

**University of Maryland
Oral History Project
Interview with James Featherstone
Conducted on June 22, 2022 by Annabelle Smith**

AS: All right. My name is Annabelle Smith and I'm an oral historian at History Associates, Inc. in Rockville, Maryland. Today's date is Wednesday, June 22, 2022. And I am speaking with James Featherstone 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 "Tex" Gathings III to radio and television broadcasting. Mr. Featherstone, can you please state your name and spell it?

JF: James Featherstone. J-A-M-E-S, Featherstone, F as in Frank, E-A-T-H-E-R-S-T-O-N-E.

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

JF: I was a student at the University of District of Columbia. And I guess it was, I was a TV film major. I forget what the actual course of study was. But I actually met him, I want to say the fall of '77, somewhere around there. Late summer, fall of '77. I was taking some of the film and photography and writing classes that were part of the curriculum at that time. I had never met him before. And so I met him because he was one of my instructors, but he was also head of that department.

AS: All right. And do you have any memories of listening to Mr. Gathings' radio shows or television shows growing up?

JF: So I didn't, I probably listened to him when he was on WOOK. I didn't remember him specifically because I was pretty young then. When I met him in '77, I had just come back from the military. I got out of the Navy in 1976, went back to school, and I met him then. That's when I learned of his history. His background in radio, his background as a news cameraman, back in the days of news film, as opposed to video. So that's when I met him. And just the wisdom and the experience he was able to bring to what for me at that time in the TV film world was very novel, I was very interested in it. But he was able to bring a lot of wisdom. He was very grounded. Tex, if you knew him, was very to the point. Didn't mess around. Had really high standards. Because he had needed to have those standards as he made his way up through radio and then also in the news film world.

03:14

AS: All right. Do you have any recollections of watching the television broadcast Teenarama?

JF: Oh, yeah. I watched Teenarama. These (laughs) I don't know too many folks in the African American community in DC that didn't watch, at some point, watch Teenarama.

AS: And what can you tell me about what you remember about the show?

JF: I always thought Teenarama was a Black version of American Bandstand. You know? American Bandstand with Dick Clark, it was entertaining, it was fun, but it wasn't me. It wasn't us. Teenarama was.

AS: In your opinion, how did Teenarama both impact and reflect DC culture at that time?

04:07

JF: Wow. Like I said, I think everybody watched Teenarama. At that time I had no idea what ratings were or what ratings meant or what ratings were. But you could, in the African American community, you could talk about Teenarama like I'm sure in the young adult white American community, people talked about American Bandstand.

AS: Can you share any stories about Mr. Gathings' time at UDC?

JF: So at UDC, it was interesting. I was a different student. Because I, like I said, I had come out of the military and decided to go back to school. And I started out at the Van Ness campus. And it really wasn't that fulfilling in terms of the TV film curriculum. And so I went down to what was called the Mount Vernon campus there on G Street where the building was where Tex worked. And I remember having some serious conversations with him about TV and film. And he said one of his challenges in teaching young Black folk in the TV film curriculum was the ability to dream. He said because day to day life was so intense and so demanding that he had to help young Black folk understand that it was okay to dream and conceptualize. Because you couldn't be a filmmaker unless you were able to dream and conceptualize. So that is one of the things that has stuck with me

for a long time, you know. Folks that were around Tex, myself, Russell Williams and probably a few other folks, we actually came out to LA and worked in the film business for several years. Russell, you know, of course, has won several Academy Awards. I worked in the film business for eight years out here. Started out I was a non-union lighting technician. Then got my union card as a lighting technician and worked on episodic TV and feature films for eight years. And a lot of the work ethic and the, you know, the stick-to-it-ness and the sense of excellence that I learned from Tex Gathings, I applied throughout my time in the film business. And also, you know, in the next career that I went onto. Tex Gathings made his mark on me. And I was not some young, easily impressed kid. I mean, I had spent four years in the Navy, Vietnam-era veteran. And I learned a lot from him. I learned a lot about him. And I was really sad when Tex passed.

07:13

AS: Can you share any stories about Mr. Gathings' impact on the communities in the DC metro area? Either within broadcasting or just his involvement with the community itself.

JF: I would just say that, you know, the sense of excellence and the energy that he brought to the TV film students on the Mount Vernon campus. I mean, everybody knew Tex. And Tex was there, Tex was everywhere. Nothing happened there without having some link to Tex. He was very much the energy and the spirit of that program. He was always encouraging. I felt when I was in Tex's program, there was nothing I couldn't do. Although it was a far cry from like the American Film Institute. I had the same sense of purpose that later on I would work with folks who were either in or alumni of the

American Film Institute. And I had the same sense of purpose studying under and working with Tex Gathings.

AS: I know it might be difficult to sum up, but in your opinion, what kind of person was Tex Gathings?

08:45

JF: I think Tex, Tex was a giver. Tex gave you all the time that you needed and wanted. Tex was always there. Tex gave all of himself. Tex gave—you almost felt that he lived at the school. Because Tex was always there. Tex was always available. And he had the answers or would help you work through the answers to anything you had. Whether it was a technical issue, you know, with cinematography, still photography, lighting, equipment, or it was just some of the issues that young adults have working their way through life, you know, in the early part of their professional and personal arcs.

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

JF: Geez, I'm only one person. The people that Tex touched. Wow. I mean, there were people that, you know, who worked behind the scenes at Channel 4, NPR, that all had at some point or another come through or by Tex. (coughs) Excuse me.

AS: Do you feel that Mr. Gathings' work opened the field of public broadcasting to minorities? And if so, how?

JF: I can't speak specifically to that. Because like I said, when I left DC, I actually left and went right to the, came out and worked in the film business in LA. While I was working with Tex, I actually worked under the direction and guidance of Russell Williams, who knew Tex well also, up at WAMU FM. And Russell ran the, he ran a workshop up there on weekends, on air and behind, and technical positions in radio. But I didn't, my interaction with Tex didn't lead to any direct interaction or impact with my time at public radio.

11:43

AS: All right. And can you share any personal stories or anecdotes about your interaction with Mr. Gathings?

JF: Geez. I can say that probably the most significant conversation that I had with Tex when he talked to me, it was almost confessional but also aspirational when he talked about getting young Black folk in the TV film program to be able to dream and conceptualize. And I never thought of it that way. Because I grew up in an environment with a family that we didn't have boundaries. And our day-to-day struggle was a struggle, but it wasn't such that it precluded us dreaming and conceptualizing. But I had never heard anybody articulate that in the greater body politic of young Black students in a TV film program.

AS: What do you feel are some of the lasting impacts that Mr. Gathings has had on public television and radio?

JF: Like I said, my work with Tex didn't lead to anything specific regarding public radio.

AS: That's completely fine. Do you have any opinions about his impacts on broadcasting in general?

JF: In the greater DC area, I think he opened doors and was a trailblazer long before, you know, I don't think he's been recognized enough. You know, because Tex didn't make a whole lot of noise. At least when I knew him, he didn't make a whole lot of noise. He didn't suffer fools. But he didn't make a whole lot of noise. And he was just this steady, solid voice and person.

14:04

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

JF: I don't know. Because I left DC to come to California in 1978, '79, somewhere like that. I knew people who had interacted with Tex. But I wasn't there to see, you know, the last third of his arc.

AS: Do you think his work and teaching advice in public broadcasting is being continued today? And if so, how?

JF: I don't know. I left the TV film business in 1986. I've actually spent the last thirty years, first as a career firefighter in Los Angeles, and then as the city's emergency manager.

AS: That's perfectly fine. My last question is just very broad. Is there anything you would like to add or reminisce on regarding Mr. Gathings and his influence on either your life or his career in general?

JF: No, nothing that I haven't already said.

15:30

[End Interview.]