**PROFILE - Mama Linda Goss: Then and Now** 

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From a little miss standing by the gatepost, twiddling her braids and listening to her grandfather’s entrancing stories, in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains there in Alcoa, Tennessee, neither Mama Linda nor her elder storyteller mentor ever dreamed how far those deeply-planted storytelling seeds would take her.

Indeed, a decade later she found herself a student at Howard University arduously researching and investigating “the whole idea of African folktales”. Among her “mentors” were recordings by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, Ella Jenkins, and an album, **The Hand Is On the Gate** featuring James Earl Jones. She relates that she was also influenced by the works of Sonia Sanchez, Nina Simone, The Last Poets, Amiri Baraka (the former Leroi Jones), and The Last Poets.

“I was taken by storm by the Black Literary Arts Movement and would tell stories in the Howard University Student Center. People would say, ‘Boy, you need to tell these stories onstage!’ so that sort of led me to seek out storytelling as a career.”

Bemoaning the lack of Black storytellers in the myriad lineup of other artists for an upcoming program at the Institute for Arts and Humanities, Dr. Stephen Henderson, (the noted scholar/author of the classic, **Understanding the New Black Poetry**—a must-read per Mama Linda) sent out the word through her husband, playwright/scholar, Clay Goss, “Where are the Black storytellers?” “Here I Am!!” Mama Linda immediately responded, and the rest is Blackstorytelling herStory.

She found herself on programs with great ones like Gwendolyn Brooks and Sterling Stuckey and auditioning for Bernice Reagon. What impressed her was their humility, supportiveness, and constant encouragement. Storytelling then, she muses, was about cooperation, not competition. When there was professional competition, it was a good-natured learning experience. “Everybody was really so uplifting because it was quite important to promote, preserve, and present Black culture. That was the essence. “Say it loud; I’m Black and I’m proud! Here we are, folks. We must respect and preserve our culture.”

Fast forward to 1983 when two outstanding Black women griots, Mother Mary Carter Smith and Mama Linda Goss having echoed Dr. Henderson’s clarion call, “Where are the Black Storytellers?!!” founded the NABS Festival followed the next year by the birth of the full-fledged organization when multitudes of Black storytellers from across the nation and world enthusiastically responded to their call.

Pensively looking back, Mama Linda remarks, “Now that I am 67, about to reach 68 on August 18, I still want Blackstorytelling to be recognized today as being done through NABS and also through scholars such as Dr. Caroliese Frink Reed in her recent dissertation on Blackstorytelling as well as Linda Humes who has also ardently been work on a doctoral dissertation on this important field of our culture. “But all of this time since I have been out there—the 70’s—there is still an ongoing struggle for Blackstorytelling to be recognized as a tradition—because ***it is***; It needs to be recognized and valued as more than entertainment. Blackstorytelling is our education, our learning tool. It is about our survival.”

Describing herself as being semi-retired, Mama Linda emphasizes that she still uses storytelling as a means of empowering others and as a way of helping others to recognize that they also have stories within them—stories which must be freed. “It is very important for us to control, maintain, create and innovate the narrative. That is the key.”

A long-time honorer and lifter of the ancestral tradition, Mama Linda declares, “The ancestors are alive as long as we remember them. We have to remember, honor, and respect them as well as our elders, our youth and ourselves… There is a crisis in our communities and a sickness in our society, and we know it is due to racism, poverty and the lack of opportunities that flow from that. That is why it is so important that the story—the narrative be told.

In closing this revelation of her life profile—then and now—Mama Linda relates that her life goal is to have storytelling incorporated into the educational curriculum from pre-K to college. “Before children are reading, they are talking.” That is why it is important for children that stories are far more than entertainment. They are means of survival, tradition keeping, and continual life upliftment.

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***---Linda Cousins-Newton***