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Interviewee: Norman West

Interviewer:

Location:

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Interviewer: We're going to talk about how the Soul Children get started, where did you come from, how did Soul Children get started. You know, what happened, how did everything workout and all that sort of stuff. What happened to the Soul Children in the end and what's been happening since then?

West: Right. Okay

Interviewer: So basically that's where we're going with this thing.

West: Okay

Interviewer: So let's start out with, and I'm going to ask you to take your cap off because it's throwing a shadow over you.

West: Alright

Interviewer: Who is Norman West? Where did Norman West come from?

West: Norman West is a son of a southern

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African Methodist Episcopal preacher who everybody in the neighborhood said he was a Baptist preacher in a Methodist format. My father was, just a country preacher that started off with his scriptures and wound up screaming and hollering at the top of his emotional voice. And that's where Norman West comes from, I'm a junior and at 10 years old mom bought an old upright piano and put it in the house. Some of the keys were down but then she took my sister and I to piano lessons and I learned the first thing in two weeks then they gave me the second book. I wasn't concerned about learning all that stuff in the books,

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but I wanted to know about the ABC's of piano. So when I went home on that piano I put the little ole thing that the lady gave me up there and I said Oh, this is easy. So I started learning songs. Dad came home from work, he worked during the week and then he pastored a church on the weekend. First song that I wanted to learn was Precious Lord and that was the beginning of, I was 10 and a half, almost 11 years old, dad came in one evening and he was very emotional minister and he heard me singing "Precious Lord" but I was getting the foundation from being brought up in a house by a minister. Well he's getting his sermons together which he always got on

Wednesday, on Wednesday we had family prayer meeting which he started at church on those Wednesday nights eventually.

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But, I was always trying to learn songs not just by the words. I learned the words by the meaning of the song. I could learn it a lot faster, if I didn't remember the words, I remembered the foundation of what the song was about.

Interviewer: What church was your father at?

West: He was down in Louisiana

Interviewer: Oh Louisiana okay.

West: Yes several churches, you know the AME church, every year, every two years, or every so many years they'd change it

Interviewer: So you're originally from Louisiana

West: I'm from Monroe, Louisiana. I was born in Lake Providence, Louisiana in the black mud delta

Interviewer: How did that whole religious experience, cause you hear this a lot with a lot of black musical recorders

West: Right, Aretha and all that yeah

Interviewer: How did that religious experience play out in your professional career?

West: I first heard "Precious Love" when Aretha recorded it for her father, Reverend C.L. Franklin. I heard it and I thought, that girl is awesome. You know and it's this little girl and she would understand she was from here but Reverend Franklin preached like my dad. So I wanted to sing, but I didn't realize that the singing that I was doing was what had the impact on everyone except I was enjoying what I was doing and when I sung "Precious Lord" dad was walking through the house and crying. I said what's wrong with him you know. I said I know I didn't sound that bad. But dad came to me, I would always want to travel with my dad. He had a church over here this Sunday and maybe about 30 miles over there the next Sunday. So he goes Son, "That song you were singing the other day, it touched my heart."

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I said, "You haven't heard that Reverend Franklin daughter." He said, "No but you singing that the way-," 'cause dad wanted me to be a preacher and that morning I went to church with him I had my little blue suit on and we was out in the country a

little country church and he says, "Before I should start today my son has touched my heart and the song that he was singing has to do with my subject matter." I said, "Oh, no he's not." My heart started beating because I had never sung in- I'm 10 and a half years old, he sprung it on me. He didn't say I'm going to call you up, so there was no room for preparation. So I just sit down at the piano there and prayer came in first, which I still hold that. When ever I'm going to preform you can never tell that I'm emotional or that thing

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that pushes all entertainers, that thing of fear just before performance. I use it as an incentive, you know. The emotional feeling, that's incentive for me, so by the time I get to stage when that first note come off and it doesn't shake you might see me grinning cause I know its going to be all right.

Interviewer: So at what point did you become, what I call a commercial singer? When did you move away and when did you start performing, and what did your father have to say about that?

West: That's funny, I left Monroe because I had been doing nightclubs and dad heard that I was doing a nightclub one Sunday morning. I was singing that very song, "Precious Lord," but one of his members, a member of the choir I had been directing this choir and I was 19

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and graduating from high school. Now I had graduated from high school and gone to Grambling and majored in Voice and one of the ladies there, she was an instructor at Grambling and dad was talking about, My son has really touched me today that's just one of my favorites. And this lady was standing right behind him she looked around and said Reverend but wasn't nothing like what he did with "Be Ever Wonderful" last night. I wish I could've gone through the ground. We standing out after church and when she said that dad just gave me a look with some disappointment because his thing was I'm praying that my son would follow in my footsteps, but I had no desire to be a minister. I wanted to sing because I could look out into an audience of people, whether gospel or whatever.

Interviewer: So what were your first kind of nonreligious-

West: Inclination?

[8:00]

Interviewer: Your first professional experience? What'd you do?

West: I had worked at the American Legion Hall in Monroe with a band called Little Melvin's Band, Little Melvin's Blues Band. We came through Memphis up to

Covington to a gig and then we came back here and we was staying at the Queen Anne Hotel, its torn down now, and that's the first time I ever made 300 dollars in one weekend and I said, "This is great." 'Cause I couldn't make it in a cotton field, chopping or picking cotton. So I had made 300 dollars that weekend and I had seen another part of the country that I never thought I'd be able to see and I had heard about Memphis you know, of the BB Kings and Bobby Bland was my favorite at the time, so I'd sing it when daddy wasn't listening,

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but that was my first thing that I had done professionally.

Interviewer: How'd you get with Stax and how did the Soul Children come about?

West: I had been to Stax and got rejected but I had worked at the Hippodrome with the original Bar-Kays as my backup band, the guys that died with Otis. When Otis first heard them, Otis was in Al Bells car sitting outside the club with the window down listening to these guys doing my show. When I came off stage the guys say Man Otis Redding is outside, I said Man get out of my face. He said He's out there in Al Bell's car. They were out there listening to the band. The next week Jimmy King the guitarist had written a song for me and he said Man we just came out of studio you gotta hear this tune we're getting ready to release, I said Aw Man

[10:00]

I said Man I told y'all y'all had the thing. They released Soul Finger. The vamp to Soul Finger, the Wamp wamp was taken from a thing that I had shown them on a tune, it was called, "You don't know how I feel, you never know." Yea. They took that vamp and turned it into [noises] and that was the thing that was Soul Finger. When they brought me a copy of it and let me hear, you know Ben was scraping the ceiling with that trumpet and it was in the same key that we did that. And he said What do you think and I said you know what I think, where is my royalties. But I was so glad to see them do that.

[11:00]

Anybody around me, you know the Mad Lads would come in and do shows with me. They would come in and do two or three tunes on my show. Temprees, Larry Dodson was with the Temprees then

Interviewer: The Soul Children came after the plane crash, right? The Soul Children weren't together?

West: Oh, no no no. No, one night I was working at a club, at the Chisca Plaza Hotel, it was called the Down Under Club. I was working with Jerry Lee Lewis' Rhythm Section with Ronnie Williams that eventually did a production with David Porter he was on keyboard. But I was with these bad white boys. They could play! They had

been living for about four or five years in San Francisco. Anyway, David Porter, Isaac Hayes, Eddie Floyd, and Steve Cropper came down and was sitting at the bar.

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When I came off stage and David said, "Man we want to talk to you." I said, "Okay, so he says where can we go were its quiet?" I said, "Let's go to the dressing room." So we're back in the dressing room and that's when he and David broke the news that they were pulling a group together. They had already cut "I'll Understand" on Blackfoot as a single, but at the time, Stax had already signed Johnnie Taylor at the slot, well Otis Redding had died so Johnnie Taylor had the single artist slide. So it would create controversy so they said, "Well what we thought to do was to do a version of the Fifth Dimension, but with our type of music." That way, this Is Ike talking, "[inaudible] and then, y'all got a career."

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I said, "Well who's in it?" He said, "You heard of this guy Blackfoot?" I said "Yea man he came to the Hippodrome one night and man he was awesome." I said, "That's a bad dude." He said, "Yea that's who you'll be singing with." I said, "I ain't got no problem with it." I said, "Who else?" He said, "You know Shelbra?" I said, "Yeah I know Shelbra. I gave her the job I was doing out on the Navy Base." He said, "You know Anita?" Anita came in and sung one night. You know I knew them, just passing but I knew them passionately about their abilities. This would be made up of four lead singers: each one in a different voice category. You'd be baritone, Blackfoot tenor, Shelbra would be alto, and Anita soprano. I said, "Aw man. That's perfect." I said, "Man, I don't want to be in no group with no women. "

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I had some bad vibes going on cause I had a group in Louisiana, a talent group, out of high school, and I had a lot of problems with the girls cause they didn't want to rehearse and so that was in my mind. So he said, "I'll tell you what, try for three months and if it doesn't work we'll abolish the idea but we need you in there. If you not there we're going to give up the idea." I said, "Aw, man, you can get somebody else." "Nah, we already picked these people. It's Anita, Shelbra, Blackfoot, and you. And you the last one we contacted." That put pressure on me you know, I wasn't ready for the pressure. They said Well man you have more experience in the music business than they have so we'll need you. You're going to run the group, but it's going to be done in a democratic format. So we had met in the conference room, used to have this big table. So we met there and

[15:00]

everybody in here know everybody? And we said, "Yeah, yeah I know." Then, we're going to need a leader. So I said, "Well, what about him?" "No, no I don't know

nothing about no music business.”... Everybody standing around they said, “Well what about Norman?” I look at David, David gave me that eye. They said, “Okay, well we vote Norman.” “Okay, you're the leader. That mean you're responsible for whatever, find out whatever and blah blah blah.” Yeah okay.

Interviewer: So you became leader?

West: Leader of the group, yeah

Interviewer: Let me tell you something, I've interviewed a lot of people for this project that I'm doing. I've interviewed Al, I've interviewed Carla, I interviewed Willie Bell, Deanie, whole bunch of folks. And I ask them all the same question I'm about to ask you, and the question is-

[16:00]

and I'm going to tell you what the answer was, that the other people said as soon as I asked them this question. Of all the groups and individual artists that were here at Stax, which one didn't really get the props?

West: You want to start with the Soul Children? I would say there are a lot of things that happened to us away from Memphis that never hit the press because we would depend on the press being where they should've been and they were never, when we were on shows like our first time at the Apollo was with Martha and the Vandellas we were supposed to be the second act on the show because nobody had ever heard of us. We did two shows here in Memphis, one was down in the club where I worked, the second show was for Isaac Hayes who was doing a benefit for the Invaders, it was a benefit show for this organization-

[17:00]

Civil Rights style organization of brothers. Our third performance together on stage in front of an audience was 10 days at the Apollo theatre. We went in there, nobody had ever heard of Soul Children. Who was that, you know. We were on there with Millie Jackson opening, then The Emotions, then the Souls Will Be Us. Then the Chi-Lites, then Martha and the Vandellas. That's what happened on the first show. Before the second show Honi Cole you may remember him from Taps. Honey came back and said, “Where is the leader of the Soul Children, where is the guy the leader of Soul Children?” He said, “I'm going to call you Soul Child, when I call Soul Child I'm talking about you.” I said, “Norman, I ain't going to remember all that Soul Children you Soul Children.” I said, “Okay.” He says, “I'm dropping you all down,

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you're going to move from up there cause you perform, you stayed according to where, if you were front you were at the top in the small dressing room and on down like that.” That's the way you graduated, down next to the floor level. So we're

going to move y'all down to the core star spot, so that means Anita and Shelbra had a dressing area and we had a dressing area. But we would have to get dressed and then get out of the room and wait outside for them to get dressed at first because we were up in the little, looked like a closet. So from the second show on for the next nine days we were close down, Martha insisted. Then the next time we were there two months later, we were on with I think the second time was with Tyrone Davis, the late Tyrone Davis. We were very close.

[19:00]

We use to, Tyrone was very helpful in giving me advice about the road and you need a bus man, get all that riding in two cars and dividing, somebody can get hurt which almost, there were several, we don't have time for the stories I could tell about that, about the near death incidents. The tragedies that could've happened, that happened to other people and we were blessed to live through them. But every time a Motown act was coming to the Apollo, because of the way these people raved about them, we did Marvin Gaye, Gladys Knight and the Pips.

Interviewer: Let me tell you, 'cause I started, I asked you the question about who didn't get their props, and you said the Soul Children and I will tell you that every last person that I've interviewed for this thing and I ask the same question, who didn't get their props? The number one answer was the Soul Children.

[20:00]

West: Well I didn't lie, did I? We did several shows with Isaac when he was number 1 in the world. And I remember we were doing the Scope in Philadelphia at you know the revolving stage, so we were there at the sound check and Ike came by there, he and I and Foot were standing around talking. You know, he talking about he had just left Cherry Hill and he was talking about how great it was and that casino circuit. He said, "Man, everything is great, I mean I enjoyed it, but I'm tired, I'm tired of meeting people I'm tired of hiding out and all this kind of stuff." He said, "Man, they working me to death." He said, "Look Foot, you going to take it easy on me won't you?" Foot said, "Naw."

Interviewer: So when did you get to the point were you realized that, man this is the Soul Children, this is really something?

[21:00]

West: When we came from the Apollo, we did two out of the state things and came home, got our clothes clean, then two days later we're back on the road on our way to the Howard Theatre. Then every time we would go to that East Coast area we would go either to the Howard Theatre first, then the Apollo or the Apollo then the Howard. But, sometimes uptown Philly, then we're off to Chicago

Unknown Voice: Baltimore

West: Baltimore, yeah. Baltimore Civic Center, oh man. That's when we met- We did the thing with Stevie, that's when we had the same management as Gladys and Stevie and just signed with Charlie Graziano who was our manager on the front end. We were getting ready to go on stage to close the first half of the show, we hear this guy hollering, coming down the hall hollering "CHARLIE, CHALRIE!" It's Stevie and his cousin who is his

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director or guide. He running down the halls and he's hollering, "I wanna see the Soul Children!" But that was one of the highlights of the thing, to be on the show with Stevie and close, his request for us to close the first half and he came in, now he had walked all the way around that building so that he could come in there and see us.

Interviewer: And that's an honor.

West: And he came in there, Anita was sitting behind the, you opened the door her chair was sitting right behind the door. We were just having a meeting with our manager, so I was just standing outside, when he got to the door I didn't recognize it was Stevie. And he said "Hey everybody coming out of the dressing room!" "Stevie what are you making all that noise for?" "I wanna see the Soul Children!" So when he came in the office he said,

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just by voices, we'd never met him, but just by voice he knew he said, "You're Norman." And then he said nicely, "You must be Blackfoot because I didn't know he could see images." So he said, "Who is the lovely lady over there?" She says, "I'm Shelbra." And Anita sitting back there he says, "Then you must be Anita." Anita looked at me and said [inaudible]. That was frightening because no one told us he could see images. But he had never even looked over, so you knew someone was over there. I don't know his senses from being blind his other senses had. And she would look at me and went [shocked face].

Interviewer: Tell me what you think is the greatest individual piece that the Soul Children did? Now I'm going to tell you what I think it is but you tell me the greatest individual piece was that y'all did.

West: The song that every time I see Isaac, we say the same thing.

[24:00]

The song that never stopped playing on the air, "The Sweeter He Is" because it was, it was where I got an opportunity to go back home to my roots inside of a song. Booker T and the M.G.'s and Isaac Hayes was a rhythm section you know the four of them and Isaac together, which was ooh. And they was singing, finished the first

half, they had the track just repeating because the M.G.'s just wouldn't stop playing. I mean they were just- and Isaac would do. Do you hear that piano in there? And it was just all five of them they was just enjoying the things that's what they would always do when they had to stop and all start over because somebody missed something or the sound wasn't right or the mic went something or whatever. So they finally get a chance at the end to run off what they feeling

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You know because the song is in, so they ran the tune on for maybe twenty minutes and while it's going on David is saying, "We gotta do something with this and somebody think of something." So he said, "Norman you good with this. Think of something." I said, "I'm thinking. What you want me to do?" When David is doing this, you try to find out what's on his head 'cause he's heard something and it's going to be to your advantage to find out, pick his brain and find out what's going on in there. So he says I want you just say anything, go into your preacher thing! 'Cause he had watched me at clubs, and I just, that's why what you head on part two- that wasn't a rehearsed, it wasn't something that was written down. He said keep it rolling, he said just sing something

[26:00]

Interviewer: I will tell you that was on my list number two. What do you think number one would be on my list?

West: Well if it wasn't "I'll Understand," it must have been "Move Over"

Interviewer: No neither one of those, "Hang Ups of Holding On."

West: That should have been the second "Sweeter He Is"

Interviewer: It's just a great piece.

West: Yeah it is.

Interviewer: And it goes on, just like you said.

West: Well that was another impromptu. Anytime we did anything impromptu it came out natural and the feeling was always something that you couldn't rehearse. That's how that came off the "Hang Ups of Holding On." 'Cause we never knew what was going to happen, it was just directed and you just sang whatever the "Hang Ups of Holding On" is.

Interviewer: Let me go back a little bit and ask you about, because this is an important part of the Stax Story,

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and I'm going to ask you about the plane crash and where were you, how'd you find out, what happened, what went through your mind, what happened to you?

West: What's that? Which?

Interviewer: Otis' plane, Otis and the Bar-Kays. Cause the Bar-Kays were your band.

West: Yeah this was my backup but see I always had that. Jimmy King, they came home and they were home for two weeks. They were all partying and going on, had the new suits and stuff they getting them out from the tailors and stuff down town. So Jimmy King came by my house. I'd been living just behind Hurts Village in an apartment there. Jimmy came and he had scribbled this song and said Man I been thinking about you. And he had written a song and he was talking about how happy they were for those two months they'd been traveling with Otis. He said, "Man it's better than what you had said it was." I said, "Well I haven't been there yet, you know where y'all had been." He said, "Man we did the Apollo man with Otis being number one I mean man, we've been going out of the country and" blah blah blah, and they getting ready to go here and there.

[28:00]

He said, "It's fantastic, but I wrote this song for you. So he came and brought his Hollow Block guitar, and he just started playing, and I'm looking at the words, and it was me. And you can imagine, I just cried. Carl was the youngest, the drummer. Carl's brother Roy was my personal drummer, you know. Roy was a guy that would start a song and let Willie Hall come in and sit in on the song when Willie was getting his development. So, I always had people like that around me. People who were teachers in their art. And the way Carl had learned from Al Jackson, his style of playing.

[29:00]

And just being around all these people. When that happened, it was like someone in my family had been separated from me. It was a very sad thing with me.

Interviewer: So what happened here at Stax? 'Cause Otis was the franchise player by that time. They were building things around Otis and that was kind of like the second time because the whole thing with Atlantic had just died, so Sam and Dave were gone, it rebuilt around Otis and then now in a couple months, it wasn't really all that long, Otis is dead. So what happened here then? What was the feeling around here?

West: I couldn't describe what was actually going on inside the company except with the people I would see individually because at that time I wasn't a member of Stax. But then when I did come in contact, I came by here one evening and Steve Cropper was in there in Studio, and I came in. "Hey man." And he said, "Hey, man

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What's going on?" "Ain't too much, you know we just finished a session on somebody." I said, "Man you look down." He said, "Aw ain't nothing to beat up about man. By now we would've been finishing off this with Otis," blah blah blah. So, I started playing "A Lonely Solider" on the piano and he came over and said, "Let me see those changes." I said, "I don't know what they is on a guitar, but I can call the changes out to you." He said, "Nah just play it," but I didn't know he was a keyboard player also. And by the time I left that day I had built his spirit up a little cause he had something to think about because when I came in the studio that day he was down. Well everybody that'd I run, 'cause I'm an emotional person so I don't like to be around people that like I am 'cause it bring me down and next thing you know I'm in tears.

Interviewer: So Soul Children

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went on. Soul Children became famous, as did a whole bunch of other people from Stax. And then what happened to the Soul Children 'cause I was surprised at the thing y'all said y'all hadn't sung in 30 years, how did it come to an end?

West: After the Stax closing, CBS had first refusal rights so we went to their pet label Epic. We signed with Epic, they released an album on us produced by Don Davis. Which wasn't distributed in the United States, but not adequately like CBS can do. But, after that, we cut another. Then, David Porter did a couple of albums with us but before that, prior to that, just before Stax, we had released a single

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off of the album with Shelbra as a lead- "I'll Be The Other Woman." Which had shown a lot of promise. It was rising toward the top of the charts. Shelbra had decided to do a single artist thing, and when she left, she left me kind of up in the air. And then we had to go back into rehearsal with Anita doing Shelbra's thing and find somebody to do her part, so she could do the lead which created a little slight problem but then we went to CBS. We went to CBS 3 and they accepted what we had done and they gave us the contract and after the three albums I know that they did not give it justice in promotion and what CBS does for an act. So, we had done that thing and it wasn't working out.

[33:00]

We went to Fantasy. Fantasy had contacted, and it didn't work out. That was not the right marriage for us. So, then we saw this tension building up among us. And I just, that was one of the saddest days of my career when we were having a meeting and Novella had consented to manage us and I had problems, not with her. But, I said, "You haven't managed in a while." And she said, "I been in the business," blah blah

blah. So, we had our problems then from one to another said things to me that hurt me, I was already hurt. And I just said, "Well I don't know what I'll be doing, I may be the one to wipe the windshield while I'm pumping gas in your car, bagging groceries, but I won't be going through this."

[34:00]

'Cause I put myself, nobody asked me to, but I put myself behind the gun on all situations because that's what a leader does.

Interviewer: So what has Norman West been doing, what year was that?

West: Too long.

Interviewer: '74, '75 maybe?

West: That was '75, my last album.

Interviewer: What have you been doing since then?

West: I moved back to Louisiana, after a while when I saw that we weren't going to get back together. 'Cause nothing here, then the company had closed. Different things were going on. Different things were going on and then when I saw this, the graveyard I called it, of Stax. I passed right here and then I would go around even if I was going somewhere close. I'd go around, 'cause I didn't want to see that. Then I left town, I went back to Louisiana stayed there two months and then moved to California. I went back to church to the AME church. There was only one AME church in Long Beach.

[35:00]

My sister was a member there and the day I went there, she asked the pastor, said "My brother-," oh she was so happy, but I was trying to stay away from the spotlight. But they hired me as their minister of music with four choirs. I had the little childrens, then I had the teenagers, then I had the gospel choir which included teenagers and older people that wanted to participate. Then I had the traditional [noises] that I had to do every first Sunday. So I had four choirs, and that kept me busy and I got a job at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard. I stayed there for five years.

Interviewer: So, now not long ago y'all did the Lemoyne-Owen thing but whose idea was that? How'd that whole things happen? Talk to me about that.

West: The Lemoyne-Owen thing is a thing that's been on going.

[36:00]

The year before I was a guest of Blackfoot had done it. You know he had this career as a single artist and he had done this thing the year before and he had me to come on as a special guest to do a couple of Soul Children things. We would always do

heresy that he and I wrote and do the [inaudible] with the help of the people that he had working in the background. I did that show with him, and then Anita had been working at Fedex, and she retired from Fedex and she had called me one day to say she had retired on a Friday from a Fedex and she start working that Monday at Time Warner. So Time Warner was sponsoring the gala. The guy over that was handling it, Anita's office as an executive was down the hall from his. So she called me 'cause I had been telling her, "Well, Anita before I die,

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I would like to see us on stage again together." "Yea well that's gonna take money." I said, "Yeah, I know it." "I ain't got none, you don't have none, you know" I said, "It's just an idea. It's nothing that anybody has any obligation to, but I would like for us to sing again." And when she called me that day, that was jubilation. She said, "Hey, Time Warner is sponsoring the Lemoyne-Owen benefit, and we been invited to do it. What do you think, are you gonna be available?" I said, "How you think you going to do it without me?" I was jubilated.

Interviewer: So you went into rehearsals, the first time, had y'all been together at all? Socially or anything?

West: Well, Anita is a member of the same church that I'm supposed to be attending, Reverend Netters, I hope he don't see this. Mount Vernon Westwood.

[38:00]

Yeah, Reverend Netters who is acting Mayor and head of MLGW. He's also a friend of my father's before he died. That's where I had been spending, when I moved back to Memphis-

Interviewer: So they got this idea y'all going to be doing this Lemoyne-Owen thing and so one day there's a rehearsal, the first time. You walk in and how'd that go?

West: Oh well see with the rehearsal it's never a problem because I would be there and then Blackfoot was there. We decided in the offset, the three of us had a meeting at Anita's, and determined we would use the musicians that Blackfoot, the rhythm section that he used when he travelled. So which would make it easier to work with. He said, "Well I got some fantastic, I got a new guitar player and a new keyboard player." I said, "Well, that won't be a problem." He said, "Man, John Sangster, that's the horns, Al Green's horns." That was our last horn section, the two of the guys used to back the Soul Children,

[39:00]

so it wouldn't be a hard thing with the horns, using live horns. So, Anita negotiated the money so it would be enough money to pay these guys. And the first rehearsal some of the tunes, what I did, we had just put together some songs while we were in

our meeting, and I just went and had the tunes made into cds off of the records. We got there, keyboard player knew some of the things, but he wasn't sure of them and the guitar player didn't have a chance 'cause he's working with other groups, they hustling music you know, so he didn't have a chance to rehearse and to learn the things. We learned three or four tunes this day and then the next day, we did the other four, five, three or four, five tunes. Some tunes like "The Sweeter Years," they didn't have to learn them because they know 'em.

[40:00]

You know "The Sweeter Years." "I'll Understand" created some problems for some of them, but it was not a real problem because these are all pro musicians. It wasn't really a real problem. Then, what I would do once we get the music out, then Foot said, "I got to go." But he didn't have to go, he was giving me a chance to work this because I hadn't been singing that hard. The way I get my voice in shape is I sing his notes. Which creates that, it's just like if you're going to run one mile you, need to run ten miles to get in shape for it. So I've got to get hoarse, and then sing my way out of that hoarseness. Then my voice is ready. So, by the third rehearsal, Anita comes into rehearsal and by that time the three of us hit it and wham!

Interviewer: And when did Shelbra come?

West: Shelbra didn't make this one. But I called her

[41:00]

and I told her, "The next time anything happens that has to do with Soul Children, I will call you and we'll see what we can do."

Interviewer: So you walk out on the stage that night and...

West: That was the weird part. When we got there, Blackfoot is always ready. You know he's like the running back on a football team. When Beth Johnson and Mother Woods are getting ready to bring us on, he takes off, and he's already behind stage because we had to come out by the side of the audience. But, I'm standing back there waiting for Anita and when Anita gets to the door, I look, she's emotionless. She had just buried her mother the day before. So she stops, just as they open the door, she stops. I look back and just grab her by the hand, the way I did 30 years before, better than 30 years before. When we got ready to go on stage at the Apollo, I went out and I turned back around,

[42:00]

and just grabbed her by the hand. By the time we got on stage, she's ready. That, now that felt very warm before we got on stage, I'm holding her hand, and that reminded me of the Apollo and it was all an emotional thing with me.

Interviewer: And of course it went well?

West: Aw man, they talk about, with the audience participation the way they did, I was blown away.

Interviewer: I've got to tell you the, 'cause you know Cofunction came on after

West: Right

Interviewer: And that's a whole different

West: And that's a whole different story too.

Interviewer: After the Soul Children, Cofunction was almost like an after thought, it reminds me of in 1975 I guess it was I had gone down to Annapolis to a Naval Academy to do a story on a kid who was graduating. And the seniors put on a show in what they call June week, the week before they graduate. This particular year, they had the Spinners,

[43:00]

They were just getting into [inaudible], and Barry Manilow. O the Spinners open. So, after the Spinners-

West: The show is over.

Interviewer: I'm telling you, after Soul Children-

West: With Felipe [inaudible]?

Interviewer: After Soul Children, honestly nobody cared about Cofunction.

West: Well, that was our backup band, and they got part of their teaching as to the staging when they were working with us. Mike Cuber wasn't singing, he was playing guitar. And Felton wasn't singing, he was playing trombone and guitar.

Interviewer: So, I didn't know they were your backup, so that was like old home week?

West: Yeah, home, and we were like, during the sound check, when they got there, first thin Blackfoot holler, "Hey! Norman, look who's here. And it was Deacon the trumpet player. We call him Deacon, Carl. And then when I saw Felton

[44:00]

and Mike, they came in the dressing room. Aw, man, it was always a real good time when we were around them.

Interviewer: So what happens now to the Soul Children?

West: If I knew, I'd be working on it instead of sitting here, but I'm working on some things now. I'm talking with some people in California, some people in D.C. and anyone else that will listen 'cause I would like to take it from here to the next level. I would like some of the appreciation that we didn't get while we were active as a unit. I would like for the press to get involved in knowing who they missed because we're not dead yet all it would take is opportunities you know, anybody's tour. I dare you to give us a tour. That's how I'm feeling about it because when we're on stage, it's something else.

[45:00]

Something happens, and we don't discuss it, but you can feel something. I know I'm ready and I can see it in that gleam and I look in Blackfoot's eye, and he gets into that meditation thing, and it just gives me what I need. I know he's going to do his and just being there puts me in the glow of what I'm going to do.

Interviewer: Norman I got to tell you, thank you very much. I don't know if you remember me from 30 years ago.

West: Yes, when I saw you, I figured.

Interviewer: I really want to thank you for giving me this time to do this and I will tell you that, I'm a writer, so you want to get some PR and I promise you I'm gonna write some stuff on the Soul Children. You put me in touch with Shelbra, and Anita, and Foot and I'm going to write some stuff and send it off to Ebony and some other people and just say, this is where the Soul Children are now, this is what they're doing. And I promise I will do that for you.

West: I would appreciate that and I'd be indebted to you for the rest of my life.

[46:00]

Interviewer: I'd do that because I love the Soul Children. Thank you man. Thank you for your time.

West: And thank you for your time.

Interviewer: That's great!

[46:29]

[END]