James Meredith

4/17/12

Jackson, MS

Interviewed by David Rae Morris

Transcript

DRM: What’s your legacy in 2012?

JM: It hadn’t been de-decided yet.

DRM: What do you think it’s going to be?

JM: My goal is to move Mississippi from the bottom to the top.

DRM: Why’d you want to go to Ole Miss?

JM: I really had no particular interest in Ole Miss. My goal was to destroy the system of white supremacy.

DRM: I talked to Bill Minor. He told me he was the first journalist to interview you at Jackson State, set up by Medgar Evers. And he said you had three ambitions, do you remember what that was?

JM: That’s the first time I knew who put him on to me.

DRM: He said your ambitions were to become a man, to go to Ole Miss, and to become governor of MS.

JM: No. [DRM: No?] He didn’t get it right. [DRM: okay] . Run for governor of Mississippi.

DRM: That might have been me.

JM: [laughs]

DRM: He also said that after that conversation, he said he didn’t say anything, but he walked away saying “that guy Meredith is crazy.”

JM: And he told every important person that came to Mississippi to interview me that same story. And it’s probably the most important thing that ever happened in my life.

DRM: Having him interviewing you? Or….

JM: No.

DRM: Or having him tell that story?

JM: Having him tell people I was crazy.

DRM: The reason he thought you were crazy was that you didn’t seem to think that white power structure was going to mind you applying at Ole Miss.

JM: Well, he, he understood very well.

DRM: Did you think you were going to apply and get in and everything be okay or did you think it would be harder than that?

JM: I still think that. I still think that Mississippi is the center of the universe and if there’s anybody in the world that can solve the problem of our time, it’s Mississippi.

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DRM: So when you applied and you were rejected and the litigation began were you surprised at how long it took and the resistance the state put up?

JM: I’ve never been surprised at anything I ever seen in Mississippi.

DRM: Talk about your old friend Ross Barnett.

JM: Well he had the highest academic average of anybody who went to Ole Miss until my son went there 40, 50 years later.

DRM: But talk about Gov. Barnett as a symbol of that white power structure and your encounters with him.

JM: Governor Ross Barnett was already the most successful lawyer in the state of Mississippi and he wanted to be governor. And what people don’t know, the first two times he ran for governor he ran as a Mississippi liberal. And he, after two times figured he wasn’t going to get to be governor that way.

DRM: He was a moderate. William Winter described him as a moderate.

JM: But he wanted to be governor, and be became governor.

DRM: And how did he become governor?

JM: He did whatever he needed to do to become governor.

DRM: Talk a little bit about Medgar Evers.

JM: I don’t know anything I could add to what everybody already know about the Medgar.

DRM: Was he your friend?

JM: I came to Mississippi to fight a war. I didn’t come to make friends.

DRM: Talk about September 1962 and your repeated attempts to register after the courts said the University had to register you. An attempt in Jackson, two attempts in Oxford.

JM: All of that was gamin.’ I knew it was a game. Ross Barnett knew it was a game, the federal government knew it was a game.

DRM: What about Doar and McShane? In all the pictures they’re on either side of you looking very stoic. What were they like?

JM: In all of the pictures that most people saw and see. But they were very latecomers.

DRM: Were you scared?

JM: Scared?

DRM: during all that?

JM: Scared of what?

DRM: I don’t know.

JM: [long pause. Doesn’t answer the question].

DRM: What gave you the courage to continue?

JM: Until couple of months ago, that question would have only uh angered me because it would have been an insult.

DRM: But you’re not insulted now?

JM: No, because I finally made peace with God. And he told me that every human being has good in them. And my job is to get it out of them.

DRM: So do you feel like this whole process has brought the goodness out of some Mississippians?

JM: Well, my goal is to move Mississippi from the bottom to the top. And we ain’t there yet.

DRM: Where are we on that ladder?

JM: Everybody say we’re still at the bottom [chuckles gently]

DRM: Where do you think we are?

JM: The first thing we have to straighten out our public education system. The public education system was deliberately destroyed by the powers that be in the state of Mississippi.

DRM: After you were finally admitted. What was that year like? You had protection. You went to classes. You were sort of shunned.

JM: I came to Mississippi with one goal in mind. That was to get the United States military using all its might to support my rights as a citizen of the United States. And long before, any of the time you’re talking about occurred, that mission had already been accomplished.

DRM: Were you lonely, did you feel alone?

JM: I was a soldier, I considered myself a soldier. I was at war. And uh those, that kind of, none of those words you’re using got, have any meaning to uh anything that I was familiar with.

DRM: How has Mississippi evolved since your enrollment at Ole Miss.

JM: Well, when I graduated from high school 62 years ago, every black that got a high school diploma in the state of Mississippi could go to some good college somewhere in America. Today less than one out of ten that get a high school diploma can go to any college, anywhere in American today including all of the black colleges in Mississippi because they don’t qualify. And to me, that is not50 years of improvement, that’s 50 years of going backward. And I promised God if I keep living, we’re going to turn that around.

DRM: Not only are we not there yet, we still have a long way to go?

JM: Well, if there’s 50, and we’re at the bottom that means we’ve got the whole way to go.

DRM: What do you think of the University of Mississippi today?

JM: Mississippi’s the center of the universe. The University of Mississippi run Mississippi. The University of Mississippi law school run the University of Mississippi. The Mississippi Delta run the University of Mississippi law school. Just that plain, just that simple.

DRM: Are you a good alum of Ole Miss?

JM: Ole Miss is not only the most important school in the state of Mississippi it is the most important school in the south for sure and most likely in America, anywhere. So, uh Ole Miss is the future.

DRM: Your son went there. Didn’t one of your grandchildren go there too?

JM: I don’t have any grandchildren, my oldest grandchildren, no grandchildren.

DRM: So maybe it was one of your children.

JM: Well two of my children.

DRM: Did they graduate?

JM: Only one graduated.

DRM: What do you think of the little memorial and statue they have for you up there?

JM: I haven’t seen it since it was put there and most likely I won’t ever see it again in life.

DRM: Did you like it?

JM: I’m not only was a soldier I am still a soldier. Likin’ and not likin’ don’t even enter my vocabulary.

DRM: So are you a hero?

JM: I have no idea what that could mean.

DRM: Other people think you’re a hero for doing what you did. Do you think you’re a hero?

JM: [laughs. Does not answer the question.]

DRM: Some of your and detractors and would-be admirers get befuddled because you are sometimes unpredictable in your views and positions.

JM: I have no idea what that means.

DRM: That would take positions that you would not expect of someone who had been through your experience would take.

JM: I don’t know anybody that know what experiences I’ve been through.

DRM: What’s your hope for the state of Mississippi?

JM: Number one is that we straighten out our public education system, and number two is that we move Mississippi from bottom to the top. And I think Mississippi is capable of doing that. If there is anywhere in the world that can solve the problem of our time, it’s Mississippi. And I think Mississippi is going to do just that.

DRM: Where do you think Mississippi is in regards to race relations?

JM: I have no clue as to what that could be.

DRM: Anything else you want to add?

JM: No.