

# Speakeasy with Denene: Beauty

Denene Millner:	00:06	Welcome to Speakeasy with Denene, a podcast from Georgia Public Broadcasting. I'm your host, Denene Millner. Each episode of Speakeasy trains 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 Beauty. I'm introducing you to a skincare chef who uses ingredients meant to make your skin farm-to-face fresh. I'm also sitting down with three beauty-preneurs who are changing the way black women think about beauty and themselves. And I'm introducing you to singer songwriter, Somi. Her music embodies beauty with poetic notes and a voice like velvet. We begin at Iwi Fresh Garden Day Spa in Atlanta. The owner, Yolanda Owens, passionately promotes natural beauty and self love.
Yolanda Owens:	01:06	More girls at a younger age are putting on more makeup, and if you look at the rate of mental health and depression, it's going deep into our children now. Because I think of all this artificial beauty that's driving it.
Denene Millner:	01:22	Yolanda runs Atlanta's Iwi Fresh Farm-to-Skin Spa. She calls herself the skincare chef.
Yolanda Owens:	01:30	I am cutting some carrots. Carrots are so good. They're so good for you internally and externally.
Denene Millner:	01:39	Yolanda uses organic ingredients grown nearby to make raw skincare products.
Yolanda Owens:	01:47	And so, I'm going to plug up my juicer.
Denene Millner:	01:50	I watch her as she tosses the chopped carrots in a juicer, which apparently is a man.
Yolanda Owens:	01:56	Let's see if he's working. All right. All right. All right. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. All right, so I put my carrots in and if everything is good...
Denene Millner:	02:16	Once the carrots liquefy, Yolanda mixes them into a white based cream. That cream is made with different oils, waxes, aloe juice, shea butter and cocoa butter.

Yolanda Owens: 02:27 And you see how that white base cream ends up turning a orange color. And you see all that fresh orange. Isn't that orange? Isn't it so pretty? It looks like sherbert. It looks so good to eat. A lot of people really want to eat our products, but you really could because it's edible. But we're going to feed the skin with this.

Denene Millner: 02:49 And not just any skin. My skin. This skin care cream Yolanda makes with carrots is called 14 Carrot Glow. In a moment she'll put it on my face, but first I wanted to know how Yolanda got her start. She tells me she used to be a network engineer and more than a decade ago made the switch to training to become an esthetician. She started learning the ropes in different spas and salons before opening up her own business. Yolanda says her dedication to natural beauty goes back to a memory she has visiting her grandmother in Louisiana.

Yolanda Owens: 03:22 My grandmother had a little garden and I used to hang outside with her in her garden after we would hang clothes on the line, and she would make all types of home remedies for the family. So, I inherit that through my grandmother. However, I had eczema as a little girl and my grandmother helped heal that through a lot of her home remedies, and so I'm paying tribute to that legacy.

Denene Millner: 03:45 Hearing Yolanda talk about her grandmother immediately makes me think of my family. My dad's grandmother was a midwife in Virginia and she delivered all of her grandchildren. She had all these remedies that she passed on to my dad. I told Yolanda about it. Listen, he told me this crazy story. One of his brothers hit his knee. They got into some kind of fight and he hit his knee with an axe, because that's how they fought.

Yolanda Owens: 04:13 Yeah. Okay.

Denene Millner: 04:14 And he had this big, gigantic gash in his knee and he told me how his grandmother healed it. So she had him go and get poke salad weeds. Or I guess it's called poke salad.

Yolanda Owens: 04:24 Um-hmm (affirmative).

Denene Millner: 04:25 And she mixed that with some kind of tea from a tree, from the bark of a tree, and snot.

Yolanda Owens: 04:26 I believe it.

Denene Millner: 04:36 And then took that and slathered it on the wound.

Yolanda Owens: 04:42 Um-hmm (affirmative).

Denene Millner: 04:42 And then sealed it with a spiderweb.

Yolanda Owens: 04:45 That's how they do.

Denene Millner: 04:47 And he said his knee was healed within a couple of weeks.

Yolanda Owens: 04:51 My grandmama would get the babies urine, [crosstalk 00:04:55]

Denene Millner: 04:55 Yep.

Yolanda Owens: 04:55 And she would preserve all the baby's urine [crosstalk 00:04:58]. And mix it into all her stuff.

Denene Millner: 04:58 That's... I grew up that way.

Yolanda Owens: 05:03 Yes. And mix it in and mix it in like whatever home remedy she was doing.

Denene Millner: 05:07 Yep. And that's a lost art.

Yolanda Owens: 05:11 It is. And when I was in college, my grandmother, you know how you get your care packages and you have all your little cute... All your little stuff in there. So when my grandmother sent me a care package, I opened it up and it had like some sticks, dirt, had garlic, onions all that kind of stuff in there. And it had this big collard green leaves in there. I called grandma, I was like, "What is this?" And she was like, "Baby, that's for you when you get sick." She said, "Take that onion, put it on the bottom of your feet and wrap it up and take the garlic and put it on the palm of your hands and take the collard green and put on your forehead and take them little sticks," she had the little yellow yucca sticks. She said, "Chew on them and that will get all the mucus and [inaudible 00:06:01] that's all inside of your body. It will get all that mucus up out of you."

Denene Millner: 06:06 What a care package [crosstalk 00:06:07].

Yolanda Owens: 06:06 Yeah.

Denene Millner: 06:07 That your grandmother.

Yolanda Owens: 06:08 Care package girl. And my roommates used to laugh at me bout my little care package from grandmother, but then when they started getting sick, they was knocking on my door. [crosstalk 00:06:18]

Denene Millner: 06:18 Can you put some of them collard leaves on my [crosstalk 00:06:20]

Yolanda Owens: 06:21 You got a piece of garlic? Can you put some garlic on the bottom of my feet?

Denene Millner: 06:25 You see what I'm saying? Yes.

Yolanda Owens: 06:25 They knew.

Denene Millner: 06:26 They knew. Right.

Yolanda Owens: 06:28 And that was passed on [crosstalk 00:06:29].

Denene Millner: 06:29 Yes. For generations.

Yolanda Owens: 06:32 For generations. And that's the thing is that we have to, you know, we got to we have to keep the legacy alive by living the legacy.

Denene Millner: 06:32 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 06:42 And then we have to live the legacy in mind with leaving a legacy.

Denene Millner: 06:46 That's right.

Yolanda Owens: 06:47 Now I'm on this big quest. I do this big component called the Miseducation of Skincare and Beauty and I call it that thing. You know how Lauren Hill say that? That thing, that thing, that thing. [crosstalk 00:07:02].

Denene Millner: 07:02 That thing, that thing, that thing.

Yolanda Owens: 07:03 And she said, she said, we're wearing hair weaves from the European, fake nails from the Korean. She said, it's silly when girls sell them, sell their souls, because it's in.

Denene Millner: 07:14 That's right.

Yolanda Owens: 07:14 That's what it is.

Denene Millner: 07:15 Talk to me about beauty, specifically black beauty [crosstalk 00:07:21].

Yolanda Owens: 07:21 That's that whole miseducation.

Denene Millner: 07:24 And how we, how it's [crosstalk 00:07:21].

Yolanda Owens: 07:25 I think that, you know, beauty got out of hand. I think that's what has happened just in general. We've, we've gotten, it's just gotten out of control through the manufacturers, through the non regulations, through the lobbyist, through the commercials, you know, all of that. That's pushing it in our face. It is there. It has. And that's where we got lost.

Denene Millner: 07:47 Right?

Yolanda Owens: 07:47 Because we're looking at these European women with their natural, that their hair is naturally straight.

Denene Millner: 07:53 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 07:54 And they naturally have blue eyes and they are naturally fair skinned, you know? And so we're looking at that and we're saying, okay, that's beauty.

Denene Millner: 08:03 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 08:04 And then they have all the false commercials that are saying, we're going to take the wrinkles out of your face in two days and we can make you look 10 years younger [crosstalk 00:08:13].

Denene Millner: 08:04 Right, right.

Yolanda Owens: 08:12 And, and we can do this if you buy this. And then if you got to buy this, so you got to buy this and you got to buy that, then you got to buy this to really, it's all of that anti-aging [crosstalk 00:08:21].

Denene Millner: 08:12 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 08:21 It's like an epidemic. It's like we are striving. And we, and the thing with black women, we lost, we so lost our way because we are the epitome of beauty.

Denene Millner: 08:21 Say that again.

Yolanda Owens: 08:21 The epitome of beauty.

Denene Millner: 08:21 Yes.

Yolanda Owens: 08:34 I mean the melanin. The epitome of beauty. We was born with melanin. And that melanin is the, what keeps you looking? Look that's the anti aging. [crosstalk 00:08:46].

Denene Millner: 08:34 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 08:46 We was born with anti-aging. We was, we got it.

Denene Millner: 08:46 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 08:51 We got it. We was born with it.

Denene Millner: 08:53 I remember being younger and feeling tugged in two different directions.

Yolanda Owens: 09:00 Yeah.

Denene Millner: 09:00 The one direction was, I didn't fit into that ideal. I'm dark skinned. I have a round face. [crosstalk 00:09:09].

Yolanda Owens: 09:00 Yes.

Denene Millner: 09:08 That doesn't have this kind of chisel [crosstalk 00:00:09:11].

Yolanda Owens: 09:08 Yes.

Denene Millner: 09:11 To it. That was a big thing.

Yolanda Owens: 09:13 Yeah. I was like that too.

Denene Millner: 09:15 Right. Obviously, my hair is not straight, [crosstalk 00:09:18].

Yolanda Owens: 09:18 Right.

Denene Millner: 09:18 Very curly, kinky hair. And so I didn't fit into that ideal and I was surrounded by people who made a point of reminding me about that.

Yolanda Owens: 09:18 Yes.

Denene Millner: 09:31 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 09:32 Your people too.

Denene Millner: 09:32 Like that's [crosstalk 00:09:34].

Yolanda Owens: 09:32 Absolutely.

Denene Millner: 09:36 Specifically my people, because I was surrounded by nothing but black. [crosstalk 00:09:37].

Yolanda Owens: 09:37 Because you were not, because you know, if you know, if you were darker, you were the less beauty you were.

Denene Millner: 09:42 Absolutely. Absolutely.

Yolanda Owens: 09:44 And if your hair wasn't straight. [crosstalk 00:09:46].

Denene Millner: 09:46 Absolutely.

Yolanda Owens: 09:46 Yeah. So, and then, and so that's where we got lost.

Denene Millner: 09:46 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 09:46 We got lost in that hurt.

Denene Millner: 09:51 And that hurt.

Yolanda Owens: 09:51 Yeah, it does hurt.

Denene Millner: 09:53 And that hurt me as a little girl. [crosstalk 00:09:55].

Yolanda Owens: 09:55 Oh, me too. I grew up with that too.

Denene Millner: 09:58 You know, don't get in the pool because the chlorine and the sun will make you black and that's the last thing you want.

Yolanda Owens: 10:04 You don't want to get blacker.

Denene Millner: 10:05 Exactly.

Yolanda Owens: 10:05 Yeah.

Denene Millner: 10:06 And it's okay, well I'm black. How is that a bad thing?

Yolanda Owens: 10:11 Yeah.

Denene Millner: 10:11 Okay. So, I'm internalizing you telling me that I'm already black and that's not cute. And if you get any blacker, you're really going to be horrible. And then the flip side to that was my mother and my father telling me that I was pretty, but that I couldn't depend on that for anything.

Yolanda Owens: 10:33 Let me ask you this, did you always get this, "You're pretty for a black girl."

Denene Millner: 10:37 Pretty for a black girl.

Yolanda Owens: 10:38 Now that is such an insult.

Denene Millner: 10:40 That's still, people still say that [crosstalk 00:10:42].

Yolanda Owens: 10:42 That is such an insult.

Denene Millner: 10:43 Absolutely.

Yolanda Owens: 10:44 You are pretty for a black girl.

Denene Millner: 10:46 What is that supposed to mean. Exactly.

Yolanda Owens: 10:49 Yeah.

Denene Millner: 10:50 Exactly. You pretty for a black girl.

Yolanda Owens: 10:52 You pretty for a black girl.

Denene Millner: 10:53 But I remember my mother always telling me, "Don't wear makeup. It'll mess your skin up."

Yolanda Owens: 10:57 Yeah. My grandma always told me that.

Denene Millner: 10:59 And my mother, she only wore lipstick when she went to church.

Yolanda Owens: 11:03 But that's the one thing that they wore. [crosstalk 00:11:06].

Denene Millner: 11:05 Is lipstick.

Yolanda Owens: 11:06 They wore that lipstick.

Denene Millner: 11:06 And it was always Fashion Fair.

Yolanda Owens: 11:14 Yes, magenta mist.

Denene Millner: 11:17 That was, that was it. And it was always on Sunday because that was a special occasion going to church.

Yolanda Owens: 11:22 And then if they wanted to dress up, kind of get fancy, they will take the lipstick and put it on and then they call it rouge.



Denene Millner: 11:29 That's right. And call it rouge. [crosstalk 00:11:31].

Yolanda Owens: 11:30 Rouge. Yes.

Denene Millner: 11:32 And that was my mother. And so for the longest time. [crosstalk 00:11:33]

Yolanda Owens: 11:33 And they put a little eyeshadow up there [crosstalk 00:11:35].

Denene Millner: 11:35 And a little bit up here if they were being extra fancy.

Yolanda Owens: 11:35 Extra fancy.

Denene Millner: 11:37 With a little bit on the eyelid.

Yolanda Owens: 11:38 But for the most part they didn't wear makeup.

Denene Millner: 11:40 No.

Yolanda Owens: 11:40 They just had that lipstick [crosstalk 00:11:42].

Denene Millner: 11:40 Absolutely.

Yolanda Owens: 11:42 For special occasions.

Denene Millner: 11:43 She just did not allow me to wear it.

Yolanda Owens: 11:46 Yeah.

Denene Millner: 11:46 I would sneak every once in awhile and get all that.

Yolanda Owens: 11:48 That was a blessing.

Denene Millner: 11:49 It was. Because I look like I'm 30 and I'm 50.

Yolanda Owens: 11:52 And hello. And I look like I'm 40 and I'm 53.

Denene Millner: 11:58 And then you don't look like you 40.

Yolanda Owens: 12:02 Yes. But you know,

Denene Millner: 12:04 Yeah.

Yolanda Owens: 12:05 We got so got lost. That's what I say. We got lost and became very unconscious of the beauty. And the sad part is that we are the epitome of beauty.

Denene Millner: 12:18 I didn't think that I was pretty [crosstalk 00:12:25].

Yolanda Owens: 12:22 Um-hmm.

Denene Millner: 12:23 Until I had my children, my first daughter. So when my baby, when I looked in my baby's face, I'm looking in the mirror and thinking that I'm not pretty, and I'm looking at this identical twin of mine and looking at her like she's the most beautiful. And I'm like, I can't, there's no way that I [crosstalk 00:12:43].

Yolanda Owens: 12:42 Cannot [crosstalk 00:12:43].

Denene Millner: 12:43 Look at her and then look at me [crosstalk 00:12:46].

Yolanda Owens: 12:45 And not know that.

Denene Millner: 12:46 And not know that I'm beautiful.

Yolanda Owens: 12:46 Absolutely.

Denene Millner: 12:48 So she delivered me in that kind of way.

Yolanda Owens: 12:51 And kids will do that.

Denene Millner: 12:52 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 12:53 They do. They do.

Denene Millner: 12:54 Absolutely.

Yolanda Owens: 12:55 You look at them and you're like, "wow."

Denene Millner: 12:57 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 12:57 Yeah.

Denene Millner: 12:57 Right. This is, this is just godly right here. And there's no way [crosstalk 00:13:04].

Yolanda Owens: 12:57 No way.

Denene Millner: 13:02 That I can look at her way and think that I'm not adequate for it. [crosstalk 00:13:07].

Yolanda Owens: 13:02 Right.

Denene Millner: 13:08 A lot went into this and so I focused on pouring into them. So in the way that I wasn't poured into as a child, I focused on pouring into them.

After we finished chatting, it was time to feed my skin.

Yolanda Owens: 13:34 Hey, so you ready for this veggie.

Denene Millner: 13:34 Yes, ma'am.

Yolanda Owens: 13:39 Veggie facial?

Denene Millner: 13:39 I am ready. In a quieter room, I lay on a spa table as she applies her homemade cleansers and moisturizers.

Yolanda Owens: 13:48 So are you allergic to anything?

Denene Millner: 13:50 Avocado is an issue in my body. I don't know if it takes [crosstalk 00:13:55].

Yolanda Owens: 13:55 Internally. Okay.

Denene Millner: 13:55 Right.

Yolanda Owens: 13:56 So most likely it should not be externally, but we'll test it out [crosstalk 00:14:00].

Denene Millner: 13:56 Okay.

Yolanda Owens: 14:00 A little bit on your face [crosstalk 00:14:01].

Denene Millner: 14:00 All right.

Yolanda Owens: 14:02 In certain areas before we start.

Denene Millner: 14:04 While my eyes are shut, Yolanda puts a warm towel on my face that's infused in green tea.

Yolanda Owens: 14:09 So this is a cleanser here. It's made with squash and blueberries and we mix in a little bit of Greek yogurt with it. And the beauty of this cleanser is that it cleanses your skin without stripping your skin of all its natural oils. So that's what this is. Are you okay?

Denene Millner: 14:29 I'm great.

Yolanda Owens:	14:30	Okay, great.
Denene Millner:	14:31	This feels so good.
Yolanda Owens:	14:32	Feels great?
Denene Millner:	14:39	And to see photos from my visit to Iwi Fresh Farm-to-Skin Spa, visit <a href="http://SpeakeasywithDenene.com">Speakeasy with Denene.com</a> . Yolanda Owens dedicates her life to fighting artificial beauty. But now I want to turn our attention to a trailblazer who came generations before her. I'm talking about none other than Madam CJ Walker, who died a century ago this year. In the early 20th century, she cemented her legacy by creating a hairstyle that helped black women's hair grow. During an annual business convention organized by Booker T Washington, Madam CJ spoke to a large crowd. Here's a quote from that speech, read by GPP producer Tiffany Brown-Rideaux.
Tiffany Brown-Rideaux:	15:33	I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. I was promoted from there to the wash tub. Then I was promoted to the cook kitchen and from there I promoted myself, into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations. I know how to grow hair as well as I know how to grow cotton. I have built my own factory on my own ground.
Denene Millner:	16:04	Madam CJ Walker, who was born as Sarah Breedlove, became one of the wealthiest black women of her time, and she's paved the way for so many other trailblazers. I talked to three of them: Pamela Booker, of the company, Koils by Nature, Melanie Yvette Martin of the beauty website, Beautifully Brown, and journalist, A'Lelia Bundles. I started off with A'Lelia who happens to be Madam CJ Walker's great, great granddaughter. A'Lelea tells me Walker helped put Black is Beautiful into the spotlight.
A'Lelia Bundles:	16:37	When Madam CJ Walker came along, she was a poor washerwoman. Sarah Breedlove, born in 1867, right after the end of slavery. Nobody was saying black is beautiful. Nobody was telling a woman who looked like Sarah Breedlove that she was beautiful. But she inherently knew that she wanted to do something when her hair began to fall out because of hygiene issues and people didn't have indoor plumbing and she wanted to grow her hair and not be bald. And that's how she developed her shampoo and the ointment that healed scalp infections that allowed her hair to grow back.

Denene Millner: 17:11 And once her hair started growing back, other women wanted to know what she was doing. And that A'Lelia says is how her business took off. But Madam CJ Walker wasn't the only innovator in town.

A'Lelia Bundles: 17:23 There were other black-owned companies, just like there's an explosion now. There were lots of people mixing things up at home and selling it. She just happened to become extremely successful with national and international distribution. But that impulse has always been there. And then you go into the 30s, 40s, 50s with Walker, Poro, Apex as the big three black-owned women companies.

Denene Millner: 17:47 Today, there are hundreds of black owned cosmetic companies in the U.S., like Koils by Nature. The Atlanta-based company was started by Pamela Booker.

Pamela Booker: 17:57 I went natural in 2007 but my products aren't natural. So I was still going in the beauty supply stores, purchasing stuff that was not conducive on my natural hair. Relaxed hair. Sure. But natural, my hair was like, no, you will not be putting this on me. So I decided to start creating products that were, that had great ingredients, but then was still affordable.

Denene Millner: 18:22 Right. And so you created these products and how did you get people to know that they were there? I mean, you know with Madam CJ Walker, she was able to capture a wrapped audience that was ready and willing to do this. But these days, how, how do you go about getting people's attention?

Pamela Booker: 18:44 In the early days it was like, before Facebook was popular, it was blog sites. Okay. So curlynikki.com was the, the haven for all black people who were natural. So I went there and I was like, "Wow. So a lot of women here and they all had the same needs or they all had the same issues. So I was able to develop, actually my line from the blog site.

Denene Millner: 19:10 Right.

Pamela Booker: 19:11 Hearing the needs of the women.

Denene Millner: 19:13 Hearing those needs and understanding them are two different things. Here's Melanie Yvette Martin, editor of the website, Beautifully Brown.

Melanie Martin : 19:22 If you don't have black women in the board room or in your labs ever, you are not going to get it. It doesn't matter if you care. If

you don't have people who represent the community that you're trying to sell to, you're not going to get it. That's just how it is. You have to get over it and you have to be diverse. And then the second thing I would say is, "Yeah, it's because they are black women and they know exactly what we need." And I also think that they know exactly what's been missing and what they want to feel.

You know, I really feel like, for example, Mented Cosmetics, they knew that we wanted a beautiful nude lipstick. It is so hard for black women to find nude lipsticks. So I think it's, it's a combination of things. When you have diversity in your office and it's authentic and it's how you operate as a business, it shows through your product. And I personally just feel like that's the only way to win. And I see so many companies doing it wrong and they keep doing this same formula. They think they can throw a few, you know, black women in a campaign and they want to get your money, it's not going to work.  
[inaudible 00:20:21] [crosstalk 00:20:21]

- Denene Millner: 20:21 Right. Exactly.
- Melanie Martin : 20:23 We see it a mile away. And we know by now now with social media, [crosstalk 00:20:28]
- Denene Millner: 20:27 Right. Absolutely.
- Melanie Martin : 20:29 We're not stupid.
- Denene Millner: 20:30 What kind of role does social media play, Pamela in, you know, getting your product out there in making people understand that this is, this was created specifically for you?
- Melanie Martin : 20:42 Yeah, social media is the thing that got me noticed by Target so many years ago back in 2013. So, seeing that we created a space for women with natural hair and the demand, you know, that they wanted these products and that they were willing to pay \$19, \$15 for a bottle of conditioner when no conditioner in these retail stores were going for that much.
- Denene Millner: 21:08 Right, right.
- Melanie Martin : 21:08 So, the, like we created that need for them and social media was the thing to do it. And as Melanie was talking about Mented, that's how I bought them because I saw an ad on Facebook with a brown girl who looked like me putting on this lipstick. That's all it took.

Denene Millner: 21:28 That's all it took for me to spend all of my money on Mented, on Juvia.

Melanie Martin : 21:32 I just bought the little lip liner set like just yesterday.

Denene Millner: 21:36 I didn't know about that. I'm going to get that [crosstalk 00:21:39].

Melanie Martin : 21:38 They have a lip liner set, like a lipstick and then the liner to go with it. I was like, Oh, I just taking all my coin. [crosstalk 00:21:45]

Denene Millner: 21:44 Purchasing post-haste.

Melanie Martin: 21:47 But seeing people don't under, they don't understand like we need that imagery. Like I was not even in the beauty space. I was a computer engineer.,But I remember seeing Lisa Price on Oprah so many years ago before I even had the, this vision, this thought of creating anything but finding out that she could, she started in her kitchen. I started in my kitchen, moved to my basement and then now I have a, you know, almost a 10,000 square foot facility.

So it's like, because I saw her that, it was like, "Wow, I can do that too."

Denene Millner: 22:20 And Pamela has made a name for herself, but you know what? We're not out of the woods yet with beauty. Lots of products don't celebrate black skin. And one of the things that gets under my skin in the beauty world is the use of skin lightening products. I asked Pamela, Melanie and ALeelia about these products. Pamela weighed in first.

Pamela Booker: 22:41 Well, I went to Paris. I was amazed. I went to the, like not the touristy parts of Paris, but I went to like where the black folks are in Paris, and I was so amazed to see a liquor store, a barber shop, and a skin lightening cream place. Like it is so [crosstalk 00:22:59].

Denene Millner: 22:59 Whoa.

Pamela Booker: 22:59 Yes.

Denene Millner: 22:59 What?

Pamela Booker: 23:00 It's a whole, all they sell is skin lightening creams and they had this black woman, dark skin, and then they had another picture

of her, you know, with lighter skin. And I was so amazed. And then they looking at me, they're like, "Oh my gosh, like you're from America." They look to us, they look to Americans as the trendsetter. Right? So it's like, what do they see when they see popular popular entertainers? What's their skin complexion? Beyonce is fair, right? Nikki Minaj is fair. Rihanna is fair. You know, the black woman that they're seeing are very, very fair.

- Denene Millner: 23:35 Right.
- Pamela Booker: 23:35 When they see me and I was like, "You're American." I was like, "Yes, I'm American." He's like, "Wow, you know, we look up to you, your trends and everything." But what they see is all fair skin, right? So it's like we need to show more black women, all hues, so they can feel more comfortable. Because it's the same when I went to Jamaica. Like I could not believe you could absolutely see the difference between their face, their neck and their knuckles.
- Denene Millner: 24:04 Oh my God.
- Pamela Booker: 24:04 You know? And it was just, it was such a struggle to see these ladies putting this stuff on their skin that's damaging to their bodies. [crosstalk 00:00:24:12].
- Denene Millner: 24:11 Yeah.
- Pamela Booker: 24:12 They have certain things about them. They are still not getting the vision and the visuals that they see are still of people with lighter complexion.
- Denene Millner: 24:20 Right, right.
- Pamela Booker: 24:21 So we need to show black women in all hues. So, the world, because the world looks to America, they look at black America as the trendsetters [crosstalk 00:24:30].
- Denene Millner: 24:30 Right. [inaudible 00:24:30] [crosstalk 00:24:30]
- Pamela Booker: 24:30 All of the entertainers are, has very, very fair skin and blonde hair. That's what you think the world sees.
- Denene Millner: 24:36 Absolutely. A'Lelia, how do you feel about the skin lightening trend outside of America?
- Pamela Booker: 24:45 Yeah. You know, it's really heartbreaking to go to someplace, to The Bahamas or Jamaica and see that people are really feeling



that that's what they have to do and that, you know, you see people who have wigs and who are using skin lighteners because somehow media or their beliefs or their communities have told them that that's what's beautiful. It's very hard to penetrate that. But it is, it just really breaks my heart to know that this is still going on. It just, you know, and it's centuries going on. I mean I think one of the things when I think about the products that Madam CJ Walker made when she was first starting out with haircare products and then some products for the skin, Witch Hazel, and just really basic kinds of things. And then after she died, the Walker Company was having some of its products distributed by a white distributor.

And because there were some skin lighteners made by other companies who were trying to penetrate the black community and really play to the vulnerabilities, there was a product under the Walker name that was a skin lightener. And it was after she died, I always like to make sure that I make that clear, because I don't believe she ever as a brown woman ever would have approved that. She put her own image on her products with her face, with her hair sort of full and natural. And that was what she was selling. And somehow this has gotten, they got perverted and we still are fighting this. And I think, you know, I just, it breaks my heart, seriously.

They know that we still are having to raise another generation of girls who are getting these negative images from people that they're going to school and somebody is telling them that their hair isn't pretty, that their skin is too dark, that they're not beautiful. And so we're always going to have to continue to reinforce this for the girls that we love and just hold our heads high, not let somebody tell us that what grows out of our hair naturally is not beautiful. We have to claim it.

Denene Millner:

26:43

Amen. Yes. And with all of these products that are being created for us, hopefully, they can see, you know, how they look on us, how they, how they move, how they just make us shine. Like I want them to feel like I feel when I'm putting on this lipstick and using these hair products and walking out my house feeling like, "I'm perfect just the way that I am." I just, I wish that for them. I want to thank each one of you, Melanie from [beautifullybrown.com](http://beautifullybrown.com), A'Lelia Bundles, an incredible writer and activist and historian of beauty and hair care products and the great, great granddaughter of Madam CJ Walker, and Pamela Booker, the founder of Koils by Nature. Thank you so much for this incredible conversation and for honoring me, you know, by

giving me your insight and you know, expertise on such an important topic. I appreciate you.

- Pamela Booker: 27:45 Thank you.
- A'Lelia Bundles: 27:46 Thank you.
- Denene Millner: 27:47 And to hear more from Pamela, Melanie and A'Lelia weighing in on premium products and prestige, visit [Speakeasy with Denene.com](http://SpeakeasywithDenene.com). I'm Denene Millner and you're listening to *Speakeasy with Denene*, from Georgia Public Broadcasting. Now let's hear from an artist whose music embodies beauty. The singer and songwriter Somi, blends modern jazz and African music to create incredible works of poetry. Here's her song, *Black Enough*.
- Somi: 28:33 Am I black enough for you? I don't talk the way you do. You call me names and try to hurt me. Spit on the ground and try to curse me. They say that blood is thicker than water. But you look like my great grandfather. Walk past me, am I black enough for you.
- Denene Millner: 28:56 Somi was born in Illinois to Rwandan and Ugandan parents. She told me how she uses beauty in her music to provide a glimpse of humanity.
- Somi: 29:08 My name is Somi. I'm a vocalist, a song maker and a writer.
- My skin is black. My forehead low. In 2014, I made an album called the Lagos Music Salon, which was inspired by an 18-month, sort of journey and sabbatical into Lagos, Nigeria. I had no plans of writing an album there. I really just went there for a residency, a seven-week residency that ended up being almost two years of my life. What do they call me, my name is [inaudible]. [inaudible 00:30:07].
- It really it was about being a witness to my own journey and to the people around me and to the city around me. And so the Salon really became this room of stories and ideas and experiences and honoring the magic and the tragic things that I was seeing around me. I was carrying around a digital voice recorder, you know, kind of trying to archive the sound of the streets or the ocean or immigration officers or the club or any kind of things that would kind of help me hold onto an archive. This sense of place.

Sometimes, you know, the story I'm telling might be about a very, what some might call, you know, heavy subject matter. But, hopefully we can frame it in a way that somebody is, is first disarmed and caught up in the sonic framing and hopefully the beauty or how hopefully it resonates with them on a personal and maybe visceral level. [Music interlude]

You know, I'm interested in the sounding of ourselves as black people in the world because that's the experience that I can speak about the nuance of ourselves, the global constructions of ourselves, the differences amongst ourselves. [inaudible] The inspiration for the last song was, I met a woman in Lagos. She had just moved back.

You know, the way that many people are, a lot of young people are moving back to the continent and we just had a wonderful conversation. We were in some wine bar and we kind of realized we had a bunch of mutual friends and we started talking about all the things that young women who move back might be talking about. If this was my last song, would you listen closer? If this were my last song, would you [inaudible 00:32:58] If this were my. So, I kept thinking about her through the week. I should get her contact and keep in touch. And at the end of the week, there was a plane crash between Abuja, the legislative capital of Nigeria and Lagos, which is the commercial capital. And everybody on the flight died. And I found out that she was on that plane. If this were my last song, I might just. It was this stark reminder that you never really know when you're seeing someone for the last time.

If this were my last song, I might just. Her name was Jenny, and it was this stark reminder that you never really know when you're seeing someone for the last time, you know. Even if it's the first time that you're seeing them. I usually don't always introduce that song when I'm performing it live, I don't introduce it with that whole backstory. But I try to just talk about what it means to be present with each other, because we never know how fleeting or profound a connection with another person might be. Even though he left too soon. I'm not ready to [inaudible 00:34:55] You know, I feel very fortunate that my parents, my mother and my father, and the sort of tribe of people that I got to call aunties and uncles who look like me, but also would validate my own existence and my own sense of beauty, especially as a first generation American child. As a daughter of immigrants. As a black girl, now woman, whose beauty is often called into question. Whose humanity is often

called into question. I'm thankful that they reminded me that I matter.

Denene Millner: 35:50

That's New York-based artist, Somi. We've created a Spotify playlist of her songs in our website. Oh, we want to hear from you. We talked about beauty. What does that word mean to you? You can reach us at [speakeasywithdenene.com](http://speakeasywithdenene.com). I'm Denene Millner, Keocia Howard and Sean Powers produced the show. Our opening theme music is by M. Fasel. We heard additional music from Blue Dot sessions. Speakeasy with Denene as a production of Georgia Public Broadcasting. You can subscribe to us for free at [gpb.org/podcasts](http://gpb.org/podcasts) and anywhere you listen to podcasts and, until the next time on Speakeasy, be easy.