

# WYF\_Ep89\_BestOf\_RuthNaomiFloyd

**Rasool Berry:** [00:00:00] Hey y'all, it's Rasool Berry. Thanks for joining me on this special *Best of Where Ya From?* episode. We went back and selected some of our favorite conversations to share with you so that no matter when you started listening to *Where Ya From?*, you could check them out. Today, I wanted to share our episode with jazz musician, Ruth Naomi Floyd from Season One.

Ruth is one of my favorite people. She's an internationally known musician, composer, teacher, and she played the flute at my wedding. But she's also a diehard Philly sports fan who can seamlessly switch between talking music history, the NFL, or any other sport. It was such an honor to have her on the show and hear her inspiring story of struggle and pain that birthed her amazing musical talent, and robust theological concern for loving our neighbors.

Since we recorded, she's released new music that you can find on streaming services, and we encourage you to check it out. So thanks for listening and enjoy this *Best of Where Ya From?* with [00:01:00] Ruth Naomi Floyd.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Well you know, the reality is I'm an African American woman living in America who loves Jesus unapologetically. And so, what it means of me navigating this world, this country, my community, I've not known life without the blues. But I would say that, you know, you have to look to history. You have to look, where were the blues created?

And so, you know, emancipation, freedom promised but freedom not fully delivered. And so, you know, the music changed of the African prisoners of the brutal system of American slavery. Their music changed. The African American spirits were about, you know, liberation, about singing the song about life, but it was about looking forward. Emancipation on earth as it is in heaven.[00:02:00]

**Daniel Ryan Day:** This is *Where Ya From?*, a podcast for those who believe it's important to stop and listen before we speak. Join us as we ask another Christian thought leader where you're from and discover how their life experiences and expertise, even if we may disagree with something they say, offer us an important perspective that's worth thinking about.

**Rasool Berry:** Welcome to *Where Ya From?*. I'm Rasool Berry. The city of Philadelphia has always been a place for me to call home. For the food, music, and sports, there's no place like Philly. But it's also been the scene for some dark events over the years. Like the scourge of gang violence that plagued the city in

the 70s and the HIV/AIDS epidemic that claimed the lives of thousands in the 80s and 90s.

Out of those horrors emerged stronger, more resilient people with a deep love and commitment for the city and their neighbors. Today, we're talking to one of those people who saw gang violence commonly as a little girl. Her [00:03:00] experience caring for the wounded and alienated let her to then treat and care for HIV and AIDS patients firsthand.

Now, Ms. Ruth Naomi Floyd has been combining her concern for the marginalized and her world-renowned musicianship to create jazz that expresses theology and justice, and has been doing it for over 25 years. Miss Floyd has traveled all over the world to perform while also being a committed music educator.

She remains in Philly where she continues her work to advocate for the unheard using her powerful mezzo soprano voice. Join me as I ask Ruth Naomi Floyd where you're from.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** I am from Philly.

**Rasool Berry:** Ayyy. One of the things that people probably wouldn't necessarily expect out of an internationally renowned, classically trained jazz composer and justice worker is that you're passionate about sports. Do you think that that's part of your Philly identity or heritage?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Yes. I think [00:04:00] two things. My father and mother had three girls, and my dad definitely wanted a boy. I remember being a little girl listening to the Ali vs. Frazier fight, and I remember my sisters crying because, you know, you had, um, the famous announcer.

**Rasool Berry:** Howard Cosell?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Yeah, saying, "And a hit to the head, blood is gushing out," you know? So, it's much more dramatic on the radio, but they started crying because it was pretty violent. And so my mother said, "Melvin, please listen to upstairs. The girls are getting upset." And so I snuck upstairs and sat outside his door and he heard me and he came and said go downstairs. And I gave him this look like, please. And he goes, you like this? I said, and we came in and from then on, probably between 10 and 20 years ago, we watched boxing together. I bring his favorite meal, just be me and him, and watching boxing.

So, my love of sports comes from Philly cause we're gritty. We don't give up. We endure. We're all about community. It's a way [00:05:00] of uniting a diverse city filled historically with so many tensions economically, racially, spiritually. All over the board it's a way of uniting. So, I love sports. I love all kinds of sports. I listen to golf on the radio. I'm really a sports avid.

But at the heart of it, at the root of it, it's a way to escape, right? It's a way to just kind of take my mind off of the tensions of the day or whatever's going on and just kind of go into another reality. And it's a way to get your aggression out. It's a way to get the tears out. It's the way to get joy out. And so I love it.

**Rasool Berry:** That's great. So, tell us more about your family and your context of where you grew up and where were you in the birth order? What were your parents like? Tell us those things.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Sure. I know that it's amazing that God allowed me to be the middle daughter. I am so grateful, probably in a different ways that most middle kids feel just because it's true. I was kind of forgotten and ignored, but it allowed [00:06:00] me time to create. And I was so grateful for that.

I know without a shadow of a doubt, if I was first born or last born, I would not be the artist I am today. Because I was just able to steal away and created my room, and I'm so grateful. So, I'm the middle daughter of urban missionaries, Urban Melvin Floyd and his wife Elizabeth, now with the Lord, both of them.

They were doing urban missions before it was in vogue. Before it was track in seminaries. In fact, they were ridiculed for it and ostracized for it. Just go to Africa. Why are you trying to help people in the streets? My dad was a policeman. One of the few African American policemen in Philadelphia under the reign of Rizzo.

But my dad felt the tension. He realized after 14 and a half years, he could not reach the youths. The badge was in the way. So he, as he said, put down his badge for his Bible. And my mom one day just said to him, for all the work you're [00:07:00] doing, what are you doing here in the community? And my dad instinctively knew that he could not drive into a neighborhood and work with the youth and drive out that night.

So he packed up his wife and three girls. We moved to one of the toughest, roughest neighborhoods. I was between the ages of four and six. And we moved in and we saw a lot of violence. But it's still to date as one of the safest places I've ever lived because there was community. So my job was to help my mom hose down the blood so that the mothers wouldn't come out and see where their

sons body laid, and where the blood was. Again, I just asked my mom if I could do it. And she felt uncomfortable with me being so young, but I felt like even young, this was a way to give back. And I, I remember. . .

**Rasool Berry:** Okay. Hold on. Hold on. You said hose down the blood after what happened?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** After the gang bangers were killed. And so, you know, it was back in the seventies. So, they would have the chalk outline, and then you would see the blood. They would pick up the body and the blood would [00:08:00] be there. So, my mom didn't want the mothers to come around and see where their sons were shot and to see the blood. So, we would get up at night or whatever time and wash it down.

I wasn't scarred by it. Even as a young age, I heard my parents talking, my mom saying, "Melvin, we're going to go and hose away that blood. Mothers don't need to see that blood." And I remember that image of a mother coming out and seeing the body gone, but the blood remaining. And I wanted to be a part of that to ease that pain. And I see where God instilled that in me. It was not me. God instilled that for the later work I would do with death and dying.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. So, you know, it sounds like you're saying at a pretty young age, you were thrust into an environment where you saw your parents really caring for their neighborhood and community and really trying to be a part of the healing process. So much there that we're going to unpack.

But before that, I don't want to skip past that formative experience you had of your parents [00:09:00] as urban missionaries, and particularly the scourge that was tragic deaths of young people, black and Brown people in the seventies and the gang violence.

And I remember my earliest memory of your father growing up also in Germantown. I was out on the sidewalk playing. And then I saw this van driving by slowly with this little coffin on top. And it had a speakers and it was like, this is how you'll end up if you get involved with gangs. And it scared me to death. And I think it worked. Cause I was like, I'm not doing that. So, tell us about, for those who don't know, Reverend Melvin Floyd and the legacy that he left in the city of Philadelphia, and maybe, you know, how we even think about urban missions, just kind of break that down. Cause this is a story that needs to be heard.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Yes. Thank you so much for asking about my dad. He passed away in April, and it's been a beautiful grief. It's been beautiful, but a

grief nonetheless. So yeah, he saw the kids [00:10:00] dying between late 1960s and early seventies. Each week, young, black African American boys between the ages of 13 and 21, 5 to 7 were dying each week from gang warfare.

And so, like my mother said, what are you going to do? My dad had just won cop of the year. Policeman of the year. And, you know, he could do whatever he wanted now. He could go as high as he wanted. And she said the next morning, "Mr. Top Policeman. What are you going to do about this?" And so, like I said, he believed that being in community while doing urban work is really crucial.

So, we lived and breathed and dealt with the issues that the community dealt with. He was really about saving souls while still on earth. He really considered the spiritual, obviously, but then also the physical of the community of the young black brothers and sisters. There were young girls caught up that held the guns, the zip guns, and were killed for [00:11:00] that.

And they were young. They really were young. When I look back, they were 13, 14. But he also was active in their liberation, right? Because he's fighting against the system. But he also understood that he had to actually help those get away. So, he would give and buy bus tickets for young boys. So, he would send young boys on buses down to the South. Down to other places to get away so that they didn't feel that pressure of becoming gangbangers. So yeah.

**Rasool Berry:** Just to put a little pin on that, because that's an aspect of the culture that people don't always realize. If you're not around in that environment, you just think, why are a lot of people making bad choices and deciding to be a part of a violent group? But there were expectations that even for your own safety, that either I join this gang or I am in danger. In those scenarios, just like your dad is saying in some situations, the best possible solution is for you to just go someplace else.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Yeah. So that's what he did. He started battling drugs and he [00:12:00] continued to do that. And then later he continued, I should say, dealing with family counseling and then mentoring. It was a great joy of his to mentor the great preachers of Philadelphia. He would say to my younger sister and I, do you know any young African American preachers that are just graduated from seminary and need to get used to preaching?

Cause he thought it was unfair. You go through seminary, then it's like here you go. You know, you're on the spot. So, they would come and preach. He would take them to lunch the next week and say, now here's where you can improve. So, his pulpit was open. But the reason why he started his church is because he would give the names after each crusade on the street. With the van that said, "Take dope end up a dead dummy" with a casket on top with the mannequin.

So, there was a visual effect, as you mentioned. He would then send the names to area churches so that they could disciple the young gangbangers. And he didn't find out till [00:13:00] 10, 15 years later that they weren't. They weren't interested in gangbangers coming to their church. They weren't interested in discipling them.

So he would do follow up. How's it going? It's going good. Some of them aren't responding. And then he realized the Lord just uncovered it. And it's one of the saddest times I saw my dad. And so then he said, we're going to start a church. And 85 percent of the congregation of that church were first time churchgoers.

So, you know, that was amazing. And wonderful, but it also caused a lot of tension, you know. When the lady of the evening came in, she's like, I just got off work. I'm in time. And we're like, whoa, you know, cause the attire was showing everything God gave her. My dad, you know, nodded to the usher and said, she's here and let her hear the word.

So, it became really a beautiful picture of church planting. Again, church planting was really valued. And again, he was ostracized. Why are you church planting? Unite with another church. And he's like, are you going to take gangbangers? [00:14:00] Okay. We'll pray for you, brother Floyd. You know? So, so yeah.

**Rasool Berry:** Such an incredible and cutting-edge approach. And it sounds like the thing I keep hearing you, this constant refrain that, and he was ostracized for this. And he was ostracized for that. How do you think that that experience, you've seen, you know, your dad and your mom doing these very unconventional approaches to try to reach people and being ostracized for it by even the church. How do you think that that shaped and influenced the choices that you made? And as you were growing up?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** To be courageous. And most importantly, to walk towards fear. Don't allow fear to paralyze you to walk towards it. You can be afraid, but walk towards it. And also truth will not always be embraced by your brothers and sisters in Christ. And so to also take a stand, and that you know the radical approach sometimes is the best approach in some situations. And lastly don't come [00:15:00] with a problem without a possible solution.

Even if the solution doesn't work or someone pokes holes in it, at least you're thinking. You're not just sitting around saying, it's so bad out here, what should we do? It's so bad. Come up with some solutions. And so I'm really grateful for that.

**Rasool Berry:** So what's some of your earliest remembrances of you having a relationship with God in your spiritual journey?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** I think for me was also seeing a huge amount of beauty in the midst of darkness. So much community, so much richness. I realized that there is beauty in the midst, you just have to look for it. And that has, definitely pushed me as a visual artist. That there's beauty in the midst of the darkest moment. There's light in the midst of the darkness. Light is never absent.

And so with my relationship with Jesus, I remember just growing up and believing it. I was the last daughter to come to the Lord. I still was so young, but I remember my father said, she needs to come on her own. [00:16:00] You know, he called me Rusey, Rusey's my nickname. Rusey to come just because her sisters did, or just because it's part of the. . . she's got to come on her own. Which was kind of radical back then, you know, for a father to say to a child. But really at 19, I wanted to make sure that I was not riding their coattails. And I wasn't sure, and I was like, is this really real?

So, I promptly announced that I was going to study other religions. And at that time I wasn't going to go to church or, or study, read the Bible. My mother was about to send me home to Jesus. She's like, we'll make it real short. Let's just take care of this right now. My father was more like, probably inherently knew, that I needed to go through this journey and to struggle.

And so I did. I studied Islam, I studied all the different religions and you know what it came down to Rasool? You know, I studied the philosophers and I remember this quote from Nietzsche who said, you know, I cannot believe in a God who doesn't dance. And I'm so glad our Lord dances, right?

And I realized I [00:17:00] cannot believe in a God who hasn't suffered. That allows suffering, but hasn't endured it, hasn't experienced it, hasn't gone through it. And that's when I realized, like, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, because He says, I am that I am. But in a very equally deep way is because he said, like the old African American spiritual, I'll go down and die for Rasool and Ruth.

I'll go down and die. I will improvise and they won't be on the cross. I will go and die on the cross for their sins. So, then He says, I will never leave you. I've gone before you, I'll walk alongside. You will walk through the fire and not get burned. And we can cling to that. We can, in some cases, even if we need to rage against it, cry against it, kick against it, but He knows He's gone through.

So that for me, that image of Gethsemane. Where He becomes the blues for us. And then He asks a crucial question. If this cup can pass. I'm so glad he [00:18:00] asked. He knew the answer. Do I have to taste of this bitter cup? And He gives us a great gift of His vulnerability, of His transparency, of His humanity. And then He shows us that we have to do just like He did and say, not my will, but thine be done. And get up and walk towards pain.

**Rasool Berry:** And that is a great segue into another kind of a problem that existed, which is this way in which music and jazz and the church, all these things can kind of be estranged. And yet you found some synergy. So, I always love to ask musicians, what's your earliest memory of falling in love with music, and being like, I got to keep doing this,

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** You know, my parents were uh, born during the depression. And they greatly wanted to learn music and art. I think in their own right, they were artists, but it wasn't an option. So, they poured that into their girls.

I never remember a moment without music, but I would say [00:19:00] around late teens, like people started pouring into my life and saying, no, you have a voice. You have something that should be shared. And I was like, I'm fine singing on the choir, you know. I didn't think it was anything I had special or anything. But I remember because of the community, which is so powerful saying, no, you do and go forth, you know?

And so again, there's verbiage, right? There's words, but then backing up those words with action. So, inviting me to sing at a Deaconess tea, or singing a song at the Sunday school graduation. I was like, oh, they want me to sing? So, it was kind of like, you're going to do it. You don't know it yet, but we're putting you in a position to really do this.

That's when I kind of realized like, wow, music might be part of my life in a different way than it has been. I really was like, just really grateful for that community pushing me.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay. So, you said late teens. So, are we talking like high school?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Yeah.

**Rasool Berry:** So what became the next step for [00:20:00] you once you saw that affirmation happening at those different places?



**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Yeah. I mean, I, again, I started writing little ditties or little songs. I started singing more. I think for me in the area of jazz, then I was playing piano, flute, and bassoon. Each of my sisters play two instruments and piano, so it was music all around us. But I remember someone in the jazz band was at a Sunday afternoon concert where I sang and said, well, Ruth can sing.

And I sang a standard. And I remember my dad saying it was fine, but my mom's like, I don't know about that jazz, you know? And so, I did it and then I went to music camp, and I was just fascinated by jazz. I wouldn't go to my flute section, I would go to the jazz and just sit outside and kind of diddle daddle around on my flute.

I started hearing these odd scales that I'd never heard. Egyptian scales and these minor, all these amazing scales. So, I started becoming interested in [00:21:00] jazz and started listening to it, but never thought like that I would sing it. And then I just continued listening to it. And then I really studied the body of music of Duke Ellington, of how he was able to swing, but also in the last season of his life, communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ and his love.

And he returned back to his Christian faith. And was so prolific in expressing that in jazz. And this was a time when the Christian community, pretty majority was like, jazz is the devil's music. And so inherently I pushed back against that. I saw it like this. I remember sitting there talking with my dad and I just like, even if jazz is indeed the devil's music. Let's just say it is right. Is there anything that cannot be redeemed by the cross of Jesus Christ? So, isn't it our job to be part of that redemption, to take it and to redeem it? Now it's clearly not the devil's music at all. It wasn't until years later, I was on my [00:22:00] third recording. Well, my dad, I went into his office, went in his drawer and I saw Ruth's file.

I was like, why does my dad have a file on me? And I shouldn't have, but I went in it and it was filled, Rasool, it was filled with letters. Your daughter has gone down the dark back alleyways of jazz and turned her back on Jesus. We will no longer support your ministry. Get your family together. There were other cards of sympathy, were praying for your wayward daughter Ruth as she comes back to the Lord. Others were more like, she's bastardizing the gospel of Jesus Christ. And he never showed me that. He was in the middle of the road. He really felt like it's not the best decision for me to make, but he never told me that.

And I calculated. How much monthly donations he lost in, it was significant. And he had to hear it everywhere he went. Like, how's your daughter? She come back to Jesus and left that jazz thing alone. And I'm like, I'm singing about Jesus Christ in jazz, you know? So. . .

**Rasool Berry:** Right. You know, you've mentioned [00:23:00] several times in being a part of work in which you draw close to the marginalized as an expression of Jesus. How did you get involved with HIV and AIDS work? How did that happen? And why is that something that you feel like is at the heart of who Jesus is and therefore what Jesus followers should be?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** I think the root of it goes to loving our neighbor as ourselves. I think the more interesting question is who we as Christians, those followers of Christ, who we deem not our neighbor.

And so I think we really need to look with renewed eyes with the Holy Spirit and really examine where Jesus went. Where he was born. Where he escaped to. Who he came through. Who he spent time with. It's very diverse. And it was people who embraced Him, people who didn't. He was radical. And I think at times we embrace the sanitized version of Jesus.

And so we [00:24:00] really have to dig deep and through those layers of who is my neighbor and who should I love? And the Bible is very clear. And Jesus is very clear in His words and in His actions. And we should open our arms to our brothers and sisters. Those who don't embrace Christ in his cross, and those who do.

One of the first persons that mentored me was an amazing young man who was music director at one of my childhood churches. And he poured into me, and was one of the people saying, you have something. So, he mentored me through and through. At that time, a violent act happened in his life. And as a result, he became HIV positive.

This was the early, early days. It was hush hush. And I would go visit him and sit with him in the hospitals. One hospital that would take [00:25:00] HIV patients at the time. And the doctors and nurses would volunteer, and it'd be the top floor. This one you had to put on all the garb and everything. And then he just said, listen, I, you know, I'm probably going to leave here soon and thank you for this.

Keep singing. And that was it. And then I got a call that said, he wants you to come see him. And I was like, oh, that's so sweet. He wants me to come say goodbye. And he just told me, he said at a church where I served at a church, where I was loved at a church that I loved, my one request was visitation from the elders and the deacons and the pastor, and that I would be able to have communion.

He was a Christian, and they said no. And he looked at me and he said, change this. And then I said, by singing? And he just looked at me and said, change this in the Christian community. And that was it. He put his oxygen mask on, and you know, it was time [00:26:00] to leave. And it haunted me. And I was like, how do I do this?

I looked everywhere around. It was still like, just misconceptions that. . . so many stereotypes you had, you know. And so I was like, how do we do this? So, there wasn't a real place in Christian community. Ironically at that time, 10th Presbyterian was starting to have a ministry to those affected and infected by HIV/AIDS.

So, you think this reformed church is going to meet the needs of this disease that is mostly affecting the homosexual, you know, white gay population. And that's the amazing thing about that church is that wherever you stand on their theology, wherever you stand on how they deal with cultural issues and isms, at that time under James Montgomery Voice, they had a ministry that directly addressed every social ill that was going on in Philadelphia. They let the [00:27:00] directors lead, and they trusted their leaders to do it. It was amazing. So, I became part of that. And at that time, people were dying left and right. And so our ministry was to give them the gift of mercy and Jesus at the end of their life.

So, it was jammed packed. I was doing investment banking that day. The Lord called me and I was like, no, I've seen my parents struggle. I'm going to be on the other side. I'm going to be the one that is the number one giver to help them. Dear Jesus. Do you, you got it? That's what I'm going to do. And He really kept calling me.

And then I became a volunteer. Then they asked me to be on the board and I was like, see? And He was like, I heard a sermon on what will, will Jesus have to send to your life for you to obey? And it was a little dramatic, but it worked. And I left that job unwillingly and started volunteering. And started serving and raising support.

And we did that work for 10 years and is the most profound work I've ever done. [00:28:00] It's amazing. Terrible, terrible, horrific situations. There was only one hospital. There's only one funeral director that would take an AIDS corpse.

**Rasool Berry:** In the city?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** There was only one supermarket that would take anyone with Kaposi's sarcoma. Because back then, you know, you could tell who was late stage by the Kaposi's sarcoma.

So if you walked into the supermarket, they'd be like, you can't come in here. There was only one of so many things, and it was just really powerful. Only one hospital that had a social work. We had to try and find housing, try and find care. We would have to give around the clock care. But our specialty and what we were really called to more than anything is to help educate the family and help them. And then to do death watches, which some of them still haunt me to this day.

**Rasool Berry:** And when we come back, Ruth Naomi Floyd will teach us what a death watch is. She will also share the two primary requests she heard while [00:29:00] caring for people affected by AIDS, and how those requests teach us the value of becoming people who are slow to judge, but quick to help those who are pushed to the margins and ignored. That's coming up on *Where You're From?*.

**Midbreak:** If you're enjoying *Where You're From?*, would you take a moment to write a quick review and give us some stars? Podcast platforms like iTunes and Google promote highly rated shows. So, a one sentence review of what this episode or show means to you and a quick five-star rating will help these important stories reach more people. Thank you for your help, and keep listening for more of *Where You're From?*.

**Rasool Berry:** Welcome back to *Where You're From?*. I'm Rasool Berry. And in just a moment, we will jump back into our conversation with Ruth Naomi Floyd. Before we do just a quick reminder that the show notes are available in the podcast description. The show notes not only contain some notes and quotes from today's conversation, but also a link to [00:30:00] learn more about Ruth Naomi Floyd, including links to listen to some of her music, which is incredible.

You will also find a link to a free resource entitled *Instruments of Peace* from Our Daily Bread. Before the break, Ruth Naomi Floyd shared about her calling and work to help those afflicted by AIDS. She mentioned something she called a death watch, something that still haunts her to this day. Let's pick up the conversation there as she defined what a death watch is.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Well, when the dying actually starts. So, we would take clients that had six months or less to live, and then we would know from the medical and from everything that the dying's actually started. Actively dying was starting, you know, it was within 24, 48 hours and they would be gone. And the number one wish of those dying were that they would not die alone.

You have to remember at this time, families didn't want to be involved. They were ashamed. Not in every case, but the [00:31:00] majority. It still was not concrete of how it was spread or how he could get the disease. So, they didn't want to die alone. Their number two requests were number one, that they would not die alone and that they were somehow able to reconcile broken relationships.

Usually, the second one didn't really happen. But the first one, we made it our mission. You get a call one o'clock in the morning and we'd go sit. And it was a powerful way of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Cause the doctors were like, no one else is doing this. Why are you doing this? And then we have a chance. And so, the nurses and other families, the hardest ones were children's hospital, the little children.

**Rasool Berry:** Whether it's the seventies with gang violence, that's particularly impacting, especially young black boys and also some girls. Or the 80s, the AIDS crisis, which, you know, is disproportionately impacting gay men. In either of those scenarios, there's this [00:32:00] consistent pattern of ostracization. Of even helping people who are in this scenario being ostracized, especially even in the Christian community. Where do you think that comes from? What's being missed or what was missed cause people to respond to those areas of need, not with compassion, but with judgment?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** You know, we've been blessed, Rasool, to have a worldview. And to visit other countries and understand. And begin to sit at the feet of other cultures.

I would say for me, in my experience, and I can only talk about, you know, my experience. For me, a very American issue in that it goes to the heart and soul of who Jesus is versus who we've been told He is. And so, not understanding who Jesus is, who He spent his time with, who He served, who He cared about, who He loved. Having those passages misconstrued or not [00:33:00] telling the whole truth about those passages has created this culture where Christians are ostracized by their own Christian communities for doing this work.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah. One of the things that you have referenced a few times, just even in our conversation, is the issue of suffering and how you said you couldn't even believe in a God who didn't suffer. There's this aspect of lament that we had, uh, Dr. Soong-Chan Rah on, uh, earlier, you know. He, he talks about the importance of lament and how that's oftentimes missing, especially in the American church.

So kind of, you know, echoing your sentiments. And that kind of brings me to this aspect of blues. Cause I've heard you talk about the theological significance

of blues. You know, so what are the blues? How did you get introduced to the beauty or the value of it? And why do you appreciate it so much?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Well, you know, the reality is I'm an African [00:34:00] American woman living in America who loves Jesus unapologetically. And so, what it means of me navigating this world, this country, my community. I've not known life without the blues. But I would say that, you know, you have to look to history.

You have to look, where were the blues created? And so, you know, emancipation, freedom promised, but freedom not fully delivered. When Emancipation Proclamation happened, they inherently knew that freedom was not going to be fully delivered. In any way, shape, or form. And so their music changed. And they started singing about life, and the burdens in a way that was very different from the African American spirituals.

The blues is a sacred, sacred body of music. It's a sacred theme. It's a sacred beautiful, but very tough thing to experience and endure. And it's [00:35:00] all around us. But you can't get more blues than the greatest blues singer singing, my God, my God, why has thou forsaken me? But yet, it's still the same blues man that Zephaniah tells us, sings over us with joy. The blues singer never stopped singing. And Zephaniah says that our God who endured the blues, who became the blues for us. Just not endure, but became the blues for us, never stopped singing over us with joy. So in every blues song, there's a glimmer of hope. There's a line of hope, of joy, of pushing for active hope.

And so that's historically where the blues comes from. But you know, there's blues in everything in our everyday life. I would say this unequivocally, African Americans know deeply that dance between deepest despair to unspeakable joy. And that dance goes back and forth [00:36:00] daily. Constantly.

Does it with other cultures? Of course. But look through the lens of American history and African American history, that dance between total despair to unspeakable joy, back and forth. That's why you can have a funeral that is three hours long of just mourning and grieving and screaming and moaning after the burial, and go down to the reception and there's laughing and joy.

You know, as my boyfriend said to me. Y'all get it all out. You know, y'all get everything out in that service. You do the active work of grief, of lament. I think in America, we really haven't really took the time to understand what lament really means. I find more and more in Christian circle, lament means sitting with my friend Rasool and crying with him.

One form of lament is holding that mirror up to yourself and looking at that reflection back and seeing how much it differs from the image that we were created in. And [00:37:00] so that's part of lament. Part of true lament pushes you towards action, restorative action. So, what I'm saying is you can't just sit there and cry and cry and cry and grieve.

It also pushes you towards, as Christians, restorative action so that we become instruments of restoration. And so I think there's a profound misunderstanding of aspects of different nuances of different layers of that definition of lament.

**Rasool Berry:** No doubt.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** I want to tell one quick story for you. You know, almost 90-year-old enslaved African, Miss Ali sitting, the news comes to emancipation. She's the matriarch of the enslaved Africans on her plantation. And they start dancing. We're free. We're free. Miss Ali, will you dance with us? Not yet. Get up, dance more, food. We're free. Miss Ali, you're the matriarch. You lived long enough to see freedom. Freedom more than other [00:38:00] slaves. You're a leader.

You've got to dance. Not yet. So at the point, everyone's saying like the little children are noticing and they finally come and say, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. With all due respect, you need to dance. And she goes, I'll dance, but where's my mother, where's my father, where's my children, where's my sister and brother, where's my cousins?

I'll dance, but not yet. She gives us a stunning example of lament. Doesn't mean that you're a sour puss. It doesn't mean that you're not grateful. Doesn't mean that you won't experience the joy that has come. But she's taken a moment to realize those, for how many hundreds of years, that didn't get to see this moment.

And I think this is my own. I think she knew that more sorrow was coming. So she said, let me mourn this and let me prepare for the stuff they about to bring us after Emancipation Proclamation. Jim Crow, you know. We can go on and on. Every day, there's [00:39:00] a reminder. And so then we have that great scripture that says He sees and He collects our tears in a bottle, and He cares for them, and He treasures them. That Jesus understands our suffering and He's actively knows what, what your bride is going through and what you're going through.

**Rasool Berry:** When did you start recording? When did you, you know, so you went from this aspect of being encouraged, you talked about in high school and,

and then you have this moment where this person, you know, dying of AIDS is saying, you know, change this. And you're thinking, okay, I change this through music. What happens to allow you to activate that into now you are a jazz composer and performer?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Well, I just realized that I had these amazing diverse communities, and that profound work of walking alongside people infected and affected from AIDS blocked them from hearing other aspects of the gospel from me. And so I said, music is a universal language, and it's a [00:40:00] unifying language. And so, I said, I'm going to put that into my music.

So, I put together my first CD dealt with straight ahead, jazz music, speaking about the unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ and social political issues. And again, I was ostracized because not all the members of my band weren't Christians. And I said, listen, if you have to have major surgery, are you looking for the best Christian surgeon, or are you looking for the best surgeon? I am uncompromising in my lyrics, and I will be uncompromising in my music. And so yes, some of the greatest jazz musicians are Christians, and a lot of them aren't. And so, it's a way of sharing together the music. And I'm really grateful for that.

But after I did my *Root to the Fruit*, I said, I really have said all that I can say in this. I'm really grateful. The professor who's writing a book on jazz notified me. I remain the first vocalist to commit a whole discography to gospel Jesus Christ and [00:41:00] jazz improvisational music. So I'm grateful for that. That wasn't my goal. But I just thought I have done that. What else do I have to say? My HIV/AIDS work has changed to where I'm testing in prisons and giving education, but it's not as full time. And I said, what else do I have to say? And I really was trying to understand the themes of American exceptionalism, American Christianity, white supremacy, whiteness as normal.

And you know, I'd done an eight-year study of Malcolm X, of Baldwin. And I said, I need to go to the root. So, the root to me is like, Harriet, Harriet. You know, Harriet Tubman. But I said, you know, there's not a lot written on her, on her words. So I said, well, let me go to Frederick. And I'd begun a 10-year study on him.

Independent. I mean, like, it wasn't just like, oh, there's a new book. Let me read it. Everywhere I went, I did research day to day extra. I would go to the Schomburg, would go around, talk with scholars. It was deep, deep research. [00:42:00] Dense research. So much so that even David Blight, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Frederick Douglass scholar said, no, you are an independent researcher. Stop calling yourself an amateur historian. And so, I was really grateful for that.



But I didn't think to put music together. And I'd written this quirky song. I didn't know what to do with it. I put it aside and I was finishing up my study of Frederick and thinking what next? It was so dense. And I thought maybe I'll just study flowers or something. I need something light. And I was reading over my favorite speeches of his and this one speech just really matched the bass line to the song. When I got home, it fit perfectly. Like I didn't need to change many words. And so I thought, oh, that's a nice song that I'll add to my repertoire.

And then another song came and another song. So I was like, oh, I have a trilogy. Oh, great. I'll do that if I do like a concert of spirituals, I'll put that in. That's so great. Thank you, Jesus. And more kept coming. So here we have the *Frederick Douglass Jazz Works*, and it's been amazing. It's been really hard, but really beautiful to keep to only singing his lyrics, only singing his words.

And it's been *amazing* that people that struggle with racism, that have a hard time of understanding or wanting to understand or even approach systematic racism, or just even history, right? History, American history, have been able to be open to it through the music of Frederick Douglass. So, you know, you hear July 4th and you're like, you know. And you hear some of his other lectures and you hear those words in music it's a way of inviting people. And so, I never dreamed that this would happen, but I'm so grateful.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. That's exciting. So, *Frederick Douglas Jazz Works* is a collection of music based almost exclusively, exclusively on his. . . the lyrics are his words, from speeches.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Right. Well, it reflects on the life in [00:44:00] times, but more importantly, based on his speeches. So, you know, where he talks about his mother coming to visit him as last time he saw her and he goes, I remember. So, I have a song called, *I Remember*. And then from his first autobiography, he talks about that. And so, I extract those words from there. For the most part, people think of Frederick Douglass, that elder statesman that dignified, uh, I'll go out there and just actually say what it is.

That acceptable Negro who's biracial, who's highly intelligent and an exception to the rule, right? No. You know, you set them up for the audience to hear that because they think, well, he's a hero. You can't deny his personal struggle and how he, that, that line, he says, I prayed for freedom for how many years but I didn't experience till I prayed with my legs. You know, so they're like, yeah, I can get with that though.

Yeah, it's been a beautiful place for people who are struggling. Who aren't able to really be at a point where they're open or willing to [00:45:00] listen to historical facts about what it means to be African American in history. And they

are able to hear through his lyrics. And he was a Christian, which no one talks about, a preacher, you know, like. . .

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah, let me tell you. That's a key turning point in my own development was my senior year at Penn. I had an AFAM Lit class and we read *The Narrative of a Slave Life of Frederick Douglass* and also of a slave girl in Harriet A. Jacobs.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Yes. Yes.

**Rasool Berry:** I was struck at that point by how deeply devoted to Christ they were. And so, there's this portion at the end of the narrative, you know, Frederick Douglass is autobiography where he has this appendix where he explains now, just so I'm clear, you've heard me be very critical of American Christians, but that's not the same as he, you know, he makes this distinction.

You know, I love the pure peaceable religion of Christ. Therefore, I hate the slave-owning, women whipping, plundering religion of [00:46:00] this land, which he says is actually a libel and slander against Christ. And that changed my whole perspective. I ended up writing my paper on the gospel, according to Frederick Douglass and Harriet A. Jacobs.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** I want a copy of that paper, young man.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay. I have to dig in the trenches to find that. But so, for those that are maybe not as familiar with Frederick Douglass, why is he such an important figure that you were inspired to create a whole series of works for? Why he's someone that Americans in the world need to know.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Because decolonization needs to still continue. But it helped decolonize my mind from what was taught at one of the top high schools in the city. In American history, our book, it was 300 pages only had 19 pages on slavery. And five on Native American. Like, really? So, I had to cleanse my mind of those untruths of the happy slave, of the Indian that just wanted to set a feast out. I mean, like all these [00:47:00] things that we're still sadly, tragically battling against today.

And so I needed to go to the root. I had to start from slavery. And even though I'd studied slavery for 30 years, You know, 30 some years I needed it in the form of the words.

**Rasool Berry:** Amen. Wow. Let me go back to the beginning because not only did you start to do jazz full time, you also, I guess, broke another barrier as

being a woman composer and lead of a jazz band. I don't know, did that happen before *Paradigms for Desolate Times*, your first album or after?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Yeah. Well, you know, I love history. So, with anything, I'm excited to find out the roots of this. So, I studied the roots of jazz. I was just amazed at the many women that got a backseat, like Mary Lou Williams, who she influenced. Like, will we have Villainous Monk without Mary Lou? You look at Mary Lou Williams, transcribing on a bus arrangements, [00:48:00] writing things. The person that I looked at was Abbey Lincoln, singing music that was made for her voice, and singing music that spoke to the human condition. You look at those few women composers.

So, I'd written *Mercy* because Lamentations 3:22-23 was so real to me. It pushed me, it sustained me, held me through the dark days of hope. But mainly I wrote lyrics for the other songs. And then with *New Eyes*, I started saying, no, I do have something to say. Who can write for me better than myself? I have this music theory. And so I began writing.

I have a hilarious story. Well, it's not so hilarious. But I was in Paris, one of the first times I was there by myself. And one of the band members couldn't make it. So we hired an amazing Parisian jazz musician. So, we're sitting there and we're, we go over the song and I was like, really at section A, I need to be mezzo piano because it shifts, it changes from the intro, so I need that U turn.

Then I realized it was just [00:49:00] one player still playing fortissimo. And so I said to him, you know, hey, I really need you right here. And he said, oh, just stand there. You're so pretty. Stand there and look pretty and sing. We'll take care of the music. Well, I am my mother's daughter. I said, can you take a moment and just tell me whose name is at the top right-hand corner of the score?

And he goes, Root! Root something, you know, anyway, that's, yeah. And I said, there's an envelope in your binder for the rehearsal pay. Can you see who signed the note? Along with the Franks, it was back then it was Franks. He opens it, he goes, Root, Root, Root, some guy Root. And I said, I'm Root. That's my music. And that's my money that I'm paying you. You sit there, you look pretty and play pretty. I'll handle my music. Had no more problems with that. But it's just a shame that that wouldn't have probably happened if I were male.

**Rasool Berry:** Yeah. And you just [00:50:00] casually talked about performing in Paris. I would like to talk about this other dynamic that's really interesting, which is the international impact that your music has had. Tell us about that. And where have you gone? How have you been received there? What has it been different than here?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** My first trip to Paris on the invitation from the great theologian, jazz pianist, Bill Edgar. Asked me to come and sing. with him. But they were already there or something so I had to come on my own.

And I'll never forget getting out of the taxi. And I was a couple blocks away and the taxi told me just keep straight. I just wanted to walk the rest of the way like three or four blocks, and it was straight ahead. I didn't have to turn any corners. I stood in the corner and I just stood there for a while just looking around waiting for the light to change.

And it's the first time that I started to cry before I realized what was happening. I burst into tears. And then I changed and I went and stood against the store wall and I just watched and people looking. [00:51:00] And I can't explain it to this day. In that moment, for the first time in my life, it didn't matter so much whether I was black or not. But whether I was French or not.

And I want to be very careful. We know France has their own issues, according blackness, according to African, all of that. But that's what I've felt. Even in the UK, there's a difference. I unequivocally would say, I'm not the artist I am without Jesus Christ. I'm not the artist between two mentors who pushed me, without a community. And absolutely that I was able to travel outside of America, that I was able to look at America from outside, I would not be the artist I am. And so to see how one is treated, how one is valued, how one is viewed, particularly by Christians around the world, is astonishing.

**Rasool Berry:** Wow. That's, that's powerful. I can relate, but that's an interesting idea. The fact that a genre of music [00:52:00] that originated in the United States is more often appreciated abroad than it is here. Why do you think that is?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Well, look at rock and roll, right? It would drive me crazy to hear ethnomusicologists say that the roots of rock and roll were white. I'm talking about ethnomusicologists. I'm talking at Ivy League schools at conferences. And I would be like, what is going on? And then one of the first few times I stepped in London, it was just like, they were like, oh, your music, you started rock and roll.

We're so grateful. Thank you. They understood they knew little Richard. I mean, they understood the history. They understood from the roots of the music. From the spirituals. I mean, the, the thing that I get most as is like, Sister Rosetta Thorpe. Even here now, most people don't know her as the godmother of rock and roll.

That in a fur high heels, and a dress with electric guitar, was singing gospel music in a rockified [00:53:00] way. But they know more of a history and you see like the Rolling Stones, all of them give honor and homage. I teach a history of popular music. Every single class I get pushed back that the roots of most American music are the spirituals.

What, where did. Where did blues come from? You can't just start with blues. Didn't just start in Congress Square in New Orleans. They had to come from something. Um, so I would say for the spirituals, you know, they may not want to deal with the theology part of that. And then also they're utterly black, you know, I mean, even Lentine Price singing is spiritual. She's singing classical music, but you can still hear that blackness in there. So. . .

**Rasool Berry:** That's fascinating. But you talked about Lentine Price and that's probably when I was first introduced to you. You know, it was as a classically trained mezzo soprano, jazz composing vocalists in the gospel expression. I was like, wow, that's a lot, but how does the [00:54:00] classical music that you said you grew up listening to opera and classical informed the jazz expression and vice versa to become who you are?

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Well, my parents loved classical music. And in, you know, some would call high black church, they were sung *The Messiah*, and sung these great coral pieces. But my parents really wanted us to have diversity in our arts. So, we would stand in the 5 line outside the Academy of Music and go all the way to the balcony and watch the Philadelphia orchestra. It was amazing. We had LPs. So I would listen to. You know, Eugene Normandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. I would listen to Dvorak. I listened to Beethoven. When I listened to Mozart, I listened to all those cats. And at the same time, listening to Andre Crouch, Edwin Hawkins, you know. And then my father's favorite singer was Lentine Price.

So, she was on heavy rotation. I would say this, that what I came to understand that there [00:55:00] was freedom in European classical music. So, there's this thing that, you know, what's your job to do as a classical musician is to play accurately what's on the page. You are to play to perfection. And there's this kind of false narrative that there's not areas of freedom within that.

Of course, there is how you, you know, use your vibrato. How you decrescendo? How you crescendo? How do you sing, you know, staccato note? There's freedom around there. As much freedom as jazz? No. But there's there. So that information that I received was a good foundation. I want to be very careful. It's not the only foundation.

And within jazz, it's just been, you know, classical music has informed my writing to a certain extent, and to my singing. But I still very firmly believe that there are jazz singers that can sing fantastically without that [00:56:00] training. And so I think for me, there's not absolutes in either. And that's really important.

**Rasool Berry:** Okay. You mentioned earlier, and I think this is a good way for us to end, this aspect of improvisation that's in jazz and also with Jesus. Describe to us the relationship between jazz and Jesus.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Well, let's start at the very beginning. Genesis 1:1. Jesus does not introduce Himself to us as Savior, as Lord, as Father, as Deliverer, as Redeemer.

He introduces us first as an artist. In the beginning, God what? He created. And he created improvisationally. He, you know, He's all knowing. He's all what He was before there was a beginning, right? But there's a sense of him creating the first day He did this. The second day He did that. And then you go through chapters of just great improvisational stories of [00:57:00] Jesus.

We serve a God who is an artist. We serve a God who improvises. Then He shows us that when you think of improvisation. . . .the way I start out is almost wonder and imagination. And so the theology of wonder, the theology of imagination, the theology of creating, every human being is an artist in one way or another.

And so those themes come together. You know, Francis Schaeffer, who was really at the point of helping Christians to say, you know, up until then, can I be a Christian and an artist? Huh? Um, but that was a real thing. He says, you know, the Christian is one whose imagination should fly above the stars or something.

I'm paraphrasing. I don't know by heart. And so I think truly, if we were improvisational in our relationship with others in loving our neighbors. And if they could see great art from us, our churches would be filled. [00:58:00] Great art and great relationship. Lack of imagination, lack of creativity, lack of truth telling, lack of chasing beauty.

As just as the gospel has emancipated us, we're willing to help use the gospel to emancipate others as on earth as it is in heaven. So, we don't have to wait to heaven to experience that freedom and that emancipation. What is stopping us? One of the major things is truth telling. The lack and the stubborn refusal to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. No one is asking the Christians, what is the answer to this pandemic, to this division, to the

politically, culturally, race, all these things. No one really cares. Something is missing. And it lies in where we started, in Genesis and in Christ's cross.

**Rasool Berry:** Yup. Well, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure as always. Keep making music that [00:59:00] inspires and provokes us to think.

**Ruth Naomi Floyd:** Thank you for what you do and who you are in Christ. A light, a light, a light.

**Rasool Berry:** Thanks.

**Rasool Berry:** That was Ruth Naomi Floyd sharing with us about the hardship she has witnessed and the learning and growth she has pursued to be the woman she is today.

We can learn from her example to be with people who are hurting, and to educate ourselves to discover how our collective past impacts our collective present. This is where you're from. I'm Rasool Berry. And remember, it's not just about where you're at. It's also about where you're from. This show was produced by Mary Jo Clark, Daniel Ryan Day, and Jade Gustafson, and was engineered by Gabrielle Bower.

Also want to give a quick shout out to Maricela and Annie for their help in supporting and promoting *Where You're From?*. Thanks y'all.