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## Art In Your Ear

From WMNF

An exploration of the arts with JoEllen Schilke.



### Deb Carson Interview - Radio/Podcast JoEllen Schilke, Host, “Art in Your Ear” WMNF Radio-88.5 FM, Tampa Bay

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JE: You are listening to Art in Your Ear. We have a great show for you...and a *really good interview* with Deb Carson. **Woaaaah!** Talk about family secrets...

JE: I believe I have on the line Deb Carson. Hello?

DC: You sure do!

JE: Alright! So I was, I'm just fascinated with what you are doing right now. And I just wanted to mention really quickly before we get started, hello wonderful listeners. Art in Your Ear – our main goal is to interview people around the area who are doing amazingly creative things, and so Deb Carson fits that. And she's been on the show with different hats on ... (pledge message) Deb Carson you've written a book, the book is called “Becoming FLO, A Mostly True Story.” Who is Flo in your life?

DC: Well, first I want to start by saying thanks for inviting me today JoEllen. I love Art in Your Ear. I've been listening to you and WMNF for 30 years and supporting when I can, so I really appreciate now being part...

JE: Yaaaaay...

DC: ...of this discussion. Flo was my great uncle who I more or less grew up with. He lived in Sarasota when I first met him as a little kid because he was my mother's uncle, um, and we would go to Sarasota and visit him every year for our family vacation every year from Baltimore. And he has an amazing story – I thought so all of my life, and then it really got amazing once I started researching it for my thesis in 2010.

JE: When I knew you were coming on, I started Googling around – unfortunately it was last night and I didn't have time to read your book, and uh, found some interviews with him about circus life, and the insight into being a clown and into both the business end and the artistic end, but the community there was amazing. How much of Flo's life did you know before saying this is going to be my thesis?

DC: Well, what I knew was that he was a clown. We would go and watch him rehearse. He was very much a part of my life from that time until he passed away in 1974, he was of course born in 1903, so we were very close. My mother and her sister and family were very, very close with him – he was my grandmother's brother. And...I knew a lot about his life and was part of it. What I didn't know was that he really believed that he was a woman in a man's body, and eventually through his trajectory of becoming a performer – which he yearned to do ever since he was little, he came to live his life as a woman inside and outside the spotlight, but only within his circus community because in the 50s and 60s, even when he was with Ringling, and of course he had built years of working and honing his skills as a clown in traveling circuses until he was invited in 1949 to become part of Ringling, he really hid Flo in the closet. But circuses provided safe harbor for people who lived alternative lifestyles. And he fled from home when he was 16 from an abusive father...

JE: They're in Baltimore, correct?

DC: In Baltimore, yeah, in 1920 when he was 16, he fled from an abusive father and joined the traveling circus that was in town at that time, mainly because he wanted to live – the father was very, very violent, and so he basically began to live his dream when he went to this entirely different life. And eventually he reconnected with his biological family after his father died – that was ten years after he was on the road in 1930...

JE: Before you go on too far, I just want to talk a little bit about, this, uh what, um, how you found out more about your family. Where you went to? Who you were talking to? What you were looking up? How did you have to dig and find out how Flo, Uncle Albert, Flo, sort of found a way to live his life? What were your sources for this?

DC: Well, he passed away in 1974, and it wasn't until 40 years later that I discovered this sort of other life, that he was living within his circus community as a woman. The way I found out was, I knew of a very good friend of his that I met when I was ten years old, a circus clown by the name of Jackie LeClaire – Jackie and Flo were very good friends. I saw that he was performing, still, in his 80s in Sarasota, and I reached out to him and lo and behold, he was so generous – in remembering me, remembering my family, and I connected with him and so I had three separate interviews with him at his home, at Jackie's home. And Jackie was the first one who said to me during the interview, "Well, you know he never went by Albert with us, he was always Flo."

And I acted as if I knew this, because I didn't want to look like a total idiot and geek, but then, that's how I first knew (of it), and it changed the trajectory of the story which was already an amazing story but this really made it amazing.

JE: The circus has both, I think in a theoretical or a cultural way, seemed a haven for people who did not fit in in places, but also in a literal way, of people who, like your uncle, like Flo, who left home because it was not a good place for them, and found another home, or another community within the circus. When you were talking to Jackie, you were talking to other people involved, what was it to know that this person they were working with was living as a woman, was legally considered a man, but personally considered a woman. Was it, did you find that the circus was protective, was it harsh, and then, you know, how did that happen for Flo?

DC: It was....circuses all along have been all along, sort of a place of safe harbor, especially in the 50s and 60s when he was really becoming a celebrity clown, and reaching his pinnacle there, and as Jackie explained to me, people who were bullied, people who lived outside of the margins of traditional family, people who aspired to be something other than what their community – and in his case, he grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family of parents who escaped the pogroms in Russia, uh -- he tried to live by their morals, he always looked beyond. He always had a penchant for wanting to perform – he loved opera, he loved dance – and so when he ran away to circus, he found a welcoming place. People tended to take those kind of young people under their wing as I understood it from Jackie, this is the way that he described it to me, and this is what happened to Flo. He was taken under the wing of other performers who had had similar situations coming to the circus and they changed their names to protect themselves from intolerance, and in Flo's case anti-Semitism because he had a very Jewish-sounding name. His birthname was Abraham Isadore (sic) Meyrowitz, and they told him right off that he's got to change it and so he, and he became Albert White – that was his stage name. But really and truly, I think Flo was inside from the very beginning and the circus community was a very live and let live community, and he was able to live life on his own terms – in circus. Not with his biological family.

JE: You're speaking...you've got a book talk that's this Wednesday at the Saint Pete Beach library. Will this be the first time you're in front of a group of people talking about Flo?

DC: Yes. It will be. I've spoken a lot to a lot of people but this will be the first sort of organized talk around the release of the book. Yes.

JE: When you want to put stuff forward about the book, what do you, what are some of the themes that you think that, the things that resonated within you? What do you want to resonate in other people?

DC: Pretty much two things. I wrote the book to honor my uncle's memory. And I really wrote it also to help and honor the life that he was strong enough to live for himself. He did live life on his own terms, he lived a beautiful art – he was able to do that once he escaped the chains of the bondage he suffered and the bullying that he suffered as a young person, so I wrote it not only to honor his memory and his life so that people could take pride in that and learn that they too, if they're struggling for any reason, Flo really, you know, he illuminates a way out. He shows with

his story – with HER story, there's a way out. You can live life on your own terms and live a happy, very fulfilling life.

JE: Did your family, you know the trips down to Sarasota as a kid, and as you know people in your family that know him, as you knew him, did your family understand how Flo was? Or when you had the book, was that, what was the family conversations about that?

DC: They...well...when the...actually, the day that Jackie revealed the...introduced Flo to me, my mother was actually with me because she knew Jackie, and they loved one another, and I asked Jackie could my mom come. So, we both learned together. My mother and I both learned together of the existence of Flo. And we both pretended not to be geeks and really just, uh, emote all over the place until we got back in the car!

JE: I can imagine the scene in the car! (Laughing)

DE: Yah, it was pretty interesting. And then I had three more conversations separately with Jackie and he revealed so much more that was just so enlightening for myself, the book, the writing, my family. And my family, you know back in those days, LGBTQ+ was not a thing. Of course it WAS, but it wasn't a known thing. So most people thought it was a binary thing – if there was an effeminate man, he was a homosexual. And that's how my family believed their Uncle Albert – my Uncle Albert was a gay man. I only came to find out later, come to believe later, that he thought of himself, always, as a woman in a man's body, and he chose in his circus life to live that way. I only wish that he had been able to live his life otherwise, outside in the world, but it wasn't a time to do that. It wasn't even a safe time to do that. He dressed as a man with us, and he dressed as a man off of circus grounds for safety.

JE: During the latter part of his life, he was working with the Shriners Circuses, and that's quite a circuit to do, and that's a somewhat conservative organization, so I would you think, or did you find that for anyone to be openly, not even gay, openly different, did he also have to hide it for economic reasons?

DC: I don't think so. And, you know, he had the luxury...when he was performing, he performed in, as a female clown. I didn't mention it but yes, I think that's very important to mention. So he was always, as some people called them, drag clowns, he always, except in his early years, he performed in women's clown attire. He also, by that time when he was doing things on his own, he had left Ringling and founded the Albert White Trio. And so he was cherry-picking his own gigs at that point and booking his own gigs, and so he was really doing what he wanted to do and, as I learned, nobody really cared who you were kissing. That was the words that Jackie told me – what was really was mattering in circus as in any entertainment piece of the world, it was how good you were. That was the thing that was important...

JE: Hmm...

DC: ...and that's what stood out, and I believe that's what he did with Shriners and all of the other shows, the Dobridge shows, that he did literally, right up until he passed away in 1974, he was working just up until then.

JE: It was, as I said before, I was listening to, about almost an hour's worth of interview with him...

DC: yah...

JE: ...and one, he sounded incredibly kind. Just, and not "I'm going to sound kind" but he was very kind, he was pretty unjudgmental about people, like when it was easy, it would have been easy to say "Oh yeah, those young whippersnappers..." he was like "No, no, we're here to help them." And that his experiences, it sounds like of being helped, is that he kept that alive as part of the circus culture. It was important to him to be the help-er instead of the help-ee.

DC: Absolutely, absolutely. And in the book I talk about how he actually spent a lot of his off-time teaching children of performers from other countries, who did not know how to speak English, so there's a whole piece in the book about that. But yah, he loved people, he loved his fans, he loved his circus family – he loved his biological family with the exception of his father who was an awful person, and he was just...very talented, and he just wanted to share all of that out.

JE: That's great.

DC: And he did.

JE: Well, we are, I have taken way more time than I told you I was going to take. So thank you for that. So once again, the book talk is next Wednesday?

DC: Yes

JE: At what time?

DC: At 3 o'clock

JE: And it's at

DC: At the St. Pete Beach Public Library

JE: They can look it up the address, that's fine. And I have it dear listeners, I have it posted on both the Art in Your Ear pages and on WMNF.org, and on the WMNF Facebook page (pledge message). Deb, where can people find your book if they said "I can't live ...I can't even live until Wednesday without reading it!"

DC: Okay! Okay! And of course there's gonna be more book presentations, this will be the first of many and I will be posting about that, but if anyone wants the book or can't come to this book talk on Wednesday, they can email me directly at [debcarsonwrites@gmail.com](mailto:debcarsonwrites@gmail.com) or they can message me on my Facebook page which is Deb Carson.

JE: Excellent. Well, thank you so much and thank you for writing this book and thank you very much for introducing me and everyone to Flo. What a wonderful, wonderful person that she sounded like, and what an interesting way to see how things change over a century and a little bit more for people who are trying to live just who they are.

DC: Yes, the themes in the book I think are just as relevant today as they were 100 years ago.

JE: And now just one more thing. So, obviously, I mean It seems it just seems the story's just calling out for a screenplay. Are you ready to write that?

DC: (Laughing) We're hoping to turn the book into a film and there's some activity moving forward on that score, but that's about all that I can say at this point.

JE: (Laughing) Alright! Good, cause, just the little bit I've seen, I'm like, oh yeah, this needs to be a movie.

DC: That's how I saw it. I first wrote it in grad school as a film treatment...

JE: Oh.....

DC: .... And that's how it sort of came to life as my thesis and now the book.

JE: Oh, how wonderful. Well, thanks again so very much for coming on and I wish you the best and all of that and, yeah, holler if you get some more appearances please email me and I can help.

DC: Oh, thank you so so much JoEllen. I really appreciate it and thank you to MNF, and support WMNF - it's a wonderful, wonderful station!

JE: Ok! Bye bye now. Bye kiddo.

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