

Interview of Little Melvin Williams

This interview was conducted by Sunni Khalid of WYPR.

Transcription provided by John J. Schwallenberg of the University of Baltimore.

Khalid: I am speaking with?

Williams: Melvin Douglas Williams.

Khalid: In 1968 where were you? What do you remember about that day: April 4th 1968?

Williams: April 4th?

Khalid: The day Dr. King was assassinated. Where were you?

Williams: I was in the pool room where I spent most of my life.

Khalid: Where is the pool room?

Williams: The pool room was on Pennsylvania Ave. and Smithson St. Smithson St. is gone. They placed a housing project across the street. That so many memories exist about with all of us presumed relics or prehistoric beings. And maybe there was occasions where I saw as much as a half million dollars change hands in Smithson St. against the wall playing craps, a half million.

Khalid: So you were in the pool room. What do you remember about that day?

Williams: I remember that everybody was running around seeming to be disturbed; because someone that they had not really know personally, was so personally associated with them. And what he stood for and how now, all of a sudden, this person's existence is so much more profound than it was in the past.

Khalid: So someone ran into the pool room and told everybody.

Williams: Someone came into the poolroom and just shouted out: Man they just killed Dr. Martin Luther King. Everybody looked wide eyed and mystified at each other: Aw he don't know what he's talking about. This guy's is the first to blab all the time. Everybody started going in different directions to see if it was the truth. So we turned the radio on then we turned the TV on and in minutes we found out that he had been killed.

Khalid: What were your initial thoughts and what did you feel inside?

Williams: I wanted to know why and how he had gotten killed and what method was used to kill this man.

Khalid: Why? Why was that important?

Williams: It was important to me because, it seem that, we as black people or African-American people whichever we choose to call ourselves. It seems that whenever one of us reach a form or a point of prominence, something bad seems to always seems to happen to him. It happened to Martin, it happened to Malcolm. It seems that each time one of us gets so smart that he wants to wake the world, they want him dead. Now it doesn't matter if this one individual becomes brilliant himself. His individual brilliance doesn't seem to really bother anybody. But when he starts to try to change everybody around him to think like him... There is so much money made off of ignorance and ignorant people. Nobody wants black people to be as wise as they truly are. You just divide it.

Khalid: So you had been following Dr. King?

Williams: Yes and every other leader that we've ever had. I mean, especially when people start pointed their finger at you saying, you got leaders skills and things. I don't want leader's skills and all the leaders keep coming up dead. I mean that's, that's crazy.

Khalid: But you admired him?

Williams: More than that. I think admiration is a small statement for how this man seemed to undergo so much scrutiny and discomfort and always seemed to turn his cheek just like Jesus did. I wish I had that kind of quality; I can't do that.

Khalid: He was supposed to come to Baltimore.

Williams: I heard that. Yeah, I heard that. I can only assume that the people that were talking about that were correct and that he would have eventually. But, I wasn't a political being that was allowed in the inner circle. I was one of the, so called, outsiders, one of the, the ones on the fringes.

Khalid: Now take me back to the pool room. The guy came in and said: Dr. King had been killed. Guys turn on the television, radio. Then what do you remember about what the mood was like in West Baltimore right after that.

Williams: There gradually became a feeling of I need to vent. I need to make someone understand just how bad I feel by making some kind of statement or making them feel bad. And upon being asked, I would exclaim to that person: This is how I about what just happened to my leader or my man or my friend.

Khalid: When did you notice that there was trouble in the city?

Williams: When all of a sudden there appeared to be more people in the streets than ever before, as I can recall. It seemed to be...

Khalid: You knew on Pennsylvania Avenue, which was the heart of Black Baltimore then.

Williams: Yeah it was indeed. It was a place where blacks owned all of their businesses and they seemed to be prospering tremendously all the time. It seemed that even the people that owned businesses were out in the street, trying to figure out exactly what happened and how it happened. And all of the details had not been given out yet. Enough details had been given out to make it clear that somebody of another nationality had killed this man.

Khalid: Describe to me the Baltimore of 1968: the segregation between the races and the tension between the races at that time.

Williams: The tension was that though there appeared to be a kind of cohesiveness for some blacks that lived way out in counties way out I mean, it would cost you thirty dollars for cab fare. That was an obvious disconnect in a city; because it seemed that white people were trying to do as much as they could to go around the inner city to get to their place of abode, which was in the different counties. It didn't appear that very many people wanted to be directly associated with inner city, those of some kind other than black ethnicity.

Khalid: So blacks stayed on their part of the town and white folks stayed on their part of town.

Williams: Yeah, yeah, it appeared that way to me. You know, again, this is only one opinion and as you well know: only God will ever only know the truth everybody else has opinions.

Khalid: Was there, I mean, fisticuffs, hate, I mean what was going on when the two races would come in contact with each other. All of the stores were segregated of course, in sixty-eight too, right?

Williams: There would hardly ever be any true, true fisticuffs because it would always be so obvious that this is a part of the city that you wouldn't go in. Like, I think it was Hanlon. That if you go down in Pigtown or certain other parts of the state, you need to be prepared for physical communication and physical contact and the physical contact would be that you would be outnumbered. And the whites would have bats and dogs and things of that nature and when the police arrives. Certainly the police is going to arrive as

his counterpart. It just seemed so obvious that you were in a losing situation. That few people bought into it.

Khalid: Alright, what do you remember about the beginning of the, of the rioting and the looting.

Williams: I remember seeing a couple of individuals exclaim how dissatisfied they were with the way that things continuously happen. There were several white people that owned stores up and down Pennsylvania Avenue and it seemed a day that just being white was the wrong complexion.

Khalid: What stores? Do you remember the stores? Do you remember the...

Williams: Ah Pipe Rack, Cookies, Rodman's. There was another hat store that I can't think of as we speak. There was Tommy Tuckers and the bonding companies. I think it was... Oh wow. It's been a minute but.

Khalid: Those stores were hit pretty quickly?

Williams: Immediately after somebody determined that they were white owned and it came a point where they just took so much out of them that the police made it clear: Now that you've taken everything, you might as well go and... At that point it seemed that nothing was enough. And they just continued to take and burn and destroy.

Khalid: What were you doing those first, those first few days?

Williams: Trying to find somebody to break. I was a gambler. All I wanted to do was catch somebody trying to play crap or pool or cards or something. Then win two three-hundred thousand from them. It didn't affect me.

Khalid: Were you able to do that?

Williams: Yeah it. Gambling continued. It was a wonderful time for betting and gambling. It was just so many people that had so much money man. Back in those days, we called money certain kinds of money we called it weigh money. You couldn't count it fast enough; you had to weigh it. It was a wonderful time. That's all I can say about it.

Khalid: Alright now you were a gambler at this time and beyond the pale of, you know the black establishment. But as the rioting continued the city fathers came to you. Explain that to me.

Williams: I guess I had become a martial artist at that time and I had some, some notorious wins against some of the people that were considered to be much wiser and smarter than myself. And ultimately those kinds of wins go down in history. Like Ali beating Liston, you know. I was a party to that also. I chose, chose Muhammad Ali even though he was an eleven to one favorite. I mean underdog. But on that occasion I

remember clearly the day that General George Gelston in charge of the National Guard of the 5th Regiment Armory, Major Box Harris who was the largest police officer, black police officer at that time and Senator Clarence Mitchell the third, came to my house and said: Melvin we want you to come with us and hopefully stop the people from rioting. And I said: why me? They said: Because it appears that you have the audience captivity syndrome going for you right now that they seem to listen to you when you say something. And so I say's: Let's go! Let's see if that, if that holds true and if it does I'm delighted if it doesn't, I hope you don't hold it against me. And so, I think, ah Major Harris said ah: Take this bullhorn and this bulletproof vest and we off. And so I says well: I can take the bullhorn but the bulletproof vest I couldn't wear that because it's the same neighborhoods that I'm in all day everyday and it seems like I'd be punking out if I took a bulletproof vest today and I didn't wear it any other time. So let's proceed with that in mind. So we rolled to all of these different places.

Khalid: What did you ride in?

Williams: It's some kind of institutional vehicle. It was me and Clarence in the back and ah Major Harris and the General in the front. And after we rode to several of these places, I got out of the car stood on a box on a car hood or roof and said that: You have taken all there is to take out of this black community. You've taken the heart out of your own area. But more importantly, I've been told by this General that in the event that you cross Howard and Franklin Streets: those two streets that divide the things that belong to the powers that be and white America their going to kill you wholesale. Their going to kill you all in a manner that would let it be known that this is something that we will not tolerate. And they tolerated it as long as we were destroying black things. But they made it clear that you can take Pipe Rack and Cookie's and Rodman's and all those places you can destroy as much of it as you choose. But again, if you cross Franklin and Howard we going to open fire and were going to kill you all wholesale.

Khalid: Is this what they told you or what you had already surmised?

Williams: This is what they said to me. This is what this General George Gelston said to me. If he's alive today I am sure he would remember having made that statement: that after a certain point, if this is something that is continuously attacked, then we'll open fire on you; were not going to have that.

Khalid: Melvin, Melvin what was in it for you? I mean why should you, why did you do this at all? I mean because, you know, it was no skin off your back, so to speak. Why did you do this? What was your motivation?

Williams: Well my motivation was that it appeared as was said: That destruction was induced by self and it's always bothered me that blacks or African-Americans whomever their called are the greatest proponents of self destruction. And I've been told years ago by a very intelligent African-American man and again by a Jew: That in all of your life the greatest amount of discomfort is going to come to you from something that you do to yourself; rarely will it come from external forces.

Khalid: So what kind of response did you get when you would go to these different places, these different hot spots? They knew you, were talking about east and west side. They knew, they knew who you were.

Williams: Yes they did and it appears to me that they were eagerly receptive to just whatever it was that I had to say. And I finally said to them: You need to go home; you need to go quick. There's going to be a curfew. It gives credence to those of you and I that they really, they being the establishment, really want to beat, they want to beat you down. Do not, I repeat do not give them an opportunity to do that, under this probable cause theory after the sun goes down. So everybody left and went home.

Khalid: If you had not acted, is there any doubt in your mind that we would have seen these wholesale massacres; that we would have seen people shot down by the dozens?

Williams: I am certain of that; as certain as I could be with it being an event in the future. I'm aware that God doesn't give man the authority to call the future. You know, it has to come from some divine revelation from the Spirit. All I presumed was if they continued in the course that they were going that at some point somebody was going to say: Hey man there's some jewelry stores across and some other clothes across here and across here means Franklin and Howard. So I think that would be an excuse to open fire on everybody. With that in mind, I said: I need to do as much as I can to stop that.

Khalid: Well something happened to you personally about two weeks after the riots were over in the city. What happened?

Williams: Ironically, there came a point when the black establishment, again, and those people that look just a little bit different than the rest of us and the difference in their appearance is that there're lighter in complexion and their hair ties around certain parts of their skull and it's easier to do that because their hair's so straight. Their lighter in complexion and I don't know if that's given them a ...a feeling of a little bit different a little bit better than the other guys. That being the case I considered I needed to try to do as much as I good.

Khalid: What happened?

Williams: There came a voice that emerged that after so many people were told and it was very easy to tell them you know you need to go home; if you go across Howard and Franklin, their going to kill you. You need to go home immediately; there's going to be a curfew, go in. Do not allow them the opportunity to dog you, to beat you up and everybody dispersed and went home. Two weeks later the voice came out of the , still out of the black community, not white, black community that: Any nigger that could stop a riot could start one; we need to put him in the penitentiary; he's got too much juice; juice being power. And it seemed immediately thereafter I began to receive these different onslaughts from the Baltimore Department of Police. And several where the police were directly beholding to several of the community blacks it was really easy to see what was

going on. I mean you don't need to be a genius to see that. Now as I look back, with these eyes and the memory, never having had a beer, an aspirin, a joint, a cup of coffee, a glass of eggnog or a blow, a snort or a hit, It's real easy for me to see what took place and who did what and how and it's all good.

Khalid: You're alright with that?

Williams: It's history, it's very little that I can do about it. It is what it is and we in spite of there seems to be a lot of people that are against it I am clear and a prime target of the Willie Lynch Theory. And I don't know if you're understanding completely. You know, everybody say they know. I'll you in a few words exactly what Willie Lynch did and who he was and what he said and why it's working today. Willie Lynch was a West Indian who was teaching white Americans...

Khalid: Barbadian, Barbajan farmer, planter.

Williams: Yeah, yeah he... Yeah, Barbajan farmer. That's correct. He wasn't Barbajan? Yeah Barbajan farmer, that's correct. How to be a controller of making slaves and he said to these white slave owners, these plantation owners: If you will follow this example I will show you how to make this people hate themselves for two hundred years. That's initially the timeframe that he started, talked about. You know it's gone much longer then two hundred years now and I think it's going to go two thousand. But he says you want to do is: You want to take the women who is clearly weaker than everybody else of that race and put her in charge. In putting her in charge allow her to govern everything that has to do with this black man. Allow her to let the light skin man eat inside the house as much as he wants as often as he wants. Allow the dark skinist, Mandingo Man to eat only after the light skin man is finished and allow him only to eat through the window and only allow him to eat morsels and they will hate each other for the next two hundred years. It's working.

Khalid: And these folks turned on you?

Williams: Well.

Khalid: You helped save the city.

Williams: I don't know if...

Khalid: Arguable no! Arguable you helped save the city or parts of the city.

Williams: Well.

Khalid: It would have been more bloodshed and more destruction had you not acted.

Williams: Well I'm a firm believer. You know I don't mince words and I don't duck nobody and I don't fear nobody and at this point, I really don't care about a whole lot about what is thought. But had I been a Parks, a Adams, a Mitchell, a Murphy or Hazeburg none of this would have happened to Melvin. Melvin wouldn't have spent twenty six and a half years in the penitentiary on a bogus drug charge. Had I been anyone of those families somebody of prominence and I had done a lot of prominent folks favors but none the less, the powers that be weren't particular about Melvin. Once something happened, something freak happened in Mr. Adams bar: my forty five fell out of my waist and it went off indiscriminately. I was told: You can't ever come in here again and so I didn't. But at that time they were looking to kidnap him as well. There were some people running around the city that were taking pop shots at people who were supposed to have a lot of money. He was one of those who was supposed to be kidnapped also. He and ah Mr. Dixon, not the younger Dixon the older Dixon and several other people that were considered to be non ah organized criminal related. But, I don't know, it didn't seem like it mattered at that time and so I honored his wish: Stay out of my place and so I did.

Khalid: The reward that you got?

Williams: The reward that I got really wasn't something that everybody thought out. Because it was a time when presumable if Melvin wasn't in the drug business, he was heading for it and he's got, maybe, three dollars more than we want him to have and he's arrogant. And I can only say this to you in regard to arrogance and the young people you see around the city today. Anytime that you do something well and gambling is something that I did well and I got paid well. It's impossible not to have a certain kind of arrogance.

Khalid: You have to.

Williams: Michael Jordon was arrogant, Tiger Woods is arrogant.

Khalid: Swagger you have to have it.

Williams: Yeah, you have to have that because it says that: Each time that I go to bat all of you people that are considered to be brilliant: bet against me and when the dust settles like Ali I'm sticking both hands up in the air. The money is laid down at my feet so. It's unlike something where you're unrewarded. In the environment that I grew up in when you are victorious the victor has an opportunity to say: Oh yeah, and I want a quarter of a million. And I won two hundred thousand and I won eighty thousand which I had the luxury of doing on thousands of occasions against all of these guys that were my seniors and since I had come there as a child I had watched them in awe and thought they were all brilliant. But as the years passed and they were slowing down and I kept coming, I could see the day when they were going to make a mistake and say: Let's try this kid or let's play this and I had saved the bank just for that purpose; I had been waiting for you too.

Khalid: Laughter. Let me ask you a couple other questions. This is you know, because, we have to talk about future and what has happened. This city was a segregated city, red neck city 1968. Things have changed. How have things changed? Have they changed for the better? Have they changed for the worse? Is the city any are blacks and whites any closer together than they were forty years ago?

Williams: No, but the difference now is in that era in time, they had a passive black. These young blacks they're like Mandingo. They're not scared of white folks; they're not scared of their parents. The only thing about these black kids that is really delightful to see is that they stand their ground. They don't run and break every time they see three white folks coming and they can't be intimidated like in the past. Now again, I've seen...

Khalid: That was a direct result of 68?

Williams: I think it was the direct result of a whole host of 68 things. But this...

Khalid: Life.

Williams: This new generation of African-Americans, including the women are conscientious, they're extremely intelligent and if I could ask them to do any one thing: I would ask them to consider black life more; be more together. Take a moment to do the one thing that only needs to happen in order to make things grow and that's want for your brother like you want for yourself. Want to talk to him like you want to be talked to. Which is something that I do constantly. And when I come in contact with one of these young guys and he calls me Mr. Melvin, I refute that immediately. I say there is no way that you going to call me. You say: I want to do that out of respect. Well I respect you too. But I want you to call me Melvin and I want to call you Little Joe or John. And the reason is I don't want you to think you get a pass on some kind of stupidity because you a young guy and coming. You see, I didn't have that. As a young guy I was expected to knock the ball out of the park every time I went to the plate and you are too. You will get no bypasses because you're nineteen or you're eighteen. When men and that's what you are aren't you? He said, yeah. I say men treat each other like men. Men shake hands and look right in the face of the guy's whose hand their shaking. In the event he's not the guy that you are concerned with then you don't stick your hand out to shake it to start with. And when he asks you, what's up? You explain to him exactly what's up so he got an opportunity and due process to say: This is the way you saw it; this is the way it really was; you didn't know that.

Khalid: This wasn't the case before 68?

Williams: No. No, before 68... I went to City College. I was put out of Douglass High School by a lady by the name of Lillian Perry because I gambled. And I was so fascinated with gambling, it just didn't seem to make sense to go to school to win money that I could win immediately and then. And most people went to school to get a certain kind of education to go off into the world to have the things that they wanted. It was just

too easy to have the things then. So I said: well... And when I went to class, the answers to these questions seemed to come so easy. It just seemed...it was boring. And so I said: gambling and those things associated with that life are more enjoyable. So I went off to do them. But upon being put out of Douglas High School they, because of my IQ, were demanded to let me in City College.

Khalid: 161

Williams: Yeah, yeah, that's a fair number.

Khalid: What about relations? What about attitudes? Racial attitudes in this city. Black and white, are they worse now than they were? Were they the same? Have they changed? Are we better off? Worse off?

Williams: I think were much better off because, in spite of that there are still some left over overtones of Willie Lynch, in and around, it's not only dark skin light skin any longer. It's: I'm corporate and I'm in this field and I have more opportunities to hang out with these kind of people and I'm removed from the kind of confusion you stumble past all day and everyday so therefore I'm a little better than you. You can feel that sometimes. They make exceptions for dollars. This is a dollars and cents generation. So anybody's that can show that he's got dollars and cents that warrant consideration he's given consideration. Whether he's a roach or something else. By roach I mean somebody who usually crawls up on other people and gets carried all of his life. There was a lot of those on Pennsylvania Ave. Just, just crawled around down there and just stayed around and begged and pinched. Now some of them are people of importance around the city. And they've forgotten where they've come from. Except that Melvin's never forgotten.

Khalid: Alright, one thing we didn't have back then that we have now, you know. We have a black Mayor, a black elected officials, black people have risen in, you know, the public eye and in prominence in the political structure. Is that something that is better or worse or has that made any difference?

Williams: Certainly that's better. Because, even if only for a few people someone black, has to, at some point, even if when they go home has to act black for a change. Now again, Maynard Jackson and Marion Berry are the kind of blacks that make it clear that before I leave office, I'm going to leave some black millionaires, multi. I'm going to leave some because that's what everybody else did. And that's what I would encourage anybody that was. I mean you've got to care for your own. Unless you do for your own your going to leave the planet with much less of everything. And there's a whole host of things that blacks should do more of that they don't. We need to do the exact opposite of Bush with these people that he's chosen to allow these American kids to fight against and the American kids are trying to live and these people are trying to die. I mean it's senseless to believe that you got an opportunity to win against a guy and all he wants to do is die. I was listening to a survey the other day and this lady said: I have a child, she was an Iraqi. She says: Here's a person that's come over and bombed and bombed now

there going to presuppose that democracy is something better for us and she's they've killed my five kids. I've got one left a girl. I'm going to feed her three times a day until she's old enough to place a bomb of ten pounds on her body. At which point in time I hope she is fortunate enough to kill two American Generals. How do you stay at war with people like that and think you're going to win.

Khalid: Laughing... Let me ask you one last question Melvin. We've been having a hard time raising funds, even from our own board here; because they don't want to look back at 68: white folks, Jews whatever. Do you, where do you think this comes from this reluctance to look back on what happened in 68 and look back on what America was like at that time?

Williams: I don't know where your funds are going from; but I will say this to anybody that wants to rule out any part of history that is part of a betterment and all history is a part of betterment. Because it allows you to see where you came from; what went wrong then. And supposedly smart people would do the right thing, if not at least by everybody, by somebody. But because... Well my father said this, and I know this to be the truth. He says: The one way to fail in life is to try to please everybody. But if you only try to please self you going to self destruct. Now there are enough black people and African-American people in Baltimore City that have means of dollars and cents. That has money. Maybe not weigh money. Money enough... But they have enough together money to do things that they don't seem to do. And this is an off shot of that. If we look today at the basis and the problems that we have as American citizens. For the last, I think, five years we've been at war and we so many trillion in debt because we want to change the way somebody else thinks around the world. Because at some point in time, we were deficient in the monies that we need and we thought we could go across the planet and take somebody else's oil and their finance. When we really wanted to fight because somebody put a hundred million dollar contract on their father and it didn't come off. So we get an opportunity to get a second shot at that. Well, if that's what you going to do, say that and the men around the planet that are just as smart as you will honor that. But when you start trying to make an ass out of everybody else like you're the only one with some sense. That's the first form of foolishness. You got one President that had some kind of sexual encounter and they had some kind of...

Khalid: Nobody died.

Williams: impeachment process on him. Here's another guy that has lied lied to everybody else on earth.

Khalid: Ten billion dollars a month.

Williams: Lied to everybody else on earth and nobody has even considered or just asking him: How do you stay in office? And here's something else: I am able to follow an individual from A-Z in his life once he makes a commitment to that. He has a religious following for somebody. If he says he's Muslim I go to the Koran and find it. If he says that he's Baptist or Jehovah's Witness or he's some kind of Christian, I can go

to the Bible with this photographic memory of mine and I can find him. Our President said he is a born-again-Christian; which means that he follows Jesus. He doesn't have any other choice. Well I want to know, if I ever have an opportunity to ask this man: When would Jesus attack somebody first.

Khalid: Laughing....

Williams: I would just love to ask him that. And, and in so doing, I'd like to show him where there came a time when a guy came to the United States and he said: *Ayer Diablo aqui*'. Yesterday the Devil was here. Well here's what Jesus says in the book of *Mathews* the 12th Chapter and 30th verse: He said: "He who is not with me is against me. and he that does not gather together with me scatters abroad." Which makes it clear there's no grey area: You either with me or you against me. You make your own determination as to whether he's a follower of Jesus; because I know for a fact: Jesus would never preemptively strike anybody. So now if he's not with Jesus did this guy in his statement: Was he right? Yesterday *Diablo aqui*.

Khalid: Chavez.

Williams: Yesterday he said: the Devil was here. Now again, if he wasn't following Jesus, maybe he was right.

Khalid: Laughing... Alright Melvin we're done.