

A Tiger Swallowtail Flies , A Poem and Interview
Mama Linda's Chapbook
The Peale, Baltimore
Recorded in January 2021

Mama Linda Goss (00:00): A Tiger Swallowtail Flies: On January 20th, 2021, a tiger swallowtail landed on freedom's shoulder atop the Capitol dome.

Mama Linda Goss (00:17) It morphed into the young poet, Amanda Gorman, a reincarnation of Phyllis Wheatley, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, and so many others.

Mama Linda Goss (00:35): Young Amanda was flanked by spirits of warrior poets and activists. Nina Simone called out, "Ain't going to be no mess up in here today. Sister Kamala is Madam Vice-President." From the amen corner Langston Hughes and James Baldwin responded in unisons, "Tambourines to Glory."

Mama Linda Goss (01:00) Amanda knew that our ancestors had been 'buked and scorned. So, like a herald angel, she stood before the multitudes and delivered an empowering message of unity called The Hill We Climb. How many more hills will we have to climb? How many more rivers will we have to cross? How many more bodies will we have to bury?

Myles Banks (01:38): Fantastic.

Mama Linda Goss (01:40): Okay.

Myles Banks (01:40): I think the line that stood out to me the most is when Nina Simone said, "Ain't going to be no mess up in here today."

Mama Linda Goss (01:50): That's right, baby. Because that's how Nina Simone was, honey. You know, it was two weeks ago it was a lot of mess up there. Because Nina Simone wasn't there.

Myles Banks (01:50): That's right.

Mama Linda Goss (02:04): You remember her, right?

Myles Banks (02:05): Wasn't she in the Harlem Renaissance?

Mama Linda Goss (02:10): Oh no. She's much later. She's part of the jazz scene... Really 60s, 70s.

Myles Banks (02:16): Okay. [crosstalk 00:02:19]

Mama Linda Goss (02:18): They used a lot of her songs.

Myles Banks (02:22): I've definitely heard some of her songs before.

Mama Linda Goss (02:23): Yeah. She was an activist, she was a civil rights... You know. I actually met her one time. Matter of fact, I cooked Easter dinner for her many years ago. [crosstalk 00:02:38] Yes I did.

A Tiger Swallowtail Flies , A Poem and Interview
Mama Linda's Chapbook
The Peale, Baltimore
Recorded in January 2021

Myles Banks (02:40): How was that?

Mama Linda Goss (02:40): It was a good Easter dinner. It was fabulous. She ate it, darling. She loved it.

Myles Banks (02:46): [Now, was this in Baltimore? 00:02:46]

Mama Linda Goss (02:46): [Crosstalk 00:02:46] She said she wished she could move in. Huh? No, this is in Philadelphia.

Myles Banks (02:51): Okay.

Mama Linda Goss (02:51): She said she wished she could move in with Clay and me and our children. And told me to promise her I would take care of her records, care of her work, care of her songs. In other words, take care of her legacy. And I've tried to, because she's one of my favorite singers of all time.

Myles Banks (03:17): Wow. That's very powerful.

Mama Linda Goss (03:17): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Myles Banks (03:17): So what inspired you to write this one, Mama Linda ?

Mama Linda Goss (03:21): Well, when I saw the inauguration. It was such a beautiful day. It was a glorious day. And everyone looked so vibrant in their colors. You know, Vice-president Madam Kamala Harris was beautiful in that purplish blue. Former First Lady Michelle Obama looked beautiful in that burgundy, it was like a burgundy cranberry. And First Lady Dr. Jill Biden looked beautiful in her blue. And Hillary Clinton looked beautiful in that purple. I just love those colors because I love colors anyway.

So when Amanda rose up to do her poem, she hit on that yellow. The yellow with her beautiful skin and that red wrapped around her hair, her hair was braided. She actually reminded me of a tiger swallowtail. And a tiger swallowtail is a butterfly. Some of them are called Eastern tiger swallowtails. And they're yellow and black, and the males always yellow, but the females can be yellow or they can be black.

And so she looked like a tiger swallowtail to me. And when I mentioned how the tiger swallowtail flew on top of freedom's shoulders... People may not know this, but atop of the Capitol dome is a statue. And that statue is Freedom Statue. That's the name of it: Freedom statue. It's a statue of a woman. I forget who designed it, but you can Google it and look it up because it's good to know some history, some facts. But anyway, when a butterfly lands on your shoulder, that's a symbol of good luck.

And so, that's kind of what the poem is about, about the tiger swallowtail bringing good luck to freedom's shoulder. Because two weeks earlier, folks tried to storm... Well, they did. They stormed that Capitol and they tried to destroy it on January 6th. But two weeks later, on January 20th, the tiger swallowtail butterfly flew and landed on freedom's shoulder, atop the Capitol dome. And young

A Tiger Swallowtail Flies , A Poem and Interview
Mama Linda's Chapbook
The Peale, Baltimore
Recorded in January 2021

Amanda, who is just 22... I think she's 22 or 23. She had a speech for all of us, for all of us to listen to her speech. Her poem was so poetic and she was embracing unity. She was asking for people to come together for harmony and it was something to be remembered. It was very powerful, as well as very positive.

Myles Banks (06:43):

Definitely. Now I'm going to read this line to you and I want you to just break it down for me so I can understand the clarification of it. The line that says, "Amanda knew that our ancestors had been buked and scorned."

Mama Linda Goss (07:01): Yes.

Myles Banks (07:01): What do you mean by that?

Mama Linda Goss (07:03): Well, buked and scorned refers to our spirituals. One of our great spirituals is called I've Been Buked and I've Been Scorned. Mahalia Jackson sang that spiritual at the march on Washington in 1963. That's why I put it in the poem because Amanda, by what she read, she knew the history of our people. She knows the history of her people. She knows history of black people. She knows about the suffering that our people have endured. And the song goes something like this, "I've been buked and I've been scorned. I've been buked and I've been scorned. Children, I've been buked and I've been scorned. I've been talked about [inaudible 00:08:12]"

So buked and scorned means the mistreatment, the mistreatment of the enslavement. So that's why I put it in there. So that's... Again, the poem is like a coded... It's like a little puzzle. I've been buked and scorned is a spiritual. "Tambourines to glory," that's actually a line from one of Langston Hughes' poems. When I say, "From the Amen corner," that's actually the name of a play written by James Baldwin. When I say Nina Simone's, "Ain't going to be no mess up in here today," that's how Nina Simone talked.

That's in her songs. That's what she preached about. The people I mention in the poem... Phyllis Wheatley was the first African-American poet to be published. And she died when she was in her thirties. She died after giving childbirth and she's buried with her child. A baby is buried along with her. But during her day she was a famous black poet. She went to England, she wrote poems to George Washington. She wrote all kinds of poems. And I had the honor of reading her book, the first edition of her book, many years ago at The Rosenbach Library and Museum in Philadelphia. I had to be in a room, and the room was taped. So the room had cameras in it. It was a special room, and the book couldn't leave that room. But I sat there all day. I sat there eight hours and read that book from cover to cover. It was amazing. The book was published in the 1700s, I think 1743 I'm not sure, but I know it was published in the 1700s.

Myles Banks (10:09): Wow. That's dedication right there.

Mama Linda Goss (10:12): [inaudible 00:10:12] Yes, so the poem has all kinds of symbolisms in it and codes in it.

A Tiger Swallowtail Flies , A Poem and Interview
Mama Linda's Chapbook
The Peale, Baltimore
Recorded in January 2021

Myles Banks (10:20): Now at the very end, when you say, "How many more? How many more? How many more?" [inaudible 00:10:30] elaborate on that, and what you mean by that?

Mama Linda Goss (10:33): Well, [crosstalk 00:10:34] Amanda's poem is very uplifting, as it should be because the young should always be optimistic, and she came there to enlighten us. She came there to lift us up and she did. Whereas me as the poet, and I'm older, I've been around on this earth almost three quarters of a century. So I've witnessed a lot. And so the question always has to be, how many more hills are we going to have to climb? Because our ancestors climbed mountains and mountains and mountains of racism, discrimination, inequality, injustice, bigotry. All kinds of mountains our people have had to cross. I mean, all kinds of mountains that people have had to cross over, or have had to climb and we're still climbing.

We're climbing. And right now, every day, people in this country have to climb. Climb mountains, climb over hills. "How many more rivers," that also refers to one of our spirituals, Many Rivers to Cross. Because we crossed many rivers. We crossed the whole ocean, our ancestors did when they came over into this new world. So they had to cross over and up the Mississippi, the Ohio, on the underground railroad, the Tennessee river. So many rivers they've had to cross. The Hudson river. So it's so many rivers our people have had to cross.

And the last, "How many bodies?" Well, since the horrific death of George Floyd, there have been many bodies that have had to be buried due to crime in the neighborhood, due to police brutality. So it isn't over. And as the poet writing this poem, I'm just saying I'm being realistic. Whereas the young represent idealism and that's great. We have to believe in something. Whereas the old who have experienced things represent reality. When I was young, I was very idealistic. My teacher, one of my professors, used to accuse me of that all the time, telling me, "Oh, you are just too idealistic. You're just full of idealism." And now I understand what he means, or what he meant. Now, I see the reality, all the brutality and the injustice that my people have suffered in this country.

Myles Banks (13:47): Yes ma'am. I guess when you're younger, it kind of goes with the notion that ignorance is bliss.

Mama Linda Goss (13:56): Yes. Well, again, that's the whole thing of being young, is that you learn, you grow.

Myles Banks (14:08): But as you mature, you start to see things from the bigger picture.

Mama Linda Goss (14:15): Yes.

Myles Banks (14:15): So to speak.

Mama Linda Goss (14:20): Yes. And you can kind of link things up.

Myles Banks (14:25): But one thing I will say about you Mama Linda is, even though you have matured over the years and you've grown and you've become a sort of, say, "realist," you still have an optimism.

A Tiger Swallowtail Flies , A Poem and Interview
Mama Linda's Chapbook
The Peale, Baltimore
Recorded in January 2021

Mama Linda Goss (14:38): Oh yes.

Myles Banks (14:39): And you're consistently fighting the good fight, so to speak.

Mama Linda Goss (14:44): Yes.

Myles Banks (14:44): Because I know a lot of people who have matured, they stop.

Mama Linda Goss (14:50): Yes.

Myles Banks (14:50): [crosstalk 00:14:50] It's gone. It's like, "Oh yeah, I can't do anything, it's over." But you still have that fighting spirit.

Mama Linda Goss (14:56): Yes. I try to. I try to.

Myles Banks (15:03): Yeah, we see it. We see it.

Mama Linda Goss (15:05): Well thank you. Thank you. Well, I'm still young at heart.

Myles Banks (15:09): Yes ma'am. There you go. There you go.