



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Interview with Minnie Black

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Transcript

Preface

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Volkersz Folk Art Interviews, Minnie Black

Tape-recorded Interview with Minnie Black

At her Home in East Bernstadt, Kentucky

MAY 29, 1984

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "theirselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: "'cause," was transcribed as "because," "'fore" as "before," "'yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Interview

MB: Minnie Black

WV: Willem Volkersz

[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' No. B1-A]

MB: . . . places in the Bible it [speaks] for.

WV: Oh, it's a beauty.

MB: [moving away from the microphone] Where the whale, where Jonah was a-fleeing from the Lord, you know, to keep from obeying the Lord.

WV: Uh huh.

MB: He was wanting him to speak to this city and get him to repent or He was going to destroy it in 40 days and nights. Well, Jonah, he was a-worrying about it, and he went—I guess you're ready [speaking of the tape recording—Ed.]—went down in the ship, you know, and hid, and they found him, and he told him. And they'd found him in this ship. There come a wind on the sea, and they knew there was something causing that, you know. So they found him in the bottom of the boat asleep, and they told him to wake up and tell them his name. He told them his name; he says he is a-fleeing from the Lord, and he says that that ship, the wind was because of him; he said, "Throw me overboard." And they threw him overboard and then's when the whale swallowed him. And I tell them when we're in our program [a weekly program she and several others, all playing on gourd

instruments, put on at the local senior citizens' center—WV] that this [a harmonica attached to an 18-inch gourd, held horizontally when played—WV] is not exactly the whale that swallowed Jonah but it represents him.

WV: (laughs) That's beautiful looking.

MB: So this is. . . And now, when I play this, this is specials, you know, that we play, during our program. And then I play this and another girl plays the kazoo with me, and then when we sing on the chorus, some of the others sing softly with us.

[Plays song on harmonica, then sings:]

I have heard of the lion

[Going] far away [strand]

Tis a beautiful home of the soul.

It's built by Jesus on high,

Where we never shall die

Tis a land where we'll never grow old

Never grow old, never grow old,

In the land where we'll never grow old,

Never grow old, never grow old,

In the land where we'll never grow old.

MB: We just sing two verses of that, you know, and it sounds pretty good when the others sing softly with me.

WV: That's great. Oh, I think you do very well. That's wonderful. That's a strange-looking instrument, I'll tell you that.

MB: Yes. I made one now for David Holt, the television star, just like it only not quite so big, because his harp [harmonica—WV] wasn't quite that big. And I hope he's pleased with it. I know he'll like it.

WV: Oh, that's beautiful.

MB: Now this one—and I play one special by myself—I play this one for fun. We sing those songs, and my son, he's kind of sentimental, and he'll say to me, "Now Mama, don't play such songs, you know, that's kind of touchin', too touchin'," he says. "Sing something funny. People don't like those sad songs." So I play this one for them, you know, in the last.

[Sings while playing an autoharp—Ed.]

I can tell by your face,

You belong to the monkey race.

And you're bound to look like a monkey

When you grow old.

Now, I can tell by your nose,

You've been swinging from your toes,

And you're bound to look like a monkey

When you grow old.

I can tell by knees,

You've been climbing coconut trees,

And you're bound to look like a monkey

When you grow old.

Now I can tell by you jaw,

That a monkey was your paw.

And you're bound to look like a monkey

When you grow old.

Chorus:

When you grow old,

When you grow old,

You're bound to look like a monkey

When you grow old.

WV: That's wonderful. (laughter)

MB: It's fun. Fun's all it is. We did, you know, and it's something different, and new, that everybody don't, I guess it's the only one in the state—or maybe in the U.S., I don't know.

WV: Would you play the dulcimer for me one more time and get it on tape?

MB: Yeah.

[Interruption in taping]

WV: . . .very beautiful.

MB:

[Sings while playing the hammered dulcimer—WV]

Oh Lord, my God

When I'm in awesome wonders

Consider all the world a ____'s ____

I see the start,

I hear the rolling thunder,

The ____ of ____ the universe displayed.

Then sings my soul,

My Savior, God, to Thee,

How great Thou art,

How great Thou art.

Then sings my soul,

My Savior, God, to Thee,

How great Thou art,

How great Thou art.

When Christ shall come,

The ____ of acclamation,

To take me home,
[Rejoice, ____ joy] shall fill my heart
Then I shall vow
With humble adoration,
And that will play,
My God, how great Thou art

[Repeats two verses of chorus]

MB: Oh, that's hard for me, eighty-five-year-old woman trying to sing and play on a dulcimer. (chuckles)

WV: That sounds beautiful, thank you.

MB: Well, now let me get one, let me get my fiddle, and see if it's a . . .

[Interruption in taping]

MB: . . . all these instruments together, like drums and kazoos and rattles and, oh, tambourines made from gourds and things, so we play that all together, and then when we have a special then I play these. [strumming]
Oh, it's out of tune. So turn that off until we ready, that I ____ ____.

WV: That's all right.

MB: [tunes instrument]

WV: How often do you get together?

MB: Once a week.

WV: That's great.

MB: Turn it off, please, son.

[Interruption in taping]

MB: I sold really my best fiddles.

WV: Oh, really.

MB: I don't know, I just will be [turn one]. John Rice [at Museum of Appalachia, Norris, Tennessee—WV] has got one, and he's got several, if he's not sold them. He sells some of them [along].

[Sings while playing violin:]

Gracious memory
Unseen angels
Sent from somewhere to my soul.
How they linger,
Ever near me
And the sacred times unfold.
Gracious memory,
Oh, how they linger,
How they ever flood my soul.
In the stillness,

Of the midnight,
Gracious sacred scene unfolds.
As I travel,
On life's highway,
Know not what the years may hold
As I humbly, _____ grows stronger,
Gracious memories flood my soul
Gracious memory,
Oh, how they linger,
How they ever flood my soul.

In the stillness

Of the midnight

Gracious sacred scene unfolds.

WV: Wonderful.

MB: You know, my son, he says, "Sentimental," and with he getting as old as I am, you know, it kind of touches him. That's why he says, "Play something funny."

WV: Yeah.

MB: Lots of times I'll play:

*[sings, again with violin, but not the popularized
version of Old Dan Tucker—Ed.]*

Old Dan Tucker's a very fine man.

He washed his face in a frying pan.

Combed his head with a wagon wheel,

_____.

Get out the way, Old Dan Tucker,

Get out the way, Old Dan Tucker,

Get out the way, Old Dan Tucker,

You're too late to get your supper.

WV: Ohh. (laughs)

MB: We have some fun out of that.

WV: Yeah, that really is wonderful. Have you been playing instruments like a good part of your life, then too?

MB: No, son, I told you that I never tried to play until I got making these gourd instruments.

WV: It's amazing.

MB: And then I wanted to play them. They wasn't no good to me nor nobody else if you didn't learn to play them.

WV: Sure.

MB: So I just picked it up myself.

WV: Good for you.

[Interruption in taping]

MB: [Examining the artist's gourd structures in her studio:] What I use to smooth up these joints. . . You see now, this one is attached on to this one, you see. [demonstrating] I cut the side there off with the carving knife, and then where this is joined together I put this sculpture mold, you see.

WV: Right.

MB: And you can drive nails in it, or you can sand it, or anything. Now this is one, two, three gourds, four, five.

WV: I see, um hmm. Now what kind of paint do you use on these? Is that acrylic paint?

MB: Well, just any kind that I. . . My son's a sign painter.

WV: Oh, so he. . .

MB: And he furnishes me a lot of just scrap paint, and just about, you can use about any kind. But I'll tell you what. Since the gourd, natural gourd color, more than any other color that I've found, is maple color.

WV: Oh, um hmm. Yeah, it seems like that color, yeah.

MB: Now here is that sculpture mold [a sculptural molding material—WV]. Just've gotten a new bag of that. And my sister worked at this art clay company in Indianapolis till she died. She died about ten years ago. Well, since that, since then, I've had to get her son, who lives up there, to bring this sculpture mold.

WV: Oh, you can't. . . You could probably get it locally, couldn't you? Or at art supplies?

MB: No, sir. No, sir.

WV: You cannot get it?

MB: No, sir, you can't. Now I've asked and I don't know if the hoppy shops, places, and they have never heard of it, a lot of them. And I don't know, I told a shop in North Carolina. You see here, it comes in fifty, or as low, as small, as a three-pound bag.

WV: Right.

MB: Well, that's a fifty-pound bag. This is a fifty-pound bag, and it's something like plaster of Paris, only it's got paper stuck with it.

WV: Right. Yeah, I've seen it. And then you add water, right?

MB: Yeah. Mix it up with the water, dough-like. Now I wanted her to take this, and she wanted a big old flat one, to set on the floor. I allowed to let her do just what she wanted.

WV: Oh, this is nice. "My old Kentucky home." [reading from label—Ed.]

MB: Yeah, now that was my home, you see. How ____ ____.

WV: Yeah, that's right.

MB: Do you take any gourd magazines or anything?

WV: No.

MB: Ain't no, nothing?

WV: No, no.

MB: Well, now you put your name here, and address, just like I was going to write to you, so if I ever do take a notion to, then I'll have the right address, you see.

[Interruption in taping]

MB: He get a, he had to get a, he got a small new car; he didn't have his van. And so he got some other things

and didn't take this, this big old woman. [showing gourds—Ed.]

WV: He didn't. . .

MB: No. You see, I told him he could have that, and this one. He had called me. . . He hadn't called me, then he wrote me and said he'd be here to get them. Now, this was kind of the first one I made. Had this one up at the gourd show, 'long, oh, it's been three or four or five years ago, and the old manager of the show—he's an old man. He loves to tease me. Everything he'd meet me anywhere about the place, he'd say, he'd tease me about something.

WV: Uh huh.

MB: And he said to me when I had this up there in my booth, he said, "Miss Black," he says, "We've not made up our mind what that thing is you brought in here," he says, "Whether it's a man or a woman." I said, "Come back, brother, I'll convince you." And he come back and I just raised that up. . . [demonstrating that it's a man] (laughter)

WV: Good for you.

MB: He ran off then.

WV: That's great.

MB: Now, here's one I'm saving for John Rice. This is the Grizzly Adams characters.

WV: Oh, that's great.

MB: They took this and broke this [deer]. I must that too. I'd forgot about that. You see, you can't hardly keep from breaking, moving and things, and I've just about quit exhibiting. If these people hadn't of volunteered to come and get it, you know, and return it, I couldn't, I told them it's just impossible. I was getting too old and I didn't have no way of going, only to hire somebody. And they wanted it so much, because they was trying to get the best of Kentucky folk art all over the state, and they wanted some of my work, because he had seen it at the World's Fair, you know. [in Knoxville?, 19__—Ed.]

WV: Right.

MB: And he said he want, so he is willing to send, get it.

WV: Now, where exactly is it located, do you know?

MB: I'll tell you, it's called the Kentucky Center for the Arts, and it's on Main and Sixth Street.

WV: Huh.

MB: This, Main and Sixth Street's where they, that's where the papers told me.

WV: Right, right.

MB: It's right in the ____.

WV: And it's next weekend, huh?

MB: It's this weekend.

WV: This coming weekend is what I meant, yeah.

MB: This coming week, June the second.

WV: That's good to know about.

MB: This is my hat.

WV: (chortles)

MB: You see, this is made out of the, the crown is made out of the luffa gourd, and of course it was stitched on here with rawhide on the brim. And this is the bag, and I've got the necklace down in here.

WV: Hah, it's all there.

MB: I got a little friend in Missouri. Her name is Kathryn. . . Chris, Chris Davis. Chris Davis. And she's got three little boys and a husband, and she's into this gourd art business—and she does beautiful work. She's just awful sweet, and she was at our show for the first time last fall.

WV: Uh huh.

MB: And she sends me things along that she makes.

WV: This is a good one, another big iguana, huh?

MB: Yeah, that's a. . . What is that called? The Metrodome, or something like that? It's a prehistoric animal.

WV: Boy, that's a real good one.

MB: I made that away back, when I was first starting. You see those things on the top, now?

WV: Right.

MB: That was my first work, some along the, first work.

WV: Oh, uh huh. Yeah, I can see the difference now.

MB: Yeah.

WV: Oh, pterodactyl.

MB: That's a prehistoric bird, you know.

WV: Yeah, uh huh. Wow, that's wonderful.

MB: And down underneath here is a sow and pigs, and. . .

WV: Oh yes!

MB: . . .and there's the cat and kittens. Now that's the Grizzly Adams character, you see.

WV: Right, now I recognize those, yeah.

MB: The year of '76, I had a whole booth of bicentennial stuff. John Rice has got some of my stuff, and then I've sold pieces here and there, you know.

WV: Right.

MB: Now, I had the early settlers making friends with the Indians, and Larry [Hackley, a Kentucky folk art dealer—WV] came and got that, now, and I donated it to the, oh, Kentucky. . .

WV: The Folk Art Society?

MB: Yes, it was the Kentucky Museum.

WV: Oh, uh huh.

MB: At Lexington. Now, he's going to take the three Minutemen, the three little marching men? He's going to take them to the Frankfort, old capitol.

WV: Oh, great.

MB: And I'm placing my stuff where I want them while I'm here.

WV: Good for you, good for you. So you know what's going to happen to it, where it's going to be.

MB: Yeah, that's right, that's right.

WV: That's terrific. That's a very good idea.

MB: And this was one of the Bicentennial pieces, you know, that covered wagon, the steer, the. . .

WV: Oh, that's beautiful.

MB: And, oh, I just had several different things.

WV: Just beautiful.

MB: And I've still got the Statue of Liberty over here.

WV: Yeah, I saw that!

MB: I think Larry won't sell it. I'm going to let Larry have that. He's been awful nice to me, and he's helped me, you know, put my stuff in different places, and told people about me.

WV: Uh huh.

MB: Now she [____—Ed.] took one of these, and you know that one [____—Ed.] in there is a whole lot, to me, is a whole lot prettier or, I mean, more natural looking, like something.

WV: Well, artists have funny tastes.

MB: Yeah, they do. What she liked, maybe I didn't care for.

WV: Like you say, they're very independent about what they like.

MB: Yeah, yeah, that's right. She took one of these iguanas.

WV: Oh, that's nice.

MB: Now, that's a prehistoric animal, and this one.

WV: Yeah.

MB: And of course, these here, along here. I let them [____—Ed.] have one that really natural looking; it was really natural. She wanted to take one in there, and it had a little flaw on it, and I told her I could have had it fixed, but I didn't notice it until today. Now this lizard, this is Komodo, Komodo lizard, from the Galapagos Islands. [probably referring to a Komodo dragon, from Indonesia—Ed.] Ain't that what they call them?

WV: Right, right.

MB: And, you know, I saw them one night on television—it's been, that one, it's ten or twelve, fifteen year old!

WV: Um hmm.

MB: And I saw them on there, and I thought, "Well, I can make one of those." So I went to look to see if I had a gourd in that shape, of a lizard, so there's one, and it was in that squattin' shape, and I just put foil over it, you see. And this is all one gourd, that.

WV: That's beautiful.

MB: Just the legs is added.

WV: That's a beauty. So that's foil that gives it the color?

MB: Yeah, that's aluminum.

WV: I see.

MB: Now here is like one of our instruments. I have a small one.

WV: (chuckles)

MB: And the, seem like, they've got a lot of rhythm to their work up there, but still they've not any of them learned to play this one. And I made this one just since, just since I started it. They're so. . . These bowls were green when I fixed them, you see, and they've seasoned out now, sort of.

WV: Ohh, right.

MB: And these are loose; I'm going to have to tighten them. And this is the way. . . [plays, to demonstrate—Ed.] That's the way the Africans play them; they just go by rhythm, you know, they don't play no music.

WV: Right, yeah.

MB: It's just a noise.

WV: Right, that's going to be a good one.

[Interruption in taping]

MB: Now that made the face kind of shrink, but that one there had kind of a full face. And that face is more like Humphrey to me, more than anybody.

WV: Yeah, yeah.

MB: But it was, it was made from Eisenhower's picture, yeah.

WV: I recognize it now, uh huh. Oh, that's great.

MB: I never did. . . That's my first and last I ever tried with that.

WV: Well, you did very well for a portrait, boy. That's real nice.

MB: I had myself, too. She took it and Elvis Presley.

WV: Oh, Presley, uh huh.

MB: Yeah. You remember back, the Chinese people, when President Nixon got, first got in, they gave him a set of China.

WV: Right.

MB: Seems like it was china. And I cut the pictures out of the paper and I made them from gourds. So that's what that represents.

WV: Ahh. Oh, that's great.

[Interruption in taping]

MB: [away from microphone] That's ____ ____ ____.

WV: Yep. Well, he's pretty heavy too.

MB: Yeah, he is. He's made out of ____ ____ . . .

WV: Yeah, uh huh.

MB: . . .and plaster of Paris. Now, before I got this sculpture mold—I was going to tell you about how I got into that. My sister worked at this place, you know, where they make that stuff. And she'd been bringing me the clay, and every time she'd visit me, she'd bring me a bunch of clay. And they asked her one time, said, "What are you doing with all that clay you're taking away from here?" And she says, "I'm taking it to my sister in Kentucky." Well, they said, "What does she do with it?" Says, "She's a-making it into, oh, animals and thing—birds and so forth." Says, "She uses this with it." And they said, "Well, bring us a sample and let us see that. . ." They did have a art teacher there, you know, a ceramic teacher, and so on, that they liked to make out of their stuff, you know.

WV: Uh huh.

MB: And, but she took a couple of pieces, or three, and they said, one of them said, "She don't need that kind of stuff; she needs the sculpture mold."

WV: Ahh.

MB: They sent me some samples of different types of stuff. But I found the sculpture mold was what I wanted, needed. And I've been using it ever since.

WV: I think that cat's lovely.

MB: (chuckles)

WV: That's great, the kitten. Huh.

MB: That's sea-grass green.

WV: Ahh, gosh.

MB: I think these are pretty.

WV: Oh yeah, home sweet home.

MB: Um hmm. Now that's my first carving, and I've just started doing that in the last year. Um hmm.

WV: Boy, good for you.

MB: They do fit. . But I'll tell you, if there was a dozen people tried it the same, do the same thing, there wouldn't be two alike.

WV: It always looks different, sure.

MB: It's always a little bit different. Everybody sings a song different and everything.

WV: And I'm glad too.

MB: Yeah, I am too. [away from microphone] You know what? I think to myself sometimes I'm foolish for even trying to sing, because my voice is gone, and I think, "Well, dag gone it. There's some of them there that I listen to that I can't hardly wait till they get through. How in the world did they ever get there?"

WV: It's, I don't think. . .

MB: There's some people with beautiful voices that I love to hear sing, but there's some that I can't wait till they get done.

WV: Well, that's not only the voice, I think, but the message and, you know, the thing behind it, the quality behind it, you know.

MB: Yeah, yeah, there's a lot of. . . You know, they write their own songs, a lot of them, and some I acquire that are just not worth listening to.

WV: Um hmm. Would you consider selling that cat?

MB: Yeah. Yeah, I priced it, \$25, the cat and kittens and the whole thing.

WV: I'll take it. (laughs)

MB: Well, I never did price it but one time, and that was to a little girl, she wanted it so bad, and her mother wouldn't let her have it because she had too many other things in her room, she told me.

WV: Oh, um hmm.

MB: And she said, she says, "I have my own money, and," she says, "when I come back I'm going to get that cat."

WV: Ohh.

MB: Yeah, she says, "I'm going to. . ."

WV: Did she ever come back?

MB: She's not come back. She just come here last fall, and I said, "Honey, if it's here," I said, "I'll let you have it."

WV: Ohh.

[End of interview]