

**University of Maryland
Oral History Project
Interview with Jordan Brown
Conducted on June 17, 2022 by Annabelle Smith**

AS: All right. My name is Annabelle Smith and I am an oral historian at History Associates, Inc. in Rockville, Maryland. Today's date is Wednesday, June 17, 2022. And I am speaking with Jordan Brown for the Special Collections in Media and Culture, a unit within the Special Collections and University Archives at R. Lee Hornbake Special Collections Library at the University of Maryland. This interview is part of a larger donation to the Special Collections in Media and Culture centered on the contributions of Joseph Gouvenor "Tex" Gathings III to radio and television broadcasting. So Mr. Brown, could you please state your name and spell it?

JB: Okay. My name is Jordan J-O-R-D-A-N Brown, B-R-O-W-N.

AS: And how were you introduced to Mr. Gathings?

JB: Well, I was first introduced to Mr. Gathings actually as a kid growing up in Washington, DC listening to him on the radio at WOOK. He was one of the premiere disc jockeys in Washington, DC from the 1950s to the 1960s. In 19, I think about '62 or '63, WOOK also built a new station facility with a UHF television station. And it was Tex Gathings who put the station on the air. When I was about sixteen years old, I ended up working, going to work at the television station. And then later on, the radio station, in about 1970. And that's when I actually met Tex in person.

AS: All right. Can you share any stories or remember anything in detail about Mr. Gathings' radio shows? Listening to them growing up?

JB: Listening to them growing up. There were two main disc jockeys at WOOK in the '50s and '60s. And that was Tex and Cliff Holland. They had been with the owner of the station, Richard Eaton, almost from the beginning in the late 1940s. A fun fact, WOOK was the first station to play Black music 24 hours a day in the United States. And six months later, it was followed by WDIA Memphis. Tex, I just remember he was just a really smooth, smooth, consistent disc jockey. I knew nothing at the time about his endeavors into television. But he was just a smooth, constant, popular disc jockey in Washington, DC at the time.

3:16

AS: All right. And I know you said you don't remember too much about his television shows. But do you remember anything about the television broadcast Teenarama?

JB: Oh, yeah. I mean, I do remember those because what happened, Teenarama was, probably the best way to describe it was a Black American Bandstand or a precursor of Soul Train. Soul Train came up, was started, I think, in 1970 in Chicago. Teenarama predates that by at least maybe eight or nine years. It was interesting because WOOK TV was a UHF station. Nowadays, all of the station channels are on one channel, but mainly all digital. But at one time, there was VHF channels and UHF channels. The VHF frequencies were lower frequency; the UHF were higher frequencies. And WOOK TV

was one of the first, if not the first in Washington DC, that was a UHF station. So if you wanted to watch the Black programming on WOOK TV, you had to buy a box that would hook up to your TV so you could watch the programming on WOOK.

So, Teenarama was a popular dance party. And it benefited from the fact that because of its relationship with WOOK radio, which was the premier Black station at the time. Then any acts that were appearing at the Howard Theater—anyone from the Temptations to Jerry Butler, the Supremes, or whoever—because Black acts did not have any exposure on national television at the time, Teenarama was one of the few TV shows that they could get exposure on. So there was a wealth of talent that Tex was able to get onto Teenarama to be on the TV show to sing their songs. And then, like I said, like a Soul Train or American Bandstand, which don't exist anymore, the kids would dance to somebody singing. They would also dance to, records would be played on the air and they would dance on the air. So it was really, really popular.

06:06

AS: All right. And could you expand just a little on in your opinion how Teenarama both impacted and reflected DC culture at the time?

JB: Well, it affected DC culture because what happened was, you didn't see daily Black kids starring on a TV show. They weren't getting paid. They probably got sandwiches from a deal that they worked out with a sandwich company called Miles Long, which was also an advertiser on WOOK. But I mean, it made, if you were on those kinds of shows, you were a star. Because people would see you on TV. People flocked to be on those kinds of

shows. It was similar to American Bandstand on a national level with Dick Clark. Those kids that were on those kind of shows that other kids saw every day, they became influencers before we had internet influencers. So you wanted to see the latest dance styles, you wanted to see the latest clothing styles, you would watch that show to do that. So that was the effect and influence that Teenarama had on the local Black population.

And the other thing was that there were other Black TV programming on WOOK TV. So it was at a time when you didn't have a BET or a TV channel that had Black programming, you had this on WOOK TV. And that's all a result of the visionary ideas of Tex Gathings.

08:00

AS: All right. And what do you remember about working with Mr. Gathings on WOOK radio?

JB: Well, it was interesting. When I actually became a jock, by then Tex had been out of radio. Tex actually became an educator. I forget what college he was teaching at in the Tidewater area. It might have been Hampton or there's another local Black college, Virginia State or, it's one of the local colleges. So Tex would split his time between being at the television station and teaching at this Black college in the Hampton area of Virginia. Hampton Beach area of Virginia. So he did, while he was doing that, the TV station at that time, he was, I mean, he was the general manager of the station. But I was like an assistant program director and there was another guy, Omar Campbell, who was

the program director. So we were pretty much, Tex pretty much trusted us that the station would be all right.

Later on, like in about 1971, Federal City College, which later on became UDC, opened up. And at one time, Tex was teaching in Virginia some days of the week. And then he would come back and teach at what later became UDC, and where he later ended his career teaching TV and broadcasting. But Tex was teaching TV when there were no Blacks in TV. So many guys originally who when the local TV stations like WRC, which was a local NBC-owned and operated station, Channel 7, which was the ABC affiliate, or Channel 9, which was the CBS affiliate, after the riots in 1968, these stations that had had all white staff decided that they were going, they wanted to hire Blacks in technical roles as cameramen and audio, and audio people. But at that time, there were actually no college courses teaching TV and radio broadcasting. If you were going into broadcasting, you would have to have a journalism degree.

10:47

So Tex was a visionary that he was able to teach the technical skills of television and opened up a whole new area of work for a lot of Blacks who when it came time, when major networks were opening their doors, the people that Tex trained were able to transition into these jobs in these major TV stations.

AS: All right. And do you remember any notable guests featured on any of Mr. Gathings' shows?

JB: Well, Tex didn't do a lot of hosting. Because Tex was, he was the general manager of the television station. So he was pretty much running the operation. Example, Teenarama. He didn't host Teenarama. There was a popular deejay at the time named Bob King. Bob King hosted Teenarama. Tex pretty much, the story that I got, when Richard Eaton, who owned the United Broadcasting Company that owned WOOK television and WOOK radio, when they built the new station, Tex somehow convinced Mr. Eaton to build a television station along with this new radio station building that they built from the ground up. And having been there, the building is still there now, 5321 First Place Northeast Washington, DC. I think it's used by an ambulance company. But the building was designed, the studio was designed as a television station. Had a lighting board. It wasn't something that was converted.

12:39

So Tex had this visionary idea of building a Black program TV station. And also having the visionary idea of training African Americans to do the job in the television station. Now it was interesting that the television station had a Black production staff. But they also had a Cuban technical staff, because Richard Eaton had owned a station in Cuba that when Castro had taken over the station, he lost the television station. So when a lot of his crew came to the United States, they came to work at WOOK TV as engineers and helping operating the station. (laughs) So you had a major TV station, a TV station in Washington, DC in the 1960s and '70s that was pretty much run by a technical staff and a production staff of color.

AS: Okay. And my next couple of questions are a little more broad.

JB: Okay.

AS: In your opinion, what kind of person was Tex Gathings?

JB: Tex was a class act. Tex was a forceful giant without having ever to raise his voice. He carried himself as a, he carried himself, you know, it's interesting that the times that Tex lived in. Growing up obviously in the '40s, '50s and '60s. For some African Americans, that would have been a limiting time for them. Post-'50s and the '60s and '70s, that's a different time. But the time that Tex grew up, most Black men had to know their place. Tex created a place for himself. He never was subservient and he always demanded respect without ever raising his voice. The way he carried himself spoke volumes. And he was just a nice, smart, witty guy.

15:04

AS: Can you share any stories about your interactions with Mr. Gathings?

JB: Well I mean, my basic interactions is that I was, I walked into a television station when I was sixteen years old, and given the opportunity to learn how to work in a television station. I was a sophomore in high school. So I would come up on weekends to learn how to run a TV camera. And then later, by the time I was a senior in high school, I was the assistant program director of the TV station. So obviously Tex must have had some faith in what I did. And also, not only that, to give me the opportunity that probably changed my life. Because after that, I moved into WOOK radio station and worked as a disc

jockey. And then I worked as a disc jockey not only in DC, but in Baltimore, Memphis, Tennessee, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. So that opened up another career for me. And then I also worked for like eight or nine years as a producer for ADC. So I mean, Tex opened up, Tex motivated me to be the kind of individual that I was. Because I can't think of too many people that would give a sixteen-year-old kid the opportunity to learn in that kind of environment. And Tex provided that environment for me to learn.

AS: And in your opinion, how did Mr. Gathings change the face or voice of public television and radio?

17:02

JB: Well, Tex, there were no Black TV camera men. If there were, they were slim and none. If you look at communications programs in colleges, I think the first ones started up in maybe 1972 or something like that. So in the late '60s, when TV stations started looking for Black talent, Tex had already trained a group of guys in television. There was one guy I remember that worked at WOOK TV, that started out there. His name was Chester Brown. Chester ended up getting a job working at NBC. And he worked as a cameraman and an engineer at NBC for thirty years. So I mean, Tex opened up an entire, not only working as a general manager of the television station, but as an educator. I mean, I can talk about my experiences at WOOK TV, which later became WFAM TV. But Tex trained so many people. He trained people at the college he worked at in Hampton, Virginia. And then for the decades he was at NBC, at the communication department, I don't know how many multitudes of people that he trained and influenced. Because like I

said, there was a time that there were no Blacks in television. Period. And on the technical side, Tex was the guy who opened the door for so many people.

AS: All right. And how do you feel that his work opened the field and contributed more into minorities working in public broadcasting?

19:13

JB: Well it contributed because before Tex, working as a TV cameraman was not a job that a person of color would think about doing. It just wasn't, you know, I mean, you barely saw Black people on TV as talent. It was almost impossible to think of, you know, when people see TV shows, they don't think about okay, there's a cameraman, there's a director, there's somebody doing audio, somebody setting up the lighting. You know, people don't think about that. They turn on their TV and expect it to work. And those are the kind of jobs that Tex created and trained people to do. And when the opportunity came up, there was a cadre of people already trained because they had worked at WOOK television. So I'm just saying that he was a visionary in that sense for that reason. Nobody was thinking about those jobs. It would be like if you were thinking about 1962, somebody being an astronaut, a Black person being an astronaut. You know, people wouldn't think about Black people being astronauts. And you could think the same thing about someone being a television director or a television cameraman or a television audio person or a television lighting person. And it's so many things that I learned from Tex that now that, you know, the technology has changed so much now. Because you've got to shoot your videos on camera and do audio and stuff like that. It's all of the stuff that I learned from being around Tex. You know, when I'm lining up a shot on a video camera,

I know that it should be enough headroom and everything, and how to compose a picture. That's all stuff I learned from Tex. If I'm checking something to make sure that my mic levels are correct, and the picture's composed right, that's all that I learned from Tex. So I'm just saying as one person, I can say that.

But he trained a whole generation of folks who I have, I probably never have, I probably never will come in contact with. But they went through, he taught them at a time when nobody was thinking about teaching Black people communication.

AS: Can you share any stories about Mr. Gathings' impact on the communities in the DC metro area?

22:02

JB: Yeah, well, I mean, that would also go back too to his days as a disc jockey. He was, you know, to being a local disc jockey, it was more than just playing records on the radio. You would be involved with going the public affairs events, to schools and churches. People would want you to help support their charities and to do things beyond just you playing records on the radio. I forgot how long Tex was on the air. I mean, I think he started in the '40s, late '40s. I mean, and stopped maybe in the mid-'60s. So he might have had almost a twenty-plus year run at one radio station, WOOK. So he was, like I said, he was known in the community. Nobody knew him as Joseph. Everybody thought his name was Tex. (laughs)

AS: And what do you feel are some of the lasting impacts that Mr. Gathings has had on public broadcasting?

JB: Well, he broke down the door. When no one was thinking about training African Americans, women, people of color, for working behind the scenes of television, Tex Gathings had a vision to do that. That's amazing. I mean, I don't even understand where he possibly could have had the idea and convinced Richard Eaton, who owned WOOK, but who obviously trusted Tex because Tex had worked with him for so long, that when he built a new station, to build a television station. And to build a UHF television station. I don't know, I think and then later on, Richard Eaton owned a television station in Baltimore and some other places. But I'm sure that the impetus of doing television came from Tex. Who would think that there would be a market, number one, to show you how technically advanced Tex was. The average person only knew about VHS stations, which would be start from channel two to channel 13. Those were VHS channels. The higher frequencies, UHS, were 14 and above. Who the heck was thinking about, in 1963, about UHS stations? All anybody ever thought about was a station between two and 13. So for him to sit up and come up with an idea that that would be an area to create a new space for Black programming on television, because Black programming on radio had been successful. And for him to sell that to Richard Eaton, who I worked for for many years and was notoriously cheap, I mean, that just speaks volumes about who Tex was.

25:35

AS: And how do you think Mr. Gathings' legacy has changed over time?

JB: Well I think like a lot of things, we are a temporary society and that our attention span lasts for about five seconds. And unless you do a project like you're doing now, that a person will be forgotten. And that's sort of understandable. Because when I'm talking about me working with Tex Gathings was 52 years ago that I started in broadcasting. But I was sixteen years old. But all of the folks that were his contemporaries that worked with him, and even Richard Eaton, who owned the chain United Broadcasting Company, and even United Broadcasting Company itself doesn't even exist anymore. So you know, and the lasting legacy of what Tex did in terms of UBC as time goes on, you know, that sort of goes past, too. So it's good that there are projects like this that hopefully that somebody—

Oh, the nice thing, too, is that with the University of Maryland. The University of Maryland's communication department has a Richard Eaton chair. And Richard Eaton was the man who started United Broadcasting Company. So it's sort of symbolic that this information will rest there, because of the connection of Tex Gathings and Richard Eaton.

27:13

AS: Wonderful. And do you think his work in public broadcasting is being continued today? And if so, how?

JB: Well, it is. Because now we don't even have a discussion about someone being a Black cameraman or a minority in a job. We just take for granted that people can do the jobs. We have a long history of generations now that you know, people have been trained as

producers and behind the scenes, and not only on camera. So that kind of visionary thing that Tex set the groundwork for is now, you know, it's just a common occurrence.

Nobody would think about a female directing a television show or producing a television show. Nobody would think about now a Black person doing that kind of job. Or even running a television or cable network or a film company. So those kinds of things that Tex had a vision for are now part of our common reality.

AS: Wonderful. And my last question is just, do you have anything you would wish to add or talk about that I haven't asked so far about Tex Gathings and his career or legacy?

JB: I mean, I've run my mouth so much, I can't even think about anything else I could add. I mean, Tex was just an amazing renaissance guy. He could do so many different things. He was a role model without you asking him to be a role model. Just his example of how he carried himself made you want to carry yourself in that kind of way. Even, you know, his, and I remember some of his early students I talked to, they felt the same way about him as an instructor. And me working for him at the time that I worked for him. I just think he was just a unique individual. And I'm just fortunate to have been in a space where I was allowed to learn everything I wanted to learn and develop my talents. Because I don't know too many places where a sixteen-year-old kid could come in and learn television and radio for free without being run out the front door.

AS: (laughs) Well, thank you so much, Mr. Brown. I'm going to just let you know that I'm going to stop recording.

30:11

[End Interview.]