

# Sweet Bea's: A Cabaret

Semaj Miller

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2020

Committee:

Jeffrey Fracé

Valerie Curtis-Newton

Scott Hafso

Program Authorized to Offer Degree: Drama

©Copyright 2020

Semaj Miller

University of Washington

Abstract

SWEET BEA'S: A CABARET

Semaj Miller

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Jeffrey Fracé

School of Drama

Abstract: Sweet Bea's is a cabaret, the goal for this project was not only to fulfill the University of Washington's MFA thesis requirement but to create a piece of work that could be performed across the country. In my admissions letter to the School of Drama I wrote fondly of my family's weekly gatherings often underscored by The Blues, in that letter I acknowledged those meetings as the genesis of my journey as an actor. Revisiting those events in this thesis allowed me to pay homage to those that helped me get to this point while simultaneously birthing a show that highlights the importance of family, resilience, and love. Major themes also explored in my show include my adoration and respect for Black women, the strength of the Black family, and demystifying a false narrative of life in urban communities. This piece is an ode and a thank to my family and an excited look ahead of what's to come.

Semaj Miller

University of Washington

School of Drama

May 30, 2020

## **"Sweet Bea's: A Cabaret"**

The pursuit of truth, at least in my experience, often requires the seeker to come face to face with their own fears. Fear and its many manifestations can completely undermine an artistic process. It is something we talk about in length here at the University of Washington School of Drama. Here are a couple of my truths: historically, I've suffered near crippling stage fright when asked to sing in front of an audience and I am not always comfortable being "seen" or vulnerable in front of others. With those truths in mind and the echoes of Valerie Curtis-Newton's mantra, from her Solo Show class, of "finding the fear in the room and facing it," (Valerie Curtis Newton) my work on my final solo show at UW began. Another truth of mine is that I am rather fond of circles and the number 7, which symbolizes creation and completion; inspired I looked back at my admissions essay to the school and there solidified two ideas for my thesis- the character had to be me and the subject had to be exactly what I wrote about in my admissions essay, my family, and our musical weekend gatherings. The desire was to revisit the topics of my initial introduction to the school as a preface to my farewell to the university and our generous audience members. I wanted my thesis to serve as a full circle moment as both a student and artist. With that in mind I decided to write a cabaret because I've always wanted to do one but was too afraid to commit to the idea.

For inspiration I looked at two of my favorite cabarets, Colman Domingo's brilliant, A Boy and His Soul and the legendary Lena Horne's Broadway tour de force, Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music. What I admired in both of those productions was that the artist stood front and center rooted in their truth and the audience was right there with them each step of the way. I also looked at one of my biggest idols, Tina Turner, and the relationship she shared with her audience. Inspired by Mr. Domingo

and Ms. Horne I embarked on constructing a narrative that would serve as an origin story to my journey as an artist but set to the sounds of Chicago from my adolescence. Inspired by Ms. Turner, I selected my set pieces- a microphone, stand, and a stool; the rest of the stage was to be bare, to keep me from hiding.

I began to write the script with the assistance of a playlist of my family's favorite Blues recordings. The experience felt cathartic, almost as if I were being guided by my ancestors. Dr. Maya Angelou was correct when she wrote that there's "... no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you" (Dr. Maya Angelou). It was not a master's thesis I was drafting but a musical ode to my family and our traditions. The difficulty came when I realized I had written an hour-long cabaret as opposed to a twenty-minute show. How was I to cut something that I felt so deeply connected? The answer arose as I was rifling through my sound cue folder and came across the school bells, I had used in the performance of "Breathe," my second-year solo show. What if my thesis, since I am enrolled in school, focused on the life lessons I learned from The Blues that played at my Aunt's house?

Invigorated by this idea I began to trim the show with the idea that each song had the potential to highlight a specific lesson. After several rewrites, Sweet Bea's: A Cabaret was complete. That is when my old friend fear resurfaced stronger than ever. The show was beautifully written, however, I had to stand on-stage alone, sing these songs, and tell these stories. My stage fright had morphed into anxiety and I found myself in full self-sabotage mode. I began to consider abandoning the idea all together until a friend encouraged me to do something that would make 5-year-old Semaj proud. As a kid I loved singing and dancing with my family. It was at that moment I decided to use the tools I had developed during my time here at The School of Drama, particularly the Alexander Technique, to deliver the show that I believed in my heart I was capable of.

At the beginning of winter quarter Catherine Madden, Bridget Connors, and I began to work in individual tutorials. First task and probably most daunting was trying to develop a way to overcome the feelings of panic I had begun to experience. To address this Cathy Madden, Principle Lecturer in Alexander Technique, and I collaborated on the development of what she calls a study rehearsed plan. A concentrated, almost scientific approach to rehearsing a performance piece, in concert with the

Alexander Technique, as a means to achieve a fully coordinated and embodied performance. The first phase of our plan was to investigate my bio-psycho-social history with the singing onstage. It was then I remembered my freshman year of high school, I fell down a flight of stairs while singing "Beauty School Dropout," in the school's production of Grease. My introduction to my high school classmates was an embarrassingly painful one and the remnants of that experience has made singing in front of an audience almost unbearable. Having identified the root of my fear and knowing the goal of my show I was able to reverse engineer a plan that acknowledged my past shame without being crippled by it.

My introduction to Integrative Alexander Technique as a practice has been instrumental in my growth as an artist due to AT's mission to place the practitioner in state of "yes" where everything begins with the desire to create. By identifying the source of my anxiety, I was free to choose and create a plan that would help me overcome my apprehension. My desire for the show, was to introduce my audience to my family and our traditions, to foster an intimate night of theatre, this became more important to me than my fear of falling on my face, again.

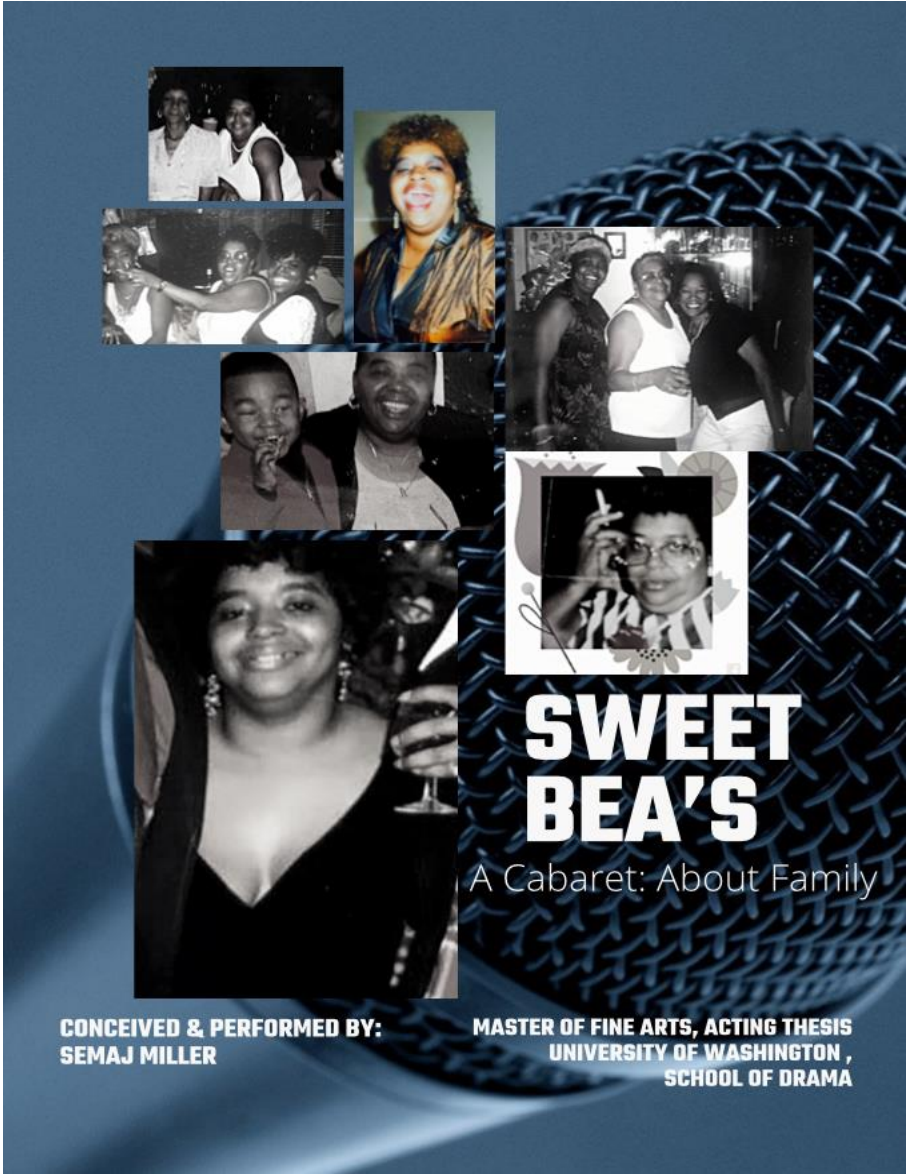
Which lead us to two other integral pieces of the plan Cathy Madden helped me develop. The relationship with the future audience and a new bio-psycho-social history with singing. For the latter, I began to carry my microphone stand with me everywhere I went. I was actively building a history with that particular object so I may call upon it as an instrument to deliver the show at a later date. This is what Cathy calls, a "bio-psycho-social" history, a connection with an event, object, or person so deeply embedded in ourselves that it colors our external behavior. The work on performer and audience relationship, unbeknownst to me, had begun while drafting of the piece. Every revision to the text was with the audience's experience in mind. To which Cathy advised that by inviting the future audience into the creative process (from the beginning) lessens the shock of their presences once they are physically present. This helped me externalize the mission of the show, it was not for me, but in service of the audience. This made me feel a less self-conscious. By the time classes were suspended I had begun to long for an audience to share the show. The Alexander Technique helped me unearth the desire in my show, it's fuel, the "why now", and once that was obvious to me, I felt empowered to deliver Sweet Bea's as a rousing night of music and stories as a means to foster community. I also received useful

feedback from Valerie Curtis-Newtown who, after reading an earlier version of the script, challenged me to search for a deeper meaning in the text.

To help ensure that the actual sound I was producing was fully embodied and dimensional in performance I turned to Bridget Connors, Designated Teacher of the Linklater Voice Technique, and Senior Lecturer in Voice and Speech at the School of Drama. Although we never worked on the actual songs from the cabaret, we worked on my singing with special attention paid to the placement of the tongue and the different resonating chambers in the body. This approach to singing is rooted in another idea that I picked up from Cathy Madden, an ideology she calls "whole self in performance." By inviting my entire body to participate in the mechanics of voice production and amplification I was developing the endurance needed to sustain a healthy vocal performance. Both Cathy and Bridget helped me tremendously in navigating my anxieties. A surprising assist in the preparation for the show came from Jane Nichols' Clown Class. Offered in the Winter of 2020, Jane stressed in her class how swiftly the clown shifts actions, emotions, points of view, etc. This attention to the quick shifts helped in my exploration of the given circumstances of the differing songs in the show. And once the show was on its feet the Viewpoints training, I received helped me "fill" an empty space with specific targets and stimuli. To the observer my stage might have appeared barren but to me it was full, and the story existed in space.

In October of 2008, at the closing of my first Equity gig, a production of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom directed by Tim Bond; I was given a keychain with the quote "... this be an empty world without the Blues" (Wilson 47) engraved on it. Back then I did not understand the quote, I just knew I liked it, I still carry that key chain with me today. When, I came to the University of Washington I was looking to gain the tools necessary to overcome the fears and anxieties that was compromising my work as a theatre maker. The process of creating this show allowed me to see for the first time my own growth as a performer but I also begin to understand that quote. The Blues is all about community. Sweet Bea's is deeply personal and that makes it scary but with the help of my community- my family, this faculty, and the idea of my future audience; I was able to embrace my fear, create a process to overcome it, and offer something beautiful to my audience. That would not have been the cast five years ago. I am proud

of this show and all it represents. To paraphrase Cathy Madden, I can truly feel how far I have come since my arrival to campus the Fall of 2017.



**SWEET  
BEA'S**  
A Cabaret: About Family

**CONCEIVED & PERFORMED BY:  
SEMAJ MILLER**

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS, ACTING THESIS  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON,  
SCHOOL OF DRAMA**

# SWEET BEA'S: A Cabaret

By: Semaj Miller

*Preshow we hear an assortment of Chicago specific 90s R&B*

*(Three Piece, Crucial Conflict, Common)*

**Music Ends**

**Pre-recorded Audio: Welcome to Sweet Bea's: A Cabaret, CAUTION!!! If you are here for a negative portrayal of the African American family or urban life this is NOT the show. This is a love letter to the hood and the people who taught me how to make do with less. Now sit back, relax, sing along, dance a bit if you want, and have a good time, because here we're all family!!!**

We Hear: **"Homecoming"** by Kanye West

*"I'm coming home again*

*Do you think about me now and then?*

*Do you think about me now and then?*

*'Cause I'm coming home again*

*Do you think about me now and then?*

*Do you think about me now and then?*

*'Cause I'm coming home again*

*Maybe we can start again"*

**Semaj Miller enters while the music plays**

**Music Ends**

**SM:** Ahhhhhh!!!!!! CHICAGO, it's so good to be home. Look at y'all! Oooh weeee y'all looking good to me. Folks know they get DRESSED to go to an event. I have missed y'all! Miss me? I said did y'all miss me?!? I love it, okay before we begin, couple rules 'bout how this night gon go... yeah yeah the preshow

happened but I just wanna re-it-terate, if at any point, and I hope there are many, but to borrow from Marvin Gaye, if at any point the "spirit moves ya, let it groove ya." That means that yes, we in a theatre, but we here to have a good time. I'm gone get this food set up, y'all already know when you're around me, we gotta eat good, drink good, and have a good time. Amen? And while I'm doing this Imma talk to y'all a bit, sing some songs, so feel free to sing along if you want, and dance if you like, because we gone parttttty like only we do in the Chi. And that can only mean its TIME y'all IT IS TIME...

*While dialogue is spoken SM is busy with pans, burners, etc.*

Cue: "**Coffee Pot: It's Time for the Percolator**" by Cajemere

*It's time for the percolator*

*It's time for the percolator*

*It's time for the percolator*

**Over-lapping the music**

**SM:** Lemme see who got the best Percolator out there? South-Side? West-side where y'all at? Let's go!

*While music plays SM is removing pants from a large igloo cooler,  
doing the Percolator & encouraging the audience to join in*

**Music Ends**

SM: That's how we start a party in Chicago!!! I know I know I been out in Seattle, but I ain't been gone that long, I know how we do, listen, **BAND** I'm so Chicago...

**Underscored**

*I'm so **southside** Chicago...*

*I'm talkin' Bulls dynasty and MJ 3-Peat Chicago.*

*Summertime penny candy, .25 icces, Flaming hots with nacho cheese Chicago.*

*All served from Ms. Johnsons front porch candy story*

*Which really was nothing but a card table, couple chairs,*

*A cooler, and a cardboard sign meticulously placed and secured with tape Chicago.*

*Rainbow Beach and walking cross the tracks at 71st and Jeffrey Chicago*

*Run to the corner store for momma to get a pack of cigarettes Chicago*

*Pastel colored Easter outfits from Jew Town Chicago.*

*6 wings dropped fresh and fried hard from Harold's Chicago*

*With extra mile sauce.*

*Or or or a Fat Albert's Italian Beef Dipped*

*with sweet and hot peppers and nacho cheese.... Chicago*

*Englewood is the taste of Chicago.*

**{mini praise break}**

Sorry y'all, gotta lil carried away, whew, I mean when you're away as much I am you gotta let it be known you still rep the "C"- "H"- "I". There are definitely things to be missed- clearly food is one of 'em, skyline is another (sorry New York), but what I've learned, over time, it's not the "what" or "things" that make this place special it's the "who" that make it... Home. Even when I don't live here, it's still home.

**BEAT**

Chicago is where it all began for me.

Underscore: **"Get Ready"** by The Temptations

Now my old man, is a man of many names, June, June Bug, Junior, Big Smooth and he had a PhD in Motor City Musicology. Our apartment at 7452 S. Paxton served as the homeroom of my musical education and James Miller Sr. presided over these lessons with the ferocity of a Baptist Preacher on Easter Sunday. Motown was and still is a serious topic in my father's house but much like high school you didn't learn everything in homeroom.

**Underscore Ends**

Little 'bout my family, momz was the baby of 10 and old man is one of 2. Growing up family was EVERYTHING. As a kid I marched to my own drum (still do), was a bit weird to be honest (still am), strolling thru 68th and Justine in some cowboy boots and sweatpants so not a lot of friends but I had siblings and hella cousins so I was free to be my weird self. In the 90s, my family was thicker than {voice trails off}.... I come from a family of "story-tellers" who, like most Black families, came to Chicago from the DEEP South. Gulfport, Shreveport, and all the other ports. Every one of my grandparents came here for different reasons but they all brought along with them something you can't talk about Chicago without mentioning, THE BLUES.

The Blues Master Classes took place weekly; this was an era when family reunions were a regular thing. Ours were held at 6750 S. Racine at Aunt Beatrice's, in the heart of Englewood. In that house you had the power to time travel because Saturday evenings always slipped into Sunday morning and the only people that noticed were the ones headed to church. It was a ritual everyone respected, well not everyone.

Like clockwork momma would get my sister and I dressed. Which I often protested

Lil Semaj: Momma I don't wanna go to Aunt Bee's AGAIN, ain't nothing for the kids to do but sit on those HOT couches because Auntie won't take the plastic off while y'all tell the same stories. And then when it's time to go its gone take forever to say goodbye because they always gone "play your record."

SM: My momma response to this was normally "Shut up Jay J." Everything I said was true, it was always the same damn stories. The same damn records. The same. The same. The same. Damn.

**(BEAT)**

Since we all family can I tell y'all something, as a kid I was unjustly characterized as bad... BAD AS FUCK according to my Aunties. Especially Aunt Lowe after the infamous "my sister fell out the window prank." I was just inventive I mean, seriously, look at this sweet face. Apparently, I was a bit of a....

Song: "**Mannish Boy**" by Muddy Waters

*Now when I was a young boy, at the age of five*

*My mother said I was, gonna be the greatest man alive*

*But now I'm a man, way past 21*

*Want you to believe me baby*

*I have lots of fun*

*I'm a man*

*I spell mmm, aaa child, nnn*

*That represents man*

*No B, O child, Y*

*That mean mannish boy*

*I'm a man*

*I'm a full grown man*

*I'm a man*

*I'm a natural born lovers man*

**SM:** Man, I hated going over there. And, I maintain my innocence against those unjust charges, but we were off because in my parents' house you had two options when it came to this tradition; go quietly or get your ass whooped and still go. Which really wasn't much an option now that I think of it.

When we got there, my old man would park his Black Cadillac El Dorado along "Caddy Row," just about everyone in my family drove Cadillac's except for Uncle Marshall and Aunt Lowe, she drove a BMW, there's always the one family member with money. That was Aunt Lowe, and she always smelled good.

Walking through the front gate you could hear BLUES blaring and cards slapping the table, once inside there sat, at the head of the table, Aunt Bea positioned like a High Priestess of ceremony, presiding over a time-honored tradition.

Chicago in the 90's was littered with gangs you had the notorious Gangster Disciples, the BDs, the Vice Lords, the Latin Kings, Four Corner Hustlers, and the fiercely fine & lethal CG's aka Clara's Girls better known as my momma and her sisters. And I'd argue Aunt Bea or Sweet Bea as they called her in the streets was the ringleader.

The 2nd Oldest of my mother's 10 siblings everybody down south called Aunt Bea's House "Headquarters." She'd dial one number and all of my mama's siblings' phones would ring. Her house was the place to go if you needed a plate of pig feet, an oil change, a haircut, your ears pierced, hospice care, pint of moonshine, hell back in the day her and Aunt Lowe ran the numbers game. Talk about a woman who could multi-task. Years ago there was a bar across the street and her house was where the after sets took place. She was a bar maid and served ALL the Blues greats that came thru the city. After that bar closed her house became the main event and afterparty. Folks from all over knew Sweet Bea.

Don't get it twisted "B" isn't the letter "B" but actually B-E-A-T as in "BEAT yo ass" (the T is silent) or B-E-E like bumble bee; sweet as honey but would sting. Auntie was a PISTOL, no literally, she once shot a man through her fur coat who tried to steal her purse with her rent money in it, and when my cousin thought she was grown enough to talk back she hit her in the mouth with a frozen chicken. But you couldn't tell that from looking at her- she gave me my first haircut, pierced my baby sister's ears; at one point she was a single mother of 6, five of which were boys, and she was TOUGH as a two-dollar steak but Sweet hence the name Sweet Bea....

## BEAT

Looking back, I "get" why I protested so much, I mean what kid wants to spend their Saturday sitting in the house while the old folk play the same 7 records, sipped whiskey, and tell the same stories; like the time when Aunt Myrte, Big Maybelle they called her, got into a brawl with Big Donna the neighborhood bully. According to my Old Man who had a front seat, when they locked up, Big Maybelle flipped Big Donna, and all of Racine shook. What kid wants that to be their weekend? But like the Bible says, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." Ohhh y'all ain't hearing me, I said (**exaggerated Preacher voice band underscoring**) "When I was a child... I understood as a, what?" (wait for response) "BUT WHEN I became a Man..." whew. Bet y'all didn't think y'all was gone get some preaching this evening, huh? First role I ever played was a preacher. BEAT I'm glad, in retrospect, my momma said "shut up JJ" and made me go anyway because knowing what I know now, we only got so much time with one another, and at Sweet Bea's everybody (except the kids) had a good time.

Everybody that walked through the door was family, the food was a plenty, the joy never ending, love overflowing, and the good times endless. Once you stepped inside you were greeted by...

Song: "**Down Home**" Blues by ZZ Hill

*You say your party's jumping  
and everybody's having a good time  
you know what's going through my mind  
do you mind if I get comfortable  
and kick off these shoes  
While you fixing me a drink  
play me some of those down-home*

*Chorus*

*Down-home Blues,  
Down home blues  
All I wanted to hear was some down home blues,  
all night long every other record or two  
She said, I'm going to get my head banged  
And party on the down home blues*

**SM:** The dance floor was ALWAYS packed by the time we arrived. You'd have Big Maybelle tip toeing on the dance floor, Aunt Jenny doing her signature "Rock", she was the only sister that was a stay at home mom and babysat most of my cousins so she had a mean rock, could put any baby to sleep. If that night was particularly hopping Aunt Bea would be right on the floor with her sisters. Doing her signature "claw dance." I have no idea what that was. And without missing a beat, as if choregraphed by Debbie Allen herself my momma, a dancing machine in her own right, would walk in and hit the "Funky Four Corners" while hugging and kissing everybody she saw 6 days ago. Sulking I'd step in and instantly be bombarded by a barrage of kisses and hugs. **Lesson #1: when you walk in a room you give and show respect and ALWAYS lead with your best self.** Back then if a kid walked into a room and didn't greet every elder individually you were sent back out to try again. A style of parenting I wish was still around today.

Before the night officially began marching orders were given, someone, normally my dad, Uncle Ricky, or Uncle Butchtail would run get the food usually a pan of fish (either perch or catfish nuggets), fried chicken wings, and fries; someone else was on duty to go play the lottery, another relative was on kid duty meaning they got us juices and plenty candy. My favorite was when they'd get different kinds of chips and mixed 'em all in a brown paper bag. Soon as everyone completed their respective tasks the night began the same way it always had.

Song: "**Love of Mine**" by Buddy Ace

*Woke up this morning –*

*I looked around  
I thought about my baby –  
I laid back down Eyes running water –  
Head's in a spin Why in the devil –  
Won't she come on in For I'm crazy –  
Crazy 'bout this love of mine  
I need my baby to hold and squeeze her tight  
'til girl you know you're my light  
Are you leaving me –  
Without saying goodbye  
Love of mine,  
love of mine,  
Love of mine,  
love of mine  
You're my light*

**SM:** This right here was FAMILY! And there was A LOT OF US, which meant it was hot, HOT AS FUCK! Bunch of folk drinking dark liquor, singing, dancing, and doing full re-enactments of stories like when Uncle Ricky smoked weed for the first time and climbed a tree in Ogden Park. Or the time my parents and Big Maybelle talked their way into a Rick James after party and got to hang with Teena Marie and the Mary Jane Girls.

The CG's were back together again at Sweet Bea's and there she sat in her spot brimming with pride. Aunt Bee, unlike my Mother was born in Mississippi, and spent her teenage years under Jim Crow- after my maternal grandmother passed she became the Matriarch of our family- she helped raise all her younger siblings, was the keeper of the family traditions, and hosted our weekly family reunions religiously. I think her house became the gathering spot because she was the only one who actually owned their house back then.

Now I'll be honest, my favorite time to come around... REPORT CARD TIME!!! Because that's when I racked UP! Which taught me **Lesson 2: the importance of fiscal responsibility.**

Song: "**Last Two Dollars**" by Johnny Taylor

*A lady at the casino  
She lost all of her money*

*She said don't feel sorry for me no  
Don't feel sorry honey  
But if you want to do a lady a favor  
Here's what I want you to do  
Just loan me two dollars  
Until the next time I see you  
But these last two dollars I'm not gonna lose  
These last two dollars I'm not gonna lose  
One's going for my bus fare  
Other one for the jukebox  
To hear me some blues  
To hear me some blues*

**SM:** Okay that one was my favorite, it's the one my momma and I would dance too. Looking back, nobody had any money! NOBODY, with the exception of Aunt Lowe, but we had each other. EVERYBODY PITCHED IN to get the food, drinks, candy, whatever was to be had during our Saturday night reunions.

It felt like things were a heck of a lot simpler than; Money and Time can do weird things to a family if you let it. I really became aware of time when I went off to school, the first time, felt like every time I came back a chair at THE table was empty. Now yall know what table I'm talking bout. That's right the card table... **Lesson #3: tough skin-ded-ness**, I made that word up, like Shakespeare Black families have contributed immeasurably to the English lexicon.

Now this one wasn't in the music but lives as part of another family ritual. These might look like a regular deck of playing cards but in my Family, this is rhetoric boot camp. Through playing cards, you learn the art of argumentation and shit talking. Both of which has served me well in LIFE. It was here at "THE TABLE" that I learned words can help take a bully down fast as your hands. Now from the outside eye... these games may appear heated but it's just passion, I have a rule I don't play cards with people I don't trust because, shit can go down. Now when you are starting out you're at the "kid's table", that's where you learn by playing Spades, and the adults take it easy on you, when you graduate to BID WHIST, you at the grown folks table. There all bets are off, your own mama will cut you, I'm speaking from experience.

*(Sound Cue: Theme music from Drunk History)*

**Spoken as if a research scholar:** "The Art of Shit talking derived in the American South and made its way north circa 1920, it was curated by those Americans of African Ancestry as a means to prepare the young for the cruelty of the world. At the card table you learned to talk shit, endure shit, stand in the shit, and overcome the shit. Watch and Learn:"

*Bring Ya Ass and Bid... I know you gotta lie to tell*

*Study Long Study Wrong*

*You Ain't Got Shit in Yo Hand*

*You Gone Have to Come and See About Me Before this Game is Thru*

*That's yo Bid? If it's a lie you done told it.*

*I'm going downtown like Julie Brown*

*Who next because they asses is SET*

**Research Scholar:** "Fascinating"

**(Shifts Back to Normal)**

**SM:** One thing about the table, in addition to being bootcamp, a lot of family business was taken care of round that table. If the elders were gathered and music wasn't playing something serious was going down. If pictures were being passed around somebody's obituary was being written, calendars meant family reunion were coming up, and in some instances- gossip was being shared. Y'all know Black families like to talk and everybody in everybody business.

This brings me to **Lesson #4:**, probably the most covered topic in Blues Music- **LOVE**. I was taught it's great to fall in love, hell it's okay to be A FOOL IN LOVE because in truth EVERYBODY PLAYS THE FOOL SOMETIME, you just gotta try not to be a GAT DAMN FOOL.

Song: "**Ain't Never Loved A Man**" by Aretha Franklin

*Some time ago I thought*

*You had run out of fools*

*But I was so wrong*

*You got one that you'll never lose*

*The way you treat me is a shame*

*How could ya hurt me so bad*

*Baby, you know that I'm the best thing*

*That you ever had*

*Kiss me once again*

*Don't ya never, never say that we we're through '*

*Cause I ain't never Never,*

*Never, no, no (loved a man) (The way that I, I love you)*

*I can't sleep at night*

*And I can't even fight*

*I guess I'll never be free  
Since you got, your hooks, in me  
Whoa, oh, oh Yeah! Yeah!  
I ain't never loved a man  
I ain't never loved a man, baby  
Ain't never had a man hurt me so bad*

**SM:** You'd think with songs like these that nobody was in committed relationships, the exact opposite, mostly everybody was in decades long relationships. Now how that didn't translate to my own dating life... which segue.... to all friends, family, associates, people with no damn business stop pressuring y'all kinfolk to settle down ain't nothing wrong with being single damn. We gone talk about it... I ain't never had a problem with leaving, maybe that's my problem. I've left and been left, cheated and been cheated on, been in love and.... I don't know if that was "me" or because of the "dream" I just know one day

Song: ***"I'd Rather Go Blind"*** by Etta James

*Something told me it was over  
When I saw you and her talkin'  
Something deep down in my soul said, 'Cry,'  
When I saw you and that girl walkin' around  
Whoo, I would rather, I would rather go blind, boy  
Than to see you walk away from me, child, no  
Whoo, so you see, I love you so much  
That I don't wanna watch you leave me, baby*

**SM:** That one always gets me, Ms. Etta James cut that record right here in Chicago. Sometimes, last few years, it's felt like a revolving door. In and Out. Same routine. I've always been ambitious, maybe to a fault. But that's what **Lesson 5: was all about if you want something go get it because nothing comes to a sleeper but a dream and when you wake up that's gone. My dad always said that, kind of his version of "the dream is free, but the hustle is sold separately..."**

Song: ***"Breaking Up Somebody's Home"*** by Albert King

*Laying around home alone  
On a rainy night like this*

*Starving for your love  
Hungry for just one kiss  
Every raindrop I hear  
On my window pane yeah  
Beats so loud and clear Why does it tell your name?  
I got nowhere to turn to  
Tired of being alone  
I feel like breaking up somebody's home  
I know it's useless  
Hanging on to you  
When you belong to someone else Can't control the feelin'  
Cause after all I didn't make it myself  
Last night I cried so hard  
I believe I caught a chill  
Can't control the vibration  
My heart just won't stand still  
Got nowhere to turn to  
I'm tired of being alone  
I feel like breaking up somebody's home*

**SM:** light that's the only song we played that dealt with being a go-getter, I'm not out here breaking up anybody's home. But I will say, I've always known my family wanted, no EXPECTED greatness from me, but that don't get rid of the guilt of feeling like an absentee son, brother, nephew, etc. That space where ambition, reality, and sacrifice intersect can be devastating. Like, I loooooove my family, I'm proud of where I come from, but I knew early on I had to leave in order to become who I felt I was destined to be. Easier said than done. Anyone else ever feel like that? Funny, my family never really made me feel guilty about that, a few did, during arguments. That's typically when truth comes out... I went away to pursue "the dream" and came back to find life continued happening without me. Maybe it's my own naivety, thinking it would always be the same when I got back, but it never is. You can't press pause on the story of life; you can try but it won't stay. I have tried it and I always fail. It's like looking back I tried everything I could to get out of going over to Aunt Bea's and here we are today doing exactly what I worked so hard to avoid back then. When I was in high school, I really stopped coming around, I needed straight As, so I could get into a good college and be free. Free from what, I don't know. I had damn

good parents and a solid foundation. Told no one where I was going until all was decided. I didn't want anybody to try and convince me to stay because I might have stayed. I ran and the first time "life happened" on my own I mentally ran back home to get through it.

I was the first to leave, go to college, graduate, come back, and then go back to school. Revolving door. Thing about "Acting School," some of 'em, the try to beat the colloquialisms and regionalisms out of your speech. My winter quarter evaluation it was decided, well "suggested," that I seek the assistance of a Speech Therapist. You would have thought someone called me a "Nig...", I mean I was devastated and infuriated. To me, in my mind, I carry my ancestors in my voice. And the idea of being perceived as inarticulate- man, that cut so deep that I was seriously thinking of not finishing my graduate degree. But I complied with the "suggestion." And that feeling worsened when I came home for break, I sounded different, I didn't sound like Chicago. I began to feel the little things I was fighting to hold on to, what kept me tethered to my roots, as I ascend, we're being stripped from me.

When Aunt B passed, I couldn't even go to the funeral I was opening a show. Ironically enough what made me begin to appreciate those weekends with my family was a play. The same thing that was always taking me away from my family was bringing me closer. How does that work? I mean the universe has an odd way of working. I was doing Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and actor work, study the Blues, well life prepared me for it. Nowadays, I can remember my shows based on who passed when what show opened. It's crazy to feel guilt, gratitude, frustration, and joy simultaneously.

So why come back? I ask myself that every time my plane lands. Then it dawned on me- you run long enough, it's a only a matter of time until you run right into the thing you were trying to avoid. And if your experience is anything like mine, the thing you're often running away from, just might be you. I thought, thinking as a child, that if I grasped onto things outside of myself to validate my connectedness to my family that I would be satiated. But you see I was so busy running, desperate to get away, the lessons I needed hadn't dropped into my soul yet. I was trying to catch up to myself while I was running from myself.

This is city and the people rejuvenate me. It nourishes me spiritually in such a way, that no program, degree, or hardship can take that from me. It took almost losing everything material to understand that.

In my 30s, I'm finally starting to understand why those weekends were so important **Lesson #6: ain't nothing like family**. Out of all the stories I love the Big Donna versus Ann Myrte brawl, I loved it because of the fact that the ENTIRE family was there. We were raised to always have each other's back so when I say Clara's Girls moved like a unit, they MOVED, you messed with one you messed with an entire house and all the men in the family too. Straight goons. We were like our own private club that was...

Song: "**Members Only**" by Bobby Blue Bland

*Members only It's a private party*

*Don't need no money*

*To qualify*

*Don't bring your checkbook*

*Bring your broken heart*

*'Cause it's members only, tonight  
Say you lost your woman  
Say you lost your man  
You gotta lot a problems  
All in your life  
Well, they're throwing a party  
For the broken hearted  
And it's members only, tonight  
Go tell mama  
Go tell daddy  
Red or yellow  
Black or white  
Throwing a party  
All for the sad and lonely  
It's members only, tonight*

**SM:** So I finished my Masters at the University of Washington and in the lead up to graduation the only thing I was excited about was sharing that experience with my family because I learned more at that table and on that dance floor than any university could teach me. Also, shit we have come a long way from Englewood. I learned at my aunt's that friends can become family and through community all things, even dreams, were possible.

And they loved to hear about my dreams of becoming an actor, when I was little, they'd go to every one of my shows (those that could), and they'd report back to the elders. Some people would say I grew up in the hood, hell I did, but inside that tiny house 2-3 generations of family poured so much love into me my cup continues to run over.

To quote Zora Neale Hurston, "... The dream is the truth." My truth is this, what I'm doing right now, with y'all has always been the dream, but I had no idea it would cost this much. Yes- I love and am grateful to be an artist, I'll do this until I have no breathe left. That does not negate the fact that at times this life can be feel incredibly lonely and isolating.

Sometimes I wonder would it have been easier had I gone to law school? Stayed closer to home? But what is life without a dream?

As the years passed, I've watched my mom go from being one of 10 to now 5. Nowadays if I'm in town I attend every family event. There aren't as many as they used to be. Time has a way of mucking with

things, as a family we're not as close as we used to be, that started right around the time Aunt B passed. So and so ain't talking to so and so etc. A far cry from how we were raised.

But on this day, at this moment, I wanted to introduce y'all to the people who helped me get here, to the people who kept me safe when society wanted to destroy me, to those who said DREAM BIG and DREAM BEYOND the GHETTO little big headed boy. The world might not know who they are but they mean the world to me.

Aunt Bee used to say... Shit y'all should wanna be kids long as you can, better enjoy it, because once it's over...

What's crazy, I hate bills, but I don't mind 'em, maybe because my folks taught me how to make it work even if I gotta piece it together. There's a lot of piecing things together as an artist. **BEAT** I reminisce on those stories a lot- especially when life becomes unbearable, I can still smell the food in the kitchen, feel the hot plastic on my skin, taste the flamin' hots with nacho cheese, but it's the voices I miss the most... the

*"Jay J, you make us so proud"*

*"I heard you did so good in your play: keep going"*

*"You gone be somebody, someday"*

I can hear them as vividly now as when they were here. I hope they're as proud of me as I am grateful to have been raised and loved by all of them. I do leave a lot but it really is to make good on the investments they made in me.

My Aunt Myrte passed away recently, I just so happened to be in town, and was able to make the funeral, SHOCKER, and after the burial, small group of us got together at my momma house and this song came on (**Sound: Members Only** Instrumental) and my 9 year old niece started singing her heart out. That shook me to the core. It was still being passed down y'all, that gave me hope.

**LESSON 7: Its never too late to tell someone you love 'em**, we gotta make the most of today. Can I ask a favor? Call someone, don't text or dm them, I guess FaceTime is cool, call 'em just to hear the sound of their voice or to simply say I love you. Will you do that?

{**BEAT**}

Okay, those are the 7 lessons I'm sharing with y'all this evening. Hell here's a bonus- always wear clean underwear because you never know when you'll get hit by a bus. Apparently, my parents knew someone who ended up in the ER with no drawers on and my cousin was hit by a bus (she survived) but they felt compelled to remind us of this all the time.

In closing, LET'S EAT, food got to be ready, a gathering ain't a git together without a little soul food. Think of it as an offering from my family to yours. How about one more for the road? This was Aunt Bea's jam.

Song: **"Hole in the Wall"** by Mel Waiters

*Let's go baby to the hole in the wall*

*I've had my best time y'all  
at the hole in the wall  
3 o'clock in the morning  
All the damn clubs are closed  
I went to this place y'all  
I didn't want anyone to know  
I walked into the room  
Had my nose in the air  
It's 7 in the morning  
And I'm still in there  
Let's go baby to the hole in the wall  
I've had my best time y'all at the hole in the wall*

**END OF SHOW**