

Simplicity and Truth -- Reflections on "Roots: Jazz/Blues/Spirituals"

Written by Lois Deloatch

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"If you're gonna tell it, tell the truth and tell it all!" was an adage I heard often as a child growing up in rural North Carolina, where hard work, honesty, and generosity anchored our deep, abiding family and community values. Entering adulthood, I learned that living this seemingly simple conviction is much more complicated than the phrase itself appears. "If you're gonna tell it" implies that you've made a choice, a conscious decision to speak truth, while "tell the truth" suggests that you have knowledge or understanding of what the truth is, that you know right from wrong and fact from fiction. Finally, "tell it all" reveals that the truth cannot be selective, and you cannot conveniently or deliberately omit facts or tell part of the story. When my siblings and I sometimes landed in trouble, as children often do, my mother admonished, "I don't care what you've done or how bad it seems, I need you to tell me the truth. I can deal with the truth, but there is nothing I can do with a lie!"

Another favorite saying of my mother's was "Just be natural; there's no need to put on fancy airs." In every aspect of your lives, we embodied this philosophy. We lived a relatively simple life. Although we lived in "poverty" based on government standards, we were self-reliant. We owned our home, which my father built himself on land that has been in the family for generations. We couldn't afford to purchase very many "store bought" goods, but somehow we achieved a high quality of living. We planted and harvested vegetables and raised livestock. We always seemed to have a smokehouse full of the best cuts of meats and enough preserved and frozen fruit and vegetables to last from one growing season to the next. Moreover, there was always enough to share with family and neighbors whose crops or lives, in general, may not

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have been as bountiful as ours. We enjoyed simple pleasures like visiting relatives and friends, playing sports and outdoor games, going to church, listening to all kinds of music, and endless house of conversation and debate. As teenagers, we would visit and spend summers with relatives in cities like Washington, New York, and Philadelphia, where we were exposed to all kinds of cultures -- music, food languages, etc.

Within families and the community, we improvised and collaborated, and shared. Miss Rosalee and Mr. Greene lived in a house across the field from us. As a childless couple, they were a bit unusual in our community where most families boasted numerous children. There were 10 children in our family, 16 of the Joneses, and 11 in the Rawls family. My siblings and other nearby youngsters were like surrogate children for the Greenes. We checked on them, spent countless hours at their home, and extended them the same respect we gave our parents. One of the reasons I loved visiting them was that they owned a Victrola, and they allowed me to crank the "box" and listen to the phonograph play the thick 78 records of artists such as Bessie Smith, as well as classical recordings. Although he was illiterate, Mr. Greene could count money. Miss Rosalie was minimally literate, having had very little formal education, a grade or two as I recall. Nonetheless, she was a seasoned storyteller with terrific poetic cadence. Her lively retelling of a particular car accident stands out in my memory: "Ya'all heard what happened to Wendell Edwards? He was doing near 'bout a hundred on the ole Buick and wrecked down yonder in that big curve near Diamond Grove Fork. Say he had that car in the wind, Trying to straighten the curves."

As pre-teens, we worked as farm laborers in the summer to earn money to buy school clothes and a few nonessentials. We chopped and weeded crops including soybeans, corn, peanuts, and cotton, which we later picked in the fall. I vividly remember the hums, calls, and singing of the older field workers, like Miss Rosalee, who sometimes sang sacred and secular music to pass the long, hot 10- to 12-hour days under the searing July sun. The conversations were as lyrical as the singing, as elders freely espoused unsolicited advice to us youngsters like "When you get out in the world, you'd better watch yourself, child, 'cause everybody smile in your face ain't your friend and every goodbye ain't gone." Another favorite saying is my father's advice: "Root pig or lose the acre," which meant if you want something badly enough, you will work to obtain it and work even harder to keep it.

I cherish my childhood memories and the rich legacy left to me by my parents and elders like Miss Rosalee, who also left me her Victrola. It was one of her prized possessions, and I'm honored that her family entrusted it to me. It is in the spirit of the ancestors and in my quest to document the rhythm and sound of their voices and cultivate new ground that I recorded *Roots: Jazz/Blues/Spirituals*. My music and life are rooted in my early experiences, and the recording, I hope, is evidence of that simple truth.

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Lois Deloatch is a vocalist, songwriter, and radio host living in Durham, North Carolina. She will conduct a community workshop and perform selections from new recording, Roots: Jazz/Blues/Spirituals, on Sunday, August 15, at Polyrythms' Third Sunday Jazz Series at the Redstone Room (129 Main Street in Davenport). More information on the event is at Polyrythms.org

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For more information on Lois, visit LoisDeloatch.com.

For a 2008 River Cities' Reader feature story on Deloatch, visit RCReader.com/y/deloatch.