

University of Mississippi  
American Music Archives Field School

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Location: Anointed 102.1 FM KBUD radio station, 627 East Lee Street, Sardis, Mississippi 38666

Begin Date: Tuesday, May 18, 2010

End Date: Tuesday, May 18, 2010

Event: Interview with James Figgs, civil rights activist and longtime host of the Gospel Train on 1520 AM WQMA in Marks, Mississippi.

Elapsed Time: Approximately an hour

Mr. Figgs arrived at the radio station during our interview with Rev. Kearney. He remained in his full-size white pick-up truck, parked directly in front of the studio, for a few minutes before he came inside. He sat silently on the couch facing our backs while we finished the interview. When I asked Rev. Kearney if we needed to pause or conclude the interview in order for him to see to two people (including Mr. Figgs) who had entered the radio station, Rev. Kearney explained that Mr. Fitts was among the individuals he had invited to come for an interview. We decided to conclude the present interview.

Shortly thereafter, I made my way to Mr. Fitts, introduced myself, and shook his hand. We stood side-by-side, and I listened as he related a previous encounter with University of Mississippi researchers in the Delta. Mr. Fitts expressed his appreciation for our research and for the university's work. As we talked, I took note of the baseball cap he wore. The hat was red emblazoned with the Greek letters *Kappa Alpha Psi*, the name of a predominantly African American fraternity. He wore a navy (or possibly black) short sleeve, button-up shirt with a pattern of rows of concentric squares of at least four colors: yellow, gray, black, and light blue. A pair of glasses and a pen protruded from his shirt pocket. He wore dress pants that were a dark brown khaki. His shoes were black tennis shoes with two Velcro straps visible beneath the cuff of his pants. Gray hair showed through below his baseball cap, but his eye brows were primarily black with a few scattered gray hairs. His face was full, and there seemed to be a darker patch of skin between his left eye and his left sideburn.

We sat at Rev. Kearney's desk in the 102.1 FM radio station. Mr. Fitts sat behind the desk, and I sat directly across from him. Eric sat at the head of the table. Like Rev. Kearney, Mr. Figgs maintained eye contact and leaned in close to the microphone. This created a strong sense of closeness during the interview. His comfort level with maintaining eye contact with me while expressing his thoughts assured me that this would be an intimate, heartfelt interview. After a few minutes of talking, it seemed that Mr. Figgs and I were alone in the room. The intonation and cadence of his speech reminded me of a country preacher, and I could not help wondering whether or not Mr. Figgs had ever preached. During the interview, he explained that he has never preached, but he also indicated that preaching influences the oratory of many churchgoers. I wanted to prompt him to elaborate about whether or not listening to

preachers had helped shape his speaking, but we did not have time to fully explore this question. Mr. Figgs seemed to have had a clear idea of what he wanted to communicate during the interview. On at least one occasion, he began answering a question before I finished asking it. He was expansive, and his answers seemed to be a little more cohesive and straightforward than for the average interviewee. He tended to speak continuously for lengthy periods of time, and I felt that I was able to ask relatively few questions. At the same time, I realized that he was probably eager to communicate a specific set of points, and I appreciated the value of what he shared with me. In other words, I was pleased—not at all upset—by the form the interview took. In addition to hosting a gospel music radio show, Mr. Figgs has vast experiences as a civil rights activist and other forms of civic involvement.

When our memory card filled up and we scrambled to replace it, Mr. Figgs took advantage of the break to make a call. I asked him if he would be willing to talk for another five or ten minutes after he returned. He assented but said he would need to leave soon after that. Other recording issues include squeaking doors and the traffic noise (the radio station is just off the highway). Other background noises, particularly other conversations taking place in the radio station, are also audible at various points in the recording. Mr. Figgs explained that he was having sinus problems, and his coughs are audible on a few occasions. Mr. Figgs's speech sometimes blends words together in a way that his oratory is both intriguing but usually clear in its meaning. It does, however, prove difficult to transcribe. For this reason, the sections of direct quotations from the interview log are only tentative transcriptions. Additionally, Mr. Figgs seems to have a tendency to not pronounce the *s*'s at the end of plural nouns. For this reason, the sentences of my transcriptions in which subjects are not in agreement with verbs might reflect my failure in transcribing instead of grammatical errors on his part. In any case, Mr. Figgs is both a captivating speaker and an effective communicator. As I began to wrap up the interview, Mr. Figgs stood up to leave, and although I did not wish to delay him any longer, I asked him to sign the interview release form before he departed. I told him he could simply sign his name and list his phone number if he did not have time to fill out the entire form. He submitted his signature and two telephone numbers before leaving. I mentioned the possibility of conducting a second interview at a later date, and he indicated that he would be willing to take part in a follow-up. Mr. Figgs told me to tell Rev. Kerney goodbye for him, but I forgot to do so.