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Transcript of Lena, a sound portrait of a multifaceted lady,
Lena Horne, a program produced by Gene Delassi from an
interview conducted in San Francisco. Broadcast on KPFA-FM
on April 12, 1966. Pacifica Radio Archives number BB0921.
Program length 00:45:00.

This transcript is part of the Pacifica Radio Archives Preservation & Access Project; made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Recording Academy, and contributions from listeners of Pacifica Radio Stations KPFA and KPFK in California, KPFT in Houston TX, WBAI in NYC, and WPFW in Washington, D.C., and Pacifica Radio Archives supporters.

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Transcript

Interview - Lena Horne

Host/Interviewer Gene Delesi (G.D.):

Pacifica Radio in Berkeley brings you Lena:

[Music: Don't know what/ There's no sun up in the sky, stormy weather/ Since my man and I ain't together]

G.D.: Lena, a sound portrait of a multifaceted lady, Lena

<u>Horne</u>. Concomitant with the publication of her autobiography by Doubleday, she talks for Pacifica listeners from San Francisco's Fairmount Hotel on Nob Hill. My name

is Gene Dealessi.

G.D.: What is your explanation of the phrase, "nittygritty"?

Lena Horne (L.H.): I don't know. One thing I think it could mean is truth. (laughter) One thing it could mean is the sediment that's left after something's been stirred up and -- there -- the "nitty-gritty" of it is left. um, It could be, uh, the bare bones of us, skeleton, after the bomb -- not even a skeleton, that dust or that floating around -- that's the "nitty-gritty" of us. (laughter)

D.H.: The nub of the matter, perhaps?

L.H.: (laughter) Yes.

D.G.: And is --

L.H.: Lots of -- It's a good phrase; it covers a
lot of territory.

D.G.: You mentioned a phrase which I am trying to locate in my notes, which I can't. But, it was an equation between how people who live in poverty stricken situations are best suited to become gourmets.

L.H.: Exactly.

D.G.: And, when you mentioned that you liked

chitlins, which Ralph Ellison calls "chitterlings", for some reason --

L.H.: (laughter)

D.G.: -- I was amazed. Do you in fact really --

L.H.: Do I really like them, yes I do. And I had them of course when I was a little girl in the South.

And I also had them in the North when I was a little girl. And, I had them I was a grown woman in many places. And I had them in France. And I didn't know they weren't cooked the same way. They were in fact put into a beautiful sausage. And I kept biting it, and I said, "What was is this andouillette"?, you know? "It tastes so familiar." And I finally realized it was chitlins. In Paris.

G.D.: How much 11 times 12?

L.H.: Oh, I don't know. I can't count. What made you say that?

G.D.: I was wondering about your --

L.H.: 11 times 12.

G.D.: -- your problem with mathematics, which you mention, and whether it is --

L.H.: You're tricky. You really did read the book, didn't you?

G.D.: Every word.

L.H.: I have a block about numbers. And I've wondered about that. It happened of course that my father was a gambler. And of course my mother said that that helped, among other things, break up their marriage. And I consequently was never able to do a card game, you know, beyond Tonk, a kind of game you played backstage with musicians. And then, my grandmother, who was an impoverished woman, suffragette, wonderful, really didn't think that money was -- She didn't think that materialistic values put upon money was something that was as important as being treated with dignity as a human being. All the women in my family had a hang-up about numbers. I wish I didn't. (laughter)

G.D.: It's of no consequence I suppose at --

L.H.: It's --

G.D.: -- your station in life.

L.H.: That's true. But, I feel that money is so often made the value of something. And I've often been -- I was often told, "Well, we don't care really so much about whether you're extremely talented. It's how much business can you do"? And that right away makes

that block stay there all the more.

G.D.: You mentioned the word, "numbers," and this is not a psychoanalytic interview, but it ties in quite well with your father.

L.H.: Yes, it does.

G.D.: Can you tell us about Pittsburgh and numbers?

L.H.: Um-hm. My father was a number banker. He was in numbers. My father was a Negro man, who, to survive, hustled. And in this sense of hustling and a Negro man, it means that oftentimes if you are educated and able to get a job, the most menial — and that was all you had the opportunity to ha— a job you had to hold — you didn't want to do that. And you didn't want to work for someone who had less talent, less brains, than you. So, you risked your life; you laid your life down on the line. You were a hustler. You worked with, in many times, criminal attitudes. It took a lot of guts. And on the one hand, you chose that, rather than have the man make a slave out of you.

G.D.: Who is "The Man"?

L.H.: I knew as soon as I said that, I shouldn't have, without explaining it. *The Man* is the employer. And *The Man*, who was unusually the employer that

offered the Negro man either the right to be a hustler or work for him, was usually a white man, a white employer.

G.D.: And this Spring-like day in 1966, that patois, *The Man*, continues.

L.H.: Yes, it still continues of course. The Man is a sheriff in Mississippi. The Man is a cop in Harlem, white.

G.D.: Could he be Negro?

L.H.: He could be Negro, because even though he's Negro, *The Man*, who's the head of his police department is The White Man.

D.G.: You worked for *The Man* in the Cotton Club in Harlem. The Cotton Club, as you describe it, was a garish former speakeasy, which catered to the white community, although it was located on Lennox Avenue and 142nd Street, and in fact was a Jim Crow place.

L.H.: In fact. On the one hand, I'm torn and I was torn in writing the book because that was the place that was the showcase for Negro talent. And one had to have (laughter) some place to show one's creativity.

Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, the great Ethel Waters.

Negro people finally who worked under a roof in a

cabaret that was a little better than a basement downstairs somewhere, and not a tent show in the South. But, on the other hand, I was torn because it was a dreadful place, uh that -- with bad working conditions, little money, no respect paid to its creative people. And our own people couldn't come and see us perform. One didn't say too much about it because one then would get all men fired who were waiters there. (laughter) And one would get all of the chorus girls fired who took care of their families by working there. It was a trap.

- D.G.: A "joint", as you call it.
- L.H.: A joint (laughter).
- D.G.: Or a "toilet".
- L.H.: A toilet, yes, and plush-lined.
- D.G.: That's the vernacular. I think that's a show business expression.
- L.H.: That's it. That's a show business expression.
- D.G.: The interesting question at this point, is how did you get there? You were 16 years of age when you appeared at the Cotton Club in the chorus. Your formative years were difficult.

My mother was an actress. A truly dedicated, L.H.: creative person who had no place to act. "How dare she," you know. There were three theaters, one in Philadelphia, one in Washington, one in New York, where a Negro actress could act. Otherwise, she, you know, kicked around the South along with every other traveling gypsy. Blues singers are the wise with no place to work. And, I then, came along and had to go to work. I had quit school, she was ill. And, she knew some Negro people who knew people who worked in the Cotton Club. And there they took me there to be auditioned. And that's where I had to work. One had the choice in the old days. The choice wasn't very wide. You could be a -- a whore. Or a cook. Or, you could struggle and be a teacher, and you could do few things. But, on the whole, in an urban --, in New York, a little corrupt, a little cynical, you were more apt to be a whore if you couldn't make it -- and you were, you know, [a] young, cute Negro kid than be a teacher, especially if you hadn't had the education to be the teacher -- and especially if your parents had no money to make you anything else. And, mine had none, so I went into the theatre (laughter).

G.D.: Because the avenues led to --

L.H.: Yes.

G.D.: -- about three directions.

L.H.: That's right.

G.D.: Noble Sissle and his Society Orchestra. Does that conjure memories?

Yes, it does. Noble had -- I gather -- had L.H.: had a very famous orchestra. He went over with the very famous Negro Regiment in the First World War. He and a man name Jim Europe, Jim Europe's Orchestra it was. And when the war was over, they had been taken up by the Castles, Irene and Vernon Castle. And so they toured all over Europe and played for dances. And Nobel became the paternalistic Negro leader man in my life, when I was $17 \frac{1}{2}$, 18 years old. I went to work with his orchestra. We played for middle-class Negro people, white people, on the road and in towns. he, uh, also taught me, or said to me, "You must be a lady". Now, "lady" -- I don't mean a lady who does no work and is an aristocrat because she has money and is waited on by people. I mean, a "lady" so that you aren't any of the other stereotype Negro characters. And one must be neater and cleaner and [have] a more

gentile an attitude, so that one will be accepted for the sake of *helping other* Negro people (laughter). I was trained very early to be many things to many people.

G.D.: There were many feelings of ambivalence in your life. You had what amounts to a Puritanical kind of rearing.

L.H.: Not for any of the right reasons, yes.

G.D.: And at the same time, you were hustling on stage, asking people rhetorically, "Do you want me?"

L.H.: Yes.

G.D.: That's a phrase in your book. Now, these feelings of ambivalence, these feelings of being torn, the inner conflicts you had, resulted in a lot of hangups. There was an episode in Cincinnati --

L.H.: There were two highlights about Cincinnati.

One, poor Mr. Sissle was in an automobile accident.

And we had just gotten this *good* job, this rather good job. The orchestra was to appear at a place called Moonlight Gardens.

G.D.: I know it.

L.H.: And, uh, they had never been -- You see, there was always that hang-up first of all of never

been a Negro there before. You know, that hang-up of the quote first. So, we knew it was important to have this job. And when he was ill, I had to go to the hospital, and he said to me, "You must front the band". And well, now mind you, here I was, you know, not --No, I used to just sit in front of the band and bounce around on the chair and get up and sing a chorus of a song. So here I was having to be the leader. If not, we'd lose the job. I said, "But one of the orchestra men can be the leader". He said, "No". Here again, you see, you put a cute little kid up, a girl, you know, in front of -- swinging around in front of the band, and you're the first Ina Ray Hutton of the Negro race, you know. In fact, I think one of the quotes in the paper said that. But anyway, all right -- I did that to hold the job. And they didn't let Negro people in Moonlight Gardens, along with the fact that we were the first band too. But also, opening night was the night of Joe Louis/Schmeling fight. And I had never, you know, thought too much about prizefights. I didn't think like that. I had seen Joe Louis once in Harlem. And I knew, you know. And that night, the guys had the radio on backstage, and we were running off after each

set, listening. And my mother was over in the corner of the stage, not paying too much attention. And of course -- I don't know, ah, whether you remember that fight, but that night I remember I was crying and the men were kind of sullen, and kind of not unhappy, but miserable. And angry. And this terrible beating was happening, and I was crying and crying. And my mother suddenly saw me, and she said,

"What are you crying for?" And I said,

"But he's being beaten." And she said,

"Well, you don't know this man, what are you crying --"

Well, I said,

"But I do. He's mine. He's ours." And that's the first time I had spoken like that to my mother, and I'd never even voiced -- It never -- I didn't know what I said, but my mother said -- Well, she shook me, she says,

"What do you mean, he's yours?"

I said, "He's mine." And, I didn't want him to be beaten. "He's ours." I think that's the first I remember ever identifying with another Negro in that way before. I was -- I was identifying with the symbol that we had, of a powerful man, an impregnable

fortress. And I didn't realize that we drew strength from these symbols. I don't think that they were meant to give us that strength by The Man. But they did.

G.D.: Just as Joe Louis was the symbolic

G.D.: Just as Joe Louis was the symbolic manifestation of --

L.H.: But he was a male too.

G.D.: Yes, but of the repressed wants of emasculated Negro manhood in a kind of a *healthy* vanquishment of Mister Charlie, *you* have served as a symbol for Negro womanhood. Or, do you see yourself that way?

L.H.: Well, you see, it was never clear-cut about a woman, in anything, in this position. There you are with a sport, fighting. It's clean. It was a clean sport with Joe, and so forth. It was the masculine strength, in the body. The woman placed in the, for instance, my position, started with a -- as a half-naked Corrine -- stared at -- going into more sleek and more glamorous, supper clubs. Then, you know, "Hmmm. Oh boy. Look at that." Ah, You never felt as pure an image as Joe's. That -- And so you kept yourself, you know, on this -- You kept this, you tried to keep this purity. Of course, cynicism clouded it all over. But,

you tried to keep this thing for yourself. And that's why I built this kind of façade in front of me, this hard shell, this thing, so that they couldn't get to the last thing I had left, my inner. And I know why now purity embarrasses one, to say, "purity." But, do you know what I mean? I had to keep my inner purity. What I was referring to in the last guestion G. D.: was this: when you were, as you phrase it, "pasted to pillars in movie scenes," you were unique because you broke barriers for other performers. Now that time of your life is especially interesting, and the reason I mentioned you as a symbol -- let me put it this way -is that you were representational of what the sophisticated N-double-A kind of Negro community wanted to purvey.

L.H.: Um-hm. Um-hm.

G.D.: Does that make sense?

L.H.: Yes, it does make sense, and that in truth is what they did want to convey. They -- I was used, you know, by many organizations, first of all, to get employment for other people, but I was also used, most uncomfortably for me, to - um - seem to appear to be a threat to the Negro people, who had to accept any kind

of caricature just to work.

G.D.: Mantan Moreland.

L.H.: Yes. Or Stepin Fetchit and so forth, all
fine entertainers, but who were being what was said to
be: "being Negro" (laughter).

G.D.: A stereotypical --

It's so funny, I often wonder what a director's going to say nowadays to someone on stage, "Act like a Negro." What is that going to keep meaning, you know? Because I find, even in my family, hardly any of us act the same way, you know, so --(laughter). But anyway, ah, the people there in Hollywood at that time, the Negro people particularly, who were in that kind of trap, had a right to resent me very much. And on the other hand, I certainly couldn't become part of the Hollywood white group. I was never allowed to act, really, with another white person in a scene. I was pinned to the piller, so I could be cut out of the scene if it went to places in the South where it couldn't be shown. So, I was really just sort of suspended in midair between the "down" on Central Avenue, and "out" at MGM.

G.D.: A rarified atmosphere.

L.H.: Yes, hmm.

G.D.: 31 years ago, there was a man named Louis Jones.

L.H.: Yes.

G.D.: Now, without revealing all of the details pursuant to your relationship with Mr. Jones, you said that the cruelest act of prejudice that you had encountered occurred during that relationship. Can you give us a nitty-gritty summary of that?

L.H.: I think you must mean the fact that I said the cruelest act of prejudice is what being a Negro man at that particular time, and in my -- our particular case, did to marriage. I said that the iniquities and the inequalities of being a Negro man out in the street working on his job, and what he had to put up with, made him when he came home, a man that demanded prodigious strength. I don't know whether I'm pronouncing that word, but I mean it's almost like Atlas, from a Negro woman. Because she had to be the buffer and the healer of all those wounds he took outside. And sometimes the Negro woman got tired of being that buffer, and being a wife, and being tender, and being loving, and being -- and taking the beating

that "Mister Charlie" should have taken. And I think that's the cruelest thing. I was completely unequipped for it. And that was my first marriage, and I was a very bad wife because I had run to a marriage to get away from what was the earlier part of my life: nobody, no -- had no one, nothing, hated this exposure of them looking at me this way. Run to him and come to him with no strength at all, and wanted it from him. And he had none to give me. And I was a coward. I just crumbled beneath it.

G.D.: From that marriage to Louis Jones -- and now you've been wed for some 19 years to Lennie Hayton, which was a "cause celebre" in itself, but I digress -- That marriage to Louis Jones resulted in a devastating experience, a devastating episode in the hospital, when you gave birth to your daughter Gail.

L.H.: Yes.

G.D.: But, I guess we'd better not reveal the entire book. So, let's skip to another facet of your life, Ms. Horne, a musically oriented one. Charlie Barnet, whom insiders a couple of decades ago called the "Mad Mab", was part of your life. Do you know the origin of the Mad Mab sobriquet?

Well, in this day and age, Charlie would be L.H.: called a blue eyes soul brother. He happened to do a song that he called The Mad Mab. I don't know how it grew, what it came from. Charlie was a mad man it all its fine sense. He was a brilliant musician. He was completely the kind of person that many musicians are. They care so much about their music that they really don't bother with stupid things. And Negro people liked him. And in fact the big, and it still is, the accolade that one offered to white people if one was a Negro, was to accept them at the Apollo Theatre, and to enjoy their work. And, he had their respect, as a musician. He gave me a job. He had a given a job to Billie Holiday. I say Billie in a -- tenderly, I think you know that. And, Billie, uh, you see, was not a tough woman. She was so vulnerable, she was an open wound. When I think and realize now how tough I was compared to Billie -- And, they killed her, you know. Anyway, she couldn't take it, going, at all, on the road with the band. They were -- Because of Charlie, they were very understanding. They let me -- I had to stay in New York, and they'd pay me when I couldn't tour South with them. They would come out and sit in

the bus with me, on the road, when we went places that didn't want me and Negro girls sitting up on the bandstand with those white men. And they commiserated when I wouldn't be served in a restaurant, and they walked out. And you know. And I had the strength, I think, to stay with him as long as I did, beside his guy, I had had two babies, and I needed to work.

Billie, unfortunately -- I only use her as an example of two of us in the same position -- Billie had no children and no family. And so she was alone and had nothing to really help her hide from that kind of frustration.

G.D.: There's a subterranean mystique about Billie Holiday. And there's an overt mystique about Humphrey Bogart, currently. Bogie helped you?

L.H.: Yes he did.

G.D.: Can you tell about that?

L.H.: When I came to Hollywood to work, I was going to open in a cabaret that never did get open, really.

But, when I did get a job in a cabaret, I lived -wanted -- had to get a place to live, the babies were
there. And the management that I was working for got -rented this place in their name, and we moved in, you

know, quickly. And I was already hung up and doing the job and everything, and didn't remember to think -like every time you let your barrier down and don't think "like a Negro", you get pop, you know. And I had just let my quard slip a minute. And the next thing I knew, there was a petition being gotten up for me to get thrown out of the place. And I didn't realize that right across the street from us, in behind this wall, I'd hear these noises and all, and parties and everything, and people fighting. And I didn't realize that it was Humphrey Bogart and Mayo Methot whom he used to be married to. And I didn't realize he lived there until her friends came and said, "Well, the petition got just about so far. But, when they got to Bogart --" I said,

"Bogart who," you know. There's a -- Well, you know -- And, so, he said,

"Get your petition out of my face, and if you harm her or do anything to her, I'll have you all killed (laughter)." And that's the first time I realized, you know. And he absolutely threatened to punch them in the jaw, you know. And I didn't have any more problem. And he didn't know me, I don't think.

G.D.: I want to talk for a moment about two personalities, and equate them with your life in 1966.

Josh White and Paul Robeson.

Hmm. Paul taught me about proud because I was Negro. I had always had this pride, this fierce, sterile almost kind of pride because my grandmother had said, "You must be proud." But, she never told me all the horror of her background. One didn't talk about it, you see. And then she died, and I was getting more and more in that middle-class trap with Negroes who might have a job who didn't speak about it also. I worked even at the time I was 16 and with Sissle, with organizations, but he never told me the reasons why I had a right to some of that pride, you see. Paul was the first one who came to me and said, "Your grandmother was a fiery little woman who chased me off the street corners of Harlem." And she was this and she was that. I said,

"Really? Nobody ever told me that." He said,

"Why, she was a wonderful Negro woman because she wanted to help her people, and she felt she had a right to it. And she made this expression, noblesse

oblige mean being proud of her people." And I said,

"But, nobody ever said it." And he sat down for hours, and he told me about Negro people, and what, you know -- I've read it in some books, and never learned it in school; they don't teach it in history books. I couldn't know anything unless I really -- had moved up by then from the South and had been with Negro people who were terrified, you know, and couldn't do anything about it. And he didn't talk to me as a symbol of a pretty Negro chick singing in a club -- he talked to me about my heritage. And that's why I was always loved him. And I didn't know -- He didn't even speak to me as a leader -- quote "Negro leader". And so, I grew to think then about all the, all the areas of it. And Josh taught me about singing about it. And I couldn't sing, you know. And I was fighting that kind of inverse chauvinism from white people who said, "Ah, she can't sing the blues," you know. And so I felt embarrassed. But, by 1966, I find more and more, uh, myself calling upon the things that Paul said to me, because it's as of now, except he is not our leader. We eat up our leaders, you know. We --History eats our leaders up, we eat them up, we drain

them, and we throw them out because everything moves so fast. But, uh, I don't think I could have felt the kind of pain I did, and the kind of sense of recognition, when I saw Alabama and hoses and dogs and children, if I hadn't had Paul in my life. And Josh. And so, I wasn't unaware. I wasn't thrown into it like a liberal. (laughter) I had a sense of identification.

G.D.: You made an album that was particularly socially significant. Did *Now* sell?

L.H.: No, banned on quite a few stations.

G.D.: We're going to play it on Pacifica, by the way.

L.H.: Oh good.

[Music -- from the album "Now":

If those historic gentlemen came back today

Jefferson, Washington, and Lincoln

And Walter Cronkite put them on Channel Two

To find out what they were thinking

I'm sure they'd say,

"Thanks for us quoting us so much

But, we don't want to take a bow

Enough with the quoting

Put those words into action

And we mean, action now"

Now is the moment

Now is the moment

Come on

We put it off long enough

Now, no more waiting

No hesitating

Now, now, come on, let's get some of that stuff

It's there for you and me

For every he and she

Just want to do what's right, constitutionally

I went and took a look

In my ol' history book

It's there in black and white

For all to see

Now/ Now/ Now, now, now, now

Everyone should love his brother

People should love each other

Just don't take it literal, mister

No one wants to grab your sister

Now is the time

Now is the time

[music]

Now is the moment

Now is the moment

Come on, we put it off long enough

Now, no more waiting

No hesitating

Now, now, come on, let's get some of that stuff.

It's there for you and me

For every he and she

Just want to do what's right constitutionally

I went and took a look

In my ol' history book

It's there in black and white for all to see

Now, Now, Now, now, now, now, Now, now, now,

The message of this song's not subtle

No discussion, no rebuttal

We want more than just a promise

Say goodbye to Uncle Thomas

Call me naïve

Still, I believe

We're created free and equal

Now/ Now/ Now, now, now, now

Everyone should love his brother

People all should love each other

Since they say, we all got rhythm,

Come on let's share our rhythm with them

Now is the time/ Now is the time/ The time is Now]

G.D.: In that album, you have three tunes which are particularly significant. And I think Yip Harburg wrote a couple of them.

L.H.: Yes.

G.D.: You have a Bob Dylan tune in there, about the bomb. You have Now to the tune of Hava Nagila.

L.H.: Yes.

G.D.: And you have a tune called Silent Spring.

L.H.: -- Spring.

G.D.: And right away, I thought about Rachel Carson, but that's not it at all.

L.H.: No, not at all. It's about those little girls. It was -- Yip wrote it as a matter of fact, Yip and Harold Arlen -- that were killed by a bomb in a church. [music begins and continues under..]] And, I remember a couple of the lines: "The winds of hate rust the garden gate as the ghost of Spring stalks the town."

[Music:

Not a leaf is heard to murmur

Not a bird is heard to sing

And bewildered eyes scan the fearful skies

Asking, "Why this strange and silent Spring?"

Children hide and roses tremble

Doors are dark and shades are down

And the rains of hate rust the garden gate

As the ghost of Spring stalks the town

Is this the land

Where flags are flown

To bring this hopeful world of dream

Of Spring I know

Is this the dream

Is this the Spring

The silent Spring

That silent men

Have reaped and sown?

Silent men

Take heart, take wing

And sing away

This silent Spring

[end music]

G.D.: Silent Spring.

L.H.: Hmm. It was written at the same time that Adolph Greene and Betty Comden wrote the lyrics to Now. And Julie Stein for a performance for SNCC, as a matter of fact, in New York, a benefit that I did with Frank Sinatra.

G.D.: As a matter of fact, you mentioned that that was the hardest work you ever did, selling seats to

that.

- L.H.: Yes, yes. Because people at that time were afraid to have their names on checks made out to SNCC, you see. Now, it's *quite* safe (laughter).
- G.D.: I'm glad to hear you say that, since I'm on the Board of Directors (laughter).
- L.H.: Yes, well, I wasn't saying it without all of my tongue completely out of my cheek (laughter).
- G.D.: Lena Horne, listeners, I know, are indebted to you for the time you spent with us. [Music -- instrumental -- "Stormy Weather", playing under, and through program end] Speaking personally, I am much obliged. Thank you so much.
- L.H.: Thank you. I feel that you were "simpatico" and I wouldn't have spoken as comfortably as I have, long-winded though I am, unless you had been.

[Music continues]

G.D.: Pacifica Radio in Berkley has presented,

"Lena: A Sound Portrait of a multi-faceted lady -- Lena

Horne." The interview was recorded at the Fairmont

Hotel in San Francisco. I'm Gene Dealessi.

END OF INTERVIEW - LENA HORNE

NOTES:

- 1. For classic Lena Horne musical performances. **Stormy Weather: The Legendary Lena (1941-1950)**. RCA Catalogue # 9985, 1990.
- 2. Lena Horne's classic film performance. **Stormy Weather**. 20th Century Fox, 1943. Available on VHS.
- 3. The songs "Now!" and "Silent Spring" are available on a 1963 single audio release by 20th Century Fox. They also appear on the 1964 album, Here's Lena Now.
- 4. The autobiography referred to in this interview is **Lena** by Lena Horne and Richard Schickel. Doubleday, 1965. Paperback published by Limelight in 1986.