

Speakeasy with Denene: Fly

Denene Millner:	00:01	<p>Welcome to Speakeasy with Denene, a podcast from Georgia Public Broadcasting. I'm your host, Denene Millner. Each episode of Speakeasy shines a spotlight on a single word, and then deep dives into the many ways it shows up in the African American community. On this episode, the word is fly.</p> <p>I'm taking you on an international journey with a glimpse into my first time traveling as a single mom. I'm also talking to author, relationship guru, and world traveler, Demetria Lucas, aka the black Carrie Bradshaw, about the importance of seeing some world. And later, I'm joined by one of the flyest black women making music today, Tarriona "Tank" Ball, who will be telling us about finding her voice and soaring in her music career.</p> <p>Today's journey starts at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in July, 2018, when I traveled to Spain with my daughters, Mari and Lila. It was the first time we had ever traveled outside of the country without their father.</p> <p>Are you guys excited?</p>
Lila:	01:16	Yes. Yes.
Denene Millner:	01:21	But you're not afraid at all.
Lila:	01:22	No. No.
Denene Millner:	01:22	You guys aren't afraid at all?
Lila:	01:24	Why would we be afraid.
Mari:	01:24	Like I don't understand.
Denene Millner:	01:27	No, I mean going to another country, with just me.
Lila:	01:30	On no.
Mari:	01:31	It's still land and food and water.
Denene Millner:	01:37	They are not scared, but listen, I'm terrified. All I kept thinking was how am I going to hold up on this trip as a single parent, a

woman and a black woman at that? I grew up in a blue collar family that didn't have money for international family vacations, and I didn't travel internationally until I did so with my ex husband. Every out of country trip I'd ever gone on was with him, which frankly made me feel safe, secure. But traveling to what feels like the other side of the world where everything from the language to the food to the people are different, was, well, different, scary. I kept wondering how do I keep myself and my girls safe out in a world that isn't exactly safe for single women and girls. And how do I do that as a black woman in places where so few black people exist?

Within minutes of being at the airport, we had our first crisis. Mari's passport got wet and we were worried she wouldn't be able to get on the plane. But as it usually does, everything worked out.

Denene Millner: 02:45 My nerves are a little bit racked, but it feels much better considering my babies are with me. What are you doing right now?

Lila: 02:52 I'm looking at, different currencies in different countries. How much a U.S. dollar's worth in different countries.

Denene Millner: 03:01 How's it looking for us?

Lila: 03:04 We're going to be poor in Spain but we're rich in Morocco.

Denene Millner: 03:09 And there it is. We are going to be poor in Spain and rich and Morocco. Here we go.

This trip was a beast. We took two planes and spent 14 hours traveling by air. [foreign language 00:03:22] Once we landed in Madrid, something dawned on me.

I'm just realizing that the last time that I was in Madrid was on my honeymoon. Ain't that a trip. Well we're here, and there are signs written in English, so I don't feel like that much of a fish out of water, but this is just the beginning.

Woo. It was hard as hell to navigate Spain's train system without the ability to speak or read Spanish. I thought for sure we'd miss our train, or worse get lost in this foreign country with no way to find our way home, but somehow we made it. Two train rides later we ended up in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, which is where my cousin lives. We stayed with her. It felt so good to be around family and it didn't take me long to shake the fear and finally feel like I was free. Everything felt brighter,

fresher. At the beach, I dip my feet into the cold, beautiful ocean.

So we're at the beach in Sanlúcar de Barrameda. We were able to walk out about a mile into the ocean without touching any water, but as soon as we got there, the water started rising and I got freaked out a bit. My kids are making fun of me, but at least we don't drown. That's the purpose of mothers in situations like that. We are the ones who think of the worst case scenario first and then haul booty.

And haul booty we did! In the 10 days abroad I did a sunset book signing next to the ocean, ate all kinds of olives and fish and homemade paella. We drank copious amounts of red wine and Spanish gin, shopped for fresh food at the market during the day and swam by the light of the moon. I also touched clouds at the top of the rock of Gibraltar and slept on a boat at the foot of the historic rock. My cousin Sheree was a fantastic host, but suddenly, sadly, after 10 days it was time for us to go home.

Well, we are in Madrid's airport heading back home, I'm about 40 shades darker. I'm happy, I'm free and we're heading home.

One thing I noticed during my travels in Spain was how invisible and yet highly visible I felt. In the places I went, the Spaniards are all white and my girls and I stood out because of our dark skin. The black people we saw were Africans in the service industry and even they are rare. I suspect the only other time they see black people is in stereotypical roles in the entertainment industry, which makes us interesting. Everywhere we went, stares followed us. I was a little disturbed, but after a while I didn't care. It took me a few days, but finally I felt like the world can belong to a single black mom too.

I finally experienced the world in a way I hadn't before. I was scared, but liberated and most importantly just fly. What does it take for people to drop their guard and preconceived notions about foreign destinations and travel beyond the security of their home country by choice? Journalist Demetria Lucas wrestles with that question and she embodies what it means to be fly. Demetria was Essence magazine's relationship editor, a former reality show star, and now she's a two time author who's working on her third book. Demetria spent a lot of time in Brooklyn writing about love. She's known as the black Carrie Bradshaw, the iconic character from the TV show Sex and the City. I asked her what fly means to her.

Demetria Lucas: 07:50 The first thing I thought was like fly as in dope, like very eighties fly, like feathered hair, asymmetric bamboo earrings. I felt like fly like that. And then I also thought, you know, fly is in soar, and then fly as in travel via flight.

Denene Millner: 08:07 Demetria says it's important for black people to see the world outside their own backyard. She's documented her adventures on her online photo gallery called See Some World. She told me traveling has always been a large part of her life. Demetria remembers her first major trip abroad. She went to London during her senior year of college. Just to note, our conversation include some explicit language.

Demetria Lucas: 08:32 I loved it. I took an art history class and all these beautiful paintings of Venice, of Paris, of Spain, all these amazing places. And I was like, why am I looking at paintings when I can actually just get on a flight for \$100 and go for the weekend, a week, whatever. So instead of going to class, I would go off to Rome.

Denene Millner: 08:52 Oh wow.

Demetria Lucas: 08:53 Yeah, it was a wild world. I'd go off to Rome, I'd go off to Spain, I'd go trekking around the UK. It was amazing. And it opened my eyes to so many different things. I almost failed the semester, but I saw a lot of world.

Denene Millner: 09:06 You got a lot of-

Demetria Lucas: 09:06 I got a lot of culture. I got to see the world.

Denene Millner: 09:11 Mari, my older daughter just went to study abroad in Botswana. She left a couple of days ago.

Demetria Lucas: 09:16 That's amazing!

Denene Millner: 09:17 And she's 19 and I cried when it was time for her to go because it was my baby's going out into the world and for the first time I'm not orchestrating the whole thing. She did it all on her own. But, and I told her that she was my hero because I couldn't see myself at 19 traveling to the next state. I'm from long Island, New York, and it was a thing to get on the train and go into the big bad city. That's the way that I was raised. And here's my kid getting on three flights that took her well over 24 hours to get to Botswana where she'll be living for the next two months.

And I am fascinated by people who can do that, but specifically black women who can get on a flight and just say, you know

what? I'm going to go and study in London and then while I'm in London, forget class, I'm just going to go ahead and go to Rome today or I'm going to go to Spain today. What does it take to be that kind of person who can spread her wings and just fly off to another place without regard for safety, without regard of your place in those places and how you'd be received. Did any of that cross your mind when you were that age?

Demetria Lucas: 10:37

Well, when I left for London, it was before September 11 so your parents could still take you up to the gate or your guests or whoever's with you could go up to the gate with you at an airport. And I cried and I boohooed so bad. My mom was like, you don't have to go. And my father was like, I don't know if I can swear, my father was like the fuck she does. He was like, oh no, get your ass on that plane. I paid for whatever. So you know, he pointed a finger and I, with my head down boohooing and my mother fussing in the background because she's mad at my dad, and he was like, she'll be fine, she'll be fine.

So I got on a flight and I really wasn't sure what London was going to be. This is also pre Pinterest and Instagram. So you can't just sort of look at pictures and see other people looking just like you doing the same thing that you'd like to do. So it was very scary. But then I landed at Heathrow and I met up with the other people who I was going to be living with in the program, I had five roommates. So it was like a Real World situation. There was one other black girl. Guess who she was roommates with?

I got there and the world didn't fall apart. It was scary in trying to figure things out and I almost got hit by a million cars because traffic is on the opposite side of the street, and I forget to look. But I didn't. I had a day once where I was crossing the street and I realized that there was an ocean between me and the next person who could actually do something for me, who genuinely cared about my wellbeing, like just cared about me. And I was like, well I guess I have to take care of myself. And that was that.

Denene Millner: 12:09

That's that part, right? It's like, when I went to Spain and there's an obvious language barrier, I know Puerto Rican Spanglish from the Bronx, I know that. I can say curse words in Spanish, but I can't ask you which of these trains is going to get me to this specific station to get me to my cousin in Sanlúcar de Barrameda. So the idea of just being able to turn yourself inside of yourself and trust that as a human you're going to be able to communicate with another human being in some kind of way to get you from point A to point B, and for them to care enough about you as a fellow human being, not to hurt you, to, not to

lead you to a dark alley where you get hit over the head. Like I think of all the worst case scenarios. I don't know what that is, but I'm just worst case scenario Denene.

But how do you push past that fear? I know that that your dad pointed his finger and you had to follow that and get on the plane. But then when you got there, you were able to get on the train and go to Rome or go to Spain. How do you push through that fear and break down the barriers between you and a new place where the language or the culture is not necessarily something that you are at all familiar with?

Demetria Lucas: 13:39 So most places someone speaks English, especially if they work in tourism. Someone will be able to give you basic directions to get in the direction that you need to go. And then from there you just, you have a map and you point to the word and someone will try to tell you with hand signals or something how to get there. I've had very great experiences. I've never been led down a dark alley, but I also just don't go down dark alleys in general. But hey, this is the alley, I'm walking that way. Or I'm like, this is a sketchy area, I don't really know this place, so I'm going to stick to the main tourist attractions. I'm probably not going to party late into the night. I'm not going to drink when I go out. So that I can have like all my awareness with me because I know that I'm operating at a default in a foreign place.

But language barriers, not really an issue. There's a common humanity, like people see someone who was lost and they usually have been in that situation themselves and so they want to help you get on the right path to where you're going.

Denene Millner: 14:39 Right, right, right. Absolutely. Absolutely. I want to talk-

Demetria Lucas: 14:42 And you brought up, I'm sorry.

Denene Millner: 14:43 Oh, go ahead.

Demetria Lucas: 14:44 No, you brought up something about as a black woman traveling and your safety, there is no place that I have felt more fearful than in the United States.

Denene Millner: 14:53 Speak on it.

Demetria Lucas: 14:54 When you go overseas as an American, you're received as an American. So sometimes people will see me and they might assume I am, and I want people to listen to this very closely because it's going to sound kind of crazy. But it also is not meant to. When people see black skin, if they think it's native black

skin to where they are, sometimes they act racist in a racist manner. When you were an American traveling overseas, your accent trumps your skin color in a lot of places. Not all, but in a lot of places. And it's very unfortunate. It's extraordinarily racist. I want to acknowledge that. But when you're traveling as a black American, I've always felt more safe in any other country in the world than I do in America.

Denene Millner: 15:35 I just had this conversation with Mari a couple of days ago. She said that she noticed a marked difference between, once people realized that she wasn't from Botswana, like as soon as she opened her mouth and revealed herself to be a black American or an African American, whichever you choose, that the way that people responded to her and opened their arms to her completely changed. They just started treating her, she said not as well as the white American students, but doggone near close to it. And she found that just odd and disconcerting and just like, I'm in an all black country, what the hell am I getting special treatment for? And it just really bothered her.

Demetria Lucas: 16:25 Yeah. When it happens in Africa, it's really weird. It's super weird cause you're like wait, because I'm here seeking a connection and a sense of kinship and like I don't really know where I'm from so I'm going to different regions to see if anything stands out. And these people look like my people, something like that. But when you start ... I think they think it's flattering to treat you like an American. And I'm just like, but I just kind of want to be more, I just want to be regular. I want everyone to have good treatment. I don't want to be treated well or treated better because I'm American. I want everyone here to be treated like an American. I want everyone here to be treated well and spoken to politely, the way that you do to me, because you think I'm other.

Denene Millner: 17:06 That's exactly it. That's exactly it. I was fascinated when you started See Some World, just because like I explained, my fear of international travel is better now. But at the time I was pretty like, oh Demetria's just living the life. She is just going everywhere and documenting it for all of us to see. And you just managed to find all of these beautiful spaces and all these beautiful places. Tell me about why you decided to do See Some World?

Demetria Lucas: 17:43 It came from a place of ignorance. When I was living in Brooklyn, most of my friends were Haitian, and Haiti does not have great PR. You watch the news, there's a very negative narrative about Haiti. And one of my friends went to Haiti. He came back, he put pictures from his trip on Facebook and I was

like, that's Haiti? Because I didn't know. Like all I knew was the earthquakes and disease and poverty and things like that. I didn't know anything else. So he was like, one that's really offensive and two, we're going to do something about that. Next time I go to Haiti, you're going with me.

So when I first went to Haiti, I didn't go with him. I went with another couple of friends who were Haitian, who he told everyone that story and was like, Demetria thinks this about Haiti, and they all laughed. They were like, that's so ignorant. You're an ignorant American. And I was like, I earned that, I deserve that, because I am. So I went to Haiti and the side of Haiti that they showed me was so gorgeous and so beautiful. You've never seen beaches more beautiful. You've never seen food so good. And contrary to popular belief, there's significant wealth in Haiti and you don't know about that because you never see it. They have upscale venues just like we do. They have popping parties and popping bars, and their New Year's celebration, people are out on boats with fireworks. Like it's crazy. But you never see that side of Haiti.

So once I went and I saw it, I did Christmas in Haiti and I was like, so what else am I missing in the world? So I went to Haiti and I went to South Africa and I went to Kenya and I went to Morocco and I went to Argentina and I went to Bali. But I go all these places because I just want to see for myself the side of the story that they're not telling us.

Denene Millner: 19:18 That's right. Tell me about Don't Waste Your Pretty. And you know, and that's the fly, like the dope girl kind of talk there. Tell me what was Don't Waste Your Pretty about and how does that connect to black girls and their fly?

Demetria Lucas: [19:39](#) So Don't Waste Your Pretty is my second book. It came out in 2014. Don't Waste Your Pretty is essentially a shorthand for know your worth. Very often in relationships women don't take a proper assessment of what they bring to the table, their "pretty." So your listening ears, your praying hands, your cooking skills, your nurturing, your listening to someone, not having a bad day, your support, the way you care for someone. We give all of that away and people just say like, oh that's what women are what women do. Women are feminine. That's how they operate. And no, those are resources that people take for granted, and we shouldn't be giving them to people that aren't also giving us something in return.

Denene Millner: 20:25 There we go. There we go.

Demetria Lucas:	20:26	So when I say don't waste your pretty, it's to say like know what you bring to the table and make sure that you're also being served.
Denene Millner:	20:34	You are just a jewel and I thank you so much for sharing your wisdom, your talent, your advice, and certainly your penchant for being fly in all of the many manifestations and sharing that with us. I so appreciate you.
Demetria Lucas:	20:53	Thank you so much for having me, Dee. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.
Denene Millner:	20:56	<p>We've posted a link to some of Demetria's incredible travel photos at speakeasywithdenene.com.</p> <p>I'm Denene Millner. Speakeasy with Denene is a production of Georgia Public Broadcasting.</p> <p>So we're going to end this show by hearing from one of the flyest singers and songwriters on the planet.</p>
Speake:	21:30	Tank & The Bangas, everybody!
Denene Millner:	21:36	<p>Tarriona "Tank" Ball. She's the lead singer of the New Orleans band Tank & The Bangas. Public radio listeners may be familiar with the group. In 2017 the band won the NPR Tiny Desk contest. Here's part of the group's tiny desk performance of the song, Boxes and Squares.</p> <p>(singing)</p> <p>I caught up with Tank to learn more about how her music reflects her flyness. She joined us from a loud house in Houston where she was visiting during her tour. Tank says singing didn't come naturally.</p>
Tarriona Ball:	22:36	<p>It took a while for me to realize that I can sing because I didn't take to singing as easily as my sisters or my father did. I wrote more. So I focused on that and I got in a poetry group where we combined music and poetry together and that did a thing. I got to tell everybody to be quiet in the house. Can I do that? I'm recording this interview, be quiet you guys! Thanks guys, be quiet.</p> <p>Okay. I'm back. (singing)</p>

Let me think. How can I think about Quick and I was me? I was just thinking about telling a story and it started with a nurse, not a childhood rhyme. Down by the river where the green grass grow and the sun be burning hot. But it really used to be down by the river on the hanky panky, where the bull frogs jump from bank to bank. That's like an old hand game. And I just started from there and after that just started telling a story. (singing)

I just write and then I make it make sense later on. I don't write like, oh, today I'm going to write about a relationship. No, I just write and then I make sense of it later on. And it happens to be about a young lady who's a streetwalker, who's living life, and somebody tried to play her and she went after him. She went to go get her revenge. (singing)

When I was younger, I used to go through my sister's poetry books, and I would learn all her poems by heart. And that's how I got into writing. At my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary, my cousin Alexia, she wants me to start saying her name now. So my cousin Alexia, she gave me a poem that she used to give to her students called A Great Somebody by Adrienne Hardesty. I memorized that and I started saying it before my grandfather preached at all the churches. I did a really horrible job when I first did it.

Well, I would say it exactly how I used to say. I am a serious child. I am a serious child with serious goals. And if it takes hard work to reach my goals, I will do it. I am a clean somebody. I know that if I lie down with hogs, I will come up with mud. So I know to keep my mind, my body and my character clean. I'm not a kid anymore, you know? And you have to know that like all green things, I'm going to grow. (singing)

Our song Ants came out of nowhere. We were just chilling in a studio with Jack Splash and he just said, "Start grooving." We just started grooving and playing the boys playing this song so nice, the Bangas is rolling. So instantly I just started writing. It took nothing to write it. The music just was inspiring to me and I just started telling a story of what it was like growing up in New Orleans for me. (singing)

It was everything that was going on in my life at the time. Like I said, my strongest memories. I grew up in New Orleans right around the corner from a theme park, which is the coolest place to grow up. I used to go to theme parks with my friends every other day. I was right around the corner.

I've always wondered why people rode roller coasters. Why the feeling of throwing up brought about some type of excitement that they didn't receive on a regular day. When did feeling sick become equivalent to thrill? What did nausea become the new x pill? I've always wondered why people rode roller coasters and I remember, I remember when I did. (singing)

The theme park was closing so I said, I'm going to get on today. I got on and it was the most exhilarating thing I think I've ever experienced even to this day. It was going so fast. I was smiling, I was laughing. I had like slop coming all out of my mouth because it was going so fast. I was giggling the whole time. And then after I got off I said I want to ride again.

See up in the swerve. It's the feeling of your nerves sitting on the front edge of their seats, front row. Eyes open, tears coming from the thrill of sight. Moving as fast as light, laughing for no reason, screaming for everything you shouldn't have said in that fight. Roller coasters. It's like leading God with a kite and your left hand, strings still twisted around your forefinger. Right hand still gripping the safety rail. There's this moment when you feel like you're in an ocean of your butterflies. This is the moment when you get free and you let your arms fly. (singing)

I ride a rollercoaster cause it's the closest thing next to flying where you actually feel safe about it. You could put your arms up, you go real high, go real low, and you feel what it feels like to actually fly. But with the safety of a seatbelt. That's what people want in love. But there is no seatbelt in love. That's the difference.

This is the instant you let go and you let your fingers fly. You're flying now. Now how does it feel to beat the wind? You at the...

You know to trust people. You have to be open to it. You know you have to be open to flying as well as falling. So the key part in the rollercoaster actually is getting off and living and walking and getting back in line if you'd like to. It's the weight. It's all of that. Flying to me is elevation. Flying to me is actually falling and lows and mids and everything. Flying is truly actually life. (singing)

Denene Millner: 30:06

That's Tarriona "Tank" Ball, one of my favorite singers. Tank is part of the New Orleans based group Tank and the Bangas. Now we want to hear from you. Who's the flyest person in your life? You can reach us at speakeasywithdenene.com. (singing).

I'm Denene Millner. Sean Powers produces the show. Keocia Howard is our editor. Our theme music is by M. Fasol. We heard additional music from Blue Dot Sessions. Speakeasy With Denene is a production of Georgia Public Broadcasting. You can subscribe to us for free at gpb.org/podcasts, and anywhere you get your podcasts. And until the next time on Speakeasy, be easy.