



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

## **Interview with Robert Sengstacke**

### **Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

### **Transcript**

### **Preface**

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 11.5.3. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Speakers are indicated by their initials.

## **Interview**

### **Robert Sengstacke Interview**

#### **AFRICOBRA Interviews**

#### **Tape RS**

#### **TV LAND**

(Background Conversation)

Q: So, you can just talk to us a little bit about what the Wall of Respect was, and what were you doing there, and a little bit of your experience and what you saw that year?

RS: Yeah. The original Wall of Respect was developed and financed by the Visual Arts Workshop of the Organization of Black American Culture, pronounced Oh-ba-see, in Chicago, at 43rd and Langley, in the summer of 1967. The artists simply wanted to make a positive statement in the community, but wound up inspiring a public art movement which, in a few short years, spread across the world.

This is two photos of the wall. This is one in its development. The scaffolding is over here, with Jeff Donaldson working on the jazz section. And then, this is the finished wall. We had a graphic designer, Sylvia Abernathy, laid the sections out, for each group of artists. And what's interesting is that, and visual artists, photographers, were also recognized and chosen for participants.

This section here is a religious section I did with Bill Walker. Those are my photos. These are writers. That's a photo by Darrell Cowherd of Amiri Baraka. Playwrights, jazz, sports, and then political figures. Malcolm X and Rev Brown and so forth. And, that was done by Norman Parrish, who now owns a gallery in Georgetown in Washington, D.C.

And then, this is a close-up shot of Jeff Donaldson, who's no longer with us, and Elliot Hunter. He died a few years after this was done. They did the jazz segment of the wall. Elliot's is kind of the abstract art, and of course, Jeff Donaldson is a little bit more into realism.

Here's another (Inaudible) shots during the development. That's Abdul Alkalimat, who was one of the founders of OBAC, along with Conrad Kent Rivers, and ... can't recall the others. They were the ones that conceived the Organization of Black American Culture, and brought us together in a visual arts workshop. And there was a writers workshop.

This is Norman Parrish, who I mentioned, who now has been in Washington for years, and owns a very successful gallery in Georgetown. And of course, Barbara Jones, Barbara Hugu Jones, who's here today. And this is her section, that she was working on.

(Background Conversation)

Q: We don't know that you're a photographer, so you can maybe introduce yourself a little bit, or what was your ...

RS: Oh, okay.

Q: ... your role, or what were you doing at that date?

RS: Yeah. Well, see, I was, in addition to being one of the photographers who participated in the development of the wall, I was a photojournalist on staff in my family's newspaper here, the Chicago Defender.

And, I played an interesting role in this, because, when we first started, the city and the police looked at this like something threatening. And they came out one day harassing the artists and just, you know, coming around, parking. And so, the next day, I ran a shot on the cover of the front page of The Defender ... and by the way, it was the only black, African-American, daily newspaper in the United States. And, as soon as I put that photo on the front page, the police disappeared and left us alone, which I knew would happen.

So, I served as not only a participating artist, but because of my relationship in the news media, I was able to keep the artists protected from the city. Because, in those days, the first African-Americans to wear Afros were artists. Musicians, and ... well, it started with musicians. At that time, the police were arresting young men who

were maybe waiting on the bus, walking down the street, who had Afros.

(Background Conversation)

RS: And just harassing anything that was innovative, or any innovations that we wanted to go about to express ourselves as African-American people. So again, you have Jeff Donaldson here, as a close-up. This is Jeff Donaldson, Billy Abernathy, great photographer. Roy Lewis, photographer. Edward Christmas, photographer and painter. He did this section here, with the actors. And then there's Darryl Cowherd, a photographer. He's hanging his photo in this shot of Amiri Baraka. But actually, there's about four of us photographers in this shot.

And I thought it was significant, because I've even heard, in recent, not that long ago, some people say, is photography an art? So, back in 1967, to be recognized as an artist, fine artist, I thought was very significant.

And of course, to me, art is anything that a person ... I mean, you can be artful with business. You can be artful with anything you want, if you want to take it to that level of creativity.

And, these are finished segments of the wall. That's the sports. Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell. And some of the other sports greats of that time. Jim Brown is in ... this segment hasn't been finished. But in the '60s, these were Jim Brown, Kareem. See, you can see the UCL ... in fact, he was still, Lew Alcindor. UCLA. Bill Russell.

This is Nina Simone. I'm not sure, on this section, if Barbara did the theater people.

And of course, Norman Parrish. That's Rev Brown, Marcus Garvey. Dadada, I'm not sure who that is. Stokely Carmichael, and Malcolm X.

And this was a shot, photo by Roy Lewis. I think this was during, when blacks wanted to dedicate Washington Park as Malcolm X park. Of course, the police beat the hell out of everybody, (Laughs), and it never happened.

Coming on, this is the literaries. Again, Darryl Cowherd's photo, painting by Edward Christmas, who's also a photographer. And that's Gwen Brooks, James Baldwin, WEB Dubois. I'm not sure of these two here.

And then, the religious section of the wall, which was done by Bill Walker and myself. That's Reverend Wyatt Walker, Nat Turner, Elijah Muhammad.

And, this photo, of course, is very ... even today, when I do retrospective exhibitions, people seem to be drawn to this image. It's titled "Spiritual Grace." This one was taken in a church, which was just two doors from the wall. And, so I wanted to, since the church was right next to the wall, I decided to shoot in the church, and highlight something from the neighborhood. And this is a young girl with a tambourine.

This was the rhythm and blues section. Billy Abernathy's shot of Stevie Wonder. Wadsworth Jarrell, who was also a photographer, but he's a painter and photographer, did the actual painting. And, as I say, Billy Abernathy, one of the greatest and one of my mentors, here's a shot he had of Stevie Wonder.

And then, this is Jeff's finished piece. That's ... it doesn't look like it, but I think that's Sarah Vaughn. That's another Billy Abernathy shot. Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Nina Simone, Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis. Oh, God. Bass player. I can't think of his name. My favorite bass. Ornette Coleman. I think this is Coltrane. That's ... oh boy, I'm getting old, I guess. But anyway, we were very excellent work. This is Jeff's work, here, and the other is by another artist.

And, (Inaudible). These were some of the brothers who lived around the Wall of Respect, which is an interesting story here, because this is during ... you know, 1967 was the height of the gang era in Chicago. Which is actually with the involvement of ... many people have heard of the Black Stone Rangers. And, people don't realize that over a thousand kids were killed every year during this. And they were mainly warring with the Disciples.

These brothers here controlled their neighborhood. They kept the gangs out of this area. And they also protected our paint and stuff. We didn't have to lock anything up at night. And so, I think that's very interesting and significant.

And especially, the Stones wanted to take the area over, because we had no idea that the wall was going to be as popular as it was. But, even before we finished, there were people lined up down the street and around the corner, because this was the biggest tourist attraction to African-Americans who were coming to Chicago, some to visit family, family reunions. And, every day, it was just lines of traffic.

And, it also provided means of income for the young kids. Not these guys, but the younger kids in the neighborhood. They would actually come out and identify everybody that we had highlighted in the wall. And of

course, for a fee. So, we were happy to see that we were also able to do a project that brought economic experience to young people.

Because there's very little ways that young African-Americans can get experience in economics as a kid. The main thing was, at that time, kids would sell newspapers. And if you go back, Ben Hooks, Malcolm X. Anybody who was anybody in the black community. Bill Cosby. They'll all tell you they sold the Chicago Defender, the Pittsburgh Courier, as a kid.

And, as I said, if you get in an economic interchange with a product, this black, and with your people. But in this case, while the wall was there, these kids were able to act as guides through. But, this was their leader, Herbert.

But as I said, they kept the gang. There was no problems. We had no violence. As I said, we were able to leave everything. When we got through painting that day, we just cleaned the brushes and left everything, and nothing was touched.

Q: Would you mind saying your full name, and just very concise, that you took these photos of the Wall of Respect, that you were there?

(Background Conversation)

RS: Yeah. My name is Robert Abbott, parentheses Bobby. Last name is Sengstacke.

(Background Conversation)

RS: My name is Robert Abbott Sengstacke. And, as well as a participating photographic artist in the wall, I was an active photojournalist with the Chicago Daily Defender, the only African-American newspaper in the United States. And, so I documented the project, and printed quite a bit in the Defender. One time, we had a double truck on the inside called Daily Defender World of Pictures. I did a couple of picture spreads. One was with Haki Madhubuti, who is the founder of Third World Press here in Chicago. And, so I did two spreads on the inside, plus kept it on the front page of the Defender. And of course, this helped to build the publicity. As I mentioned earlier, the police were trying to harass us until I ran a photo on the cover of the Defender. And then, the cops disappeared and left us alone.

So, my role was double, participating as an artist and then as a photojournalist, and coverage of the Wall of Respect.

Q: Could you very briefly mention some of the important figures, historical figures, that you photographed around that time?

RS: Oh, my God.

(Background Conversation)

RS: My worldwide recognition first came in 1985, leading up to the King holiday, and the work of Martin Luther King. And, not my opinion, but many photo editors and researchers have always said the same thing, that my works seems to have captured the essence of Martin Luther King's character, personality.

I also worked with the Nation of Islam's newspaper, Muhammad Speaks, for about three years. And that document followed the Civil Rights, and became very prominent worldwide.

But, oh God, I've photographed, you know, Charles Mingus, Bishop Tutu, Nelson Mandela. Oh, God. I don't know. President Obama.

You know, I had a sense of purpose, not only as a photojournalist to do my job for the newspaper, but the black photographers in Chicago had a purpose of documenting our people in history through our eyes. And, today, the kind of exposure we get was not available then. We just did it, kind of a pure cause, because we felt that one day, someone would want to look back and see what the black photographer had to say about his community, his personality, personalities in the community and the history.

And so, I had what I considered assignments for the Chicago Defender, and then what I call Bobby Sengstacke assignments. And this was pretty much a Bobby Sengstacke assignment, because there was no demand for color in those days. But, because the wall was such a colorful project, I shot these, mainly color slide film, and also black and white. Mostly black and white, but I did document the whole process in color.

But, I think I photographed everybody but Malcolm X and John Coltrane. And, I tried to get them, but didn't happen.

(Background Conversation)

RS: My name is Robert Abbott Sengstacke, and I'm a photojournalist, fine art photojournalist. And, I've been documenting the history of my people for the last 52 years.

Q: That's beautiful. That's it. Great.

(Background Conversation)

(END OF TAPE)