr. **Elkedon** took

it, and Mr. Elkedon did more with it than anyone that ever tried it. He's got it where it is nowadays, but at the same time, it took the heart out of Beale Street because of the way they did it. You know, they – where a musician could come up and play off the streets. You never knew who was coming. BB King, Abbot King, Mr. Al Green, all those people would come up and – Lynn White.

[0:46:03]

You got so many people would just come up and play with the bands for free and just be sitting out there listening and enjoying themselves, but they can't do that anymore. It used to be bands could sit up in front of businesses and play. You know? Can't do that anymore. It's all regulated. So that's the heart of Beale Street. Beale Street was a place where people just free wheel enjoyed themselves without any strings. You know?/ And which was – wasn't as violent. You know, it wasn't as violent as it is now. When tourists come to town, you got all kind of panhandlers trying to rob them, carjack them, and all kind of stuff.

You know, it just created a problem. I'll say it like that. They was trying to contain, which they did a real good job of containing all the money because they claimed musicians outside caused the club to lose money. But they come to see the musician. If you that concerned about making money, put the musician in the club.

[0:47:12]

You know, you want the money, you want to make the money, but you don't want to pay out. That's not fair to the musician. They got bills to pay. They gotta pay for strings, tubes, speakers when their little amps go out. It raining on them outside. They gotta pay for that. You not gonna do that for them. And that keeps them struggling.

*Nguyen Pham:*

And now let's talk about the future of Memphis and Memphis music. So where do you think the city is heading in the next few years?

*Morris Cummings:*

Well, CDs is – well, they probably get smaller. They probably get smaller, CDs will. I think they probably got some of that already. Smaller CDs. Have you seen those? Got something about a little bit bigger than I guess a cookie. It ain't as big as the CDs now, but then again, they experiment with so many other things, like digital where you don't need none of that.

[0:48:10]

You buy this little gadget, and you can dial up anything, like a computer, and have your little jack and plug it into your speaker system in your car, your radio. Get anything you want, any time you want. Then eliminate the CDs period. So many different avenues to take that.

*Nguyen Pham:* So in terms of that, do you have any advice for any Memphians and Memphis musicians today?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, advice I have for Memphis musicians, you need to band together and stop cutting each other out. Because once the situation come to view and people really look into it, it's enough for everybody. It takes a while to get it in order, but there's enough for everybody, and you'll be paid what you should be paid if you only stop under cutting each other.

[0:49:08]

You'll be paid. Everybody won't take that time. That's what it's all about. Learning to work together.

*Nguyen Pham:* Yeah. So are there any particular stories that stand out in memory that might illustrate what music and your music – I mean Memphis music mean to you.

*Morris Cummings:* Well, Memphis music, I tell you what, you make more money here on a bad day than you would in Mississippi. Because there ain't no money in Mississippi. It's a lot of people going to Mississippi. As a matter of fact, in my hometown of Clarksdale, and they claim they building up the place, but there only somebody making the money is the investors coming in and there and eating up the grants because the poor people ain't getting a chance to do the grants because half of them down there got criminal records from trying to provide for their family. So they ain't gonna be able to get no grants.

[0:49:59]

The only somebody who gonna be able to get the grant is the aliens that's coming in from all the places coming in, sucking up all the grants and giving the poor people the peanuts, and that's not fair. As far as Memphis music, they need to cherish what they have because Memphis is very rich with all sorts of music. Not only just blues, but they got jazz, soul, R&B, reggae. I mean you name

it. Gospel, opera, you got people doing all kind of music here. And it's going to only dry up if you don't support it.

*Nguyen Pham:* So I guess we're good to our questions. Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't covered?

*Morris Cummings:* Well, only thing I could say is try to be creative in \_\_\_\_\_ - have some kind of thing going on to help the music, help the arts in Memphis.

*[0:51:01]*

Look into it, study it. You know? If it before your time, we're talking about young and old people, find out what it's all about before you knock it. You know? I listen to rap, I listen to all that stuff, but it ain't me, but everybody has their thing at some given time. So be appreciative, be understanding, and I think everybody can work this thing out together. You know?

*Nguyen Pham:* All right. So we – thank you for your participation in the Crossroads to Freedom project. We really found everything you shared today interesting.

*Anne Rhynes:* We really do appreciate like you doing this interview. Can't wait to hear you play tonight, too.

*Morris Cummings:* I guess that went okay. You all ever heard me play?

*[End of Audio]*