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Eddie Ray, 2006

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Interview of Edward 'Eddie' Ray. Interviewed by Crystal Windless, of The Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mr. Ray was a high level executive in the music industry and a US commissioner for copyright matters in Washington, D.C. In this interview he discusses his childhood, his experiences in the music industry and his work with community organizations.

This interview was conducted in 2006 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

Crystal Windless: First of all, on behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom project here at Rhodes, I really want to thank you for being here with us today and sharing with us your story. Starting off could you give us your name and your occupation?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: My name is Edward 'Eddie' Ray. I'm known as Eddie Ray. And I'm retired. I spent most of my career in the commercial music industry. And I also, at the end of my career I was a US commissioner for copyright matters [Copyright Royalty Tribunal] in Washington, D.C.

Crystal Windless: Okay. Mr. Ray, could you tell us where you were born and raised?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: I was born in a little town up in the smoky mountains of Western North Carolina called Franklin, North Carolina.

Crystal Windless: And who were your parents?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: My parents, my mother had two beautiful names before she married, than added a third beautiful name. Her name is Grace Love Ray.

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And my Dad's name is Andrew Ray.

Crystal Windless: And what were their occupations?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: My mother was a housewife because we had a very large family. So she had children about every two years for a while. And my Dad was a farmer just for us and he had a janitorial service.

Crystal Windless: And what about siblings, did you have any?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Yes I had four brothers, well I had another brother who died in childbirth, but there were five boys and three girls, there were eight of us.

Crystal Windless: Can you tell us a little maybe what they were like?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well, we were one big happy family believe it or not. At least during those days we enjoyed each other a lot because we spent a lot of time together.

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Until each group of the older siblings would leave you know. My oldest sister is **Annie Jean**, she's the one that I really remember the most even though I was with her the least. She's the one that taught me how to read and write before I even started school. And this was very important to me because later she would send me when she was in New York she sent me books and different things and I was able to read and get knowledge of places and things outside of the mountains where I was born.

Crystal Windless: That was a privilege. Tell me about the neighborhood where you grew up?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well during those days it's strange that you should use the word neighborhood. The neighborhood was miles and miles before you saw another house.

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I was brought up in the rural section. We had a nice home, we had my mother loved flowers, so we had a lot of flowerbeds. I loved the flowers, but I didn't like necessarily like the work it took to make them beautiful. We had hedges around our home that would then we had beyond the hedges, we had the barnyard and places like that. We were country folks; we were from the country.

Crystal Windless: And where did you attend school?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well I attended school in Franklin, North Carolina. Until the 10th grade. Because during those days, see I was born in 1926. And it was and I was born in the south---

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where segregation and we didn't have a senior high school for African American kids. Even though they had a brand new high school for white kids. So all of us after the 10th grade, we would have to go miles and miles to other places to attend high school. And we all did that. We would have to leave home either live with relatives or live on campus. So I graduated from high school in Laurinburg, North Carolina. A school called Laurinburg Institute. I graduated in 1944.

Crystal Windless: Was it easy for you to attend Laurinburg Institute?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: No it wasn't because it was, well, it was a well known school and

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years later I saw Ted Koppel, you know the Ted Koppel show, I believe it was on ABC, he was talking about the school that I finished, Laurinburg Institute. It was one of the few black preparatory schools in the country where 98% of the students graduated from high school and 94% graduated from college. A couple of years before I graduated, Dizzy Gillespie had attended there and he graduated a couple years before I did. But I didn't have enough money to go after the 10th grade, so I repeated a grade in Franklin and then the next summer I went to Connecticut and worked. Consolidated Tobacco Company had a program where students could work and earn money to go to school so I used that money for tuition to go to Laurinburg Institute.

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Crystal Windless: Moving towards our target period of the Civil Rights era, the '50's through the '70's, can you give us two or three really meaningful experiences that you had during that period?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well see I left home early, I had to, I left home when I was 16 to go to Connecticut and from there on to my high school and after finishing high school I didn't go back home. I took a special test for the army. I was 17, I wasn't old enough to go into the regular army, I had three brothers who were in the service and I want to tell you about them because they, two of my brothers won a lot of citations the silver star, the bronze star, and other things.

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And the other brother was a chief petty officer in the navy. So I wanted to get into the service, that's why I took that special test from the army. And they sent me to Howard University in Washington, DC. So I went from June to December taking this army specialized reserve program course at Howard. And then I decided to apply for OCS to go to officer candidate school. It was there where they discovered formations of cataract of my eyes and I was unable to continue my career in the military. It was shortly after there I went to California and I didn't go back home.

But I think the thing that I remember most was in 1945 when I went to L.A.

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I became a member of a church called All People's Christian Church and Community Center. It was on the east side of Los Angeles. And at that time I was 18, I believe, or 19 when I joined this church. It was one of few churches in the country, especially in California that was inter racial, there were Asians, Mexicans, African Americans, and we all in this community center, we worked together. In fact, when I became 21, I was the youngest chairman of this community center. When I was 21 years of age we had a childcare center there for kids, for mothers who could hire them to get jobs and work. We took kids to camp.

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So because of the interracial structure of the church and community center, a lot of people thought we were experts in racial relations. So I was invited out to San Bernardino, Riverside, Bakersfield, all over California to talk to churches on how they could integrate their churches. So this was my first experience in the art of integration. Of course we were not experts. We lived it, we then, we never considered it anything special. That 20 years I spent with this church and community center changed my life.

Working with kids of all races, taking them off the streets of LA, taking them for the first time they go into the mountains to see birds and I had seven, eight year-old kids.

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I would take my vacation from work just to go to camp with these kids. I did work in with a lot of church organizations in NAACP. But and we were involved on a couple of occasions in breaking down discrimination at public swimming pools and things in LA. But that was the extent of my operation, my, that was the extent of my work in what you would consider, I guess, racial relations. Except in my occupation, my profession, which I continued the rest of my life.

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Crystal Windless: You mentioned the interracial structure of the church. Do you feel that segregation had an affect on you personally?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: I, of course it did. The mere fact when I was born and where I was born.

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But it didn't, it didn't, I don't believe it had, well it had a negative effect upon what I could do and what I couldn't do of course in many areas of my life. But it didn't prevent me from trying to make the most of my own life and do what I think I should do in my career. For instance, in 1955, I was working for a independent record company and we had a big country star, a country record, a guy named Slim Whitman which you've never heard of, but he had a lot of records.

We also had a young man out of New Orleans who was coming, and I handled all his national promotion named Fats Domino. And I had a young kid, 16-year-old kid from L.A. that he and his Dad and his brother and his mother had a big TV show, named Ricky Nelson.

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So I handled all the national promotion and sales for these artists. But the thing I want to point out to you, in 1955, I would take Slim Whitman, a country artist, I would go into Provo, Utah, Oregon City, Oregon, Rockford, Illinois, promoting a country record star. Here is this black national promotion man promoting this country artist. Now if I had let the earlier discrimination that I experienced in my life, let it become a negative to me, I would have never have done that. The reason I did it is because it was important to me in my work is important. It was important to me to, to promote an artist that I had regardless---

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of what kind of artist he was. And where I had to take him, I took him, so those kinds of things. The segregation, early discrimination did not affect me.

Crystal Windless: Tell us more about your position being a high level executive at times you had to take care of many different groups of artists. And no doubt some of them were different races. What was that like?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: In my entire music career, see first let me tell you where I started from. My first job in the industry was as a stock boy, I don't know whether you know what that is or not, that's the guy, he's the low man on the totem pole in the shipping department. He does whatever no one else wants to do.

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Like pack the box, unpack the boxes and put them on the trucks and things of that nature. I started with this job in 1945 with Decca Record Distributing Company in Milwaukee. And when I went to Los Angeles, I started with a country label, a distributor that promoted country music. And by that time I had worked myself up to assistant shipping clerk. And I left that job after a while and went to an independent record company on Santa Monica Boulevard, the reason I'm mentioning Santa Monica Boulevard is because L.A. City College was two blocks away.

So I decided to go back to school. So I went to L.A. City College at night and I worked as a shipping clerk for Aladdin Records, it had a lot of stars of that era.

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Charles Brown, Amos Milburn, a lot of big R&B stars. And they also distributed a label that had concerts by Billy Holiday, Nat King Cole and other jazz artists. I went to school at night for three and a half years and I got my degree. An A.A. in business administration. And it was shortly after I got that, I really started in the industry with a local distributor in L.A. named Central Record Sales Company. Now Central represented 95% of all the R&B artists and labels of the time. We were the number three distributor in the country.

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And I was responsible for promotion, for sales to jukebox operators, to smaller stores. And we had every star there was. Ruth Brown, B.B. King, everybody on our own independent labels, okay? Elvis Presley was on Sun Records, he just started, I was with that company from '50 until '55 when I went national with Imperial Records where I became national sales and promotion manager. And two-thirds of their artists were white. But I handled all the artists of course.

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Then at Capital and Tower Records, this is where I dealt mostly with English artists; I'm the one who signed up and brought to America, Pink Floyd.

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I don't know if you're familiar with the group, you're familiar with the group Pink Floyd, and I had Tom Jones records ___ for Tom Jones. Freddy and the Dreamers was an English group I had number one record on. That's where I met a guy named Mike Curb. I set a production deal with him. He was a young kid, 17 years old.

Crystal Windless: You definitely had a very high profile career. At any time did you ever feel discouraged at some moments being the only African American exec to...

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: No there were African American executives in the industry. But not for, in the major companies, they were with Atlantic Records which is a very big company. Chess records, all the independent companies. But the major companies, Capital, Columbia at that time,

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the major companies were Capital, Columbia, Decca, RCA and I think those were the big four at the time. It's the type of thing I've been asked many times, "How did you feel being the first executive of a major record company?" It meant nothing to me, I wasn't even aware of it. I was doing what I always did. I felt if I had something, if I had a chore to do, I did it and I did it to the best of my abilities. And I had confidence in myself. I felt no-one knew the business any better than me. But I think, of course this may be rationalization, but

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perhaps if things had been different in society, maybe I should have been President instead of Vice President.

Crystal Windless: Yes. I want to know what was it like you growing up in the South then moving to LA and as part of your business some time having to travel back to the South and things were different. What was that.

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: You know it's interesting you should ask. I think I've sent Dr. Troutt a profile where I pointed out some of these things that had happened to me. When I first went to Imperial Records as national sales manager, sales and promotion manager, and I had independent distributors in all parts of the country, the owner of the company was a guy named Lew Chudd.

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He said, "Eddie, I don't want you to go anyplace unless you can fly first class, stay in first class hotels." This was in 1955. Very few people flying first class and very few African Americans flying first class. But this is the way he wanted it. But I had a chance to meet a lot of my southern distributors at conferences in Chicago and New York, Atlantic City and a lot of times my distributors would come to the West Coast. Now they were selling a hell of a lot of records for me. And so I said, I'm going to visit my southern distributors. So the first two I chose to visit was Miami, I don't know the exact year, but I knew it was Miami and then Atlanta. I went to Miami; I had no difficulty.

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I was there a couple of days; the guy who owned the distributorship had previously been an A&R man at King Records. And he had recorded a song that I had written and it became number one in the country called "Hearts of Stone" by a group named the Charms and the Fontane Sisters and two or three other people. And the country field it became number one. Well he was aware of me and so he, I guess, sort of shielded my visit to where I would have no problems.

I go to Atlanta and when I come out of the airport, the, my distributor had already set up a hotel for me on Atlanta University.

It was called during those days, Atlanta, the University Motel at Atlanta University.

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And I couldn't get a cab. And a skycap, a black African American skycap says, "You have to get a black cab driver and they all gone now, but I'm getting off shortly, where you going?" And I told him, he says, "I'll take you there." And he did. The next morning, my distributor sent her promotion man over to pick me up, took me to the distributorship, we all had breakfast together at the distributorship. Then we, the promotion man for, for the my distributor was a white guy and then we started making the rounds to all the radio stations. I had records by Rick Nelson, by Fats Domino, new releases, Fats Domino, a kid drummer from the West Coast who was very hot named Sandy Nelson

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which I had produced and one other record I think it was a thing called "Mother-in-Law" by Ernie K-Doe I believe it was, Allen Toussiant produced out of New Orleans. What he did when we'd go to stations around noon, lunchtime, we'd go to this station I think it was on the campus of Georgia Tech University, and the DJ there said, "Anybody hungry? Look, why don't we send down to this deli down the street, they have some great, great sandwiches down there. So we can continue our interesting conversation." They did that in order not to embarrass me, that's the way they handled it. A year later I got a call from Gwen, my distributor, Gwen Kessler, and she, "Eddie, when you gonna come visit again?"

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She was at the airport to pick me up, she took me down to the first class hotel in Atlanta, she took me out to a French restaurant to dinner, everything had changed. That's just one example of one thing. They did really try to protect me.

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Crystal Windless: Desegregation evidence ___ things. You mentioned being a member of organizations such as the church and the NAACP. Are there any other organizations that you can tell us about?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well the industry organizations I was a member of practically all of them. Like NARAS, National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. I was, even when I, my five years I spent here in Memphis, I was a national delegate to the, you know NARAS is the one that puts on the Grammy's every year. Jerry Butler, the artist, you've heard of Jerry Butler, right?

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Crystal Windless: No, I'm sorry.

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Have you heard of Jerry Butler? Okay.

Crystal Windless: Tell us about him.

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: I can't believe it. Okay, well I, anyway Jerry Butler and I we were the first national people in the national board, African Americans on the national board at NARAS. And I brought him up because I thought you were familiar with him, he had a lot of hits. Okay.

Crystal Windless: You actually established a political action committee, a accredited political action committee in a predominantly African American neighborhood. During that time of being involved in politics, did you notice other people getting involved in Civil Rights and things like that?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: No, but at this time, when I got involved in this the real march and fight and victory

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in Civil Rights, there had already been won. This was in 1980. This is way after the period and but there's one thing that I believe I have no documentation, Dr. Wigginton probably say this is not worth very much because I can't document it. Because he's a historian. But I believe during the early period of rhythm and blues, this is in the '40's, late '40's and through the '50's. I believe the black artists of that day, the type of things, the music that came out during that time was instrumental in bringing about

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especially in the south between southern white youth and the black experience. Because the kids loved that music. And the only problem with it, their parents didn't love it. And they had difficulty and even in listening to it on the radio because the radio

had another segment for black entertainers as I call them and artists called the black DJ, disc jockey which is very, very important in that period. I think they had the second reach, they had second to the churches, reach in the black community was the black DJs.

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And they were playing music by these black artists. And they also was talking about politics. They was talking about believing in yourself. Talking about self-sufficiency that you didn't, you were no longer on the plantation. And I think between the music and the disc jockeys, it had a tremendous effect. Then eventually the white radio stations started playing this music. And a lot of the big disc jockeys that became big in rhythm and blues became white disc jockeys, like Hunter Hancock in LA. "Hoss" Allen in Tennessee, these guys became bigger and then the white artists started covering the black music.

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Pat Boone covering Fats Domino. Ricky Nelson covering this person, they started covering. But what it had done the genie was out of the bottle. The music brought it out. It brought these young white youth from mid-west, from the south and even from the northern areas into a relationship they'd never had before with black people. So I think it's important for you to look at what R&B music and everything surrounding R&B music, the impact it had upon racial, the movement.

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Crystal Windless: Music certainly did serve as a bridge for those different races. How did it make you feel at the time seeing that and being such a part of it?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well for instance, sometimes I'd have to count to 10.

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And sometimes before I got to 10, I used profanity that I was taught not to use since a kid. For instance, when I was with the local distributor, the local central record sales in Los Angeles where we carried all of this music, white stores out of Long Beach, surrounding areas of Los Angeles were starting to get calls for this music. They'd never heard of it. So they would come to, we were wholesalers, we sold only to retail stores and to jukebox operators.

Jukebox operators would call me from Bakersfield, California, from Riverside, "Have you heard of this by whatever the title is by this artist?" And I'd say, "Yes, we got it."

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But they would come in to our place over the counter and I would be standing there and they would say, shake their heads and say, "So you guys carry this music to steal hubcaps by?" Those kinds of remarks. I heard it so many times. I told them, look, for the five records you're going to buy; we don't need your money. But this was the initial stage. And the end it became the big, big, big buyers, big supporters of it. A jukebox operator would call me from some area where there was no blacks living in California and say I got 80, 90, 700 jukeboxes. Give me 28 records. I would program them myself.

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And naturally they would come from my house, from Central. Most of them would, and maybe "Earth Angel" came from another house. You've heard of "Earth Angel."

Crystal Windless: Yes I heard of it.

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: You have, I'm glad. (*Laughing*) You know Mike Curb speaking of him, we've known each other for years and we've worked together many enterprises. And we were talking one night and he saw where I was graduated from high school in 1944. He said, "Eddy, I was born that year." I said, "Get the hell out." Excuse me. (*Laughing*) So that's where sometimes I forget how old I am.

Crystal Windless: And you remember by music now, you two seem to continue to run into one another in different businesses again and again.

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: We have a lifelong relationship, very good friends.

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Crystal Windless: You seem really passionate about education yourself. And to that of others, can you tell us about ways you try to pass on?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well what happened during my career, wherever I go, young people would ask me, especially young African Americans, or inner city kids, but also young white kids, "How can we get into this business?" And my answer was, "I don't know." Because if

you don't have experience, how can I hire you? We didn't have training programs, see, remember, the music industry was never like a major corporate entities of today; it was always rather small. I didn't have that many people in any one company, even the majors

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were limited to the personnel that they could use. And so this bothered me a lot. So near the end of my career, when I thought I was coming to where I wanted to in my active career, then I really became interested in commercial music education. That's when I came to Memphis. And when I was in Memphis doing many other things here, that I'm very proud that I was involved in, like Hi Records with Al Green and Willie Mitchell and all this. And the Stax music publishing company and all those things which I was involved with. I started a school called the Tennessee College of Recording Arts and Sciences. It was a vocational school.

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And at least the courses under the recording studio here Sounds of Memphis, recording studio, and we taught, in fact I still got the old brochure from the school and the courses we taught were in recording engineering, we taught the legal and business aspects of the business. And we had every course that you would need to get a job in the industry. And then I and the kids at the end would create, would write, produce, record their own creations. And I made we didn't have CD's then. I made an album with the pictures on it; the things that they had written and I sent it out to record companies. They would take when they go for audition for jobs and things.

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We did things of that nature. I would take some of them with me instead of having a summer internship things which they couldn't afford, I would take them occasionally to a trip with me to New York, to L.A., to visit just to see how it was done, to visit the major company, the record pressing plants and things of that nature.

Unfortunately the kids who needed it the most, especially here in Memphis, couldn't afford the fee that I had to charge for it. And so I got in touch with then it was called Memphis State University,

University of Memphis, and we set up an advisory board there to study this. And I worked with the students sending out to the industry,

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to every phase of the industry I put this exactly what would you want in an institution like Memphis State University to do to prepare kids in order to get jobs. It became very successful after I left Memphis I got a call, I've been down several times since, where they invited me, brought me back to the ground breaking exercise where they built the 33 million then, 33 cost you 100 million now, 33 million dollar recording studios and they put my program in the University of Memphis which is there today. That's a degree granting program. And I'm very proud of that. But then I ran into further problems that all the kids who were interested in this, especially from the African American community couldn't qualify, first of all to get into Memphis State, weren't interested in all the other courses they had to take

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or didn't have the money. So there again it's the same thing. I was sitting in a restaurant with Mike Curb in Nashville, years later he said, "Eddie, didn't you start something in Memphis at one time?" I said, "Yes." "Well how come we can't do this in Nashville?" And so we started talking. And I told him whatever we started, whatever kind of program and to this day I believe I talked to several colleges and universities, there must be diversity the student diversity. There must be in order for this thing to and from my point of view to be successful. Now Mike of course went on with Belmont University, fantastic school.

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A lot of students, he and I did a seminar in December over 1,000 students, but still had not been able to get that diversity in Memphis, in Nashville. I don't know what the answer is.

Crystal Windless: That school and those programs were definitely a very exciting opportunity for you and a true service for Memphis. Did you ever consider yourself as an example for your family and for African American youths?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: No, no, never, never. You know I don't know first of all, I don't consider myself as being a great contributor to society period. But

if people choose to credit me with that, the only thing I have to say is

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I was just doing my job. I was trying to do the best I can which I've always done, whatever I do, I try to do the very best that I can. Except an interview. *(Laughing)*

Crystal Windless: And you're doing great. You are. You've mentioned several people while we've been talking. Can you name a few individuals who you feel served as your role models?

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Edward 'Eddie' Ray: That's funny, that's another funny question. I guess the pat answer would be my mother and father. But I always consider them as my mother and father, not my role model. I don't think I ever had a role model. I don't know, maybe I did. Maybe I wasn't aware.

Crystal Windless: Maybe you _____

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: I know situations and experiences and things have really registered me in one of the greatest ones was **All People's [Christian Church and Community Center]**.

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It was that more so than anything I ever accomplished in the music business.

Crystal Windless: In closing, I know there're probably so many answers to this question but do you think things have changed today from how they were during the Civil Rights era?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well I think things have changed in everyday, but I don't. Are you asking me in the commercial music industry?

Crystal Windless: Music industry.

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Well that's what I'm mostly aware of, of course. I see a lot of changes. I saw from the time I became involved in it of course there's very few I know African Americans, except as artists, tremendous artists. And producers.

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Then I saw change to where most of the major companies then developed whole divisions within the company, Warner Brothers, EMI, Columbia, Columbia Records, all the major record companies created whole divisions for urban music. And it was run entirely by blacks, you had a lot of blacks, you had who was it? President of that division, all the sales promotion, I saw that happen. The only thing that my comments regarding that was it did provide a lot of jobs, more jobs for African Americans within the music industry. But what I didn't like about it, is that

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that division only handled African American artists. And when an African American artist like Michael Jackson started getting played on pop stations and started selling millions of records, then the white division took him over. And I couldn't conceive of ever being part of anything where I start, I pick up something from scratch, from the very beginning, help create it, develop it and then have to turn it over to somebody else. I don't understand that. I couldn't do that, but yet it had other advantages by employing more black people. I think if you're a record man or a banker or whatever profession you're in, if you're good at this, then you be good for every in that corporation. Why should you only deal with African American people?

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Why don't you deal with all their clients, all their customers. That's my idea, okay. Now the other thing which happened today of course is all together different. This is a day of independent production companies. The African American guy today owned their own independent production company, they own the music publishing, they own merchandising rights, these are the rappers. And they're making millions of dollars. They're not part of the organizational structure of the major company, they have a contract with them as distributors of their product. I like that.

Crystal Windless: You see that as progress?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Oh yes, definitely.

Crystal Windless: And you---

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: And don't ask me about my opinion of the repertoire.

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Crystal Windless: (Laughing) I won't, we'll stay away.

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: You might surprise you though; my answer may surprise you. For an 80 year old man. Okay, go ahead.

Crystal Windless: Well you undoubtedly helped the fact that more African Americans being in these fields and having higher level positions in these industries, I know there's no way we can cover all the experiences and knowledge that you have to share, but is there anything that you would like to add that we didn't cover today?

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: I'm glad to see Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, really getting involved in this and I'm glad to see the interest in preservation. I have one problem with that though, I won't say that because I'm supposed to be on the panel tomorrow, (Laughing) thank you very much.

Crystal Windless: Well thank you so much for being here and sharing your incredible life story with us.

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Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Thank you, I enjoyed it very much, thank you for inviting me.

Crystal Windless: You're welcome.

Edward 'Eddie' Ray: Okay.

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