

A Woman Speaking Her Mind

Abbey Lincoln at home with Lara Pellegrinelli

May 10, 2002, 2P.M.
New York, NY

Filmed and Transcribed by Amanda MacBlane

1. Family
2. Continuing the Great Women Vocalist Tradition
3. Some Autobiographical Details
4. Songwriting
5. African Heritage
6. Movies, Paintings, Beauty
7. The Purpose of Art
8. Gender Distinctions
9. The Process of Composing
10. Today's "Terrible Times"
11. Being a Singer AND a Composer

1. Family

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Well, Abbey, if we're going to talk about your work as a composer, why don't we talk a little bit about the Lincoln Center performances back in early March? You did three days of your own compositions.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. Now I'm trying to remember exactly what I did, but I don't. I think there was a spirit that just carried me through. I don't think I sang forty songs—I know I didn't—but I have written about forty songs since 1970. And I'm glad that, I think that I'm going to be known principally for my repertoire, for my songs.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Why don't go back to the beginning and tell us a little bit about your childhood and what brought you into the music?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I'm one of 12 children, the 10th child. And my father built the house in which I was born.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: In Chicago?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. Morgan Park. And he built the house in Calvin Center, Michigan, where I grew up. And my mother was brilliant and beautiful and a great woman, and taught us about our spiritual selves. And everybody in the family got over really. They produced a tool and dye maker, my oldest brother, that's Alex. [she points to his portrait] And Alex, he really didn't like it here. I understand it. Bob, the second eldest boy, became a judge and the youngest boy became a V.I.P at a great corporation. It was like that. My sisters brought many, many children. When Mama died, there were 84 children. She was 84 years old and there were 84 children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren that she had.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: That's amazing.

ABBEY LINCOLN: There's probably about 200 of us now. I believe it's got everything to do with the mixing of the nations, even though it was a drag. But we're hybrids and we're healthy and strong people. African, Indian, and English and Irish.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Mixed together.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: How much do you know about your family heritage?

ABBEY LINCOLN: What my mother told us. She was the griot in the family. She was the storyteller and told us who we were, who our grandparents were, who our great-grandparents were. In the book, she left about 38 pages that are going to go before my

own story. I asked her to write it. She said, the first part of the first page, she said, "They called me the preacher."

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: They called her the preacher?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Why?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Because she was a woman who spoke her mind and told everybody the difference between right and wrong. As she understood it. And she didn't tell us, she and my father, they didn't have to tell you but one time!

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: [laughs] You listened.

ABBEY LINCOLN: All of us did. We grew up with discipline and principle. And if you don't have that in this world, you're lost. You can't just do anything.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: What does it take for a child to listen to a parent? What kind of qualities does that parent need to have?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Dignity.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Dignity.

ABBEY LINCOLN: That's all. Yeah. Dignity and honesty, which goes with dignity. My mother didn't lie about anything. I never heard her drag anybody. The only person she was mad at was my father! [laughs]

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: [laughs] Well, give me an example of you doing something wrong...

ABBEY LINCOLN: I didn't do anything wrong.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: You never did anything wrong?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. There was a piano in the house that my father brought for us.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: In Kalamazoo?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, in Michigan, on the farm. When I was five years old, I went to the piano because I could, because Mama and Dad let me do it. If I had gotten on my mother's nerves or my father's nerves, my brothers and sisters would not have left me alone at the piano, but they all did. And I learned how to play a song I could sing. I remembered the intervals. I didn't know they were called intervals then. The spaces

between notes. And I taught myself how to play a song. And I went to school and I sang in school when I was like 6. [sings] "Away in a manger no crib for his bed."

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: What denomination were you growing up?

<Video clips>

ABBAY LINCOLN: The church that Mama took us to was African Methodist Episcopal and they didn't talk about Jesus a lot. So we didn't go through that. We were taught principle. We didn't, Mama and Dad didn't talk about anybody who wasn't a part of the family. We didn't know that the Europeans were supposed to be our enemies then, even though we knew that we had been slaves. But they didn't complain about the white folks. I found that after I left home. What can I say? I'm really fortunate.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: I think so.

ABBAY LINCOLN: Yeah.

2. Continuing the Great Women Vocalist Tradition

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: You sang in high school too, right? High school band follies?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. Mr. Chenery is the one who included me in the show. It was his project and I sang for three years. The first year I sang an Ella Fitzgerald song I'd heard, a song that she'd sung. And the second year I sang a song that Lena Horne had sung, "Stormy Weather." "A Sunday Kind of Love," Ella had sung. And then the last year, I sang Sarah Vaughan's "You're Mine..."—I mean "Don't Blame Me." After that, shortly after that, we moved to...

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Calvin—

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, we were in, this was in Kalamazoo in high school. I went to high school in Kalamazoo. After that was when I went to Jackson, Michigan. The minister of the church sent for me to sing for the young kids in the basement of the church. They call it the Devil's music.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Was it that way when you were in high school?

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's always been like that. Yeah, they call it the Devil's music. Jazz. It's not seen as sacred or holy, but if you sing about Jesus, then it's holy. If you don't sing about Jesus, it's not holy. But it's the same music.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Did your parents accept you singing these songs?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I didn't sing anything that wasn't what was expected of me. I didn't sing the blues or anything like that. Mama told me that her mother, that when she was a little girl in the house she was singin,' [sings] "He may be your man, but he comes to see me sometimes." And my grandmother, her mother, slapped her in the mouth, and she never sang that again. So I started writing songs when I discovered what I'd been delivered to: a stage where women stand and sing about a low-life man. Now what does that make a woman? If he's nothing how can you be something? I don't sing any of those songs anymore. I did it for a number of years. "Happiness is Just a Thing Called Joe."

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: "You're Mine, You."

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: "Good For Nothing Joe."

ABBEY LINCOLN: "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man (of mine)." "My Man." "It's cost me a lot but there's one thing I got, it's my man. Cold and wet. Tired? You bet. All of this, I'll soon forget with my man. He's not much on looks, he's no hero out of books, but I love him. Two or three girls has he that he likes as well as me, but I love him. I don't know

why I should. He isn't good. He isn't true. He beats me too. What can I do?" You have to be a degraded woman to go for something like that.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: But wait a second, I mean...

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, I am not waiting a second! You leave. What can you do? You leave!

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: But there are women who you admired, who you do admire, who have sung those songs, like Lena Horne and Billie Holiday.

ABBEY LINCOLN: That doesn't mean that I don't admire them. It was the time for that. The people that hired them expected them to play this role of the berated woman whose man wasn't nothing.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: And they did it.

ABBEY LINCOLN: And she was not seen as anything herself. "Stormy Weather." Anyway...

3. Some Autobiographical Details

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Go back to high school. When did you decide to leave Michigan and how did that happen? We've never talked about that.

ABBEY LINCOLN: I didn't decide to leave. My mother decided to come to Kalamazoo. She and my father were divorced. And she brought us to Kalamazoo, where I went to high school with my brother and sister. It's not anything I want to talk about. Kalamazoo's a long time ago! [laughs]

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: When you graduated from high school, did you stay or did you go?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, when I graduated I came to Jackson, Michigan through this minister and started to work in Jackson, Michigan with a band. So I didn't do this all on my own. There was always somebody to help me to do what I do.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: And then from Jackson, was that Honolulu next?

ABBEY LINCOLN: My brother came to Kalamazoo to see my mother for Mother's Day and brought me back with him to California.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Where in California?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't want to go through all of that.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Okay.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Really I don't! It's autobiographical. I've written about it. Yeah. California. When Watts was a beautiful place to live. There was a red car that went from Central Avenue, from Watts to downtown. I did not live, I have not lived a tragic life. I'm one of the privileged ones that came from the royal man and woman. And so are my sisters and brothers. They all know how to live here and take care of themselves. And none of us have ever been in jail. We're not junkies and we're not whores.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: I know that.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. That's where I got it. I'm made at home. I didn't have to figure it out and on my way through with my career, on my way through life, I stood where I was given to stand. It serves me.

4. Songwriting

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: How about Bob Russell?

ABBEY LINCOLN: He was my first manager.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: In California?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. He was a great songwriter and he taught me a lot about songs. That's how I learned how to write. He was a lyricist and he taught me what a good song was. How to judge a good song, a great song, has something to do with being original, succinct in your description. Yeah, Bob Russell. He wrote "Do Nothing 'Til You Hear From Me," "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," "Crazy He Calls Me," "(You Ain't Gonna Bother Me) No More." Yeah, that's where I learned about great songs, was from Bob Russell. And I also knew the great Duke Ellington. He was a great songwriter.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Did you know Duke at that time or Duke's music?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I met him during that time. Same time I met Bob Russell in Los Angeles.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Was it the band playing in Los Angeles, Duke's band?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Of course! Whenever he wanted to play. He was a king there.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: What did you learn from Duke's writing?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I didn't learn anything else from anybody else's writing. I knew what a good song was, but it was Thelonious Monk who told me I was a great composer. That's why I started writing compositions. Thelonious was quoted as saying on an album [*Straight Ahead*] that I'd recorded— Max Roach did the liner notes, and he asked Thelonious for a quote, Ruby and Ossie Davis for a quote, like that. And Thelonious was quoted as saying that 'Abbey Lincoln is not only a great singer and a great actress, she's a great composer.' And I started to write my own compositions. I started to believe what I heard and I wrote my own songs. My first one was called "People in Me."

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Maybe we should fill people in on your acting as well, because some of the people reading might not be familiar with...

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't care if they're familiar... I'm not really interested in everyone knowing everything about my life, if you want to know the truth. I didn't come to the stage to be popular and to be known. I came to save me from the grief of living here. Yeah. And there's a lot of grief here. So I sing songs about my life that help me to live. I don't have to go to a therapist. I can write it down and remember where I've been. Yeah.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: You started writing lyrics before you started writing compositions.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. My first lyric was on an album with Riverside Records, and Max wrote the melody, but he said that I had written it anyway. It's called "Let Up." That's when I was beginning to understand where I was in the world. All the trouble. I was having a relationship with Max Roach, who was married, and I wasn't concerned for his wife or his children. I was thinkin' about myself. I've forgiven myself over the years because I'm an African woman and I know that my ancestors practiced polygamy. I wasn't supposed to feel shamed, I wasn't supposed to be treated badly. He was supposed to give me the bride price and his first wife was supposed to be trying to help him get it! [laughs] I know that. His children are my children, I love them. And he was a wonderful husband in many ways and taught me a lot about this form that they call bebop and jazz. Yeah, Max Roach.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: What in particular?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, just witnessing his life. He would sit at the piano and compose; I had a chance to listen to him compose. Now I know how you develop something from a line. If you live in a house with a master, you learn who they are. That's all it is. Yeah.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: What was he working on at the time when you first met?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't remember anything about what he was working on. I don't know what he's working on now. He's a great musician. Comes from the times, from Charlie Parker and Miles Davis and all that. All of these men became great bandleaders. The people that were with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie. Yeah, they were all great, all of them. I didn't meet Charlie Parker. He was gone before I got to New York. But this is the work of a spirit—the human spirit.

5. African Heritage

ABBEY LINCOLN: The reason the African American people have music is because our ancestors practiced it. Music and dance. [claps] Hey! Forever. And we inherited it like our hair and our skin. The ability to express yourself.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: You went to Africa.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah, I've been there a couple of times. Miriam Mikeba took me there and introduced me to the heads of state. She was Sékou Touré's friend.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: In Guinea?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. She worked for the state. And, yeah, so that's where I've gotten my African names. I'm Aminata Moseka. I got a bunch of names. Anna Marie Wooldridge was the name I was born with. Then I took Gaby because the people at the Moulin Rouge in Los Angeles wanted me to have a French name. They didn't know I already had one. I didn't either. Anna Marie is as French as it gets. And Wooldridge is English. They gave me Gaby and kept Wooldridge so I had a German and an English name. It's America! [laughs] And then Bob Russell named me Abbey Lincoln, because we used to sit and talk about life. He understood how I felt about my people because he felt the same way about his. He said to me, "Well, since Abraham Lincoln didn't free the slaves, maybe you could handle it." Named me Abbey Lincoln and I laughed, but that's the name that I took. Abbey for Westminster Abbey he told me, and Lincoln for Abraham Lincoln. He was aware of his self and of his people—socially aware. He's the first socially aware person that I met. Bob Russell. Roach is socially aware. Duke Ellington, all of the great ones. I met Louie Armstrong in Honolulu, Billie Holiday, who sang "Strange Fruit." Yeah.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: What was the experience like going to Africa the first time?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I knew I had come home when the minister of information named me Moseka in Zaire. He told Miriam to tell me because they spoke French. He told me that Moseka was a god of love in the form of a maiden. He didn't tell me it was a goddess and I knew that I had come home because I know that God is a god—male and female. I do not worship the man, any man as God alone. I'm the one. It's me and him. She's the one who makes the baby out of her. She clones the baby. The women ought to be ashamed of themselves to do this, to play this role and then blame him for it. How could you bring a baby, carry it for nine months and create it and praise God "He"? There's just no, it's perfectly understandable that He's as crazy as He is. And He is crazy. Almost as crazy as She is. Yeah. He, Him, fall on your knees and worship Him! Is he supposed to know the difference between Him, that Him, and him? It's not right. And lean all over Him? She's not God or the Devil. He's both. She's nobody. I don't respect it at all. It makes me angry too. That we're going through all of this. For what reason? Is She a coward? She can't tell him that She's God? He doesn't know that She's God? She ought to

knock him out then! What kind of a fool is that? So, my music is full of all this. Stories that I tell about the life I've had "...a figure made of clay. I think about the things I lost, the things I gave away. And when I'm in a certain mood, I search the halls..."

6. Movies, Paintings, Beauty

ABBEY LINCOLN: The halls for me are the books and the landlord, my landlord in Los Angeles, gave me some precious old books from 1953. Encyclopedias and dictionaries. Larry Weiss. And I would get up in the morning and fix my coffee and have a cigarette and go through the books and I have a dissertation, a thesis on Egypt.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: But this is later. This isn't the first time that you were in Los Angeles.

ABBEY LINCOLN: This is in 1970.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: This is when you started writing songs.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Where were you in your life at that point of time?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Rolling. I left the marriage and left my career, too. I'd just made *For Love of Ivy* with Sidney Poitier. I played Ivy. I was supposed to kiss somebody's feet, so I could get another job. I was raised better than that. I wasn't planning on making any movies in the first damn place. So I really wasn't living for another movie. I painted. The paintings here, I painted them when I was living in Los Angeles. Living over a garage in three rooms.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: What's this one?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I did her in Los Angeles. Her name is—that's *The Merry Dancer*. I was using that board as a, because I make my clothes, I used to anyway—I still do—and it was a cutting board I was using and I inherited the whole big house so I didn't need it anymore. I put it outside and I brought it in one day and I thought I'd paint it. Yeah. That for me is God. Yeah, *The Merry Dancer*. I wrote a song about her. "Mama told me of a beauty that is made of purest gold. One the weather will not tarnish, one that never will grow old. She said beauty comes from understanding, looking at the things we see. Beauty of the human spirit. Beauty that will set us free."

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: That's beautiful.

ABBEY LINCOLN: That's the lyrics. Has nothing to do with vanity. Vanity is a useless thing. You shouldn't look for excellence in the shape of your nose or the shape of your mouth or the color of your skin or the texture of your hair. This is disgusting! And the size of your breasts... And the width of your behind... I mean, really! [laughs]

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Do you think it's more difficult to be here as a beautiful woman?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, it's a blessing to be called beautiful! I didn't become beautiful until I was about 17. When I was 14, I was the one that the boys said, I mean, "Hey cookie! Not you, dog biscuit." Yeah, I really did experience that.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: [laughs] You told me that and I find that still incredibly hard to believe.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Well, it's true! I wasn't supposed to be beautiful. Mama said to me one day when I was 14, we hadn't spoken of it, but she knew. She said to me, "Don't worry, you're going to be beautiful like your sister Betty in a few more years. And it really cooled me out. So I've been known as a beautiful woman all my life on the stage. Because of that, there were people who said I couldn't sing. You're not supposed to be talented if you look a certain way. It's really stupid. So if I didn't write about my life, I'd lose my mind here. That's the thing that keeps me sane and secure is the fact that I can write it down on a piece of paper and have a realization. Yeah. Mama and Dad.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Well, they give you everything you need.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Mama, yes, she did. Yes, they did. We're failing the children today. They, the women, push them through the street—the men, too—in a battering ram. The baby can't see the person's face who's pushing them. They could be choking to death and they wouldn't even know it. And push it across the street like it's a piece of luggage. We're lost here, whether we know it or not.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Where did your song "Conversation with a Baby" come from?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I met a beautiful little boy, who lives in the building. His name is Ghandi; he's got a little brother named Walker. And I was just inspired to write it. "We were really very lucky that you got here. Nowadays we slay them at the door."

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Abortion?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes! The Supreme Court has said this. They also said that the Africans were 3/5's human! We got a lot of work to do here. This is not going to work. If the child has to be sacrificed, you don't have a life, that's suicide. The baby, abused. The Priesthood. This is pitiful and I'm full of tears, too. I'm mad as hell. [stamps foot] This is not right!

7. The Purpose of Art

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Do you think that songs have the power to change or at least to help?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't do it for that reason; it's for my own spirit. I believe that God made us and God made the world and God has to fix it. I'm not trying to change anything. I'm not trying to fix it. I didn't make it. [wipes eyes] It's the creator's world. And if it's all right with God, it has to be all right with me. I don't know why we're going through this—all of this. [blows nose] Nobody made anything here. But as you can see, I'm beside myself. I'd rather cry than...

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Do you want to take a break for a minute?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I'm okay.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: You're all right? Abbey, I think it's better to cry than not to cry and not to care!

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. Yeah.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Because if you don't care, then...

ABBEY LINCOLN: You may as well...

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: you may as well not be here!

ABBEY LINCOLN: That's right. All that we have that we can depend upon is love. You have some regard for yourself and the people that you know and we all deserve some love.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Is music part of that love?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. The arts are the expression of the great human, holy spirit that is love. Through the arts, through technology, through the sciences. They talk about Egypt all the time. It's because the artists did that work. The artists created that house that's on our money.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: The pyramids.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. They were totally fascinated with their ability to express themselves as brilliant human beings. So what is this? It's disgusting.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Well, they knew everything. They had the math and the sciences and music.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: It's the cradle of civilization.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. So we can't say that nobody told us, because it's not true. Somebody did tell us. And they also wrote that the love of money was the root of all evil. That is an absolute truth. You're not supposed to love money. And it *does* grow on trees! How insulting and rude are you going to be to somebody and say, "Money doesn't grow on trees?" And you make it out of paper and where does paper come from?

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: [laughs] I never thought about it quite that way before.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's amazing. Oh, I mean, it's really a sneer. I mean, it's a spit in your face, a total lack of respect. Yeah, it doesn't grow on trees. Oh, my. And you're not supposed to say anything, you know? They're going to clone a human being and the women have been cloning— the female clones everybody who comes here. You'd think somebody would knock this man in his mouth, would hurt him for saying such a thing to us. Yeah, she clones everybody. I look like my mother, I think like my mother, my mother and father. This is who we are. We come from our ancestors. We're living in a weird time.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: That's why it's important to have art.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Without art, we would not be human. All human beings practice the arts. All of them. They have music, they dance, and they create things and make things. Women create the people. She's the one that makes the people. He builds the bridges and the houses and makes cars and things. He's brilliant. He's the perfect other half to the woman and vice versa.

8. Gender Distinctions

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: So it's all right to say that men and women are different?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes! Are you kidding? I mean, really.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Well, there are some women who are...

ABBEY LINCOLN: Are trying to pretend that she's just like him?

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Yes.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Oh, I know. It's sick. We weren't made like that. She's not made to play football. If that was true, she wouldn't have to complain about being abused. She could defend herself. He has muscles.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: But just because they're different doesn't mean anyone is less than anyone else.

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, it doesn't. It means that we are this. [clasps hand together] If everybody is what they know how to be, we are strong and brilliant. But a woman wants to be a man and a man who pretends that he's a woman? Give me a break! How are you going to continue...how would you perpetuate the species like this? This is just a bunch of lies that we're living through.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: I've heard other people use the word feminist to describe your work...

ABBEY LINCOLN: I'm not a feminist. How are you going to be a feminist and you bring the male and the female child here?

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: What does the word feminism mean to you?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I think that the women have had these resentments and she hasn't been woman enough to speak about it until just now. After Dr. King got over, after the blacks got over, she thought, "Okay. But I didn't get mine yet," she said. And she teaches. She talks to him, much the way the African Americans talk to the white man. He's to blame for everything. Nobody did nothing low but him. How is anybody supposed to believe this? The African people are paying for something they did a *long* time ago. They were delivered to the level long before they met the Europeans. Well, the woman, the white women, followed after the blacks. It's my body. Really? Well, if you keep your dress down, it's yours. And the man didn't say to her, "Yeah, until you lay with me, then it's ours and if you kill my children, I'm gonna kill you, I'm gonna hurt you." He didn't. My body. My word! So we're all guilty in this. I don't know. I guess the white man has

got really a great superiority complex because everybody blames him for everything. Nobody did nothing low but him! [laughs]

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: It's a terrible burden for him, too.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's not right.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: No, it's not right.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's a lie. He didn't do this by himself. Yeah. It's really interesting growing older and becoming elder. I'm thankful for my life. I really am. I don't want to stay here forever. But I'm glad I had a chance to experience this.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: And you've put so much of that into your songs. Do you think of those as your monuments to us?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes, I think so. I never knew it was going to be like this, but... "When I'm Called Home." Stan Getz said to me, "Abbey, I don't want to put a hex on your song, but this is a great song." "When I'm called home, I will bring a book that tells of strange and funny terms and of the heart it took to keep on living in a world that never was my own! A world of haunted memories of other worlds unknown."

9. The Process of Composing

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: When you begin to compose, how does a song take shape?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I can't explain it. It just comes. It's through concentration and I have to wait on the spirit that brings the music. But when I sit down and I start, that's all. I start. And I'm accompanied, I know this, by my spirit, whoever that is and everything. They write all this stuff. It's not me. I'm an instrument that they use.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: A medium?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yes. An instrument. Yes.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Do you find that you find your texts first?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, it depends.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Or it's just all...

ABBEY LINCOLN: It all depends.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Can you give me an example?

ABBEY LINCOLN: "Look to the Star" came as a composition first. It took me a while to find the words. Usually I find the words first, but sometimes not. I always did like language. There was a big dictionary in the back of the school in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where I went to a one-room schoolhouse. I love language—to express yourself through words.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: You'd mentioned to me, too, that Bob Russell had given you a book on rhetoric?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, not rhetoric. He gave me a book, Hayakawa wrote one, on semantics and helped me to approach things from a serious standpoint, reading, how to begin and read the whole book, everything from the very beginning. Yeah, semantics. *How To Increase Your Vocabulary By a Thousand Words or Less*, or something like that, was the name of another book. And it did help me too.

10. Today's "Terrible Times"

[Outside noise/music coming from a car]

ABBEY LINCOLN: You hear that? That's confusion. No, it really is confusion and it's also revolution. And nobody's supposed to have any rights, just them. Play your music *loud* and everybody has to listen to your crap.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Well, the volume on everything...

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah, this is all crazy.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: ...keeps getting higher.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Hysterical. The TV is, everything is...it's a wonder that my nerves aren't worse than they are. That any of us have—we're going through a terrible time right now.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: You wrote "Devil's Got Your Tongue" about some of these rap artists.

ABBEY LINCOLN: The rappers and the women who take their clothes off and walk—you know what I mean? Who entertain in her drawers, with herself exposed. Yeah. Madonna. Devil's got her tongue. They say that I am spiritual, but so is he. There's all kinds of spirits—there are holy spirits and there are demon spirits. And if you're not careful, you will be controlled by the demon spirits here in the name of music or whatever you're doing. Either it helps us to live or it doesn't.

11. Being a Singer AND a Composer

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Do you use the word "diva"?

ABBEY LINCOLN: No. It's just I don't know what it means. I'm a singer. I'm an artist. I'm not a diva.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Do you think as a vocalist it is more difficult for people to think of you as a composer?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't care if they think of me as a composer or not! My producer thinks of me as a composer. [laughs] Jean-Philippe Allard, probably the greatest man I ever met on the planet.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: And he's the one...

ABBEY LINCOLN: Who helped—yeah, Jean-Philippe Allard, he's French. Doesn't try to tell me what to do, he helps me to do what I do. When he called me the first time, he said, "Abbey, what do you want to do?" And so he has blessed my life. That's why I have all these albums. And it's why I'm popular, because I'm being marketed by PolyGram and Verve. There's a bunch of names now—Universal.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Universal, Verve, the Universal Group.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah. Yeah.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: I asked because when I wrote the piece on you for the *New York Times* and when Nat Hentoff wrote the companion piece, our whole, all of our writing was to talk about you as a composer.

ABBEY LINCOLN: It was wonderful.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: But when the review ran a few days later, the headline on it was "Singer Abbey Lincoln"!

ABBEY LINCOLN: Yeah, I'm a singer though.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: I know.

ABBEY LINCOLN: I'm glad they know that I'm a singer. Some singers write their own songs, some of 'em don't. Bob Dylan is a great composer. So they just say Bob Dylan; everybody knows who he is. Yeah.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Although there are some within the music we call jazz who would not...

ABBEY LINCOLN: He's not what you would call a great singer. You know what I mean? He's a great composer and lyricist, Bob Dylan is, as far as I'm concerned. He writes about the real world. "Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me. I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to. Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man play a song for me. In the jingle-jangle morning I'll come following you." I don't know what the jingle-jangle morning is, but I have a pretty good idea. It's one of the greatest songs I've ever heard to describe a world we're living in.

[recorded on Who Used to Dance]

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Do you think that songwriting has helped your longevity as a performing artist?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Probably. But I'm a lot more than just a singer. I'm a personality. And I'm strong and... You have to help people to kill you, you know. You have bad habits. You can die young here. Most people die of bad habits. I believe that if you're blessed to have this work, then you should be experienced in spirituality and it should make you strong and great.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Would you still be singing if you were singing standards?

ABBEY LINCOLN: I don't know anything about that. It's not who I am. I'm an actress. And I'm a woman. More than anything I'm female. Female of the species. Yeah.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Do you think women have a role as the storytellers, as the griots?

ABBEY LINCOLN: Of course they do.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Why is it the women?

ABBEY LINCOLN: It's not the women or the men; it's the women and the men.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Okay.

ABBEY LINCOLN: Some men are griots and some women are griots. Depends on where your head is. What you want to do. That's a picture of Billie Holiday up there against the wall next to my father's paintings—at the piano. I didn't know she played the piano. She looks just like my sister, like my big sister. She wrote "God Bless the Child('s got his own)" and "(Hush now,) Don't Explain." I come from her. She comes from Bessie Smith. Bessie Smith wrote this song and I've repeated it more than once. "I'm going up on Black Mountain with my razor and my gun. I'm gonna shoot him if he stands still and cut him if he runs." [laughs] Yeah!

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: It's interesting to me to see that when Billie wrote, she started with the blues. Which kind of goes back to that.

ABBEY LINCOLN: She comes from...

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: Bessie.

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, she does come from Bessie, but she got her start with Louie Armstrong. In the book that she wrote [*Lady Sings the Blues*], she worked in brothels and cleaned up after the prostitutes and that's where she heard Louie Armstrong. They called them jazz houses. Jass houses. Because it's the only place they played the music then, in environments such as that. Yeah, she comes from Louis Armstrong.

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: And when you started to write, the first thing you wrote lyrics to was a blues...

ABBEY LINCOLN: No, it wasn't. I wrote a child's song called "People in Me."

LARA PELLEGRINELLI: No, I mean the first lyrics that you wrote for "Let Up."

ABBEY LINCOLN: "Let Up." Mmmhmm. I'm not really overwhelmed by the blues. They talk a lot about the blues, but I'm a ballad—I write. "The Music is the Magic" is like a chant. It's not the blues though.