Miils, Rex

Malik Austin

Rex Mills

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Rex Mills
Interviewer: Malik Austin
July 17th, 2011

MA: Hello, uh, hello, my name is Malik Austin and I’m here on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. It’s a beautiful Sunday morning, Sunday, July 17th, 2011. We are talking with my new friend, Mr. uh, Rex Mills. And uh, um, uh Rex, tell me a little bit about your Beaufort background.

RM: Uh, I’m uh Rex Mills, originally from Ohio, Dayton, Ohio. And uh, I’ve been just about me personally? (MA nods) Uh, uh, my mom was from South Carolina, my dad was from Alabama. And around the age of seven or eight I started coming down to South Carolina. Uh, but actually upstate South Carolina, in the county of Anderson County. But my mom always talked about the lowcountry here and how they ate and their different culture. The culture that they have here, the Gullah culture. And it’s been, ever since about seven or eight, the delight, how should I say that, overwhelming at times. To know the history of South Carolina, what it played in American History. And uh, not just that, worldwide history. So, I, in ’92 I came down to live permanently, and uh, it’s been a blessing.

MA: So now, I know we spoke yesterday, and so you were coming, you were coming from Dayton, Ohio?

RM: Absolutely, Dayton, Ohio. Born and raised there.

MA: OK, and so, I guess it was a, was it a big transition from Dayton to the lowcountry?

RM: Yes. Actually it was, even though I knew a lot about the culture but living here is quite different from visiting.

MA: Sure.

RM: Because when you come down to visit you see a lot of the uh, tourist sites and, you know, come down and party or do whatever. And go back home. But living here, you see how hard the people work here, and how uh, the island people are uh, unique individuals. You know what I’m saying? Uh, they can do everything. Multi, uh, talented. You know you’ve got farmers, you’ve got carpenters, you’ve got electricians. Automotive. Uh, fisherman, uh, mechanics. All type of things. And these people are very good at what they do. And very friendly and very helpful. That neighborly love? It’s definitely here. Definitely. I feel safe.

MA: So did you come, you said you came here permanently...?

RM: In ’92.
MA: Ok. So that’s been quite a while, so...

RM: Yeah, it’s uh 19 years.

MA: Ok. So you, do you um, feel, I’m sure by now do you feel part of the community?

RM: Absolutely, absolutely, because uh, through my mom, and coming down here and my sisters and my brothers, uh made a little pathway for me to come down. They set uh, uh, a platform for me. You know, made it easier. Because uh, one of my sisters, Marlena McGhee Smalls, she’s been in several films, she’s in the entertainment field. Uh, she’d done several movies, uh the most popular is uh, Forrest Gump.

MA: OK.

RM: She played Bubba’s mother.

MA: Oh, wow.

RM: And uh, the choir that was also in the movie is her choir, it’s called the Hallelujah Singers. And uh, they still travel all over the world. All over the world. Uh, she’s met presidents. Uh, three presidents. Bush, uh, Obama, and uh, what’s the, uh, what’s the...

MA: Clinton.

RM: Clinton. Yeah. You know, doing a lot of things. But, they made it easier for me because when I came down here, people knew of my family. And so the transition was, was was not that different.

MA: Now did you marry, are you married...?

RM: Yes, I married an islander here, uh, Jacqueline uh, Cody, and we’ve been together for sixteen years.

MA: Congratulations.

RM: Yeah.

MA: That’s, uh, that’s commendable.

RM: Yes. It’s hard work, hard work, and knowing her culture, and the culture of these people has sometimes been difficult. But uh, it’s been uh, I like it, a lesson, but I like it.

MA: And uh, do you ever see yourself leaving the island?
RM: Actually, no. Uh uh, something tremendous would have to, would have to happen. But uh, I like it here. You know, and I like the people. I like the people in the culture. Mm hmm.

[End clip 1]

[Begin clip 2]

MA: Alright. Hey Rex, I know you mentioned the idea of the Gullah culture, what was your idea of it before you got here and if you could share with us what you know of it now.

RM: Ok, uh, my sister Kitty Graham, who you will meet later on, her husband is from the islands, and um, when I first came down I noticed that everybody was cousins. And the reason for that was, because, to go into town you had to have a boat. Ok, some people had boats, some people didn't. And so therefore they intermingled with one another. And so for that it was a lot of somebody come out the front door, somebody come in the back door. And so literally, some people don't even know, they gotta ask who their parents are. Because you have cousins marrying cousins. And that's why on these islands, everybody is cousins. You never know who you're talking to, and who, who their family, if you're not living here. If you're not from here. You have to learn that. That was a... a mind-boggling thing.

MA: Bad-mouthing. You can't bad-mouth nobody.

RM: No, because you never know who you're talking to. Uh, but uh, the culture, well uh, you might know that these people here migrated, through the slave trade, through Senegal, West Africa. As you probably know. But the thing was, the reason why South Carolina made more money than any of the southern states, and if you can remember South Carolina was the first state to secede from the Union, because they were making oodles and oodles of money because the slaves from West, uh, from Senegal, they were fisherman, they were carpenters, and they were farmers. And so, it was like a hand in a glove. You know, so when they came here it was an extension of Africa. Ok, the rich soil. And so when the, they came through the slave trade, the uh, uh plantation owners, the slave owners, knew that they had something going on. And uh, from that they just kept migrating, from you know, from all down, you know, through the islands. But they was coming here. And as you can see, they built all this, all the nice homes and stuff, with tabby, and shells, and you'll see a lot of that. And they've been doing it for years. For years, man. It is a beautiful, beautiful thing. Beautiful.

MA: I know Randall was telling us about the, basically all this is a family.

RM: Family. Uh huh, in 19, uh, 1862, when uh, the Civil War kicked off, you know Abraham Lincoln, he was pissed off, to say the least, about South Carolina started
the war. So he made a decree that when they did a blockade, any property owner could not keep his property unless he had a male heir five years or younger.

MA: Wow. In other words, they lost everything.

RM: They lost everything. And people here, a lot of them got these forty acres and a mule, some of them didn’t, but they started buying their property. And so, and some of, and these people here were freed, almost a year, actually a year before the emancipation. You know, and all that. And they thought that they were going to die, kill themselves, but these people survived, and they survived real well. Like I told you, my mom uh, was born and raised and she went to school here. And the teachers was hands on. They were very strict, even here, they were very, very, very strict, because they wanted to learn. Wanted their kids to learn how to read and write and agriculture. These schoolteachers had it right. You know, and these people are self-sufficient. They are self– if you do, I can go, cause I live on Seaside, I can go up and down Seaside and get people to do everything, anything that you need, from automobile to carpentry to electricians, to planning, or design, architect, all kind of things. It’s a, it’s truly a mix. And I love it. And they’re very friendly, neighborly people. They see you on the side of the road, and it’ll be a line making sure you’re alright. You know, I’ve, a really feel safe coming from the city. Now, you know, we’ve got a criminal element, but I feel a lot safer, you know, I can walk down the street and somebody sees me, they’re gonna stop. And I love it. And it, oh (looks at camera). Ok.

MA: So, any last words or thoughts about what you think about the word community, and St. Helena, what would be maybe your last thoughts to us about that, if you can just think about those two ideas, community and St. Helena.

RM: Natural resources, God's country, beautiful people, and thank God that I'm here.

MA: And on that note, I thank you so much for meeting here yesterday, and coming back early, and helping us out, so I appreciate you, man. From one Buckeye to another.

RM: Oh, you know it (Laughs).

[End clip 2]