HANDOUT READING AND LISTENING: LIFE HISTORIES OF ACTIVISM

Directions: Below is an excerpt from Doratha “Dodie” Smith Simmons chapter in *Talk That Music Talk.* In groups of three, read the excerpt out loud, with each person taking on the “voice“ of Bruce, Doratha or Will. Practice active listen­ing by paying attention to what you are reading and/or hearing



Doratha “Dodie” Smith Simmons encouraging a boycott of seg­regated businesses in New Orleans.

Introduction by Bruce Sunpie Barnes

*Almost every Saturday, a prominent CORE activist, Doratha “Dodie” Smith Simmons, would come to the [Music for All Ages] program with her husband, trumpeter John “Kid” Simmons, to listen to the kids perform.*

*They would sit towards the back, and when they knew where they could make a suggestion, Dodie would write some songs out on a piece of paper and whisper, “Here are some tunes they might want to play.”*

*John was even more hands-on. He played at the Park Service on a regular basis, and if he had a concert, he’d invite*

*the kids to come and let them sit in. Dodie’s youngest brother, William Smith, was a member of the Tremé and the Storyville Stompers Brass Bands, so the kids were also getting to know him as a teacher.*

*I know they were aware that Dodie, John, and Will were related and had a special relationship to the music, but I’m not sure if they ever realized*

*how. Dodie had been the secretary of the New Orleans CORE before committing herself to traditional jazz music by working for years with Preservation Hall and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. What I always saw in Dodie was someone who was not rigidly dogmatic., but held a deep belief that people should have the right to choose their own lives – to have their own pursuit of happiness. That’s what the struggle should afford you, and she passed it on to her younger brother in music and life. Will grew up playing at Preservation Hall and with the Fairview Baptist Church Band, and has played with the Lil Rascals Brass Band, Treme Brass Band, the Storyville Stomp­ers, and the PresHall Brass Band. Dodie taught him about being a full, actualized human being and not having to worry about other people’s thought processes. Her family’s support for the pro­gram hopefully taught the kids something similar.*

**Dodie:** On Thursday nights, CORE had their meetings at New Zion Baptist church on Third and LaSalle. We all showed up at the meeting and joined the organization. But you just don’t just become a member, you have to go through training. We had to learn Gandhi’s philosophy on non-violence and the technique of direct action.

**Will:** One of my main ways of remembering Dodie as a kid is sitting somewhere with a book. She’s a very well-read woman. She may not act like it all the time when you see her on the street second lining like she’s trying to sweat, but she has always been. I think that’s where she gained motivation to get involved in that whole Civil Rights Movement.

**Dodie:** In the middle of the winter we fasted outside of St. Aug on London Avenue. We were allowed to bring one blanket or quilt. We had our overcoats and gloves, and we spent the night outside in the cold. We didn’t talk. We just sat there. That’s how we learned how to become disciplined...

We went on a testing campaign. We had testers and ob­servers. At the Greyhound Bus Station in McComb, the testers were myself, Alice Thompson, George Raymond, and Thomas Valentine. And Jerome was the observer. He

went to the ticket counter, and didn’t look at us. The four of us went in and sat at the lunch counter. George Ray­mond said, “May I have a cup of coffee please?” The man­ager said “Greyhound does not own this building.”

George said, “May I have a cup of coffee please?”

A young white guy filled a cup of coffee, walked behind him, poured the coffee all over his head and hit the base of his neck with his cup. At that time, Jerome signaled Alice and me to come to the waiting room, and that’s how other people in the station connected Jerome to us. This guy started beating him with brass knuckles yelling, “I’m going to kill him! I’m going to kill him! Some other guys jumped in and were beating him, too.

There was a glass partition around the lunch counter. Other white folks came around chasing George, and he jumped over the glass partition, and ran around the counter. It looked like a scene out of *The Three Stoog­es*. They’d run after him and he’d jump over the count­er again. Thomas Valentine was a little slight guy. They picked him up off the stool, threw him on the ground, and he was up again right away. They grabbed him threw him down again. Up again.

On campaigns I’d always take a note pad, and I began writing. *George is jumping over the counter being chased. Alice and I can only sit here and watch the guys get beaten.* As I’m writing all these notes, I sang in my head: *We are not afraid. We are not afraid…*

That kept me sane.

When we finally got out of the station, Jerome and I start­ed running. I said “Oh my God, what am I going to do?” I looked back and saw Tom being kicked as he tried to get in a cab. I didn’t know what was happening to George and Alice. I ran around the side of the Greyhound Station to the Colored Entrance, and those black folks just encircled me. I stood amongst them just trembling like a leaf in the wind. I said to myself “You are going to calm yourself down, you are going to walk out of this crowd, and walk up the hill like you are going to clean Ms. Ann’s kitchen, and when you get out of sight, you are going to run like hell.” It didn’t dawn on me that I was in a white

neighbor­hood…where was I going to run too? An 18 and a half year old girl, never been in a situation like this before, and that’s what I did. Then I head “Dodie!”

I said to myself, “How do these white folks know my name?” I ran faster. I was thinking “They are going to have to catch me. I am not going to just stand here and let them kill me. And they are going to do some speeding to catch me.” Those heels were not touching the ground. I was fly­ing. I think of this song that we sing.

*If they ask you tell them I’ve gone.*

*Tell them I’ve gone.*

*If they ask you, tell them I was flying, boy.*

Then I heard my name again. The adrenaline had kicked in and I ran even faster until the truck passed me up and I saw it was Jerome.

**Will:** I used to think Dodie had no fear. After McComb, she kept going. I think she saw Civil Rights as he way out. Like people she saw had to get out of rural Mississippi, and she saw it as her way of the Ninth Ward. Because the Ninth Ward actually wasn’t just a place. It was the state of mind that people accepted this is where they belonged.

**Dodie:** The first time I went to jail, three white Free­dom Riders had gone to a black family’s home for dinner. The police dragged them out of the house and beat them. We did a protest. We had a sit-in at Orleans Parish Pris­on at Tulane and Broad. We were singing, and the police came out and said, “Stop the singing. You are disturbing the communication center.” We sang louder “Ain’t going to let no police man turn us ‘round, turn us ‘round, turn us…

The police came back and said, “I told ya’ll, stop the sing­ing, you are interfering with the communication center.” We sang louder. They brought the police dogs, and we started to sing,

*Ain’t going to let no police dogs turn us round.*

They brought the dogs closer. *Turn us round, turn us*-closer- *round.*

*Ain’t going to let no police dogs turn us round*. They brought them as close as they could without the dogs biting us, and when they saw they weren’t going to deter us, they arrested us. They put the nine females in a cell for two so we sang all night because we had no­where to sit, nowhere to sleep. Then Oretha Castle, who we didn’t know was pregnant at the time, got out, went home, and had a son! He was almost born at Tulane and Broad.