Swinging with the Sweethearts: A Conversation with Marilyn Nelson and Jerry Pinkney

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Marilyn Nelson and Jerry Pinkney, the Children's Literature Assembly Breakfast Speakers for NCTE 2009, are each well known for their rich creativity—Marilyn for her artistry in writing poetry and Jerry for artistry in illustration. Sweethearts of

Rhythm, The Story of the Greatest All Girl Swing Band in the World (Nelson, 2009), recently published by Dial Books, finds these two outstanding artists collaborating in unique and exciting ways as they tell the story of an all female American Swing Band that originated at Piney Woods Country Life School in Mississippi. Focused on the band's performances around the nation from 1935 to 1945, Sweethearts of Rhythm offers the reader many levels of understanding about this era. My response to this book was a mixture of delight with the verbal and visual images, somber attention to the contemporary message of war's effects on a nation and the resiliency that moves it forward, reminders of the contagiousness and powerful effects of music, and insights into the lack of equality for women and ethnic groups, not to mention the pure enjoyment of learning about this particular group of performers. A poetic picture book for all ages, Sweethearts of Rhythm positions readers at a place in history where other texts have left a gap and provides poetry and art that support an exploration into topics that help to fill this gap in understanding our country's history. At the intersection of Marilyn Nelson's poetry, Jerry Pinkney's art, and the music of the Sweethearts of Rhythm, readers are reminded, as they live through this story, of the integral role of the arts in life, culture and history.

The following interviews each begin with insights regarding the individual work of Marilyn Nelson and Jerry Pinkney, the two speakers for the 2009 Children's Literature Assembly Breakfast, and lead into their per-

Marilyn Nelson has received a Newbery Honor, a Coretta Scott King Honor, and a National Book Award.

A former Connecticut State Poet Laureate, her mastery of words and craftsmanship of language draw readers into historical moments and cultural contexts.





Jerry Pinkney's book illustrations, awarded numerous Caldecott Honor Medals and Coretta Scott King Awards, have entertained and informed readers for years. In addition, his art may be seen in museums throughout the country.

ceptions of creating *Sweethearts of Rhythm*. Individual interviews maintain the voice and perspectives of each artist, although both interviews reflect their collaboration.

MARILYN NELSON

Marilyn Nelson, recently retired as a professor from the University of Connecticut and a previous Connecticut State Poet Laureate, is an award-winning poet for readers of all ages. Her numerous published works include *Carter: A Life in Poems* (2001), *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005), and *Fortune's Bones* (2005). She has mentored many young poets through Soul Mountain Retreat and through her work at writing events and conferences across the nation.

Mathis: As a poet whose style and mastery of language is unique, is there a particular form of poetry that you enjoy most?

Nelson: There is not a specific form. I've written a lot of sonnets because they are such a neat little form. Although I've probably written more sonnets than any other form, I'm not interested in staying with one form.

Mathis: In reading about you, I was impressed that since you were a young child, you knew you wanted to be a poet and that is what you told yourself you were. I think this is such a strong message for young people today—both from the perspective of individual agency to do and be what one desires as well as the notion of writing as a natural way of expression that comes from the heart. Do you have any further thoughts for nurturing the writer in our students?

Nelson: I do feel that everyone is born with the desire for self-expression and the desire to be a writer is related to that. However, not everyone is willing to do the work that comes with it, which is to learn the "craft." That means studying as many literary traditions as possible. I wouldn't want to give students the idea that writing is something that comes naturally; it isn't. The desire to write comes naturally, and I would encourage every writer who wants to take that desire seriously to sit down and learn the art. You have to learn the craft. It is like the painter needing to understand perspective, color, how to create the sensation of light on water, among the many other aspects of that craft. That is where the teacher comes in. The teacher can encourage the student's passion. If you are interested in writing poetry, for instance, a teacher might introduce you to books about writing or a biography about a writer—in addition to giving you examples of the craft of poetry. Good teaching is essential to the nourishing of our future, our future literature, and our children's futures.

Mathis: Have you taught poetry writing at the university level?

Nelson: I had a long academic career at the University of Connecticut, teaching writing workshops and literature courses.

Mathis: I have read quite a bit about your establishing a retreat for poets—Soul Mountain. Can you share a bit about this experience?

Nelson: I started Soul Mountain Retreat in 2004 as a way of encouraging and nurturing young poets, especially those who belong to underrepresented ethnic groups. It has been very rewarding for these five years. I have hosted 75 or 80 fledgling poets at Soul Mountain and have watched them grow as artists. It has been wonderful to see how successful they have become; many of them are now getting books published and winning awards. Several have acknowledged Soul Mountain in their books, which makes me feel great!

Mathis: It is powerful to think you have had that impact within a limited amount of time and that the "fruit" of Soul Mountain is taking on a life of its own.

Nelson: I am really happy about it and I feel I can see a ripple effect. I am very thankful to have this opportunity to reach out in this way as a mentor. I've been encouraging the Soul Mountaineers to consider the possibility of writing for a young adult audience. One individual has produced a book already and others are starting to have ideas in that direction. I'm hoping that this will produce a new strand of multicultural young adult poetry.

Mathis: Your passion in this area of mentoring new poets and encouraging young adult writing is a significant part of understanding your passions and purposes as a writer. In a previously published interview you stated that you believe in not writing down to children and in maintaining the dignity of the language and the context of the poetry, so your focus on young adults easily encompasses these beliefs as well.

Nelson: What I am trying to do by claiming the young adult designation for poetry is to identify my poetry as having been written for a wide audience of people: people who may not read poetry all the time, but who actually love poetry when they do read it. I don't think of myself as writing for an age group, I think of myself as writing for readers like me or readers like my parents or siblings, or readers like most of my friends who are not necessarily committed readers

of poetry, although they like it—people who seldom read contemporary poetry because they find it frustrating that they don't "get" it.

Mathis: As I think about the story and information a reader will find in *Sweethearts of Rhythm*, I wonder if this began with a personal interest?

Nelson: No, it was suggested by my publisher.

Mathis: How did you begin the research for this book?

Nelson: I went to the library!

Mathis: Was this a type of music or era that you had been drawn to in the past?

Nelson: I grew up in the 1950s, after the era of Swing music. There were still swing bands on television variety shows, but that was the music of my mother's generation. She liked it and would dance around the house to its rhythm, but I had never really thought about it beyond that. In order to write about it I had to listen to it. I had to learn the history of swing music. I had to learn about the instruments, and the configuration of the swing band. I also had to learn the personal story of this band and the context of American and world history during the World War II era. Writing this book was a complex challenge.

Mathis: Did you know that Jerry Pinkney would be the illustrator?

Nelson: Yes, that's why I agreed to do it. I feel so incredibly lucky that we finally were able to collaborate. Jerry and I had met briefly several times at conferences and each time we met, we agreed that it would be nice to do a project together. It became sort of the catch phrase, "Yes, I really would like to do a project; let's not forget that!" When this project came to me, Jerry had already signed the contract to illustrate it. I would have written it, whatever it was, in order to collaborate with him.

Mathis: Did you have the text completed when he first read the poetry? How did he react to your perception of the story?

Nelson: Yes, he received the completed collection of poems. I know Jerry was surprised that so few of my poems were set at the school and that the speakers are the instruments, not humans. There is a subplot in the book. It takes place at midnight in the back room of a pawn shop in New Orleans the night before Hurricane Katrina hit. The instruments wake up and start talking about their history, and they discover they

were all played in the same band. That, I know, was not easy to visually conceptualize.

Mathis: What did you think when you first saw the illustrations? Did you have any specific thoughts as to how Jerry had decided to create the visual aspects of your work?

Nelson: I think they are spectacular. I feel very fortunate that this collaboration happened. It is a tremendous gift to me to see what he pulled out of my words. I'm very impressed by his work.

Mathis: When I first read *Sweethearts of Rhythm*, I was struck by the many levels of understanding and points of connection within each line of each poem. Have you had any visions as to how you might imagine a teacher using this in a classroom — how might it be shared with young people to nurture these connections?

Nelson: I just write the poems. I hope they are teachable. The history is as accurate as I could make it, so it should be possible for a teacher to teach something about history. And the musicianship is accurate, so it should be possible for a teacher to teach something about music as well. But, I don't think about teachability as I write.

Mathis: Can you share more about your process in giving the instruments voice to share the story?

Nelson: Well, every musical instrument does have its own character. In this book, the instruments discuss what music is, what it means, what it meant during that period. The task for me was to transform those things into poems. The most challenging aspect was working with swinging, bouncy rhythms of these poems.

Mathis: I wondered if you discovered a favorite member of the Sweethearts as you researched and wrote?

Nelson: There is not too much information in print about the individual band members. The one whose personality came through most, however, in the research that I did was the trumpet player, Tiny Davis. Because she was apparently very, very good, Louis Armstrong tried to convince her to leave the Sweethearts and join his band. Louis Armstrong! That is really high praise! She was a very colorful character; she was openly a lesbian. That must not have been easy. I decided not to write about that fact because I didn't want to complicate the story by talking about individual sexuality, but Tiny was definitely the most colorful character.

Mathis: I love the way you wrote about Tiny: "Her pristine technique wove a shimmering of sound that was shot through with joy, on the day Armistice was declared." Throughout the book your command of words and phrases parallel that of music. Were there any of the instruments that really gave you pleasure in creating their poems?

Nelson: Early on, the band included a bagpipe and an accordion, which I thought was amusing. I assume they were not playing swing music at that time. I enjoyed having those two instruments say they were



left behind by accident. And in the swing band the trombones always play together; there is never a trombone solo. So I enjoyed having the trombones always speak together. And I particu-

larly liked writing the poem in which the bass tells of longing to have the girl's arms around it again.

Mathis: That is the sense you get when you watch someone playing the bass—the embracing. Did you have a specific reason for having the setting in New Orleans?

Nelson: I don't think it was the initial idea, which was just that they were in a pawn shop. As I continued, I decided to make the pawn shop be somewhere. At first it was in New York and then it occurred to me that there is a whole new layer of meaning if I put it in New Orleans.

Mathis: I think that setting will resonate with many people. Are there any other specific insights you would like to share here about the creation of *Sweethearts of Rhythm*?

Nelson: One last thing is about the piano. This was somewhat of a stretch: first of all, would there actually be a piano in a pawn shop? And what kind of a voice would a piano have? All I could think of was that, since the piano is played by both the right hand and the left hand, it might have two different voices. My piano piece consists of quotes from two important works of the time. One of them is T.S. Elliot's "The Wasteland," and the other is the United Nations' *A Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. I was really struck by how much those two texts resonated with each other. Elliot's poem is about the sense of hopelessness after the war and

the United Nations' statement on human rights puts in writing specifically what is meant by the concept of human rights. That poem would be probably the most difficult one for teachers to teach but I think it may be the most important one and the one most relevant to today.

Mathis: Since there is much more to discover about *Sweethearts of Rhythm* and its author, I would encourage readers to explore the lines and between the lines of this exceptional book.

JERRY PINKNEY

Jerry Pinkney has been illustrating children's books since 1964 and is well known for his realistic and sensitive cultural images as well as his visual retellings of folktales. His many award-winning titles include: *The Old African* (Lester, 2005), *Moon over Star* (Aston, 2008), and as his newest book *The Lion & the Mouse* (Pinkney, 2009). His website, www.JerryPinkneystudio.com, describes his numerous commissioned works and independent exhibits, provides an extensive list of his books, and gives a peek into his new studio.

Mathis: In reading your website, I noted your comment that whatever is in progress is your favorite work, but is there any one that really stands out in your memory for its topic, process, or other personal reasons?

Pinkney: There is one book, *John Henry* (1994) by Julius Lester. There are lots of reasons. One is my growing up years filled with books and stories, but few had a tall tale hero of color. As a kid going to movies where adventure, tall tales, especially westerns were important, that kind of narrative literature was of great interest but there were very few stories about Black people, and I didn't know about High John (the Conquerer) at that time. So it was a story that lived within me for all my life in many ways because it was a powerful story of a person of African descent. Another reason that this story is important is the fact that it was the first book for which I initiated the process. Up until that time, the publisher would acquire a text and if they thought that I was the appropriate artist, they would follow suit and ask if I was interested. That's how it worked and it was working fairly well for me. But during one visit to my agent, we were having a casual conversation and he asked if there was a project I felt I must illustrate. Within a heartbeat I said, "The legend of John Henry."

It was originally to be my first retelling, but after thinking about it and a couple of tries and looking at text in public domain, I felt I was a little over my head. Actually, I felt a little intimidated after working with Julius Lester on Uncle Remus Tales and with Bob San Souci on a number of projects. So I mentioned I thought it would be a good idea if we could entice Julius Lester to write it. In the beginning, Julius was lukewarm to the idea. It wasn't a story that he felt at that time that he had to do. During a telephone conversation he asked what about that particular tale excited me. After sharing just why the folktale was so compelling, he responded, "Oh I get it." It was the first book in my career where the story concept actually came from me and in some ways was guided by the way the story affected me as a young person. I still love to read Julius's version aloud and it still moves me in the same way, as well as being whimsical, funny, and poignant at times.

Mathis: Do you know the roots of your interest in folk literature?

Pinkney: My grandparents and parents migrated from the South and they brought with them the Southern way of doing things. We had books at home but most often I remember stories being told. Stories were in the air; it was a natural way of expressing yourself and often times there were adults telling other adults animated stories. So I grew up on *Aesop's Fables* and *Uncle Remus Tales*. My sister often tells me, and I don't remember this but I know it is true, that my mother, who loved to read, often read to us the classics of Hans Christian Andersen, like "The Ugly Duckling." I later adapted it out of the sheer excitement of knowing about my mother and my childhood.

Mathis: I was impressed by your various commissioned works mentioned on your website. Do any of these stand out in your mind as especially significant or memorable?

Pinkney: I was commissioned by the National Parks Service to do two large paintings for the Booker T. Washington National Monument in Rocky Mount, Virginia. One of the things interesting about the National Parks is that they like you to visit the site you are interpreting. I met with staff members, one on wardrobe and architecture and another who was writing the text for the project. We met there with a park ranger and it was amazing to me that in addition to being the ones who take care of and manage the parks, the rangers are

often times historians. That visit was very powerful because [at the same time] I have this project to complete, Minty, A Story of Young Harriet Tubman, and now I have on hand in terms of research, the National Parks Service, directors of costume and architecture, and a park ranger who is very much dedicated to preserving Black history and the Booker T. Washington National Monument project itself. NPS realized that a lot of what they had done in the past in representing that time period was inauthentic so they were going back and rethinking all that. My job was to give a sense of what slave life was like during that time by reconstructing visually some of the buildings and the tasks of the enslaved. Another piece of that visit that was so powerful was visiting an African burial plot that is not on the printed tourist trail and that you would only visit if you knew it was there or happened upon it. I remember being emotionally moved by seeing these head and foot markers with just a single name carved in them. These were stones that were shaped in a certain manner that had a feeling of a tombstone. I remember asking to be left alone in the burial plot for a while. Today, I can always go back in my mind's eye to that experience and the awakening of a strong interest in African American culture and life, especially the time period of slavery.

Mathis: That is a story within itself.

Pinkney: Exactly, and it cemented the idea that I had a role to play interpreting that time and the people who struggled and carried the heavy burden of slavery, while contributing to this country's wealth.

Mathis: Your various projects overlap in the dates of your work on seven illustrations for the African Burial Ground Interpretive Center in New York, *The Lion & the Mouse* and *Sweethearts of Rhythm*. I was wondering how you work when you have more than one project ongoing?

Pinkney: Usually, I am juggling two or more projects at one time. It is not always the desired way to work—sometimes it just happens that way. In the beginning stages, where perhaps I'm starting to think about a project and to enter into that space, it is nice to be able to move back and forth from one project to another because one often stimulates the other. It just makes it much bigger. When I am working on the finished drawing and then the paintings, I would prefer to work on just one project. During the time when I was working on *Sweethearts of Rhythm*, I had delivered the

art work for *The Lion & the Mouse*, but it would come back for different reasons and often times I would have to stop and work on it.

I think with African Burial Ground, Interpretive Center, it was sandwiched between the dummies for Sweethearts and the actual finished product. And interesting enough, there was a point when I was working on the African Burial Ground pieces and I was also finishing up The Lion & the Mouse that one almost became a respite for the other. It was the first time, because I'm in a new studio with great space, that I had two projects actually physically out on two work tables and I would move from one to the other. They were both very demanding, but I would move from African Burial Ground to The Lion & the Mouse which was much more whimsical and required more lush paintings. You can only do that for so long, so then I would just move back to the other. They would energize each other and provide a fresh eye upon returning to one or the other. Then back to work on Sweethearts.

Mathis: How long did *Sweethearts of Rhythm* take to complete?

Pinkney: There were close to five months where I was actually involved with the process of creating the images—where I had on hand the research, there was a dummy book, and there was enough information for me to sit down and start working. Of course there was a lot of work before then. For the first time, in terms of the amount of support or help I needed, I had an assistant working for me who was helping with the research. One of the challenges of this particular project was that even though it dealt with a 10-year time period, all the individual images often times required a different set of references. There was no bringing models into the studio and wardrobing them and then beginning to think about composition, etc. This process of working so closely with someone was very different for me.

Mathis: The world around you and the notion of legacy are very important to you. How has your sense of community been influenced by your research or fed into the creation of *Sweethearts of Rhythm*?

Pinkney: I was very young at the time of the Sweethearts. I was born in '39 and their era was 1935-1945, during those very traumatic times of Jim Crow and World War II. I was too young to really know and experience what my parents were going through in that time period as well as the excitement of the completion

of the war. Because I was delving into the topic like a researcher in many ways, what I did get caught up in during the process was how little documentation of African-American life I found. It was almost as if there were no African Americans unless you dealt with Jim Crow. So the task for me was to find ways to speak and talk about that time period through the eyes of what African Americans felt. I was amazed and delighted to find a piece that referenced an African American man in a Victory Garden. Up until that point in time, Victory Gardens were always something white folks participated in. So if we talk about community and my interest in community, the Sweethearts needed to speak about the African Americans participating in this time period. In so many ways, it was interesting that this wall of Jim Crow was separating two groups of people who were going through the same thing—hardship. I wanted to firmly place the African American experience in that time period. For example, in the *Time-Life* publications on American history, you can go on and on during those decades of this era and not find African Americans. You might find them on occasion in a section that dealt with rural life. My father was affected by the Great Depression but you don't see that in the historical literature, so it was important to me to share the excitement of finding the role of African Americans in that time period. There are a lot of different ways to talk about community. One of the things that I want to share with those who read these poems of Marilyn's is a sense of the completeness of this country at that time. I want to speak to the shared trials and the joys of those times and express my excitement of the discovery of this larger community.

Mathis: When reading *Sweethearts of Rhythm*, the dancing, the music, the resiliency, it makes you want to be part of these people although it was a war time and a difficult time.

Pinkney: The democracy of the time was in the music. At a time of great struggle, and a great burden on the shoulders, everybody went out and danced. They were dancing to Swing music. There were whites dancing in clubs in the north and blacks dancing in the south—all dancing at the same time and all dancing well.

Mathis: When I talked with Marilyn, she said they could have asked her to write anything and if it were with you, she would have said yes. You mentioned in your Artist's Note at the back of the book your enthusi-

asm about working with her. Can you share more about the mutual admiration between the two of you?

Pinkney: I knew Marilyn in the beginning through her work. I remember reading Carver: A Life in Poems for the first time and thinking that this is coming from a different place. On the subject matter of Carver, I knew all about him, but the way Marilyn presented Carver was almost like I was learning and understanding Carver for the first time—in kind of a joyful way too because of how her poems are created. Then reading A Wreath for Emmet Till, I knew then that she is a poet coming from a place that excited me. The other piece is that I'm just finishing up my term on the National Council for the Arts. We did an NEA project called Operation Homecoming, a writers' initiative to encourage returning U.S. troops to write about their wartime experience. Marilyn was not only participating by directing in workshops but was also important in the initial planning stages.

Mathis: You said your work was text inspired. What stood out when you first read the text of *Sweethearts of Rhythm?*

Pinkney: The first thing (and I talk about this in my Artist's Note) that was interesting was the subject-The Sweethearts of Rhythm. The editor at Dial Penguin suggested that it might be a great topic to collaborate on with Marilyn Nelson. I had known about the Piney Woods Life School from a few years earlier and I thought, "Wow, this was kind of interesting!" We agreed to collaborate, and I had no idea at that time how Marilyn was going to tell the story until I received the poems. What I was first struck by was her taking the voice of the instruments to tell the story. It is not unusual for Marilyn to find her own way of telling the story—a way that is not an obvious one. So was I surprised? A bit. In many, many ways I had to rethink what shape I thought the story would take, and that was based on what I knew of the school and not of the Sweethearts. So on my first read of the poetry, what struck me was the approach that she took. I think that was good because I was responding like the reader for the first time, but I was responding without images in place. What I noticed was how compact the poems were in terms of lines and word count, but at the same time Marilyn was able to weave into lines the bigness of that time period and all of the different layers and dimensions that were going on. I thought that was pretty powerful as it was not straightforward narrative but did take you through that time and through the lives and journey of the Sweethearts.

I talk in the Artist's Note about how I saw it first as a straightforward narrative beginning at Piney Woods that then followed the girls as they became an international swing band. I originally started the beginning sketches in that way, treating it almost as a regular narrative. After reading the poems, my approach began to change. The richness and power of reading poetry is about the first read, the second read, the third read, and every time one reads it being able in a way to call forth a new image. So my work started changing and reshaping, in very much the same manner as a reader reading a poem, but my role was interpreting it and coming up with the images. The power of this was that Marilyn's poems were driving me to go places that I have not really been before. Now part of my personality needs that drive. I need to feel that the effort and the work in making these images is adding to something and challenging me to rethink what comes out at the surface initially for visual interpretation. I was excited about the topic. I was excited about the way Marilyn decided to use her poems and the manner in which she would tell the story. I was energized and motivated about the way her text forced and guided me into a space where I would come up with an image I didn't know was there, within me, which is different from a straight narrative because things are in place. So, I was challenged by her work to reach the height of information that is in her poems and to reach that level of energy that is there.

Mathis: When you think about the target audience of this book being young adult but that it also will be read by many ages of readers, is there anything particular that you hope readers will take from reading *Sweethearts of Rhythm*?

Pinkney: I'm in and out of schools all the time and one of the things I often have to rethink is my presentation as far as putting it in a context that students will understand, and I find that is getting harder to do. It is getting harder to talk about things that happened in the past, and it doesn't have to be that far back. I try to connect it to what decisions and lives the children are living today—to speak about a time in such a way that students are interested in the topic and how it affects them. I think that is the thing that often times is lost to young people, especially in areas like music.

Children should know about swing music and what swing music meant at the time. They should also know about the creativity that was part of that time and how people expressed themselves in terms of dance, body movement. It is important to me that they understand the relevance and that they don't see their lives as this little isolated capsule. I think this desire to share this insight with young readers feeds my excitement. When I was growing up, I couldn't see where history would play a role in my adult life, and it was much later in my adult life that I began to see how history enriches one's world. It is fascinating how we've been able to overcome challenging situations of the past as well as maintain our joys, especially the lineage of music.

One thing we haven't talked about is the role music played in my working process. I am a jazz lover, and usually there is jazz in some form being played in my studio. It was one thing that heightened the interest and energy in this project—this passion and love of music, especially jazz and the interpretation of that music. For years now I have always been interested in publications that deal with visualizing sound, especially jazz. There are a number of artists who have done such an amazing job, such as Romare Bearden, in dealing with this energy and color that we find in jazz, especially swing. That was in a way another piece to this project that had so many layers. How do I interpret the kind of color that we find in music? And I remember when I was working on this project I happened to be in Columbia, South Carolina. We went to a jazz club after presentations and workshops. I was sitting very close to musicians who were playing jazz and their body language was almost on the cool side of being calm, yet the music had this rich depth of excitement and energy to it. All these things were part of the decision-making when I decided to use collage for the first time. I wanted to visualize music in a way the reader would recognize the sound and the magic of the music as well as share the rich layers I experienced. I knew color would be a way to do it, but I also realized that collage of brilliant and textured colored papers, pieces of torn photocopied music sheets, notes, and eventually pieces of maps and flowers was an exciting way to create these images. I didn't want the layers to appear too literal so that is why you find the torn paper. In a way, that is the

force behind this project. We started with swing—we started with music—and dealt with that time period and then the success and the journey and the hopefulness of these young people. In some ways the book is inspiring because of these young girls. You think of the fact that they entered these life schools to learn a trade to help them navigate their lives in a respectful way. These students didn't go to music school. They weren't there to learn music. While there was probably good instruction, they had the talent and aptitude to pick up instruments and to master them. They had the courage then to find their way into this bigger space of music at the time and compete.

There is another piece here that attracted me and that is the style of the time. I'm always interested in body language. You can find different body languages at different periods, such as the way people carry themselves and the way people sit. The wardrobe and hairstyle of that time are fascinating. What I try to do with my work, and this is especially true of the Sweethearts, is to talk about how these young women carried themselves, how they thought about themselves, and in terms of being African American, how they felt about themselves. These women saw themselves as beautiful and carried themselves in that way. So that is also what I was trying to show in this particular book.

Mathis: Thank you for your thought-provoking comments as well as your dedicated focus to the creation of *Sweethearts of Rhythm* and its potential in the hands of all readers.

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