

Isaac Hayes: A Conversation
Captioning Script

Isaac Hayes:

I've always been somewhat of a renegade. Creatively I dare to go where others fear to go.

Susan Hoffman:

Isaac will hear things that were beyond his knowledge.

Isaac Hayes:

I support literacy as well as music education in schools and try to save a kid, try to inspired kids the right way. Contribute, put something back.

Susan Hoffman:

Isaac Hayes, it is a thrill to have you in our studios today, thank you for this conversation.

Isaac Hayes:

Thank you Susan, it's a pleasure to be here.

Susan Hoffman:

I know that we are one of many stops for you today but I want you to look at the laundry list of titles that you have: actor, singer, composer, restaurant owner, radio host, coronated king, black icon. I want you to tell me which title you think best reflects the real Isaac Hayes.

Isaac Hayes:

Entertainer. That puts out the excuses for all my screw-ups. (laughs)

Susan Hoffman:

Is there some, there's some leeway in that wording, in that label?

Isaac Hayes:

No, it's just that I've been an entertainer for so long, you know, and I've grown through a lot of errors, and you know, so I always blame it on the entertainer so I use that as an excuse for all the things I've messed up. (laughs)

Susan Hoffman:

Entertainer may be the word that you would like to use to describe you, but really it was your score for the movie *Shaft* back in 1971 that made you an international star, and it's amazing when you look at the history from where you came from to that point in your life and beyond. Look at the history though, go back - you were born in 1942 in Covington, Tennessee, small teeny-tiny town in rural Tennessee north of Memphis to a poor share cropper's family, and your mother passed away when you were one and a half,

and your father took off so you were raised by your mother's parents. What were they like?

Isaac Hayes:

They were very sweet people, they were very dependable and they were very religious people too, and all the things I learned, I learned from my grandmother and my grandfather.

Susan Hoffman:

But things were tough, I mean you went through a phase too where you were actually homeless.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah I was, you know, when we moved to the city, everybody said "go to the city, things are better." But things were great in the country where we grew our own food and everything - I never knew a hungry day. But when our grandfather's health began to fail and we moved to the city, and I had to live with a guy who was kind of a, he was an alcoholic. He got arrested one evening, and then I couldn't get in the house, so I had to sleep in cars for about ten days. Yeah.

Susan Hoffman:

That's scary when you're 10 or 11 years old.

It was, but thank God it was the summer time. (laughs)

Susan Hoffman:

And did you like country life? Did you like the picking of cotton?

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, I was a day dreamer, and I would stand in the cotton fields and look at planes going overhead - "one of these days I'm gonna go on that plane" - I just daydreamed what I wanted to do and what I wanted to be.

Susan Hoffman:

What did you want to be?

Isaac Hayes:

I just wanted to be somebody. I didn't know at that time what I wanted to be.

Susan Hoffman:

When your grandfather died when you were eleven years old you really did fall in those hard times as you've been discussing. And took any job you could in addition to picking cotton you would shine shoes, you would run errands, deliver groceries, whatever it took to bring in whatever change you could.

Isaac Hayes:

That's right, I even cut grass, I poured cement, wrecked houses, cleaned bricks.

Susan Hoffman:

For 2 cents apiece. (laughs)

Isaac Hayes:

Oh. Oh you really learned a lot over there.

Susan Hoffman:

I did, I checked you out before you sat down in that chair.

Isaac Hayes:

Alright.

Susan Hoffman:

When you were five years old, you made your singing debut at church. Was that your idea?

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, my grandmother - it was the Easter program. And I think I might have been three, something like that. Anyway, my sister and I did a duet, and we started singing, and I raised it, you know we sang harmony, and my sister messed up.

Susan Hoffman:

You could sing harmony when you were that little?

Isaac Hayes:

Oh yeah! I had big ears, they're little but... (laughs)

Susan Hoffman:

Good ears

Isaac Hayes:

But anyway, she messed up. I said, "Stop, stop, it's no good, don't do it like this. It goes like this!" And I sang the part and I looked around, my grandmother was looking at me - What are you doing!?! (laughs)

Susan Hoffman:

This was in the middle of the Easter program?

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah! I was a kid, what did I know? You know, so...

Susan Hoffman:

You wanted to get it right.

Isaac Hayes:

That's right, that's right. I always did that.

Susan Hoffman:

Did your grandmother continuously encourage you?

Isaac Hayes:

Yes she did, but you know, some of the people, some of the neighbors- when I started singing secular songs, popular songs, "You ain't gonna ever sing those songs, that's the devil's work, Bubba." So I went to my music teacher Mrs. Jones – "Mrs. Jones, am I going to hell?" She said, "Young man, as long as you do well with your talent and don't do anything to harm anybody, I don't think God would be mad with you." So, that made me feel better.

Susan Hoffman:

Somewhere along the line you decided to drop out of school. Why?

Isaac Hayes:

I loved school. But, when you reach puberty, that's when you start watching girls, and I realized I had holes in my shoes and patches and all this kind of stuff, so I dropped out of school out of humiliation. And one day, a delegation of teachers came to my house, said "Mrs. Wade, Isaac hasn't been to school in six weeks." Oh, whew, the look that old lady gave me!

Susan Hoffman:

Busted.

Isaac Hayes:

As if to say "Wait till they leave!" I'm gonna get it now! They said, "This young man has so much to offer, we can't lose him." So I went back and I wore a lot of hand-me-downs.

Susan Hoffman:

They collected them for you didn't they?

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah

Susan Hoffman:

The teachers

Isaac Hayes:

Mrs. Georgia Harvey... Her husband stood like 6'6." And I put his jacket on ..

Susan Hoffman:

And how tall are you now? I was gonna say...

Isaac Hayes:

Well, I couldn't break that 6. I'm 5'11 and $\frac{3}{4}$.. I couldn't ever do that . But, anyway, I looked like a scarecrow when I put his jacket on, and I put newspapers in the toes of the shoes to keep them on my feet, and I went back to school. And I stayed in school...I wanted to be a doctor at first. You know I was taking related subjects, biology and all that stuff. But a talent contest came up and I went and auditioned, nervously... the last one in the auditorium that evening to audition. They asked, "Ok what you wanna do?" "I wanna sing!" "Well, OK sing". Anyway they worked it out and I start singing Nat Cole's "Looking Back." And the people milling around the auditorium they stopped and listened, and when I did the climax of the tune, everybody went "yaaaay". So Mrs. Howe said "stop, stop" You gonna sing in the talent show here tomorrow, you gonna sing. And, she called me the swoon crooner. Issac Hayes. (laughs).

Susan Hoffman:

So that was your first label.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, the Swoon Crooner, that's right, and when I sang I got the crowd into the song, I got on my knees with the microphone and the place went crazy, girls were screaming, and when I realized all this, all these accolades I was getting, I said "career change!" Wanna be an entertainer. That's when I changed my whole thing.

Susan Hoffman:

So that was the day when you knew music was going to be an important part of your life.

Isaac Hayes:

That's right, that's it. Anyway, you know, I went on and I won 7 scholarships in vocal music.

Susan Hoffman:

And you turned them all down. Why?

Isaac Hayes:

Because, I wanted to be an entertainer. I didn't want to be a high school band teacher, or a college professor. I didn't want to do that. So I just did it the hard way. I sang in doo-wop groups, rock n' roll groups, blues bands, I sang jazz in a local night club.

Susan Hoffman:

You took any gig you could get at that point

Isaac Hayes:

That's it, that's exactly right.

Susan Hoffman:

Wasn't your grandmother at that point just mortified that you turned down all those college scholarships?

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, she was, she was. But I think she, somehow she trusted me.

Susan Hoffman:

I read somewhere that you actually taught yourself how to play the piano, the organ and the saxophone.

Isaac Hayes:

I had to because we couldn't afford it. I couldn't afford a keyboard. I couldn't afford a sax.

Susan Hoffman:

Ultimately you became part of the Memphis sound. You were good enough on keyboards and you ended up in the Stax Records band, the house band playing for people like Otis Redding and many, many other very well known artists at that time, and you became part of the Memphis sound that really spread across the board to all types of artists including people like Elvis Presley.

Isaac Hayes:

That's it.

Susan Hoffman:

So you were making a name for yourself at that point.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, I met David Porter, but he said: "Hey man, look uh- I write lyrics mainly, and you do music, let's team up and become a writing team like Holland-Dozier-Holland and like Bacharach and David. So I said "OK" so we teamed up with a few flops, but then we found our groove, and we started writing hit songs.

Susan Hoffman:

I'll say. 200. For big names like Sam and Dave, and Carla Thomas, and you were busy. You became a hot commodity for Stax at that point.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, we did.

Susan Hoffman:

And then in 67 after a late night party, you and a couple other guys put down some tracks and it became your first album called "Presenting Isaac Hayes."

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, Duck got on the bass, and I got on the piano, and Al Jackson on drums said “Ya’ll follow me man” (laughs) so, we didn’t rehearse anything. So Al let the tape run, and when we had finished, I think eight tunes later “I think I got what I want.” I didn’t take him seriously. And a couple of weeks later he said “Ike, you gotta go the photographer for a photo shoot.” “For what?” “Your album cover” “Oh you serious!?” But we did it and they put it out, and it was OK. You know, critics, really, they didn’t kill it - they saw what it was really about.

Susan Hoffman:

You were percolating

Isaac Hayes:

Exactly. And later on, Al said “I gotta do an album. “Oh you want me to help you? OK.” I said “Al, can I do one too?” “Yeah you can,” “I wanna do another one, I wanna do it the way I wanna do it.” He said “OK, alright, you got carte blanche how you wanna do it.” So at that time I recorded. And I did it the way I wanted to do it. So Al named the album “Hot Buttered Soul” and I had those long, of course only four tunes on that album. And that’s when I started talking, ya know- rapping on these things.

Susan Hoffman:

You rapped before rap was cool.

Isaac Hayes:

Well.

Susan Hoffman:

But it was more of a romantic rap.

Isaac Hayes:

It was, it was like delivering a message telling a story.

Susan Hoffman:

That album was a huge breakthrough though.

Isaac Hayes:

It was.

Susan Hoffman:

Because you had a couple of songs that ended up on a single, that were cross over hits. People were buying them off the pop charts. That was huge.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah. (laughs). Shocked me.

Susan Hoffman:

So “Hot Buttered Soul” made a huge impact but I want you to rewind very quickly for me because the year before you had planned to meet Martin Luther King on April 4th 1968, the day that he was assassinated. What were you going to talk to him about that day that you were to have met him, the day he was killed?

Isaac Hayes:

I was gonna tell him “Sir, I will follow you wherever you go, and I’m a kid, I’m a young man, but you know, whatever I can do to help you, I’m here.”

Susan Hoffman:

You were roughly 25, going on 26.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, yeah.

Susan Hoffman:

You put your career on hold for over a year after his death.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, I was so bitter. I was so bitter. And (sighs), a time later I realized, you’re not gonna do anything, you can’t do anything about him, go around hating, you can’t do that, you gotta get busy doing what you can do, and do what you can do best. So I started back writing.

Susan Hoffman:

And then comes *Shaft* (laughs) It is hip, it’s cool, it’s got a great beat, it’s got class, and it literally puts you on the map. The theme for the movie *Shaft*. Black composer, black director, black cast about the dark side of the black community, the mafia. And it had a huge white audience. Did you anticipate that?

Isaac Hayes:

I didn’t know it was gonna go that way. I was just happy to have completed something that the producer, Joel Freeman, and the director Gordon Parks didn’t have my head on a platter, because I had never done that. (whispers) Oh lord, they like it, they like it.

Susan Hoffman:

What did you think when you went in creatively, cause it’s got- it starts out with a really great percussion beat, and it moves all the way through. The tambourines are awesome, the horns are awesome, the guitar licks are awesome, and it just all comes together beautifully. Creatively, what went through your mind, did you envision what you wanted to hear?

Isaac Hayes:

No, Gordon Parks talked to me. He said: “Isaac, you have to zero in on the character. This guy Shaft is a roving guy, moving around all the time. You have to capture that in your music.” So, he and Joel gave me 3 scenes on a 16 millimeter film - when of shots,

and when he was with his lady Ellie. He said “Now, write some, write something to that and then meet me New York at my apartment.” “OK”. So the main theme, the rhythm part of the main theme it took me about two hours. The shot through Harlem took me about an hour. Ellie’s love theme took me about an hour. And I went to New York and played the tape, and played it against the moviola, Gordon and Joel said “Wow, that’s good, OK you can go on in now and write the score. (laughs)

Susan Hoffman:

So in four hours you essentially create this music that they love. It goes on to win you an Oscar, a Golden Globe, and Grammys. You’re the first African American to win an Oscar, for best original score. Huge.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, first one to win for music. The third in history to win an Oscar, behind, Hattie McDaniel and Sydney Poitier.

Susan Hoffman:

Which is more important to you?

Isaac Hayes:

Well, I guess, I guess the Oscar for the music. Because, that’ll stand forever, it can’t be changed. I was in the big.

Susan Hoffman:

Alright, so that was 1971 and you continued over the next decade really from 69 to 1980, you put out 20 albums, some soundtracks. You continued making music, you survived the disco era intact, and actually had some fun with it.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, I did.

Susan Hoffman:

What inspires you to write?

Isaac Hayes:

Well, experiences, personal experiences, and experiences of others, and occurrences in society in general, it’s all fodder.

Susan Hoffman:

Is it usually quick for you? Once you have the idea is it quick?

Isaac Hayes:

Sometimes. Sometimes you get the idea and then it takes a while to work on it. Sometimes you got an idea and lyrics come quick or music comes quick. It’s... you know, you never know how the creative faculties work. You know.

Susan Hoffman:

And do you feel that at this point in your career that you can still be Isaac Hayes, or do you still feel that you kind of have to conform to what's going to sell commercially?

Isaac Hayes:

No, I have to try and maintain some artistic integrity. So, I do what I do. And I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna change.

Susan Hoffman:

And all this while, you're acting, you're in TV series like *Rockford Files*, you went on to do things like *Miami Vice*, you've appeared in roughly three dozen films. In 1977 you ended up signing a new deal, here in Atlanta. A record deal, and you moved here. What'd you think about Atlanta when you first moved here?

Isaac Hayes:

Well, I loved Atlanta, because I- what attracted me to Atlanta, there's so much intelligentsia around here man. And I saw some black women in TV, welfare mothers, that, they were arguing with some authorities, you know. They said "We not gonna take it!" Oh, really? Because where I came from it was like "Yes, sir, mister, sir." looking down like that. They said "We not gonna take it! We deserve this!" and I say "Ohh! I think I'll move to Atlanta."

Susan Hoffman:

So you moved to Atlanta and you liked it. Now, you shared with me that you've been married four times, and you actually separated from one of your wives while you were living here, and you're the father of eleven children, and sixteen grandchildren.

Isaac Hayes:

Grandchildren, Exactly.

Susan Hoffman:

But you like being a father? And a grandfather?

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, I kinda have some fun. The girls, they always have little talent shows and stuff, and each one wants to be the apple in Daddy's eye, and I couldn't let them know which one my favorite was, and I just, I just bask in all that warmth and good love.

Susan Hoffman:

Your father left when you were a baby when your mother died.

Isaac Hayes:

Mhmm

Susan Hoffman:

And you found him again when you were thirty years old. Describe to me what happened.

Isaac Hayes:

I knew he was guilt-ridden. So I had everybody leave the room. I sat him down and I said, "I missed you when I was a kid, I needed you." But I said "You know, through the help of God, I grew up, I'm a man now. I'm not going to ask you what happened, why did you leave, because having been a man for a few years, anything could have caused you to leave. I'm not holding that against you. The most important thing is we found each other, so let's make the best of what's left.

Susan Hoffman:

Did you?

Isaac Hayes:

I let him off totally. You know I thought his health was bad, I put him into a hospital, I got him checked up and everything, and I bought him a new car and a wardrobe of clothes. And one thing he told me, he had a piece of paper in his back pocket, you know those Sunday magazines, those little newspapers?

Susan Hoffman:

Yeah

Isaac Hayes:

He... it was worn, folded up in his pocket, said, "I tried to tell them I was your father, but they wouldn't believe me." Yeah.

Susan Hoffman:

So he had actually tried to approach you before.

Isaac Hayes:

He was afraid. So we had ten good years. I took him on his first plane ride, to his first concert. Oh, we had a lot of fun. Yeah.

Susan Hoffman:

You're a black icon. Does that come with an awesome responsibility and weight?

Isaac Hayes:

It does, it does. But I try not to let it affect me. I try to take responsibility in, with my integrity and my ethics, but I don't let it steer me in any kind of way that I wouldn't go.

Susan Hoffman:

You also have an amazing humanitarian spirit. Early in the 90s you traveled with artist Barry White over to West Africa.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah.

Susan Hoffman:

And you were really there for music, you - I believe you were shooting a video.

Isaac Hayes:

We shot a video in Cote d'Ivoire. Ivory Coast.

Susan Hoffman:

But something very profound happened to you on that trip, what happened?

Isaac Hayes:

Well, what happened. I saw what was happening in Africa, and I wanted to come back. And, my friend Dionne Warwick was invited to Ghana, West Africa. She said "Isaac I'm invited to Ghana. You wanna go with me? I said "Sure I'll go." So, that was in '92. And we visited the slave dungeons, the castles. And, that's where our ancestors were warehoused before they were sent through the north passage. And, when I stood in that room and this guide was explaining to us what was happening in there, I just had a feeling that came over me. It was like I heard the voice of my ancestors. It was like that's all I heard, and then I heard the voice of my ancestors say "We're back home through you. The circle is complete, it's complete. Now you know what you must do." Whoa. And we cried, and you couldn't help but let the tears fall, and when I went back home, I went on speaking engagements of black expos, and encouraging African Americans to go to Africa and interact socially, culturally, and/or economically. Just go home and see the place where you were born. And, this princess in Queens, New York heard me speak, and so she called her father back in Ghana. He was a king maker, Nene Koo the Third. And she called me a week later and said "Mr. Hayes, ah- would you like to be a king?" Uhhhm, yeah.

Susan Hoffman:

Tell me your name.

Isaac Hayes:

My name is Nene Katey Ocansey the First. Now Nene means "King." Katey is a brave warrior type that can fight the wild beast and calm the elements. Ocansey was a family name of the family that made me king. It means "I do as I say," in other words, I'm a person of my word.

Susan Hoffman:

So you obviously have an enormous attachment to that area now. And you went on to, rather than build a castle, build a school.

Isaac Hayes:

I built a school. I would go every year, and at the festival they carried me into the streets like all the other guys-chiefs and masters. On a palanquin. And I announced at one of the festivals, I was going to build a school. And just like that they gave me the ground,

they had a ground breaking ceremony. And so I got busy and I built the school. And it's an 8,000 square foot architecturally designed school.

Susan Hoffman:

And it's high-tech. In fact the students there can actually communicate via the Internet with students here in the United States in inner city areas.

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah we have some guys from M.I.T. go and teach a little bit, and we teach them computer technology. We teach them study technology, as well as we teach them health education. So, a major event happened. One night the chiefs- a delegation of chiefs came over to the hotel and said, "Nene, you've done something no one else has done. You've brought some education for our families." They said, "We really thank you. Now we're going to do something for you. Here in Ada, there are ten clans. We've been fighting and feuding for over a hundred years. We're going to stop. We gonna stop this and we're gonna unite behind you." Wow. And they said "That's not all...see where Ada is, is where the Volta River enters into the Atlantic Ocean. It's a lot of estuaries and islands. They said, "We're gonna give you an island. One thing though. We're not going to pick it out for you. You gotta pick out your own island." So, next day, we got a big boat (laughs) and we went around island shopping.

Susan Hoffman:

Oh my gosh. Was it mind-blowing?

Isaac Hayes:

Oh, it was awesome. It's beautiful. We found one, it took us about 45 minutes to circumvent it.

Susan Hoffman:

Had to check it out.

Isaac Hayes:

96.4 acres. You know it had one little mud hut on it. And, you know, I got to thinking well, I think I'm gonna make a healthy retreat over there.

Susan Hoffman:

Tell me about your health regime. Because in doing my research for this interview, I saw that you told Tavis Smiley back in the Fall of 2004, that you were on day 15 of a 30 day fast. You do this often?

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, I do it about four or five times a year.

Susan Hoffman:

Is it to drop weight, or is it a cleansing process?

Isaac Hayes:

Both of them, to drop weight and detox.

Susan Hoffman:

Do you work out?

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, I work out. I do some cardio, you know, and then I'm getting back into weight training.

Susan Hoffman:

You said you were doing that so you could wear your chains again.

Isaac Hayes:

Put the chains back on, There ya go.

Susan Hoffman:

In addition to your workout routines, you have made a commitment to really eat better and you have turned out two cookbooks, one which is a best seller, and one very recent, in the unfortunate situation, the passing of Barry White roughly a year ago because of kidney failure. And your new book is "Kidney Friendly Comfort Foods," a collection of recipes that are kidney friendly.

Isaac Hayes:

We all lost Barry, I lost a father and a grandfather to kidney disease. And, the cookbook is – there's some great recipes, and it's low in phosphorus, and it's low in sodium. And it's free.

Susan Hoffman:

Well, you started a lot of things. You started a wave of music, you started rap before rap was cool, with what you call romantic rap. You have recently taken a stand and said to Capitol Hill, people on Capitol Hill and in the schools and school systems: "We have really done our kids a disservice by taking music out of the schools. It's imperative to their education." And look I can see by your face...

Isaac Hayes:

Yeah, you're right., because, you know the first thing that goes when they start cutting budgets are the arts. And that should be the last thing to go. If we don't have arts, what do we have? A society without an art is like- it's like Taliban.

Susan Hoffman:

Empty. Vacant.

Isaac Hayes:

Exactly.

Susan Hoffman:

It has no love, no life, no passion.

Isaac Hayes:

So, that's what I fight for a lot. And through my foundation, I support literacy as well as music education in schools, especially inner-cities.

Susan Hoffman:

What would you say to members of the black community about what they need to be doing? Young guys today 15, 16-year-old men. What do they need to be doing?

Isaac Hayes:

You guys need to be more ethical. Put something in your hood. Contribute. Put something back. And try to save a kid, try to inspire a kid the right way.

Susan Hoffman:

I know one of your philosophies is "looking back", because until you look back, whether it's at very distant ancestors, your own grandparents, your own parents, and your own life, you have to look back before you can plan where you're gonna go.

Isaac Hayes:

Exactly, because you have to know where you've been to see where you're going.

Susan Hoffman:

What advice do you give to your children and your grandchildren?

Isaac Hayes:

Take some responsibility. Take responsibility, and think about your ethics.

Susan Hoffman:

When you were a little boy, and you were five, and you were looking up in the sky, and you thought "I wanna be somebody" are you proud of who you've become?

Isaac Hayes:

I am. My grandmother's teachings stuck to me, stuck with me. And I didn't steal, I didn't rob. I respected old people. I stuck to the right road, and I'm glad I did.

Susan Hoffman:

Above all else, is your grandmother's validation the most important?

Isaac Hayes:

Oh yes. Cause that old lady, she saw me through some rough times. When I went to the Oscars, she was my date. And I had a house in LA in Beverly Hills, and I took her to see the house and we walked around the grounds. I had four acres out there. And flowers were blossoming and everything. She looked around and said, "Lord have mercy, I never did think I'd live to see this." I choked, because of what she was saying. I knew what she

was saying, all the rough times we went through, she never thought that - but there she was, right in the midst of all of it. And I prayed to God that he kept her alive so that she could share in my success. And it happened.

Susan Hoffman:

With that I want to say thank you Isaac Hayes for this conversation. It has been wonderful.

Isaac Hayes:

Thank you.

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