

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Grace Jones Part 1 & 2

INTERVIEWEE: Grace Jones

INTERVIEWER: Virginia Irving

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

TRANSCRIBED: December 4, 2007

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:13:35

Jones: Bluff, B-L-U-F-F.

Irving: Bluff, Eleuthera.

J: Uh-huh.

I: Okay. And what I need-- I was trying to ask you about whether you remembered anything about that-- that island, you know?

J: You mean Bluff?

I: Yeah. Do you remember anything about the things people used to do?

J: I wasn't raised there, not all the time. You know, part of my time, I was raised to my mother's place she settled in called Bogue. Because she belonged to Harbour Island where she was born, but she went and settled in this place called Bogue, Eleuthera. You understand? Well, you know--

I: Mm-hmm. Do you remember anything that-- as a child, some of the games you used to play over there?
[audio cuts off]

I: You worked mostly.

J: Yeah, back then we used to make hats. We didn't have time to play when we was children. We started making hats and then we'd-- all we'd get six years old-- we learned how to plait because I like to do work by myself. [inaudible]

I: You would make the hats out of what?

J: Make the hats out of the saw palmetto and the (rim?) silver-top and the (real plait?) straw. I guess you hear about them. The whites used gumbos at Cudjoe one time. Down at Cudjoe here. You're supposed to get them here. And I had one. I sold it the other day. I made- I could make them, you know.

I: Oh.

J: I made a lovely one I sold Saturday. I sold them for \$5 a piece.

I: Hmm.

J: Yeah. Because they're--

I: So that's what you did--

J: All my life.

I: --all your life over there?

J: Made hats, you know baskets.

I: Did you do that when you came to America?

J: Well, I make plenty of them over here, yes. I made-- oh, I make plenty in Key West. Hats (?) used to call (bellamina?). Did you know the (bellamina?) hat?

I: No.

J: No? That make-- I don't have one of them. That was a (bellamina?) I made the other day but I'll show you one came from Nassau. It's old but I'll show you one.

I: Okay.

J: Came from Nassau. My sister sent me-- sent me this. I can make this, too, you know.

I: That's beautiful. By hand?

J: Yeah. I can work that-- That's hand work.

I: Now, what kind of straw is that?

J: This is what you call the real (?). You could get it up to the place they call Cudjoe but since the people bought the place you can't buy it-- get it up there. But you have to send away in the Bahamas to get this, this kind of straw.

I: Oh. And you can make this?

J: Yes. And I can use a coconut straw, too, make the (bellamina?) out of the coconut straw when they get ripe. That's what I make a (bellamina?) out of that.

I: Well, what about purses? Can you make a purse?

J: Well, I never tried to make a purse out of that.

I: Just hats?

J: Yes, just the hats, yes. Well, I like to make ordinary baskets, just plain baskets. I never make no purse, now. Because it's so hard to work without break to make purse, you understand? Unless they have the real top like this that don't break. But see that's a (?) straw (?).

I: Do you think that-- now, the family that you have over there, they still do this? They still make the hats from straw or they do other things?

J: I don't know because I ain't been over there since 1957 since I've been back over there. I ain't been back over there but once since I been (?). That was 1959 when my husband went over there. I ain't been back since but my sister, (and they come over?) every now and then. And you know my niece (Kathleen Petite)? You know-- you remember Bertram Cash? Your mama done know them.

I: I know Cash.

J: Bertram Cash? He there. That's (Kathleen?) daddy. In fact, he was married to my sister, Sabiny, and she is there. (Kathleen?) is my niece, she here now. She born here but she was raised over in the Bahamas.

I: Mm-hmm.

J: Yeah. She could make these hats, too you know.

I: So, you all didn't have much time to play? You had to work and help out with the family?

J: That's right, that's right. Didn't have time to play, no ma'am.

I: Ms. Jones, what about some of the-- do you remember some of the dishes you used to cook and parents used to cook over there?

J: You mean like--

I: Some of the--

J: --peas and rice?

I: -- foods. Yeah.

J: Like peas and rice?

I: What kind of peas?

J: Pigeon peas. You put pigeon peas and rice together (?), yeah. Catch crawfish, conchs, and so on.

I: Do you still cook those dishes today?

J: Well, I don't eat nothing out of the sea now but fish and turtle.

I: Mm-hmm.

J: I (had the salmonella?) with crawfish and shrimps like the (?) and I haven't eaten them. I tried to eat them, I couldn't eat them. I could just smell them and make me sick, I'd throw up.

I: Oh.

J: Ever since then, I don't eat them. Only two things I eat out of the sea fish and turtle. That's all. Raised a lot of chicken over there and hogs and goats and sheep and like that-- raised a lot of them.

I: And you say that when you came here, you-- most of the work you did was taking care of--

J: Babies, yes.

I: -- other people's children. You did that most of the time?

J: Yes. I did that until I got married. It wasn't long until I--

I: Then you took care of your own?

J: Took care of my own, yeah. I married-- I came here in 1919 in November-- about the 14th of November and I got a job in December. Right away, just as I said, in December. And I worked until 1920-- because I married in '20.

I: Was your husband from--?

J: He from over there, too.

I: Oh, he was?

J: But he came here a boy with his uncle. He was a small boy, a minor, and he just go right here. Look at his picture.

I: Oh, I see it. Up there?

J: You see? Yeah. That's his picture. That's his uh-- what you call it? What you call it? Like mine.

I: Yeah, your citizenship picture.

J: Citizen. That's his citizenship.

I: Did you uh--

J: Me and him got ours at the same time. Make ourselves citizens at the same time.

I: Did he ever say anything about things he remembered from the islands? You know--

J: Well, no more he say he used to like to-- they farm a lot over there, you know, and they used to ride horses, coaxing stuff on horseback, you know, from out the farm. (That's all I've seen?), and then stuff that they raised used to put it in barns. You know, storage over there was called a barn over there. Put it in a great big place. You know, go there and reap it and stack it up in there for like these same days now, rainy days, you know, when they needed it then to go in there and get it, see?

I: Do you remember-- we were talking to him, you know Mr. Mounts?

J: Yeah, he up to Marathon now.

I: Well, I saw him this morning.

J: You've been up there?

I: No, he was down to the center, Mr. Mounts?

J: From Marathon? You mean the old man or you mean his son?

I: It must be his son.

J: Luther, eh? Luther Mounts, that's his son.

I: No, no. Not this Mounts, now. It's another--

J: Oh, Sam Mounts boy you talking about. I know.

I: He goes to the center--

J: Goes to the center to eat. I know who you talking about.

I: He was talking about-- oh, I forget. I forgot that quickly what I wanted to say.

J: Yeah, I know who you're talking about, the Sam Mounts son.

I: Mm-hmm.

J: Yeah, but I'll tell you, youngins those days, though. I didn't have time; I'm going to tell you the truth, when I was coming up, because I had to make up for my living, see? Sometimes I'd be half the night just plaiting and sew, getting ready for the market for Friday, see? You start on Monday, you take the plait that you'd start green. You make fire in the oven and put them in the oven and let them (wrinkle?), you know? Kind of dry.

I: Right.

J: And then they get dry, you take them out and leave them out overnight in the dew.

I: These are the--?

J: These are plaits that you bake in the oven now- green. So we could have the plait Monday morning. You do that on a Saturday and we put them out in the dew Saturday night. Sunday night, them stay out there. Monday morning we go get them and strip them. They be white just like you see that top. Whiter than that, up there. And you make them hats just out of plait and from Monday 'til Thursday. You start to (?) those hats on Thursday to go to the markets Friday. You have to try to sell them hats. And you know those days you wouldn't get much for the hat. You know what you used to get a piece sometimes for a hat? Fifty cents would be the most, twenty-five cents all like that. And it was big money.

I: Yeah. Those were the tourists that would come over there and buy?

J: Yes. Well, at the time it was no tourists. We'd make them to the island and take them to the capital.

I: Oh, I see.

J: To Nassau. Nassau- that's the name of the capital- Nassau. We'd take them there to sell them. Or Spanish Wells- another place they call Spanish Wells off Harbour Island. Now Spanish Wells nothing-- no white folks there. And you take them over there.

I: But then, this is what you would do all the time?

J: All the time. Just make those hats and make a few baskets- not no pocketbook, now, baskets.

I: Do you remember any of the, um-- like maybe-- did you have carnivals and, you know, holidays?

J: I know. Nothing like that.

I: Nothing like that?

J: No, no, no. There was none of that.

I: Oh.

J: I didn't know nothing about that 'til I come over here. And you see--

I: But they didn't have any times where the people got together and sing and dance?

J: Well, yes, they used to have dances. But you know, I'll tell you one thing: I know so less about going to dance. And parents, I'll tell you-- my-- them old people in those days, what they used to do. My old grandma, if I was around 'til five, then she got to go. You stayed about a half an hour. "Come on child, let's go." You couldn't enjoy nothing like that.

I: My grandmother was telling me today, she said the children couldn't go out?

J: No.

I: If you went anywhere, you went with your parents?

J: That's right. She told-- she didn't tell you no lies, she tell you the truth. You know, I'll show you what they used to even do with you. After you get grown and you want to take company, as you got a boyfriend, you know what they used to do? You sit here, the boy sit here, the ma on that end, and the daddy here.

I: [chuckles]

J: You hear me? That's the way they did it when I was getting acquainted with my husband. And my brother-in-law picked my husband for me. I didn't pick it for myself, but he picked me a good man. That's right, I give him credit. He was a good man. I stayed with him fifty-one years 'til the day he died. (Make it?) fifty-one years we were married. Now you know people don't know how to stay together that long.

I: No, no.

J: And there's another ten kids (?) him. I've got six of them and four dead. People say, "You stay with one man that long?" You know, I'll tell you this: in those days, women stayed with men for love. But these girls get married to get out their mama's house. They do it to please, you understand? They married for fun and passion and to get out. Choose to get out to find fun with the man. The man doing this and do the other. [laughs] (Since we get out, do it to please?) but we couldn't do that. Sister, did you get a man then. And you know what they used to do? They guarantee that girl to that man. No man know nothing about no woman there, 'til you marry. Then I knew about it when I was twenty. I really like the (?) [laughs] (?) and I was scared to death [laughs] that I was married. And I was scared to death, sister. Me know nothing about no man. But then I was young and coming up and seeing men, my mama used to oh, scare us so bad, especially when you become a young man. If a boy touch you, you get a baby. [laughs]

I: They would frighten you, huh?

J: Scare you to death. And you're so scared when they say that. And then you go have a baby and you ain't married. Nobody look after you. Oh no, nobody (?) like they ain't never seen you before. You go have baby and you haven't been married. They thought that was a disgrace, you go have a baby. But now that you gonna have one, now the boys don't want you. Do you know that? They don't want-- [laughs] I'm telling you, if you gonna have one, now they don't want you. What they say? "I ain't buying the baby no bottle." That's what they tell you. But then (there you better buy one of the bottle they gonna?) get married. That's how you (?) know about a man. Yes ma'am. I know one girl over there had a baby before she got married. Oh, she was the talk of the town. None of the (?)-- not even myself, I didn't even look at her myself, period. She messed up She couldn't even-- she get in streets, everybody (took?)-- turned up from around looking out of the house to look at her. She got a baby. Now, why she gonna get that baby and she ain't married? The boy ain't marring her, you know? And I'd say she's so nasty. That's all they say, "She nasty. She gonna get a baby." Nobody looking at her. (Ma said put her?) out door. Pull her out. Oh, I felt sorry for her, though, because I was a girl myself, you know.

I: My grandmother said that, too, that when the girls got married, that if that was your friend, you couldn't be with her anymore.

J: No, no.

I: The married people had to be with the married people.

J: That's right. She was right. She was right, sister. And she go and get that baby, child, the dogs was better than her. But I still feel sorry for her, you know, because after all--

I: Because she's human.

J: Uh-huh. She was a human. Yeah, you could not get no (girl?) over there, the men don't want you if have a baby before you married. No, he don't want you. But now, if you don't get one, he don't want you. [laughs]

END OF INTERVIEW

Part 2

INTERVIEWEE: Grace Jones

INTERVIEWER: Virginia Irving

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

TRANSCIBED: December 13, 2007

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:07:03

Jones: I could put the names, the age, and grade and where the mother was from and so on. So I asked Mr. (O'Brian?), I say, "Mr. (O'Brian?), will you grant me a school on Marathon?" He say, "Grace, no, I couldn't build you no school" I said, "Mr. (O'Brian?), I didn't ask you to build me one, I asked you to grant me a school." [laughs] And he keep on like he couldn't build none. I didn't ask him to build it; we didn't have enough for him to build no school 'cause I had to have twenty-two children for school but to have-- I mean to build a school. But to have one, we could have had it with ten. Well, fourteen years back before I got that school, we had it an old church, a church which we used to have at that time, had service in there. And the time being, that was well. We could have had school, you know, at that time. You know teachers (?) them days, ain't like now, this is modern times. That was 'ancient', we called that in those days. [laughs] Well, then he had-- he kept putting me off," No Grace. No Grace. No Grace. I couldn't build you a school." I said, "Mr. (O'Brian?)," I said, "those kids running around out of school. If they get into anything," I said, "who would be the cause of it? You, me, or the kids? Which one?" You know, just like that I'm talking to him. [background voice]

J: Uh-huh?! Alright! No, I'm talking to a lady here! No, I've got-- I've got visitors! And so well, anyway, he said, "Grace, no." I said, "Mr. (O'Brian?), how you feel that you was a child? Could have been in school and you're out of school and other children are in school." I said, "How you would feel to know they in school and you out?" I said, "Would you please grant me this school?" "Oh, no Grace, I told you I couldn't build you one." I said, "Okay." I went back to Miami. Mr. (Tanner?) was the news writer. Mr. (Tinagler?) was the president of PTA meetings and I talked with them 'cause all my friends was white folks that I had up there was very nice to me. Mr. (Tanner?) said to me, he say, "Grace, I'll tell you what to do." Say, "We will back it. Go back to him again and ask him will he grant you the school." I went back the next day. He saw me coming. I didn't care what he said. I said, "Mr. (O'Brian?), I'm here on the subject that I was here before: school. Would you please grant me a school? Just not for my young ones 'cause my ones couldn't get a school." I said, "but so many people got their kid's up there running around out in the streets." He say, "What I told you when you was here before?" Just like I talk to you, he say, "I can't build one." I said alright again, that's the second time, now. So I'm going back the third time, now here. Thought of me write Tallahassee, huh? Oh yeah. I mean, go clean to Tallahassee from here. I got a letter wrote. I send it to him. Mr. Williams, that's his name in Tallahassee, the headquarters. Mr. (Tanner?) sends one. I mail out one and he sends one. In two weeks, he answered me. He say, "See your superintendent the county which you live at." I said, "Ah-ha." That's when I get the (?) in the mail. This the third time I'm going to him, now, he going to give me the school 'cause he see that I've done gone to him so he got to give me the school to get (scared?). Come back down here. Brought the letter. He said, "You back here again?" I said, "Yes, sir. Same subject, this school. We'll triumph through by perseverance. I believe that going to you directly." So he says, "Yeah, I haven't picked up a letter yet" I say, "You like to read, sir?" He said, "I wouldn't mind." I take my letter out the pocketbook and put it on the desk. He read that Mr. (Tanner?) gave me different, too, you know. He set Mr. (Tanner's?) down. He didn't have time to read Mr. (Tanner's?) one, he reading the one I have and that got his vote. He didn't read Mr. (Tanner's?) at all. He say, "Do you have a teacher?" I said, "Yes." I said, "(Geraldeen Maynor?) or (Lorraine Redding?) either one of them." He said, "Well, tell (Geraldeen Maynor?) I say (?)." I said, "Thank you." Just like that. Well, now ain't he could have given it to me before when I had fight him that much for it to go all the way to Tallahassee. He was just scared. I had one more place to go: Washington. He was a white man (but I'll stay and break him?). He would have never been one of them school superintendents no more if I had to wrote Washington, you understand? I guess he said "That little black woman, I'd better give her the school before she goes to Washington." [laughs]
[audio cuts off]

J: Oh, you recording?

Irving: Yeah, that was-- yeah, I just recorded what Mrs. Jones said about the work she had to do to get the school in Marathon and the school that eventually came to be named 'Grace Jones School'. Is that school still--?

J: Yes, it's still there.

I: It's still there?

J: They got daycare.

I: Oh, I see. It's a daycare center.

J: It's a daycare center.

I: Okay.

[audio cuts off]

I: Okay. You were born there and your parents were born there?

J: They were born over there.

I: And they brought you here?

J: Well, I came here with my cousin-- a cousin of mine who was coming here. My sister was here and she sent for me over here and he was coming at the time so I came along with him.

I: So you were nineteen years old when you--?

J: I was nineteen years old when I came here 'cause I married when I was in my twenties when I got married, yes.

I: Do you remember your parents talking about how they came to live-- where did they come from-- did they-- did they say anything about where their parents may have come from to Nassau or anything like that or they were just there all the time?

J: Well, (that I find?) myself, I was born to a place called Bluff, Eleuthera. That's where I was born. My mother was born to a place they called Harbour Island as know it-- know about. She but now, where her mother was born, which I don't really know, unless it's a place we call eastern Bouge 'cause that's where she say her home was. So she must be have to born there, you understand? That's my grandmother 'cause she raised me. Yeah, but my mother was born to a place they called Harbour Island, that's where she was born.

I: And your father?

J: My father was from Bluff, Eleuthera. That's where I was born, it's called Bluff, Eleuthera 'cause my daddy is dead, my mother is dead, my grandmother-- all of my grandparents, mothers all is dead.

I: Okay, so they did never come over to Key West?

J: My daddy used to be here.

I: Uh-huh.

J: Yeah, my daddy used to be in Key West. He just left from down here, lived before I came here. He been here most of all his life. Yeah, worked here all about, you know, in Key West and you have a brother called (?) 'cause--
[audio cuts off]

END OF INTERVIEW