



## Sankofa Community Research

### James Williams III Transcript

**Storyteller:** James Williams III

**Interviewer:** Marcia Black

**Date:** October 20 2023

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:02:13

JW:

My name is Jack Williams. The third.

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JW:

I was born April 10th, 1999, and technically in Livonia, Michigan.

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JW:

But I grew up in Detroit. Telegraph eight mile border of Southfield, Retford Really weird areas. A lot of stuff over there. But yeah, my family. Born and raised Detroiters. My dad's family has been here for a long time. My mom's family came from Memphis, Tennessee, so yeah, my dad, he grew up in the forties and fifties and my mom like fifties sixties but.

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JW:

Yeah.

00:00:42:02 - 00:01:01:10

JW:

Something that I always like since I'm a musician I'm a singer. My dad's mom, she went to Cass Tech for something in fashion. I don't quite remember, but she was a seamstress for Motown. And so my dad's about the same age as a lot of those guys, like Smokey Robinson.

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JW:



I think they went to kindergarten together. Like Diana Ross. No, I'm sorry. He went to kindergarten with Barrett Strong. I think the guy that wrote the song Money, That's what I like. So he's around the same age as some of those guys. And so they used to come over to my dad's house and get fitted. You know, my mom was working his his mom was working on their clothes and his cousin lived across the street from Melvin Franklin who was the bass singer of The Temptations.

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JW:

And every morning when they were kids, like during the summer, he said, Melvin used to come over there and eat breakfast with them. So I always thought that was really cool.

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JW:

So obviously, you know, I Black Bottom was gone long before I was born, but I learned about it.

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JW:

So in 2013, I was a part of the Mosaic Theater of Detroit Youth Development Organization through vocal music and theater and technical theater as well. So by my second year in the program, we did a play called Hastings Street. Hastings Street was the story. It was a play within a play type of deal. It was set in the forties in Black Bottom, and there were a group of teenagers who wanted to write a play for a class that they were in, and they decided to write about their lives.

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JW:

And so through doing that play, I learned a lot about you know, Paradise Valley, Black Bottom and that whole area, that time period. Doing that show, I had never heard of it. I was like 13 at the time, and we talked to some Detroit historians or some of our relatives who may have been there during that time. I remember my dad, he came in and spoke to us and just about his experiences.

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JW:

I mean, it was a really cool experience. I really enjoyed doing the play. I learned a lot, learned a lot of cool music. And what's funny is now where Mosaic is in the UPSM elementary school



building, which was the old Sydney de Miller campus, which was like a high school over there. It's in the area where Black Bottom was.

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JW:

And so I remember one year after I graduated, you know, went to college and things like that, I came back and I worked for Mosaic for two years and I remember we took some of the young artists just across the street where there were different, like it was like a walking museum tour and it was like different stops about like Black Bottom and Paradise Valley and we took them through there and it was a really cool experience to be a part of.

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JW:

But yeah,

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JW:

So my dad's father never got a chance to meet him, but my dad, he's always talk about him and he owned and lived in this bar was quite the apex bar.

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JW:

I feel like. I think the building is still standing. I've seen it a couple of times, but my granddad own that bar and he worked there and he lived there and all of the big acts of the day whenever they came to Detroit would come to the Apex bar, which I haven't seen the inside, but just from the outside, it's not a very big venue like the Fox or anything like that.

00:04:09:24 - 00:04:33:13

JW:

But you know, the Duke Ellington's The Count Basie, the Louis Armstrong was like that during that big band jazz era. All those people used to come by my grandfather's bar and, you know, come performed or just come after a show. Maybe they did a show at the Fox or something. They came down to the Apex bar and maybe did a little afterparty, things like that.

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JW:



So it was really cool to know that, you know, somebody in my family who I never met played like a small part

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JW:

the perspective of someone who was a kid during that time.

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JW:

So I was really interested in my dad was born in 1941. And so through talking to him and also doing the show Hastings Street with Mosaic and learning about what it was like to grow up in an all black neighborhood during times of, you know, racial segregation and things like that. You know, it was really cool to hear from and to hear about just growing up during that time, seeing black owned businesses.

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JW:

Right. I think we're seeing a much bigger surge of it now. But when I was a kid, you know, early 2000, I can't recall knowing about too many black owned businesses in Detroit. But hearing from my dad, who was a kid during the forties and fifties and, you know, he didn't live in Hastings Street, but when he would go visit or didn't live in Black Bottom, but when he would go visit his dad and, you know, just be in the area, he talked about how it was black, everything, black barbershops, black grocery stores, black doctor's offices, black anything like you name it.

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JW:

And so we always hear about like Black Wall Street and things like that. But it's really cool to know that there was a time where Detroit had that as well.

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JW:

sure know.

00:05:57:00 - 00:06:09:01

JW:



He never really talked about what happened after the fact. Yeah, I don't know. I just know the building's still there, and I know it's closed down, but I don't know when it closed. I don't know what happened.

00:06:09:01 - 00:06:42:11

JW:

that we would definitely feel more of a sense of ownership of the city if Black Bottom was still there. Well, I feel like Detroiters have a lot of pride in Detroit. It's not really a true sense of ownership because we don't listen. This is just to my knowledge, we don't own a lot of things in Detroit, you know, as as a community, even though we are one of the blackest cities in America, we are not primarily black run, black led.

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JW:

And I feel like if we had if Black Bottom was still there, right. And it maybe expanded and branched out, we would have a lot more ownership over our city, over like what happens. And even just like day to day life business is in restaurants and doctor's offices and just all that, right? Like we have a lot of black owned small businesses, but it would be very nice to have huge businesses, huge black owned businesses in Detroit, not just a restaurant here or there or a barber shop or a clothing store, but like, you know, large, even corporations maybe.

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JW:

Who knows? Detroit could have been a booming capital for black business, could have been like Atlanta, you know, if Detroit, if Black Bottom had stayed, you know, and it didn't get destroyed. Yeah. Like I said, we definitely have a lot of pride in our city, but I wish we had a lot more ownership of our city.

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JW:

my age are like either dying to get out of Detroit or like, you have no aspirations of leaving because you don't. Maybe you don't know what else is out there.

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JW:



You don't want to know what else is out there or I got to get out the city. You know, And I think a lot of people have that mentality no matter where they're from. I just moved to New York a couple of months ago. And so a lot of people are like even people who are from here want to get out of New York.

00:08:07:10 - 00:08:26:14

JW:

You know, you think, wow, I want to leave New York, you know, But I get it, you know, And I think but I do think a lot of people leave and come back where it would be nice if Detroit was a place where you didn't feel like you had to leave in order to help the city while there there.

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JW:

Now, I do know some people who never left, who are making changes in the city and are trying to do things. I think that's great, but it'd be nice if Detroit was one of the places people wanted to come to. You know, people always want to go to Chicago. When I go to L.A., I want to go to New York.

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JW:

A lot of people go to Atlanta. I know a lot of people who have left and gone to Houston and like Dallas, you know, these big major cities. But I feel like if we had had that ownership and it was like a place where people wanted to come. Right. One thing I hear is interesting talking to people who maybe are even from other cities in Michigan, like one of my frat brothers, Ypsi.

00:09:07:15 - 00:09:26:02

JW:

And so he talks about how like, you know, the choice of Cool city and all, but nobody's going to get a vacation. I never anybody say, I'm going to Detroit for summer vacation, summer break. Or like when people ask, what is there to do in Detroit? Sometimes I'm kind of like, I'm not too sure. Like, I.

00:09:26:08 - 00:09:49:21

JW:

I know, but like, if somebody were to ask, I, I don't know. It's like, I can't really tell you. You know, people you go to Chicago's like, go to Navy Pier. go to go see the Bean. Or you go you go to



New York, go to Times Square, go to Soho. You know, things like that. But it would be nice if Detroit was one of those places people wanted to come to.

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JW:

maybe giving some of those people that you displaced, like some ownership of that land or maybe allowing them the opportunity to open up a business there and like actually supporting them throughout the, you know, not just like, here's ten K, you know, start something or here's I don't know how much

00:10:12:01 - 00:10:36:07

JW:

it takes to our business, but like, here's here's \$10,000, but like actually sitting with them and walking with them because we all know the statistics of like small owned businesses, you know, you either do great or you like crash and burn, right? It would be nice if the city of Detroit helped those people who got displaced and gave them some sort of reparations in that way.

00:10:36:07 - 00:10:59:18

JW:

Like you get an ownership of the land, you can the opportunity will walk with you as you start a new business venture over here, you know, like things like that, I think, or just stuff where I feel like a lot of times it's just like a handout of some sorts, but it's not like actual like we're going to really try to fix this right wing of the whole 40 acres and a mule thing.

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JW:

What are you going to do once you get to 40 acres and a mule? You know, because me, because you've been displaced for so long and then generations after you have kind of, I don't know, assimilated to maybe what that displacement feels like if you actually gave them a chance to bring back what it once was and not just like, here's some money, we're like, And not to say you have to dictate what the money is for, but actually giving and providing resources to use the money, you know,

00:11:31:06 - 00:11:49:14

JW:



be nice to learn more about the place, you know, and figure out what happened to it and maybe get it back up and running. I'll because it seemed like it was one of those like small hole in the wall joints, but that's actually like driving, you know what I mean?

00:11:49:14 - 00:12:24:03

JW:

And so I'll be cool to open it back up. You know, I have zero business knowledge and I've never had any aspirations to owning a business or a restaurant or anything like that. But it would be nice if somebody, I don't know, reached out one day and was like, Hey, the granddad lived here. He worked here like, we want to put this place back up and get it back to where it was, you know, because I feel like a lot of the fact that, you know, those were the celebrities of the day and they were coming to this little small joint.

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JW:

You know, I feel like it's nice when big names come to Detroit because I feel like a lot of times with concerts and things like that, you know, you look and see, that's coming. And they're not there or they're like, I don't know, and like Royal Oak or, you know, someplace else. That's not really Grand Rapids Pine Knob not where it's nice that we have Little Caesars Arena now that you know, the big acts can come here.

00:12:49:19 - 00:13:09:24

JW:

But it would be nice if they came in like actually got to experience the city, you know what I mean? Like, I don't know, like Drake was there over the summer. I would have drunk, actually stayed and had a party in Detroit. You know, I'm sure he had something in Cali, had something in Texas. You know, I got to see him in New York.

00:13:09:24 - 00:13:33:06

JW:

He was all across the city, you know, for two weeks, you know, so be cool. And when he came back in July, like if Drake was actually able to experience the city a lot more, you know, And so I think it's just that that sense of ownership where like if black Detroiters had more like physical, tangible ownership of the city, I feel like we could really do something,

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JW:



important thing is that it's a part of our history that has kind of been erased because not too many people, I feel like it's one of those if you know, you know, type of things where like there's so many I think from learning about Black Bottom, it really opened my eyes to more Detroit history and how Detroit history has helped shape Black history in a sense.

00:14:00:10 - 00:14:24:23

JW:

And I think while, you know, as a music person, Motown is a great contribution. And that's I you know, I always stand on that hill. Like, y'all wouldn't have been nothing if we didn't discovered in five years from Gary, Indiana. You know, I'd be nothing if Smokey Robinson didn't sit down and write them songs. But I thought there there's so much more to Detroit history that we don't even know about in our own city.

00:14:25:00 - 00:14:47:21

JW:

And I think projects like these are important because it helps get the word out in like really spread it to the youth, the young people. Like I said, I was 13 when we did Hasting Street. I think they originally commissioned the play back in like 2001, maybe 2002. I think when I did it, it was Mosaic second time doing the play.

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JW:

And so I think more projects like that, it would be cool. I saw another show recently, theater company called Plowshares. I think they had a show called Hastings Street, and it had its own story, like Guy trying to buy a jazz drawing or something like that. But it took place during the forties in Detroit in Black Bottom, you know, And so having more things like that, that's very based on the life of, you know, what it was like during that time where we have stuff like Dreamgirls.

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JW:

You know, that's a fictional story, but it has so much to do with what music was like at that time and what Black people how they were like, you know, they were in Chicago before that. We had something like that that took place in Black Bottom, you know, something that everybody kind of knew about.



00:15:36:08 - 00:16:09:00

JW:

Right now I'm a music teacher, but I am interested in like my own artistry as well. I've had a lot of really cool experiences through being organizations like Mosaic and singing at school. I went to Renaissance for high school and I just I've had a lot of really cool experiences and I want to be able to pass that on to create them for the next generation to come after me, whether that be through education or through like my own.

00:16:09:02 - 00:16:22:23

JW:

You know, artistry in my own work. So, yeah, just as, just as an artist who who shares and exchanges and continues a legacy and keeps passing it down,