This interview explores Tambra Jones’s religious music experience, focusing primarily on her involvement as the oldest member of the Jones Sisters, an a cappella gospel group comprised of Tambra and her five sisters, Tawanda, Tara, Dorothy, Brittany, and Kayla. Tambra explains her start in singing gospel music in church and discusses the sisters’ involvement with the film soundtracks of *A Time to Kill* and (in passing) *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. Throughout the interview the smoke detector just overhead in the kitchen area beeps regularly. Tambra’s sister Tara is present in the room, and once or twice Tambra confers with her about her answers. Some talking by people outside on the porch is audible at times, and one of the children walks out of the house, opening and closing the door while Tara gives a “shhh”.

In this interview log, Tambra will be named using her initials, TJ.

00:45: TJ tells how she began singing at age four when she forgot her Easter speech at church. She knew Al Green’s “I Need the Lord to Guide Me,” so her mother prompted her to sing. TJ says that she didn’t think that experience would be the start of singing in churches every weekend.

1:19: TJ clarifies that she started singing at age four, not three, as “a lot of people think.” She explains that she was in Head Start, in which most children enroll at age three, but she started at four.

1:41: TJ describes her home church in Sardis, Mississippi, St. Peter Missionary Baptist Church (whose current pastor is Rev. Odell Draper, Jr.), where she sang that Sunday in lieu of her Easter speech. She describes the old church building—a white structure, “kind of uneven, you had to be careful about clapping or stomping too hard; you just might fall through!” She says she did not do much singing in the old church building, only in choir and Easter speeches and in fund-raising programs. She explains that the church now has a new building, which was built using funds raised by music programs held in the old church building.

3:39: All of the Jones sisters were born in Batesville, Mississippi, except for Tawanda, who was born in Marks, Mississippi. The girls were raised in Oxford, Mississippi, and TJ mentions that many people think the sisters are from Oxford, which is a point of pride for her, as indicated by her “Yeah!” and fist pump.
4:04: TJ lists her other sisters: Tara, Tawanda, Dorothy, Brittany, and Kayla. TJ is the oldest (at age 30 now), and Kayla is the youngest (at 21 or 22—here TJ confers with Tara, who is sitting in the room). TJ explains that Kayla’s greatest talents lie in “doing hair” and dancing, rather than in singing.

5:19: TJ explains that though her sisters started singing at young ages, too, they were reticent to sing boldly, if at all. Tawanda was the first younger sister to finally begin singing more confidently and loudly. TJ explains that the rest of her sisters finally overcame this reticence and fear of performing in front of the crowds who watched them.

6:00: TJ discusses differences in audiences and says she can tell a “dead” crowd from a “good” one. She says that it is very difficult and exhausting to perform for “dead” crowds who do not show much enthusiasm for performances.

6:58: TJ says that the sisters’ best audience was at a party at Southside Gallery in Oxford, Mississippi. She explains that many of the audience members had been drinking and were an enthusiastic and appreciative crowd who left large tips.

8:00: TJ laments that sometimes troublesome audiences are in African-American communities, who ask the group to perform in far-away churches and pay them very little. She shares that there are practical expenses for musicians, like fuel and family expenses (in time and money) even if “you don’t mind doing it” to help churches or people in need. She seemed to view herself as a public negotiator who makes sure the group is adequately paid for their performances (other than their non-profit benefit concerts).

10:01: TJ discusses the negative fame that came to the Jones Sisters after their big-time debut on the soundtrack of *A Time to Kill*. She says the sisters are still normal people, though some people accuse them of thinking that they are better than everyone else.

11:00: TJ explains that the sisters’ career did not really begin until after their involvement with *A Time to Kill* in 1995, when TJ was 14 years old. She explains that, though the sisters were not movie stars and did not get to meet John Grisham or Samuel Jackson, people seemed to more freely associate with the sisters, and claim family ties, after the sisters’ debut in the movie.

12:38: TJ tells about being suspended from school during the filming of *A Time to Kill* after getting in a fight with her cousin, who had accused her and her sisters of thinking they were better than everyone else because they had sung in the movie.

13:53: TJ lists several performing opportunities that opened up after the release of *A Time to Kill*, including Thacker Mountain Radio and the Oxford Film Festival. She concludes the list with performances at many weddings, for which the sisters had to learn unfamiliar songs.

14:52: Describes her experience learning non-gospel songs for weddings; some were harder to learn, especially if the songs “didn’t catch [her] ear.” She explains that Dorothy, Tawanda, Brittany often sang without the other sisters, who found the songs too difficult to learn.
17:06: TJ remembers her mother singing in various gospel groups. [In the time between Tara and Tambra’s interviews, Tara had mentioned that their mother had been in at least two groups: Heavenly Voices and The Butler Singers]. TJ explains that the sisters would tell their mother plainly if her groups’ performances sounded good or bad.

17:53: TJ describes watching her mother’s performances in church, and then explains that the sisters often fell asleep in the church pews while waiting for their own performances.

19:21: TJ describes her own feelings about performing in programs in many “sanctified” churches, where people “fall out, and they cover them up with a sheet.” The sisters were afraid to sing in churches where that happened because they thought the people were dead. She explains that they were young and merely did not understand others’ ways of worshipping.

20:20: TJ explains her mother’s role as the young sisters’ “agent.” She often booked performances that conflicted with TJ’s school band performances at basketball games.

22:07: TJ describes experience as a young child traveling with older groups to performance venues. She says that the sisters were often bored on those trips and were relieved to arrive at churches and see children their own ages.

23:07: TJ explains the positive implications of singing at the same venues with older people, who usually proved a good audience.

24:03: TJ explains that she writes some songs for the group, but that Tawanda and Dorothy act as tough editors.

27:00: TJ’s parents, especially her dad, taught the girls to sing without music, so they do not need (or usually desire) instrumental backups.

27:48: TJ explains that she was a first chair trombone player in the band in school. Her father also played trombone and gave her much advice. She later played as a percussionist in the school band.

28:45: TJ talks about what inspires her to write. In addition to listening to gospel music, she enjoys listening to the blues. She describes her early childhood memories of listening to blues on the radio. She explains that she often adapts blues music to fit the gospel message, saying, “Most of the blues you listen to, it’s gospel. They just change it over.”

29:43: TJ wrote “Just a Little Talk with Jesus” for the group, which her sister Brittany sings. She says that much inspiration for both writing and singing come “when you’re going through something.” The best songs are the ones when you can sing best because you’ve been through it. TJ explains that Brittany sings the song, though TJ wrote it, because sometimes another singer can evoke more of the meaning of the song than the writer can, “so it’s best to let them sing it.”

30:33: TJ explains that the sisters do not sing as often as they used to. She laments that church today is “like going to the club.” Logistically, it is also much more difficult for the sisters to get
together to sing because they live far apart, and because traveling and acquiring babysitters for their children is expensive. All of the sisters have children, except for Tawanda and Kayla.

32:22: TJ thinks her and her sisters’ children will eventually sing in a group together, but hopes it will not be like their early experience of wearing uncomfortable dresses and singing at Friday, Saturday, and Sunday programs every weekend. She explains, “We started off so early that when we did get to the point where we knew what we was doing and why we was doing it, you’d be like, ugh, I’m tired of it now—you get wore out!”

34:07: On the future of the group, TJ explains that the sisters must decide if they want to commit to being a professional performing group. Tambra, Tawanda, Tara, Brittany still sing, but Dorothy (who lives further away, in Olive Branch, Mississippi) has to decide if she will continue singing. TJ says that no one can “outsing” Dorothy, and that the sisters need her with the group to be most successful. Dorothy has had offers to sing with R&B labels, but she has chosen, up to this point, to remain with the Jones sisters. TJ has encouraged Dorothy to do what she needs to do to provide for her children; if that means leaving the sisters to sing alone, “it doesn’t mean you lose your soul cause you’re singing R&B, it doesn’t mean you lose your soul because you want to sing jazz—or whatever it is. Girl, you got it. Flaunt it.”

35:17: TJ explains that she had a stroke in 2007, and that after her recovery, she began singing soprano in the group, and though she has been “unstoppable,” she says she does not want to make a career out of singing because the lives of people in the public spotlight are tiring, stressful, and too public.

36:32: TJ discusses her dreams for the group. She wants to write songs with no editing by her other sisters and desires to have large, well-paying concerts, but only if the other sisters decide they want to keep singing. She mentions that she wants her children to be well provided for and to be proud of the things their mother did.

38:36: TJ Attributes the sisters’ greatest recognition to their debut in *A Time to Kill*: “Before *A Time to Kill*, we were just the Jones Sisters. Now we’re the Jones sisters who sang in *A Time to Kill* and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*” When people ask what part of *A Time to Kill* the sisters sing in, TJ likes to answer: “The main part--the best part!”

39:10: TJ describes the experience of going to see *A Time to Kill* for the first time and almost missing it because she had to sign so many autographs outside. She remembers paying to get in the theater, even though the man taking up tickets asked for her autograph. She recalls watching the movie and hearing herself on the film for the first time.

41:23: TJ talks about what kinds of performances the group will do in the near future. Tawanda acts as the group’s booking agent and is, according to TJ, much like mother in her booking of many concerts. The sisters have not been asked to sing in Tawanda’s upcoming wedding, but TJ seems to anticipate that they will.

43:00: TJ talks about the lifestyle needed to effectively sing gospel music; “you’ve got to practice what you preach.”
44:56: TJ explains that many of the songs she has written have come from her recent experiences, including her stroke and the death of her best friend, her cousin in Como, Mississippi. She explains that one can’t question God and that one must believe that God will take care of things in one’s life.

47:20: TJ explains that, given the opportunity to start over, she would make sure that the group would be adequately paid for their performances, because if their money matched their fame, the group would be an example of how God blesses people with material wealth and success when they “don’t let that talent go to waste.”

50:55: TJ laughs about future researchers listening to her interview, calling herself the “crazy” sister of the group because she is the most outspoken group member.

51:28: TJ explains that she is happy that people (participants in the field school) are still interested in the Jones Sisters, especially because she thought that they had largely been forgotten.