

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

**Interviewee: Charles Trott**

**Interviewer: Jennifer Souder**

Date: March 28, 2019

Time: 7:00 pm

Place: 1403 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave., Asbury Park, NJ

Jennifer Souder: So Charles, thank you for being here to talk about, uh, your work. And I want to introduce myself. My name's Jennifer Souder. Um, part of the Asbury Park African American Music Project. And, uh, we've been working on this together for a couple years now. And we thought it would be really important to hear some of your thoughts behind the, um, artwork that you created for this project.

Jennifer Souder: Uh, it's become a symbol of the project, and it's really something s-, uh, pretty special. So, we're going to go through a few questions. And, uh, and talk about whatever you'd like to speak about.

Charles Trott: All right.

Jennifer Souder: So, can you, uh, please tell us your name, where and when you were born, and a few early memories of your neighborhood?

Charles Trott: Well, my name is Charles Trott. Um, I was born in Brooklyn, New York, uh, back in the, 1951. Um, I, as the story goes, I came to Asbury with my parents when I was two years old. So, I was here ... I've been here since 1953. Uh, went through the Asbury Park School District, K through 12. Uh, went away to college. Uh, started in Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and then went to Pratt, where I finished.

Charles Trott: Um, you know, I had a number of experiences that had to do with the profession that I would go into, which is, uh, art and education. Um, and, um, you know, I'm, like I would say, I'm not your usual art teacher. Um, I've spoken to some of my colleagues, and they were fortunate to basically come out of college, and within a short time they get a job. Stay there until they're old like me. And, uh, and retired. But, uh, not me. No, I, I've been around. I've taught at prisons; I've taught at community centers. I've taught, um, a little bit in a small museum up

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

in, uh, Lincroft, Monmouth Museum years ago, um, and public school districts here in Jersey primarily but I did a little [inaudible 00:02:11] work in New York. Uh, I don't know what district it was, it was, um, well anyway, it was a school up in Manhattan.

Jennifer Souder: Hmm.

Jennifer Souder: Uh, so can you tell us some memories associated with music and art from your early childhood?

Charles Trott: Well, um, music was pretty much ... I guess I'm a classic Afro-American male or from a classic African American family. Music was in the family. It was-there was no, at that time, um, professional. Although, I guess, loosely speaking, you could say there was - my mother was a professional musician because she was the church organist and of course they paid her a little something, I think, I don't even know. But, um, my father sang and, of course, I sang and I started playing clarinet, uh, in fourth grade and did it for eight years - clarinet.

Charles Trott: And then I sang in the church and I sang in the school, and actually, I wanted to be a professional musician. I wanted to be what Wynton Marsalis has become. He's actually a little bit my junior I think. Um, I enjoyed European classical music, but I love jazz. And, you know, I loved R&B and a lot of other forms too, but jazz was my mainstay, almost cost me getting kicked out of band a couple of times because once I learned a song, then I wanted to put a couple riffs in it and, of course, the band leader was not having it. Um, I also played in what they called the stage band at the Boys Club. Now it's Monmouth County Boys and Girls Club but it was the Boys Club back then, and they had a stage band which played typically, um, swing era, uh, you know jazz band compositions. And so I did that for a year or two, uh, but that was as close to a professional as I got. Um-

Jennifer Souder: And when was that? How old were you when you played?

Charles Trott: Oh I was in high school. This was high school, sometime in high school, I don't know 14-17. You know, um, that's how that went. Uh, I, uh, my family decided that they didn't want me to go into music, and this is one time I listened to them. I didn't usually listen to them back then, but I did. And um, of course when I went away when I started college I-I really wanted to be a sociologist or psychologist, but [cough] I got frustrated as I often did and still do - couldn't wait. So I said, "You know what, you can't, can't quit college but you've got to do

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

something." So, I decided to become an artist because of a friend of mine that, uh, I had met while I was at Lincoln University and she too was going to leave Lincoln to go to study art in New York. So I thought it was a good idea and I was fortunate enough to get into Pratt, and the rest is history.

Jennifer Souder: So, can you tell us about the art piece that you developed, uh, for the project?

Charles Trott: Well, that piece as you may remember, I forgot I even did a piece some years before that's similar to it. There was some event going on at, um, St. Augustine's and, I don't even remember how I got into it, but I probably got into it by way of my brother and Mr. Dorian Parreott. Um, at any rate, I-I-I somehow decided to do an illustration. That illustration said, um, what'd it say? Jazz legends of Asbury Park. Something, I don't even remember. Anyway, uh, when I became a member of, um, the Asbury Park African American Music Heritage Project - got it right finally, it's not called that anymore, I thought I'd do something similar.

Charles Trott: Anyway, [laughter] it came up and I said, "Well, you know, you need a cover piece, I can...you know." And so, why did I choose a quintet? No particular reason, but I do remember, for me, my formative years being introduced to jazz, a lot of what they call combos were around, and many were trios to quintets, you know maybe a little larger, but generally trio to quintets. And for some reason, I - wait a minute. Dee, Cliff, who else? Al? And someone else. Well, any rate, we-we did the classic four I believe when we interviewed the first four people. Al, Cliff, Dee, who was the fourth? Seems like a fourth one.

Charles Trott: But any rate, I just chose five and why did I choose those five? Well, saxophone / trumpet is usually in a small [combo], back then, was usually one of the melodic instruments aside from the piano. Generally, always had a bass, they always had a drummer and a singer was sort of optional. So, I don't know, I said let's do five. Yeah, and um, that was pretty much it. I want to keep it simple; I didn't want to go off on some tangent, which I can do.

Jennifer Souder: Well it represents the project very well, um, and the colors - is there anything about the colors?

Charles Trott: Only the blue and black of course, which are, or black and blue, which are traditionally Asbury's school colors. Um, the sort of pinkish or reddish, um, I can't even tell you why I put that in there. I guess for contrast, but I was

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

definitely thinking of black and blue. And, um, those are my two favorite colors even if I didn't go to Asbury Park schools.

Jennifer Souder: [laughter]

Jennifer Souder: So can you talk to us about the intersection of art and history as it relates to Springwood Avenue?

Charles Trott: Well, as you know, it, uh, my recollection of art and history, uh, in terms of Springwood Avenue is primarily performing art - music in particular. And of course, our project focuses on jazz, but when you talk about music in the United States - and probably Canada too, but at least the United States - uh, African American communities, well you know, music, we've gotta have music. There's all sorts of music, and of course, uh, as history has, uh, shown us, jazz in particular is an American invention and, uh, invented primarily if not solely by what we call today African Americans. And um, that was the main intersection.

Charles Trott: Now, uh, you had people from the West side, of course, before me, but the only person I can think of who was a visual artist did, uh, at least some of his work that's been recorded, uh, over on the boardwalk - actually in the sand, and that's Kay Harris's, uh, grandfather. I never met very many, if any, um, you know, Black visual artists other than Larry Walker who was from the area at the time. But as far as fine artists who were, you know, in my time, commercial artists, I didn't know of any. Um, but as I understand, there was a lady, at least one - I'm trying to remember her name now, ugh - uh, but anyway, she, uh, was a visual artist. She's a little older than me; I didn't know she was until, oh, I was much older.

Charles Trott: So I don't know anything about that, but you know the music scene was alive and well, uh, in people's homes, obviously in the churches. And then it comes to social life, um, of course now I came of age in the '60s, so most of our music was recorded in terms of records, but every now and then there was some young folks who around my-my contemporaries who had bands and were in especially singing groups. Um, you know, uh that was the extent of the history as I remember it from a child to 1970 and beyond.

Jennifer Souder: So now that there's a lot of - I'm throwing this in there, it's not on the paper - now that there's a lot of change, uh, and some development happening on Springwood Avenue, do you see any opportunities or what do you think about

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

opportunities for visual arts, um, along Springwood Avenue? Are there different things you envision?

Charles Trott: Well, you know, um there are a number of things that I-I envision, and because of what I just said, um, I would like to see a lot more visual art in some of, in - well, there's really only one venue at this time - and that's the senior center. Um, hopefully the Turf will, uh, be revitalized and at that time, I'd certainly like to see some visual art done in conjunction with the, uh, musical performances in particular. But I hope that it won't just be music, uh, I mean I love music but, um, let's bring in the rest of the performing arts. You know? Where are the dancers? How about the poets? Uh, you know, um, you should have a screen in there, you know? And we'll have some short clips and films to be shown and, and the visual arts - you know, folks like me, with drawings, paintings, prints - have them around as the performances, um, occur. So that's what I would like to see, and of course, some-some public arts, some murals, um, wherever.

Charles Trott: And speaking to that, the Turf. Uh, my last recollection, one of the things all of the photographs that you may see and the ones that are on our site, um, are the Turf. But, I guess, ooh a couple of years - I don't know how many years after, there was one of my contemporaries, uh Larry Walker, he also grew up here, he muralized that Turf Club. When you walked down Springwood Avenue, skeletal as it was, uh, looking like Beirut as it did, um, there was a beautiful mural on the Turf Club. I don't know if it was all four walls but certainly on the end section of, um, At-Atkins and Springwood. Um, so, you know, maybe uh it can happen again and if not, we'll take it inside. [Laughter]

Jennifer Souder: But, um, there's gotta be some pictures of that somewhere I hope.

Charles Trott: Yeah, maybe Larry has it. I'll have to contact him. I don't know

Jennifer Souder: Mm-hmm [affirmative] it's amazing.

Charles Trott: Yeah, I can't remember what year that he did, but um, I do remember he, and it's Greg Brewington were your visual artists uh on Springwood Avenue in I guess the late '70s, but I really don't remember. It was after we both got out of high school, so and-and it would've been after the insurrection in 1970, but I just don't remember the year offhand.

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Jennifer Souder: Um, so, what is something that, something that you would like someone walking down Springwood Avenue today to know about the history of Springwood Avenue?

Charles Trott: Well, the first thing I would want them to know is whatever you have read, which probably won't be much, I believe our project will give you a lot, um, a lot more information as to the history, especially artistically, on Springwood Avenue. And even those who did not perform, um, they had a peripheral involvement, uh, not just as audience members but music bound, and probably still does to some degree, the Black community. We're not strangers to it and many of the people who we would call musicians are not necessarily, you know, classically trained. Uh, Errol Garner's, uh not from Asbury, but he's a classic, um, example of what I'm talking about. Couldn't read a stitch of music, but the music that he performed was great.

Jennifer Souder: We'll pause for a second - we're fine. You don't have to actually pause, I mean just-

Jennifer Souder: Thank you so much. You can come in. We're-it's recording, but we're taking a-

Malcolm: Ice cream

Jennifer Souder: You got ice cream? Oh wow!

Carritta Cook: We got pizza too.

Jennifer Souder: Oh my goodness. Thank you so much Carritta. I'll see you tomorrow.

Carritta Cook: Okay, see you.

Jennifer Souder: Hey Malcolm.

Jennifer Souder: [whispers]

Jennifer Souder: Okay, sorry - sorry about that

Charles Trott: Yeah, and you know, you look at Springwood today, they just finished the housing complex that replaced Boston Way Village so there's a lot more

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

architecture on Springwood than just 6 months or a year ago, but that was not it. And the last pictures that many will see of Springwood Avenue prior to the insurrection in 1970, um, you'd probably say, "Well, this looks a little run down" blah-blah-blah. Yeah right, they do, but you know they reflect the times, and um, I just want people to really go beyond. If you want to know about something, you cannot stop at the information that's presented to you easily. Don't go to the low-lying fruit, climb the tree, shake the tree, go beyond. You know? Cross reference. Um, but as far as what I would tell them, I'd say this place used to look a lot different. It was much more vibrant than it is today. Because you walk the streets or drive down the street at 11 o'clock, pretty much any night on Springwood, it's pretty quiet. That was not the case, uh, some 50 years ago. I could-I could attest to that. [Laughter]

Jennifer Souder: [Laughter]

Jennifer Souder: So is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't touched on?

Charles Trott: Mmm

Malcolm: Mommy?

Jennifer Souder: Hold on. Excuse me. I'm coming, Malcolm.

Malcolm: Can they [inaudible 00:17:30]

Charles Trott: (Laughter) me too.

Jennifer Souder: (laughter)

Jennifer Souder: Sorry Charles

Charles Trott: That's all right. [inaudible 00:17:47] I'll wait. (laughter)

Jennifer Souder: [laughter]

Jennifer Souder: [inaudible 00:18:03]

Charles Trott: All right, what was the question again?

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

- Jennifer Souder: Oh sorry. Um, I just said if there's anything else that you wanted to share that you felt like - we're going to do this again you know - but this, [inaudible 00:18:16] thoughts?
- Charles Trott: I don't know. The only thing, I mean, one thing that stood out when I, um, heard about this project was, uh, the historical fact. Now, this is ironic for me only because if we go back 50 years ago when I was in high school - a quick, quick story - uh my [inaudible 00:18:39] was, um, U.S. History. Uh, I did not graduate on time, did not walk with my class because, guess what, I failed U.S. History. My cumulative average was 69.5, you needed 70. So anyway, of course I cursed Mrs. Lieberman but Mrs. Lieberman - god bless you - because you have created the monster. Now, I really like history, and it's partly because of her. But um, she was a great teacher; it's just that I found it very boring. I've taken a different take. I'm sort of African-centered but not stuck in Africa because I like to move around and understand the cultures and history of the world. And, at least indirectly, it's because of Miss Lieberman. [laughter] You know? So my hats off to you, wherever you are. And that's about it. Um, it's really very important, as important as the arts, even though the arts are-
- Malcolm: [yelling]
- Jennifer Souder: I'll be right there. But um, um-
- Jennifer Souder: But also Charles, I'm gonna-. If you just can share with Melissa a little bit about DIA.
- Charles Trott: Oh DIA?
- Melissa: Oh yeah, definitely.
- Charles Trott: Okay. Well, DIA - D I A - an acronym for Diasporic Images of Africa. Um, while I was in the school systems, I started to do projects with the students, um, for definitely Black history and Hispanic history. I don't remember going onto the other ones. Oh, um, later on - just, a couple of years before I retired, we started to do Native American history as well. Um, I don't remember if we did women's history. But I'm saying all of that to say, um, after my - after my first trip to Cuba and a previous trip to Egypt years before, um, almost a decade before, um, I just got the bug to, uh, talk about history - talk about the history of Africa and how

## ASBURY PARK AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC PROJECT

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

obvious African descendants, whatever nationality we may call ourselves, are all connected, um, not only because we look like them but you can see vestiges of African cultures, the few that I know, um, in different parts of the world as well as here in America, and um, people don't recognize it.

Charles Trott: And being illustrative, being someone who's work deals with symbolism, surrealism, portraiture, all of that, I said, "I know exactly what I'm going to do." So I combined, um, the desire to talk about Africa's connection to cultures and countries around the world with my art and with, uh, doing some deeper research into what that connection is, what countries are connected, um, where are the examples of that. Um, and now of course some, ooh what are we four years into DIA, you know, that still applies and I'm still looking to, uh, you know improve on it and, um, improve on the presentation as well as collect more information firsthand by going to countries and digging up the obvious African descendants. Now why do I say obvious African descendants? Because, according to the scientific community, every human is an African descendant. We're caught up in colors, and races, and nobody wants to hear that, except I'm going to say it anyway [laughter]. So that's what DIA is, and, um, that's what I do.

Jennifer Souder: Well, thank you Charles, and I just wanted to say that - first of all, I feel like everybody that's worked on this project brings really, um, sort of special aspects of their life to the project, which makes the project, I think um, even richer - and your, um, knowledge of history and your passion for the arts and the whole, um, DIA project and just having you here has been a huge, um, value for making this move forward. So, thank you for all that you bring.

Charles Trott: Right, well I appreciate it and I hope that it'll always stay on the positive.

Jennifer Souder: Oh it will.

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