JF=James Figgs
ML=Miles Laseter
EG=Eric Griffis

00:45 JF was born in 1943 in Quitman County, Mississippi and has lived there for most of his life. He still lives in Marks in Quitman County. His father was a farmer who grew cotton and beans and raised cattle and hogs. His mother was a domestic worker.

01:58 JF's family owned its farm. His family consisted primarily of “traditional Baptists.” Some family members entered into other denominations after leaving home. He has family who are Methodists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. JF had fifteen siblings.

02:38 JF sometimes went to his aunt's Pentecostal church, St. Matthew's Pentecostal Church, which is about eighty years-old. The Missionary Baptist church, Silent Grove, which his parents attended, is roughly 101 years-old. He summarizes: “That's where I grew up, between those two religious groups.”

03:31 JF still attends Silent Grove: "Born, baptized, found the Lord in Silent Grove Baptist Church--some sixty years ago. He grew up hearing traditional Dr. Watts hymns “with different tones and twists...” Songs varied with the general ages of the choir's members and musicians.

And I've had the opportunity to do transitions in terms of listening. One main focus, it is—it all is about serving God, one Supreme Being. It's all about that...

05:31 JF describes the musical styles of the Baptist and Pentecostal churches as “very much different.” The Pentecostal church's music was “upbeat” while the Baptist church's music was more “settled.”

The Baptist church traditionally praises the Lord, and the Pentecostal church shout the Lord.
06:28 JF's radio program, which is thirty-one years old, consists of traditional gospel music. Much of JF's listening audience will not listen to FM stations other than 102.1 FM. JF's audience enjoys "doe ray me" songs. He explains, "I don't know if you're familiar with them [doe ray me songs], but that's songs that foot stomping and hand clapping, no harps, no horns." He goes on to reference Rev. Kearney who had earlier mentioned the fact that Sunday morning gospel programming usually fills a time slot that radio stations “write off” because that time does not regularly generate a large listening audience.

07:27 Many AM gospel personalities work in some more contemporary songs:

We blend a little FM in, in terms of music we play because we have some listening audience that will listen because their grandparents and their grandmamas and the uncles and aunts— you don't touch that radio and flip to an FM because they're going to listen to what they've been listening to. And then AM, we play songs that are relative to circumstances in which they grew up and lived out. And lived through. You take the late, legendary gospel writer, Dawson. His songs, the song, “Precious Lord,” as he include in that a whole gamut of circumstances that African Americans had to face during the troubling years. Just music, trying to survive. And so, when you play gospel music to down-hearted and bowed-down-head listening audience, you're lifting them through the songs of Zion. It is traditional with their Biblical teaching that one day soon, that the bottom rail will rise to the top, and that just simply mean that life will improve. Circumstances will improve. And the historical poetry writer, in the writing, spoke about circumstances of African Americans. She wrote, “Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.” And in our songs of traditional gospel, we emulate that. And that does an inspiring uplifting to those who come up on the rough side of the mountain, who begin to see, through God's grace, eleven off of blessings that are making life much better for them and much more better for the ones behind them. And that's their concern. Even from the fields of slave plantation, the spirit that existed in those individuals, was given to them by their fore parents, and they carried it in their bosom and their mind to the next generation. It's like a baton: you pass it on. And the rhythm that we display in our singing, in our preaching, in our teaching is bloodline given. It come through the bloodline, to keep you from giving up hope and having doubt.

11:03 JF discusses the role of African American music in communicating uplifting messages, including messages intended to circumvent the wishes of authorities.

You couldn't meet and gather, how you going to come, further in advance against the wishes of the powers that be. But you're allowed to sing to your God, and in doing that, the historical writers of African America, and leaders, and preachers, and teachers found a way to communicate to the souls and hearts of African Americans without intimidating the powers that be. And peace prevailed until later on, it popped out during the Martin and Malcolm. It broke loose, so our gospel music has been a straight line of communication to the African American community, may it be church-related, social-related, or just anything affecting the community because we were stifled. We had no communication, no phones, no cell phone, and we couldn't talk openly. So the writers included it and dissected songs that were written by Caucasian and modified to communicate to the African community causes because we were an oppressed people. Circumstances dictated that. So that's why that my audience would change the radio station number if I came in with John P. Kee. If I came with John P. Kee, Tremaine Hawkins
every Sunday morning consistently, I have no listening audience. So what I do, I try to satisfy my listening audience because whatever they call, I try to pull it up and play it. And I include those who have been forced to listen to the AM station. I include some John P. Kee in between Morgan Field, in between James Cleveland, and in between the old traditional Five Blind Boys of Mississippi. I include Lee Williams in there, the Canton Spirituals, so you're able—you have to do things to satisfy your audience in a manner of decent order. So I mix it. I mix it.

14:05 JF talks about the reasons for 102.1 FM’s success, which includes Rev. Kearney’s commitment to the station and the wide array of gospel music that the Kerney’s play.

And one reason that 102.1 has captivated this whole northeast, northwest Mississippi is because Rev. Kerney came in here with a program has something for everybody. And it was the first FM station that have the nerve to do that. And most of it [coughs] is because of the financing. You couldn't get people. You couldn't get people to finance my gospel program because the music I was playing. They wanted a group that going to spend money and that would listen on the AM station. They had the airwaves. Even though AM was first, but they took over the airwaves because of the change in the time. Change in the time. But as preacher say, in this business of gospel music, there's enough pews for everybody, whether it be AM, FM, or whatever you're listening to. As long as it's coming through the ether waves, there's enough pews for everybody to inspire somebody that perhaps, if they hadn't heard a sermon or a song that lifted them that day they might have never recovered from the circumstances in which they were tied up with. And it's been an inspiration, and when Rev. Kerney and the 102.1 here came with the twenty-four hours of service to the community, you were able to feed on that. So when I go off the air (I stay on four hours, for thirty years), but when I go off the air, I'm locked in to 102.1 because I need that feeding. I need that inspiration. I need to be inspired. Because listening to the words, music, talking about how good God has been—it inspires you. It keeps you lifted up, and they're right there, twenty-four hours. I don't care when you wake up, you've got 102.1. It's doing a tremendous job in this area, and we suffered the little time they was out. They regrouped, and I said Rev. Kerney never gave up. If it was just in him. He was obsessed-obsessed with it. To continue to bring this service to this community. And for one that been knowing him his whole life, I'm so proud of—so proud of him, and I bid him and his wife much success. And I know God going to make it successful for him.

17:44 JF discusses the services provided to the larger community by 102.1 FM, including church announcements, obituaries, “meetings that take place that have something to do with their livelihood,” information during emergencies, and other urgent notices for the community. JF mentions that the radio station can also serve benevolence needs for those in the community undergoing hard times. He also talks about the role of Christian radio programming of inspiring those who do not regularly attend church. He speaks about his own experience with inspiring recommitment on the part of listeners who had not been to church for a while. He mentions playing a song that reminded a listener of his or her grandfather who had raised him or her and strived to keep him or her “on track.”

20:06 JF discusses the enlargement of the area's sense of community and the identity of the community, which is beginning to transcend previously firm racial differentiation.
...it includes the total community, and even though I mention African Americans, as this time continues to revolve, it is not totally African community no more. We are finding ourselves, as a community, more like each other than we ever thought. Our needs are the same. Our concerns are the same. And we're finding that out through our experiences and circumstances. And I think it's going to be a better world for all of us, a better community, a better state, a better county. Because I don't think—I don't automatically draw an opinion on you no more based on what you're wearing, based upon the color of your hair or your eyes. I don't do that. Because I've been inspired and enlightened, and I've listened to communications and the dialogues and the different opinions that I understand why you might differ from me. When before I heard it, I didn't understand. I had a preconceived wrong idea about you, so that communication and listening and being inspired—the radio will always have a very important place in our society.

21:41 JF talks about how he became involved in gospel music. He started out as a teenage disc jockey, playing at parties and “juke houses.” He and other disc jockeys would play whatever the audience wanted to hear, “… to the bump to the rump to whatever they wanted, we would play it.” He later obtained a Sunday evening radio program for which he played primarily blues music. When he became a deacon at his church, he changed the content of his show:

And I played all of the blues you could find. And I became a deacon in my church, and I had to change formats because it didn't look right. And it wasn't right for me to play the devil's music and go in the church and pray to the Lord when folks in the church knew that I was playing the devil's music. It was quite hypocritical to me even though I knew that it might have been accepted because it was a job, but I just felt upon—that was an individual choice that I made. And then I had a young man that was already doing gospel that taught me the selection of music to play and requests made by call-in-ers, and I got into the gospel. And I wouldn't go back. It's just like—it's just like when you're a sinner, and you become saved again. You ain't going back. You're going forward, serving the Lord because you know what the benefits are. The benefits are greater than that in which you were doing, so that's how I got into gospel radio. And I just won't quit. I'm just going to stay in there. I've been there thirty-one years.

24:12 JF mentions the fact that new technology has enabled some people to get their music from other sources, but he affirms that the purpose of gospel music remains unchanged.

But the main thing is still serving a purpose. And you're helping somebody. You're helping somebody that had a rough time. Somebody done passed, family—you let them know that, you know, through your programs, there's a song somewhere that will lift you up. And our job as air personalities (we ain't D.J.'s no more, now—we moved from the D.J. to air personalities), a gospel air personality, is to make sure that you can play music that is—that is comfortable and acceptable and decent to your listening audience who want to hear about the work and the good works of the Lord—how he blessed us, how he lifts us up, how he keeps on keeping us, and that's a calling that Rev. Kerney and his wife and all of us that's in gospel (because there ain't no money in it—ain't no money in it), but more—greater than money to me is the blessing you get from the Lord: the release you get, knowing that you doing something that the Lord wants you to do to glorify his name and spread the good news.
JF was about twenty-seven years-old when he obtained his own Sunday evening blues radio show on 1520 AM in Marks, Mississippi. He says he always appreciated a wide range of good music, and he grew up listening to artists who performed both gospel and blues music. He listened to WDIE out of Memphis as well as Nashville radio. He says that gospel and blues music have few differences. They are forms that “intertwine.” Both forms relate lived experiences. Many legendary blues musicians honed their musical and oratorical skills in churches (many of them “pastored” by their fathers or uncles before getting involved with blues music. Gospel music communicates God's goodness while blues music communicates “how much Hell you caught with your woman, with your wife, your love life, your job...” Today, many concerts feature blues, gospel, country and western, and contemporary music. He adds, “That's part of all of our cultures in which we grew up.”

JF said that it “bothered” him to continue playing blues songs while holding leadership roles in the church. He said he initially did not know if he would enjoy gospel music because he loved blues music. He adds that he still loves blues music. The transition was not as difficult as he initially imagined it would be because the gospel music he played proved to inspire him. After that, he was “hooked.”

JF went to high school in Quitman County. He went to Coleman Community College for two years. Then he took a basketball scholarship at John C. Smith University in North Carolina. He went to graduate school at Chapel Hill and graduated from Mississippi Valley State University. He participated in a student protest with the Fannie Lou Hamer in Charlotte, North Carolina, which ultimately led to his expulsion. He has been a part of the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and SCLC. He has been involved with human rights and voter registration rights. He has held a position in the Mississippi NAACP for thirty-seven years. He has been the legal redress chairman for the past ten years. He has been the first vice president for twelve years. He has served on the school board for about twelve years, and he is the vice mayor of Marks, Mississippi. He has been chairman of the Democratic Congressional District for multiple years.

JF played football and basketball. He earned his scholarship for basketball. He played “forward guard.”

JF became involved with civil rights activism as a result of his mother's activism. His mother, Ruth “Ruthie” Elizabeth Figgs, was a “devout activist” involved with the National Council of Negro Women. His mother “was with Kennedy (Robert) when he came in the Delta...”

My mother had Martin King come to Quitman County during the preparation for the Poor People's Campaign, the mule train—my mother organized—helped organize the Mule Train that was started in Marks, turned into the March on Washington—the Poor People's Campaign. So I've been in it all my life—all my life.

JF discusses the student demonstration in North Carolina.

JF has a degree in political science and is certified in coaching. At the University of North Carolina, he studied social work. He spent a semester there in graduate school.

JF briefly mentions being expelled from college as an “agitator.”
38:18 JF talks about some of the specific aims of the student protest, which included changing curfew hours, visitation rules, transportation to off-campus shopping centers, and the right of adult students to smoke. At that time, the Pentecostal school did not allow smoking on campus.

38:59 JF listened to Nat King Cole and Motown music while in college, and he also liked Conway Twitty. He listened to Twitty on Nashville stations. JF also enjoys Ike Turner. Both Twitty and Turner came from JF's area.

40:08 JF discusses the benefits of gospel music. These include helping the listener to focus on questions of right and wrong and responsibility. He also asserts that gospel music helps to build character. Gospel music communicates the importance of building up one's life, family, church, and community.

You give yourself more when you come in that mindset. You just become a total person in terms of existing in your community. It's just not for self anymore. No more for self. And once we've reached that milestone, the community wins as well as individuals like myself.

41:26 JF explains the differences between gospel and blues music.

My difference is—and I put it simple. When I was listening to blues, I thought about my love. I thought about my relationship with a human being. When I listened to gospel, I thought about my soul, my savior, and I thought about that day that I would not wake up no more. And what have I done to deserve to make the transition on the other side. And that's, to me, the difference. That's what counts. Like this guy said, “All that you do ain't worth nothing unless it's for—for the good of the Lord.”

42:42 JF talks about the tendency to develop and enhance interests and abilities in church:

...you won't find many that come from across the cotton field that can express themselves if they haven't been through the church. The church gives you a confidence. First of all, you know the Lord got your back. Long as you're doing right, you know he got your back, so you step out. Just step out with that confidence. If when you step out with that confidence, “Oh, it's alright.” So you started developing it, you see? So then you're able to express yourself, and you're not as shy. Because you ain't doing it by yourself. The Lord got your back. Until you can come to that understanding, you will forever be in a shell, scared to come out. Scared to express yourself, and then when you do it, you're satisfied. There it is; you don't need nothing else. And that's how significant that is when you're in a church. See, you know, I don't say my religion is better than nobody's religion. I just have my religion, to me, is better than nobody else's religion [laughs quietly]. To me [with emphasis]. To me.

45:33 ML mentions JF's talent for speaking and asks if he has ever preached. JF answers that he has never preached.

Never preached. But I had a pastor (preacher) that I grew up in the church with, had a gift of deliverance that I listened to all of my life. I could never perfect it, but it gave me some confidence that I could come halfway and do—I could do it too, see...
46:22 JF talks a little more about the preacher he grew up listening to:

...and was blessed because this preacher was an old preacher, but somehow or another, his parents probably had got that forty acres and a mule that was promised because he was able to go to the finest black training schools...

[Memory card fills up. Interview interrupted to put in a new card.]

0:00 ML apologizes for the interruption. JF talks about the role of his church experiences in shaping his career as an on-air gospel personality. He says church has encouraged him to keep going during difficult times. He relates the difficulty in financing a gospel radio program. Church as also helped his decision making. He asserts that Rev. Kerney is a fine example of the “stick-to-it-iveness” required of gospel music radio personalities. JF discusses the importance of song suggestions and dedications from listeners. He briefly references the instance in which the owners of 102.1 airwaves pulled the station rights from Rev. Kerney for a short time. After finding it difficult to make a profit in doing so, they returned the programming to Rev. Kerney while retaining the rights to the frequency. He mentions Rev. Kerney's willingness to “beat on doors” to obtain sponsors. JF expresses his respect for Rev. Kerney, who visited JF before starting his own station.

04:54 JF discusses the commentary he adds during his radio show, which includes local news, community events announcements, and discussion of issues. He delivers improvised speeches during his “Speak Out” segment on subjects including politics, young people who are on the streets instead of in school, President Barack Obama's significance, voter registration, the importance of the census, scholarships about which some people are unaware, housing loans, and other issues relevant to the community. He asserts that he talks about, “Anything affecting the community between them gospel songs and them gospel sermons and preachers, sermons I play, I'm going to talk about what I think you, sitting in that living room. So I do that.”

06:45 JF describes his show as a “multicultural-type gospel program.”

07:00 EG asks JF about the social significance of his gospel program. JF talks about the role of gospel music in individual lives. He explains that it is easy to feel that no one cares about one's problems. Listening to songs that communicate similar struggles that the composer has undergone can alleviate this problem. He mentions playing a song that reminded one listener of her aunt. He talks about the power of gospel music within the lives of individuals, and he wishes ML and EG luck on their project.