

Detroit Music Oral History Project  
Detroit, MI

## **Gayelynn McKinney**

Interviewed by  
Rochelle E. Danquah, WSU Graduate Student  
December 6, 2017  
Farmington Hills, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science  
Kim Schroeder, Instructor  
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### Brief Biography

This collection focuses on an interview with Detroit Jazz Drummer, Gayelynn McKinney. Interview includes personal biography, educational training, gender/sexism discrimination of females playing non-traditional musical instruments in the jazz idiom, artists McKinney has played with, world travels and the Detroit jazz music scene.

### Interviewer

Rochelle E. Danquah is a Ph.D. student in the History Department at Wayne State University.

### Abstract

### Restrictions

### Original Format

### Transcription Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

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Transcript of interview conducted: December 6, 2017  
Gayelynn McKinney, Farmington Hills, MI  
By: Rochelle E. Danquah

(Interviewer Last Name): Danquah

(Narrator Last Name): McKinney

(Format Note: Include a time code in here randomly when there is a natural break in conversation. It should be in 10 point font and located in the far left margin).

### UP002660\_McKinney

RD: Testing 1-2-3, Today is Wednesday, December 16, 2017. (laughing)

**McKinney: (inaudible) GM corrects RD (laughing)**

RD: Today is Wednesday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017. My name is Rochelle Danquah, the interviewer and I will be interviewing Detroit's very own, and these are my own words, most famous percussionist, Gayle McKinney, and she is the interviewee. This is part of Wayne State University's Detroit Music Collection, and we're going to go ahead and get started and just have a good old causal conversation. Hey, Gaylynn, how are you?

**McKinney: I'm good (with a lot of excitement in her voice) and, how are you?**

RD: Girl, I would be fine if I can get this technology together

**McKinney: Girl, I don't know, you might want to lay it down. (referring to the recorder, because it would not stand up) (laughing)**

RD: If I get this technology together...that one doesn't want to stand and I'm not going to force it. I'm going to let it lay, just like it wants to. Well, first before we get started, I just really want to personally say thank you for being my interviewee for this collection.

**McKinney: It is my pleasure, and thank you for asking me.**

RD: We're going to go ahead and get started, and this is going to be a fun interview, and there may be some questions that will come from this and some other topics that may shot off from this. Let's enjoy the experience. I'm going to start by asking you, what is your full name?

**McKinney: My full name is Gaylynn McKinney.**

RD: No middle name?

**McKinney: Well, yes (laughing). There is a middle name. The people who are my high school friends know me a Gaye McKinney. But when a got to college, I decided I wanted to push my middle name and first name together. So, all of my college buddies know me as Gaylynn McKinney, because I just like the way that it sounded.**

RD: Oh wow! Now that's something I didn't even know. That is so cool. Where were you born?

**McKinney: I was born in Detroit, Michigan at Herman Keifer Hospital.**

RD: So, you are a Detroit Motor City gal?

**McKinney: Yes, born and bred. (Laughing)**

RD: Alright, so I am quite sure you have seen Detroit go through a lot of different changes on the music scene.

**McKinney: Well yah, and even before I hit the music scene as an adult the scene was different. My father's scene than my scene. And actually, I grew up in Highland Park. We move there when I was five. It was a wonderful little city; a little city all of its own right inside of Detroit. It was beautiful, and I met a lot of musician friends there. My cousins lived in Highland Park, and I lived in Highland Park. And my cousin had a band called Everyone is Everything...EIE for shout. So he was one of those person who started acronyms (laughing). He was doing that a long time ago. We had a little band we formed in Highland Park and we use to play at the McGregor Library. They had a little music festival, and we played there. I have always had music in my life, even before I was born.**

Interviewer: Out the womb?

**McKinney: Yah.**

Interviewer: Oh, wow! Did you attend high school in Highland Park?

**McKinney: Yah. By they tore my high school down. . . a brand new high school when I went there. I spent my freshman year at the old high school on Gerald Street. Then my sophomore year I went to the new school. It was brand new. There was really nothing wrong with the old building . . . it just, I think it had some building problems, the gym floor was warping, and it had a beautiful Olympic size pool. Something wasn't built right in**

the old school. Then you had people moving out of Highland Park, and the City Hall disappeared, and a lot of municipal things. Then the city just seemed to disappear, especially when Chrysler left, because that was the tax base. So when they left, the city just went downhill from there.

Interviewer: So, that just devastated the city?

**McKinney: Yah.**

Interviewer: When you were in high school do you play in any . . . I know you mentioned you played with family members around Highland Park and the Greater Detroit area . . . but were you involved in any ensembles while you were in high school? And if so, what did you play?

**McKinney: Actually, my involvement with school bands started in elementary school. I was one of those kids that started out with the recorder first, (laughing) and I got bored with that real fast. It was fun, but I said ok what's next. So by the time I got to fourth grade, they put me on the clarinet.**

(05.40) Interruption (telephone rings)

**McKinney: I think they did that to all of the kids. . . . when you get to fourth grade you have to start with the clarinet. That straight black stupid little thing with the open holes, that was okay and I was cool with that, until I came across a music folder. And on the cover of that music folder was this beautiful gold shiny instrument. And I was like . . . woo, what is that? (laughing) And, then I found out that was a saxophone. And then I knew it was still a reed instrument, and I still could play it the same way like a clarinet . . . except the holes close and its gold and shiny (laughing). . . . so I switched over to the saxophone and I was playing the drum at home.**

Interviewer: So, you actually started out as a saxophonist?

**McKinney: Yes, in an ensemble band. So, I played the saxophone from fourth grade to through high school. I was in the marching band. And when I got to high school, there was a jazz band. Let me go back for a minute. While I was in elementary school, grades 4 – 6 was the recorder age, and the when I got to middle school I switched to saxophone. There were some drums around in middle school, and then I got on them and started play and got some attention. People were like saying "this girl is playing the drums, and playing them well I might add and she actually knows what she is doing." Playing drums drew a lot of attention, but it wasn't necessary good attention. Because back then, it was very rare to see a girl play drums. Probably I was the only girl that I knew of at that time who was playing drums. If there was another girl, I never met her.**

Interviewer: And, this was while you were high school?

**McKinney: No, this is while I was middle school. That was just me getting on them because I saw them, and I started playing a little bit. And I remember standing at the bus stop one day, this little girl was standing there and she said, "Don't you play the drums?" And I said yah, and her face was all crinkled up. Then she said, "girls are not supposed to play drums, drums are for boys." Then I said "No they are not, because I play drums." Then she said, "You should not be playing them, because drums are for boys." I felt really, really bad, and at that moment I felt very discouraged to continue playing the drums.**

Interviewer: And this was while you were in middle school?

**McKinney: Yah, so right about the same time, I said to my, since I was getting so much flack about the drums, maybe I should just stick with the saxophone. So I continued to play the saxophone in middle school, but I just could not quite playing the drums at home, because I loved them so much. I would practice daily, every day for hours. (laughing)**

Interviewer: How did you get access to a set of drums at home?

**McKinney: My parents bought me a kit when I was two years old. And then they bought me another kit when I was I was nine. That's when my love for the drums started. So at home when I was two years old I started beating stuff (beating a rhythm on the table).**

Interviewer: So, you were beating in your mother's belly?

**McKinney: (laughing) Now, there is a funny story. My mom said, "Lord just help me." Then she said one days she was sleeping and her and you know how couples spoon. . . . so she was sleeping up against my father's back, and dad verified her story, he woke up because he felt some tapping in his back and said, "Gwen, what do you want?" And she didn't say a word, and then he went back to sleep. Then it happened again. "Gwen, Gwen, what do you want?" Then my mom woke up and dad said, "Why are you tapping me?" She**

said, "That not me it's the baby!" (laughing)

Interviewer: So, you were putting them on notice?

McKinney: Yes, I'm here, and I'm busy! So you all are going to have to do something with these arms and legs. So when I was old enough to start tapping, it didn't changed. Then somebody gave me some bongos I was playing on, and then at two my parents bought me a tiny set. I remember, it was an orange sparkle kit with little trash can cymbals it what I called them. They were all thin, and I tore the cymbals up and crack them too. Two week later the heads were torn up too. (laughing) I don't know where my dad found those little heads, but he found some drum heads that fit my drums. And I play on them until I was about nine, because I got too big for them. Then the next think I knew, I had a brand new kit. Now that is what was going on at home.

Interviewer: Wow, that's so cool.

McKinney: But at school I continued to play the saxophone.

Interviewer: So you mastered two instruments at the same time?

McKinney: Yah, I guess you could say that. I was definitely doing both. Now back to the story when I was ten, and when I was getting flack about being a female drummer . . . my father had gone to New York to do some music stuff, when he came back and said, "Gaye, I got to tell you something." Now he didn't know that I was think about not playing the drums any more. He didn't know that, because I didn't tell him I was thinking about putting the drums down, and just hang out with the sax.

Interviewer: Was that because of the peer pressure? Because kids were saying, this is something girls don't do?

McKinney: Yah, and I didn't like what people were saying. I didn't like it, getting all of this negative attention. I'm not going to do it. Plus I felt very alone, because as far as I knew, there were no other girls doing this but me, that I could see. So he came home from New York one day, and he was excited and said, "Man, guess what, guess what . . . up you will never believe this, I saw another little playing the drums." I said, "Really." (with excitement) Then ask him what her name was? And he said, "Her name is Teri Lyne Carrington." And she was about eight years old, and I was ten. Then he said she was playing with Crack Terry. (laughing) I said wow, that's great! And that's all I needed, was to know that there was another little girl like me playing the drums. That was it, and I had two emotions, the first one was "Yaah, someone else is playing the drums, and they second emotions was like hey, there is other little girl besides me playing the drums. . . . let me go practice! (laughing)

Interviewer: Wow, that is a great inspirational story!

McKinney: It was so funny, and I was so thrilled, because it was a little competition thing. . . because there is another little girl playing the drums, so I better be good. Have you ever heard of Teri Lyne Carrington?

Interviewer; Yes, I have. But, I am not that familiar with her.

McKinney: Well, she played the festival here (Detroit Jazz Festival), last year. She has done great things. She and Geri Allen have toured a lot together. She won a Grammy for the Mosaic Project. She has worked with Herbie Hancock, and she went on and did great things with her career. And here is a footnote to that story, year later while I was in college, my college visited Aquinas College for a college music festival. I was looking at the program brochure, and I was flipping through it and saw a drum clinic being conducted by Teri Lyne Carrington. (with excitement) I said, that is the girl my father was talking about! I was about twenty, and I was going to go see her. That was the date we met.

Interviewer: So what is the timeframe? About the early 1980s?

McKinney: Yes, maybe a little bit before the 1980s. No, you are right. About 81 or 82. I said to myself, I got to meet this girl who motivated me to continue to play drums. I got there, and she was in the room talking to somebody, so I just waited around. Then I walked in and said hello. And she said hello back. Then I told her I was a drummer too, and she said "Yeah, then sit down and play." I sat down, but she started talking to another person, while I was playing. And I didn't want to crash-boom-bang-bang while she was talking, so I just told her I didn't want to interrupt her conversation. Then I told her my college was playing later tomorrow, and I will just come back. I told her, that I just wanted her to know that the reason why I kept playing the drums was my father had seen how play as a little girl

the reason why I kept playing the drums was my father had saw you play as a little girl, and she said “Really.” And if it wasn’t for you, I would have put these drum sticks down, and she was like “wow.”

Interviewer: So, she was really impressed?

**McKinney: Yah. And we have been in touch and friend ever since. And when she came to the jazz fest (Detroit Jazz Festival) this year too. She played with Wayne Shorter, Esperanza Spalding, and we got a chance to really hang this time. And it was really great to see her.**

Interviewer: Now, I would like to ask you, have the two of you ever had a private drum sessions, no one else in the room and you just have a chance to bang it out?

**McKinney: No, we never have done that, but maybe one day we will get a chance. But we did come close to doing a clinic together at Wayne State University. This was back in the 90s. Something happened, and it didn’t go down. I did the clinic by myself. Had we done it, it would have been our opportunity to hang out and play together. That hasn’t happened yet, but life is still young.**

Interviewer: I love your optimism.

**McKinney: Life is still young! I have a feeling it will happen one day.**

(17:45)

Interviewer: Since we are on the subject of college, let me back track right quick. Where did you go to school?

**McKinney: I went to Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. I received a bachelors in music.**

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

**McKinney: My mother’s name was Gwendolyn Elease Shephard. And my father was Harold Walton McKinney.**

Interviewer: Did your parents come from musical backgrounds?

**McKinney: My mom worked for a production company that put on plays like *Porgy and Bess* and *Carmen*. I cannot think of the name of the company right now. She had parts where she played *Carmen*, and she played in the *Porgy and Bess*.**

Interviewer: Your mother was a vocalist?

**McKinney: Yes.**

Interviewer: And she must have been a serious vocalist?

**McKinney: She actually started out as an opera singer. She would sing all kind of opera music around the house. So I would wake up to her singing (Gayelynn sings and demonstrates her mother’s opera singing. . . laughing).**

Interviewer: You don’t sound too bad yourself (both laughing). You might have to put down that sax and drums for a minute (both laughing). That is stunning! Now what about your dad?

**McKinney: His mother taught him how to play the piano, to keep him out of trouble. He got hit by a car one day, and it could have been a lot more serious. It just clipped his foot, and my grandmother happened to see it, and she lost her mind. Then she told Harold, I am going to keep you busy, so she started teaching him how to play the piano. My grandmother played the organ, piano, and she sang. And she actually wrote a gospel tune called “Step by Step.”**

Interviewer: Is that the song from the Whitney Houston movie?

**McKinney: No, it wasn’t that one. But we are think about recording it, because it has never been recorded.**

Interviewer: You come from a well-rounded musical background? It was just in your genes?

**McKinney: yes, it was there. My mother also played piano, and she did a lot of work play and singing. She was also a teacher, she taught people. She taught one of the background singers for the Raylettes, a background singer for Ray Charles. Then she also taught the singer who sang on the song “Good Life.”**

Interviewer: So, she was a vocal coach as well?

**McKinney: Yes, she was a vocal coach. She did a lot of teaching and in her younger days she was a model. She was snazzy too. So when I was a child, I would always wake up to jazz piano and opera. (both laughing).**

Interviewer: What a combination? So you have wonder training, I mean not only from your genes from your parents, but from Oakland University.

**McKinney: I also received scholastic training from Oakland, and I received coaching both my parents. My mother taught me how to play behind a singer, and my father taught me how to play in a combo rhythm section.**

Interviewer: That is some wonderful history. That's even new to me about both of your parents. Since your parents were around during the Motown era, did they do any work with Motown?

**McKinney: I believe my dad did a little bit, but not like a lot of his friends did. I don't believe he is on any of their records. However, he might have done some of the live shows. (23:45)**

Interviewer: That's a good connection to have or at least to know. We have talked about your backgrounds, and you have addressed several questions. It was very interesting to learn what caught your attention about the drums, and I am going to shift the conversation now. But before I do I want to know based on your experience, the experience with your parents, what do you think it is about Detroit that has created a foundation of wonderful musicians?

**McKinney: Part of it is interesting, because I have heard and know for a fact, it is not like this in other city. . . . the Detroit scene is not like other cities. We actually nurture our young (laughing). For example, my father's generation of musicians like Marcus Belgrave, George Davidson, Wendell Harrison, Ike Daney and Kenny Cox. These people were my mentors, and Rayse Biggs mentor's, and everyone else in my generation was playing music. My father told me one time. "We don't let you out, unless you know what you are doing." (both laughing) In other words, you will not be representing Detroit sounding like crap. (both laughing) He said you would be fully educated and sounding good by the time you leave up out of here. I thought that was very funny that he said that to me. And of course, You know I use that now. (laughing)**

Interviewer: So, you are using what they pulled on you, with the current generation and your students?

**McKinney: Here's the thing . . . Rayse Biggs and I were talking about this. Suddenly, without our permission, we have been kicked upstairs. My father's generation of musicians who were are mentors have left. Marcus Belgrave is gone, and I recently saw a picture of the Jazz Masters, which included George Davidson, Don Mayberry, dad (Harold McKinney), Teddy Harris, and Wendell Harrison. And the only two remaining today is George and Wendell. That blew my mind that is so crazy. And these are all the people I had been hanging out with since the age of five. I use to sit at George's feet, and watch his feet go. And George would say, he would always get nervous able my nose was so close to his high-hat, that he was afraid I was going to get catch up in it. (laughing)**

Interviewer: What were you doing there?

**McKinney: I was just sitting in the floor watching his feet, watching his hands, and I was checking out everything he was doing. Sometimes, I just felt that I wasn't close enough. I wanted to get closer. (both laughing) He would watch me, just to make sure I would not get popped upside the head.**

Interviewer: There was another percussionist in Detroit, about the same time as your father. Roy Brooks, who played with Max Roach M'Boom. He was an outstanding percussionist.

**McKinney: Yes, he was another one. . . all of them gone. Not only was he a percussionist, he was an inventor. The things he did with that saw on stage, then he made a drum that had a special foot pedal, this guy was amazing. Lawrence Williams was another one. So, I reminded Rayse we are the elders now. We have been kicked upstairs.**

Interviewer: But you are still young?

**McKinney: (laughing) Yes, I am still young! None the less, we are now the mentors for these younger people that are coming up. Thank God, there are younger people still interested in jazz. In my father's generation you could still here real traditional jazz on the radio, and in my generation you heard less, but you could still hear it. Now, it is like gone. The only way you can hear it is if you listen to one station that plays it all day, and another stations plays it only from 7pm – 12 midnight. So whenever you see a group of young people that actually find their way into jazz, it's a miracle. (laughing) When we do see that, we snitch them up, and give them mentoring. It's kind of funny, because I ran from teaching for a long time. (laughing).**

Interviewer: You are so hilarious!

**McKinney: (laughing) I was like . . . I ain't trying to teach. I ran from it for a long time**

**McKinney:** (laughing) I was like . . . I am trying to teach. I fall from it for a long time.

**But it kept calling me back.** (laughing)

Interviewer: (laughing) Like the saxophone kept calling you?

**McKinney:** (Laughing) Yep, and it (teaching) kept calling me, is that people kept wanting me to teach something . . . teach drummers or do an artist in residency. So the next thing I know, I said I'm going to stop fighting this, and enjoy it. Then the other thing I knew was that, this was in the tradition of my father and Marcus, because this is what they did. And I knew in my soul I had to do it too.

Interviewer: That is so nice. I am having a wonder time with this interview.

**McKinney:** To answer your question through . . . why is it so different in Detroit . . . because we do take the time to take young people under our wings, have them watch us, but then we throw them into the scene. We put them on jigs, and tell them they better work it out. So if you fall on your face, that will be on you. So make sure you practice, and have it together. That gives them the incentive to practice and get their stuff together. And we are a lot gentler than Marcus and those guys were with us.

Interviewer: I know your father was a perfectionist.

**McKinney:** Yes, and he was the most gentle out of the group. He was the nicest from the rest of them. The people he mentored would say, he was really kind and he was stern. But he didn't make you feel uncomfortable, like some of the other ones did. The other ones would cruse you out, by saying, "Get your blank, blank home and go practice." (laughing) "And don't you come back until you practice that." And that is what the fellows was getting. Because I was a girl, I didn't get it quite as hash. I got it though, but not as hash as some of the guys did. My generation, we are a little kinder. We say the same thing, but in a different way. The kids are very different now. They are very sensitive. They are way more sensitive, than my generation. We took a lot of stuff. These kids now a days crack and crumble if you hurt their feelings, or say something that crushes their inspiration. They just quite. In my generation, we would just say, I will show you the next time I come back. They don't have that same kind of attitude. They just say, I don't want to do this anymore, and just quite. So you have to really trend lightly and keep them motivated.

Interviewer: Millennials are different. I would like to double back for a minute, but the questions is in the same area. So many young people want to go into the music scene, but they do not want to get the proper training.

**McKinney:** I was just talking about this the other day, with a teacher at Cass Tech High School. This is the generation of fast, because of the internet and how fast they can have access to stuff. The art of working at something is very difficult for them. They don't have a desire to practice, and really work to get better. They want it quick and now. And when that doesn't happen, they will just move on to something else. . . something that is faster to get.

Interviewer: They don't want to put in the work.

**McKinney:** Exactly. And that's the difference I see in millennials. They don't have that work ethic, that our generation had.

Interviewer: We're not too far from that generation! (both laughing)

**McKinney:** No, we are not that far, we are still young (both laughing). There work ethics are not the same, and unfortunately, I hate to say it, but it is laziness. This generation has a lot more stationary activities. When video games came out, that just killed outside activities. They rather sit in the house. When I came home from school, I did my chores, and if I was still sitting in the house my mother would say, "What are you doing?" My reply was nothing. "Oh, you are not doing nothing?" (both laughing) "I can give you something to do . . . if you want or you can go outside." BING...I was gone, I was on my way outside. . . going outside (laughing). There was no sitting around playing video games or sitting around the house all day. And millennials sit at home, they watch TV, they play video games, they are on their phones, they don't play outside and don't have any get up and go. These activities makes them very, very lazy. So, when it comes time to practice to get better, it too much work.

Interviewer: Do they ever question you, about how did you get so good?

**McKinney:** Yes, they do. And I tell them practice. I tell them, they can do anything they want, if they put their mind to it, and work hard at it. I had to practice, I just could not just

sit down to do this. I had to work at it. Some of the kids do get it. All millennials are not this way; it is just a lot of them are.

Interviewer: Not all, just 90% of them (both laughing).

**McKinney:** So you get happy, when you can grab two or three of them, the sometimes actually one. Then it makes you feel good, that you did at least get to one of them or two or three. It's a little different day, but the point remain in Detroit, we are not going to send you out into the world to be sloppy. You are not going to be sloppy when you leave us. And a lot of other cities do not do that. Other cities have competition type of programs and mentality. They will see a young person coming up the ranks, and veteran musicians will try to push them down, because they are afraid that the younger musician will take their job. So a lot of cities will not encourage young people. But if you stick with it and get there yourself, you can get there with the masters.

(38:45)

Interviewer: We have talked about college, you playing in bands, a wealth of teaching experience under you belt, now tell me how did you get started with the all women's jazz band call Straight Ahead?

**McKinney:** Straight Ahead... Well, I started my career with my father, when I was eighteen and started playing with him. I count my first paying gig as the start of my career. (both laughing)

Interviewer: That is cute!

**McKinney:** That is when I started my career, is when I received my first payment. And that came from my dad actually. I started working with him and my Uncle Ray, his brother on bass, and Mama Jarrah (Michelle McKinney) was singing and that is when I really started performing. I had been playing around the city for different people and dad, then other people started calling me. And in the meantime, I saw Marion on the scene. She was a young whipper snapper . . . and she's still young! (laughing).

Interviewer: Had she finished college?

**McKinney:** I don't think so.

Interviewer: Did you attend Wayne State University?

**McKinney:** No, she attended University of Michigan. And she finished at Michigan State for her masters. I had been seeing her around, and it was always in my mind . . . look at that, another girl playing an instrument (upright bass) that girls don't play! (laughing) I said, I got to play with her one of these days. Then I met A'leena through my mother. My mother started doing some jazz stuff around the city and she put together a group. And A'leena was in it, and I met her. So I had played with her, and that was cool.

Interviewer: So, A'leena plays the piano and Marion plays the acoustic upright bass?

**McKinney:** Yes. So one day I received a call from a woman named Micke Braden and she says, "You know, I have been having trouble with this gig on Monday nights at Bert's Place." This is when Bert's was on Jefferson. It was on Jefferson near the Pontchartrain Hotel. Miche said, "This gig on Monday nights at Bert's, which I know is not a good night, I cannot seem to get any of these men to play with me. They are all busy, so I called Marion is she doesn't mind do it, so I'm calling you and I called A'lenna to see if she would want to do it too. She said she was interested too, so I am calling you to see if you would be interested too?" I said, "Did you say Marion is going to be in the band?" (laughing) She said yah, and I old man, I finally get to play with Marion. Then she said yah again. I said Ok, I'm in.

We started our first night at Bert's on a Monday, and it was the most God awful night to do a club date. We got in there and set up, and it was a dead night, and you could hear echoes. . . . hello, hello, hello. . . . You could hear cricket, in other words there was nobody in there. We started the first set, and one person came in, and the staff was there (laughing). That one person came in, and then he looked and saw all females playing. Then he sat down, and was looking. And I don't know if that one person went out and said something, but the next week we had some more people. This time it was about ten to fifteen people (both laughing). By the end of the second month, there was a line going outside the door to see us. It was such a unique situation people. This was unheard of, a group of women playing and drums, bass, piano . . . wow! And a fantastic vocalist in the front singing her behind off. People though we were iust unbelievable. you could see it in their faces.



So we held that gig down for quite some time. Then, Regina Carter, who had been living in Germany, returned home. And when she returned . . . I'm not sure who asked her if she would be interested in playing in the group, it may have been Miche or one of the other girls . . . but anyway she ended up joining the band. By this time, we had quite the following. Everywhere we went, we had lines going out of the door. We were an all-female phenomenal group. Then we started playing on the Montreal Jazz Festival, not the Detroit Festival, that's is not what it was called back then. It was the Montreux Jazz Festival. We played that festival every other year, and the first time we played it was in 1988.

**McKinney:** I'm still young! (laughing) In 1991, we received an offer to do an exchange.

**Interviewer:** Was Miche still with the band?

**McKinney:** No, by this time Miche received an offer to start doing musical productions. She was starring in musical plays. That is about the time her career was taking off, and she received an offer to go to New York to do more of that. There was a switch in personnel, she left and me, Marion and A'leena took over the group, and Regina came along. Then we met Cynthia Dewberry, and we invited her to come join us, and she agreed to join the band. So back to 1991, we received an offer to go to the exchange program in Switzerland. And in return, a group from Switzerland was coming here. We got invited to play on the Montreux Festival. So we were like wow this is great. But we were supposed to play in a club, as part of the festival, but not on the main stage. So we were rehearsing and doing our thing, and unbeknown to us, someone was listening . . . and the next thing we know, we found out we were going to play on the main stage. What, what do you mean we are going to play on the main stage. The Switz producer said, "Yes, you are going to play on the main stage, and open for Nina Simone." We were like, oh my God, this is incredible.

**Interviewer:** How could you guys just keep all of that energy locked in?

**GM:** We were so, scared! (laughing) Excited, but mostly scared. First all, these people had never heard of us before, and we are about to play on the main stage in front of people who don't know us. Girl, we didn't even have a record (laughing). We didn't have no record, nothing. This was just some little group from Detroit. Who is this strange group (laughing). We were just the exchange group. We got out there on the stage that night, and you could see in the video Regina eye's were big a sausage. I never looked out at the audience, I just said I'm not going to look out there (both laughing). I looked out there once, and it made me not to want to look out there again.

Claude Knobs, was the director of the festival, passed away a few years ago and it was sad to hear that. He introduced us. "Now we are going to bring on this group Straight Ahead," he said it in French. The people (audience) were standing, and looking at us. We took a big gulp (both laughing), and we said, "Well let's just go for it." At the end of the first song, the people were stumping and clapping. They were stumping and clapping, and Claude Knobs could not calm the audience down. The audience was going nuts. The Claude said, "Ok, ok, ok, claim down, there is going to be at a club later on this evening." And out of that performance, came a wonderful video.

And later, I was also able to meet the very great Nina Simone. It was an intense experience, because she was intense, she had a lot of deep stuff going on. But it was still an honor to meet her. They didn't have camera phones, but I'm still young (both laughing). I could take any pictures, because I didn't have any way of getting pictures. We returned to Detroit, on a very high experience. It was just such a great experience. I met Dizzie Gillespie, and I do have that picture. I met Steve Turre, and all these people at the festival, even Al Jarreau. It was awesome. They don't separate the artist, everybody is together, the well-known and less-unknown in the same hospitality room. It was a very relaxed and wonderful situation. So, we returned home and I had this wonderful video I was carrying around in the car. I had it in the car for a reason, I was taking it somewhere. I went to Big Boys on Jefferson across from Belle Isle, and ran into \*Sylvia Moy. Sylvia Moy wrote "My Sharia More" and numerous other Motown hits. I ran into her, and she ask how was I doing. I told her I had just return from Switzerland and so forth. Then she asked if I had any video. I said it's odd that you ask, because I just so happened to have one in the car. She said if you give it to me, I promise I will get it back to you. I just need it for a short time. I said ok, and are you sure I will get it back, because this is the only copy I have. She promised to return it.

Interviewer: Did you know her prior to running into her at Big Boys?

**McKinney: I don't think I realized who she was exactly, and I have seen her on the scene, but I really didn't realize who she was until later. Then the next thing we knew, we received a call from a man named Kevin Woodley. He worked for Sony Records, and we said, "What?" (laughing) Then he explained he was with Sony Records, and he was interested in the group. We were like, oh my God. Then we found out he was moving Sony Records over to Atlantic Records, and he took us with him. He was an A&R man (a record scout/producer). He took us over to Atlantic with him. And that is what started Straight Ahead involvement with Atlantic.**

Interviewer: How many records/albums did you all record with Atlantic Records?

**McKinney: We did 1-2-3....three.**

Interviewer: Go on ahead and name the records.

**McKinney: We did "Look Straight Ahead" with the entire group, then we did "Body and Soul" with the entire group, and the producer of both of those CDs was Lenny White. By the third CD, Regina went solo, and left the group. The last CD was called "Dance of the Forest Rain." That only had the four of us, me, Cynthia, Marion, and A'leena. That one was produced by Bob Belldon. Then after that we became independent, because of the industry. In the industry things don't happen fairly, and it can be very disturbing in a way, and it affected us for a very long time. We joined Atlantic Records during a time of great unrest (laughing).**

Interviewer: That's a good way to put it! (Both laughing)

**McKinney: In my opinion, we should have been a lot larger, than we were because we were so unique. There was no group like us out there.**

Interviewer: I don't think I have seen a group like yours out there now?

**McKinney: There has been some same attempts, but they haven't lasted long term.**

**Atlantic's promotion department was a revolving door, new people all the time. . . .an when Regina left, that put a damper on things too.**

Interviewer: There are companies that cater to the jazz idiom tradition. Atlantic was not known as a jazz label, do you think that may have had some impact on the group, and did anything come up about the gender of the group, with you all being all women?

**McKinney: The only thing that was troublesome, was that our A&R rep left, and that would have been a good reason for the label to keep the group for the integrity of the group. After they signed us, they wanted to change us to a pop group. We did good trying to adapt to that, to that new way of music, but we still didn't received the proper promotion. There are a lot of people who made money off of us, and we didn't make the money we should have made.**

Interviewer: Was there a little distant there, because the record company was trying to make you all something you were not? Be more commercialized? Or stay the course of what you where?

**McKinney: Yes, we were jazz musicians. In the end, we just lost in the shuffle. We were done with Atlantic, that part of our history. However, we continued on and put out independent records. We produced "City Cuts" and others.**

Interviewer: It really sounds like you all returned to what you were trained for, and what you all really wanted to do, without having the pressure of the label on you.

**McKinney: That was really nice, not having the pressure of the label we could do things the way we wanted to do. And then we did "Still Swingin'". A lot of people still know who Straight Ahead is, and there are people who don't. We have core fans and still come out to see us. We played at the Dirty Dog not too long ago, and we sold out every night. The dynamics have changed, because we are no longer all female. We have a male in the band. His name is Yancey.**

Interviewer: What instrument does he play?

**McKinney: He plays the saxophone. The reason why that happened, is because after Regina left we went through a lot of changes trying to find an instrumentalist to replace her. We have a couple of violinist. One violinist was a hoot! (laughing). So, that didn't last long, then we used Karen Briggs on a couple of dates. Then after that, we did have a consistent person called Sabrina LaMar out of Flint. God bless her soul, she just passed 3 – 4 years ago. She was good, but there were some small issues. We couldn't keep her on. Finally, we ended up with Althea Rene. She was a good fit for about ten years. She's a**

flautist. By this time, Cynthia was gone, and the new vocalist was Kimberly Wright. And that was a good fit too, then she moved, and moved Texas to start her solo career. That is one thing about Straight Ahead, we have been a catalyst for solo careers (laughing).

Interviewer: But the cord rhythm sections has stayed together, which is so important.

**McKinney:** Yes. The reason why we use Yancey is because, we really could not find a strong female component. We needed a strong person, who could just put it out/swinging it.

Interviewer: You all are monsters by yourself (heavy hitting players).

**McKinney:** People have a hard time letting go of the past. "I thought yall were all female" (laughing). Well clearly we are not now. You see this big handsome man standing up here don't you? He is most definitely a guy (laughing).

Interviewer: I would like to transition into one last questions about Straight Ahead, and then really want to get back to you. What was your memorable performance after signing with Atlantic Records?

**McKinney:** There were several, but the one that stood out the most, it may not have been the performance itself, but the one that stood out the most, that I would never forget, a gig at an airplane hangar. We were told, we were the opening act for so-and-so. The manager didn't even tell us who we were opening for. He just said you're an opening act. I said ok, and airplane hangar, wow, this was in LA. We got to that place, and got on stage and were getting ourselves together. I started looking around at the audience and said, "Is that Eric Bradley from 60 minutes, oh God (both laughing) is that Don King, is that Tevin Campbell, where are we, who are we playing for?" It was insane, girl, we were thrown into this situation and told to play for these people. We did like we did in Switzerland, we just went for it. We played, and when we got off the stage we mingled around with a lot of folks. Then Cynthia saw Queen LaTifa (both laughing).

Interviewer: Stop it!

**McKinney:** I said, where? where? Then Cynthia said, she is right there. Oh my God! I got myself together, and tried to get my cool together, and remind myself (talking to myself) that these are people just like me, they do the same things that I do in the morning (laughing), so just chill out. I walked over there all confident to Queen LaTifa, and I said hey, how are you doing. Now, this was during the time her hit was out call "You and I T.Y", she was at the top of the rap game and breaking wide. She was big, but not as big as she is now. She was just getting started. I told her, I really, really like our style. I told her, she had a very jazzy style of rappin, and she said she really liked jazz too. I told her I loved her work, and then she asked me was I playing the drums; and I said yes. Then she said, she liked drummers, I was like oh, then I went shy (both laughing). That is one day, I wish I had more gumption, I would have slapped her my card, cause she was really cool.

Interviewer: You were a little shy?

**McKinney:** Yes, I was shy. So for me to even walk up to go talk to her was a feat. I didn't utilize that opportunity to the fullest. I could have been her friend today (both laughing). That was one of my most memorable times, because of all of the people I met. I also meet Michael Waldon (Grammy Awardee, drummer, producer). I still keep in touch with him today, because there has been some times when we were on the same show while I am playing with Aretha Franklin. He's really a sweetie. That's the most memorable moment for me.

(1:08:00)

Interviewer: Girl, we can talk for days, wow, this is really great. Now, I want to move the interview back to you. You have talk about your childhood, and how you almost gave up the drums, but you also continued with the sax. Now, that you have come through a professional career, do you feel females have a difficult time being accepted into the industry as percussionist, in any genre of live music?

**McKinney:** It's a lot better, than it used to be. I just recently found out some things, that I was totally unaware of, because I was sheltered by my father and Uncle Ray. A friend of mine, who I love dearly because he has given me opportunities that no one else has given me, outside of Straight Ahead, as Gayelynn the drummer. He has given me opportunities that has taken me to another level. I used to always wonder why cats like Ron Otis, and all these cats were getting big gig calls, and I was wondering why I wasn't getting these calls. Part of it may have been, people thought I was married to Straight Ahead, and that I

part of it may have been, people thought I was married to Straight Ahead, and that I wasn't available. But that could only go so far, because people knew I was soloing and gigging outside of Straight Ahead. And I still was getting the call, and I questioned why am I not getting calls. I finally found out, recently by way of friend, he told drummers to call me when a drummer was needed for bigger gigs...and the male drummers said "she got that little female thang going on." I said, "Seriously, are you for real?" Then my friend said he was going to call me, because I was a good drummer. That is when I realized, as current as a few years ago, it was still that female thing out there. It's a stigma, and it's still a boys club out there. I was kind of hurt, all the fellows that were smiling at me, saying hey girl, and these are the same guys who didn't want to hire me, because I was a female. That blew my mind, and I was like ok.

So, for females, a lot of times, we work towards getting our own projects. But it is still somewhat still a "boys club." Even in the current generation, they are a little less likely to be like that than my generation. There is this pianist I met named Alexis Lombre, and she a great and talented young lady, and I met her, because my god-son (Marion's son) Tyrique hired her to play with him. He hired her, but my generation still have the old boy's club going.

Interviewer: So it has been a little difficult breaking through?

McKinney: Yes, but thanks to this one cat who opened the doors for me, I am getting less of that now. It now like, she is a good drummer. I used to love hearing, "You're good for a girl." By now, I don't care for it (laughing). Can't I just be a good drummer, and why do I have to be good for a girl? I heard it not too long ago, but the guys were just kidding, and I let them know it was outdated. Thankfully, I don't heard much of that now.

Interviewer: You can pretty much shut them up, once you're on stage?

McKinney: (laughing) Yes, I hope so. I am really like, come on now! It is not as nearly as bad now, verses when I was coming up. Thank God for that, because now young girls can try it without discrimination. And of course, Beyoncé had an all-female group. And they were not playing, they were kicking butt. And now, a lot of those girls are doing a lot of things out side of her. Like Tia Fuller, she plays the saxophone outside of Beyoncé, and she has played for Straight Ahead.

Interviewer: But there has also been other women drummers, and I wonder if their impact was the same, the old-boys network of drummer, who will not refer female. Or do people think perhaps because you were trained in the jazz idiom you were not diverse in your style?

McKinney: That could be part of it too, they probably through I could not play anything else. I can see if people didn't hire me for the R&B stuff, but my friend was talking about jazz cats who would refer me. My father's generation hired me a lot. I was hired by dad's peers, because they know dad, and they knew my skill set. The problem was more so with the people of my generation. I remember going to a clinic, and Straight Ahead was there, and this one guy goes, "Women don't play jazz as good as men." (laughing) "An vocalist, are not really musicians." We were like wow, this is deep. And it was an unbelievable comment, and he was telling this to all of these young male students in the clinic. We were in our thirties, and the students were in their twenties. And he kept telling them his stuff, and this is a very well-respectable musician, that is international known saying this. And they were, oh my God, and he continues to say this stuff today.

Interviewer: Besides jazz, are you comfortable with playing other genre? Rock?

GM: I can play everything from rock, folk . . . I have played a few folk records . . . I have toured with Speech, from Arrested Development when I was living in Atlanta. I lived in Atlanta for three years. So during that time, I hooked up with a bass player who played with Speech, and I was seating in. That's what you do when you get to new places to find other musicians. And you also have to go to jam sessions, and that's how you get work too (both laughing). So that's what I did, and I met the bass player, and he asked if I could hit with him. He said he had a project he was work on, and I asked were there going to be drums at the place, and he said yah. He said, you only need to play one song. So, I did that, and they he said would you be interested in playing for Speech? I said like Speech, from Arrested Development? (both laughing) I said yah. It ended up with me doing a tour in Japan with Speech, so that rap! It was cool, because the bass player Zan, gave me a lessons in play rap, and I gave him lessons in jazz. Rap sounds easy, but it's a very different kind of

feeling. You have to play behind the beat, and it's real laid back. I had to very conscious of that because when coming from the jazz idiom you play on top of the beat. It was quite a lesson, and I really worked on it, and Speech was happy about it. And the only reason why I am not still with them and living in Atlanta, I had to come back here to take care of my mom. That was a hard time, me having to leave Atlanta. I really wanted to be there, and stuff and the train started moving for me. But I am still young (both laughing). But returning home was good for me.

**1:19:15**

Interviewer: This interview would not be complete without you discussing your composing skills. I heard you talk about a few pieces you wrote, but could you please talk about the process you go through to compose music and talk about my favorite piece "Seven Minutes to Four".

**McKinney: You remember "Seven Minutes to Four"?** (laughing).

**Interviewer: That has always been one of my favorite pieces.**

**McKinney: Oh wow, isn't that something. I didn't know that** (laughing).

Interviewer: I used to set in the audience and say to myself, play "Seven Minutes to Four." I love that song.

**McKinney: I am thinking about doing a re-arrangement of it, and doing it again. My composing thoughts comes in different ways. Sometimes the entire song will come to me at once, bassline, piano, and everything. I just hear the entire song in my head. Then, I sit down and write out each part. I will pick out each part on the piano, and record the bassline, yah I play a little bit of piano. Now, don't ask me to play the piano at a gig. . . (laughing). . . you won't be happy (laughing). Leave that up to A'leena. I use the piano as a composing tool. If I can hear the bassline, I will pick it out on the piano first, and figure out the chords to go with that baseline. I try to figure out what I heard in my head, and then play it on the piano to get the chords. The last thing I do is the melody. Then, I try to record it, the bassline, the chords, and the melody. Or sometimes I will write it out, or I will send a person a tape of the piece and have them write it out for me. When you hear "Gwendolyn" that a song for my mother. Unfortunately, she never got a chance to hear people playing it, she heard the computer generated version. And what came first on that song was the bassline and drum beat. It's real quarky . . . (Gayelynn hums a sample of the tune).**

Interviewer: It's a really upbeat tune?

**McKinney: Yah, because my mother was spicy and sassy. She spoke her mind, and if she said something to you and you didn't like it . . . you just better be strong and take it. And the rhythm in the song reminded me of her. And she liked the funk side of jazz, so the beat reminded me of her. And the other part of the song, is flowy with a melody on top (Gayelynn sings the melody). The melody remind me of her voice, because she had a beautiful voice, it was real angelic. That part reminded me of her sweet side. I said this is definitely my mother's song, it was made for her. When Straight Ahead came out with Dad's Song on the first album, the first words out of her month was, where is mines (laughing). "Where's my song?) So when this song came to me I was really glad. I tried writing one song for her, but I just would come. I tried, but when this one came out, I said this is my mama right here. As once again the bassline came first, they the chords and the melodic melody came to my head. When I compose it either comes all at once or in pieces; sometimes the melody might come first. Then I build the song around it, the bassline or the chords.**

Interviewer: Do you have to be in a quiet place when you compose or do things jump out at you, like driving in a car?

**McKinney: Most of the time it is in the wee hours of the morning when a song pops into my head. For example, if it is 2:00 AM that is when songs just pop into my head. And I just grab my phone and I will sing . . . there are so many pieces of songs on this phone that I need to get to (laughing). The downside is that if I don't record it, I will go to bed and it will be gone.**

Interviewer: It appears as if you have the legacy of both parents in you. What year did you lose your mom?

**McKinney: 2011. And dad passed in 2001.**

Interviewer: This has truly given me some new insights on you, even though we have known each other for years. I

**McKinney: But, we are still young (both laughing hard)**

(1:27:15)

Interviewer: Thank you for the information about your composing talents. What is your best performance space in Detroit that captures your instrument?

**McKinney: I love all the clubs I play in, but for different reasons. My favorite place to play is the Dirty Dog Jazz café. That is definitely my favorite. It is my favorite because it is a listening room. They have a strict policy, which states that when you come there please keep your conversation down to a minimum for one good hour. During the hour that the artist is playing, no talking. Or if you talk, keep is very very low. I have seen the management enforce the policy. One time I was performing, and I could hear a little conversation, but I didn't think it was that much, compared to other clubs. It really didn't sound that bad. Girl, when we finished with that song, the manager walked on stage and said, "Hold on one minute." He got on the mic and restated the policy again. "Please keep your talking to a minimum, and does anyone have a problem with that?" The audience said no. And that is one of the reason why I love playing that room, and they treat musicians wonderful. A nice plush dressing room, and the food is really, really good.**

Interviewer: Do you need a roadie? (both laughing)

**McKinney: Just come on down, and let me know when you are coming. I have a standing gig at Bert's on Thursday nights, and it has a Cheer's like atmosphere. Everybody knows your name.**

Interviewer: But you might not know theirs. . . (both laughing)

**McKinney: But in most cases, I do know their names, because they come every week. I say, "What's up Al, hey Sandra, and" they have a very faith audience that come every week to sit-in or just sit and chill. The vibe is homey and eclectic. You can get foreigners who may come in and jam with us, to Wayne State students, kids from U of M, it is just that kind of vibe. That is where I take a lot of my student, for them to come and sit in, so they can play with professional musicians. It is a wonderful environment for that.**

**I teach private lessons and I am in residency at Detroit Public Schools. And when you teach privately, something the students do not have any motivation to practice. If they don't practice and have a place to use their skills, they will get bored. So, I give them a goal and say practice, practice . . . so when you come down to Bert's Place you will be playing in front of people, a real live audience. And you will be playing with professional musicians like Ralph Armstrong who has played with Sting and Herbie Hancock as a bassist. And then there is Bill Meyer on piano who has also played with a lot of people . . . so you better practice. And that gives the students incentive to get their stuff together. I love Bert's for those reason, because I can have my students come in and play.**

Interviewer: I know they have good food at Bert's too.

**McKinney: Come on down, then there is Baker's. It has a very long history. I saw Tony Williams' last concert at Baker's, before he passed. It was one of the most inspirational and discouraging performances I ever seen.**

Interviewer: Girl, you keep taking me down so many paths, now you have to tell me why? (both laughing).

**McKinney: He was so phenomenal, he made me to want to just pack up my little sticks, and say I am done. I'm done playing, that guy there wow . . . then once you get pass that then you like well let me practice, because I like that lick he did. As a result I play my cymbals pattern as a result of watching him at Baker's. When I am swinging, I got that directly from him. I liked he swing pattern, and then I stole some other stuff while watching him that night (both laughing) and I incorporated it into my musical arsenal. That was his last concert in Detroit, and he passed away 2-3 years later.**

**I like the historical value of Baker's, but it also has another vibe. Its vibe is different from Bert's. Different kinds of people come to Baker's too, and they are a let's have fun crowd. They come to have a good time, enjoy the music, they have a sound guy, and they provide backline gear. And the owners are really nice guys. They treat me like royalty when I come in there.**

(1:34:45)

Interviewer: You are royalty. I still think I do not have your whole story. There is only so much

we can get in an hour and a half but, I still think there is so much more to you. How did you get the gig with Aretha Franklin?

**McKinney: My friend, Ralph Armstrong, he has a long distinguished musical career, he played with orchestras and went on to play with Herbie Hancock, his resume is huge. He plays bass. He played on a Jon Luc Ponte album and he played the bass on a song called "Sunset Drive," he played the bass line, and even today it is one of the most studied bass lines and solos ever. He has been in Bass Player Magazine too.**

Anyway he has been using me on drums, since the 90s. He hired me to work with Veron Reed, who was from In Living Color, and he has hired me to do a lot of things. So, Ms. Franklin called him and asked did he know of a drummer. So she asked him about me. Now, how she even knew about me . . .

Interviewer: Oh, she asked him about you?

**McKinney: Well, he gave me a glowing report. But here my history with Ms. Franklin. My first encounter with her was when I was 17. My father, he was so casual, he said we have a gig tomorrow night, and I said ok. I asked him, were are we playing, and then he said Aretha's house. I said Aretha who? And he replied "Aretha Franklin." "Dad, did you just say, we are playing at Aretha Franklin's house?" He said yah, and I didn't even know he knew her from back-in-the-day. Like, when they were younger. My dad and Aretha had musical encounters. I was like, oh my God!**

Interviewer: Is there any one your dad didn't know?

**McKinney: Girl, I am telling you. And, that is when I first met her. Then the next time she wanted me to play for her was at the 2004 Detroit Jazz Festival. At that time she was doing two shows, and one was a jazz set, and the other one was her R&B stuff. So she hired me for the jazz set. So I played the set, and her regular R&B drummer played the second set. Until April 2016, she asked Ralph about me, and she wanted to know if I could play R&B. Then, there was another time I played with Ralph and Chaka Khan R&B.**

Interviewer: (McKinney laughing) You, just keep pulling names out of a hat! (both laughing)

**McKinney: Well, that was a Ralph connection too. He said he had called all of the drummers in Detroit, and all the top dogs for the gig, and none them could read music. I was confused, because none of them could read music. But, I know Ron Otis can read. He said he called me, because he knew I could read music. I told him, I learned to read better in college. They he told me that is why I called you. I had to read H.B. Barnum musical book. He was Chaka Khan and Aretha's music director for 40 years. I have to read the book, and over the years I had musical encounters with both.**

**So, in April 2016, Ms. Franklin called me to gig with her. And I have been doing it ever since. I have been pretty steady with Ms. Franklin.**

Interviewer: That's wonderful! I would like to close this out, and I have truly enjoyed this interview. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end?

**McKinney: Whoever listens to this interview, I hope you have a good time listening to it. And I hope you get something out of it. And I hope I have provided information that is useful.**

**And lastly, peace, love, and blessings to you all always!**

Interviewer: And this interview is just the top of the iceberg of a young woman named Gayelynn McKinney. Detroit's very own Queen of Percussions . . . Thank you hon, I really have enjoyed it.

**McKinney: You are very welcomed. Oh thank you!**

Interviewer: I really enjoyed it . . . signing off.

(1:41:26)