

Dance and the New Orleans Second Line Tradition

Interviewee: Wellington “Skelly” Ratcliff Jr.

Interviewers: Rachel Carrico and Daniella Santoro

Interview date: March 26, 2014

Locations:

- **Part I:** In Carrico’s car parked on Washington Ave.
- **Part II:** McDonald’s on S. Claiborne Ave.
- **Part III:** In Carrico’s car, driving to Celebration Hall on St. Bernard Ave.

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Part 1: Washington Ave

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:00:00 I was at a concert coming out, and it was in—what, 1986? It was Tougher Than Leather concert. So I came—after dropping my clothes off, I came right here [Washington Ave.], and the club wasn't really doing nothing, so I went in, seen the lady—she was in the club. I was in there. Pack girl came in saying, My sister wants you. So I left out the club, crossed over on the side of the street, walked up the sidewalk this way. And I turned up Willow, where I grew—I grew up on Willow on the far end on this side. My building would have been on this side. So as I'm walking up the street on this side, there was a car waiting at the light, but the car was all lit up. A guy hollered my name. What's up, Skelly? I hollered; kept on going. I walked about another half a block and got up here. Another guy hollered at me—hollered my name, so I don't know if these guys were telling them who I was by hollering my name or else. So when I heard that, I crossed over on this side. The guy came out the driveway and drove down on me, like, Where the keys at? I'm like, The keys? What you talking about? He said, Where the keys? I said, I don't know what you talking about. While I'm standing there, my back is in the driveway, and the driveway would be anything like this lot, but it's black. If I can get to the inside of this lot, I'm feeling I'm not going to get shot. So I don't think he—I think he knew I was about to run or try to run, so he started walking towards me, shooting.

0:01:17 The first two shots hit me in my chest. The last ones hit me—one of them hit my leg, so I fell. When I fell, I fell on the side of—the car would have been on this side of the street because he shot me from that side of the street. So that meant he had to come around the car to see where I was. When he got around the car, I pulled myself up under the car and was lying there like I was dead. My life partner friend came—well, I say my life partner friend—my partner's mom came outside and said, You didn't shoot him enough? Leave him alone. And that's what made

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him stop. Jumped in the car—a guy pulled up, and he jumped in the car and pulled off. So she came downstairs, and her daughter had a watch on. The lady took the watch off. She kept my pulse, and her mama kept talking to me, so by then, the people that heard the shots came to the area. And I was going—I was blacking in and out. I was going in, and I was going in and out. Every time I would hear a faint voice, I was going out, somebody hollered, you know, Fight, man! Fight! I could hear some of the familiar voices, but I kept feeling myself blacking out. So it took like forty-five minutes to an hour before the ambulance had made it to the scene. But when they made it, they put me on the gurney.

Rachel Carrico

It took forty-five minutes?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:02:22 Yeah, for them to come in the projects. So that's why when I got out of jail after surviving that, I used to tell them 911 is a joke because that was the song out at that time. [Flavor Flav](#) had made that song about the police. So, you know, that happened, but in the sense of—I don't know if it was just bad timing for me or just my curiosity got me—you know, I thought about it over the years and can't—still come up with the same thing. I saw it—just saw the keys in it, just like any other child—your curiosity before your care. I wanted to ride the bike. I knew how to ride a bike, but this was a Harley-Davidson. I took the Harley-Davidson. Keys in it. Helmet on it. Never did I know that the bike was left there for drug—for somebody to pick it up. So that decision I made that one time caused me to get myself in the situation that I was in.

0:03:15 I was bitter at a lot—about the situation and bitter towards a lot of people because I felt like nobody really—couldn't understand my situation. You know, they don't—you know, they never knew what it was about. You know, everybody was passing judgment. And my grandmother—my dad, my mom, and my grandmother are scared because they're figuring—they saying, Well, the guys may come back and get him because they didn't find the bike. And my grandma, she tripping—Wherever the bike is, tell me so I can get it back to the people they standing up. Somebody—man come knocking on my door asking me about a bike. And nobody knew where the bike was, so they never found the bike. The bike was right across—on the other side of Toledano, in an apartment complex in the back, which was one of my best partners' aunt-tee's house. And we covered it up and chained it to the pole like it was a normal bike. We just put it back there and chained up. So it stayed back there for a couple of weeks.

0:04:10 And when I come home, I just got home on my own. Everybody was putting up so much commotion. I just got my bike taken. And I moved it from my—her house and brought it to my grandmother house in the backyard. And the man came and got the bike. But he never got the drugs on it though, you know. Another incident—then I got shot in '82. I was sixteen at the time but I was shot then because of my jewelry. I used to wear a lot of jewelry, and the guy wanted to rob me of my jewelry—two guys, rather. I had to be sixteen at the time and got shot in my back. And my grandmother must have told—the people must have told her that I can be paralyzed, but, you know, I need to get out of the bed and just start working or something. So my mom used to

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drag me out of bed that first time, and they pushed me a lot. I came back from that. But I think that was somewhat of an iron in a fight that made me want to just go wild. Like, I mean, after I got shot then, sixteen, I walked away from that, got my legs back, I felt like I had paid my dues to the hood and everybody had to respect me—this, that, and the other.

0:05:23 So I remember, my mom ended up incarcerated in '80—yeah, like '85 or '86, I think. So that meant that I had—it was me and my—when I got paralyzed, my mama was already incarcerated. So that meant my mama had already prepped me for if something happened to her, I had to be there for my sister and be able to take care of both of us. So here I was in the twelfth grade in high school without a job, having to pay light bill, water bill, gas, save my mama money, make sure my grandma all right, make sure my sister all right. So the responsibility at the time—it was not—I didn't look at it as being overwhelming, but it was pushed upon me like as if—if you do or you don't. If you do, there's the possibility that would happen; if you don't, this.

0:06:11 So, that being said, I pushed hard to maintain all the stuff my mama had left. She had a lot of stuff in storage. So I got tired of paying the storage bills, so I started packing the stuff in the house. Everything she had, I just put it in the house. All her clothes, all her jewelry, I packed in the house. So now, it's like, I'm not going to school. So now, I got to pay the—you know, find ways to pay the bills and make sure I try to stay on my sister about staying in school. My dad got slick now, and now my dad not really telling me everything and she not being a hundred. So she hanging with other girls. So she had find this opportunity—going, My brother ain't gonna be on me that hard. She's sneaking around, and she ended up getting pregnant as a result. My mama held that against me for so much, man. Like, really, it was a overwhelming weight. It was like my mama really wanted me to be in a situation where—when my sister got real out slick, like, I was going to just jump in front of the boy and say, Stop what you're doing! I can't keep up with her, knowing if you're going to school or not. So I explained it to my mom for a long time. Then eventually, she gave me some gratification by saying, I understood, son. You did a good job. I know you couldn't be there to stop her with that. So that kind of like lifted a lot of weight off my shoes because I only wanted to do whatever I was supposed to do for my mama, and I wanted her to be proud of me. But at the time, when she said—my sister got pregnant and held that against me. It was like I forced her; I pushed her. I wasn't doing what I was supposed to do. And I'm saying, mom, she must—more wanted to do that than me because—I mean, you know, to do it because my dad didn't have to.

0:07:40 So that being said, you know, we cleared that. I was cool. But the relationship with me and my mama, distant. I mean, after I got paralyzed, then she ended up getting married. So the relationship we had—we were like this, me and her and my sister, but as the years went on, everybody started twinkling and going their own way. My sister and me don't communicate with my mama as much as we should because of my mama's husband. I had a fight with him. I don't like him because he's controlling, trying to be so manipulative. And my mom is very intelligent, but I feel like she went into the relationship expecting one thing, and she got something else. And now, she's in a relationship where he didn't tell her on numerous occasions that he don't have nobody there for him. So I know she felt like she should be there for him because he's there

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for her. So that being said, that's their marriage. I love him, but I just don't like what he do. And I don't like that they come around when they don't have nothing. They want me to fix it, and when I fix it, you don't see them no more. But they don't give me credit. They're gonna go tell all my friends about all the negative things, and they think it ain't gonna get back to me. As soon as they say it, it gets right back to me. And I'm telling 'em—I'm saying, Mama, I look at it, I look at you as being my mama, wouldn't even sit down and entertain no thoughts of talking about me to somebody and figuring they're not going to come back and tell me, or you allow your husband to sit down and talk about me knowing that it's going to get back to me.

0:08:59 But—you know me. I talk to a lot of people. Every day, I go places, and I'm mentoring. I'm going to parenting classes. And my grandson's in school. All this to try to be a better parent, be a better grandparent, but at the same time just try to do some of the things for my kids that my mom never did with me. I played sports, and I was good at sports. And my mama just didn't—my dad and my mom didn't make all my sports games like most parents did, supporting and wearing the number. My mama didn't have time for that. She was always trying to keep the bills paid or whatever. So I played sports, and I was good, but I never had my dad and them in the stands, like a fan base and all of that. So a lot of that over the years, I used to be asked myself, man, how can I get my mama and my dad to show me they appreciate what I do or get down about what I'm doing? My mama, with me being—my mama was not being in total relationship with my dad because when they were in high school, they wouldn't believe that she was pregnant with me from him. So I ended up getting—my mom ended up getting married, and I got a whole 'nother name from a guy that wasn't really my dad. But legally, he's my dad now because he the man that signed my birth certificate. But, you know, I actually had—I have two fathers. I have a father that's my biological father, and the father that took on the responsibility of me, raising me, and he gave me his name. So having that, it's a better—it's kind of strong structure. You know, I have two men when you want to talk about manly things that you can get advice from.

0:10:40 But it's like—man, I'm at a point now where I'm so overwhelmed and so frustrated that I carry so much on my plate. And I try to—you know—I'm not open to talk to a lot of people, so I keep it in a lot, and it's kind of—it get overwhelming at times. So sometimes, it's just pressure that it crack—you crack. I go to second lines really to relieve—that's how I get a chance to relieve tension that I don't normally relieve during the week. If I relieve it, it would probably be fussing or get into an argument—so, I get away, get in the zone. Music does a lot to soothe a lot of other things. Like, you know, my mama relates to me—my mama stay right over here. I could get out—

Rachel Carrico

She does now?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:11:26 I can get out of this truck and push up Claiborne this way to Louisiana Parkway, and she stay right across the street from the daiquiri shop where they killed that guy—where the guy got killed. But I can tell you from both of my hands how many times I've been to the house. And she

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stay right there because I don't get along with this dude. And it's so much stuff. I had to get up—I can get up the steps and get down the steps. I just don't like him because he's materialistic, and he's controlling. And it's like, when I go around my mama, and she's sitting on pins and needles because she's worried about what's the reaction he gonna say if I gonna say something that he don't like—if I don't say nothing—approve of him, I don't speak to her, don't speak to him—I mean, if I speak to her and don't speak to him, it's a problem. If I call on the phone and talk to her, Hey, ma, how are you doing? Or he goes—you know. So I just stay away. But it hurts because doing thirteen years in the prison, all that I wanted to do was get back around my mom and spend time with her. She got lupus, and she's sick. But it's hard.

0:12:39 But, I mean, a lot of stuff that I do, I do to try to keep my mind off what I go through to benefit, help any other kind of way I can to somebody else. I'd be a blessing to somebody else. But, you know, I just pray on it. It's gonna get better because I feel like—and God, I mean—in all the good times, she'll come around enough to say, Well, you know we're not going to allow this to be an open chapter where if I close my eyes, that didn't bother me, that my kids are not on the same page. My daughters—I mean, my sister is forty-six. I'm forty-seven. So she only have two kids, and neither one of us go around because of the man—how he is. He's sitting around, looking, and my mama has never had nobody to be around her like that. So, you know, I see her from a distance, and I play my distance like that. So when I came—I had moved on this street right here, on Jackson, and they had some apartments they were staying in. I stayed with them. But when I got there, and I seen how it was, it was like I had to get my own because of him. He was always saying something if a dish wasn't washed, something was out of place. This time my daughter came, and she was pregnant. She comes staying with me. He asked my mom, What's she doing here? What do you mean what's she doing here? It's my daughter. So we had a lot of difficulty. That being said, I just pray on it, you know, me keeping my God allowing us to have a relationship before she close eyes because that's gonna hurt me if I don't get back to where I used to be with my mom on that level.

Rachel Carrico

Skelly, what's the timeline? You talked about two separate incidents of being shot, right?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:14:22 Yeah, I got shot in '82, which was at a second line, like April 29. It was at a second line, and it was ending at the [Young Men Olympic Club](#) [*sic*]. But it used to be [Tujague's](#) at the time, but now it's the Young Men Olympic's bar [*sic*]. And I got shot. A guy wanted to rob me, and he shot me in my back. And I kept on walking. I walked to the corner of Liberty and Josephine, which was—the corner was catty-corner from the bar. My grandmother was in the bar, and she came out the bar because she knew the second line was ending, and I was, you know, going to come to the bar. And the guy shot me. I collapsed on the corner with all my jewelry. He ain't got no jewelry from me. And I ended up going to the hospital for that as a result. It didn't do—it just—it lodged in my back. I come back from that, and it's like—'82 to '86 will be the four-year timeline for me when I got shot in '86. It was, like, September 29, 1986. I think it was a Saturday

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night, probably around 11:45, seven to twelve, a night like this. You know what I'm saying? Club night, probably. I used to always go hang out in the club.

Rachel Carrico

What was that club called?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:15:42 The Congo. Yeah, it was The Congo at the time. And it used to be crowded at night. We used to sit down on these steps. The church steps was right here. That's what they tore down right here—was a church right here. We just sit on these steps—come out of that bar. I got in a fight with a couple of guys—always fighting in the bar, all that kind of stuff. But you know—and I got shot in '86. It was—I don't know. It was a time for me that my mom wasn't there, so me grasping what had really happened, I couldn't comprehend it at first. But as the days went on, and the doctors used to come around, and they doing the diagnosis on you, and they saying, This is the nineteen-year-old Black male with multiple gunshot wounds to the chest. As a result, he's a [T-12 incomplete](#).

Rachel Carrico

What does that mean?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:16:45 I was paralyzed. But I heard this for a while, and then he said the word paralyzed. So it resonated like—hell. So I'm looking at my feet, and every day I look at my feet, and I want my feet, my toes to move, and things wasn't—you know, so I really went to shutting down, but at the same time, I had to—I started getting into myself, asking me—being like, put yourself together. But it was like going back to my mama's womb and being reborn again. And I had to learn how to do everything over. And there wasn't nobody. I had to really get myself back into—if I'm going to be in this position to be able to survive. And it was grueling because I was nineteen. I was just really trying to be a man. And I mean, my dad, he wasn't there. My mom, she was incarcerated. My dad came the night I got paralyzed—I mean, when I got shot—and he's always been there for me. Both of them have. But I mean, it was like I was in a big hole, and I couldn't get myself out there. I couldn't get nobody to get me out of it. So I had to get myself out of there. But it was frustrating because I was so used to doing so much on my own, and now, I need help. So then, when I expected my friends, the friends that I called my boys, to come around, they didn't. So that meant I had to really start doing a soul searching and learn how to get out of my own. Being so independent like I am, that's where I come from.

0:18:17 One of my friends told me he had no room in the car for me to bring me to a concert that me and him had already spoke on going to together. So that really touched—that resonated home again. That really touched me to make me feel like, if I wanted to do anything I wanted to do, I was gonna do it on my own, whether I had to start off early or start off late, but I would get there. So that's where getting out of the house on my own, pulling my chair down the steps, pulling my chair up the steps come from, you know, because the minute you put so much trust in a person is

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when that person is not going to be there for you, not intentionally saying that that person's gonna let you down. But sometimes, you may have someone in your life that you cannot put aside for that instance to, you know, to come—to do something. So you have to do something else. So, you know, it's hard when you're in certain instances—like Francis [Falls, another wheelchair second liner]. Francis can't get out of bed on his own, so he gotta wait for his daughter. He gotta wait for his nurse. He gotta wait for his wife to do all these things. I know how he feels. I know it hurts sometimes to be in that condition and not have nobody there for you when you feel this is your wife. My situation is the same thing. I gave my wife twelve years. But at the time, in the twelve years I gave you, you never had to bathe me. You didn't have to—I wasn't bedwetting. I did everything in the house that another walking man was supposed to do—clean, wash, fold. I did everything I was supposed to do. I played my role because you were the barrier at the time. But me just getting disability, you working, I'm not. But it came a time where I went to feeling like she didn't appreciate me and what I brought to the table, so I really started getting mad. And I'm like, Well, if you feel like that, I mean, you could take this and do it all by yourself.

0:19:53 So that's why I'm mad with that—you know, my wife. And it's like—I told her—I said, Man, I give you with more credit to, you know—I would've never in a lifetime thought you woulda did me, not like that, man. You know, that's like—that's the thing. You know, I can never trust you no more because if you wait—one argument we had—we had one argument—we used to have arguments that I would just leave just to get space, come back two or three days later. Everything cool. Where you at? I'm coming by my sister. All right. This particular time, you packed everything I had, so I felt like you were intending—you had this already in your mind, but you wanted an opportunity for it to happen so that that would have been your reason to do what you did. Now, I know, and everybody know. Everybody know. I know. Your children know, and everybody. But I'm cool, but I just don't like the way you—if you had told me, Man, we need space. I can respect that. You didn't go about it that way. So that's the business in my heart as far as with her, you know. But I ain't mad. I mean, I'm good. I just—I'm more focused on getting Push for Change known and doing a lot of things to do Push for Change, and in the same process—

Rachel Carrico

I'm gonna—you started talking about—I'm gonna go ahead and start the car, and we can start moving towards it. Keep talking—but start moving towards the McDonald's.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah, right there. See it right there?

Rachel Carrico

Right there? Okay. I also wanted to ask about—in your teenage years, you talked about dancing down in the quarter for—like for tips and stuff with the tourists?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

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0:21:30 Yeah, well, I started dancing—for me, started in the hood. You know, you danced in your hood. You danced at the block. We had block parties where DJs would play and—you know, but for money, just the hustle, just to get down and get the camaraderie and go down there. We used to take shoes and put taps on them, an old pair of tennis shoes or an old pair of shoes.

Rachel Carrico

Bottle caps?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:21:55 Bottle caps. We were taking—when we were doing it—bottle caps is a thing now. We were taking real taps. We would go to—

Rachel Carrico

Really?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

—and buying real taps to put on your shoes or get a pair shoes and buy taps. And we were going on—we'd go to Canal—you're gonna probably have to go—let me tell you—it's a red light.

Rachel Carrico

Okay, come back around?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah, and we'd go in the quarters and hustle for tourists. I might tell you a story. I said, I bet you I could tell you where you got your shoes at. And that was the question—you know, first impression, you would think I'm actually tryna tell you where you bought them at, but I'm telling you that you had them in New Orleans on [Bourbon Street](#). And that's the catch to the question. But a lot of people didn't know that. So, you know, that was a hustling question. They might give you a tip. You'd tap. Dancing was a big thing for me. I felt like when I was that age, I wanted to express myself and show people that I could dance, so we went to the quarters and danced. And we went from the quarters—went for dancing in the quarters to dancing in a lot of places for people. We went to dancing and clubs, concerts, disco. But at the same time—you can go ahead. At the same time, you know, all that made an appetite in me. I grew up out dancing. So we started doing world fairs. We started going out of town dancing. I grew up on Josephine and LaSalle, where I started a little neighborhood group that was, you know, all the kids in the neighborhood, you know, and it was fun.

Rachel Carrico

Did you have a name?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

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0:23:26 Yeah, our group name was Footloose Breakers. We were good. We danced in the [Superdome](#), won a trophy. And my mom became my manager because the more we went into quarters and danced, people were giving me cards. Get this to your manager. And so I just made my mama a manager.

Rachel Carrico

How old were you?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

I was probably about sixteen. I probably was about sixteen at the time. And all the kids—I had about one or two more dudes my age, and everybody else was—excuse me—twelve, younger.

Rachel Carrico

So was this before the first time that you were shot, or did you keep dancing after that, like after '82?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:23:59 Yeah, the first time I got shot was in '82. You know, after I got away, I went back to dancing like it was nothing. We went to the club. That's what you did. You went to the house clubs. That's what you did. You danced against your friends on [Canal](#). You know, we went on Canal for [Mardi Gras](#), and you had guys—we used to walk around with our own music. So it wasn't hard for you to stop and see somebody and want to challenge somebody and dance, and you had your radio. So, you know, that's what it was about for me. Then, I was like 6'4". I was considered tall and lanky. So, you know, guys were looking. There used to be a lot of jealous guys because I was tall. And we're speaking about it right now. There were people saying, Well, yeah, you know, he was bad. You know, a lot of people was jealous of me, which it was because of my dancing skills. It grew a lot of animosity—and I dressed good, and a lot of girls liked me, so I got into a lot of fights at block parties. I got into fights at house parties. I got into fights, you know, just because. You know, dudes just didn't like me.

0:25:01 The love I had for basket—I mean, basketball, sports, and dancing. I went everywhere. If it was a basketball game, and the best played, I went there. If it was—so everywhere the best was dancing, and I wanted to go out, win the contest that there was—we won a contest in the '80s for [The Joy Theater](#). The Joy Theater was giving a concert—I mean, it was giving a rap contest. [Sporty T](#), [Gregory D](#), some of the hottest artists in the city had applied to get into the contest. The week of the contest, everybody in our neighborhood telling us, If y'all don't place, if y'all don't win first, second, or third. Y'all sad; don't come back to my neighborhood. Y'all better not talk about y'all rap, can rap, none of that. So it was like we had to carry our hood on our back. And we walked from Josephine to The Joy. That's like coming right up La Salle—I mean, up Simon Bolivar, under the bridge, past the Greyhound bus station. And we were—as we were in the process of walking, we're running our lines. We're running our verses together. So Sporty T and Gregory D was considered a hot pair—I mean, a hot rap group that was in high school. They went to [Kennedy](#). We went to [Booker T](#).

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0:26:18 So that being said, I had a rap group I started, plus I had a rap group at Booker T that was called the Triple Boys—Triple Boys that I rapped with and also danced with, too. So things went to getting where we went—you know, starting getting the competitions at school. But when we started rapping, and we started the group Felicity Crew, we started opening it up for different rap artists. We opened it up for [2 Live Crew](#) one time, you know, and it was—everybody at the time—like you say, it wasn't about money. It was about getting exposure and getting people to really see who you are in your own city. So that's what it was. It was a opportunity for us to do something. We opened up the show, and everybody enjoyed it. They talked about it. So back to The Joy, I mean, the two of them went to The Joy, and Sporty T and Gregory D, they dressed in the eggshell—the shell toe Adidas, Adidas jogging suits, so they're looking like real rappers. We had on some jeans and two—the same type of shirt, two different colors, jeans, and our tennis. Everybody bragging about they gonna win, this, that and the other. They went before us, and they sounded crap because they were tryna scream into the mics. The audio wasn't like—so I'm telling you, the two of them like, You see how they tryna scream? I say, You cannot scream. Don't scream. Just talk into the mic like you're talking. Your words going to come out smooth. You're going to hear our rap; it ain't gonna sound distorted. I say, You hear how they sound? And that's how it's gonna sound if we go in there and try to holler and scream.

0:27:48 So he had a part. At the end of our rap, he says a prayer verse where he says a prayer rap on that verse, and everything was going good. He spit the last chorus of the verse. We shut it down. Everybody jumped up, hollering and screaming. So, you know, the crowd was the judge, and they let the crowd judge, and we won. So we won the contest. They were waiting outside for us. They're like, Well, look, we got some more money. We're gonna put that money up with your money. And he said, We ain't got none of them, fool. We ain't gonna need to take no more money. We came here, did what we need to do, we won this contest. We proved that we won, got the prize money. Y'all be cool. Boy, they was burnt up. They didn't wanna hear that. They didn't wanna hear that. They didn't wanna hear that at all. They were like, Oh, man, y'all—so Sporty T and Gregory D made it big, but when they made it big, Gregory D had made it big and got signed a big contract, and he didn't bring Sporty T with him till like a year later or two. And I felt—everybody in the neighborhood, everybody that knew him, felt like that was wrong because once he got—that's just like [Run-DMC](#) and them when they started. Russell Simmons was their manager. And Russell was saying if he's gonna take Run and don't take DMC and [Darryl Mac](#), the man—DMC—the group ain't what it is. You can't make number one person, you know. So that being said, he—[phone rings]. My friend.

0:29:18 [speaking on the phone] 0:29:59

Rachel Carrico

So when—the dancing you were doing in both of these venues, like on the street and in the contest and the clubs and stuff, was it like tap dancing on the streets and then more of like—?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

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0:30:08 It was tapping in the quarters. It was hip hop when we danced in contests at the Superdome dances for—you know, they had Superdome dances. In the quarters, when we danced as a full line, it was breaking. Breaking was that next level of dancing for me. I learned how to tap. I really learned how to dance it from my mom. My mom, when they would get together, family gatherings, and they'd get in the house, put music on, and you'd be in the room, they'd come out, “Come show me you know how to dance!” And that went from learning how to dance in front of my people to, on weekends, or when I'm inside doing chores, I'd turn on [Soul Train](#) on the weekend, and I'm looking at *Soul Train* dancing through the house cleaning up. So it went from that—and I never was shy to get in front of a crowd of people and dance. I went to—started getting in contests. I went to winning contests. It went from that to start second lining. And my grandmother put me in second lining with the old man, [Mr. Bucket \[Alfred Carter\]](#). And that's when I started second lining with the Young Men [Olympian, Jr. Benevolent Association]. And being in school, I was the most popular already. So any school dances they had, I was the tallest one in the school. So I went and danced. I'd be the main one in the circle.

0:31:18 So the culture itself was New Orleans music, period, whatever genre of music it is. Once you are bit by that bug, you just—you know, I listen to jazz. I listen to R&B. I listen to country. I listen to [Zydeco](#). I listen to—[coughs]—excuse me—any type of music that is catching to the eye—I mean, catching to my ear. I went to—the first time I heard Zydeco, Zydeco to me was like second-line music, but it's just a fast tip. And then, you know, it's something different. But when you hear, it still has that southern flavor. It still has that same effect on me because I used to laugh because I'd say, Man, damn, if I wasn't in this chair, boy, I'd be done picked up the Zydeco because you see them swinging out, and, you know, it's a big old crowd of people in the club. And the club is going one way, and everybody's like—I'm like, Ooh. So I got into it and listened to it. And I started, you know, vibing to that type of music.

0:32:23 Jazz, when I started to listen to jazz, my favorite actor when I first saw on the screen was [Cicely Tyson](#). And I saw Cicely Tyson in *Roots*. And when I saw her in *Roots*, I always followed her from then on because—I don't know if I gravitated to her for seeing her as a Black woman, you know, Black slave woman, being a mother. And I gravitated to her. But I followed her whole career. But then I found out years later that she's married to [Miles Davis](#). She's been married to Miles. Then I found out that Miles was fighting a bad drug habit. He was a real heroin addict, but she still stuck with him until the end. So, you know, that was what I liked about her, and that's the way I was taught. And that's what I saw in my grandmother's marriage and her husband being married thirty, forty years. So, you know, I looked at her as being a strong woman that came from a background of people that told you that regardless of what your man go through, you stand firm behind him through all that. You know, and then, back in the days, you just have—people still say, you know, the man—I mean, the woman's place was that she knew her place. And when someone said she was behind him 100%, whether it was right or wrong, because that was her place, that was her husband.

0:33:44 It's different now. The vows don't mean nothing. It's just a set of words to a lot of these people. And, I mean, it's sad because you losing—we losing our kids. We losing our women. We

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losing our men because of the lack of respect and really knowing and appreciating another person's feeling, you know, to a degree where you respect her feelings like you want her to respect yours. The relationship has to be the same way, too. I respect her space, and I want her to respect mine, but we got to wanna grow together. And what you say—I'm taking the contents from you. You say—whatever I say to you, you take it. You're taking the content. But there's so much rebellious stuff going on now, you know, just everybody wanna do them. I do me; you do you. So that's what's cool. And it's a whole different era. It's a whole different means of respect. These young girls are not respecting themselves. They feel like they got to be halfway dressed, walking around you, you know, doing all this stuff for you to be approved—I mean, be accepted by this person. That person not accepting you for who you are individually, just only accepting you for what you've given him, what you can get. It's not about your heart. You know what I'm saying? The children, you know, like they say, these kids don't have—what do they say? What that word is when you don't have empathy?

Rachel Carrico

Sure, is that what they—

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:35:07 Feelings? You know, I'm serious. You know, some kids—like you were looking—my kids sometimes, some of them just stand up there and look at you, like—they wouldn't cry because they feel like if they cry, that makes them look—so, you know, having feelings, being—crying and letting go your feelings—every time, they're bottling up, and that's why these kids are so the way they are. You know, when you get out, and they got so much stress and so much anger in there holed behind—pride and stuff they don't know how to release. And the way they're releasing it, just hurting somebody, harming somebody to a degree. [Sees someone on the street.] Your window go down? [Yelling at somebody on the street] He probably didn't hear me. He got in the car.

Rachel Carrico

In the car?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:35:54 No, not in this car right here with him; he in the other car. He had a damn hat on his head. That's my daughter's friend. He probably heard me, probably looking, though. He in the car with the hands full.

Rachel Carrico

Yeah, and it's like, Who is that?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

No, but he ain't in his truck. There you go. Right there. They go, over here. [Yelling at somebody on the street]

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Rachel Carrico

He had his headphones.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah, see, that's—

Rachel Carrico

Should we go inside?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

What time it is?

Rachel Carrico

It's eight—

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

8:30 now.

Rachel Carrico

Let's go inside and have a tea or something. Can you just hold this and put this in your pocket?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah.

0:36:30 [End of Recording]

Transcribed by Adept Word Management, Inc 6/28/2022

Part II: McDonald's

Rachel Carrico

0:00:02 Okay, cool. So, Skelly, can you tell us about how you got—started second lining? You mentioned that your grandma put you in the [Young Men Olympians](#).

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:00:12 Well, my grandmother was affiliated—like knew a lot of old guys because she cooked—she was a cook at one of the restaurants. And, you know, just like the second line goes down certain streets, well, she knew all the people in the second lines, and she was—it was a normal thing for everybody. So when she started bringing me to second lines—as she started bringing me to the second lines, the more and more she started, I liked to dance to the music. The old guy, Mr. Bucket, told her—said, [Leona](#), you need to put him in a group with us. And that's pretty much where it started. I started second lining with them—

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Rachel Carrico

How old were you?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

I'd say about twelve when I jumped off into second lining.

Rachel Carrico

So kind of the same time that you were starting tapping down in the Quarter maybe—?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah, but I was tapping way younger—

Rachel Carrico

Oh, okay.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

You were out there just hustling—it was just—tapping in the Quarter was like hustling at Winn-Dixie over there, carrying bags—Hey, ma'am, you want me to carry your bag and in the process you give me a—? If I tap for you, you want to see me tap? I'll tap for you, if you're going to give me a—so it was a hustling thing. But not only that, but exposing you to the culture of music and dance. And we danced to the music that was coming out of the club. You just tap to—whatever—you get by a club, and you felt this club's music was playing good enough, then you get out there and tap. And people knew New Orleans for that. When you came to the Quarters, the tourists looked for that. That's why the Quarters is the way it is now, and you got all these guys that don't even much tap no more. You know, if you see somebody that's tapping, it's somebody that told them about that, but they done ran them cats out. And I see all everybody else that want mime. Everybody wants to stand up there like statues and paint themselves gray, gold, and bronze—they cool with that. But with New Orleans—the French Quarter is originally about tap dancing and jazz music. You go down there now, the clubs—I be forty-seven. These club that I have never been in—now that are dominantly and predominantly mixed with young Black people that's down there in the Quarter. Whereas when we were going, you can count on your hand the clubs that Black people hung in. Now, they're in every club. They're down there—and then—it was a whole another life in the quarters at nighttime.

See—you go in the Quarters in the daytime, it's nice. It's a tourist atmosphere. See, at nighttime, it's transformed into a whole different city. This is why you have all what you see. Dudes doing what they're doing 'cause it's be a whole different life. Youngsters that's out there hanging, they' running around—you know what I'm saying? Everybody that's—in their own little different worlds, doing their own little different things, you know? But me being the age I was, I never got comfortable with the Quarters. I have never been in a strip joint in the Quarters. I can tell you the places I haven't been. I haven't been to [Pat O'Brien's](#). I haven't been in [The Court of Two Sisters](#). I haven't been in [Ralph and Kacoo's](#). I haven't been in TGI Friday's. I haven't been in the [House of Blues](#). I haven't been in a few places. But when you go to talking about—what the bar's name

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is—[Chris Owens](#), I've never been in there. Any strip joints from [Hustlers](#) to whoever—the Hollywood Swingers, I ain't been in in none of them.

[03:17 Phone ringing] He's probably asking if I'm going with—excuse me—.

[Phone call ends 04:11]

0:04:12 Yeah, but another—you know—then, you know, I used to—me being a dancer, I had—you—you acquire your bragging rights. I was the cat that, when somebody talked about they was bad, somebody in the crowd saying, Man, we need to go get Skelly. Man, he talking about—he got to—Skelly! Well, they got a dance contest, and they're giving away such and such amount of money at the door. They got a dude that won two weeks in a row, talkin' about, Ain't nobody going to beat him. It's a gong show. Now, you get in there, and they gotta get—if you get finished, the crowd—they gong you. It was called Gong Show. So now I'm popping up at every little club they got a gong show—or if they got a talent show somewhere, I'm popping up. All right? They had the Packard Theater that's retail? Right there down on Rampart, in the back. Now, this is where Ray Charles used to come on Rampart when he came to the city and did shows, and we're playing at them small pubs. Rampart St. was where that was. The Packard Theater was on Rampart Street. So we went to this place one night, and we got the guy—we see he got a gong show. So we signed up for the gong show. We went for like six weeks in a row. They thought it was a fluke. So people went to—Oh, yeah! I see the crowd is the ones who's judging the gong show.

But we were so good that, you know, it started making me—we'd go dance for [Patti LaBelle](#) at the World's Fair. Man, I thought I had arrived, boy! You couldn't tell me I wasn't a celebrity. You know what I'm saying? It's strange to say, but people walk up to my kids—they say, Y'all know who he is? They're looking at you like, What do you mean? Yeah, we know who he is. That's my daddy. No, no, no, you don't know what he did! He a legend, man—that boy, he had the feet you—they ain't had nobody—and then they'd go to telling stories, so they'd be like, Man, dad, you can't go nowhere; everybody know—I say because I went everywhere, Saint Mary's dances, Xavier Prep dances, Warren Easton dances, Superdome dances, house parties. Man, I was so bad at dancing.

These women used to come to this little club called—at the [Young Men's Club](#). The lady would come in the club; she said, I came to that club every weekend just to watch you dance. She said, I would never approach you about dancing because you danced too good. And that was intimidating for me sometimes when I walked up to you and grabbed your hand, and you're like, No, you dance too good. No, you're going to show me off. No, I'm gonna make you look good. Come on. You know—you're like, No—they're like, No, your footwork too good—Skelly, You go dance. You know, we get out there and have fun. So it was intimidating sometimes. I'm like, No, I ain't gonna show you off, I'm going to show you some steps. And that's what it became for me to grab a little group and a group of people. Them kids kept begging me—they be like, Skelly, we want to be in a group. And my mama like, Look, all these young guys, all kids you

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got coming in front of my door—being about a group, I'm going to tell you what. You get to—we talked—we went right over here, which is City Trend, was probably Kent's or another little store.

0:07:03 They had Wolfman jogging suits. They were red and blue, and they had another color that was red and green. The suits were no more than it was—twenty dollars. So I went bought—you know, bought me a suit and I'm like, Well, it's our new dance. We gonna dance in these, you know. Like, man, why everybody ain't getting it? So now, we're going around to the parents telling the parents, Y'all got to get y'all children—if they wanna be a part of the group, they got to get jogging suits. All the children go home like—like you sent 'em home with a paper from school—Skelly said you gotta buy me a jogging suit—see my child talking about—yeah, he in the group, he gotta get a new jogging suit so we all look the part.

So now, you see, my mama—I'm pulling this money in—me and my mama went and bought us a full roll—not a half roll—we didn't go pull it out of somebody's house. My mama went and bought a full roll of linoleum that you put on the floor, the linoleum rug, the carpet—the linoleum you put on your floor?

We used to roll in a van. My mama had a customized van. We used to take our linoleum and roll it up on the track—on the top and tie it on top of the rack. And everywhere we went, from City Park, we didn't have to have no stage. We put it in and grass, put it on top of the grass and go to spinning on our head—you be like WHAAAT? So My mama like, overwhelmed.

We'd go, and we danced. We down by on Saint Louis Cathedral one night. We're getting it in. Then next thing I know, there're these two white men standing there watching us, so I done did something, then they came to the back of the line, and a man walks up to me—[changes voice timber] Take this card. Get your manager to call. Yes, sir, I sure will. What's your name? Are we sure? Sure, and we—they had a club in Chalmette. So I go home, and I'm like—my mouth was like this. I'm like, Mom, I got somebody want us to make some money. She's like, What kind of money? I'm like, Dancing for some money, the whole group. How much money? They ain't gonna pay y'all no money. I said, Ma, I told the man you were the manager. You gotta find out how much money it is.

Rachel Carrico

(laughs) That's your job.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:08:49 You gotta get your cut, and the group gotta get their cut. So she called the man. The man called and told her he wanted to see us. We go to a ballroom. Mind you, all of us under the age, and I'm under the age. They ain't serving us nothing but pitchers of Sprite, pitchers of Coke, and pitchers of water. We ended up eating potato chips. They feeding us and everything. No alcohol being served though, right? Well, my mama said, You noticed—you seen that white lady? I said, What do you mean? You didn't see that white lady wiping your face? I said, Mama, I didn't

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realize the woman was wiping my face. She was like, Why do you have the white woman wiping your face? It was all it took, but it was a club. We went to [Chalmette](#). It wasn't a Black club. We in a white club, and the man locked the club, and we danced. And I say we danced—for, like three hours. He paid us good. Guess how much we left there with?

Rachel Carrico

How much?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Our first paycheck was \$1,500.

Rachel Carrico

Whoa!

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

When my mama showed me that check, I'm like, Ma, you serious? All that money for us? She say, Oh, y'all good! Because the man gave her the money. He had a limousine parked outside the front, a stretch limousine. We sat her in the back. I'm like, Well, damn, they just hired me. They got a limousine outside, security outside. They waiting on us to dance. So when we get in there, it's a bunch of people, but it ain't no mixed club. So everybody was like—I had to go in the crowd and said, Look, don't y'all get nervous. You can't look the people in the face. Find something on the wall and stare at that. Don't you look at the people because y'all gonna get nervous and mess up. I said, Don't look at the people hard—you know, they ain't—they're drinking, and everybody's in tune. You know how you go somewhere like—? I don't know if y'all ever watched The Blues Brothers—when they went to that club, when they had the fence. Remember they started off, and everybody standing there, like—and they go looking like, Man, we got to do something, do something fast. Y'all, we're going to get out, but it tore up in here, they got a cage. They're throwing everything in the bar at them. So you know what I'm saying?

The same thing—when we get there, my mama, like—look, we want to enter—we entered into this contest—we was entering this contest at the Superdome. Everybody over the city come to the dome. My mama said, I done paid all this money for y'all to get jogging suits, buy linoleum for y'all, y'all going in this Superdome dance, y'all better place. I don't care if it's third place. Y'all better place first, second, or third. I'm like, Man, our career's in jeopardy. We got to go home with a trophy. Now, all the trophies like this, one like that, one like this. Man, I'm looking at the big one. I'm going to walk out with the big one. My mama said—my mama paid \$5 a head—\$5 a head to get almost eighteen or twenty kids in those things—he' the only adult. Baby, she's standing there, she done gave us our pep talk, and she said, Look, y'all better place because if y'all don't place, some of y'all might be walking home. I'm saying to myself, Oh, no. We right here. It ain't far, but we be embarrassed to walk home if my mom got a whole van, and we got to trail her. Man, you messed up, man. You got us walking.

0:11:49 [Answers the phone] **0:12:58**

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My niece called my phone.

0:13:00 [Answers the phone] **0:13:30**

I had to tell her not today—

[chatting about the phone call]

But, you know, so we go in the contest; my mama standing in the back of the stage. And I'm nervous because I'm in the zone. So we dance, and we do our routine. After the routine, the last part of the routine, we follow—if you ever seen a group do the domino effect, where the first person falls and everybody fall behind them, but I'm the tallest person, so I catch the last person, and I do like a free, but I don't fall. I catch the last domino-effect person and just break down into a pose. I don't fall down. I just break down on my knees. And that ends the show, right? So we finish, you know, you just freeze and you don't hear nothing. Then all of a sudden the crowd erupts. I'm like, We might have a chance. So now we're on the side of the stage standing, and my mom looking at us like—she's shaking. Like, you know, y'all better place. But y'all did good. I think y'all might get first place, but I don't know. Y'all might place. She's standing—we all knew. I said, Boy, if we don't get no trophy, boy, we're going to be in trouble. Somebody say, Man, we gonna get a trophy, Skelly. We ain't messed up. We didn't—our routine was flawless.

When people say, Third place—they called a group. Second place—they called a group. So we're looking around for—Hey, that was second and third. We might not even be winning first place—boy, we going to have to walk home! I was like man! they said, “First place winner!”—and I went to I turn around, look at my mom like, Man, this phony! Man, them people cheating us. “Footloose Breakers.” Boy, I ran up on the stage. I went up on that stage to snatch the trophy and I stood there on the stage, and I showed everybody like—you got something to say now? You? You? I lit up like—boy, we went back in the hood, we had our little party, and people cooked food. But I think that is why I'm the person that I am, because everything I ever learned—that's why my daughter the way she is, Terrinika [Smith].

Terrinika was a child—when she first started, she did just like I did. When you get in the house and you tell her to dance, she could dance. She would watch a video all day, wasn't no six o'clock—all day. See, that evening? Baby, she got Beyonce's step and she doing it better. She got everything down pat, but she never knew how to count steps. And I told her, In order for you to be a dancer, you have to know how to count your steps up. It ain't just jumping into a routine. You go, five, six, seven, up, move, up, move. You know what I'm saying? But you ain't just go—you got to learn how to count the steps, too. She had a Contest she wanted to enter—to enter at school. She wanted to dance one part of it, and she wanted to second line one part. But now, I am her coordinator-slash-DJ, so I got to take the tape, I got to tape the music, stop it, then tape the second line music after that so that the song—the tape would go straight into the second line

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music. So we had the house for a week. I said, What are you going to do, Terrinika? I'm gonna second line and dance. I'm gonna second line and dance.

0:16:53 So people are telling her already, Girl, you ain't gonna place. You ain't gonna win. All right, she come home upset, like, Daddy, they told me I ain't gonna place, I ain't gonna win. I said, Well, do you think that you are? I said, Do you think you have a chance to win? She said, Yeah. I said, Well, we gonna win then. I said, I don't wanna hear nothing else about losing. I said, If you don't come back with that trophy because you had doubted already—I say, go get that money. So everybody was like shocked. See, when the music came on, she danced. We went in, and it went from—and it broke down to second line music—after she started second lining, she shook the whole—that's—everybody in the audience had—Terrinika won that. But she didn't mess up. She wasn't scared. And she did everything I told her to do. From then on, she was a bug. When we go to second line, she goes. She attached to it. She going. I'm going to second line with my Dad. I'm going to second line. Damn sure don't be worrying about me.

They like that right now. We separated. We still communicate. We're starting to communicate more now because, you see, what you cause, you thought your children are gonna rebel with you and be all, Okay, man, that's cool. We won't go with Preston. They don't like Preston. They told Preston they don't like him. They told her, I don't like him. I'm going with my daddy. She in the car with him. Oh, Terrinika jumps out. They were supposed to be going eating, and he put—like me and you talking, and we eating? They right there. They must be sharing food. He decides to go put his hand on her food, and she clicked out on him. So when my wife said, Well, we share food, me and him. She said—Terrinika said, Well, what that have to do with me? She said, Well, what you would have did if your Daddy Wellington would have did it. Terrinika said, I wouldn't have did nothing because that's my dad. He can go in my food. He ain't my daddy. I don't know that man. He got no business putting his hand in my food. She jumped up from the table and left. She called, I asked where she was at. I'm going to my dad. She tells Preston—my wife tells Preston, Oh, she's going by—she doesn't want to see you, so she was going by me. Hear me? So I said, What's happening with you and this dude? I say, You in a relationship with this dude you scared of? He controlling you or something? This something you go into and now you don't know how to get out of? You scared of him? Because he ain't told me nothing. He ain't looked at me, told me nothing. And I told her—I said, If he say anything to my children, they come back and tell me. I'm coming over there because he ain't supposed to be saying nothing to them—he ain't coming up for them. He come—but you trying to win them over thinking you will get in with that—the only person accepting him is my son—my grand—her son, Mario. He ain't done no more. You know what I'm saying? My other son, Mario, do not—I mean, John, hate him.

0:19:10 The first night he pulled up at the house, I got the number—the add—I got his picture, the color of his car, and his license plate. So if I wanted to do him something—you know, you don't think I had intended—to him doing something? I'm not worried about him. I'm not even worrying about her no more because the only thing that hurt me, like I said—and it's being real, I was really dedicated to my marriage. I got your name tattooed on me. You ain't got my name tattooed on you. So it showed me that my love for you was way more bigger than your love for

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me. You see what I'm saying? So now, I feel some type of way because you knew how I felt, but I think you just didn't call yourself doing that to feel okay, he can't do nothing. So now, when you started messing with this clown, I told you about him. Well, that's my friend. He married. I said, What that got to do with it? But now, when I post a picture of one of my high school friends on my page, oooh—oooh—it's hell and damnation now. Oh, I'm gonna send you your papers in the mail, you and Candy, ha ha. That's the text she sent me after she's seen us in the store. But I only did that to send you a point. Me? I have never had a problem with getting girls.

At school, my girl—Candy, the one I'm talking to now, her and one of the girls that she best friends with, they like this. They BFFs—that's what the girl they saw—the last—night before last. They drank, and they drank in her house. She said, Candy, let me tell you something. Don't get upset, you know, but I was sweet on Wellington too. So she called me on the phone. Oh, you ain't tell me Michelle liked you, too. I was liked by a lot of people. I'm saying—I was liked—but I mean, it's just been real. She was also—remember, we went to reminiscing, and it was like we went back to childhood days when you be on the phone 2:30 in the morning. You know, the phone, you fall asleep, and you hear the dial tone [imitates dial tone]—you've been on the phone all night. That's how it was. Now we got cell phones. We on the phone 4:30 in the morning reminiscing the old times. You remember that?

You know, I used to be so happy to walk down the street and the dudes say, oh, that's Skelly's girlfriend right there. Oh, they wouldn't mess with me. I had—oh, everybody knew who I was. And we went to reminiscing, you know, how funny it was. But that stop—that was twenty-eight years ago. She was a virgin at the time. I was, too. She should have been my first baby momma. I ended up getting paralyzed. We lost contact. On Facebook, she said she saw five friends or some people you should know. Wellington Ratcliff? Oh, she pressed request, so I pressed—you know, Candy. Oh, she's the only one I knew when we were kids. And that's where it went. But now they found—oh, the quarter—both of the quarterbacks for our team, for Booker T, high school people, and I went on my page, and I posted my picture from then. I'm graduate from 1985. Everybody from '85 from Booker T, Oh, what's up Wellington? Say, Hey, you know. So everything I did in my lifetime, I always competed in basketball, football, dancing, but I had people that hated, but it was always people that loved me for being—that dude's dancing.

0:22:03 I had a little girl came up to me, and it made me feel so good. She come out for Josephine, and she came to play cards at my daughter's house, and somebody asked her, Did she know me? She said, Know? That man like my daddy. That man took care of me when I was a little girl. Anything I wanted—and I did that. Look, I seen a little girl, and I knew her mama didn't have money. She had come up to me, Skelly, I have fifteen dollars; I need twenty more dollars to get my hair fixed. Here you go, baby. I said, Come back and let me see your hair. Or, Skelly, I need ten dollars. My mama gave me ten dollars, but I need two more dollars to give me some gym trunks and my gym shirt I don't have. Here you go, baby. I see you on the porch and your children sitting on the porch, and I come up to you and say, Ma'am, how you doing? You know, I could take your kids and get them something from the store, good food or whatever, popsicles. You might be out. Oh, great, Skelly. I go to the store, buy them popsicles, but when I

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go in the store, I'm going to buy food, too. So when I come back, I got a whole bag of food—here you go, cook—but if you cook, fix me a plate. That's all I ask for. I ain't asked to come through your door. Just fix me whatever—you good if you go prepare the food, fix me a plate, and I'm good. Oh, Skelly, the food I said—everybody in the Black community—the food—it how you get in the door. I showed them I wasn't about nothing else but being nice, give us some food. If we didn't have no food in your house, then you got a dinner tonight. That means a lot.

I was taught that way. You don't give nobody no money, but you ain't going to refuse nobody no food. You know what I'm saying? That's just plain and simple. So dude was like, man, they're trying to find out how I do things, but I was only doing things decent, you know, how I was taught. Again, that comes back when my grandma used to always tell me, you can't take the kindness you take the care. This woman got fifteen kids. That man took care of all fifteen of them children. When you think about the old days, when the man worked, he worked on the railroad. He had a good job because when he went home, he had some mouths to feed. You tell somebody to marry somebody with fifteen kids. What? Fifteen children? Whew! Well, you got to feed on them. You got to clothe them. What? No, indeed. You know what I'm saying? We losing, and we losing, and we losing, and we losing our kids because guys don't want to be in a relationship, already-made relationship. And I seen guys like, I'm going out there; get me a little young girl, no babies. That's what you gonna get? A young girl that's still part little baby because she might not can cook for you and probably can't do nothing but fix some ramen noodles. You coming home from working and think you're going to get a little meal. She might have McDonald's special for you over that—a Value Meal and everything, a Kid's Meal with a toy, saying, Oh, baby, I got the toy for—a souvenir for you, too.

Rachel Carrico

All this for a dollar.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah, you know what I'm saying? And they done lost it—they done lost that. So my thing was—this is why—through dancing, through music, I give back. I mentor. I give back to children that don't have parents—I mean, daddies. I got guys calling me daddy, saying, Man, you're like my daddy. Skelly, I can sit down and talk to you about stuff, and I know when I leave, I'm gonna be in the right perspective of mind on how to handle that. But I mean, if we're individuals, though, we are involved and have a means of touching people, I don't feel that it's good to pollute and mess people's minds up. I tell them about the funny story that they be telling to make them go out there thinking, That's what he did. You got to give them real life in order to really appreciate who you is. And when you telling them something that's real and when they identify with that, they know one thing. If I go to him, he's not going to lie to me. He's not going to sugarcoat it. You know what I'm saying? He ain't gonna tell me something that would make me go out there and get myself killed because he won't be lying. I'm gonna treat you like I want you to treat my child or somebody else that's adult in my shoes to do my job. If we're doing something wrong, pull him on the side, say, Man, that's wrong. That ain't the proper way of doing that. You got to

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have respect for the people around you, what you do, respect yourself. There's ways of doing things.

0:25:39 My son, yesterday, I looked at him playing basketball and just to see he was—I would say—court respected. After every game he played, he went around all the players and shook hands, whether they lost or not. You know what I'm saying? So that's when you know your child has arrived at understanding respect. You know what I'm saying? They played a good little game, and they were running hard. After every game, Good game, man. Good game, man. Good game. You know? And that's camaraderie of people respecting you as an individual. And I'm not his birth dad. I'm just his step-dad. But he'll tell his birth dad, You ain't did nothing but birth me. You ain't taught me nothing about how to be a man or how to act when I'm around people. He right now twenty-seven years old, he ain't got a child. Good. You ain't ready for that?

Rachel Carrico

Skelly, when you were young and first in the Young Men Olympians, was that—were those people that mentored you and taught you some of the things that you're talking about now? Was that—?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

When we first started the social and pleasure club, everything about the club is just what it is. They teach you difference in man skills, dressing. Some men know—some kids don't really know how to tie a tie. We do that. I go to a mentoring class and try to tell them how to tie a tie because they don't think that you need to know. They're putting on a clip tie. They don't know what shining shoes is. So when you got in those groups, those groups molded you into men, really. It wasn't really about second line, it's about growing up, knowing how to dress, learn how to tie a tie—you just really learn how to be a young man, really. You know what I'm saying? Everything else came after; the second line and the camaraderie, that came afterwards. But being in second line it grew you up—it made you grow up to be a man. Then you learn how to do a lot of stuff that they don't do now. Social and pleasure clubs, they're not taking they members like they used to and teach them how to sew—then like the Indians do? The Indians teach you how to sew a suit. Eventually, you'll be sewing your own suit. I don't have time to entertain sewing your suit and sewing my suit, so I have to teach you how to sew. And when I teach you how to sew then that means? I taught it to you, you're going to teach somebody else. You're going to teach that person, and that person's going to teach somebody else. And it's a revolving thing—everybody teaches. But now, nobody want to teach. Everybody is, Well, I could do that and charge it on their lay [*phonetic*]. The group—now you're seeing the groups, the groups are not teaching no more. My group's president, you know, he know what I'm saying, but—you learn how to second line. They used to have practice and everything, too, like any practice. We had second line practice.

Rachel Carrico

Really? Like dance practice?

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0:28:23 Yeah, we had formations. It's like you were doing a parade. We had formations, and I'm going to do that when we separate.

Rachel Carrico

I've seen that.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah, you catch—a few groups do it. You have formations where they might stand, they might line up. They got fifteen of them, everybody lined up, all side-by-side. And one of them might blow the whistle. You see them come into one circle, and they come in—I mean, one line, and then might second line. They didn't have to stop—I mean stop and break down, put this—but all that was taught. You don't teach that no more. That's why with the [Mardi Gras or Black Masking] Indian thing—a lot of that went away because they don't know how to do gang signs. They don't know what the Indian signs is. They just play Indian. But it was something that went with that, you know.

Rachel Carrico

What about the steps? Do they teach the steps or they just teach the formation?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

They taught you the formation, and you really picked up your steps, just like I told y'all. Y'all pick up y'all steps, what you know how to do. You know what I'm saying? You're—It's a comfort zone for you. You can't really look at somebody else's feet and think that you're going to learn or do these steps. You know what I'm saying? It's that I watch Rachel, I watch Daniella, I take a little from Daniella, take a little from Rachel, and make it my own. All right? You might have a little one-two step where you slide to this side. She may have her a little one-two step where she gets on her toes. Yeah, you know, it's something different, but I'm still in moves, and that's where all that come from. You take moves from other people that you see do and incorporate it into your own. That's what second lining is. You make it your style. Everybody's not flashy. Everybody not fresh. Everybody just like to be cool. Some people break a sweat and get soaking wet. Well, I'm that one. I'm one of those guys. But then you got some that's like Joe. Joe don't worry about getting sweaty unless it's for Easter Sunday. You got a parade. But now you see him, he's so cool. He laid back, if he feeling himself he might want to. But me, I'm gonna get my money's worth—put out four hours on the street. You're going to see me work. And I ain't got nobody pushing me. Joe [Henry] gonna have somebody pushing him, Joe cool, good one.

Rachel Carrico

When you were young and in Young Men Olympians—because they're kind of a more traditional club, right? Were you able to bring your tapping, your breaking, your hip hop, that stuff? Were you able to bring that in to the second line, or were they really separate for you?

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0:30:27 No, I brought it in, tap dancing. And I took up something that most people never took up. But I went to dance class with my sister. I took up tapping and all that with my sister.

Rachel Carrico

In a dance studio?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah. So I wore leotards. I knew I wore the little boy tights and all that. Yeah, I was called a fag and all that. I dressed in that because my mama put me into me—into that. But that's how we got exposed. So for me to put on leotards, I didn't—it wasn't nothing for me to do it. I wasn't scared. But, you know, back then, that was taboo. They looked at you like, Man, ain't no man gonna put on those. Ain't no man gonna be doing that. But I love music. I danced at Loyola. I danced recitals at Loyola University. You know what I'm saying? I done danced all over the city for different things, but it was like any other family. You expose your kids to the things that they like music, and you don't set no borders saying, Well, this is just going to be the genre that I want you to listen to. Music is a bigger genre. You have to allow your kids to just listen to it and take from it what they get and proceed. We listened to oldies but goodies. Right now and there, the oldie but goodie come on, you say, Boy, this song was made in 19—you wasn't even born, but I could adapt to it because it was played in my household. I listened to it too much. That became music that I still listen to today. You know what I'm saying?

And, you know, everything with my dancing incorporate—I put it together, and I did—I always took something from my dance skills and made it a patent move. I had a move where I could be second lining and dancing, and I spin, take a spin, take my leg and cross it around and spin. Remember how Michael Jackson used to do that, spin and jump up on his toes? Well, I did that same thing, but my thing was, when I spun and come up on my toes, I walked on my toes. So I'm walking. I just froze like Michael did. I took it—stole that move from him, and I walked on my toes. So now, I'm second lining on my toes. Then, I would go down in cross position and come out that spin. So you got guys like [Charlie Brown](#) from the Sidewalk Steppers—I used to challenge him in dancing. They got a guy they called Squirt. They got a tall guy. This is the guy that put his foot up in the leg like he got a banjo and be playing. Me and him danced. You see his footwork? That's the footwork I had. Me and him, we used to go at it. You know what I'm saying?

0:32:47 So these guys that I still see today, that I pay homage to, I smile because I knew these guys along the way remembered me. They got a guy who used to call Motown Sound. He pulled the rope. He see me and say, Boy, these dudes knew you before you was walking, you know. And my trademark was the Gallo Show on Jackson and Claiborne, they had a Gallo Show, and on the side of that Gallo Show they got a big old bill—a billboard. They had a big old billboard sign. And I would run in front of the second line, four or five blocks, climb up on that building to get up on top of the Gallo Show and then climb up on that billboard. So when the second line swung on Claiborne and Jackson, I'm on that billboard cutting up. And you got a cameras there;

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everybody up there looking like, Man, look at Skelly! And my brother held the videotape for me for thirteen years, and he ended up losing it. He had a scene of me on the Gallo Show cutting up.

I had some—can remember me having on some—I had took some jeans and bleached them and put holes in them. You know, you bleach your jeans, then you cut the holes in it. I mean, there was holes in the whole pants on and the t-shirt. I looked like I had just come out of hell or something, just cutting up second line. So when they swung the car—my auntie, she knew about it. And every time I called home, she would tell me. I'm gonna tell you all this. The video that they took of me, that's on Facebook now. Everybody's like—everybody see it, and they're like, Man, I saw you on Facebook whoo whoo whoo. That was last year for joining second line on Father's Day. Carrie was on the video. If you ever see it, it's on my page, but—I mean, I shared it with everybody, so you might run across it. But anyway, she out there wiping my face. You could see her—me and her second lining and she wiping my face.

Rachel Carrico

Skelly, you told us the story one time not long after you were paralyzed, you were in a chair in your grandparents' house, and you heard the second line going by.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah.

Rachel Carrico

If you could tell that story again.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah, that was the first time I ever had a chance to get out the house—was the first time I wanted to get out of the house. And we were standing on St. Ann downtown, right off of Orleans, and I got—come home, and I'm in the back—I mean, my room was in the back of the house, but I'm laying in bed. I don't know if I was watching stories or—something was on, and I could hear music. So when I heard the music, I hear, uh, uh, uh (sic). But [Rebirth](#) used to come around the neighborhood. They used to practice in the neighborhood. So they didn't have to have a—they didn't have permits. What they did—they would get their uniforms, the bands, their stuff, and come around the neighborhood. So I was looking—I'm listening, but I'm like—so I went to the front door, and I peep out the front door. I don't see nobody. So I go back, I say, Grandma—I said, Would you please let me down the steps? I got on my little jamas, now. I ain't putting on no clothes. I just got out in my jamas in my sleep. I'm like, Grandma, let me down. My grandmother's like, No, get your grandpa to let you down. I'm like, J, come, let me down. Where are you going? I said, I'm trying to go see—listen to the band. Excuse me. They're like, Listen to the band? No, we ain't letting you out there—No. So, man, I went to that door again and seen people coming around the corner. I'm like, Please, let me down. They won't let me down. So I didn't know how to pop a wheelie, and this was a big old —the manual chair it was all iron. I went to the back.

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Rachel Carrico

That's a good catch. (laughter)

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:36:00 I backed up from the—so what are you doing? Pops a wheelie like this. You hit the door—the screen door popped open—you got you a little spring on it—you know it spring open AHHH! It hit the wall, and it come back. I looked out the door again. I see the people steady coming. I say, This time I'm going out down the steps. I did it again. I hit the door. Boom! The door flapped open, and I went down the steps. Bam! I hit the ground. I'm trying to get up. So the guys come around at the second line, and they picked me up, put me in the chair, dust me off, and I ended up following on the second line. And when I got finished they brought me back home. But that was my first time going to the second line. They pushed me. I enjoyed it. And from then, it was like a bug. If I couldn't get there with you, I started off early in the morning, and I get there right on time. I'd call cabs. I'd pay almost \$30 to go to the second line, so you know I got to be a junky behind second line. Every time, you give up \$30 in cab fare in New Orleans. I had to come from uptown. I'm calling everybody. Rachel, could you come to take me to second line? Oh, Skelly, I can't come get you. Daniella, I need to go to the second line. Can you—? Oh, Skelly, I can't come get you. I'm like, See, man, I got some gas money for y'all. I can't come get you. I called a cab. Cab man, he never do feel me. I say, How much I owe you? I'd say, \$25!? I'm like, Oh, man, you got it bad, son. You got it bad. If you're going to pay \$25. I say, I won't be paying \$25 to get out tonight. I came down here, somebody bring gonna me home. And that's how I, you know, came.

So I'll be—the camaraderie you get when you meet people from different wards. Second lining in the Ninth Ward is different because all the people in the Ninth Ward come out for that second line because that's the biggest thing in the Ninth Ward. Where I was uptown, it's a big thing all the time; people come out. But, you know, across the river is a different atmosphere. They got a second line group called The River, you know, and I never been across the river. I've never been to nothing across the river. Everything dealing with on this side I've been. Now, downtown it's all-Black parade; across the river, truck parade that they—you know, they go to—I never been to that. And it's sad to say; I'm New Orleans-enean, and I ain't been across the river. I'm sorry. I don't know nothing about across the river. I would get lost across the river. You could drop me off in a neighborhood and tell me to find my way back, and I'm like, Really? I won't be going nowhere.

Rachel Carrico

Where's the bridge?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:38:10 Yeah, I don't see no kind of iconic—or, yeah, that's going to go switchback, and I'm going to go that way. I'm gonna be—you don't see nothing. They got a lot of places across the river that look just like over here, houses, parks—they look the same. You're like, Man, it look like my street right here, you know, but—

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Rachel Carrico

So, over the years, as you've been second lining in the chair over the years, and your chair's obviously gotten better, more sophisticated and lighter, but how have you—sort of like—molded your second lining, your dancing in the chair? Like, where did your footwork go? Like, what's your footwork now?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

My footwork is my upper body. My feet don't work. I move my feet a little bit, but I move my feet just to show people that—you know what I'm saying? I'm not totally paralyzed. Most people see me and say, Man, that man is not paralyzed. He's moving his legs. He's doing too much movement. Paralyzed people don't do all that. Well, actually, I am paralyzed, but I'm called a paresis, and the paresis is a person that has not full mobility, but just some mobility. So I'm no longer classified as a paraplegic, but a paresis. A quadriplegic is a person that does not have no movement from the neck down. A paresis or a paraplegic is a man who's paralyzed from the waist down and does not have no movement. Well, this leg is my stronger leg. I couldn't do that when I first—and I can do that. So I mean, all that came from practicing, error, pain and just not allowing my body to lock up and not being able to have my legs being like they used. That's all I was seeing, my legs not continuing to be like they normally were in case I had to walk. That's why I walk on them. That's why I pull up—get a chair, pull my chair up. I've never allowed myself to become totally—what they would say bedridden or paralyzed because of the simple fact that I knew a lot of my friends didn't—couldn't come get me. So, you know, it would be in my best interest to keep myself in this shape and form. And if you look at me parade or if you look at me after four hours at a second line, I still have to get home, and I get home. I push. You know what I'm saying? I mean, I be tired. My body be locked up, but I push. I incorporate moves that I used to do before I got paralyzed.

Rachel Carrico

Yeah? Like what?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:40:27 It's kind of hard. I don't know. You know, I got so many. I don't even have a name for some of the moves. My daughter, they were talking about it. They called it—she started doing this dance. They called it—Doing The Wheelchair where she used to—or like doing the Skelly. But she'd be doing this and doing the thing. Look, she was about—do the Skelly, and she'd take her hands like—she turned 'em into the chair. You know what I'm saying? They used to make fun of me doing it, like, Oh, y'all got to do the Skelly. So, you know, my moves is more upper body, my hands, you know, but a lot of the stuff I do is therapeutic, and it's really rehabilitation—all in that fashion for me. I mean, I tell people I could be out in the crowd of 1,500 people, and I don't see them people. All I hear and see is that band, and that's where I'm gonna be, behind that band listening and feeling that beat. I can have a million people with cameras. I'm not looking at cameras. I'm not feeling no camera. I ain't trying to frown, pose, unless it's a still picture. But when I'm in the music, my mind—it's like that experience some

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people see—I had an out-of-body experience. My body could be right here, but I'm—my spirit—you know what I'm saying? I'm flying above the whole second line. That's my spirit right there. I'm like—and you see the expression on my face and say, Boy, he's going ham. People like, Man, Skelly, boy, he'd be cutting up. And that's not just to be for sure. That's how I'd be feeling. When I'm feeling the music, you're gonna see me dance. If I ain't feeling the music, you be saying, Damn, Daniella, Skelly must be feeling bad. He ain't did a move or one-two or one.

Like last week, I couldn't do nothing. My head was hurting. So all I did I walked around the second line. All the people that see me, every girl came past me. Oh, the second line must be bunk. I'm looking like, What do you mean? Oh, the second line got to be bunk. You ain't dancing. I said, Well, oh no, it ain't the second line. Today, my head is hurting. I can't do nothing with a headache, you know.

Rachel Carrico

And you said you'd like to be behind the band. Is there, like, a part in the street? There's a part in the street that's the best to be, right? Or like a part in the parade?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Well, for me—for me, you know, most people like to be behind the band, in a few feet where they can hear the band good. I like the vibration of the music, so I like to be right on the heels. Say, for instance, I'm either two rows or a row behind the band, I mean, right there on the tuba player's butt or the bass drum player or the snare drum player. But I want to be right there where that music is. I'm hearing the horns. I'm hearing the trombone. I'm hearing the tuba. And I hear that boy with that cow horn boop-boop-boop or that man with that glass bottle bink-bink-bink. You're hearing that, and I'm feeding off of all that. I might hear the beep, beep, beep sound but it made me wave my head. I might go to clapping my hands if I hear the dude beating on the cowbell—you know what I'm saying? And the music itself is so therapeutic—be like—

0:43:08 The food in New Orleans, the gumbo—everybody had their own little flavor and their own little way of fixing their gumbo. We all don't prepare the same way, but at the end of the day, it all comes out the same as a finished product. You know what I'm saying? And when you think about the groups that done played in the city, The Rebirth, the [Pinstripes](#), and all these new groups, the [Pinettes](#), the [Da Truth](#), [TBC](#), all these people also took little knickknacks from other groups and made it their own, like the Pinettes being an all-girl group. You know what I'm saying? They have to establish their own style. You heard me? And it's like flavor because the guy, Travis, with Da Truth—I love Da Truth. I love Hot Eight. I love Rebirth. I love Rebirth because I came up listening to Phil. I've been on Phil since Phil was—when Phil was fresh out of Clark. Him and my wife were battling about who run Esplanade. That was the whole chant. How they say—something, something—who run—we run Esplanade, so they would always battle because both of these school is on Esplanade. John Mack is further down this way, and they further up so that was the battle at Esplanade and all that.

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But the camaraderie with these guys—I could go to any venue, and they're playing music, every young musician, every old musician, anybody dealing with the second line music is gonna come up to me and shake my hand, greet me some kind of way. And with the music of being in this city, the camaraderie I get from people, I couldn't change it. I wouldn't want to change it, and I would never, ever go nowhere because you'll never find it. On a Sunday, I feel good. I know—I done had—haven't been—I don't know if you know your girl playing on CSI. She's on CSI. The Black lady playing the mortician. She was in Treme, and she played in Treme, and I got a chance to meet her. She's so down-to-earth. I want to meet her again and tell her. Man, it's like—I don't know. I wanted to take her picture at one time, and the guy—no, the lady came up to me—she second lining—the lady, you might see her out on Canal. She always on all the other traditional second line groups. It's the lady who dresses up like a—she's a old lady—she dresses up like a bib and all, and she has all different colors of the top hats. But she's been doing that for years.

So that being said, she wanted to take a picture. She wanted a picture of the lady. And she said—you ask her—could you take a picture for me? So I asked her. She was, like, no, I don't want to—you to take a picture of me. I want somebody to take a picture of me and you first, then I take my picture with her. Yeah, because I like you. So we went to talking from then on. The police wanted us to take a picture with him. Like, Well, look, my boy, he's a good photographer. Oh, there you go. Come here, my friend. Take my picture with him. So from then on, it was like she saw me again at a second line; it was passing, and she came out the crowd and come, gave me a hug. I got it on my arm. I got a picture of it on some old memory card that I had from some of my old phones. I got a lot of pictures and stuff that I want to put in and get—put it in a portfolio and stuff like that, but—

Rachel Carrico

Yeah, you were saying on Sundays—like on Sundays, I feel good—earlier. I think before we were—turned the recorders on, you were saying like there's a reason on Sundays to second line that you kind of let go of stress. You know, like it's therapeutic not only physically but in other ways?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:46:32 You know, it's like—for me, I can go through something during the week, and Sunday comes up, and everybody knows it's the second line. And that's one time that I can go outside and relieve whatever stressful things that I'm going through and not have to harm—physically or verbally hurt nobody. I didn't have to curse you out. I didn't have to get in no argument or confrontation with you. All I have to do is put myself in a situation where I can hear this music and, five minutes after I'm out there, I'm not mad no more. After the second line, I done pretty much forgot about that. That's what music does for me. If I'm anywhere in a venue and the music is playing right, I'm gonna forget what I'm mad about and focus on that because it—it stimulates me, it motivates me, then it calms me now, too. You know and I think I learned that early on from being incarcerated for thirteen years. And if I didn't have music—y'all seen the guy that was in the second line last Sunday that dressed up in a dress? Well, me and him was in an [Allen Correctional Center](#) together.

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Rachel Carrico

Really? What years were you there?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

From '97 to—from like '94 to '98 or something like that. And on Saturday, we would go in the big yard. On the big yard—we'd go in the big yard on the weekend. So I got my cassette player with my music and my little tapes. A guy through a Rebirth tape in a garbage can. I took it out of the garbage can, taped it, fixed it up, and put it in another case. He came on the yard one day, so he's like, What you listening to? I said, Man, I'm listening to that Rebirth. I'm on Freret and Washington at that second line. He's like, Man, you ain't listen to no Rebirth. So I gave him the earphone. He hear it, he like, No! So he second lined behind my chair. We go around the yard. Man, I tell you, the people in the tower, everybody on the big yard wondering what we listening to. Half of them probably thought we had a—drunk some hooch, and we was drunk or something because we was like—we were really on the street like it's Mardi Gras time. So the people say, What y'all listening to? Second line music. Whenever we get together, I'm gonna make him tell you the story.

Rachel Carrico

Well, that was him that was with you with the—?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:48:30 Yeah, me and him used to cut up so hard. He'll catch me at the second line, I know he'll say, Say, Skelly, so we were that Allen working out, we would get ready for when we were going to get ready to come home. I was like, Man, I told you I was coming out here for this. So we always see each other, and we greet each other and tell people that we were in jail listening to this music. And it's a love for it that you will never lose. I got a friend right now who got a life sentence from killing the guy at the Caledonia behind the second line, and they had a trophy. He felt like they beat him out the trophy to give it to the guy downtown because he was from up here.

Rachel Carrico

What kind of trophy?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Second line trophy.

Rachel Carrico

Oh really!

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

They used to have a second line contest down at the Caledonia. He went down there.

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Rachel Carrico

Oh, I see, okay.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

And that was on a Tuesday night. Now, this guy is in jail and been in jail for the last twenty-something years. He called on the phone, and guess what he want to do when he call you on the phone?

Rachel Carrico

Play the music.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

He say he want you to get by the band. He wanna hear the band. He gonna holler at you a few minutes, and he wanna hear that band. They had him on the phone about like, man, call him back, man—he won't hear the phone. We went up there to see him, and he had a group called the Mellow Fellows. The Mellow Fellows was a group that originated with the Young Men. We brought that group back out, but they were tripping with the power, struggling about who was going to be president. I'm like, Man, I don't want to be part of this because I ain't gonna be in the middle of y'all trying to stop y'all from fighting about saying who the president is and all that, you know.

0:49:53 [background talk] 0:50:05

Rachel Carrico

Do you think that—like, in the 80s, there was so much happening with—like, evolution and brass band music was changing. Hip hop was blowing up; b-boy and was blowing up. Do you think that, like, hip hop and b-boy had an influence on the brass band music here and on the way that people would second line?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:50:25 Yeah, because now—at one time—second line music has always been perceived as traditional jazz music. But when you take the younger generation after—you know, jazz music has been traditional so long that—like the other generation coming up feels a need to make that gumbo tap with this little tradition and add a little flavor to it, give it a little funk, take an R&B song and add it with a traditional jazz song and see what you come out with. And that's what it is. It's a melting pot where as we take the format of jazz music, take an R&B song and incorporate it into this jazz music to where everybody appreciates it. That's why—and this is how you find out which bands have street cred by the music they play. Traditional bands are only for people that's young. They want to hear the hip hop—excuse me.

0:51:33 [Talking on the phone] 0:52:10

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Rachel Carrico

Do you think that gumbo was happening with the dance, too, as the music was changing?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Yeah, because as the years went on, the music changed. If you go back to the traditional times, before Rebirth, Rebirth was that transform—Rebirth was the group that made that transformation into changing the music, changing the genre, people that listened to it, and changing the format from being traditional—you know what I'm saying—into—I would—like to know what name of jazz, what type of jazz they call that. You know what I'm saying? But traditional was mainly traditional songs. Had second line groups stayed with traditional songs, I don't think you'd have as many second line bands as you have. But when you allow the artists—the artists—and the individual to tap into other resources and other music, then take that and incorporate it into jazz, that's just like the bounce music in New Orleans. Bounce became bounce because we took and remixed everybody's song that had a hot song and put it—and incorporated it into bounce with a triggerman beat. That's just a track that's empty—and the triggerman beat. And that made bounce come pit. All right, bounce was a formation of an aspect of music that came from what? Luke Skywalker, when he had "Get it Girl," When the girl started shaking for Luke Skywalker. So New Orleans took it because he come down here, and they put their own flavor to it. Now, you got different genres. You got [Big Freedia](#). Big Freedia is a gay rapper, but Big Freedia is a gay rapper and had been on the Larry Kimmel Show [sic]. He's been on all kinds of stuff, and he getting paid. He even did a party. He did Beyonce's mama birthday party down here. So, I mean, if you can do that—you know, he ain't cheap. It wasn't like no price tag. What do you want? Big Freedia? What do you want? Freedia for the company, for my party? Whatever it was, they paid him.

Rachel Carrico

Probably more than 1,500.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:54:11 Yeah, probably about twenty racks. You heard me? Because they'd be getting paid money. When you're doing them type of private show, that's money. And then again, that's your money, you know. But everything with the city starts off traditional, and it filters out to something else because you got mixed genres getting in as just like jazz musicians playing jazz music for so long. Then here you got these R&B cats playing, and we get together, put our heads together and collaborate and say, Well, this is the music we want to bring out. That's what my cousin Wardy [*phonetic*] did when Wardy came out with [The Stooges](#). A bunch of young cats fresh out of high school and played in high school together and got a band and got in there, and they playing music, but they want to play the music that's differently from tradition, that allows you the—No, they ain't playing that song. You know, you go to a parade in high school and your band playing, and you know when the hottest song's on the radio, they done practice it and all of a sudden they playing. No, that ain't—that ain't Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. But they playing it and you hear it—you know, when you hear the horn playing, Uh-Uh-Uh, you hear the horn player—Oh, it is Michael Jackson. You could sing him. And not even have the words because

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you could hear it from what the band playing. That's what it is with second line. You may not start off knowing what the music is, but once you go to listening, you—now that ain't—I know they not playing "Billie Jean is not my lover," but they playing it from a jazz formation. And the people loving it. They vibing off it. We're shaking our heads. You can tell if the music's doing something. Somebody—we got people with bikes hopping around holding they bikes. You got a man on a ice chest. He doing something. You might have somebody to stand up on the corner there, but it's going to move everybody, and it's own and unique way, you know. Like you stood up into the crowd, you're going to catch everybody else.

It's like—my little friends, he's on the show with the girl—the lady who does the pit bull rescue. His name is Earl. He brought a lady—he brought one of his friends here for her first Mardi Gras. So it was like two years. It was her second year this year. Baby, she was lit up like a Christmas tree, running around with that camera. Oh, look at the kids. The whole family dressed up in Indian suits. She's like—she don't know what to do. She just like this all night, huh? Oh, look, she just went around, and she could tell she was enjoying. She said, I love it. The first time I came here, I fell in love with it, and I haven't stopped coming since. And that's what it is. When you're from here, you can understand what it is. But when you're not, and you come here, and you see it, you just automatically love it. And once you get around people that can show you this, that—most people come in, and they're like, Man, New Orleans is a bad place. I'm telling you, don't you get caught. Now, go pass the bridge down there—you go pass the bridge here in the white area—I mean, the Black area, go further down this way. So they're telling you all this type of stuff where that's the places where you need to go because that's where everything goes down outside of the, quote-unquote, Bourbon Street atmosphere.

0:57:13 You know, you ain't got no second line going on Bourbon Street on a Sunday. Oh, no. Now, you might catch a celebrity throwing something, and you've got a band coming through there for a minute. Yeah, but, you know, that is—that's not—you know, most people—that's why you see a lot of people at the second lines now. You see just as many Blacks and just as many whites in there. And at one time, you didn't see that. And if you go back through the history of the second line, you was one or two, three or four, five or six. Now you got just as many now. You know what I'm saying? They out there. They comfortable in their little shorts and their shoes. Half of them, you may not know, they're lawyers. And I went to court and a dude said, Man, you go to second line. I said, You're a lawyer? He said, Yeah. I said, No shit! You know what I'm saying? I'm like, No! But they'd be out there. They're not dressed like lawyers with suits on. They got on a t-shirt with some jeans. You know what I'm saying? Probably got a little brew in your hand. You know what I'm saying? It's a day I can relax. I ain't got to be worrying about reading no case file today and worrying about who going—you know.

And then, you don't go out there looking for nothing to happen. But everybody else used to do that back in the game. Oh, man, something bound to happen in the second line. I ain't going to second line. Somebody's gonna get hurt. It's not like that no more. Everybody know that. Everybody come out there. But, you know, the last serious shooting, when that lady Cotton got shot, you know, it really messed with me because I've been a victim of being shot at a second

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line, so I felt her pain and everybody that got hurt that day. I was really—I felt like I was helpless because I was right there when it happened. I'm right behind the band. Like, I see—that's where I wanna be, behind the band, and that's where it happened there, right behind the band. As soon as the band got past, he come running out. I turn around and went the opposite way. I ain't never flew with the crowd. I turned around and went this way. But as a result, I'm seeing people laying down, falling in the grass. People have been shot. I think he shot several people, but he didn't shoot the guy that he was shooting.

Rachel Carrico

Yeah.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

I don't understand that. Back in the days when I was raised, if they had something for you, they had it for you. Now they don't care if you got your children with you. One of my little friends—my daughter's boyfriend got killed—ex-boyfriend got killed in something with his daughter. The girl was in his arms when the gun got her. He covered her.

Daniella Santoro

This came up a lot in Francis [Halls]' interview, too, about how the rules of the game have changed, but I don't know why. I don't know if you have any idea what it is that—

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:59:36 Everybody not eating. And when I say everybody not eating, people are looking for the easiest escape or the easiest route to come up. What I mean—Rachel, you work hard every day. Like I said, I'm outside your house every day and watch you go to work. You've been doing that since I've been staying close to you for the last twenty years. But now, you done got you a nice car and dressing real nice, and the house look nice, and now I'm feeling them 20 years, been working you out a little money, and you ain't doing no more than what I've been doing for the last twenty years, making my bills, but I'm using my money wisely. People look at that as a need to right something—she got something. You know what I'm saying? I'm gonna go try to take what she has, whereas I'm not going to get with her—ask her what type of work she do ask could she teach me that job and get the skills she got to get that job and then get paid the same thing she get paid possibly. Now, if she had pass the trade to me, then I could pass it to somebody else. They want it right now. Well, they want the retribution right now. And they want—they don't want to work four hours, eight hours, and take half of your money and save it for two years, three years. They want it right now. So if I can go in there and knock your brains out and go in your safe and get \$30,000, which I know I ain't gonna keep a year because I'm spend it up because it's not my money. I ain't earned it. I don't care. That's it.

You cannot nowadays flash. Flashing gets you killed. If you on Facebook, and you're putting all your business on Facebook, it can get your killed. If you're on Facebook flashing money like you got money out the butt, then people looking like, Oh, he got about—let me see how many racks he said—Ooh, that. Well, he might have \$10,000, not in the bank, not tracing you that \$10,000,

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your life worth \$10,000. It ain't me. Better him than me. That's the mentality. But to work for and earn it and walk around with your head up saying I'm a citizen. I'm fulfilling the community, and I earned this. It isn't—gave to me. I didn't take it from somebody. I worked hard for it. That says something different. We were so used to looking at the people that was getting it right then and there, and they wanted to be—I wanted to be that one and get it right then and there. My mama made sure I wore everything I wanted to wear. At the age of sixteen, I was dressing like I was twenty-one. I wore \$125 standard belt slacks. I'm wearing \$125 legion suit that I go get paid, get sold on me for having Heinman's for second lining. I'm wearing almost \$1,500 worth of stuff for one day at a second line. Now, being forty-seven years old, being older and wiser, I sure wish I could have a little money back then. You know, I blew a lot of money on jewelry. I blew a lot of money on clothes. I had no gambling habit. I had a dressing habit.

Rachel Carrico

You know, people say sometimes—you know, we'll ask, Well, you know, if people are struggling to pay the bills, make ends meet, put food on the table, why spend all this money and energy and time at second lines, putting on second lines? Why do people do it?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

1:02:52 Well, everybody—for me, you know, the story—it entails something different. For me, I do it because the love I have for it. I do it for all the guys who showed me how to second line along the way that are not here. I do it for the camaraderie of Mr. Bucket, who showed me and gave me the first—you know, the ability to second line. I do it for the people that come out there every Sunday to see what they see. I don't get paid. I don't put on a show to be seen, but I get out there to let somebody know that me being in this condition doesn't mean that I'm—my life stops. I still do normal things. I still enjoy music like you enjoy, but I express it a little different, from the chair. I might can't get up and do my little one-two, spin around and hop up on my toes, but when you see me pick this wheelchair up and spin it around and go this way and spin it around and go back that way, stop, put it down, get up out of chair, crawl, all that's different. You ain't seeing it. This is why, as the years went on with me, I perfected—me and Joe perfected, but a lot of people don't know. Joe the one taught me how to pop wheelies, but I just perfected it a little better than him. He don't do as much as I do in the chair. I just do more than him. I feel it's a need for me when I go to the second line. If I'm at a second line, I'm doing this. If you see me in a second line, I'm coming down a second line, I'm bucking. You're like, Oh, he into it.

Then the band is doing what it's doing. Then you're gonna see that crowd rocking like that. You gonna see that crowd participation. Everybody's gonna be singing a little chant. You know what I'm saying? They might play, I can feel it. They go—everybody be singing it. You know what I'm saying? You know, being over—you know what I'm saying? Everybody be singing it. That's when you know the crowd is feeling what you're playing, and that's what they come out there for. They come to hear you play what they come out there for. And it's not about you no more. It's about entertaining the crowd and giving them what they pay for. If you're playing in a band, and I give you \$1,500 dollars to pay for me for four hours, I want you to give me your best, and I want it for four hours, not three and a half. I don't want you walking five minutes, and then you

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play—and then I don't want you running me. We made a living running people because when the parade get behind, and then Rebirth play that song, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, that's that run. You ever heard that? Boom, boom.

Rachel Carrico

Yeah, yeah.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Everybody like this—

Rachel Carrico

Yeah. Make way for the wee (sic).

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Everybody got old people there [imitates gasping] trying to get it up. You know what I'm saying? And they like, What do you do? Man, they trying to get the second line over because the police told them, like, Y'all behind schedule, this, that, and the third, you know. But all that being said, everybody brought something different to the table as far as that. But traditional second line was good, and it's good for traditional reasons, and, you know, that traditional thing. I still love traditional music, but I get off on that R&B, jazz.

Rachel Carrico

Let's go hear some.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Hey, bra, I'm in agreement

Rachel Carrico

We can talk—

1:05:59 [End of Recording]

Transcribed by Adept Word Management, Inc 6/28/2022

Part III: Carrico's car, driving to Celebration Hall on St. Bernard Ave

Rachel Carrico

0:00:00 Well, let's see. If the red light is on, it's going. All right, so it's going.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

[Pointing out the window, on S. Claiborne Ave.] All right, so this used to be [unclear] right here, and I used to climb up on this building right here.

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Rachel Carrico

Oh, right there?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

And they had a billboard on the side, like that billboard right there. And I used to be on the billboard dancing.

Rachel Carrico

Oh, and it's the Queen's Beauty Supply?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:00:16 Yeah, but all that was the show. That was the [Gallo Show](#). They turned it into that. But that's what we used to—the second line used to turn right there and had a stop right there on the side of the Gallo Show. Yeah, but that's where I always—that was one of my trademark moves, climbing on top of the [Magnolia Project](#) when the second line would pass the project. But one-two step—back to moves meaning. When you're second lining, you can't try to absorb too much. A lot of times, people get to the second line, and they're trying to see all the moves everybody else's doing and try to incorporate that to what you do. What you do is you take one simple move, and you take that one move, and you incorporate it into yours. And I say, That's where you get that one step. You know, you might just be—any time they tell you, one-two step, you might do the one-two step, and you bend down. And it went from pum, pum [*sic*] to pum [*sic*]. That's the one-two move. Then you add one, two, three, four, spin. It might be a slide. It may be a hop. It may be a pause. It's just—you know, you just add steps in. It's how you're feeling when you hear the music. You know, some music makes you wanna rap. You know what I'm saying? Some music might make you want to do something else. It's just the music and what it makes you feel. And that's how your dance skills come out. You're doing whatever that song make you feel like doing, you know?

0:01:34 And that's what it is. Everybody—when you look at—and just like your girl. She be—everybody be looking at her and saying, Oh, this white girl, she'd be sweating. Who be wearing the shorts? She got her own, and you see how she'd be getting off, but if you ever noticed, when she'd be doing, she ain't be worrying about nobody around her. She'd be in her own little world. You know, she ain't trying to dance with you. If you could, she would. But if you see her, her mind be not on nothing else but where she in in that little zone, and she'd be sweating for the oldies, baby. She'd be getting her sweat on. When you get good, she'd be sweating. I'm like, Yeah, I like it because she's out there doing her thing. She ain't letting nobody else—or worrying about what nobody else doing around her. You know what I'm saying? And that's really what it basically is, getting your niche and knowing your niche and staying in your lane doing what you know is your speed, you know, not trying to outdo yourself by doing something or doing more than you can. You know, four hours is a long time.

Rachel Carrico

You got to pace yourself.

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Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:02:30 Yeah, something's up here, that's why they doing at the arrow—they got an arrow up here—at the arrow, I'm going to jump back in. Something's going on up here; I don't know if they're doing road things. These lights on—these bridges was out for a long time when you started coming back here. Lights were out for a long time. I think they started putting them different lights up there than the ones they put. They're putting up them energy-saving lights that the sun would run. So at nighttime, they'd be charged up enough to—see how they—they probably be changing light bulbs or something.

Rachel Carrico

Yeah, look at this text that Joe just—when I asked what happened with the friend. I'm so concerned. I know it's not my—it's not really my business.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:03:17 I'm trying to find out who it is, though. Did he say?

Rachel Carrico

Yeah, I don't know. He said it was his friend. It was younger than him. He didn't say how much younger. He didn't tell me much. He said he'd text if he was going to come out. He sounded really upset. I don't know.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

They kidnapped and killed this boy. I wonder who the fuck this is. Excuse me. I'm gonna find out, and I'm gonna tell you because if somebody—it got to be somebody. See, they just killed a—the one that—the little dude they just killed back there, T—he was a big-time drug dude. The dudes came and got him. He just came back from the FEDS. Dude's coming with ski masks on. I knew that would do that. You know what I'm saying?

Rachel Carrico

I didn't know that was a thing. Kidnapping, and just like—?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:04:28 Yeah, you know, people doing house invasions—I mean, yeah, home invasions and that. Them motherfuckers see—you hear about that lady, talkin' bout, man—she called 911, and ain't nobody would answer the phone. Remember that? 911 failed that lady? Look, just recently, a white lady called 911, and nobody answered the phone. They didn't have a 911 dispatcher to take the woman's call. The woman was calling the people, telling somebody was tryin' to come in her house, and he was almost in her house. We stayed in this house right here, this house behind this house right here. Right there.

Rachel Carrico

Oh, at Touro and Claiborne?

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Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:04:59 Yeah, baddest little house we've ever been in. But I come down the steps and got caught on the side of the house. It was flipped upside down. My leg was stuck on there. My kids laughed so hard they peed on themselves, boy. I come down the steps—tryin' to come down the steps, I'm gonna hop the little first step. My foot—my pants' leg got caught on a shutter—you know how you put them open up shutters, and he got the little—my leg's stuck like that. They laughed, and they let me lay there for about five minutes. And they told my mom, Mom, come see daddy. I'm like, Come on, get me up. They laughed, they laughed, they laughed, but I didn't think it was funny. Boy, they laughed. Then one day my wife, she caught herself being slick and hopping across the little water puddle and missed—hit the water. I say, now it ain't funny? You laughed at me. At least I didn't get wet. You got wet. Boy, she was burnt up. She was burnt.

Rachel Carrico

I wanted to ask one other thing when you were talking about—

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:05:58 Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh—yeah, I have to get some cigars.

Rachel Carrico

I got to—

Daniella Santoro

She has to meet TBC?

Rachel Carrico

I was supposed to be there for three minutes.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Oh, all right, come on. That's good.

Daniella Santoro

I can go run and get some. Is it open right now?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

I don't know.

Rachel Carrico

When they start playing, too, I can run over there if you don't want to walk over in the rain.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

It ain't raining that hard. They got a truck here tonight, huh? They got a truck here.

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Daniella Santoro

There's no store here.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Oh yeah, look, I forgot they got a liquor store right there.

Rachel Carrico

You know what? There might not be any food if it's right here.

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

0:06:30 Are you gonna park right here?

Rachel Carrico

Right here? I'll block those people in, don't you think?

Wellington "Skelly" Ratcliff

Man, they better learn how to get their ass out another way. Handicapped parking, baby. I'm sorry. You want to put my tag in the window? I got a tag for them. Let me get that tag, Daniella. Look up in the—look right here in your little zip—oops. Look in that—zip this part back, and you're gonna see that little sign. You're gonna see a little symbol in the zipper part. I got my hand on that thing, this here, right here. You're gonna see a little blue arms, little handicapped sign. All right.

0:07:05 [End of Recording]

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