

Tona Brown
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins
Interviewer

The Transgender Oral History Project
Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies
University of Minnesota

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The Transgender Oral History Project of the Upper Midwest will empower individuals to tell their story, while providing students, historians, and the public with a more rich foundation of primary source material about the transgender community. The project is part of the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. The archive provides a record of GLBT thought, knowledge and culture for current and future generations and is available to students, researchers and members of the public.

The Transgender Oral History Project will collect up to 400 hours of oral histories involving 200 to 300 individuals over the next three years. Major efforts will be the recruitment of individuals of all ages and experiences, and documenting the work of The Program in Human Sexuality. This project will be led by Andrea Jenkins, poet, writer, and trans-activist. Andrea brings years of experience working in government, non-profits and LGBT organizations. If you are interested in being involved in this exciting project, please contact Andrea.

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1 Andrea Jenkins -AJ

2 Tona Brown -TB

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5 AJ: So my name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History
6 Project and today is September 22, 2016. We're here at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and I
7 have the distinct honor and pleasure to interview Ms. Tona Brown today.

8 TB: Yay! Thank you.

9 AJ: So Tona, can you just start out by spelling your name, state your gender identity as it is today,
10 your gender that was assigned at birth, and the pronouns that you use?

11 TB: Sure. OK, my name is Tona Brown, T-o-n-a, Brown B-r-o-w-n. I am a male to female
12 transgender woman, I go by the pronouns she – all feminine pronouns. Anything else?

13 AJ: That's great. Tona, where are you from?

14 TB: I am from Alexandria, Virginia.

15 AJ: Really? What's it like living there?

16 TB: Whew. You know, it's a beautiful . . . I love my state even though it's conservative and so we're
17 always fighting for something as you can imagine. But it's beautiful and because of what I do for
18 a living – traveling and as I mentioned with the drama of traveling, it's a place where I can go
19 and just be calm and that's very important for artists, I feel.

20 AJ: Absolutely. Did you grow up in Alexandria?

21 TB: No, I actually grew up in Norfolk, Virginia, which is in what they call Hampton Roads and most
22 people who know it is because of the military. It's a Navy town, a military town.

23 AJ: So when did you first realize that you may not be the gender you were assigned at birth?

24 TB: I would have to say . . . my family realized it before I did so I was very blessed in that regard
25 because even though they didn't understand what being transgender was, some of my family is
26 from rural areas and we didn't have that language. So they realized it very early and I was also
27 blessed because my mother, who didn't know what was going on, decided to do the research
28 when I was very young. I want to say she said she knew I was different from three or four.
29 Then, of course, I always tell people I was the Double Dutch champion and I did all this stuff that
30 I just thought was very natural for myself and knowing, as you all talk about, the binary and all
31 that kind of stuff, it was totally foreign to everyone around me.

32 AJ: Yeah, because those are considered girl activities, it's not what little boys do.

33 TB: Oh, extremely. Yeah, I didn't do contact sports, I hated gym. And now I love to work out but I
34 hated the gym. I hated a lot of different things that people thought was normal for a "young
35 boy". And so my mother kept saying, "Something is different, something is different." So she
36 did her best, the Lord rest in peace. She did her best to keep me away from people who were

1 not positive because that was in my family as well, it was a very religious Southern family so you
2 can only imagine some of the discrimination and stuff that I went through as a young person
3 growing up. But my mother said, "What you're not going to do is embarrass the family." So,
4 you know, you're going to be who you are and you're going to walk with your head up and I'm
5 going to teach you how to come into your womanhood at a very young . . . teenage years. So I
6 was very blessed, because she was a youth evangelist so she could have done it way different
7 and I want to thank her. I always pay homage to my mom because that's . . . I believe with her
8 and my aunts, they are why I'm the woman that I am today.

9 AJ: Wow. And I know we have some parents of transgender and gender-creative children in the
10 audience today and the research shows that family support, parental support, is so important to
11 the . . .

12 TB: Development.

13 AJ: . . . success and development of trans and gender non-conforming identified people and so I'm
14 just so thrilled to hear that your mother was so supportive.

15 TB: Yes, I was blessed – very, very blessed. She had a lot of fight from other family members as you
16 can imagine. But she just was a very strong and dynamic lady, and I use that term because in
17 the south we have how ladies are so she was a very dynamic lady, very forward thinking. I don't
18 know where it came from but I'm very, very blessed.

19 AJ: Absolutely. So was there bullying in school? I know that you mentioned that there were some
20 challenges within your family, but what about in the broader community?

21 TB: I did face some violence in school unfortunately. Like I said in gym locker rooms sort of thing
22 where I had to fight, because you're not going to touch Tona. So that was . . . let's not get it
23 twisted. So I went through those sort of things, but again because my aunts were fighters and
24 my grandmother was a fighter, what they decided to do was to teach me how to defend myself.
25 It wasn't cower away, I just don't know that language – and not to say that people who aren't as
26 strong naturally that there is something wrong with them, but we weren't allowed to be that
27 way. You needed to learn how to defend yourself and learn how to deal with the stuff that my
28 people knew I was going to go through.

29 AJ: So, Tona, I know that you are now a world class, world renowned mezzo-soprano musician,
30 violinist, what role did music play in your early development?

31 TB: Well, you know, I don't think I would have transitioned early enough if it wasn't for my voice.
32 My voice was always an issue, ever since I was a teenager. I started off singing in the church, as
33 we do down there especially, and I was a boy soprano – a very high soprano, very high soprano.
34 So I started with that, of course, and then I said . . . after my voice changed a little bit, I was like,
35 "Oh, I must have lost my high notes, why do I still want to sing?" Just being dramatic. So I went
36 into playing the violin and I could just really get into letting go with the violin and my mom was
37 saying, "Oh, you're not going to sing anymore?" "No, no, no – my voice has changed." I was a
38 very dramatic child and I cannot . . . I think I would annoy myself with the type of child I was.
39 Like I said I was Double Dutch champion, I was skipping around and dancing. I think that's
40 fabulous, like I see young people who are able to be themselves and it brings me to tears. But

1 my voice was the deciding factor. In college I started to sing again because all of my friends
2 were also in the opera program. My roommate was a phenomenal tenor, he has since passed
3 away – rest in peace, and he kept saying, “Look, you have this really beautiful voice, why aren’t
4 you singing?” And I would go into auditions and it was always an issue about your gender, like,
5 “What are you going to sing?” So I would get up there and sing and they would be like, “What’s
6 going on?” But they couldn’t negate that there was a talent there no matter where it was, so I
7 had to go where my voice was. So through my voice I decided that I needed to live in my
8 complete self and be me. It was really through my voice.

9 AJ: What challenges did you face being able to perform at the level that you do based on your
10 gender?

11 TB: Well, first of all, I’m primarily a classical artist, so classical music is pretty conservative. Not the
12 artists ourselves – there are some freaks and everything. I mean, my friends would be in this
13 room – they’re very liberal, they’re very olden, they’re amazing people and in classical music.
14 But those who run it, those who are paying for it are not. And so you do have to deal with the
15 politics and what I learned to do was, one day I was asked by GLAD – you all know GLAD.

16 AJ: Gay, Lesbian, Anti-Defamation . . .

17 TB: Alliance Against Defamation – thank you.

18 AJ: Thank you.

19 TB: They asked me to be in the local paper because at the time marriage equality hadn’t been
20 passed and all that, and so they asked me to come out and tell people that I was trans and I’d
21 been touring and stuff, and after doing that, I got calls around the world from sopranos, mezzos
22 – people I’d sung with, people I hadn’t sung with, “Oh my God, you might have just ruined your
23 career.”

24 AJ: Oh really.

25 TB: Oh, it was huge, it was huge.

26 AJ: So people didn’t know your identity.

27 TB: No, and it was . . . well, they did – they were my friends. But they just kept saying, “Why did you
28 have to tell anyone, why do you need to tell anyone?” Why shouldn’t I tell someone? That was
29 my point. There is nothing wrong with being transgender. And so I was kind of offended but I
30 understood where they were coming from but I’m also a realistic person and I said, “You know
31 what? That means you need to learn more than what it is to be a performer, you need to also
32 understand business, you need to also understand that you need to put on your own events.”
33 And so that’s what I did in my mid-20’s. I just thought if I started my own ensemble, a string
34 ensemble and I just started grabbing people saying, “Hey, you want to sing, you want to play,
35 what do you want to do?” I started doing events and then I had no desire to be a part of any
36 organization so I didn’t go into the symphony where you still have politics, I didn’t go into the
37 opera companies. Now they contact me now.

38 AJ: OK, there you go.

- 1 TB: So again, you can do whatever you put your mind to, even if you have to do it in a different way.
2 You can be successful and that's what I try to share with everyone because, I mean, of course
3 there is challenges but you can do it – you just might have to pay for some things yourself. You
4 might have to . . . in fact, my Carnegie Hall debut, we didn't have any major funding or anything
5 like that. It was a community effort to put together something that was LGBT at Carnegie Hall.
6 So we did Crowd Funding, I took some extra jobs. We did what we had to do and it was such a
7 successful event because the community showed up and I'm very grateful.
- 8 AJ: What was that experience like as a performer on one of the largest stages in the world.
- 9 TB: Well, I know I was trying to keep my emotions together that night. The repertoire that I chose
10 was Negro spirituals and African American composers because I just don't see that on the
11 national stages like we should. A lot of just purely American music you don't really see on the
12 stages. So I said, "You know, I could get up here and do a whole bunch of things that everyone
13 else does, or I could make this historical event really worth it for my audience and for myself.
14 And so many people were very, very emotional – I mean visibly crying and all that. But for me, it
15 was just . . . it was another venue, just to be honest. And that's not belittling Carnegie Hall or
16 anything.
- 17 AJ: Because you have played at the White House as well, right?
- 18 TB: Yes. Well, that is one of the other problems . . . you know, I'm so glad you're doing this oral
19 history. My debut singing for Barack Obama wasn't at the White House. It actually was at the
20 Sheraton in New York City at a big LGBT fundraiser sort of event, but it wasn't at the White
21 House. But I did sing at the Department of Veteran Affairs. So people, when they see all my
22 pictures they just put two-and-two together – they see the American flag and they're like, "Oh,
23 it must have been at the White House." No.
- 24 AJ: Well I'm glad you cleared that up.
- 25 TB: I always try to. I always try to keep it real, to the best of my ability.
- 26 AJ: Did you meet Barack?
- 27 TB: Of course, yes. They give you time afterwards and I have my photo with him and they give you
28 time to come in and to speak with him and it was just another very emotional time to say, "I'm
29 living in my truth and all of these people told me that I could not be successful living in my truth,
30 look at this."
- 31 AJ: That's incredible.
- 32 TB: Thank you.
- 33 AJ: So, you've been making music and creating art, but when you described your experience at
34 Carnegie Hall and the repertoire that you chose to play, it sounds a little bit like you are an
35 activist or an advocate, so talk about that a little bit.
- 36 TB: I'm really glad you brought that up because I never saw myself as one. The community song is
37 one. People had to educate me that being in front of so many people I need to understand
38 what is going on. I lived a pretty sheltered life so I didn't know a lot of things before I came out

1 as a transgender artist. I wasn't outed, I never kept it a secret from those I cared about or
2 anything, it was just, "I'm here to audition, do what I have to do and leave." That's what it was.
3 It was never from shame. But my friends in Baltimore, some of them are leading activists that
4 some of you all know, they were saying, "Well, Tona, your existence is," as Crispin was saying,
5 "Is very political, you're going against the binary." I had to learn all this activism talk and all that.
6 I'm just an artist – I just sing and play, that's what I do. I went to school for it. I think the other
7 thing that I want people to know is that when you see people doing phenomenal things or
8 they're doing things that are going against the grain, it's not always because they're trying to
9 make a statement, sometimes it's because this is what you love to do. Am I supposed to stop
10 because I'm transgender? That was the attitude I had. Everyone kept saying, "You know, you're
11 opening up these waves and these magazines and news." And I'm looking at them like, "Well
12 this is what I've always done." Yes, I'm doing it and I'm a transgender person, but I went to
13 school for this and this is what I do. I don't allow the hoopla of the media and all that kind of
14 stuff to kind of over inflate my ego in that sense. It's just what I love to do and I hope that my
15 audiences can feel that – that comes from a real place.

16 AJ: Tona, completely to the extent that you feel comfortable . . .

17 TB: Sure.

18 AJ: And if you don't want to answer this question, don't answer it at all. What medical
19 interventions have you undergone in your journey to become . . .?

20 TB: Just hormonal, just hormonal. I think that was another big misconception, I want to say, in the
21 media was that in order to have a mezzo-soprano voice that I had to get some kind of surgery on
22 my cords or something, which I think is absurd. Because if you look through history with the
23 castrati, there was music written for people that have my voice type.

24 AJ: Sure.

25 TB: So I'm not the first, I'm not going to be the last.

26 AJ: Castrati – can you explain to our audience what that is?

27 TB: They were eunuchs or castrati – unfortunately they didn't have the will. They were young boys
28 who actually were extremely talented and they were castrated to help their families – really,
29 that's what it really was all about, compared to what you read and the glamorized version of it.
30 So these young boys, usually between the ages of 10 . . . I'll say 8-12, some were a little later,
31 unfortunately, were taken from their families – their families basically sold them to the church
32 at that time. It was really big in the Catholic Church and they were the prima donnas of their era
33 – for 400 years. So most of the music that I sing and when I'm looking at people and they're so
34 in shock, I'm like, "No, there were people like me, people who had voices like mine." And so for
35 me transitioning hasn't been about what surgeries you have but rather understanding
36 everything around you and what's inside and getting the counseling, which I'm constantly telling
37 people that is very important – not that there is something wrong with you, but so that you can
38 deal with society and what society is going to say to you or how they're going to act towards
39 you.

- 1 AJ: Yes, that's a huge hurdle that I don't think a lot of people consider as people are on this journey
2 towards . . .
- 3 TB: Yes, it's imperative, it's imperative. You need to have a strength about yourself and even with
4 your family that . . . there are some family members that I just don't associate with. And it's not
5 even . . . now, of course, everybody wants to be your friend but it's from . . . it's from just
6 knowing that you come from that theology or ideology that I don't want to be affiliated with and
7 if you have an issue with me just because I'm transgender, when all my other cousins are doing
8 all kinds of things. I'm blessing millions of people with my art and speaking and trying to do the
9 right thing and if you can't look past that just because I'm trans, then that's your loss – not mine.
- 10 AJ: Absolutely. Tona, what do you think the agenda for the transgender community should be
11 moving forward?
- 12 TB: I think we have to get to a point where, and I'm kind of glad that you asked this because I don't
13 think I ever would have brought this up, but I think we're at a place where we're getting a lot of
14 attention and we're going to see a lot of us be exploited. Can I say that?
- 15 AJ: Absolutely, speak your truth, honey.
- 16 TB: I have so many friends that I love and I see that they're beautiful, they're talented but this
17 attention is becoming the thing, it's becoming . . . I would say an obsession that people are
18 having and you're seeing it in the media today. They're being exploited, they're being used, and
19 I would just like for the transgender community to understand that everybody doesn't need to
20 be in front of the camera all the time, on the mic all the time – that you need to take the time to
21 learn, like I did, because I didn't know a lot of things when I first started performing and
22 speaking out about trans issues. I think we need to really, really take a moment and say that the
23 glass ceiling is opening but it's just a crack and what's starting to happen is that the media
24 knows that you are a hot thing, that's it – you're the hot thing, you're the hot thing right now,
25 we're the hot topic – we can sell for them but at whose expense though. And so I think that if I
26 could give any advice towards the transgender community is to be more cautious, especially
27 when you're dealing with the media – be more cautious, they're not your friend. I've had a lot
28 of very positive experiences with the media and I have people that contact me regularly to know
29 what I'm doing, but it's a very select group of people that I talk to and deal with. Even recently I
30 was asked about a Broadway show and I was so excited because I was like, "Ahhh, Broadway, of
31 course." And that would really, really just be amazing, but the role I had to sign a waiver to be
32 naked – well, partial nudity and show my entire derriere. No, no, no – that's not going to
33 happen. Now to those that that's OK, there's nothing wrong with it. But for me and my brand,
34 and you also need to know your brand people – you've got to know your brand, that's why
35 people don't need to just jump in the media without understanding what the machine of the
36 media is. And that takes a while, that takes a while. So that's my biggest advice right now for
37 the transgender community – don't be used.
- 38 AJ: Don't be used – very sage advice.
- 39 TB: Don't be used.

- 1 AJ: Tona, I want to just thank you so much for willing to be a part of this process, for being here to
- 2 share your art and beauty, and what I will call activism for you.
- 3 TB: Oh, thank you.
- 4 AJ: So can we give Tona a big round of applause.
- 5 TB: Thank you guys, thank you.