

Pacifica Radio Archives Preservation & Access Project  
Transcript of Odetta / interviewed by Celestine Ware.

An interview conducted at Pacifica Radio station WBAI-FM in New York City, on April 14, 1971. She talks about being an African American woman in the performing world, and the development of her music. Broadcast, WBAI, May 27, 1971. Pacifica Radio Archives number BC0047. Program length 01:01:00 (61 minutes)

This transcript is part of the Pacifica Radio Archives Preservation & Access Project; made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Recording Academy, and contributions from listeners of Pacifica Radio Stations KPFA and KPFK in California, KPFT in Houston TX, WBAI in NYC, and WPFW in Washington D.C., and Pacifica Radio Archives supporters.

We appreciate your comments, additions and corrections.

Please address them to Brian DeShazor, Director, Pacifica Radio Archives, 3729 Cahuenga Blvd. West, Studio City, CA 91604.

Phone: (800) 735-0230, email: pacarchive@aol.com

Also contact Pacifica Radio Archives for information regarding audio CDs.

Transcript  
Interview -- Odetta

[Song begins: "Hit or Miss" from Odetta Sings, 1970. The song is a 12-bar blues with drums, bass, and acoustic guitar.]

Odetta [singing]:

Ah-la-lai-lai

[Chorus] Whoah, can't you see?

I gotta be me

Ain't nobody just like this

I gotta be me

Baby, hit or miss

[Verse] Sittin' here all by myself

Trying' to be everybody else

[Chorus] Can't you see?

I gotta be me

Ain't nobody just like this

I gotta be me

Baby, hit or miss

[Verse] Look at you sittin' there

All by yourself  
Listenin' to everybody  
Everybody say "be everybody else"  
[Chorus] Can't you see?  
Whoah, you gotta be you, see?  
Ain't nobody just like you  
Baby, hit or miss  
Oh-la-lai-lai [scat]  
[Horn section enters]  
Oh, you see?  
I gotta be me.  
Ain't nobody just like this  
I gotta be me  
Baby, hit or miss  
[Verse] Sittin' here, I'm all by myself  
I'm tryin' to be everybody else  
[Chorus] But now I see  
I gotta be me  
Ain't nobody just like this  
I gotta be me  
Baby, hit or miss [repeats 2x]  
Ain't nobody just like this  
I gotta be me  
Baby, hit or miss [repeats as song fades out]

Celestine Ware: This is Celestine Ware. I'm in the studio this afternoon with Odetta, who is by now a legendary singer in many categories. On her latest album, she sings everything from Elton John, Paul McCartney, Randy Newman, James Taylor to Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. I heard a spot on the radio that said you got the idea for this song while you were washing the dishes, and that brings me back to the idea of you as a woman artist. Can you go into that a bit, about getting ideas about songs and about being a woman?

[Except for the two, the studio is mostly silent except for men's voices far in the background.]

Odetta: Somehow or other, the song starts happening before the actual idea does. I was in my own house and I was there by myself, and I'm not at home very much, and it was a joyous occasion. I fixed a little something to eat and was washing up the dishes and then that song started in my...this thing started happening, and I went into the work room and I picked up my guitar and I started playing through and

singing and that's how that came about. Now, the song is a self-affirmation. It is at the same time a wanting to attempt to include others and not necessarily to me, or for me, but in themselves, for themselves.

CW: Hmm.

Odetta: And it is not from a woman point of view, but from a human being—just a human. Now, as we walk different paths, we find that it is difficult to go through the guff, as society throws it out, as a woman, or as a male, or as a black. There are many problems that have got to be worked on at this time, and the base of the problem, or the problem solving, I believe, is recognition of yourself as a human being. No banner, no banner. But just a human being. And what you are physically is one other thing.

CW: Ah, but that's the problem right there, because what you are physically is really the way other people take you. For instance, I think that...I saw you Friday night at the Fillmore. Now, for a Fillmore audience, and I'd say for most audiences that are in the concert halls today, a woman who comes on the stage is a chick singer. And that's the way you're going to be perceived and that's what they want to admire in you. And if they want to talk about someone being a genius, or, you know, who's really got a wonderful talent whom they admire, it's mostly men. I mean, it's really a male world. And yet, you are a woman relating in this world and performing in this world. I can see, sometimes, the audience trying to relate to you as a chick singer, as a sexy woman.

Odetta: Well, maybe one of the reasons I came back this life as I am, and the shape that I am in...it is very difficult for anybody to connect me to a sexy chick singer, okay? [Both laugh.] So, we erase that one right there. Now, as I walk along and go into performing areas—not only performing areas, but in my private life—I feel that I am in a man's world with those concepts. The concept of man about woman, and all those things that woman has swallowed that man has told her about. Okay? Now, there is another step that can be taken, and that is a step of: I say to myself, "I want to do this, that, or the other thing." And if I want to do this, that, or the other thing, it fits within my code of whatever, then I will always attempt to. Not as a woman, not as a black, but as someone who's attempting something within the musical field. And that is the thing that I'd like most to concentrate on. No one can be dubbed a full-fledged citizen. No one can be dubbed with any

kind of self honor. All these things come from within ourselves, and as soon as we start looking outside to see who is seeing that we are what we want to be, we're lost.

CW: That's true.

Odetta: It is strictly from our working. It's like...years ago, I got to the point where I said, "Well, hey. If someone called me an asparagus, that's kind of ridiculous, isn't it?"

CW: Yeah.

Odetta: First off, the person calling me that, I most probably wouldn't have any regard or concern or respect for their opinion, right? So they call me an asparagus, and I laugh. Ha, ha. Right? But as soon as they call me a nigger, then I start paying an attention. Why is that? That's because my head's in the wrong place.

CW: Oh, but I think that, you know, everybody is affected by what other people think—

Odetta: Absolutely. Absolutely. And that's the thing that we have to... it is not the surface things of woman, or black, or man, or Puerto Rican, or Indian, but it is the inside thing. We are taken by others as we present ourselves, and as soon as you look towards someone else to say you are ordained good and whole and pure—that's the moment that that other person you're looking towards will say "thumbs down." Now, that is not to negate the fact that we are in a system that says that women should be—and you can name the whole list of these things.

CW: That women are not really human beings. That men are humans, and women are...for instance, "mankind." That's men.

Odetta: Well, we can start from...as a matter of fact, it was just last night. I got into bed and I was going off to sleep and there were thoughts going on in my head. And I thought about the sun, s-u-n. And then I thought "A-ha. The male child. The son." But they...I don't know why they started spelling it s-o-n. I'm not quite sure why they... but it's son, right? Now, you and I start before we're conceived as second choice, alright? Papas want mamas to give them sons, to carry their lives on, right?

CW: Yes, right.

Odetta: Now, it's kind of a shame that their lives will be carried on only because of a name. Not their ideals, but a name, right? Alright, so mama drops a little girl, and papa is disappointed. That's the kind of thing that you and I—all the ladies—have to fight through. That's the kind of thing that sets our whole pattern up. We are considered not someone who can do this that or the other thing—including throwing a javelin—but we're considered something less than what papa wants, and then something that is to be protected and guarded. I remember—

CW: To make a man feel good. That's what a woman is for: to make a man feel good.

Odetta: Well, I guess...yes. Yes, that is it. In the area, I suppose, of man and woman is a very general area of how races feel. We're also brought up with the need to find somebody to think less of. So that goes on to—

CW: Yes. [Short pause.] Yes, yes, yes so—

Odetta: All of these things tie in so neatly together, and we've inherited so much bullcorn—

CW: [Laughs.] Yeah, right. Listen, you said, the reason you came in this life, or in this form and this shape.... Do you believe, then, in the transmigration of souls, in that....

Odetta: I believe not in the transmigration of souls—I don't believe that we go back to a form that is...say, on a school-type level, we don't go from high school to grammar school. But I do believe in a migration of souls through a certain kind of passage that is heading, all of them heading, towards the opening of the particular soul. I believe in reincarnation for.... I used to say I tended towards believing in re-incarnation, and then as I've lived, there have been too many things that have said that it is. I see...I believe that children, through genes, through the physical, get their physical traits. I believe that through something else we get all those other things that are artistic or un-artistic or all kinds of things—

CW: Your real soul. Your soul. Your genius. Right.

Odetta: The thing that you have to work on after you're here. After

that whole body is here. I also believe that we pick our parents.

CW: You pick your parents? Oh—

Odetta: As hard as that might seem.

CW: Oh, I think almost everybody I know would disagree with that. Do you really feel that? I was reading about your parents. You know, that your father died and your mother re-married, and that—

Odetta: No, my father didn't die. My mother re-married. It was...shall I say it?

CW: Yeah, sure.

Odetta: It was a case. It was in Alabama. Birmingham, Alabama. And my grandfather decided that my mother would marry Ruben Holmes, who was a very good risk. He had a good, steady job. He had seniority. I didn't learn until just about three years ago that he played the guitar and sang.

CW: Ahhh—

Odetta: —which was incredible, right? And she was very young, and she was very afraid, and she left. They got divorced and then she married again, and I grew up with my stepfather, who was a near-saint. I have had the most luck with parents. My stepmother is a fantastic angel. [Laughs.] My mother is that, too. My stepfather I hardly believe, because I really believe he's a near-saint, and my father is something else.

CW: When you say that, do you mean because they encouraged you to be what you—

Odetta: Nope. Nope. Just 'cause of what they are. It was my mother that was the one that found the sponsor for me for singing lessons. It was my mother that encouraged me. It's because of her, really.

CW: That song, "Take Me to the Pilot of Your Soul"—does that have a private meaning for you?

Odetta: Yes, and I've been singing it for a little while now, and it's still developing...my thoughts on the song. But it is like...to me it is like, if

you feel that, it's real. If you feel that your criticism of me is real, then I'm on trial, right?

CW: Right. Right.

Odetta: I'm on trial in your head, okay? I'm here in your prison, and I'm like a coin in your mint. It's still your thing, right? I'm dented and spent with high treason, if only treason against you, right? Through a glass eye, your throne. It's still you, right? You're still looking at me. It's the one danger zone. In other words, we're still back to that other thing that we were talking about, and that is somebody else is putting on you, what you're not at all. And then, my own confidence is: Take me to the pilot of your soul.

CW: Ah, right. Right.

Odetta: Take me to the pilot for control.

CW: Yeah, that's a good song. Let's see...I think we'd like to hear that, yes.

[Song begins: "Take Me to the Pilot" from Odetta Sings, 1970. The song starts with gospel piano and ads drums and tambourine.]

Odetta [singing]:

[Verse] If you feel that it's real, I'm on trial

And I'm here in your prison

Like a coin in your mint

I am dented and spent with high treason

[Bridge] Through a glass eye, your throne

Is the one danger zone

Take me to the pilot for control

Take me to the pilot of your soul

[Chorus] Take me to the pilot

Lead me through the chamber

Take me to the pilot

I am but a stranger

Take me to the pilot

Lead me through the chamber

Take me to the pilot

I am but a stranger

Na-na-na [repeats]

[Verse] Well I know he's not old

And I'm told, I'm told he's a virgin  
For he may be she  
But I'm told, and I'm never, never for certain  
[Bridge]  
[Chorus]  
Na-na-na [repeats]  
[Chorus]  
Take me, take me [repeats as song fades]

CW: Odetta, you were one of the first women I ever saw wearing an Afro, and at the time that you wore it, it wasn't in fashion; it wasn't at anything like that. It just was such a highly individual way of dressing and being. It seems to me really that you were a forerunner for what everybody is trying to do now.

Odetta: Mine was the first natural in this country. It's been here 21 years now. I first saw it on a dancer by the name of Gini Lagawn [sp?] in Los Angeles. She was an interpretive dancer, and when she did programs of African lore, she would have her hair in a natural. I remember running into her at City College in Los Angeles, and she was getting ready to do a program and she had that natural. I said, "Hey, Gini," and I was talking to her but I couldn't keep my eyes away from her hair. Then, the next summer I was a counselor at a camp of some kind and I was in a children's show and I had to keep my hair straight, forgive the pun [both laugh] for the role on the weekends when I went into Los Angeles. When that show finished, I got back to the camp and I was a counselor, right, so I went into the cabin thing and the kids were still up. So I said, "Okay, well as long as you're up, cut my hair." So they started cutting my hair and they started getting scared, right? It was straight at this point and so I said, "Okay, that's enough," and I went into the bathroom and washed my hair, and the natural thing happened to it and it's been that way ever since, right? The only...my mother, the only thing she said was, "Lord, look at that fool." [Laughs.] But she never did—well, the only time she complained about it was when I started letting it get long. She liked it short for some reason. Guess it was better for my face or something. I'm into head wraps now. I'm just into head wraps now. There was a lot of times when I would get on a bus and people would snicker and laugh, and it was very difficult at the beginning. And I remember a reviewer in Ohio, somewhere in Ohio, who said, "If she'd let her hair grow and straighten it and sing pop songs, she'd be all right." [Both laugh loudly.]

CW: Oh! That's right! Just change yourself completely and you'll be alright. Then I'll accept you.

Odetta: But the reason—one of the strengths that came to me even to do that, because even though I'm a performer, I'm not an exhibitionist—one of the areas that gave me strength to do that was starting to learn about where I came from. That started to happen when I started being interested in folk music and started investigating folk music, and I found out where I came from.

CW: Then in a way, being a performer—or your pursuit of art—has actually been a search for yourself.

Odetta: In a shallow way, yes. But because it was folk music, it took me closer and closer to me. I mean, just to be a performer, I could be kind of looking for myself on the surface, but it was folk music that started taking me below the surface.

CW: Now, when I was reading about you, I read that at one time you were training to be a coloratura soprano. Is that right?

Odetta: Well [laughs], actually it happened that one time, I was staying the piano as some kids do, you know? The teacher would come to the house. This was also in Los Angeles. And one day, because of the bus services in Los Angeles—it was bad then; it's worse now—she was late. A friend of mine and myself, we were just waiting until the teacher got there, so we decided to do scales to see how high we could sing. And as we were screeching and carrying on, the teacher was walking up the street and she heard these voices, and she came in and tested both of our voices. When she heard my voice, she all of a sudden became a voice teacher. [Both laugh.] My voice was very high at that point. Now, this was around age eleven, and I was a coloratura. Well, such a conglomerate of things you can't imagine. I mean, a coloratura in a big black frame—that's not the picture that we've been given. [Laughs.]

CW: Yeah, once again. Yeah, once again other people's pictures....

Odetta: Right, right. Well, as I grew older, my voice changed, and about the age of 13 I'd gotten serious about training the voice. I was in it for a few years there, and I was interested in the area of [oratorio], you know. Always the preaching end of it, you know? [Laughs.]

CW: Oh, yes, but I love it. Also, I heard that you were interested in Lieder, is that right?

Odetta: Yes, yes.

CW: I would love to hear you do something like that. Have you ever sang...?

Odetta: Well, as a student, yes. But not going out and singing without being a student. But, one of my dreams—I don't really know what my goal is; I cannot discern what that is—

CW: I think life's over when you know, right?

Odetta: [Laughs.] Just to get through it.

CW: Right, right, right.

Odetta: One of the things I want to do...one of the dreams is Gian-Carlo Menotti's *The Medium*. I decided that I was going to do that before I died. If I had to produce it myself, and if nobody came, I was going to do it. Well, it looks like we might be doing it next year.

CW: In New York, or where?

Odetta: At Temple University. They're thinking about it. I haven't heard what their decision is yet, but I've got to find a teacher, which I'm very leery about. There was one—I was in high school, and there was one summer that I spent with one teacher, and that's less than three months, and it took me a year to get out of the bad habits he got me into. It's fantastic.

CW: Now is that the teacher who you said—I read in another story you said—this teacher is trying to turn you into a second Marian Anderson, is that...?

Odetta: Yep.

CW: Tell me about that, sort of, because....

Odetta: Well, the thing is that he couldn't have taken my voice anywhere it couldn't go, so I really have a lot to be grateful to him for. One thing that he was doing was that he was stomping on my ego.

Now, I was a backward kid, but even then I knew that I didn't want to be another anybody. And also going at that point was that Marian Anderson was my absolute idol. You know, she was my goddess, and I was fashioning my life after what I thought she was like, you know?

CW: Yeah. Yeah.

Odetta: But I didn't want to be another Marian Anderson.

CW: Still. Still. Yes, right. Right. To admire, but not to be the same thing as.

Odetta: Well, you know, I've seen...that's one of my pet peeves. Where I understand that our whole process of learning is through imitation, there is some point when we cut off and go into our own selves. When I see imitation completely, I resent it...for one thing, the person who is doing it, denying their own selves.

CW: Oh, now that really gets me into something, and that's the idea of white musicians who make money doing imitations and, of course, very good, imaginative imitations of black musicians. We have, say, someone like Mick Jagger and Keith Richards who rip off Robert Johnson and Elmore James, or we have—what's the name of that guy who does Ray Charles and now is making all the money? You know, the English...oh, I can't remember his name. You know, "Delta Lady" and all that? It's an incredible head—

Odetta: Joe...Joe Cocker.

CW: Yes, Joe Cocker. Exactly...he sounds exactly...and now, you know what he just did? He just recorded "Let's Go Get Stoned," and this is the story of the black musician in America.

Odetta: Yes, it is.

CW: And, that's just—I mean, there you have an imitation again and again and again, and they make the money. They become the great stars. People very rarely have allowed black musicians just simply to be and to go on and to develop, you know? All the great talents, the really great talents in black music, it seems to me, have been stultified. Marian Anderson didn't get to the Met until she was past her prime, really.

Odetta: Mm-hmm. Well, these kids could imitate from the day of birth to the day of death and nobody even hear about them. So it actually means that there is somebody else who is perpetrating this deceit. I sit here as you're talking about this knowing that if I look like a dog and I were white, I would be much further ahead than I am right now, and that's been a little something that's been very difficult to live with. I have to fight my way through, and because people are in the entertainment field does not mean that they have grown up without the biased-ness, the hate that everybody else has.

CW: As a matter of fact, I would say—A.B. Spellman pointed it out in his book—that the black musician is sort of the prototype of the black experience in America. What is done to them. There they are, they're performing, and they're artists. But they often have to perform under the worst conditions. For instance, if you perform in a nightclub, people are talking all the time. You have to work all hours of the night. You're given bad music. You're given bad deals on recording contracts, or you don't get your money. And then the audience just really doesn't respect you. They don't. And the big money still goes to the white person. It still goes to the white musician, and always will.

Odetta: Ah, yes. It is the history of American music, as you said before, from giving five dollars to a musician for buying a song and making millions on that song. But it is...it is something that the people—the whites who are running the business—have within them before they even get into the business. It's like growing up through an atomic fallout kind of area. You grow up with this fallout kind of stuff, right? And not only do the people in the business give us the business, but the people who are attending whatever performance it is, and it seems that within this society, if somebody knows that you're making \$50,000 for this particular gig, then they'll sit and listen, and only the whites will, right? I have seen...when the Café a Go Go was going, I went down to hear a blues singer, right? An old daddy blues singer. And he was he up there, he was singing, and there was some kids sitting in the audience. And I noticed this blues singer...he kept looking towards these guys for a “yay,” for a response from them, right? And once again, it happened in my head, that the confidence and/or arrogance, if you don't mind, has to come from ourselves. And there's been this constant thing and there still is a thing of working with the system to get to somewhere.

CW: Yeah. Yeah.

Odetta: And I wonder, after getting there, do you really start calling the shots on your own? I have heard of more peculiarities, you know, from white musicians that people put up with; and a black musician, his train was late, and they can't hardly stand it.

CW: Right. They'll fire you. Or they say, "You don't play in my house anymore." That's right. I've heard of stories like that. In fact, there is a story that that's what's supposed to have happened to Roland Kirk with [concert producer] Bill Graham at the Fillmore. That one of his musicians was held up and he said, "That's it, you're dead."

Odetta: I had to leave a manager because of that. That thing, that area ...sometimes I get the feeling that it is an area where it cannot be helped. It's like a reflex reaction. It's like Pavlov's dog—

CW: Yeah, dog is right.

Odetta: They get us to a certain point, and then they can't get us any further, because that would mean that they wouldn't hold the place that they hold in their own head, you know? That would mean that we'd be getting too close to where they think they are, and it's all based on the economic thing. Maybe not even knowing that they're not even close to us outside of the economic thing. [Both laugh.]

CW: Maybe. I think that, you know, it's not really economics. I think that that's ego. I think that's power. It's like men needing women to make them feel good. Whites need blacks to make them feel good. To have somebody beneath them, and not to give them credit for what they are, or to let them expand into whatever they can become—

Odetta: Alright. We grow up, and we are constantly being told "no." This is just mankind. Humankind, okay.

CW: Right. That's education.

Odetta: We're told "no." So we grow, really, to be great big "no"s. We stop and think, basically, before we do anything, whether we want to do it or not. Right? So, that means that, if we're a "no," whatever positive areas we have going, we have to take advantage of. Now, the white man has the fact that he had a white skin.

CW: Right.

Odetta: Alright, now he has a white skin, and he's successful. Why is he successful? Not because he is white, but because he clever and has money or can prove that he's clever because of his money, alright? Now, you get this white cat with money backing a black cat without money, and will take him only so far, and then leave him off, and that is the area I'm speaking of as far as economics are concerned. Because his only acceptance—that white guy's acceptance—was money. Money. Mo-ney.

CW: Right, right, right, right.

Odetta: And I don't mean to say that all of the thing is around that. But when anybody aspires to anything in this country, it is m-o-n-e-y, and/or power.

CW: Right! Or in fact, money is power.

Odetta: Mm-hmm.

CW: Some people say that money is freedom because it greatly limits the number of people who can tell you what to do, but I don't think so, because I think that after you get to be at the top—

Odetta: Oh, people don't have to tell you what to do when you get to a lot of money, because you're so busy protecting your bankroll. You understand through osmosis that you've got to join the crew and keep the others down.

CW: Yeah. Your audience has changed since back in the '50s, when you were at the small nightclubs where you sang folk songs. It's changed in age—

Odetta: Well, they're...yeah, age has changed. [Laughs.]

CW: And also the locations and kinds of places that you're playing now are different, besides....

Odetta: They've also changed. There are many places I performed before that aren't even open now.

CW: What changes has that meant in your material, and also inside your head, as far as communicating with the audience?

Odetta: No. I don't think so. I...I wish to bounce off of myself. An audience in the '50s, or the people I met in the '50s changed me, of course. I mean, I can walk outside of the house and see a tree, and that puts something else into me. So, certainly an audience and a place has got to put something into me, and the audience and the place now puts something into me. That's re-interpreted as it goes through me and comes out in the next song, I'd say.

CW: Yeah, but I was wondering about that...that...because there's a change in audience. Because the audience now, for instance in New York, is likely to be 15-year-olds from Queens instead of people, right, who are out of college, who are sort of into intelligencia, who are existentialists, who are coming to a nightclub to hear you. Or people who are political and want to hear what you have to sing. It's a different audience.

Odetta: But I've been performing for that particular audience for 20 years now. The rhetoric has changed, and fortunately there have been more levels and areas brought into the rhetoric. I have gone through a change just within myself. I think of myself when I was younger as very shy to the point of being backward. I have been finding within myself a kind of freer thing going on. And as that happens, it can't help but feed into the music. Now this record that you played from today is a record that is closer to where I am now, but it is nowhere near where I am at this point. It is not close to what I did 10 years ago because I am not close to what I was 10 years ago.

CW: That's something...a freedom that an artist is often not given. You're not given the chance to evolve if people think of you as being one type—

Odetta: That's right. That's very interesting, because when I went into this, we did the record first, and then I got the musicians. A beautiful bunch of musicians. They're gorgeous human beings.

CW: You introduced them as "the family."

Odetta: Yeah. Yeah, they're my family. The first time we played together was at the Main Point near Philadelphia, in Bryn Mawr. And that's a very nice, a very warm...a feeling of a family-run club.

CW: Yeah, I imagine it would be—

Odetta: You know, a coffee shop kind of thing. A beautiful place. So we went there and set things up and I'm staggered by all the equipment. I really am staggered.

CW: What a shame.

Odetta: I used to complain about one guitar, but I'd never complain again about one guitar. [Laughs.] So we set up and we started doing sound checks and rehearsing, and I thought, "Now, what is the program going to be?" And I remember being at Newport when Dylan brought the electric in, and he did a little of the old and a little of the new, and I heard the "boo"s. And then when Phil Ochs, with his gold lamé, opened at Carnegie Hall, and he did a little of the old and a little of the new. And there were things like, "When is Phil Ochs coming out?" All kinds of...and I thought, "How can you stand there with all this coming at you?" And he said, "Well, that's just the chance I had to take, that's all." Now, there was no...the record wasn't out. There was no pre-anything of what I was going to be doing, so people coming to hear us were looking for Odetta with her guitar; or Odetta with her guitar, another guitar, and a bass; or Odetta with a bass.

CW: Right.

Odetta: That's what they were looking for. Right. Okay. As we were standing up there and I was getting frantic-er and frantic-er, I finally decided, "I'll have to just jump into the pool. No little-of-the-old and little-of-the-new. Just new." And I went home...I went to the hotel, and I got myself together, got back. Before I left the hotel, I went over automatically to pick up the Baby—my guitar—and bring her. And I said, "Aww. No. Because if she's there, I'll do it."

CW: Yeah, right. Right.

Odetta: So I left her at the hotel, went to the Main Point, and we did the new. We haven't, from that point to this, heard one "boo." One... any negative. Now I know there are people in the audience who were disappointed because they want to hear what they've heard before, or something in the same vein. And I happen to feel that as an audience... we as an audience look towards performers as a "consistent". An absolute impossible thing in our lives, or in nature.

CW: Exactly.

Odetta: But look towards the performers as “consistents”, and we don’t want them to change in any kind of way, because they’ve deceived us. They’ve left us behind. They’ve, right?

CW: Right. That’s really true, that people put performers in prisons. And I think for many people it’s fenced them in, and also in a career. A performer has many fluctuations. And because you’re expected to stay in the same place, you’re not allowed to experiment, because if you experiment and it’s not a success then you don’t get engagements. But you said you liked [oratorio]. Handel. What is...my goodness. How many did he write? He wrote 12 flops. 12 flops! And they still kept giving him commissions. That wouldn’t happen today. You can’t write 12 flops.

Odetta: Right.

CW: So there isn’t any freedom to develop. That’s what happens to someone, say, like Jimi Hendrix when he was changing groups. He kept changing groups after the original Experience broke up. And then sound wouldn’t be right, and he got very, very depressed because there wasn’t anything to support him. You know, the sound wasn’t right, and the audience—he was not in the same relationship with the audience, and he was lost. I think somehow people...you know, the bull fighters say that it’s the crowd that gores. Sometimes I think the audience....

Odetta: Whoah-ho. Yeah..

CW: I like another song that you sang, the Paul McCartney song very much. And it’s a different vein.

Odetta: It’s a simple song, but it’s very much in the area of where I’m at so many times, you know—

CW: Yeah. Yeah, I thought it was. Yeah. I get it. Yeah. Right.

[Song begins. “Every Night” from Odetta Sings, 1970. Electric bass, guitar, and drums accompany Odetta.]

[Verse] Every night I just want to go out, get out of my head  
Every day I don’t want to get up, get out of my bed  
Every night I want to play out  
And every day I want to do

[Chorus] But tonight I just want to stay here  
And be with you

And be with you  
[Verse] Every day I lean on a lamp post, I'm wasting my time  
Every night I lay on a pillow, I'm resting my mind  
Every morning brings a new day  
Every night that day is through  
[Chorus] But tonight I just want to stay here  
And be with you  
And be with you  
Believe me, daddy

CW: I really do like that song very, very much, and you say, like, every night, sometimes you feel like going out of your head. We've all been there. [Both laugh.]

Odetta: Right. The...oh, yes, you started to say you were in India....

CW: Yeah, I was in India in 1965, and I saw someone who made a movie, he was an Indian millionaire...he made a movie there. He had your voice in the background, and you really are world famous. Yeah, there I was—

Odetta: No kidding!

CW: Yeah, right. And that's what he used for the background. It was a short film that he—

Odetta: [Slowly] wow. You know, there was a...we were invited to a celebration in Guyana—the independence. We sang around there for a while, and there was an Indian man who came up to me after one of the concerts. He looked at me and he said, “Do you know what you're doing?” And I said “very few times.” [Both laugh.] He said—it was a song I sang called “Black Woman”—and he said that it was correspondent to some of the Indian music in India.

CW: Really?

Odetta: It's from this country. It's like...a black woman is like a moan and a holler and a blues thing all put in together, you know?

CW: Yeah. Right, right. Oh, that would be great, because I was thinking the way the field hollers started, that everybody would have his own particular holler. That was your way of saying whatever you felt.

Odetta: Mm-hmm.

CW: I mean, that was your way of saying whatever you felt—

Odetta: You know, the idea of sea chanteys—that work song thing—came from Africa. Did you know that? I mean, there's so much we don't know, man, it's kept away from us.

CW: Uh-huh. Yeah. Definitely, there's a lot that's kept away from us. You have a voice, I mean a beautiful voice. You have a really wonderful instrument, and not many singers do because it's not required in order to be popular today. I was thinking that...Billie Holiday once said that as a singer, you were expected to get up and sing no matter whether you're sick, or what you like for breakfast, or whether you had a quarrel. With a singer, it's the most personal because your whole body is your instrument. What you are offering, really, is your breath, and breath used to mean, like, life, genius, spirit. I was wondering about that—how you feel about being a performer.

Odetta: You know, there's...singers are...people are expected to do whatever you do. You know, you can call into the office, maybe, sick, but I imagine there'd be very few times that you could call in being, because you have to...right? Well, there have been times I've gone on stage that I've been physically ill or I've been emotionally just torn up. And I've gone out and sung and by the end of the concert, I had to remember that I was sick because I really feel that music is a very healing agent. It is for me an extremely necessary area, especially as the world gets more clouded up with finding its specifics with problems that's going on in the world. I started...I recently discerned, or decided, that one...not only am I to sing this life around, and do whatever I can through singing and writing; but I must pass whatever of the techniques that I have on. So I've started giving lessons and coaching. It's a spastic thing because I'm out of town a lot of times. But anybody who can talk can sing, you know?

CW: Hmm. It's interesting, because I have been trying to explore, really, what is the line between speaking and singing, to me you see, black speech is the only musical speech in America, really and truly. From many singers, what happens is that they're just...they're sort of talking. It's a very thin line, like when the preacher gets going in a sermon, right?

Odetta: Absolutely. What it is, is the sustaining of tone. Because it's like, as I sit here and I talk to you about this, that, and the other thing, [sings] la da da da da, [speaks], it's closer to the singing as I sustain the tone from one word to another word.

CW: Oh! Oh, I'm learning something. That's great. That's pretty good.

Odetta: [Laughs]. It's like dancing is the extension of walking, and/or running.

CW: Yeah. Most people just can't see that and can't feel that. You can't relax—

Odetta: And that's because we haven't really been encouraged ever since we were here on the face of the earth. If...I really believe we need a magic wand. If we were, singing and dancing would not be the odd thing that it is, where it is exalted on one side and cuffed down on the other side for one thing, you know?

CW: Yes, yes. Oh, that's because of the old sort of, "anybody who's admired has got to pay for being different." So as it is now, if you're going to be a singer in a band, you're going to have to pay for being near the sun. I mean, people are going to pay you pay. They'll pull you down when you get to be a star. When you have students, how do you pick your students?

Odetta: Oh, I don't pick them. It's whoever wants the lessons. If I feel that the person isn't doing work on his own—because I can't learn for them, you know? I finally learned that from my teacher. My teacher couldn't learn it for me. So, if the student isn't doing work on his own, you know, then he's wasting his time or her time, and I'm wasting mine.

CW: Do you work through an institution, a music school, or do you—

Odetta: No. No. Just the people that I run into and who are interested ...I give them my number. They call me and we get together.

CW: That's nice. That's really nice. That jamming...that sort of, like, just getting together.

Odetta: [Seriously] No, honey. It's definitely standing by the

keyboard and doing vocalizing. It definitely is that, and they can sing somewhere else. [CW laughs.] Actually, I've worked with one on getting words out. There's a method of doing that without being over-pressured on the stage. And just as far as interpretation is concerned, because a lot of people think that if you sing a song, you just sing the notes. But there's something else there. The voice, the body, the person is the one that has that area of communication that goes beyond the dance, beyond the instrument. Or, you know, regular instruments. Where definite thought patterns are set.

CW: Besides, weren't instruments actually made to imitate the human voice?

Odetta: Absolutely.

CW: And now, when they praise a singer, they say she sound like—

Odetta: Sounds like, right. [Both laugh.]

CW: We've come around full circle. I hope you're going to be back in the New York area again soon.

Odetta: Well I live here.

CW: You do live here?

Odetta: I come home every once in a while.

CW: Yeah! Well, that's great. I've really enjoyed talking to you.

Odetta: It's been a pleasure, Celestine. Thank you.

[Song begins. "Give a Damn" from Odetta Sings, 1970. Electric bass, guitar, and drums accompany Odetta.]

[Verse] Or put your girl to sleep sometimes

With rats instead of nursery rhymes

With hunger and your other children by her side

And I wonder if you share your bed

With something else that must be fed

For fear may lie beside you

Or it may sleep down the hall

[Chorus] And it might begin to reach you

Why you'd give a damn about your fellow man

[Verse] Come and see how well despair  
Is seasoned by the stifling air  
See your ghetto in the good old sizzling summer time  
Suppose the streets were all on fire  
The flames like tempers leaping higher  
Suppose you lived there all your life  
Do you think that you could smile?  
[Chorus] And it might begin to reach you  
Why you'd give a damn about your fellow man  
And it might begin to teach you....  
[Song fades]

End of WBAI's Celestine Ware 1971 interview with Odetta

NOTES:

1. Odetta Gordon, born December 31, 1930. American folk-blues-jazz singer. Her seminal performances are available on Vanguard records.
2. Search the Pacifica Radio Archives catalog for audio recordings of [American] folk music. <http://www.pacificaradioarchives.org>

Copyright © 1971, Pacifica Radio. All rights reserved.

The Preservation & Access project is made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Recording Academy, supporters of the Pacifica Radio Archives and listeners to Pacifica Radio stations WBAI, WPFW, KPFA, KPFK, KPFT.



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS