

Interviewee- Tracy Jones

Interviewer- Lynita Hamilton

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Victory Baptist Church, Valdosta GA

**Lynita Hamilton:** Tracy do you give your permission to record this interview for the South Georgia Folklife Project?

**Tracy Jones:** Yes

LH: Where were you born Tracy?

TJ: I was born here in Valdosta, Georgia

LH: And if you don't mind my asking when is your birthday?

TJ: December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1970.

LH: What size family do you have?

TJ: It's my mom and dad and me and my sisters "unintelligible" My dad's name was Steve Ward my mother's name was Deborah Ward. My sister's name is Marie Dix.

LH: Do you know the ethnic heritage of your family?

TJ: Yes, my mother's side comes from Germany and France and my mother had ancestors that actually cam over on the Mayflower. Then, my father's side of the family were Cherokee Indians.

LH: Do you have any idea what generation you are?

TJ: I do not know that on my father's side it was his great grandmother that was full-blooded Cherokee.

LH: Do you know of any of the circumstances of why your family immigrated to America?

TJ: No, I'm not sure about that.

LH: What instrument do you play?

TJ: I play piano.

LH: And you sing as well?

TJ: Yes.

LH: How did you come about playing the piano?

TJ: My dad is the pastor in a Baptist church, so I naturally had an interest in the music that we played and sang there at the church. And so, when I was about two years old my dad would play the guitar and he taught me and my sister to sing. So, I guess at the age of probably two is when I started having interest in music, and at the age of five is when I started wanting to learn to play piano.

LH: Do you have any formal training or education in music theory?

TJ: Not other than just a few piano lessons.

LH: Well, how did you know how to play the piano so well?

TJ: My mother was taking piano lessons and she showed me a few chords that she knew. And so from there I would take the chords and I would hear the melody of the song and then I would try to pick it out by hand myself without using the music. (Unintelligible)

LH: What church are you affiliated with at this time?

TJ: Victory Baptist Church in “unintelligible”

LH: Do you have any special interests or skills?

TJ: Mostly music is what I love. I like to write poetry, and I do write songs. And that’s mostly what I love is music.

LH: How did you learn to write songs?

TJ: When I was in high school, I was made to write a song for a project. It was for a competition that our school was going to and I did not want to do it but I was made to. It ended up being a good learning experience for me because I learned that I could do that, and I actually learned to score the music myself. I had to write the words and the music to the song and put it to the sheet music. “Unintelligible”

LH: That sounds kind of complicated.

TJ: Yeah: I had to take a songbook and actually figure—I knew from taking piano lessons that I knew the notes on the scale, and I knew about timing and things like that. And I knew that I had to take a songbook and actually look at it while I made my music, so that I could make sure I was doing everything right. “Unintelligible”

LH: How old were you?

TJ: I believe I was fourteen or fifteen.

LH: Have you had other important events in your life, or anything that stands out as being important?

TJ: Well, I love to do any kind of—like that competition that I did. I’ve done some piano competitions and I’ve done a bunch of singing competitions and I enjoy it. And then we’ve made

two recordings me and my sister and my husband and I really enjoyed it. That was big goal in my life, was to make a recording.

LH: And how did you feel about the music that you put on it?

TJ: Some of it was songs that I wrote and some were songs that we had heard from other groups.

LH: How do you know it's the right songs? Do you just have a feeling for them or when you listen to it is there something you all agree on?

TJ: When we hear a song we know if its one that we can sing and you know when you hear one its going to be a good song. And then we go by people's response and asking to sing those particular songs over and over.

LH: Where else have you performed other than at this church?

TJ: Well, I was a pianist at another church when I was younger "unintelligible" I've done numerous weddings, funerals, a lot of dramatic plays and things that like that. We take all the music with us and put all the music together. Funerals, that's not my favorite thing to do but just basically anything that we've been asked to do.

LH: Have you tried playing at any places other than this local region?

TJ: Yes we've been asked to sing in Florida. We've been to Tennessee. We've been to South Carolina. Lots of the neighboring states we've been asked to come and sing.

LH: Have you ever been exposed to different kinds of music other than the kind that you perform?

TJ: Of course, you hear all kinds of music, but I do love classical music and I've been to a classical music concert, and I enjoyed that. I love classical and opera.

LH: How do you feel up there performing? Are you comfortable? Are you nervous or excited? Do you heart beat really fast or is it just kind of natural?

TJ: It depends on what I'm doing. If it's a normal church service I'm not nervous at all. I don't even think about it. I usually get nervous for a wedding. And when we do like I said for our plays and things that like that sometimes I get nervous. It just depends on how involved the thing is.

LH: Do you prefer singing over playing or playing over singing or is it just a kind of combination where you just love it?

TJ: I love both. I like to play and sing. I prefer it when I sing for somebody else to play.

LH: Oh really?

TJ: I don't mind playing for myself most of the time but it's easier to concentrate on one or the other.

LH: When you play and you sing like you do in church do you have to consciously think or actually read the music as you go? I mean is that- That would be a comprehension problem for me reading the words and the music. Is that a problem?

TJ: No I usually- The songs that we sing in church I've known for so long that I don't even have to think. I know the key that they're written in. Most of the time I don't even have to use the songbook. When he calls out the number, I know which song it is. But if I'm playing for somebody else to sing and its something that I haven't practiced a bunch of times I do try to concentrate more and it does take more effort to do that.

LH: I've noticed recently you've done singing and playing for different singers in the church. Did that take some getting used to? I know you and "unintelligible" Stevenson are used to each other's vocal styles. But when you sing with somebody else does that take some work? I mean do you have to-

TJ: It takes a lot of practice. The last song that we learned, me and my sister and another girl. we practiced for hours. And usually, if I sing with Steven and Lauren, we can go through something one time and sing it. So, it does take more of an effort

LH: Do you have to consciously think about how you're going to sing it when you sing it with somebody other than Steven and Lauren or do you ever have to alter your singing style to adapt to theirs?

TJ: Yeah, I do. When I sing with Steven and Marie, I know exactly what range we sing in and we normally sing the same parts all the time. But then when you sing with different people who have different vocal ranges a lot of times you have to adjust, and a lot of times we'll try with one singing one part and the other two singing a different part. And then we'll have to switch those parts around until we get the sound right.

LH: Do you have other instruments that you're interested in besides the piano?

TJ: I can play the guitar a little bit. I can play the accordion. I'm interested in the banjo but I haven't had the time to spend.

LH: Where did you learn to play the guitar and accordion? The accordion is kind of an unusual instrument. Is it really complicated? No, it's not a whole lot different from the piano. They're the same scale. We had a missionary friend that came through to the church and he had an accordion. So, I played on it for a couple of days while he was here and I learned it. And the guitar, my dad "unintelligible."

LH: Well, I know Steve can play the guitar. Have you ever played with him?

TJ: Yeah, I can play his bass guitar too sometimes, but he usually prefers to play if he's anywhere around.

LH: I know you have two children. Have either of them ever expressed an interest in music?

TJ: They can both sing really well. Spencer has learned to sing harmony. He can sing parts I read. He can sit down at the piano and pick out a song if he can sit there long enough to do it. And Lauren can too. I believe they're both good at music.

LH: And how old are they?

TJ: Spencer is ten and Lauren is six.

LH: Do you consider your music to be a job or a hobby?

TJ: I consider the ability to play music a blessing. I feel like what I have come from the lord. Sometimes it's a hobby. Like if I'm at home playing or doing it just for fun it's a hobby. As far as being interested in other types of music I consider that a hobby too. But as far as the gospel music aspect of me being the pianist at the church I consider it something I was called to do.

LH: Have you ever had any particular moment in your musical career that stands out as being a best or worst?

TJ: Well, the worst moment was when I messed up somebodys wedding and I started playing the song at the wrong time but we were able to cover it up. It was in the middle of their vows, and I just kept playing the song until they finished and it got to the part where I was supposed to sing. That would definitely stand out as the worst. That's the only wedding I've ever messed up and it made me sick "unintelligible" It didn't bother them.

LH: Well, that's good. How about your best? Any particular performance or thing?

TJ: I don't know I haven't really had very many as far as actual performances. I guess when I do things here at the church that involve genre and all those kinds of things. That to me is an accomplishment. To be able to take all that and put it together and have it go off smoothly.

LH: When you're planning to sing say at some other church or a camp how much practice do you do?

TJ: It depends on whether I have to sing one song or two. We know most of our songs so well that we don't have to practice. There have been several times when we've been asked to sing eight or nine songs in a row. Then we'll usually sit down and decide what we're going to sing and we'll practice "unintelligible"

LH: What type of audience do y'all play for? Is it a diversified audience? Do you know anything about the makeup of the people at the church?

TJ: Most of the people at the church I would think have their interest mostly in southern gospel music because that's the style we sing here at the church. I imagine that a lot of them have interests in other types of music too as well away from the church. But even within the church, there are those who prefer softer more sacred music and then there are those that enjoy the more upbeat types of hymns. And we have some of both at the church.

LH: Is there a particular era of music that you can relate to? In my research I had to do like Moody Saint Pierre and that kind of thing. Is there one particular style that you're more known to?

TJ: Most of those old hymns that were written back in that time still carry over. There are a lot of those songs that are in the books that we use now. I enjoy all types of gospel music I enjoy the old hymns that were written back in that time and I enjoy the new music that comes out. We use some of both.

LH: When you hear a song, lets say one of the older songs that you play, do you change it sometimes, add your own style to it? Or is it customary to just do it just like you've always heard it or "unintelligible"

TJ: It depends on if it's for a normal church service if the people are going to be singing while I play. I usually play it the way that everybody has always heard it, the standard way. But sometimes things for the offering or before or after church I'll use my own style, maybe change the rhythm.

LH: Earlier you stated that you learned to play by ear. Do you still play some music by ear or now that you know how to read and write music do you prefer to do it with the music?

TJ: I prefer not to use it. But there are times when somebody brings me a song I've never heard and I do have to use the music to pick the melody of the song out.

LH: Is it easier to play by ear?

TJ: It is because you're not focused. You're not watching the notes, and you have more versatility.

LH: When you play do you have to consciously think of where you're putting your fingers and that kind of thing?

TJ: It's just like typing. You know where your fingers are so you don't have to look.

LH: Have you ever considered singing at church with Steven and Lauren and Spencer?

TJ: We have sung a couple of times at church. The kids love to sing but mostly we don't have time to practice "unintelligible"

TJ: Have you ever been asked to write special music for something?

LH: Yes, as a matter of fact, I have. My sister-in-law got married back in December and I wrote a song for them. For their wedding and it was a surprise. They knew about it but it was a surprise to everybody else.

LH: Did you perform the song at the wedding?

TJ: Yes. I have been asked to write. I wrote a song. I've written songs about things that have happened in my life and in other people's lives. Most of what I write does come from a personal experience "unintelligible" and I have written songs for Christmas time

LH: Have you ever gone about having things copyrighted or you know?

TJ: Most of my songs are copyrighted I have a couple that I've written recently that haven't.

LH: And by being copyrighted what does that specifically mean?

TJ: That means that the song was claimed by me. They can't legally- You could never I guess prove that a song belongs to you, but you can claim it as yours. And then if anything ever comes up later the copyright will be proof of that. And they do specify when you have your recent copyright that it's not a legal—It's not a sure thing you know that that song belongs to you because you can't really prove that.

LH: Tracy, I know for a fact that you have taught piano because you taught my daughter, and she really loved it. Do you enjoy teaching piano or do you feel pressure when you do that? What sense of accomplishment do you get?

TJ: I enjoy it. It is very time-consuming, and I do enjoy doing it. I enjoy taking a child that doesn't know anything about music and starting at the very beginning, and then I enjoy the part where they get to where they can read some music on their own and start to feel a little bit of their imagination with it. But I feel a lot of pressure when they get up in the more complicated music because I'm not as well versed in that. It is something that I enjoy but it's like I said it's very time consuming it takes a lot of time and you have to be constantly like a school teacher I guess. You have to be constantly thinking about what you want to teach them next and be prepared for their next lesson. But that is very fulfilling.

LH: Have you ever found music that you saw and thought "oh this will be wonderful" and you sat down and just felt overwhelmed? Oh, I can't play this. Does that make you feel a more intense desire to learn to play?

TJ: Usually if it's something that I want to know how to play then if it seems complicated, I'll usually sit there and take it piece by piece until I do figure it out.

LH: "Unintelligible"

TJ: "Unintelligible"

LH: Tracy, what's the biggest size crowd you've ever performed?

TJ: I have played for over two thousand at a "unintelligible" that we went to and we had to sing. And also the pianist, the regular pianist, wasn't in service at that particular time, and they needed somebody to play so I had to go up there and play. The whole crowd sang too, and I know there were at least two thousand.

LH: Did you get a little intimidated?

TJ: I did by that because I wasn't at my own church at my own piano. Yeah, it was a little intimidating.

LH: Do you feel that your music has brought your family closer together?

TJ: I know that as a child growing up our family would sing together, and I would play. And I know that that was some of my best memories was being at home standing around the piano learning to sing. I know it did as a child growing up. As far as my family now, we don't have the time you know that we need to do that. So it's not as big of a part of their lives as it is mine.

LH: Do things ever just come to you like do you ride around in the car or you're going to sleep at night or taking a shower or whatever and you just get an idea for a song or think about how a certain piece of music would sound?

TJ: That's how most the songs that I've written that's how they started. Just get a thought running in your mind and then you just kind of go from there. A lot of my songs come from a message that I heard or maybe thought in my bible. One of the songs that our choir sings, one of the most popular songs that they do, I wrote it because of a thought that was expressed in a sermon that I heard. And then sometimes it will just be a thought that will run through your mind. Usually those I have to sit down and write it down or I'll forget. I probably have hundreds of thoughts that have flown through my mind but at the time I couldn't stop and think about it and write it down

LH: Have you ever thought of doing any kind of music other than gospel music?

TJ: No mostly my life has revolved around gospel music, and like I said I've written a few songs that are not gospel. They're "unintelligible" songs and love songs, and I don't know. It may be that one of those songs could be used at a different time "unintelligible" But as far as pursuing anything in that area I never really thought about it. I do pursue my gospel songs that I've written. I had several groups listen to my songs and there's a possibility right now of one of the big gospel music groups recording one of my songs. I still have to hear from them. I could sign a contract in a few weeks on that song but it's not a for sure thing yet. But that would be one of my big dreams.

LH: Now what do you do? Do you like give out demos of the song or-

TJ: I take all of my songs and put them on a tape, and I sent them to one group. I never heard back from them. This other group is listening to one of my other songs. It was through a friend of my husbands who sings for this group. I gave him a tape of my songs and he was really interested. He called back, and if that happens it will be recorded by probably one of the most well-known groups in southern gospel. It's "The Inspirations."

LH: Oh, wow!

TJ: I'm excited about that. That's always been one of my dreams too. If that happens, I'll "unintelligible"

LH: Would you be more encouraged to keep writing for other groups or-

TJ: It could be a lot of times that's how groups get their songwriters. They'll pick up on one song that they like that that person has written. And then a lot of times they'll contact you and ask you to write more songs on a particular subject or whatever. That might be something that might "unintelligible" So I'm looking forward to that.



LH: All right. Have you ever considered any other career other than in music?

TJ: I don't know. When I was just out of high school, I considered for a time I put in my application and was accepted at a particular college. They had an ensemble that traveled and sang, and at that point, I changed my mind about where I wanted to go to school. If I had pursued that and been part of that group, it may have been that I would have been offered a career in some type of singing. I ended up not going to that particular college. My life ended up going in a different direction so who knows? At some point, you don't ever know what the future holds. We considered traveling and singing some. I don't know that we ever will. It would have to be something on the side. That may be something in the future.

LH: Do you have any particular aspirations "unintelligible" future "unintelligible"

TJ: I don't know it's pretty satisfying to do what I'm doing now, to be the pianist for our church. I enjoy doing it. Like I said I feel like it's my calling so if I'm the one doing that, I'm happy with that.

LH: Well, I know that our church has been blessed with a lot of pianists. Do they ever come to you to ask you about something they may be going to play or something they want to try to learn or anything like that? Has that ever happened?

TJ: Sometimes they do especially the ones that are younger than myself, and there have been times that I've sat down with them and shown them. "Unintelligible" But for the most part they leave it all to me, and I have a hard time as a matter of fact when I'm not there getting somebody else to play. None of them like to do it like I do. I guess it's just my natural thing to do, but I do help them sometimes.

LH: Have you ever written a particular song with a particular person in mind with them singing that song?

TJ: Yes, several. Probably at least five or six good songs I've written I wrote with the church choir in mind. They do some of those songs. Most of the other songs I've written I write for our trio to sing, and I have written a song for my sister to sing because of something that she went through in her life. It inspired me to write the song for her. That song meant quite a bit and usually like I said most of my songs do come from experiences of mine "unintelligible"

LH: Well, is it easier for you to write a song for the choir or an individual?

TJ: I would say, individual because when you write with the choir you have to think of all the different parts and of all the different harmonies that will be going on at one time. You have to keep it a little more simple when there are forty or fifty people that are going to be singing as opposed to one or two or three. You can usually make a song a little more interesting.

LH: What is your favorite song that you've ever written?

TJ: I guess my favorite song would be the one that The Inspirations are thinking about recording. It's called "I am," and it talks about how the lord can do anything whether big or small. And that came as an inspiration from a story in the bible. The children of Israel "unintelligible" mostly

what that song talks about. And then throw some things that I went through in my life and some things that my family has been through also inspired parts of the song too, but a lot of that particular song comes from “unintelligible”

LH: Now what’s your favorite song to sing?

TJ: I don’t know we have so many. At least a hundred songs and with all the groups in church I don’t know. I don’t think I could pick just one particular song. I love all of them.

LH: Have you got one particular song that the trio sings that you “unintelligible” or you think y’all were better?

TJ: Yes, and it’s not a song that I wrote, but one of the most recent songs we’ve done is more of a dramatic slower song. And I guess it would have to be my favorite. It’s called “When He Spoke,” and it talks about when Jesus rose from the dead and Mary had come to find him in the garden. When Jesus spoke to her, she knew it was him. That’s probably my favorite song right now.

LH: Has there ever been any particular writing influence on the way that you write songs? Has another writer’s music influenced “unintelligible”

TJ: I guess most of my songs are southern gospel style of music and a lot of influence too probably comes from the camping style of music that we use a lot during the church, and from different events that we’ve attended, different camp meetings. There is a certain sound to that type of music. I think most of my songs have to do with that category of music.

LH: Now what is a camping style of music “unintelligible”

TJ: It’s more of an upbeat style. I guess you call it a soul-stirring type of music as opposed to a more sacred sound that’s softer, more majestic. I guess you could probably compare it most to country gospel instead of that sacred sound of gospel.

LH: If there is anything that you could change is there anything that you would want to change about your ability or your style of music?

TJ: Maybe that I could be a little more versatile, and maybe that I could read more music than I do. If I took the time to pursue that I’m sure that that would help me as far as my abilities. I do like classical music, and I would love to do more of it. But as far as changing the style of music that I am doing I don’t think I’m going to change that. It just depends if you’re at church you play one type of music. If you’re at home, you may play a different type, and I do enjoy classical a lot. I would probably add more classical music to my abilities.

LH: Well, thank you so much, Tracy, for your interview. I appreciate it.

TJ: You’re welcome.

