



Roosevelt Credit Oral History Interview, April 25, 2014

Title

“A Beaver on Broadway”

Date

April 25, 2014

Location

Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, Credit discusses his upbringing, his earliest interests in music, the connection in his family between music and the church, and other boyhood activities, including avid involvement in the Boy Scouts of America. Credit then reflects upon his decision to attend OSU, his transition from majoring in engineering to music education, the mentors who guided him during his tenure in Corvallis, and noteworthy performances while an undergraduate. He also describes the social setting that he encountered while at OSU as well as his memories of the university library and living in Weatherford Hall. He concludes with a few thoughts on life as a Broadway performer and a discussion of his involvement with youth organizations. At minute 14:30 of the interview, Credit performs an impromptu version of the OSU alma mater, "Carry Me Back."

Appended to the conclusion of the interview is a recording of Credit's performance, with OSU choir members, held at the Memorial Union during the afternoon of the interview. The event was hosted to celebrate OSU's announcement of an alliance with the GRAMMY Museum. In the recording, Credit performs solo versions of "Sir Duke," by Stevie Wonder, "You've Got a Friend," by James Taylor and Carole King, and "Over My Head," a traditional gospel song. Credit then conducts OSU choir students in a formal presentation of the alma mater as well as a reprise of "Over My Head."

Interviewee

Roosevelt Credit

Interviewer

Mike Dicianna

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/credit/>

Transcript

Mike Dicianna: Okay, today is April 25th, 2014 and we're having the pleasure to interview Roosevelt Andre Credit, class of 1990. My name is Mike Dicianna, oral historian with the Special Collections and Archive Research Center, and we're just basically going to get to know you for a short period of time while you're here.

Roosevelt Credit: Great, fantastic.

MD: As one of our famous alumni. How about a little bit of biographical information, like where you were born and your parents, and things like that?

RC: Oh, thank you for asking. So I was born in California, I'm from California, from the Bay Area, so I was born and raised in Oakland. My family is from Texas, my mom and dad are from Texas, so that's where the family kind of lives, and then they got married and moved out to California, which is how I got there. So I was born there and went to K-12 school, McChesney, junior high, Cracker Highlands Elementary, Skyline High School, and then I sang all my life and I was a member of the Evergreen Missionary Baptist Church where I was baptized and all of that. So yeah, so I'm from California originally and then—that's kind of where I began and then I went to Oregon State for undergrad and Northwestern for graduate school.

MD: So your early years, other than singing, did you have any other hobbies or interests?

RC: Oh yeah, my mom kept us real busy, so I was in the Oakland Youth Chorus, Oakland Chamber Ensemble, I did a lot of different things like that. I was a Boy Scout, I'm an Eagle Scout, so Troop 254 in the Golden Acorn District, and I've been there all of—I was basically with Cub Scouts, Webelo, Boy Scout, I did the whole thing. So it kept me really busy. I like to go camping and all that kind of stuff because of that, yeah.

MD: When was your first interest in music, I mean is it based in the church?

RC: Yeah, based in the church, yeah. My mom sang and my dad played the piano a little bit by ear and I've al—I've been as long as I know. We've gone to church, I even started—we'd spend a lot of summers in Texas with my grandparents and Big Mama on Sunday morning, so we'd get the family up at about 5, 'cause she had a family of twelve, my mom was one of twelve—thirteen, one died, and she—we'd start singing, we'd have prayer meeting at church before we went to church, so I was singing at a very, very young age. As soon as you can start, the minute you can start putting words together you can start saying prayers, and we started singing hymns, so we started that on Sunday mornings at like 5:00 in the morning, then we got dressed and we went to church, 'cause she believed you had to pray to get to church, and then that's just the way that is. So yeah, I've been singing all my life. All my life.

I never knew I'd be a professional singer though. When I came to Oregon State I was supposed to be an engineer, which I came to school on a scholarship here as an engineer and then I got the lead in the opera and you had to be a music major to take the lead in the opera at the time I was here, so I transferred schools and never left.

MD: Ah, so that was one of the questions that we've—you know as an alumni, we were interested in why OSU, what made you a Beaver...

RC: Yeah, I know, you know it was close enough to home but far enough away and it had the number one engineering school in the country. And so I—and I got a scholarship in engineering and that's how I got here. And 'cause of CH2M-Hill that's here. So yeah, they help out a lot of students.

MD: And so you got the bug.

RC: And I got the bug. I mean, I was singing the whole time that I started—I joined the choir, I did all that and then I—they had me audition for the opera and I got Figaro and so I decided—had to—so I changed the school so I could do the rehearsals and be in the music school and that's kind of where one part of my heart lies and I didn't think there'd be—you know my mom was like "no way!" 'cause engineering to music, you're like "oh, you're going to be poor the rest of your life, oh my gosh, what are you going to do?" And that's the parent's biggest fear, but in today's world if you put your mind to it you can pretty much do whatever you want.

MD: So what were your first impressions of the university and Corvallis, going from Oakland to the small town of Corvallis?

RC: I love Corvallis. I came here, again, it was far enough away from home so I wasn't homesick and I could go home by bus on weekends if I—and in the first couple weeks I would go home almost every other weekend, because I was very homesick. But it got better. So the cab dropped me off the first time I rode the bus here, all my luggage, the cab dropped me off at the administration building, it's like "good luck." And I realized, they're like "well"—I went in there, they're like "no, you have to go check in at the residence halls." I was like "where's that?" I had to go all the way to the other side of campus with all my luggage to Hawley Hall, the overflow hall, because there wasn't enough space for all the students. So I schlep all my stuff all the way down there, get to that desk, "I'm checking in."

[0:04:57]

They send me up to my room and I open up the door of my room, first thing I see is a gunny sack and a *Playboy* magazine and a rifle and a guy in a cowboy hat and a shirt, a plaid shirt, and on my—on the other bunk, and I close the door, it's like I'm in the wrong spot. And my friends are always like "Roo, be careful, you're in Oregon, you know Oregon's going to be kind of wild. I don't know about this, you sure you want to go?" So I "yes, I'm fine." My parents are like this church prayed for me, alright. So I went back downstairs, they're like "no, stupid freshman, that's your room." So I went back there and next thing I knew I bumped into my six foot five roommate, and there you go, and that's how I started Oregon State. And he was a military guy who later became one of my best friends, but it took us a while to get to know each other because we were very different.

So I loved it. So that was my first experience at OSU and OSU has just been—I grew up here now and I have so many friends and so many memories, beautiful memories, memories that made me grow on the inside, a lot of challenging experiences as well, because during that time there weren't that many people, African American people that were doing, that were immersed into the school and I was in the School of Music and Engineering, so it was a class of 300, I'd stick out and so the professors would know my social security number just because I was there. And I was like "why do you always pick me out?" But it's just 'cause I stood out a little bit, and you get used to it. And then I met—and the other question is like "oh, you're here on an athletic scholarship?" and I was like "no, I'm on an engineering scholarship and now I'm in music school," so you dealt with all those kind of things, like everybody deals with I'm sure, in their life, but I had to deal with them the way I did.

And people were very kind, I got to—some of my besties are the people, those overflow students that we all got together at Poling Hall and I started early, I became president, we started doing homecoming parades, we had floats, we did it all instantly because I like that kind of stuff, so I got immersed quickly into the fabric of OSU, which would help me to get along. And then I found the same thing in First Christian Church, so life just kind of—the path just found its way through and I found my way through school, like I hope every student will be able to find.

MD: So what are some of your memories of the music department specifically? I mean your time in Benton Hall, oldest building on campus, some of the performances, and—

RC: Those Benton Bugs were in rehearsal. You know the Benton Bugs? It was a big tree outside and they had bugs on them, these flying things, they're little beetle things. So you're in your rehearsal, you know in rehearsal I'm in my voice lesson, I open [vocalizes], open your mouth and these bugs are trying to fly in and the teacher's like "stop worrying about that, breathe!" And it was, you know you're just—so you're watching the Benton Bugs and you're trying to—it's just, that's one of my biggest things about that building. It's in a great building, it's old and crooked and I guess it used to be Administration building and all of that, but—and now it's a very close, dear place to my heart, where we spent many hours, many, many hours.

MD: So what are some of your memorable performances while you were here at OSU? Obviously the opera.

RC: Yeah, the opera's a big one. I was—won the concerto competition, one of six winners—or eight winners, I think, so I got to sing with the orchestra early, which is how I got to know James Douglass and, oh I guess I should say, he wasn't the conductor then, it was Professor Carlsen, yeah. So that's how I—so I did that and anything the music department did. I loved the pep band, I had a lot of friends in the pep band and I loved to go to the football games, so we'd be down there

with the football games and the pep band would be just tearing it up and I'd be clapping and stuff and carrying on, so yeah, that's one of my biggest memories there.

MD: That's great. Now do you have any memorable faculty, mentor-type faculty here at the college?

RC: You know, there was—because it's a small university that way and all of our classes are in the building, so they got to know you real well, so all of my teachers were mentors for different ways. The late Gil Knapp, Professor Knapp, got me into music education and he taught me how to deal with kids, specifically, lesson plans for kids; teach them our experience songs and develop curriculums for small children. So I learned that from him and then sight reading I learned from Judy Krueger, who just recently retired, but she's still around in the community, still plays for people, and she taught me how to sight read. They all kind of did that together. Judy Kruegar, there's Rebecca Jeffers, who plays, and she taught me piano right off the bat, 'cause I auditioned and I played by ear and then they had me come in the Dean's office and they had me sing, they played me—they let me play the piano and they're like "can you sit down and sight read this?" And they put the music in front of me and then I was like "oh, D, C, G, oh," and they're like "okay, you need to take piano lessons." So I got stuck with Rebecca and she became one of my bestest ever. I should say she got stuck with me. And then there was Dr. Eisman, the late Dr. Eisman who passed away, clarinet faculty who was my history teacher. So many, Ron Jeffers, oh sorry, there's lots.

[0:10:12]

MD: Now, did your interest in opera come from your relationship here at OSU or did that predate the—?

RC: It came at—my first opera I saw was like in 5th or 4th grade, 5th grade I think, when the school—the outreach programs in California like the Paramount Theater. They would bus the kids in for a dress rehearsal to the operas, so I got to go see them early and I went to see at the Paramount Theater "The Marriage of Figaro," which was the first opera I had ever seen, and the opulence of the upstairs and the downstairs and the costumes and everybody's running around, and the instruments on stage, it was the first time I had seen anything like that and I kind of knew back then that I really liked it enough that I might want to do it. So, and coincidentally I got here and that was my first role that I landed, was Figaro, and my life went full circle, and it was just amazing, and I was actually doing all of that stuff except we did it here at OSU. So yeah, it started really early.

MD: Now, when you were here, was it at Mitchell Playhouse or had they already moved over to the old dairy building?

RC: You know, Mitchell Playhouse, yeah. A lot of the operas were done at LaSells, actually. They would build stuff on LaSells and we did the operas there.

MD: Because it was a large production.

RC: They were big productions, right.

MD: Yeah, you had a long connection with OSU even after your graduation, but how do you feel that your time here at OSU, specifically in the music department, prepared you for your later career, and we all know that you're our Beaver on Broadway, so.

RC: Yay, thank you. Without Oregon State I don't think that would be possible, because again, I was coming in as an engineering person—student—and the music department was very careful to give me the tools that I needed and to give me the love that I needed, being what I look like, going into an opera world, which was considerably different than my background, my face color and all of that. And so they had to talk to me a lot about just how we were going to get through the business, in addition to being able to sing. And I was told early that I really do have to really jump over five hoops instead of just two to get to where I needed to go, and to be a black opera singer and all of that, it was a big process, and so they talked me through that. I would spend a lot of time in the Dean's office, even all the way up to President Byrne, just 'cause they wanted to know how I was going along through school, because I was kind of unique and I wasn't in the athletic department, which was unusual for Oregon State. And so they're like "well how come—do you play sports at all?" I was like "I love sports but I don't play them, I'm not any good." And I played for fun, but, so they were all, everybody was watching me.

And because I was involved in student government and so many things on campus, and then the First Christian Church and the youth program on Sunday nights were students, the College Age Fellowship, we called it, there was so much that was OSU in my life and I liked to, you know I was singing the solos at the concerts, I was singing—I got to sing The Star-Spangled Banner and all that stuff for graduation, you know, things they're like "no one's ever sang the alma mater at graduation." I'm like "well why not? Because it's our song." So I started singing it at the graduations, and then the year I graduated, I sang the national anthem and the alma mater and James DePreist got his honorary doctorate, so I was sitting next to him. I about cowed, oh my gosh, my heart stopped. I couldn't believe it! And I was like "wow, what is going on in my life just to be sitting—" so we had a nice conversation, and he again talked to me while we were on stage, about being what I look like and my experience with Oregon State and how I got there, and he's like "well you're doing pretty good, you managed to get up here on this podium." So we never really—I never worked with him but he's kind of like a distant mentor. And they're just, all my teachers were that way. All my voice teachers were that way.

MD: So you sang the alma mater, do you remember any of the alma mater?

RC: Oh absolutely, it's one of my favorite songs to this day.

MD: Give me a little song, give me a little bit.

RC: Are you serious?

MD: Yeah.

RC: I haven't warmed up right now. Wow, really? Okay.

[Sings]: "Within a vale of western mountains / There's a college we hold dear. / Her shady slopes and fountains / Oft to me appear. / I long to travel"—or "wander," depending on which one you know—"by the pathway / Down to the Trysting Tree"—which still exists on campus [claps] / For there again I see in memory"—or fancy— / "Old friends dear to me. / Carry me back to OSU / Back to her vine-clad halls / Thus fondly ever in my mem'ry / Alma Mater calls."

MD: Haha! That'll be on the website for sure.

RC: Yay! I even did an arrangement of it, I loved it so much when I was here. So it's great.

[0:15:35]

MD: When you returned to OSU, you've been back some times and I know one of the times that you sang at the dedication of this library.

RC: Yes.

MD: What are your memories of the library that you knew when you were here as a student?

RC: Oh my gosh, that 24-hour, the computer lab. And so we couldn't print, you had to run all—because you know we didn't have computers in the dorms—so we had to run down here, stand in line, get on those computers for an hour at a time or two hours at a time, get your papers typed in, print it, run someplace else and print it downstairs and back up to the other room to get the stuff, and then correct it and go back to the computer, get back in line, and do this process until you finish your—'cause I didn't have a computer at the time. So that was what—that computer lab was where you got to know so many people and it was one of the most frustrating places because all the sudden you'd be picking up somebody else's paper and you're trying to "oh is that yours? This is yours," and it was chaos. Total chaos. And you look at this building now and it's definitely not chaos. But the library, that was probably the biggest thing. And then the music selection, half of the music library was at the music school and the other half was here, so we'd always go back and forth to try to find what we needed, and quite often we'd ended up having to send for it because it was just limited sources for music, because it wasn't a huge music school. But we got good.

MD: And then singing at Reser Stadium for the—

RC: Oh, bucket list. I couldn't believe when I won that award, that Most Distinguished Alumni award. First of all, I didn't know it was me, and then when they called and asked me who I was, to verify it, and you could hear them in the background in the office, going "he's a music major?" "Yeah, he"—and I could tell, I was like "are you sure you're talking about me? I didn't create a button for the space shuttle or I didn't cure cancer for cows or something like that." I was like "I am a music major." "Yeah, you've been nominated and I think you're a winner," and you could hear them in the background going "he's a music major? He's an opera singer? What? He's on Broadway? You're kidding." And so they were interviewing me and telling the whole office. It was the funniest thing, because you know we were like "Oregon State, really?" and they're like "Yeah, music school?" "Yeah." "Well we've got to see what they're all about." It was so funny. But yeah, I got—they made a mistake and gave it to me, [laughs] and I took it.

MD: You're well-deserved.

RC: Oh, thank you. Yeah, Dr. Charlotte Headrick, the acting theatre prof here came to see me on Broadway and we made the reconnect and she sent her business card back and she's like "Does OSU know you're doing all this?" And I was like "well I kind of tell them, but not really." And so she came back here and got the ball rolling.

MD: Oh, okay.

RC: Yeah, so because of her I think I was nominated.

MD: So now that you've been on campus for a day or so, what are your impressions of the campus in 1990 versus the campus of today, and what do you think about the direction that OSU is going right now?

RC: You know, thanks for asking, that's amazing. OSU is a completely different school than when I was here. Student-wise, faculty-wise, I think, this faculty has always cared, but because the school's gotten so big, there's so many students and there's so much money put into bettering the campus so that there are more resources here for the students. I think that's so beautiful. And this building, I mean it's like a gold mine now. It gives us all the tools—it gives the students all the tools they need, so they don't have to go downtown or find someplace else. They can get it all here, which is amazing. So that's probably the biggest change. The buildings, of course the residence halls, Weatherford Hall, where I lived my senior year, that dining hall was not even there anymore, and they've done all kind of things with the buildings and stuff and music faculty — everything is completely different, but it's going in a positive direction. So I love it.

MD: Yeah, 'cause when you lived at Weatherford Hall it was during its declining years.

RC: It was during declining, and I lived in the tower, so I lived in—and I had my own elevator stop, opening up to my area, my room area, which I purchased from the student that was there before, because he had had the loft carpeted, all of these little things that were such great tradition here at OSU. But so it's totally different now. It's still equally beautiful. I'm very glad that they restored Weatherford and not did something crazy like ripped it down, you know, 'cause for a while there we didn't know.

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MD: It's one of the iconic buildings on campus and you're not the first person I have interviewed that has lived there.

RC: Oh, this is good. Yeah, it took—well I couldn't live there until I was an upperclassman, so I was very excited to move there.

MD: Well, everybody wants to know what's it like to be on Broadway, to live in New York, I mean we all live vicariously through your success. Just a little about what it's like to be a star.

RC: You know, I always say I'm a star in my mom's eyes and in God's eyes and everything else is just icing on the cake, so thank you for that. I carry Oregon State wherever I go. All my of experience—see, it makes me happy. I carry it wherever I go. So I have a great responsibility, I call it, to represent well. So I want to do my best everyday with what I was given to represent well, because I have a lot of responsibility, and I do realize that.

And then I had the opportunity to be on Broadway twice and both shows were Tony Award winners, we were on the Tony's twice. I've been on two big national tours and they're two big iconic pieces in American history, "Showboat," by Oscar, you know Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, and "Porgy and Bess," which I'm doing now, which is the Gershwins. And they both captured the black experience on paper the best they could, the best they were allowed to at their time, and then they—so now we bring to it our life experience. So I—it's amazing to be on Broadway doing those pieces, and because the world knows what those pieces are and they know all about the music and stuff. They don't always know the story because the opera, "Porgy and Bess," is so elaborate that sometimes you miss the story because the music is glorious. So this production, Diane Paulus decided; you know the Gershwins came to her staff and asked them to make it shorter and tell the story in their way so it would be more accessible to a broader audience, which we have done.

So it's history. I've been a part of history all my life, in so many ways. And they're like "who are your mentors?" There are lots of mentors out there, but no one has done it like me, because no one has my life experience, right? And everyone has their own path to take. They tell you "okay, this is what you need: you need to make sure you have a good résumé, make sure you get a lot of sleep, make sure you know what you're talking about, and do your studying so when the time avails itself to you, you'll be ready." And I auditioned and I guess I was ready, I got the parts and there you go, the rest is history.

I've met all these wonderful people. My life has changed yet again and I even got to meet Michelle Obama just because I was in "Porgy and Bess," because you know she—they are very big music people and they understand what that piece is about in American history, so yeah, I have been blessed beyond words. There's just nothing I can say except that I'm glad to be able to tell the stories and hopefully inspire other people to do it, because if I can do it—you always hear that cliché, "if I can do it, you can do it," but it's true. I say if you put your mind to anything, you can do it. You just have to stay focused and know how to handle rejection, because you get rejected a lot and in my business you also catch a cold. There are things you can't do. I can't push a valve when my voice comes out. If I'm sick, I have to sing or I have to—you know there's so many humbling experiences about it because I carry my voice around in me. Yeah, so it's a lot of—it's a great responsibility, being on Broadway, and it's very competitive and it's hard to get a job there and I'm just thankful I got a job.

MD: Now I understand that you're still quite involved with youth, you have a long history of that.

RC: I am, I love to give back that way. Absolutely, I still do that. Wherever I go I—we have an outreach program with "Porgy and Bess" that the students can come to talk to us. So I'll go in the schools, we'll do acting seminars, classes, we'll do master classes, whatever, just to help inspire the students to continue focusing in on what they can do. So we tell them all we do, this is how an audition works in today, at this hour, this is how it's working, might change next week, but today this is what's going on. And we try to give them the insider scoop so they can be as prepared as possible. Because we do all the work, they do all the work, you do all the study, but once you get behind that audition door nobody knows, it's a big secret. Well I've been behind that door many, many, many times and I've been told many times "no" and I've been told I've been of the wrong type or the wrong whatever, or "yeah that was wonderful but you just stand out," they tell me. And then other people just don't say anything at all, so that's the part of the business you don't see, it's very competitive.

So you have to kind of know how to deal with that and I tell you how I deal with it. Everyone does it differently, but is it always glamorous? It's always glamorous and it's always beautiful, but you have to be prepared, but there's so much other time you don't see. The glamour's like this much and then there's the work. There's the work and then there's the rejection, and then how do you get through that? And I'm very lucky to have a very strong family unit. My mom is very supportive. My family, my entire family, so—and usually the communities. I always involve myself with churches and stuff, so they're always very supportive of me. So yeah, if you keep that support system going you'll make it.

[0:25:10]

MD: Well I know that your schedule is tight because you're a man in demand on campus here.

RC: Yeah, I got here last night and I leave tonight, it's crazy, but I am glad that they had me out. I love coming back to OSU and will do all I can to make sure OSU is thriving for many, many, many, forever.

MD: So we really appreciate it, it's been an honor meeting you.

RC: Aw, thank you.

MD: We will include your performance today in this oral history.

RC: I just hope it was okay at this hour, oh yeah. So thank you, yeah I'm honored to be here, so thank you.

MD: Thank you very much.

RC: Yeah. See you, bye OSU, love you.

[0:25:47]