



“Keep the Faith”
an Oral History of
Melvin Davis
aka the Detroit Soul
Ambassador

RECORDED 11/18/2015 @ WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

INTERVIEWER: JESSE ALEXANDER LOPEZ

LIS 7700, PROFESSOR KIM SCHROEDER

Subject Index (Ctrl + F)

Andre Williams

Anti-Indian

Atlantic Records-

Augustus Hall

Barry Gordy

Blues (Music Style)

Butterball Joltin' Joe Howard-Deejay

Chitling Circuit

Club Chit-Chat

Club Sepia

D-Town Records

Dairy Workers' Hall; Local 49

David Ruffian

Detroit

Detroit Riot of 1967

Earl Van Dyke

Ed McKinsey's "Dance Party"

England, Northern Soul

Ernie Durham-Deejay

Fortune Records

Georgia

Greystone Ballroom

Groovesville Records

Hank Ballard and the Midnighters

JJ Barnes

Jackie Wilson

James Brown

James Jamison
Joe Peal (Peel)
Johnnie Mae Matthews
Jook joint
Ken Bell-Deejay
Lewis Huff
Little Richard
Little Willie John
Macon, Georgia
Marv Johnson
Marvin Gaye
Mary Wells
Michael Ramsdell-documentary filmmaker
Michigan
Mike Hanks
Milledgeville, Georgia
Motown
Muskegon, MI
Nathanial Mayer
Navy, the United States
Nolan Strong and the Diablos
Northern Records
Northern Soul
Nub's Knob, Ski Resort, Upper Peninsula, Michigan
Otis Redding
Prestatyn, Wales
Primes and Primettes
Race Music
Record hops

Richard "Popcorn" Wiley
Rock Mill Baptist Church
Rock Mill Records
Segregation
Shady Rest
Smokey Robinson
Steve Mancha [Clyde Wilson]
Swinging Time with Robin Seymour
The 100 Proof
The Club Ponytail
The Distant
The Diving Bell and the Butterfly
The Ebony Club
The Funk Brothers
The Greek Theater, Los Angeles
The Jaywalkers
The Supremes
The Temptations
The Twenty Grand
The Upsetters
Timmy Shaw
Upper Peninsula

JL: This is Jesse Alexander Lopez and this is my oral history of Melvin Davis. We are currently at Wayne State University on Nov 18, 2015. What is your name and what do you do?

MD: My name is Melvin Davis, also known as the Detroit Soul Ambassador and recent inductee into the Rhythm and Blues Hall of Fame. Music is my business and also my ministry.

JL: Your ministry?

MD: Absolutely.

JL: How so is it your ministry?

MD: Well, I believe that music is one of the most viable and important mediums in the world. It transcends language, it transcends nationalities. To impart our history, our beliefs, our faith, our culture to be spread amongst each other, I think music is one of the better ways to do it and I try to do it with dignity and professionalism, so it's almost like a ministry for me.

JL: Beautiful. Where and when were you born?

MD: I was born in 1942, August 29th in Milledgeville, Georgia.

JL: Could you tell me a little about Milledgeville?

MD: Yeah, it's a town about a hundred miles below Atlanta. I was born on a 300 acre farm about 4 or 5 miles outside of that town. I spent the first 3 years of my life there. I went back 2 or 3 times a year until my grandmother and grandfather passed away when I was around 12 or 13. I spent some time there, but I never went to school there and wasn't really raised there. It was really enjoyable to be able to share that time with my family and to absorb their history and my culture.

JL: You told me about a church your grandfather founded.

MD: Yeah, my grandfather founded Rock Mill Baptist Church which is the mother of all of the other Baptists churches in the area. I also named my record label Rock Mill Records after the blood. My publishing company is called Leola publishing and that was my grandmother's name, so as you can see, I am very fond of my family and I try to carry on the blood and to continue to make them proud and form my link in the chain of evolution.

JL: So what was the foundational influence of your musical life? Was it back in Georgia or was it over here [in Detroit]?

MD: Well I think of course it was back in Georgia. We are all a product of our environment and of our families, so I guess it was in my DNA. My mother could really sing well, but she never had the opportunity to pursue a singing career and I don't think she really wanted to. She definitely had the ability.

My grandfather was an extremely talented man, he could make anything. He was the only one in the community that could build a chimney in a house so that the smoke would not back up into the house. He had many, many talents. He was also a very talented person on instruments. He could play piano. He could sing. He was a great player and he was also a great harmonica player, an extremely talented harmonica player.

JL: So did he teach you these things or did you just picked them up?

MD: No, he didn't teach me any of these things but I absorbed the vibration from what he was doing. He was not a teacher. But you don't have to be a teacher in order to teach someone something. Like for instance, I am a drummer, but I never had a drum lesson. I watched. If you observe anything, you can pick up a lot and you can teach yourself. That's what human beings do. That's why you have all these senses. Your sense of sight, your sense of hearing, everything. So if you see something, chances are you are going to pick up on how it's done. Especially if it really appeals to you and its interesting and its part of something that you feel passionate about, then you'll be able to do it.

JL: For the record, what's your grandfather's name?

MD: My grandfather's name was Lewis Huff. My great grandfather's name was Augustus Hall and he was the founder of the church. He was also a great community leader in Georgia in a time when that was very, very rare. He owned property, he had a store. He would hire 70 to 80 people to harvest his food every year. He was quite a community leader.

JL: During this time segregation was in place right?

MD: Oh segregation was rampant at this time.

JL: Can you talk about an experience you felt there?

MD: I was really protected from it because I lived on farm. I didn't live in the city. I never went to school there so I didn't experience it that much in the South, other than to see the signs "Colored" "White." Everything was separated and it wasn't a pleasant time. It is a dark, dark day in the history of America and I hope that one day we will be able to eradicate any racism but we are still working on it.

JL: We are. What is the first song or first time that you saw a performer that sticks out in your mind like that was a special moment for you?

MD: Back in that day, the big thing on television was American Bandstand and we had several shows here in Detroit. There was Ed McKinsey's "Dance Party" There was the one in Canada which was "Swinging Time" with Robin Seymour. So I saw a lot of acts. Little Willie John Jackie Wilson, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. Many acts that I saw that influenced and inspired me to pursue this career.

JL: I read previously that you saw Little Richard and that was a big moment in time for you...

MD: I was born 20 miles from where Little Richard, James Brown and Otis Redding were born. I was born in Milledgeville, they were born in Macon. So that's 20 miles away. As a matter of fact, less than half a mile away from our farm there was a jook joint out in the woods where people would come and have a good time and party and dance.

Little Richard and James Brown and all of these artist would come and appear. Like I say, it was less than half mile from our house and there was a valley. Our house sat on one side of the hill and Shady Rest, which was the name of the jook joint, sat on the other side of the hill, so it was almost like hearing them in stereo.

JL: That's amazing.

MD: I could hear the Upsetters' playing their behinds off and I could hear Little Richard yelling just like they were in our backyard.

JL: How old were you in this point in time?

MD: I was maybe 7 or 8.

JL: You ever run down there? Or did you just bask in the sound?

MD: Oh I couldn't get there because we were on a hill and there was a deep valley and a little creek down there. I would have to go all the way up the other side of the hill. My parents and grandparents would never let me do anything like that, late at night, there were all kinds of animals and snakes and everything in the woods.

JL: But you had that amplification...

MD: It was really an experience because the sound was amazing. There were no city sounds or anything. We were out in the woods so there was nothing to interfere with the sound of the music coming across that little valley. It was just great. I think that is part of what really inspired me because they were really rocking. No doubt about it.

JL: How long did the jook joints exist? Are they still out there?

MD: No they're not out there. I'd say the last time anything happened of that magnitude was probably in the early 60s but this was all through the late 50s.

JL: And then federal and county laws took over?

MD: Yeah and more opportunities developed for these people to have better places to play. They could go to the cities. They could go up North. Once they acquired their fame, they would be invited all over. They would tour all the time. It wasn't necessary for them to do what you might call the "Chitling Circuit" all the time.

JL: Why do you think there was such a hotbed right there for all these performers to exist like James Brown and Otis Redding to come from your little neck of the woods?

MD: That's hard to say, but every city, every town, every state, every country has an identity and has a personality and it comes from the identity, the personality and the energy of its people. So it's not an inanimate object—a city or a town or a state— it's the people within that cause whatever development, whatever achievements they are able to accomplish. It's hard to say.

There are so many different variables that go into the creation of a situation, like for instance the music scene in Detroit. It's not just the musicians or the singers. It's the clubs. It's the opportunity that comes from all the fledgling record labels. It's the deejays. It's the people. There are many, many facets and many, many ingredients that go into the development of a situation.

I guess the ingredients in those situations were extraordinary because the results speak for themselves. These are historical people and historical events that we are talking about, so there was something special. I don't know if it was in the water or in the DNA, but it was part of the ingredients of what was in Georgia in that time. A lot of very talented people came from Georgia. 1302

JL: I just learned that you moved from Georgia when you were 3. Could you tell me about your first memory of Detroit?

MD: The first time that I came to Detroit my aunt, Maude Butts, brought me up here on the train. It was quite an experience. It was before school, the first time I came. I was less than 5. She would go to work and I would stay with the babysitter. I would have 1 big bowl of fruit and listen to radio and wait for her to return. It was a very interesting adventure. Being 3 or 4 years old, I wasn't able to interpret it that way, at that time, but looking back, it was a great experience for me to escape the prejudices of the South and to be able to come to Detroit and go to school here and to be able to develop as I have.

JL: So you think there was a huge difference in the level of segregation and racism between [the South and Detroit]?

MD: [Cuts me off from finishing the question] Of course, even though there was...there's always different levels of anything...

PAUSE MD RECEIVED PHONE CALL

JL: In what ways was Detroit different than Georgia?

MD: The opportunity. The lack of segregation. I know in Georgia the schools were totally segregated. I never went to a segregated school and that is because I went to Detroit for my education.

JL: So what year was that?

MD: I started school here in (19)47.

JL: So even at that time the schools were desegregated over here? I didn't know that.

MD: Yes. I went to grade school. My first day of school was at Fairbanks Elementary on Hamilton. They have a new one there now, but I went to the old one. In 1947, I would have been 5 years old. That's when I started my kindergarten. It was a mixed class. There wasn't the obvious separation and prejudices that you would feel in Georgia...it just wasn't here. There was some of that here, but like I say, there is always different levels and the level of prejudice and bigotry was much lower than in the South, otherwise people wouldn't have gravitated to the North the way they did.

JL: How did your family end up over here, making that big move?

MD: My mom got married to William Ley who's my stepfather and just for the record, I've never seen my father. I have nothing against him. But I've never seen him. My father was a college graduate because that is where I think I received my intellect. I never went to college, some people think I did but I never did. All the people on my dad's side, my true dad went to college, and my grandfather, my father's father was a determined man. Matter of fact, to tell you how determined he was, he walked from Atlanta, Georgia to New York City.

JL: That's a lot of determination [laughter].

MD: That's a man who was leaving the South [laughter].

JL: One way or the other [laughter].

MD: One way or the other. He walked every step. That just shows me what type of determination, what type of fortitude, what type of spiritual presence I have in me.

JL: So what high school did you go to?

MD: I went to Pershing High School and I also went to Mumford. But two days after I turned 17, I joined the Navy.

JL: We're going to get there in one second...So what was the city like then? What was it like being a teenager then? What was a Saturday night for a 16 year old Melvin Davis?

MD: When I was 16 it was really good because I had a lot of friends here. There was always a lot of dances, a lot of music, and a lot of energy in the city. I think that with this music of which I am a participant in and a legendary contributor of, I think that's what they are trying to retrieve. I put on a show a couple of years ago and I titled it a "Northern Soul Review" and "Northern Soul" we'll talk about that. It's an English term. It's an appreciation of the Detroit music, of the Soul music of the (19)60s. But umm...I kind of lost my point there....

JL: Saturday night for a young Melvin Davis...

MD: Like I said there was a lot of dances, a lot of bands, a lot of energy. Lie I was going to say, I call this show the "Northern Soul Experience" but on the placard I wrote "It's more than music, it's a way of life." What I think they are trying to recapture is energy and enthusiasm of the (19)60s which is totally missing now. We're very pessimistic and we don't look to the future with too much optimism. I think it's what they are trying to recapture. It's more than music. It's a way of life. It's a mindset. It's a commonality of people and what their desires are.

JL: So at this point in time, 16 year old Melvin Davis, were you already playing music?

MD: No I wasn't as a matter of fact. I was a great dancer [laughter]. I used to win dance contests. It was great. There was the Greystone Ballroom, there was the 20 Grand and a multitude of different locals, like the Dairy Workers Hall, which was the Local 49. These were Union Halls where they would have different dances and they would have live bands or sometimes they would have records. So I was a dancer and just enjoyed the music like everybody else.

Actually the music bug didn't hit me until I was in the Navy. I was exposed to a couple of people who knew how to play piano a little bit and they showed me a couple of chords and I've never looked back since. That was really my induction into doing music and creating music, but loving music, I've done that all my life just like probably you and most of us have.

JL: So that's a perfect Segway into the Navy question. Why did you join the Navy?

MD: I was just bored. I was real smart in school and I didn't have to study and I think that hurt me a little bit because I got bored very quickly. Like prehistoric man and everything in the history books, that was extremely interesting to me but once they got to the British King whoever and this date, I want at all interested in that. So once you lose your interest you don't participate as you would have when you were interested. Like the Neanderthal man and the Cro-Magnon man and stuff. That was all very interesting because that pertained to me but European history, I just didn't see the value for me in that.

JL: So while you were in the Navy, I was in the Marine Corps, we talked about it a little bit, you get exposed to all these different people from every nook and cranny in the country...and I bet it would have been a little different back because I have [music in] Mp3 files and stuff like that, but your peers came with their 45's and vinyl. Can you talk a little about some of the music you heard that you didn't hear before?

MD: Absolutely. At the time I joined the Navy that's when Motown was just beginning. That's when my friend Barret Strong recorded the song "Money." And to go to Chicago, where I joined the Navy, I actually joined over here, but I went to Chicago for boot camp, it was extremely exciting to me, like "I know that guy!" So I guess it was being slowly embedded in me that music and Detroit were synonymous and that there was a lot of talent here and a lot of musical creativity and people were very innovative to take music to the next step to where it was going. It was a very sharp edge, a breaking of what they would call "Race music" to a more professional, more crossover appeal. Of course Barry Gordy and Motown did a great job with that. But before that it was just called "race music."

JL: So what do you mean by "race music?"

MD: "Race music" is music that came from our culture, from the back porches, from the houses and stuff like Blues. It might just be one guy sitting on the back porch playing a guitar, singing the Blues. That's where it came from but it evolved into where it became actually a legitimate music with proper instrumentation, with eventually symphony orchestras playing it and everything. We had to develop it to that point. It was in that process at that time.

JL: And Detroit was instrumental in that?

MD: Totally, totally. I think Motown is the most instrumental company in as far as developing crossover music. Of course there was the Drifters and Atlantic Records...they had strings on their records, they did a good job at cross over but Detroit took it to another level. That's history now of course but Motown is probably the most famous rhythm and blues label on the planet and I don't think there will ever be another, not at that level. Everything takes proper ingredients and for whatever reason it was a perfect storm. All the right people, the right situation, the right educational system, the employment that let people have the money to go out and enjoy themselves, there was a freedom that we had never really experienced before. It was very inspirational and it gave us a sense of optimism for the future.

JL: Ok. So how long were you in the Navy for?

MD: I was only in the Navy for 7 months because I had a medical discharge. They gave me some shots that broke me out. I hid for a month because I loved the Navy and I wanted to stay but I got a medical discharge, kept my uniform and everything, but I didn't want to come home but I guess that was my destiny because when I came home I started my musical career and I've been in it ever since.

JL: Perfect. That's exactly where I wanted to go with this. So you're out of the Navy, you're in Detroit, what year is this?

MD: Yeah, this is in 1959, early 60.

JL: So it's 1959, early 60, so how did you get connected to the music scene?

MD: I had a couple friends who were musicians. Joe Peel (Peal?) he was never big in the business but he was a guitar player and he knew Richard "Popcorn" Riley who is a legend in this city. Richard was affiliated with Motown, the early days of Motown, before they had hit records. This was back in the days when they just had Marv Johnson, Mary Wells, she really hadn't had her first hit, so this was very early. I had the opportunity to go down to Motown and see a real recording studio and to see how music was made and I was hooked after that.

JL: How did you get that invite?

MD: I went with my friend Joe Peel, who was a good friend of "Popcorn" Wiley's, who invited Joe. I got like a second or third hand invitation...

JL: Like a friend of a friend...

MD: Exactly, it was oh so exciting to me.

JL: I've actually been to Studio A on West Grand Blvd...

MD: That's where it was!

JL: And it blew my mind. I'm not from Detroit. I see this place that [gave birth to] all this music that everyone knows right off the bat, and it came from this little studio that's a converted garage essentially...

MD: Mmmhmm. Even back then they hadn't built the block extension on to the back of that house. Once that was built they had a real Studio A but that had to be put up. Barry Gordy was quite a genius and what he did with Motown is a phenomenon that will never occur again.

JL: What were some other labels that were around at the same time as Motown?

MD: There were so many. There were some even before Motown. For example Fortune Records. They had Nolan Strong and the Diablos, Andre Williams, Nathaniel Mayer. They had a couple of hit records that were million sellers. "The Wind" by Nolan Strong, "Mind Over Matter" by Nolan Strong and the Diablos, those were million sellers.

There was Northern Records which was owned by Johnnie May Matthews who was another very innovative woman. As a matter of fact, sometimes I tell people if she had been a man she'd had been some competition for Barry Gordy because she had the Temptations and the Supremes before Barry did. They were the Primes and Primettes. She released a record of the Temptations under the name of the Distant called come on.

She was very instrumental. She had a couple of hit records. I wrote three songs for her. She had a song called "I'm Gonna Send You Back to Georgia" by Timmy Shaw which was a big hit and was picked up by Atlantic Records. She had "My Little Angel" which she recorded. She was a very, very vibrant woman and a real go-getter. Some of these people that you may have never heard of in Detroit, they really made great contributions to the great legacy this city is.

Another one was Mike Hanks who owned D-Town records. These people didn't have the expertise or the vision that Barry had, but they had just as much love for the business as he had, just as much love.

JL: So that's what you think set him [Barry Gordy] apart, the vision and the business acumen?

MD: Without a doubt. He was a visionary among visionaries. He didn't start out with all the assets that Motown has. He started out with a tape recorder and a microphone and a few dollars. He had to have the ability to perceive what was important and develop it and he did. He was a person that was really able to take the entire level of the recording industry to another height, to greater heights.

He had such an ability to pay attention to detail. It wasn't just the songs, it wasn't just the music, it wasn't just the lyrics it was the way that they dressed. It was the way that they walked, it was the promotion. There are so many different aspects that go into the success of a venture and he had his finger on the pulse of all of them. As these different talented people and these different parts of his organization came to him that he didn't have before he knew exactly how to intertwine them in the business and get the most out of it.

He didn't start out with a James Jamison or these great musicians or great singers. They came to him. He had the ability to house many dreams and not just his. That's the difference that sets him apart from other producers in the city that made money. They didn't have the vision to include everybody else. He could house so many dreams and that's a very, very unusual quality.

JL: Tell me little bit about your music when you started playing around this time, when you started to form you own sound and identity. Did you have you own band? What were you playing?

MD: I was playing piano, actually. The very first song that I wrote was called "Happiness," simple little song, but even then I went to the studio, I took that guitar player Joe Peel with me and I recorded my own record.

JL: What studio?

MD: It was just a little studio. I don't even remember the name of it. What I did was I looked in the yellow pages looking under recording studios and I'd just call them up ask them for an appointment for an audition take my little songs in a cardboard briefcase get on the bus and most times I was accepted and encouraged by the people there, that's why I have to give so much credit to my city.

They were the ones that inspired me and nurtured me and made me continue this until I developed into the person I am today. Without that I may have given up. You have to have some reason to believe that you can do what you're doing. The encouragement and inspiration you get from people that say "Yeah that's it, you're doing it, that's it, that's good," The Funk Brothers, James Jamison, Earl Van Dyke they all encouraged me to no end.

James Jamison as famous a bass player as he was, I say was because he's passed on, he would come and sit in with my band and he would tell me "you're doing it keep doing what you're doing that's it." Of course, I'd be wondering if this is right. When you go into the business or any venture you don't know that you can do it you believe it you act on that faith but the only you're going to find out is to continue to develop it to continue to pursue it and then you'll find out. That's what happened with me.

JL: What were some of the names of the clubs?

MD: There was the famous club "the Chit-Chat" where all of the Motown artist even after they were really big the Tammy Tyrells and the Temptations and the Four Tops and Marvin Gaye and Diana Ross and the Supremes, they would all frequent many clubs in Detroit. They were just people. It's kind of like when you go to Hollywood. You look around and you see all these artist and they're just people walking

on the street. It was the same thing here. These artists were famous all over the world. But with us, they were just our citizens. Our famous citizens, but they lived here. You would see them all the time. There were so many clubs. As a matter of fact, back in the (19)60's every club had a live band. Even it was just a little 3 piece, guitar, bass and drums playing Blues they all had live entertainment. That gave you accessibility to see just where you stand as far as trying to perfect your talents and hone your craft.

JL: And the opportunity for a job...

MD: For a job, but also to find out if you even qualify. You can't find that out playing for your mom or your sister or your brother, they're going to love you. For you to find out what your potential is, you have to go before the public, the audience and they will either accept or reject you. For that to happen you do need that opportunity. The clubs, the radio, the bars, the recording studios, all of that was the perfect storm to bring about this phenomenon that Detroit was and is because of the opportunities that were presented there.

JL: Tell me about your life as a musician at this point in time, what's the weirdest Detroit bar story you got for me?

MD: [Laughter]

JL: The one where you look back at it and you're still chuckling [laughter]. I see that smile.

MD: Oh yeah, They're weren't so many weird ones here in Detroit but the weirdest one I could recall is...I used to play drums for a lot of people...I was the Temptations first drummer, I played for Martha and the Vandells, I was Smokey Robinson's personal drummer for two and a half years, I played a couple of weeks with Chuck Berry. Being able to play drums, write songs, sing, perform...I mean I did all this not because that was what I was trying to do, trying to become a multifaceted entertainer. I did it because I wanted to participate. If they didn't want me to sing, well do you want me to play? If you don't want me to play, do you want me to write a song? When you really, really have a desire and a passion for participating you utilize whatever assets you have in order to accomplish that. I'm just proud and grateful I have developed these talents. I'm grateful for each and every one of them. Playing for the Miracles and travelling all over the country the way I was able to it really exposed the professionalism of what is was like when you really became a pro.

JL: What's the difference between an amateur and a pro then?

MD: Amateurs are going to get the second or third tier of opportunity. When you get to be a real pro and you have success and you've proven yourself, then you're top shelf. Smokey Robinson had all the best gigs. All the best supper clubs, the universities, the big theaters. All of our itineraries were perfect, our cars were all rented, our hotel rooms. It was an opportunity to see what it was like when you've had success how it would manifest, it was great, it was the best gig I ever had I really enjoyed and I'll thank Smokey for that all for all my life.

JL: What's one particular show or gig you had with Smokey that sticks out in your mind?

MD: Oh it was the first one. There's a place in California, in Los Angeles, called the Greek Theater. I could not believe I was playing drums for Smokey Robinson! He's singing "Oh Baby, Baby" there's stars all over the sky, there's palm trees everywhere. There's a total and complete orchestra, full horns section, full violin section. I thought I was going to pass out. I really did. That show was great, I'll never forget. Just

the environment of it, just the setting...I had never played any shows like that. I had been playing in Bars all my life. Sometimes I'd do a big show but that was an experience I had never encountered before and it will stick with me always.

JL: What year was that?

MD: That was probably in 70. 69 or 70. Early 70. After that I had my very first big hit record with Holland Dosier called "You Got to Crawl Before You Walk" and it was a million seller. So I had to leave the Miracles and Smokey wanted to know "why you leaving?" He offered me more money and I said "No, Smokey, I have a hit record." He said "what do you mean?" Cause Smokey didn't know that I sang and wrote. He saw me as a drummer. So when I do this documentary that's going to be an interesting point I would want him to speak on, the fact that he never knew I had these other abilities. He just saw me as a very good drummer.

JL: So for 10 years you're just building your craft. From 1959 early 60 to 1970 with Smokey...so are you just doing bars...

MD: Well I had records out to. I had many record labels. I started out with Jackpot Records. My first record released from a professional company, Jackpot, was released in 1961. I went from Jackpot to Fortune Records. I went from Fortune Records to D-Town. I went from D-Town to KiKi Records. I went from KiKi to Amy Alabelle out of New York where I was produced, I wrote for myself, but I was produced by Mike Theodore and Dennis Coffey, two very talented producers in the city. I went from Amy Alabelle (sic?) to Holland to Invictus with Holland Dosier Holland.

I was recording and releasing records all through this time. They weren't necessarily hit records. Well they were definitely not hit records...to reflect on my history is something I never did until 2004, but we'll get to that. I was with many record labels. I played with many bands.

JL: Was it always here in Detroit or were you going around places?

MD: I was going around all types of places. As a matter of fact, in the early sixties I formed a group called the Jaywalkers and there was a member in that band his names was David Ruffian and he went on to become a very famous lead singer of the Temptations. Also Steve Mancha [Clyde Wilson] became a very successful writer and lead singer for a group called the 100 Proof that had million sellers. Everyone in that band went on to have extreme success.

JL: The Jaywalkers

MD: Yeah the Jaywalkers. We never recorded but we travelled all over Michigan to the Upper Peninsula sometimes we'd be going to Nub's Knob, a ski resort in the Upper Peninsula or the Club Ponytail right by the bridge in upper Michigan. We would be doing 100 mph on ice to get there. We were kids. There would be 5 guys, 3 girls, all our instruments, all our clothes in my 61 Chevy... Yeah...We were very adventurous.

I think that's why I had so many friends. I was probably the most adventurous. For some reason I've always had a lot of nerve. I was always the one who put the band together. I was always the one who went out and got the gig.

I mean, in the daytime, I'd put my suit on and grab my briefcase and go into a bar and say "You know what? You got a really nice club here. You know what you need? You need some excitement. I can provide that for you." The next thing you knew, we had the gig, so they were just like sitting on the porch waiting for me. They didn't have cars at that time. They didn't have that gift of going out and just soliciting people and getting jobs.

JL: Did that ever get you in like a sticky situation?

MD: No. It always assisted me. From there I did so many things. For 25 years I ate, breathed and slept this music. All day at the studios rehearsing and recording. All night at the clubs. If I had a gig I would do my gig but if I didn't I would go to several other bars and just sit in with my friends. If I was awake I was doing music, if I was asleep I was dreaming about it.

JL: I have to do a quick pause...say you wake up. What time do you wake up in this period of time?

MD: It would depend on how late I was out. Sometimes we'd be 5,6,7,8 O Clock in the morning...

JL: So just give me a typical 24 hour day for Melvin Davis.

MD: First thing I'd do when I got out of bed was go pick up Clyde Wilson who was Steve Matcha who was a famous singer and Dave [Ruffian?]. Dave was living with me at the time. We would take off. First thing we'd do is have a little breakfast. Then we'd stop by studios and see what they were doing see if there was any action going on, any recording going on. If we had a rehearsal that day we would rehearse, otherwise we'd work on songs, and we would just talk about our dreams and our aspirations. This was 24-7. Then in the evenings, if we had a gig we would do that. If we were going out of town we would be packing our clothes, arranging our outfits and getting our stuff out of the cleaners. Just getting ready to do it.

JL: So your clothes, tell me a little about your clothes and the style back then.

MD: Dressing has always been a great part of entertainment and that's how we got the name the Jaywalkers. We went downtown to Sherman's to get uniforms for the band and we all got a jaywalking ticket [laughter]. So I said "that's the name of the band, the Jaywalkers!" So we never paid the tickets incidentally [laughter] so maybe I shouldn't put this in the archives. But that's how that name occurred. We all got a jaywalking ticket when we down to get a uniform, our first set of uniforms for the Jaywalkers was how that name came about.

JL: How did those uniforms look?

MD: They were bluish silver-ish jackets and black pants and tuxedo shirts with the little tuxedo ties. Oh we were sharp. I see how you're dressed right now. You're representing the city very well right now. You know that's something we do in Detroit, we represent!

This one guy says "Melvin, I've never seen you when you're not wearing a suit." I says "Well my mom taught me a long time ago." She'd look at what I was wearing and she would say "Well, you ain't going nowhere with me looking like that." [laughter]

I carried that on and I realized that you never get a second chance to make a first impression so you really should try to represent to try to show visually what you are inside. If you are a professional, then

dress professional, speak professionally and act professionally. That way whatever you are involved it would receive the dignity it deserves.

JL: I agree with you 100 percent and I was raised in that same vein.

MD: Yep, I can look at you and tell, yeah.

JL: So you were just talking about touring and you were just talking about going up to the bridge and all that. Could you tell me some of the strange things you've seen, like only in Michigan, Michigan as a special place? I heard that you actually went to Indian reservations.

MD: Well we played near Indian reservations but we didn't play on the reservations.

JL: What was it like near those reservations?

MD: Oh it was real nice because actually I realized that most of those people close to the Upper Peninsula, they hadn't seen black people. What they were really sort of anti, they were anti-Indian.

JL: Really?

MD: Yeah but they weren't anti-black [laughter]. I could go some places that the Indians couldn't go and it was... I say "wow." Segregation takes all types of forms...

JL": This is perfect. This is the kind of stuff I never could have imagined...

MD: Yeah, yeah and like I say I'm disappointed about segregation but I can't afford to be bitter. Just like in so many situations I made a lot of money for people and I never received my proper share but I'm not bitter about it. You have to be careful about what you put into your system. Everything has a result. If you want a positive life, you have to put positive ingredients in your system. You have to find a way to look at everything in a realistic manner. The fact that I didn't get paid could make me bitter but I won't allow it. I know I've fulfilled my obligations to the best of my ability. Now if someone chose not to fulfill their obligation to me that's not something I should be bitter about. I didn't do that. I'll be disappointed, but I'm not going to allow it to make me bitter. That would take away from my energy to continue pursuing my destiny.

JL: Would you say music was a bridge for those people up in the Upper Peninsula when you would come to those clubs....

MD: Oh without a doubt. They loved it. They really did. It was an opportunity for them to experience real Detroit energy which there was no other way they could do that without coming down into the city. We would drive them people nuts.

JL: What were some of the clubs? Do you remember the names of them?

MD: The Club Ponytail was one of the main ones and Nubs Knob the ski resort was the other one. There were a couple of other clubs like in Muskegon we played a place called the Ebony Club. It was out in the woods and we lived upstairs. It was great. There was horseback riding and a place called Goose Egg Lake. There was go kart racing. We would do all these things in the daytime. I've really had a great life, I really have.

JL: So you were like the house band for the Ebony Club?

MD: We were the show band. Don Tamarino, who was the owner of the Ebony Club...

JL: What year was this, I'm sorry...

MD: This was probably in 63, 64 and 65. Don Tamarino owned the Ebony Club. He allowed me to book the shows for him. I would take a couple of exotic dancers up there. I would take a lead singer. I would take an opening act. We would play for all of those people. We were the house band but I also booked the shows for him. It was a great opportunity for me and it was a feather in his cap because I did a really great job and I didn't charge him for that. I just charged him to play. I didn't charge him a booking fee. So it was good.

JL: You got your fingers in management and all that.

MD: Yeah, yeah. That's why I can put on shows right now. I've been a promoter on many, many shows. I've done my own shows. I have my own record label Rock Mill Records. Every time I went on a venture and put a record out and it wasn't successful the first person I would look at was myself. To look at myself in the mirror and say "what can I do next time to give it more of an opportunity for success?"

That's why ended up playing drums, playing keyboards, writing songs, recording my own...I have many, many songs. I've used the Detroit Symphony Orchestra on some of my own songs on my own label. It really led me to become more entrepreneurial. It allowed me to see the business from many different aspects. I understand from many different points of view.

That's why I love to have win-win-win situations. Some promoters, all they care about is the ticket sales. I care about the people, I care about the performers and I care about the promoter. If you can get those three in alignment and those three are happy, you will be successful. There's no doubt about it.

And the Club Sepia which was another club in Muskegon that I spent many, many nights at. Probably 2 or 3 years I was back and forth up there.

JL: So you're a Michigan man through and through...

MD: Without a doubt, yeah

JL: Can you tell me a little about what makes Michigan, Michigan? What does it hold in your heart when you hear the word Michigan? Especially when you are away from Michigan.

MD: Well I think it was because this is where I was raised and wherever you're raised, it's a part of your fiber. The environment. The people that you know. The experiences that you've had. The situations you've been involved in. It's all here in Detroit. So I tell people all the time "I am Detroit and Detroit is me."

Detroit is not like I've said before some inanimate object. It is the people. Without the people what would the city be except a bunch of empty buildings? My history's here and hopefully my future is here. I won't be leaving Detroit. No. I have some difficulties with some of the things. Detroit does not recognize their own history. And history not recognized, I like to say will be history lost. That's why I'm in the process of doing this interview with you right now, Jesse.

I think all of this needs to be documented. It needs to be passed on from generation to generation. It is an opportunity to extend the pride to the next generation instead of so much of the shame. When I look

around I see that there is reason for these youngsters to be ashamed. I think it's up to us to give them reason to be proud. To carry on the tradition that is Detroit, one of the greatest cities on the planet.

JL: We're going to get to a little more difficult subject. We're going to talk about the riot in 1967, or the uprising, however you want to term it. Can you talk a little about that?

MD: Like you say, it was in 1967. On the night it actually occurred I was at Cedar Point with my girlfriend. We were coming back home and all of a sudden there was this extreme traffic jam that was just miles and miles and miles long. We didn't know what the deal was. As we got closer to where the state police were turning people around...if you didn't have Michigan identification they would turn you around and send you back. Since we lived in Detroit they had to let us through. It was a very difficult time in the city. It was like an occupation. The city has never been the same since. We are still living that legacy of the riots.

JL: What were you doing during those days? It lasted for a week, right?

MD: It lasted for longer than a week actually. The repercussions of it have lasted until this day. There were curfews so there wasn't very much that you could do. You stayed at home. During the day you could go out. My dad he worked at Chrysler and he was coming home from work and he got a shotgun thrown right in his face and he didn't like it at all. But my stepfather, he was not an educated man, so he came home and cried about it. He just felt totally violated.

Whenever something like that occurs you're always going to have atrocities. They are going to take some things out on the wrong people. Sort of like what we got going on today. Right now we are talking about what happened in France, but we're not saying much about what happened in Lebanon or what happened in Iraq or what happened in Afghanistan or what happened in Syria.

It's like we value some people more than we value others. I just want us to develop a mindset where we can rise above that. We must. If we are going to be able to save ourselves we must rise above this negativity. We must. I do truly trust that we will.

JL: Why do you think those riots went down in 1967?

MD: I think they went down because there was a sense of injustice. Like Martin Luther King said "Justice delayed is justice denied." We had passed the Civil rights Act, this is before we passed the Civil Rights Act, but we had the emancipation a 100 years ago but we still weren't free. We are still not free. Freedom is a difficult word to define. In our country, in the USA, with the pay to play thing, freedom really is money.

How much freedom can you buy? I understand that, but I am little concerned about having a society that allows us to prey on one another the way that we do. It's always going to result in the rich getting richer and the poor being denied, unless we resist that. We must understand that we can resist that and we should. We are the nation. It's not the corporate structure...I'm proud of the corporate structure and what we've been able to do. I'm ashamed of what they did with the Free Trade Act because they deserted us and that's just a fact...

JL: Deserted the City of Detroit?

MD: Deserted the nation of America. Anytime you lose tens of millions of jobs, you lose tens of millions of dreams. I don't think those jobs are ever coming back. We've destroyed our productive ability. If you don't have production, you will have destruction. I don't think this is a secret I am telling anybody. All of these so called brightest of the bright and best of the best, they had to know taking all those jobs overseas was going to destroy our tax base. For me to say "Oh it was just an accident" or for them to say that, of course it's not true. They had the intelligence to know what it was going to result in. Obviously they chose to do it. They're not suffering, we are.

That's just a fact and for them to deny it, they can't get mad at me, they're just getting mad at the truth. I have a saying, "I won't lie for you and I won't lie on you." I am a lover of the truth because that is the door to freedom. If you stand against truth you're in trouble. I was doing this interview, and I tell the girl, "the funny thing about truth, it doesn't need our approval our acceptance our permission [laughter] truth is absolute. It's by itself. It's not going to change because we don't like it. If it did then how could it be truth? We have to realize these things and accept them. We also have to implement them. We spend so much time dealing with unimportant things until we don't focus on the things that are really important and if we don't focus on them, then we don't really embody them.

I have a lot of songs on my new album. They have a lot of advice and a lot of wise things that I am saying. I'm trying to live those songs. It's sort of like having a table full of food. If you don't eat it you will starve to death. To know and not do means that knowing did you no good. These are just basic things that I want us to pass on to the next generation so they can have the opportunity to succeed rather than fail. I got a song on the new album called "Power, Glory, Fortune and Fame" [recites lyrics] same old story same old game no blame no shame no rules to the game power glory fortune and fame. The bridge says "words and deed are just like seeds whatever you just will grow." Be careful what you do and say. It's going to have repercussions.

MD: Can you talk about the repercussions of the riot?

MD: I think we're seeing them right now, the city has been going down. The city has lost its population. The city has lost its employment. The city has lost its leadership as far as its personnel and its people go. If you create a situation where you drive out all the successful people and all the people that have the ability to pass on the necessary attributes to be successful in life then you're left with whatever's left. I think that's what happened to Detroit. We're left with whatever was left. The opportunity is no longer here. We're seeing the result of what that means.

JL: How did it effect, specifically, say it's 1967, 1968, how did it effect the music scene over here? How did the musicians handle it?

MD: I think that's one thing about the creative arts. It doesn't suffer from some of the detrimental things that the rest of society might suffer from because of the mindset of creative people. I know the music scene changed. That's when Motown started to fade.

JL: They moved, right?

MD: Yeah, they left. For one thing music was changing. People were seeking truth. It wasn't just the riots it was also a revolution of mind. The war, that played a big part in it. A lot of youngsters of all nationalities started to realize that a lot of what they had believed throughout their lives and been told was false. Therefore you had the hippie movement and the songs of freedom and the songs of

truth...there was a metamorphosis that took place and not just in the black culture but in the culture of the United States. People had to realize that if we were going to stop living these lies...because sometimes, I hate to say it but our democracy is a hypocrisy.

A lot of what we profess to be, we are not. We want to be but...we first have to realize the fact that we are not. Why would you pursue something that you don't think exists? You have to realize where you are and be honest about it and try to move forward and better yourself in order to that we have to do what we're doing right now. It's up to us. It's up to the people. Each individual is important.

I am writing another song and in that song...I do a lot of soul searching when I write. I write love songs. I have many, many love songs. This is a form of love. Politics is life. I wrote this down in a book..."we as a people we are blessed and we're cursed, we're the best and the worst." In our humanity we have Mother Theresa and we have Hitler, but we are all humanity. We are all part of the human experience. We have to find a way to navigate this positive and negative and come out on top. We have to do that. That's why we're here.

JL: So back to the music at this time, so it's going from soul to rock n roll and all that. Can you talk about that? I know you worked with Wayne Kramer.

MD: As a matter of fact I've got a song on my new CD "WCTP: We Come To Party." At the end it tells what my music is [breaks into song] "It's soul, rock n roll, rhythm and blues." You'll hear it when you hear it. Those are the three forms of music...I play Jazz but those are the three genres I feel that I am best equipped to express and to create, soul, rhythm and blues and rock n roll.

JL: How did you get into the rock n roll scene?

MD: I've always loved rock n roll from Chuck Berry, from back in the day, I've always loved rock n roll. Little Richard was rock n roll, Chuck Berry was rock n roll, Fats Domino was rock n roll. Rock n roll came out of the black experience but being the watershed that we all are, there was the country influence in rock n roll. That's one thing about music. It doesn't mind crossing lines. At all. We have a problem with it. Music doesn't have a problem with that's why I am so grateful to be in the profession that I am in. It allows me to cross these lines. I played country for a while with one of the best steel guitar players in the country, Don Davis was his name. I used to sing "Cheatin' Heart."

I tell you what happened one time. There were a couple guys in there, you know these were the good ol boys and they wanted to press me a little bit, they got me in the parking lot, they called me few names, the whole bar came out and defended me... "That's our drummer you get hell out of here" and these were the good ol boys. I don't have a racist or prejudice bone in my body...

JL: When and where was this?

MD: This was in Pontiac probably in 1971 it could have been early than that might have been 69. There are good people...I don't care what color you are I care what type of person you are. I'll go back to what Martin Luther King said "It's the content of your character" what type of person you are. You can be green, blue, stripes, spotted, polka dot, whatever, what matters is what type of person you are and that's going to determine what type of relationship we are going to have and what type of deeds you are going to put forth.

I do see it changing. I see people that have been a victim...sometimes when these people have these biases they are the first victim without even realizing it you have sold yourself short as a human being. Don't do that. Rise to your potential. Expect, demand more of yourself, demand it! If you don't who will? Someone else outside of you can influence you to an extent but you best friend has to be in here or your worst enemy. It's up to you to choose which it is, you know? Whatever your profession is, whatever your expertise or work you choose, what type of person you are is going to determine your success.

What your characteristics are that's going to determine what type of person you are and what type of environmental situation you are going to develop. Positive people don't do well around negatives. Negative people don't want to be bothered with positive peoples so what you are that's what you are going to attract so make sure that you're trying to attract something that's going to be of benefit to you rather than a hindrance.

JL: Tell me about the Northern Soul scene.

MD: Ah! The Northern Soul scene was fantastic. I had known about it and I have heard about it ever since the 70s and some of my friends had gone over and talked about what a wonderful experience it was...

JL: Just for the record could you talk about what it is...

MD: Oh yeah, I'm getting to that. I had expected it to be a great experience. What it really is, is an appreciation, a fever for the music that was created in Detroit and some of the other cities but mainly Detroit by people on the European continent, especially the English. Now, when it started out, they would not play this music on English radio. But there was a boat, from what I understand, from the story of the Northern Soul movement, that was anchored offshore and they could play it. So everybody would tune in to hear all this fabulous music that had all this energy and all this innocence and all this enthusiasm...

JL: So this is contemporary, in the 60s, this boat was out there?

MD: Yeah. This was in the 60's. Very early as it was going on. Motown wasn't famous then. The Northern Soul movement, they are really famous for loving music that didn't gain fame. They're not interested in the Motown records because they were millions of them. But for instance, my record, this song that I recorded on the D-town label "Find a Quiet Place" it's worth 3500 dollars right now...

JL: Yeah, I saw "Wedding Bells" which is a song...

MD: 1200 dollars a copy!

JL: I love that song, man, that organ in the background kills me, it's a beautiful song.

MD: Thank you! Oh wow. Now because of the fact that there were only 1000 or 500 pressed that makes them extremely rare. We're talking about vinyl here. CDs anyone with a computer can make a CD. The collectability of vinyl is so viable because if you don't have a pressing plant you can't make a vinyl. You cannot do that at home. So the collectability has...there are several people in England that are fans of mine and they're the greatest people in the world, that have over a million dollars worth of records in their houses and their garages. "I must love you" is worth 1800 dollars a copy. That was on the

Groovesville label. I have so many, because I have so many that weren't a real success [laughter]. I really thought that they had no value, to tell you the truth. Here, in my city, I had never sang those songs live ever.

JL: Really?

MD: Never sang them onstage in my life. When they were out on the radio I went out and did some record hops. I never put a band together and sang those songs. I would do cover songs.

JL: What do you mean by record hops?

MD: You would do record hops for DJs that were playing your record and they would have certain events and you would go down and perform for them for free so that's a record hop. I did so many if these for so many disc jockeys...Ernie Durham, Ken Bell, Butterball Joltin Joe Howard. There was so many great djs that participated in bring our music to the public. But the Northern Soul scene I expected to go over there and have a great great experience I took my younger son Brian Davis with me

JL: What year was this?

MD: This was in 2004.

JL: How did you get hooked up with it at all?

MD: I had talked to people in England that wanted my history and wanted interviews and all that so I knew of several people over there. When I did go in 2004 it was because I was invited to do the biggest show in England. It was in Prestatyn which is in Wales. There were 5000 people there. I had to relearn these songs that I wrote I had to learn them again.

I said what songs do you want me to do? I had a couple of million sellers then. I had "You Gotta Crawl Before You Walk" and he said "no, no, no we don't want them. We want the old stuff." Then he starts looking at my list and he says "Oh my God there's so many of them aren't there?"

Most people in the Northern Soul genre had one or two flops and they go over and they are kind of obscure artist. But I had flop after flop after flop [laughs] so they had dozens of records...I've written over 600 songs. They had dozens of songs to choose from. When I went over and did them, they knew all the lyrics. I couldn't fake it. I had to learn my lyrics and then I learned something else.

JL: The audience members? They were singing back to you?

MD: They were singing background, the whole 5000...I'll tell you what, when I went out on stage...

JL: That must have been a surreal experience...

MD: The whole thing was weird. I had a brand new white suit. Snow white, I mean not off white, snow white, and I came out on stage and they said "Here he is... Melvin Davis" and I came out and I started singing and they were looking at me like this...they were just like...and I'm going like "wow, I hope they are enjoying this." So I just kept on singing. I'm wondering if they like me and what's going on. They were just staring at me.

Then when the musical interlude came, I stepped back, did a spin, and danced all the way across the stage and they went berserk. I realized, after the fact, that they had never seen me before. So it was just

like they were looking at Santa Claus. They were just awestruck and I was with them. After that interlude, the whole night after that, was just crazy. They didn't want me to leave the stage

JL: What songs did you sing?

MD: I sang "Chains of Love" which also recorded by Mayba Staples, JJ Barnes, the Dirtbombs, Larry Hughes, Jimmy Hughes and it was also in a very famous award Winning movie "the Diving Bell and the Butterfly." I did "I Must Love You" which was my first hit number one record here. I did "Find a Quiet Place" which is one of my favorite songs. All of these are love songs. I did "I'm the One Who Loves You." I did all my love songs. I did about 10 or 12 songs. My son had tears in his eyes. He looks at me and says "Dad these people love you." And I said "I'm checking it out."

There were two or three generations of people there. The older people were following me around. 10 or 12 just looking at me, taking pictures. Their kids following my son around. My son came over to me and said "dad you got to come over and talk to this guy" I said ok and I come over and he's standing against the wall and he got on these big thick glasses. He's not a dancer. I reach out to shake his hand and his hand was shaking. And it was sweating and he says [mimicking a stutter] "MmmmmMelvin my wife left me and my kids left me but you never left me." Tears were coming out of my eyes. What he was telling me is that I helped him through t most difficult part of his life with my songs.

I won't go on but here at least 6 or 7 occasions like that. This one lady, she said... "This Love Was Meant to Be" that was my favorite song so I sang a little bit of it [breaks into song] "you're the one that loves me so true, when everyday problems get me down, I can always turn to you" She started crying. She said "I had my first baby to that song" I'm starting to realize that I have affected these people's lives for decades.

JL: Was this the first time that that hit you?

MD: Absolutely. How would I know that? I had never been there before. It changed my life. I had never reflected on my career. I was always moving ahead. Living in the moment and moving ahead. What could I do with something that nobody wanted here? Nobody was "Hey Melvin come and sing 'I Must Love You' come and sing 'Chains of Love'." Now they are. Now I do them all on stage. But then they weren't in demand. I knew nothing about this love of this music and this value.

Then I did one other gig over there. It was at a place called Stoke on Trent. I only had to sing two songs. But I had two 45 minute sessions of question answering with the media. In the lobby they played all Melvin Davis songs that I had written. For all the people that I have written...cause I have written for 8 or 9 people. I even written for Lonette McKee, the famous actress. I wrote her first song when she was 14 years old "Stop Don't Worry About It."

I wrote for Johnny Taylor. I wrote for JJ Barnes. I wrote for Steve Mancha. The list goes on and on. You can check my history and see that's it all there. That's when I turned to my son and said "I've never realized how many songs I've written." Listening to them, it was like turning the pages of my life, Jesse. You know what I mean? Every song took me back to that era and I never sat down and listened to my own material.

2004 was a life changing experience for me. I owe it to the Brits. I dubbed them "Soul Angels." I did and they loved it. This one guys said "Melvin, I've always loved your music but I would pay to come and hear

you speak. I didn't know what to say about that because I don't have no ego. I don't know how to accept compliments like that. I've never had an ego. I'm so full of gratitude that I have no room for an ego. No place to put it. I don't know what you do with an ego anyways. What do you do with it? Get in front of the mirror and say "well I'm just the man" What do you do with it? I don't know. Do you?

JL: I don't [laughter]. The Marine Corps took that from me.

MD: [laughter] I see people that have them all the time but what is that given you, what is that doing for you?

JL: Have you been back to England since 2004?

MD: Oh yeah, I've been over there several times now and each time it has been great I've been to Spain, I've been to England, I've been to the Netherlands I've been to Austria, I've been to Germany, I've been to Sweden...

JL: And this is touring?

MD: Yeah...I've been to Italy, I've been to Hungary. I've had the opportunity to really take this Detroit experience and share it with so many other cultures of the world and I am so grateful and proud of that, I am.

JL: What is Detroit? What is it that you are trying to express to them?

MD: I'm trying to express the energy and the spirituality and the never say die energy of Detroit.

JL: Never say die?

MD: Never say die. I was telling them 5 years ago that Detroit will be back. Now everyone can see it. I never doubted it. I believe in the people here. It was just a matter of time. I'm working on a song right now that I am going to get some of my legendary friends to participate with me and I am going to give it to this city of Detroit. It's just a positive message about Detroit. I think Detroit....It's never going to be what it was, but we don't want it to be what it was. Nothing ever returns. The very first song on my new album is called "Cherish Each Moment." It talks about our most valuable commodity, which is our time. What you do with will determine what kind of life you have. Time is more valuable than anything. And if you don't believe it, run out of time and see how much you can accomplish. [Laughter] Not much.

JL: So tell me a little more about this documentary.

MD: Well the documentary is really going to highlight my life...

JL: Who are you working with on it?

MD: I'm working with...Michael [Ramsdell], my filmmaker...he has had several documentaries that have been successful before. Matter of fact he's out of the country right now receiving an award for one of the documentaries "Why Elephants Fight" [When Elephants Fight]. We are spending an extensive amount of money to really bring the history of Detroit to this documentary as seen through my eyes.

I've had so many different experiences and I've participated in Detroit in so many different facets, as a musician, as a writer, as a producer, as a student, as a citizen, so I am going to talk about all of that. I

love the idea. I wanted to do a documentary on myself but I think that this is so much more. It's not just about me. It's about the city which makes it 10 times bigger than me.

All of the different eras that I've gone through, all of the different situations I've participated in, all of the wonderful people that I have been inspired by. I just want to talk about all that and make sure it's documented because I think I told you when we're coming up "history not documented can oftentimes become history lost." I don't know very many people that can tell the story the way that I can. I've heard all about what happened, we all have. What we really should know is why did it happen and how did it happen and I can tell that.

JL: I think you have a little bit.

MD: I have and I'm glad you have some of this down because it does involve so many different influences, the deejays, the record shops, the radio stations, the clubs, the recording studios, the recording companies, the public. All of that. It's not just one or two things that cause something like the phenomenon of Detroit to happen. It is many ingredients coming together somehow at the same time to allow this to develop. I think that a lot of ingredients are coming together right now allowing Detroit to enjoy the success and development that it is going through right now.

JL: What are these ingredients in your mind?

MD: I think it's the people, the money, the willingness to invest in the city. I saw a headline that said "Detroit's Dead." It's ridiculous. According to who? According to you? No. If you said something like that you don't know very much about us. Because we don't die, we multiply [laughter]. We just have to have the willingness to work together. I think it's a contagious thing. Like I said I have that saying "catch the fever, be a believer."

We have to bring the positive energy out. Then it becomes contagious rather than the negative energy. Everything is a learned experience. The only way you know two and two is four is become someone told you. You didn't get two sticks and two rocks and go "oh my god!" We are teachers and we are students. We have to be good at both. I think that's why Detroit is going to rise again and is rising. I think it will continue because this is a contagious effort that we have.

You can feel it in the city. That's part of what I'm saying in this song that I'm writing [recites] working together making it better building it up higher than ever we got the talent we got the skill we got the talent and we got the will [breaks into song] cause there aint no city like Motor City aint no town like Motown [laughter] I have the whole audience when I got gigs singing that with me...

JL: I believe it.

MD: I do and they love it, yeah.

JL: We are kind of winding down right now. Tell me a little bit about the new album and tell me a little about what the future holds for Melvin Davis.

MD: The new album is really a continuation of bringing good quality music with a Detroit energy to the world. This album "Double or Nothing" is that. I think that the documentary and the album working together, I think we are going to hear a lot about this. It has a lot of songs. I did an interview with Metro Times and the headline said "If I don't believe it, I don't write it" Everything in this CD I do truly believe, I

want people to understand, like I told them when I was inducted into the Rhythm and Blues Hall of Fame, this is not something that we've done, this is something that we are and continue to do. We need to pass it on to the next generation so they can carry on this great legacy because there are so many talented people in this city. I know the opportunities don't exist the way they did when I was growing up but that doesn't mean they can't be developed. I want us to believe in them.

I am going to spending the rest of my life doing everything I can to highlight the energy the spirituality and the creativity of this city. I hope it just becomes a contagious thing and carries on to the next generation and they continue to make Detroit great. I believe that the best days are ahead of us, I do. I have to believe that. Otherwise, I'd be a part of the doubters, but I'm one of the faithful.

I got another saying. I got so many of these sayings. "Gratitude creates joy" and "you've got to feed the faith and starve the doubt because what you put in is what comes out." These are just the things that I not only believe but I try to live them. If you really believe them then live them. If you don't live them, then they are not a reality. We have to realize what we know...not just in our minds but realize it and make it a reality. We have to do it or it won't be done. No one is going to do it for us. We have to do it ourselves.

JL: You had this epiphany in 2004 that you had this big effect on people's lives, what's one of the big lessons life has taught you?

MD: What you put into life is what you get out. You have to be cognizant about this. Everything that you say and everything that you do is very important because we are all connected. The entire universe is one thing and we are all a part of that one thing. We are here to learn the lesson of how to participate, how to manage this great responsibility if planet earth that we have. We have to be a lot more serious about that.

I told them when I did a gig, it must have been a couple of years ago, a New Year's Eve gig I just wanted to remind them that this year make a commitment to think about a few things. We are so obsessed with possessions. I want this and this and grabbing and more and more. I want you to realize that this is not your stuff. It is for you to use while you are here. You are going to leave just the way you came, naked. Tutankhamen, he filled up a pyramid with all this stuff. He has been gone for 10 thousand years and his stuff is still all there. You don't take anything with you, so relax, it's not yours. It's a loan.

JL: Where does music fall into all of this?

MD: Music is a vehicle to express that. To share the lives that we lived. To share our emotional experiences. To share our beliefs, our hopes and dreams, our fears. Everything. Music is the soundtrack of life. Every culture has already had it. But every culture is interchangeable. When I hear African music, when I hear Jewish music, when I hear music of other cultures I understand what it is they are getting out of it. They are expressing their experience. This one asked me "What is the Blues? Why do Black people sing the blues?" I said "Well, if you've been enslaved for hundreds of years you're not going to have a song about oh how happy I am." You're just not. That's not a reality. But you can express your pain and that's your way of releasing it. You're not expressing that as something that you're proud of, it's something that you want to get rid of.

JL: Catharsis.

MD: Catharsis! That's what it is. It's not like you're living that every day, but it is a part of your life. You don't just want to internalize it and absorb it, so you sing about it and let it out and then you feel better. Everybody can have the Blues. Everybody has ups and downs in life. When you have been victimized, you're going to have more downs than you are going to have ups. Because there have been placed a lot of obstacles in front of you. It's a reality and you can't allow it to make you bitter although it does sometimes and it has a tendency and possibility of doing that. You have to resist that. That way you'll have the energy to rise above it. If you just continue to hate, you're just victimizing yourself all over again, continuously. And to allow yourself to do that is a mistake. I won't say it is stupid because that's the wrong word to use. It's human. We do that and we must learn to rise above that and that comes into this thing I talk about called mindset.

JL: What is the mindset of a Detroit? What makes a Detroit different than anyone else in the country? What your definition of a Detroit?

MD: For myself I have a very positive, forward looking mindset. I realize that that doesn't mean that everyone in the city does. The mindset of the city is going through a period of adjustment right now. We have had a mindset of being a victim, of being like someone's done something to us, of waiting for someone to rescue us. We have to get out of that. We have to realize that we must empower each other. First, you must empower yourself by realizing what you are. I wrote this down. "Every individual is one of a kind, an original divine design." You have to realize what you're created to be and what your capabilities and potential is. You have to be willing to fight for that and get in your own face and demand more of yourself.

Don't accept mediocrity. If you do, that's what you're going to be saddled with. It's that simple. You have to demand things of yourself. You have to have expectations of yourself and not just "well it don't matter." Everything matters. Everything. Action, reaction. Cause and effect. Nothing just happens. Everything is caused. Everything. If there is a door open, if the wind doesn't blow it or you don't push it, that door will remain open forever. It needs a cause to have an effect. That's throughout life. I think that if we can understand this...and implement it in our lives and start to live it, then we'll become examples for the next generation and we could prevent some of these negative things from occurring and we could make a better life for ourselves. It starts on an individual basis.

JL: So imagine it's a 100, 200 years in the future and some kid on an MP3 or whatever format they are listening to now hears "Wedding Bells" or one of your songs...what do you want him to think, what do you want him to know?

MD: I want him to know that it came from my heart. I also hope that it will inspire him. When I look out into the audience and I see youngsters just looking at me I ask myself "how do I know which one of them can do what I'm doing?" I don't. That's how it happened to me. I saw something. I felt something and I was inspired. So if I can do that for people, rather it's now or if its 200 years from, then my life will have been well served. I feel that I would have had a good reason for being here. I don't want to leave without a good reason for being here because then I feel like I've wasted life. A life is too precious a thing to waste.

JL: For my final question, we're at it now. Imagine a researcher is going to find this file of our conversation, of our oral history, 200 years, 300 years in the future, 2215. Is there anything else that you'd want him to know about you, your music, and the city of Detroit?

MD: I would like for him to look back at the history and say “Wow he was right!” [laughter] “Look at us now! We are a thriving metropolis. We have a very positive community. Everything that Melvin thought and believed has come to fruit.” I have a lot of very positive thoughts for Detroit, for Michigan, for the United States, for this planet, for this universe because I am a part of this. We come here for a very short time and then it’s time to go. What the next phase is, nobody really knows. We make a lot of guesses about it and we have our own personal beliefs. I’m not a very religious person, but I am extremely spiritual as you can probably tell. I just hope that what I am hoping and what I am dreaming and what I am believing, actually comes to fruit. I have to continue to believe that. Why would I doubt it? Then I am working against my own hopes and dreams. If I allow myself to be infiltrated with doubt. Keep the faith.

JL: That’s the final thing you want to say?

MD: Keep the faith. Absolutely.

JL: Alright, thank you Melvin Davis.

MD: That goes for you too, Jesse. I appreciate it. What you are doing right here I feel that it’s very important. I don’t know what avenues these talks and these archival productions that you guys are doing...I don’t know where they are going to end up. I’m sure that you don’t either. But I believe that destiny will put them in the right place and I hope that it will influence the people that it’s meant to influence. I really do.

JL: Yeah and you have the important names and dates. That’s what I was trying to grab. We got the Ebony club, Ponytail, there not there anymore.

MD: Yeah, these are just that I have experienced in my life. No, they’re not. Even the recording companies like Golden World is not there anymore. It’s a strip mall. Fortune records is not there anymore. Thankfully, Motown, the Hitsville building is still there. It’s there because of the success that they had. Also we were able to preserve United Sound. Which is a recording studio that was here long before Motown. As a matter of fact, Motown recorded there. Berry started recording there. But I feel that United Sound has value to Detroit’s history that’s even beyond Motown. Because of the fact that Motown, that recording studio, you had to be a Motown artist to record there.

United Sound allowed anyone that wanted to come and record. It allowed dozens of fledgling record labels and recording artists to go in and participate in the music industry. So I am glad that the business and recording studio were saved and I want people to understand the value, the historical value it has for the city of Detroit. We’re losing our landmarks. That’s one thing that I noticed when I went to England. I would see a brand new building and right there, right next to it a completely refurbished building that was 400 years old. And I said “Why can’t we have that here?”

Just like I looked at the people dancing to my music. Three generations! A little three year old. I looked at her and I said “what are you doing here?” “Why can’t I have this in my city?” Where we can share this experience. Hopefully it is in the process of being developed right now. That we can bring this history to this city. And it can be shared with the next generation and they can share it with their next generation and it will continue to be a bright light in the city of Detroit. Keep the faith, once again, keep the faith. [laughter]

JL: Thank you.

MD: Thank you. Let's see where we are with time because I don't want to get a ticket out there, 'cause they like to give them to you! Oh man, they just got their little pen ready [laughter] but I guess it's their job, you know? Oh my goodness I'm over. I better boogie.

Descriptive Record

1. Basic Information

- a. **Title:** Melvin Davis Oral History
- b. **Identifier:** [Accession #] UP002660_Davis
- c. **Resource Type:** Choose: *Collection* The Other Motown Oral History Project
- d. **Language:** Choose: *language of materials* ENGLISH
- e. **Restrictions:** Check box if restrictions. If no restrictions, leave unchecked.

2. Dates (Filled in via EAD)

- a. **Label:** *Creation* November 18, 2015

ONLY use the Expression field if entering circa dates. Otherwise, delete the content in the Expression field and use the Begin and End date fields.

- b. **Expression:** [circa 1947-2015]
- c. **Type:** Choose one: *Inclusive Dates*
- d. **Begin:** [Date] 1947
- e. **End:** [Date] (only if Inclusive Dates was selected) 2015

3. Extents

- a. **Portion:** WHOLE
- b. **Number:** 2 (TRANSCRIPTION DOCUMENT AND AUDIO FILE)
- c. **Type:** ITEM; Transcription 145 kilobytes; Audio 45 megabytes
- d. **Container Summary:** ([## MB, SB, or OS]); Include [# cassettes], [# reels], etc. if describing recordings; Change to ([## files]) if describing digital. PDF and WAV
- e. **Physical Details:** (Describe the specific type of recording format, e.g., audio recording, film reels, etc.) N/A
- f. **Finding Aid Status:** *In Process*

4. Subjects

If creating a resource record for a legacy collection, only create subjects for those subjects associated with the collection on the Reuther website.

- a. **Select:** *Add Subject*
- b. **Subjects:** Begin typing, browse, or create subject. If creating a new subject, check [LCSH](#) first.

[Soul music.](#)

[Popular music -- 1961-1970.](#)

[Rhythm and blues music.](#)

[Musicians](#) -- [Michigan](#) -- [Detroit](#) -- [History](#)
-- [20th century](#).

[Music](#) -- [Michigan](#) -- [Detroit](#) -- [History](#) and
[criticism](#) -- [20th century](#).

[Detroit \(Mich.\)](#) -- [History](#) -- [20th century](#).

[Gordy, Berry](#).

[Motown Record Corporation](#)

Note on the cover graphic

I created a word cloud by uploading the text of the transcript into wordle.net and deleting commonplace words. The size of each word in the word cloud is determined by the frequency that it was used in the interview. For example, Music and Detroit were used very frequently and are visually dominant.