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7-16-2013

## Bolles, Charles

Portia Morgan

David Slutzky

Charles Bolles

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Interviewee: Charles Bolles (CB)

Interviewers: Portia Morgan (PM), David Slutzky (DS)

Location: Saint Helena, SC

Date: July 16, 2013

PM: Good afternoon. This evening uh we are inter-uh – I'm Portia Morgan, uh interviewing with David Slutzky and this afternoon we're interviewing Mr. Bolles. Good afternoon Mr. Bolles. Tell us a little bit about living on St. Helena.

CB: Living on St. Helena. Well um, well I can't imagine living anyplace else. And well, I guess I've I've been around, I've been on the East Coast all the way to the West Coast, California and um I haven't done a lot of traveling but I love – this home, I love, and I love home. Um best weather I guess you're gonna find is here. It's not as hot as Florida but you still get a lot of sun over here. I mean this is a great place to live. Um the culture over here in St. Helena is great. You know the Gullah/Geechee culture is what dominant culture here on St. Helena and um I guess I'm happy to be a part of that culture. And this is home I love it.

PM: So when you use the term “Gullah/Geechee” what does that mean to you?

CB: (laughs) What's that mean to me? Um. Well that (sighs). The Gullah/Geechee culture or actually the dialect or language from my understanding is a cross between when the slaves who were brought over here from Africa and the English language that mixture there came out you know with a um the dialect or what we call the Gullah or Geechee. I think Geechee accent with classified being maybe a little-a little different in maybe the style or the speed. Some people have different answers from different people but yeah that's – the culture came from there. So.

DS: What are some cultural – Oh sorry. What are some cultural traditions or uh famous you know or uh happy memories you have?

CB: The traditions. Of course the food. You know uh- the culture food, the Gullah food- matter of fact I just got through eating some gumbo. We do it okra and tomatoes. I got tons of 'em out there now. Good food, the stories as passed on. You know the struggle of the slaves and um and how we all um you know that's passed on and of the family members and we all fight to keep our property and you know that kind of stuff.

PM: I- we were talking earlier and-and you started a church. How important will Gullah or Geechee culture play in your ministry?

CB: In my ministry? Oh that's a good question. Um I'm not too sure, it's only- my ministry is only about a year old um, a little over a year, it'll be, it's-it's part of my culture we're sort of open it's non-denominational ministry so it's open for other cultures. Being that I'm a pastor there my daughters are there. So don't shy about my accent comes in every now and then and sometimes I express it a little more in my sermons so yeah I guess it will be weaved in and out of the ministry.

DS: So I guess you'd have a combination of the *binyas* and the *come-yas* to your -

CB: Yeah (laughs). I guess you can say that. *Binyas* and *come-yas*. You know the um, the Gullah um dialect language, you know I guess they're doing different things to preserve it here. Um my generation or the generations under me is – they really don't embrace it as much as the-as the older generation. Uh some people are ashamed of it. Uh and some people mistakenly um classify it as a broken English, which it's not. But um here on St. Helena they do a lot to preserve the culture, to preserve the uh the language and uh I don't speak it as fluently as I uh wish I could but uh you know when I get pretty relaxed and I'm around a lot of home people and eatin' it'll come out a little bit. Mmhm.

PM: One of the things we also spoke about a little bit earlier was the difference between St. Helena and of course Hilton Head.

CB: Hmmm.

PM: Do you think that most people here are interested in maintaining the island as it is or would they like it see become more progressive?

CB: I can say yeah that most people are more interested in maintaining the island as it is uh they're not for developing of the island. I think they've made some um great strides in preserving the culture here, preserving the property. Um I think the county is out as purchase property there's just for preservation, just for you know to save the property it's not for sale. Um yeah so there's a great push for that here.

DS: How many generations- sorry. How many generations does the Bolles Estate go back?

CB: The Bolles Estate go back to let's see, 1,2,3, I'm 5- I'm fifth generation. 5 generation yeah.

DS: Yeah we saw your nice sign -

CB: (Laughs)

DS: as we approached your lovely compound here.

CB: Oh yeah, oh yeah. It's five generations. Um yeah here in Bolles Estate.

DS: So, how do you uh convey to the younger generations how important it is to hold onto this land?

CB: Um you know just by way of of sharing with them um you know what we had to go through to you know keep the land, paying the taxes, that's a big thing in this area, you know maintaining your property. Um you know my kids, of course we have beautiful property here all of- you know- we're sitting on the- the deep water and so they

understand the value of the property that's first of all, and um- and what our forefathers went through to uh to keep you know- well first of all to purchasing the property and uh keeping it up and maintaining it and passing it on from one generation to the next. So yeah you know just putting that, keeping that pretty real in them.

DS: Yeah we keep hearing the term "pay your taxes" from other uh-

CB: Oh yeah?

DS: From other people on the island.

CB: Yeah, it's something uh it's a big thing. What happened in the past is that I mean a lot of um families have lost their property technically because of property tax and the property taxes are high here in Beaufort county. And so um if you don't maintain your taxes of course they come and they'll gone take a portion of the property, you know the equal to what you owe, actually they were taking the whole property that you - which wasn't right. I don't know if they're still doing it like that these days but yes it has always been a big cry to hold onto your property on the island.

DS: Right. Yeah it's kind of ironic that uh you know all the property here that is owned by Gullah families is because of other people that left town shall we say during the Civil War uh that just abandoned their property and it's-it's funny how the tax issue is what - is what lost it and what gained it for uh you know many of the folk here...

CB: mmhmm, right.

DS: Which is- which is nice. If I may, can I get a close up of your shirt? Because that relates to you uh- to uh-

CB: Oh this right here? Yeah.

DS: A topic that I want to- I want to get to.

CB: "New Life" Yeah that one is- is pretty ironic. I'm wearing my "New Life" shirt today. (laughter)

DS: No that's okay and I see "music ministry" in there. Which are two uh- two topics which are near and dear to uh my heart as well as to uh- well as to uh- things you want to convey to our students back in Cleveland about the- about the importance in- that's put on the church and music together. Um, what do you play, first off?

CB: I play uh keyboards or um I'm really am organist. That's what I'm more fluent in so um um I started playing a little guitar at the beginning and then sort of moved my way into um playing the organ.

DS: Okay.

CB: So I'm really considered an organist at the church.

DS: Okay, and which came first, your love of the ministry or your love of the music or is it uh-

CB: (laughs) Maybe it was a combination. Actually love of the church because I found God first and then I was gifted to play.

DS: Right.

CB: So, I mean literally God just gave me the gift one night and I started playing on a Wednesday night and played that Sunday in church. I think it was maybe I don't know maybe 30 years- 30 something years ago.

PM: So you weren't trained –

CB: No.

PM: in music?

CB: No not at all.

PM: Okay.

CB: No I have an ear for music. There's some people that say you can – there's some people that read music and some people that just hear music or have an ear for music. So yeah I have an ear. I do understand some music theory but you put a hymn book in front of me I'll probably say "just hum it a little bit, okay I got it from there."

DS: Right.

CB: (laughs) Yeah.

DS: Right, right I understand that because to me I've always been fascinated with the uh- with the combination of religion and music because you really can't have one with out the other and uh – and bring it both forward to the extent that you'd like to. Um any – are there any favorite uh-favorite styles of music? Any favorite hymns that uh- stand out for you?

CB: Um style? I-well um there's a style when I first got started playing music there's a style called *vasabul*, you might hear somebody say *vasabue*.

DS: Okay.

CB: Um and when I play the guitar- and the-the guitar itself is toned in an harmonic array. So the six strings are already toned in a particular harmonic key. It might be toned in A-flat or it might be toned in C-sharp, so you just frettin' - hitting the fret bars and uh going through the uh musical notations of the uh- yeah we call it the notation or the uh number system- it makes it sort of easier to play.

DS: Right.

CB: Um, and a lot churches did that. They called it *framing* back in the days. You might hear it in some of the movies uh that may go back to uh Baton Rouge, back in those-those swamp days you might hear some of that blues style and that's um, um derivative I think of vasabul. That's how I got started. I could hear the three parts in all them songs and I thought everybody could hear it but apparently not. (laughs).

DS: Well apparently not.

CB: Yeah mmhmm.

DS: There's so much of a combination or an evolution shall we from uh- from these spirituals into-into blues.

CB: Right.

DS: into punk into other contemporary uh forms of music and we hear it a lot of that come out uh in your church as well.

CB: Yeah. Yeah um, the old school gospel, more of a choir sound, that's uh the new life. They pretty much was accustomed to that. More of a contemporary um sound now.

PM: How do you-

DS: Do you think that helps - I'm sorry Portia, last time I interrupt you I promise. (laughter) Uh- We have so many questions and so little time I guess.

CB: It's alright.

DS: Um, it's because of the sound it's what attracts more young people to the church as well?

CB: Uh, yeah. Of-of course music and you know and the beat, that always attracts people you know, and especially the young people so yeah, um you come to church you know they wanna hear the music they want good music. Um good music get people going, they get emotional and of course dancing in church or what is called shouting in some places yeah that happens a lot at-at new life. So yeah you want a live- they call it you want a live service.

DS: Right.

PM: That point kind of leads to mine. Are you more in favor of the older spirituals or do you like kind of the newer um spirituals or hymns that are being sung today?

CB: Um, you know the older spirituals are the ones that- that you know they never leave you.

PM: Right.

CB: So the newer ones they- they just come in with the time you know. I don't want to call certain artists but you know the contemporary music it- it comes and it goes you know. Yeah some of the older spirituals, um they'll be with you forever. So I'm more of- more um favor those kinds.

PM: What kind does last Sunday- we went to church and that-there seemed to be a kind of combination?

CB: Uh-huh

PM: Uh do you tend to do that on a regular basis to kind of appease the older members and then offer something for the younger group is that –

CB: yeah...

PM: Is there a plan to your music?

CB: Yeah, that is a- that is a plan um typically we start off with a hymn, you know to um open up the service and um then when worship- what we call *Praise and Worship*- when the worship leaders come and they'll sing something that's pretty much on the top 20 list of what's gospel music or worship music. And it's a little different between what's gospel music and the worship music.

PM: Okay.

CB: And the hymns.

PM: Can you explain the difference?

CB: Well the hymns that we talked about that is from the old church and um it causes the ride from some of the struggles and the spirituals and the hymns and so and so forth. Um the gospel music could be uh from a particular artist like Kurt Franklin or –

[Clip 2]

- something like that, and it's alright. They might be singing about a particular area, a particular struggle in life but then worship music is all about um making adoration to God. And so that's just more of what's um conducive to bringing down the uh presence of God in the service. So we have a worship part of the service, it's called *Praise and Worship*. It's more centered around everything going up versus you uh having a testimonial in your song. Mhmm.

PM: I noticed you said, you said your church uh *Greater New Life* or *New Deliverances* was non-denominational. Why do you think we're making a move from Baptist, African-American um you know um Methodists –

CB: uh-huh

PM: Regular Methodists, to this idea of non-denominational?

CB: Yeah that's a good question 'cause new- the New Life is a Pentecostal-Pentecostal holiness. I'm pastor in all nation, which is non-denominational. Um non-denominational-um is just you know there are- there are boundaries around certain denominations and divides us up. Non-denominational, from my understanding is saying that we'll- we're not gonna draw lines. Um we're here, there's one God, you know there's-there's one faith, there's one baptism, we're here to serve that one God come as you are this-typically in those churches you don't see a g- a real strict uh dress code or anything like that. Um but it doesn't say that the church doesn't have a fast strong doctrine, you know it's just- it's just on the top notch saying who we are you know around these borders as to say we're Baptist or we're Methodist or we're Pentecostal, no we're non-denominational and whoever-whenever your background is you're free to come and worship and yeah it just doesn't put a uh divide line between people.

DS: Sounds good. Um you were talking about uh, you know worship music and praise music, how about secular music? Any favorites of yours growing up or today?

CB: Secular music?

DS: Uh-huh

CB: Yeah I'm a big uh Ray Charles, I really love him and you know I own most of his albums and uh some of the uh jazz music I really love jazz. Danny Conner- Carter, and Billie Holiday. I can't even listen to Billie Holiday because it just takes me away and you know I-I gotta be focused on other things than just Billy Holiday. So when I put her on, I'm just, I'm gone.

DS: yeah

CB: It's just a very strong um music there. I just love those uh jazz artists, those secular music. Some of the uh let's see the hip-hop stuff, I ain't really into all of that. I sort of study it sometimes so I can be in tune with you know the people- the young people and



um and I'm not that crazy about it, I'm not impressed with it. Um you know that's all I'll say but-

DS: I understand that.

CB: yeah.

DS: We, as you know, we're educators. Um what we're doing with these interviews partially is bringing them back to our classrooms in the Cleveland, Ohio area to educate the students that we teach about that their culture, about American history, which so much is so rich down here. What are some messages or some thoughts you'd like them to uh get out of this?

CB: As it relates to the what? The music or –

DS: As it- no as it relates to - oh as it relates to- to their lives at you know, why this history is important for uh, for them to know, for education, about anything.

CB: Well, I think it is because when you go up North, somebody up North is always tied to somebody down South. And I think it's important that they know where most of their roots came from for the most part down South and they can, they don't know it's somebody- know you there- you know there's somebody in the family that can relate to a family member down South. I think it's important then that they understand the culture here. Um, I remember growing up, and there always used to be a cousin that is coming down from Jersey or from New York or something like that, and we used to love the summers because they'll come down and they think they'll know all this you know "city life" and then they come here and they realize it's a whole new different life here and they really don't know anything. You know we're climbing the trees and you know we call it *muscadines* now but it was *ball grapes* back then and you know we just- the life here we just- the culture here is completely different. It's very rich um and it's something to be proud of. And uh- and uh I think there's a part of Gullah I would say even in Cleveland. You know with the students in there. There's a part of Gullah of them, there's a part of Gullah that's in them there. You know, and um sometimes I think it's just good to express that and they can maybe relate to it.

DS: Yeah we see it, I've seen it even in my own classroom in terms of recipes passed down from uh several generations and uh you know: "Where'd you get that?" "Oh it was in grandma's recipe cabinet." "Oh where is grandma from?" and it's usually down here.

CB: Yeah. Well we're tied in.

DS: Right.

CB: mmhm.

DS: Right. Okay, well I want to thank you for uh, for your time um, in taking this time now to – Reverend Bolles, the Musician Charles Bolles

CB: (laughs)

DS: Just uh- we appreciate your time and really hope that uh our students- I know our students will learn from this, I know that your two interviewers did.

CB: Great.

DS: Okay, thank you.

PM: Thank you.

CB: My pleasure.

[End of recording]