Oral History of DanceAfrica, D.C.
Transcript

Interviewee: Melvin Deal

Interviewer: Sylvia Soumah

Date: May 18, 2018

Description:

Melvin Deal reflects on his work preforming, choreographing, managing, and promoting African dance, which he has been involved in for over half a century. He speaks about how when he started dancing it was generally understood that you had to do ballet, if you wanted to be successful. But he was drawn to African dance and decided to follow that desire. At the time, decolonization was happening in Africa. Part of his work was fighting stereotypes about Africa. He reflects that at the time they were being romantic about being Africans. His interests brought him to take his first trip to Africa in 1969.

Many of his former students were at-risk youths that credit him with having changed the direction of their lives. Through his African Heritage dancers he won legitimacy for African culture in the community and the larger city. He speaks about educating a Washington Post writer about Africa dance and how the resulting articles led to a large uptick in attendance at African dance events. He expresses concerned about young people's sense of personhood, "I feel like I am someone now", is the feeling he wants young people to feel.

Biography:

Melvin Deal has been an integral part of the Washington, D.C. African dance community for over five decades. He is a Washington, D.C. native that started dancing in 1959. He graduated from Howard University in 1965. His contributions include having trained countless at-risk youth in dance, residencies at all the major Washington, D.C. area universities, helping to found the Duke Ellington School for the Arts, and work with the DanceAfrica festival.

Interview:

Sylvia Soumah: [00:00:00]: This is Sylvia Soumah. I am here with Baba Melvin Deal. We're meeting today to talk about Baba Melvin's long history including stories, uh, relationships with DanceAfrica and just dance in general. Um, we're, we are meeting in Baba Melvin's house, Hyattsville, Maryland on Monday, May 14th, 2018. You're also here with Jonathan Hsu and Rinu Kuranga. Hello, Baba Melvin, how you doing?

Melvin Deal: [00:00:27]: I want to say hello and greeting to everyone.

Sylvia Soumah: [00:00:32]: Okay. So, um, as you know, I've been wanting to do this for a long time to find out about your history in creating African heritage, but before we do that, um, and how African dance has influenced, uh, people here in Washington D.C. Um, could you just start by telling me your name, date of birth, age, if you choose, how to get started, where you're from.

Melvin Deal: [00:00:57]: All right. I am, at once, I am Melvin Deal. I am, I'm 75 years old. I'm a native Washingtonian and I am the Founding Executive Artistic Director of the African Heritage Dancers and Drummers and the African Heritage, um, studio and center. Um, I have been dancing in Washington for well over 50 years and um, it started in the late fifties, early sixties when, as far as people would go with African culture was Afro Cuban. So, our first introduction to things African in Washington D.C. was from a Cuban Afro Cuban perspective. It was not from an African perspective, but it was from an Afro Cuban perspective, which meant that as close as people would get to Africa was by way of Cuba and of course the Candomble, traditional religious shrines and things of that nature were one of the things that brought people together to want to know more about the culture because it was quote unquote exotic, if you will.

Melvin Deal: [00:02:25]: And people were looking for excitement. So there are many wonderful stories about how the culture got started in Washington, but I want everyone to know that it was primarily through Afro Cubana that the culture started in the District of Columbia. And of course it was started by me and Baba Goma, who was called Cal Joyner, who was the, the originator of the Association of Bongo and Congo players and associated instruments, than I, I must make sure that I say associated instruments because he would always say if that's not official, if you don't put in an associated instrument, it's not valid, it's the Association of Bongo and Congo players, and as soon as, okay, Baba it's associated instruments, he said yes, now it's correct. So I want everybody to know that.

Sylvia Soumah: [00:03:21]: What is associated instrument?

Melvin Deal: [00:03:24]: The Shaker Ray, the bell, the clave, sticks that you hit together. The wash pan. Um, any instrument, whistles, flutes, any instrument that is played with the Bongo and Congo orchestra, that is not necessarily a percussion instrument meaning you play with the hand on the stick.

Sylvia Soumah: [00:03:53]: Were you always an African dancer? What other dance forms did you?

Melvin Deal: [00:03:58]: Well, I started with at the Bernice Hammond Northeast Academy of Dance, Ms. Bernice Hammond Jackson was my first official dance teacher in terms of the District of Columbia. Um, I took ballet from her and modern dance, uh, for two, three years. And then I went on matriculated to Howard, but I also dance with Erika Thimey and for Ethel Butler. These were modern dance groups that existed at that time. And um, I continued my dance study at Howard in the Women's Physical Education Department because dance at that time was put under women's physical education and Dr. Murray Rose Alan was head

of the department, so she was the one that dictated the curriculum for the dance program. And then Carolyn Tate was head of the dance program at Howard, who she went on to become one of the major movers in dance by way of Maryland Park and Planning.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:05:07**]:** But, um, it was Bernice Hammond Jackson. And then there were a number of other people that influenced me during that period. Um, there was the Jones-Haywood School, uh, there was, um, the Therrell Smith School, these are ballet schools, um, there was, you see a number of, of dance entities, John Taylor, who is now known as Kinderman, was one of my first African dance teachers out of Baltimore in Columbia, Maryland. And a plethora of others.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:05:52**]:** What drew you to African dance?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:05:55**]:** Well, initially I was told by Ms. Bernice Hammond Jackson, God rest her soul, that ballet was the only official form of dance that would be recognized in the world. I said, well, Ms. Hammond, come on now. I said, you know, black people have attributed a lot to the dance in America from way back in 1900 onto the twenties and thirties and forties. If you want to see real African dance, you want to look at tapes and films from that era because you have those people were closer to Africa than they were to America.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:06:32**]:** And of course jazz is. Jazz is the only American, the only artistic form that is uniquely American. Well it is American, but it's more African than anything with a theme and then improvisation is what you get. But it was a situation where I was told that ballet was the only. She said, if you're going to succeed, you will have to succeed as a ballet dancer. I said, well I don't want to do ballet because, well one, you had to wear makeup and makeup used to break me out. Okay. And then it was a situation where you're dealing with, um, a plethora of problems around being a male dancer and we need not go into all that

LGBT stuff. But that was a part of it too. But the perspective of being told that ballet was the only form of dance, I said, well, I have to go do some research because I know that black people have contributed a lot to the dance in Washington and of course New York and all over the country. So I started doing research with books and tapes and grabbing every indigenous African that I could find at the university when I was attending Howard to teach me what they had brought from their culture. Now, interestingly enough, at that time, a lot of nations were being freed from colonialism and the culture was coming to the fore. However, the Euro-centric mindset did not allow the culture of Africans or black people to be in franchise because of the mindset is he owns the definition, owns the culture. And they kept redefining African dance as quote unquote, primitive exotic. And even to the point where people would call me and one performances and they will say, well, do you perform in clothes?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:08:47**]:** What do you think we perform in, you think we perform naked? This is what, you know, in the jungle they say, you know, they wear loin clothes. No, we won't come to you with loin cloths on. We have traditional dress. It's called traditional dress or traditional clothing. And when they would see the costuming that we wore these old, that's beautiful, and this comes from Africa. I said, of course, you think people running around with a piece of grass between their legs or you know, dirty rag. This is the slave image. And not be able to wear colorful clothing and tailored clothing that is sewn by hand and sewing machine and whatever. Uh, I went through it, believe me. I mean, I had a lady attack me on the, um, D.C. transit bus and it was called Capital Transit at that time, the predecessor of Metro. And she said, I had on traditional African dashiki sokoto and my hair was long because as a symbol of our African heritage we used to wear our hair in a style, which was long. She said, number one, you need a haircut and number two, you're running around in your pajamas on this bus. And I just think that it's such a travesty. And she took her umbrella and started to beat me off the bus because she said that it looked like an abomination with my hair that long and my pajamas on. So I said, no, you know, that's not the case. Now, another epiphany, and this is a classic epiphany I'm going to tell you, I was in the supermarket one day in the early, early

days and it was snowing outside. And of course you have to understand that we Africanist, we cultural nationalist, made sure will everybody know that we were Africans.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:10:56**]:** Okay? Which means that we did things to reinforce being Africans. So I'm standing in line with some items I'm going to buy. I had my sandals on, I had my traditional African dress on and my hair was long. So this little girl came up to me and she looked up at me and she said hi. I said, hi. She says, what are you supposed to be? So I said, what? She said, what are you supposed to be? I said, go away, little girl, go away, please go away. So she stood there and she, you know innocence, you know, children and their innocence. So she said, what are you supposed to be? I said, an African. So she said, well, my Mama told me if you go out in the snow with no boots on, you gonna catch a cold. And she said, you're going to catch the terrible cold because don't have any boots on. And you got those sandals on. And we wear those in the summer. She said, well, where's your coat? I said, we don't wear coats in Africa. And she said, but it's cold outside. So she said, you would really want to get a coat and also get some boots to wear. So I didn't succeed in shooing her away. Her mother came and grabbed her and said, you should watch your mouth and who you're talking to. But that was an epiphany in terms of understanding how romantic we were about being Africans and African people.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:12:39**]:** So you just started taking classes and then you started your company. How did African Heritage has come about? How did you start your company?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:12:51**]:** We had, of course Baba Ngoma drummer and every Tuesday he would allow us, ingratiate us, to come and dance in the corner of their studio on 1407 U Street Northwest, where the Reeves Center is now, and we started coming together to do class. I would invite Africans that I knew who could show us something and then my research and tapes and whatever. My first trip to Africa was 1969. And

prior to that I had established the African Cultural Dancers which matriculated to African Heritage Dancers because there was a split in terms of the mindset of some of the people involved. The young people wanted to take the drums home to practice, and they didn't want them to take the drums home. And I said so far as I'm concerned, you can take them home because you performed and made the money to buy them you could take them home. Well, the other members of the group, the adult members, didn't think that that was appropriate, so there was a schism there, so they went one way and I went the other way with the children.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:14:10**]:** And um, we changed the name from African Cultural Dancers to African Heritage Dancers. So from the African Heritage Dancers, we begin to build the, the company as such, African Heritage Dancers and Drummers. Now understand that during that period it was a serious effort to win validity for African culture in the community because many people did not consider African dance or music to be valid as a civilized form of artistic expression. We were told that you'll never succeed doing that because the larger society will never accept that savagery. And I said, well, we're going to show you that it's not savagery that it is in fact an enfranchised culture. That caused the question that was always asked was, is there a system of teaching which you do? And I said, Oh, most definitely there is. And I approved it and had it validated by people like Alan Kriegsman who was prominent critic for the Washington Post.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:15:22**]:** He called me in and he says, Melvin, I want you to educate me about what you do so that I can intelligently do reviews for your programs. And I had several conclaves with Alan and many people from the Post and other newspapers and magazines who really wanted to know something about African culture, something about African dance and music that they could use to write reviews of our program. So there are over 300 articles in the Archive of the Washington Post that details the journey of African heritage from its roots in the sixties to seventies on up to now. And those articles are all aimed at establishing a validity for African culture in the community. So there's still some

people who have their reservations about African dance and music and they still think it's, you know, an exotic pastime. But if they do their research, they will find that we have bothered to go to Africa to research dances and music and bring it back.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:16:43**]:** And teach it to people in the community, so understand this. It wasn't just a romantic experience, but it was one where we try to re-initiate the values of love and respect for self and family and elders and to reestablish as we have in the South, because people who are from the south are much more mannerable, much more kind and considerate than some people in the North, to bring that feeling back to black people. Not just black people but all people so that they will be within a frame of mind of more acceptance of diversity in the society which we live. So it wasn't about a melting pot with us. It was about a multicultural experience and we've had all kinds of people to come through African heritage.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:17:42**]:** Where was your studio?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:17:44**]:** Well wow. We were at 1407 U Street, then we left there. We went to the 12th Street Y, which is now the Thurgood Marshall Center. And because we were evicted from that building, because at the time it was a Young Men's Christian Association and they said you are too black and savage to be in this building so you have to get out of here with those drums and that jumping up and down and moving your waste and whatever. So we said, well, what's the problem? The problem was they were refusing to accept themselves. They saw themselves as acceptable negroes, American, Hello American Negros, not African-Americans. Okay, so this is why they put us literally, they put us out. We used to have class on Friday and Saturday and they came one Saturday and since you'll have to get out of here because you are propagating savagery and we wouldn't be surprised if you weren't cannibalizing people in the base. We said we're not, we're not cannibals, were not eating people, you know what I mean?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:18:53**]:** But this is the image that many people who consider themselves American Negros had of Africa and African people and people who associated with Africa. They would ask our African friends if they had tails, you know, did they never want trees when they were in Africa and wherever. And it was hilarious, but it was also sad. So we were at 1407 U Street. Then we went to the 12th St Y, then we went to the New School of Afro American Thought, which was Gaston Neil's organization on 14th Street. Then we left there and went to St Stephens and the Incarnation Church up on 16th Street. Then we left out of there and we came down 9th Street and we went to Salvation Army on 9th Street. Then we left there and we went to the new thing on 18th Street and we were there for three, four years.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:19:54**]:** Then we moved to the Pig Building 2146 George Avenue on the top floor. And of course that gave Carla Perlo the impetus to start Dance Place. When she came to see the performances that I had in that log, she said, yeah, I can do this. So she went and started Dance Place and um, she told me point blank, Melvin, you gave me the idea to start Dance Place but I said okay, fine. So Dance Place is doing a good job. So we're family. But um, it's a circumstance where from Georgia Avenue we went to the Lansburg building, the Lansburg Art Project and then after that fell through. We were thrown under there, then we went to 4018 Minutesman Avenue, which is in Ward Seven and we were there for 20 years at 4018. Then we moved from 4018 to two, um, 1320 Good Hope Road and that was our last two years, and I might add that Marion Barry put up the majority of the funding to renovate that building on Good Hope Road.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:21:17**]:** Calvin and Wilhelmina Rolark were major contributors, the List Corporation and the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. They helped also to get that space renovated for us. But of course when Marion passed on, we lost favor with the city council and we weren't able to get anymore earmarks. So that took us down, but we have been all over the city. We were in Clifton Terrace before it was renovated, dancing on dirt floors and one light bulb in the ceiling, whatever, all been down 14th Street, 16th. And you notice that we were in Shaw at

first in the inner city in Shaw. And we started with the community service project while I was at Howard. This is from '60 through '65, '66. Um, and I was teaching, uh, in 913 Peace Street, that building's not there anymore. They tore down and we were working with the children there with the community service project through Mr. John Staggers and mayor Washington and whatever.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:22:31**]:** So we've been all over the city. I mean we were in Ward Seven and Ward Eight, before Ward Seven and Ward Eight were. And we have been involved with the art commission since the inception of it as the Mayor's Performing Arts Committee, which was 1968. There was a meeting with our commission was going to give most of the money to the white organizations myself and several other people, Dr. Rollar went down and protested and told them that we weren't going to allow them to give the majority of the money to the white organizations. So we protested and we did a set in and of course you know what's going on in '68, Martin Luther King and the riots and whatever. So they gave us money to do the first summer program in the arts, uh, in June of 1968. So, that gives you some idea of the road to establishing an entity like African Heritage and you know, I'm sorry to say a lot of the people came along that era now, you know, deceased, passed on and I'm blessed and lucky to still be here to tell the story.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:23:55**]:** How many years are you celebrating with African heritage?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:23:58**]:** I would, I would take it from 1965. So it's about 50 well, some 50 plus years.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:24:09**]:** So was African Heritage, the only company in the city? And then how did KanKouran and Memory of African Culture, Wose, when did they come?

Melvin Deal: [00:24:16]: Wose came before Memory of African Culture and KanKouran. Baba Ido, started Wose in the '70s, I believe, and it was with some Senegalese that came over after they came and performed at the folklife festival and out of that perspective came Assane Konte came here in early seventies to perform at EPCOT center in California. So of course everybody that got off the plane, the first stop was Melvin Deal's African Heritage. So Assane worked with us for a while and he formed his own company and then Djimo came and worked with us for a while and formed his own company and Wose was still in existence. Then we had Uhuru Sasa. They came through African Heritage and formed their own company. Then we had Contact Africa which was Kojo Baiden and he came through and then he went and started his company. But you know, the thing is all these people thought it was gonna be easy because as a professional artist I made it look easy in terms of starting a company and maintaining it. I made it look really easy, but it was not easy. It was quite difficult, quite difficult to do.

Melvin Deal: [00:26:00]: Okay. So yeah, Kojo Baiden Contact Africa and then we had Wayusiyomoja from Baltimore and they joined with African Heritage, so it was Wayusiyomoja and African Heritage for a good while they combined companies. And um, then there was, I'm trying to think... I think that was pretty much.

Sylvia Soumah: [00:26:37]: So let's just go back a little bit. Um, how did you get your company members? How did you recruit your dancers and what were some of your favorite pieces of choreography that was done over there?

Melvin Deal: [00:26:51]: Well, one of my classic pieces was the Intory from Central Africa, from the Hutu and the Tusi people. Chuck and I were tall. This is Baba Chuck Davis and we performed the Intory together here in D.C. of course in New York, the World's Fair and it was all classic. Um, another one was the ritual Shango, that was a classy, and then Ocongfu Compuhena, which was another piece we did religious piece. Um,

Coyaga from Ivory Coast, which is an initiation dance. Um, of course, back in the day, the other standards. Udunde, Patakato, Stig dance, those projections of choreography and performance. Um, we'll find that through the years, the knowledge about the culture increased with artists coming here from Africa and people from here going to Africa. So we came to understand what Mangani was and Suno and Lamba and all the dances and I'm pretty much done in this, in the Gambia. Um, we find that they became standards for the African dance groups to perform.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:28:55**]:** What was the dance, I'm always hearing about it, but I don't know, the title the dance for the big ladies with the big bucks.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:29:03**]:** The Abong was a project that I did in Rivers State, Nigeria in the '70s. And I went to Calabar. Calabar has over 30 rivers in its area, uh, out in Eastern Nigeria and they have candles out there by the way too. Anyway. Um, but it was a dance that focused on the graduating of virgins from the fattening room to be married. The emulation for women was bigness. And I said, well, when I was out in Calabar I said, you know, everybody's running around America that trying to be small and skinny and whatever, and out here, they're putting women in the fattening room for six to eight month or year, to fatten them for their troubles. So I learned the dance and brought it back and it was a big hit because there are some real big women in America. And they said, you mean to say that they fatten women even more as, oh, yes.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:30:20**]:** And I learned that women who are big or fat conceive easier and quicker than women who are skinny. That's why they wanted the women to be big because they said they can have children quicker and in a much healthier perspective. If you look around the society, most, not most, but many of the mommies that you see with children or women who are big, they're fat women. They're not skinny women, they're fat women. So you learn auxiliary things as you're doing research, um, on projects of that nature. But the Abong was one

of the hits of African Heritage the Big Ladies Project. And I'm a number of others, we have other standards, but the Hoyaga is one of the standards. Dundunba and Su Suny, with the boga masquerade, and we have egungun masquerade, royal egungun, we have condom egungun, I did that one in retort to the AIDS crisis.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:31:34**]:** Over thousand condoms on the masquerade and then we show how they're to be used. And of course some people are shocked. They act like they never seen a condom before or with a penis for that matter. And when we show people how to use them as like, I don't believe that I said yeah, you don't believe when people get AIDS either, do you. So it's a matter of being real and relevant to the society in which you live. Many of the young people that I recruited from the, um, community to be in the company were recruited right off the street, you know, right off the playground. They are, they audition. Some came through the summer youth program. Others came because they had to have satisfied community service because they were delinquents. They got arrested for one thing or the other and they had community service time, so they had to come to African Heritage and Dance and they found the savings ship there because so many young men had to come and they ended up, they learned drumming and whenever, and you will find that when you see the adult drummers of African Heritage, then you see their sons.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:33:01**]:** That's the richness of the legacy. We performed at the Meyerhoff in Baltimore 30 years ago when the fathers of the young men who are drumming now were young men and they called me about four years ago and said Mr. Deal, can you come back and bring the drummers again because we're doing Hannibal Peterson's African Suite and we need the drummers again. So I said, well, I can't bring the drummers that I brought 20 years ago back and bring their sons. She dropped the phone. She said, you mean to tell me that the sons. Yes, the sons of the original drummer's had came here to Meyerhoff 20 years ago, now 30 years ago are going to be able to come and which he greeted us when we went over to do the performance. She cried, she says, I've never seen anything so beautiful and so meaningful in my

whole life is to see young people embracing their culture and then their sons and daughters coming right behind them and embracing the culture. But that's what it's supposed to be. The culture is supposed to be a saving ship for black people and for other people to understand the necessity for us to be one people and as human people and not all this division and racism and ugly stuff that people do.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:35:03**]:** Okay. Let me see. I want to ask you some other questions.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:35:13**]:** And see I remember the history by the locations that we have been in and their stories associated with, with, um, the different locations. Like we just had a reunion for New Thing which was the 18th and California back in the day. And fortunately, a lot of the instructors and some of the students, uh, who were little little kids came to the reunion and it was really wonderful to see, you know, everybody's still alive and doing well, you know, but they told how much the new theme meant to um, their life, how it helped to save them from the street. And at that time when they were at New Thing, the heroin epidemic was very prevalent in the city.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:36:20**]:** How has African dance changed from when you started?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:36:29**]:** To be a researcher and an artists of a traditional artistic form of a race of people makes you become a time, a walking time machine. Because what you learn during a given period metamorphosizes either up, meaning better or down meaning lesser in the course of time. Many of the dances that we learn back in the '70s coming from Africa cannot be seen in Africa today in the form that we learned them. People come here from Africa and they see us doing a certain dance and they said, well, you know, I know that dance with, I've never seen this version. I said, I know because you were looking at the original version and you're looking at the evolved version because you're young, you're younger and therefore you are not, you didn't

learn the dance the way the elders taught it whoever passed on now. Uh, I'll give you a good example. The Sabar from Senegal, which is their national dance, was taught in the context of its usage to project itself as the dance of birthing, a birth celebration dance, and the movements are indicative of birthing and flirtation. Today, Sabar is vogue, and people say, "what do you mean vogue?" All this with the hands and the arms and the poses and the makeup and the lips and the shoes and the nails. None of that was part of the traditional Sabar when we learned it in the late sixties and early seventies. Now it's who's to say whether that's an evolution up or evolution down, but the fact is the dance in traditional African society is primarily used to convey values. That's where people don't understand why **Melvin Deal:** did not want to go to Broadway. Why many other African dance and music icons did not want to go to Broadway.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:39:03**]:** They wanted to enrich their people with their culture so that people could live a better life and have a more positive image of themselves as opposed to always emulating somebody else's culture in a denigrated perspective. So it's a situation where the emulative is not egotism, but it's intrinsic values and those intrinsic values are kindness and love and honesty and consideration and family and the whole nine yards of good stuff and the golden rule, do unto others as you'd have them do unto you and it's not. It shouldn't be. It is in some instances a controlled environment that society projects. It shouldn't be, but it does creep in and people do act ugly and use a European standard on an African value perspective. You can't do that, well your butt's too big so you can't dance. So you're too light skin. You can't do African dance and your hair's not nappy enough.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:40:25**]:** You can't do African dance and, and, and you know you don't have the right look. So you know, no, none of that. If you want to do African dance and you develop yourself and you train and you get your, your training under your belt, you can perform all that prejudice and ugly stuff that people put out. No, no, that's not a part of the culture. Unity and love is the culture. We've been preaching it since the fifties and before. The other people that came before us. Marcus

Mosiah Garvey, you know, Malcolm X and W.E.B. DuBois. All those people came before they were Africanist. None of Dinizulu and Baba Ishangi and people like that. They were Africanist. They were not people who wanted to color things that were black, white. No, not at all. We had our own value system and we still have our own value system.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:41:40**]:** Many people have begun to embrace that because it's so bad out here now with people taking life lightly. They are murdering people wholesale every day, it's because they have no perspective of respect for individual personhood. And that is one of the things that I've tried to give the young people that I work with is a sense of rich personhood. You are somebody, you can be somebody, you are beautiful, you are wealthy, you are this, you are that, that's positive. Rather than you talk in my class and therefore I will forever denigrate you and make you sit in a corner and I will not allow you to redeem yourself because you're one of the people that I'm going to use petty punitive on and that will change you. If the harder I make it for you, the more you'll change, that doesn't work. The children become anti and they do what, they leave.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:42:47**]:** They go out the door. They never come back. And I have so many young people that I work with. They're telling me, Baba Melvin, why are so many people so mean to us. I said, they don't understand how precious you are and how you need to be loved and understood. I said, I'm not going to spoil you to the point where you just can take carte blanche, but I'm going to spoil you just enough for you to understand that I'm your friend and if you cross a line, I'm going to put you in order. It's just that simple. I tell them stories. I gave them experiences. I'd take them out to dinner and many of them have never been out to dinner before. One young man couldn't even read the menu and he called his mom and told his mom that he was at this particular restaurant and she cursed him out because she wanted to go to the restaurant before him and he said, mom, why would you get upset with me for coming to this restaurant?

Melvin Deal: [00:43:50]: Baba Melvin brought me here, and she said, well, God bless Baba Melvin but he should have taken me first, not you. So he said, well, we were just coming from a show. So I had to read the menu to him because he dropped out of school because he was an oversized boy. His social graces were in, but so much he never been anywhere. He never done anything. And here I am, lifting him up out of the community, letting him drum, letting him be applauded for letting people appreciate him. And he says, I really feel like I'm somebody now. I said, yes, you should have felt like you were somebody before, but there was no one around to build him up, or to build her up. You know, you have nappy hair. Your breasts are too big, your butt's are too big, your feet are too big, your lips are too big, you're the wrong color.

Melvin Deal: [00:44:47]: All of these negatives have kept black people in a denigrated position for too long. So we come with the culture to teach freedom from our denigration. And believe me, it does work. I know because there's so many young people, I'm, I can go right here to the McDonald's at a corner and order some food and somebody will yell from the back. Hi Mr. Deal, hi Baba Melvin. Would you, what do you want today? I say, I want a so and so. Okay, it's on me. Thank you. And I can't tell you how that makes me feel. To know that I have young people everywhere, I go into most inconspicuously place, and I went to have blood test one day, get some blood work and half of the technicians and the doctors came out from the back. They said, we heard you out here, Baba Melvin, I was in your program and this year and blankety blank and this was the housing improvement this year, blankety blank, and I said, where did all these people that were in my program?

Melvin Deal: [00:45:58]: How did you all get here? They say, what you gave us gave us impetus to know that we can go anywhere and be somebody because we have manners, we have respect for ourselves, we have respect for God and our culture and these things are very important in saving the lives of young people. You have the bond with them, spirit to spirit and heart to heart. It's not a job that you go and get a check for every two weeks, but it's a feeling, it's a spirit. You know that you

connect with. I went to the daycare today to work with the babies. I don't have a problem with the baby, the teacher. Some of them, they pull their hair out because the children give them the blues, they don't give me the blues. I said, okay, we're not having any more of that. Well she asked, do you want to sit down? No, I said then get it together. That's it. No screaming, no hollering, yelling, falling out on the floor. I don't have none of that. Why? Because I bond with this period. I said we're going to have fun and we're going to learn and we're going to do that. Yes, and that's what we do.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:47:14**]:** How does the drum help with the spirit?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:47:20**]:** The drum opens a vortex from the spirit world to the earth, and many people don't discover that until it started drumming. They come up to me and they say, Baba Melvin. I said, what? Something happened. I said, what happened? Well, no, but something happened. I said, well, when did it happen? They said, when we started drumming, I said, and they said, well, I was feeling different. I said, yes, you will. I said, part of that difference is that your hands get sore and your backward okay, and your body will generally give you the blues. When you first start, same thing with the dancing. One Lady told me, I didn't know I had muscles in my butt until I took your class and I couldn't walk down the steps. She said I couldn't even go to the bathroom. She said, I just crawl into the bathroom because my whole body was hurting so bad. I said, hm, initiation, but it gives, it opens up the individual, the shockwaves in the body to receive wisdom and knowledge, and I have seen some of the worst young people when I say worst young people, I'm talking about young people that curse people out that want to fight. One of my lead dancers who's a captain, Ms. Valencia was one of those kind of people. If you looked at her hard, she'd beat you up because she was just that kind of girl and she was big and when she came to me, you know the kids that brought her in said, Baba Melvin, do you think you can do anything with her? I said, well, what's wrong with her? They said, she's so angry and she wants to fight everybody. So I said come in, girl, I said, is it true that you wanted to find everybody? And she said, F you. I said, oh my.

Melvin Deal: [00:49:22]: I said, you're that kind of animal. Yes I am, and I'll kick you're a** too. I said, okay. I said, well, you see this stick in my hand. I said, I will use it on your backside and I will tell your mother, I use it on your backside. This is back in the day when corporal punishment was allowed. And she says, well, that's not gonna do any good because my mother doesn't care. You see, her mother didn't care about her, but I whooped her behind and to this day she loves the ground I walk on because I beat her butt and I told her we're not having foolishness here, you either going to do right or you're going to get your butt beat. It's just that simple. And she teaches like that. Not that she beats children, but she bonds with the children and they see that even though she's hard on them, she's a nice person.

Melvin Deal: [00:50:15]: People know Baba Melvin's hard on us, but he's a nice person. So that's the what the drum will do. You put a drum in the hands of a young man who's wavered. You let him play it for a while. You will see him change because he sees the power that he has under his hands and under his spirit, and he goes, I need to be better than I am. I need to act better than I do, you know, because I'm somebody. And that's the crux of a lot of what has happened with racism, removing the self-esteem from people, making them feel less than human and the culture makes them feel human. It makes them feel loved and accepted by way of the spirit of God and our ancestors' wishes. So it's very important to understand that the culture is not just jumping up and down and having fun, but it is teaching lessons of propriety that people need to embrace to improve their quality of life.

Melvin Deal: [00:51:50]: We have a new phenomenon with, with Africans coming to this country. That must be addressed. Many are coming with the idea of making money, and they're willing to let their culture and their manners go for the sake of making money and that needs to be spoken to, so I'll speak to that. If you asked the question, how are new immigrants seen in America coming from Africa. We want to make them art, we want to grow, make money, have families build communities because the people who went back to Africa to live, primarily in Ghana, they got their head screwed on, right? They're

making money, but they're also adhering to the culture, so it was not a situation of liberation for them in terms of the exchange of money, but it was the adopting of the culture that money is made within a context of propriety.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:53:23**]:** What is your legacy? What are you, what do you see? What do you want people to remember most about African Heritage and about Melvin Deal?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:53:34**]:** That it was a place where you could be yourself. Where you could develop yourself, discover yourself, and it's been said by the dancers themselves and the drummers that being in African Heritage was one of the only places that they found that they could be themselves and be appreciated for being themselves, crazy or no crazy, knowledgeable or no knowledgeable, handicap or no handicap, rich or poor. You can be yourself and you could grow. We took the first hearing impaired student into the studio in 1969. Her name was Ladice Campbell and she is retired now, but she was one of the first persons with a hearing impairment to perform in the company, by way of vibration. And of course Jamal Parker will profoundly, special needs but a genius on the drum perform with us for many years as he was growing up that has down syndrome.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:55:13**]:** Um, there have been a number of individuals who have come to African Heritage and been accepted and allowed to perform where others in the community would not allow them to because they were too prejudice to allow them to come in. What they were afraid of, I don't know, but I guess they would, following the judgments of the society that they are products of, that you just don't let people with down syndrome perform. You don't let people who have hearing impairments perform. You don't let people who have emotional problems perform or people who, um, are different in any way to be a part of what you do because you're not sure yourself, what you're getting from what you do and you gotta be sure what you're getting

yourself in order to give it to others. If you don't know, you better ask somebody, it's just that simple.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**00:56:28**]:** Well DanceAfrica is coming up. And uh, how many times have you have your company performed in DanceAfrica?

Melvin Deal: **[**00:56:36**]:** Well, from its inception, really, because we had, when I say we, I mean African Heritage had their first DanceAfrica in the city in 1979, I believe. We had the Sunshine drummers and dancers from the Midwest. We had Dance Core, we had African American Dance Ensemble, which was Chuck Davis, and then we had Arthur Hall's Afro American Dance Ensemble. We had um, international African American ballet and all these groups that existed in that era to come to the Tacoma Theater, and I think we have videotape of it, to perform, um, in 1969, 1970 Chuck Davis, Arthur Hall, and myself sitting in my office on Georgia Avenue. And we said we need to have a big dance festival. Baba Chuck took the idea and took it to Brooklyn Academy and they loved it and they put money behind it. And that's how DanceAfrica started going all around the country. And Baba Chuck was the grill.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:57:58**]:** Um, as time went on, people begin, and now that Baba Chuck has gone, people asking where do we go from here? And of course one of the answers is go to the values as opposed to the hype. When I say go to the values instead of the hype, I was told almost the second day that I started dancing at Bernice Hammond Jackson's studio on Benning Road Northeast. She said, son, I want you to know this. When you become a performer, and you will perform. She said, you will become a successful performer. She said, because I see it in you. She said, you must remember to be as decent a person as you are as statued an artist, which means that your value system should be rooted in God and the word of God and all those things that are good and wholesome for people to embrace.

Melvin Deal: **[**00:59:15**]:** She said, because there are too many people that the devil uses because of their character or their charisma to compromise people, and she said, you must remember that you have a charge to only do good. See when the old lady shakes her finger at you and say only do good, and I mean what I say, because if not, you're going to have to reckon with me and the rest of the ancestors and the elders. You always put doing good first. Even when it disadvantages you sometimes and you have to make a sacrifice in many ways, your family, your community, your resources, financially, wherever you are, making a sacrifice for the good of all and she said you have to do that because you are a very special person, being an artist, said artists are healers. She said, and you must remember that. So I remembered what she told me in order to embrace what art teaches you, you must always remember that you are special person.

Melvin Deal: **[**01:00:34**]:** As Maya Angelou said, never forget who you are and people will try to keep you from knowing who you are and you will tell them I am, no you're not. And then they will list a whole bunch of things that made you not who you are, you say, but that's what you say, but I know who I am and there are others who know who I am and whether you have come to know who I am or not, I am going to be me. It's just as simple. So a lot of people have found themselves in the culture. They don't know why they in the culture, some of them are crazy as a bedbug and they're still trying to find themselves and you help them define themselves and they get on your nerves. They do. Oh God, here he comes again. He is crazy. The cootie bug, or here she comes again. She is crazy as a whatever, but you tolerate them out of the mercy that you see that is regular to heal them and they'll never forget it. So when I leave here, go to the spirit world. People remember that. We'll remember that Baba Melvin was one of the people that allow me to be myself and to find myself and to be somebody. And he did it with love. He did it with tough love. And he did it because it was the right thing to do. Knowing very well you should always do good. Never do bad. Always do good. So they remember that. Always do good and always remember to be yourself. Then I will be satisfied that they got that proverb and they move on with it. It makes a big difference.

Sylvia Soumah: **[**01:02:34**]:** Well, thank you for, um, starting African dance here in Washington D.C. It definitely has made an impact on my life. Uh, so I'm, I'm so grateful and thankful for that.