

Speakeasy with Denene: Flower

Denene Millner: 00:07 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 flower.

Denene Millner: 00:27 Raising children is a lot like tending a garden. Good soil, water, and sunshine are necessary to grow healthy plants, just like strong values, love, and discipline are necessary to grow healthy children. I'm giving you a peek into my experience as a mom during a defining moment of my oldest daughter's life.

Denene Millner: 00:47 I'm also introducing you to two artists whose unique masterpieces bloom right off the canvas. And actress and songstress Vanessa Williams's baby Jillian Hervey is telling us how she's blossomed as her own woman and now leads the band Lion Babe. But first, a reminiscent moment from when my daughters were just little girls.

Denene Millner: 01:18 Not long ago, I was looking through old videos of my daughters. I came across this one from 2009 of Mari, then ten, and Lila, then seven, riding a swing set.

Mari: 01:29 (laughs).

Denene Millner: 01:29 They have these giant smiles on their faces. I swear they look like little black angels.

Mari: 01:43 That's funny.

Lila: 01:43 I'm gonna get higher than you.

Mari: 01:43 No, you're not.

Denene Millner: 01:43 Fast forward a decade, and my girls are now young women. My oldest, Mari, is a student at Yale University. In one of our previous episodes called Black, she talked about how she came to terms with her blackness. For Mari, part of that journey involved her hair. Mari used to have beautiful dreadlocks, which I call locks, because you know what? Ain't nothing dreadful about them. But she felt differently.

Mari:	02:08	I didn't like how they looked, and none of my friends my age had dreads. It was really only my family members who had them, so it was kind of, like, I don't know. I just felt super different, and I... Back then, I really did not ap- I didn't appreciate it.
Denene Millner:	02:26	Mari asked me if she could lose her locks, and my gentle no did not go over well. Rather than let her fall victim to trying to be like everyone else, I wiped her tears and held her in my arms, and we made a plan for how she could look more like how she wanted to look. We Googled pictures and watched YouTube videos for cute looks she could pull off on her own.
Denene Millner:	02:50	People like Serena Williams, Lauryn Hill, and Erykah Badu also made her appreciate her own special brand of beauty. She'd go back and forth on whether to get rid of her locks or lengthen them with extensions, but I insisted she love the hair growing out of her head because it's beautiful, unique, hers. We also went through her clothes, finding a style that represented her. By the time she got to college, Mari realized that representing blackness had nothing to do with other people.
Mari:	03:19	Blackness is, is truly just, like, its own entity of, like, creativity, and beauty and intelligence, and just like a mix of all kinds of beautiful cultures and identities that I... like, I had never even been exposed to, for a good portion of my life.
Denene Millner:	03:43	Of course, as her mother, I have to throw a side-eye at that, because from the womb, I've been bleeding blackness into that little girl. But I get that you have to leave the house to put what you've learned into practice. I was no different. When I was 15 and worrying about what the popular girls looked like and who the boys found attractive, my mother didn't have any time for my whining. She didn't play that game. "Focus on what is important," she'd tell me. "Get into a good school. Get a job, and be able to take care of yourself as a woman in the world." Looking back, I see what she was trying to do. She wanted to protect me from the dangers that can come from unchecked male attention.
Denene Millner:	04:27	So I hid myself under baggy clothes, and a bare face, and sensible shoes, insisting that being pretty wasn't important at all. And I was deeply uncomfortable with myself. It wasn't until I was 40 that I figured out that wearing makeup, cute outfits, and adorable hairstyles is not about impressing or competing with anyone else, it's about loving me.

Denene Millner: 04:48 When it came to helping my daughters blossom, I would just as soon chop off my hands and sever my own tongue than let either of them feel the way I did all those years. I made a point to find the balance between respectability and self-love, knowing that feeling beautiful on the outside would for sure help them get to the deeper business of being beautiful inside. Today on Speakeasy with Denene, we go to the roots of what makes a flower blossom.

Denene Millner: 05:33 Just as a flower grows in soil, a painting grows through the love and care of its creator. I love art. In fact, when I got my first big check from my first book, the very first thing I bought was a piece of art by the late, great Bunch Washington, mentor to the iconic Romare Bearden. To this day, whenever I get a big check, the first thing I buy is art.

Denene Millner: 05:56 On my walls are works by so many other great black artists like Elizabeth Catlett, and Fabiola Jean-Louis, and my latest obsession, Marryam Moma. She is a master of collages, working with different types of paper and fabrics to reveal silhouettes and blossoming flowers.

Marryam Moma: 06:14 When you see my work, there is a discipline about it. There is the cleanliness of the lines, the precision of the cutting that comes directly from my practice in architecture. Um, the, the balancing of the color, and the hue, and the tones, um, I might use certain textures or fabrics, which comes from my love of fashion. And you can see that translated very clearly in my work.

Denene Millner: 06:39 Marryam talks about her work as if it's a formula in an equation. Makes sense, since she studied architecture in college.

Marryam Moma: 06:47 Five years later, I graduate, and I'm like, "Okay. Um, you have an architecture degree. Did you, how do you feel about this?" I'm like, "I just wanna create. I don't know if I want all the physics and the math and differential equations that come with that."

Denene Millner: 07:00 Marryam's work goes deeper than any equation. It's a process of discovery. She grounded herself in that process in 2019.

Marryam Moma: 07:09 Uh, first of all, I'd just like to say that that was definitely the planting.

Denene Millner: 07:14 The planting was a month-long residency in the studio of veteran artist Tracy Murrell. Tracy's artwork has been exhibited at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport and at the

Atlanta-based National Black Arts Festival. We'll hear from Tracy in a little bit. But first, Marryam tells us more about her growth in Tracy's studio, where I met with the two artists.

- Marryam Moma: 07:37 I would come in here and I would work, I would work until the wee hours of the morning. I had these two Tracy, uh, pieces. I call them my angels.
- Denene Millner: 07:46 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Marryam Moma: 07:46 They just watched over me.
- Denene Millner: 07:47 Uh-huh, mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Marryam Moma: 07:48 And I would work and work. And I, I, I mean, naturally, yes, my body would be tired, but my mind would keep going, and I'm like, "I'm just gonna work until I'm, you know, ready to close my eyes."
- Denene Millner: 07:59 (laughing).
- Marryam Moma: 07:59 Literally.
- Denene Millner: 08:01 And what Marryam grew was simply beautiful.
- Marryam Moma: 08:10 Um, there's one specific piece that I designed while I was here during the migration residency called Her Inner Guide. And it is, um, of a black woman smiling, um, with all these, um, florals, like, sprouting out of her. But within the image, there's another silhouette of a, a, of a different female energy that's clearly identifiable as a female figure that's her inner guide. Um, Tracy definitely has been that guide for me. Being in this space, just soaking in the feminine positive energy, definitely was translated into my work.
- Denene Millner: 08:54 Meanwhile, 4,000 miles away, Tracy was in Morocco on a residency of her own, documenting that country's migrant crisis.
- Tracy Murrell: 09:03 Hey, we walked up the trail, to the mosque, to watch the sunset on our last night. [inaudible 00:09:10] And I'm out of shape.
- Denene Millner: 09:15 During her trip, Tracy captured incredible sunsets that looked like paintings. She shared with us footage from her journey. In another scene, she is in a home as villagers chant a prayer. As part of the artist residency, Tracy met migrants in Morocco who fled violence in Cameroon.

Tracy Murrell: 09:43 It was the most eye-opening experience I've ever had. The isolation, the being invisible... um, that you think you're going to be there for just maybe a couple of weeks, but you've been there for nine years and your children are in a school. Um, I cried. I, I spent more time crying processing this experience than I, I ever imagined that I would.

Denene Millner: 10:04 And the task ahead, create art that speaks truth.

Tracy Murrell: 10:10 How do I tell a story in a painting?

Marryam Moma: 10:11 Right.

Tracy Murrell: 10:12 That is what is my quest. You know, from the residency, it is, uh, how do I tell the story of the migrants that I still communicate with, that elevates them, um, gives honor to their life, so that they're not... They're s- they're so invisible in, in Morocco.

Marryam Moma: 10:31 Yeah.

Denene Millner: 10:32 And so, Tracy has taken what she saw in Morocco and poured it into her artwork.

Tracy Murrell: 10:39 There it is. And blue tape is my best friend. (laughs). And green tape, and yellow.

Denene Millner: 10:48 In her studio, Marryam and I watch as Tracy takes off a protective tape from a canvas.

Tracy Murrell: 10:54 This has two resin pours on it, and to protect the sides, I put on the blue tape. So now's the fun part of getting the blue tape off. Unveiling a piece is, uh, always fun.

Denene Millner: 11:08 This is one of the works born out of Tracy's trip to Morocco.

Tracy Murrell: 11:11 It's on here. Boy.

Denene Millner: 11:13 On the canvas, we see an endless ocean with a bright sun beaming above. In the glistening water are three black bodies sinking below the surface. Two look like they've fallen in, while the other one looks like he may have jumped. Tracy plans to add the outline of a white ship on the water. She says this piece, which is called Beneath, explores the Middle Passage slave trade. It's part of a larger exhibition marking 400 years since the arrival of the first captive Africans in North America.

Tracy Murrell: 11:49 I can never forget that we came from another country, we were sold into bondage, and we have been struggling ever since to be recognized not only as human beings but as equal citizens. And so many of our forefathers are, um, never got the opportunity to even make it here.

Denene Millner: 12:12 In the studio, we turn our attention to a work by Marryam that shows what appears to be a woman in a dress dancing. She kinda looked like a ballerina from Alvin Ailey's seminal work Revelations. If you look closer, there are beautiful flowers and leaves above the torso. Look even closer and you see Marryam includes fabric in the work. It's stunning.

Marryam Moma: 12:35 So that piece is called Transparency, and that was, um, I, I just, I created that piece, um, just celebrating open connection and communication.

Denene Millner: 12:45 Hmm (affirmative).

Marryam Moma: 12:46 And being so transparent that you really have nothing to hide. I'm not meeting your representative or you mine.. And we're really connecting on a very, uh, basic level, and we're able to build a bond because we're so honest and so direct.

Denene Millner: 13:01 Right. Is that lavender I see in there?

Marryam Moma: 13:04 It is lavender. Guess who gave me this lavender? Let me tell you the story of the lavender.

Denene Millner: 13:08 (laughs).

Marryam Moma: 13:09 For the... So for the last, I wanna say year-

Denene Millner: 13:11 Uh-huh.

Marryam Moma: 13:12 ... and a half, um, I was introduced to this beautiful lady. And she was like, "Well, I love your pieces." She ended up purchasing three pieces that night.

Denene Millner: 13:21 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Marryam Moma: 13:22 And before I left, she gifted me with this bunch of lavender, this fresh lavender. And I was like, "Oh, my." She was like, "I, I, I haven't really figured out what I wanna do with this, but I think you'll make good use of it."

Denene Millner: 13:33 Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Marryam Moma: 13:33 And she gave it to me. And it was Denene. (laughing). And since then, I wanna say, I must have sold, created and sold at least 30 pieces with this lavender in it.

Tracy Murrell: 13:47 With the lavender.

Marryam Moma: 13:51 Yeah. Absolutely.

Tracy Murrell: 13:52 Yes. Good use for the lavender. The fresh lavender.

Marryam Moma: 13:52 Yes, yes. So...

Tracy Murrell: 13:53 (laughs). Beautiful. So you collaborated on her work [crosstalk 00:13:59].

Denene Millner: 13:59 You know, I didn't even know it.

Marryam Moma: 13:59 Without even knowing it.

Denene Millner: 13:59 I was like, "Here, I just bought this. It smells so good. I bought two bunches. You can have one."

Marryam Moma: 14:02 Ah, that makes me feel good. (laughing).

Denene Millner: 14:07 But I am only a small seed in Marryam's creative world. The influence Tracy and Marryam have on each other's work is indescribable. When they finish a piece, they'll ultimately sell it. I asked if that's ever painful, giving up something you poured your heart and soul into. Tracy weighs in first.

Tracy Murrell: 14:27 For me, I am creating work for someone else, and it's just my job to find who's the, who's the real owner of the work. And I've been very fortunate, everyone who buys the piece, they see things that I've never seen. And I know, okay, this is, I created this piece for you.

Marryam Moma: 14:43 I think it, I, I second that for sure. Um, in addition, I think that we as artists have a responsibility to share our gift with the world. Um, there's a growing when it leaves our hands into the collector's hands or in a new space because it, it, it, uh, it stimulates conversation. It propagates people to think about things differently. So the growth continues for sure.

Denene Millner: 15:17 My thanks to Marryam Moma and Tracy Murrell for their time. You can see more of their work on our website. This is Speakeasy with Denene, a production of Georgia Public Broadcasting.

Denene Millner:	15:40	We've talked on this episode about what it takes to blossom like a flower. For a flower to grow, it needs the right kind of soil, sunlight, and water. Let's end our show with music from someone whose roots are in a family famous for entertaining, but who's grown in her own light as a stunning singer.
Denene Millner:	16:12	That's the song "Hit The Ceiling" by singer and songwriter Jillian Hervey. Her mom is a legendary singer and actress, Vanessa Williams, who was the first African American crowned Miss America. Jillian is from the New York-based group Lion Babe. Performing is in her blood. From a young age, she was exposed to the family industry and she fell in love with music and dance, but was resistant to being compared to her mom.
Jillian Hervey:	16:53	Originally, as a child, I definitely wanted to create my own path, and dance was really my first love and passion. And that already was something that I knew my mom did, but she did it not as intensely, like it's not, it wasn't her main practice. So in my eyes, that was a lane already that was separate from her. Um, I still think I have a resistance to show business, the business end of things because I think it taints the creativity sometimes.
Jillian Hervey:	17:25	But I understood that just where I come from, what I've been surrounded by and, you know, I've seen my family members, um, close and distant navigate the creative industry in all the different ways. There's people that are makeup artists in my family, and producers, and, uh, music teachers. So I felt that, I think I had a lot of ground to cover and learn from in that way. And, and I knew that I would be supported in the arts, so I think I just gravitated towards it because it was really around, me and I knew that I, I wasn't going to be forced into being, um, you know, a shadow or another version of my mom or being compared to her. I think those, those pressures were self-inflicted. But when I actually did start to share my music and just explain that this was something I wanted to do, you know, my parents were super supportive of it.
Denene Millner:	18:23	Jillian says she started finding her voice after meeting Lion Babe producer, Lucas Goodman.
Jillian Hervey:	18:29	When I first met Lucas, I was just kind of, like, shy to sing in front of him. The, the fear was because, you know, these were my own ideas and they were, like, going to be my own words and my own melodies. I think that, that whole aspect of it is the thing that originally would be, you know, the, the shyness 'cause it was just the judgment immediately creeping in my head being like, that doesn't, no one's gonna like that or whatever.

Denene Millner:	18:53	The shyness eventually melted. And what blossomed was Jillian Hervey and her group Lion Babe. One of the most striking things about watching Jillian perform is her naturally thick and curly hair. It literally looks like a lion's mane. She talked with me about her music and began by sharing how her hair translates the beauty of her art.
Jillian Hervey:	19:26	My hair is an extension of my artistry and how I express my blackness, my womanhood, and my imagination. I would say that the actual hair, the birth of this whole thing really stemmed off of "Treat Me Like Fire."
Jillian Hervey:	20:12	We made that song, we had the name. Um, I don't think we were really even thinking about our imaging or any branding or any of that. We just were thinking about, okay, we have one song, we should probably make a music video for it. I had some ideas about what I wanted the look to be.
Jillian Hervey:	20:38	My family has always called me a wild child, and I always wanted my hair to be big and crazy. For a time, it did, it did become for me just a frustration because I felt that it was like I'm more than my hair. I want people to listen to the music. And, um, for me, now, just so much fun to just, it's my identity. Like, it's me just exploring me as a black woman. And I think also for shows and for visuals, I love to create magic and do things that are kind of not of this world or push the limits a little bit.
Jillian Hervey:	21:16	The song Honey Dew is about protecting your sweetness and, um, growing. You know, I just kind of, always with writing, try to match lyrically with, with what I'm kind of hearing sonically. It just made me think about, um, time and, uh, love and then also just being pulled in a lot of different directions. Like, you know, the, you have to always protect your sweetness, you know, or well, you'll give it away.
Jillian Hervey:	23:02	Rockets is about being lit, and feeling good, and having a good time, and having a party. This guy, Moe Moks, who's on the record, um, had this song, and it wasn't done, it was just kinda, like, it had the, we lit, we lit and, like, had his verse and it was just kinda, like, an idea. And Lucas is like, "Oh, my God, this is fire." Like this is, this is, this is the one, like we gotta make something happen. Um, and Moe was, you know, also game. And I think he was just like, "Oh, it sounds so cool." And...
Jillian Hervey:	23:52	I had never really sang, um, like just a verse like that, it was just kinda like super playful and I just kind of riffed off of real- really what I was hearing Moe doing.

Jillian Hervey: 24:35 It's awesome. I mean, it's just, it's been such a great song for us, and people love it, like, everywhere. And, um, I always, I think I'm just, like, uh, you know, I feel sensitive, all that stuff. So, for me, sometimes I, I always fight, like, the really easy songs, the ones that are just, like, "Oh, come on and just say we lit, like, it's just so easy to say and everyone's gonna be happy you said it," and everyone's gonna be lit, just do it. And I always fight my like, "Oh, I had asked to be this way that way," but this was just, I loved the kind of Bossa Nova nature of it. I just love that it had, it all also still felt soulful and jazzy to me.

Jillian Hervey: 25:34 It's fun to play and challenge yourself to, like, oh, you can still give 'em something that, like, really knocks and you can turn up to, but do it also in your own way. And so, I feel like Rockets is, is a great, like, bridge for people if they've never heard us to kind of come into our world. Cause it's, it's very digestible and really fine. But, um, you know, it also gives you a little bit of, like, oh, they're still kind of, like, vibey. It's still a little left of center.

Denene Millner: 26:09 That was the enchanting Jillian Hervey of the band Lion Babe. You can find more of her music on our website, and we want to hear from you. Tell us about a person in your life who has grown or helped you grow like a flower. You can reach us at speakeasywithdenene.com.

Denene Millner: 26:36 I'm Denene Millner and this is Speakeasy with Denene. This episode was produced by Sean Powers. Keocia Howard is our editor. Our theme music is by M. Fazol. We had 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.