TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Changing the Conversation in Music Education with Tammy L. Kernodle

In this episode, Fred Lawrence speaks with Tammy L. Kernodle, University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Music at Miami University, whose work explores African American music, gender, and race in American popular culture. Kernodle shares how her working-class upbringing in Danville, Virginia, and a home filled with music led her to Virginia State University, graduate studies at The Ohio State University, and a career dedicated to expanding the narratives taught in music history. She discusses her mission to change classroom conversations, create scholarships for underrepresented musicians, and broaden what audiences hear in the concert hall. She also reflects on her roles as curator of the New World Symphony's *I Dream a World* Festival and her work on the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and

present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today. I'm delighted to welcome Professor Tammy L. Kernodle. Professor Kernodle is University Distinguished Professor of Music at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She's an internationally recognized musician and scholar whose research focuses on African American music, gender studies in music, and race in American popular culture. She's the author of the biography, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*, which chronicles the six decade career of jazz pianist, arranger and educator, Mary Lou Williams. Her scholarship has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, and she currently serves as curator of the I Dream a World Festival multi-year initiative with New World Symphony that celebrates the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. She was previously the president of the Society for American Music and as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting scholar this academic year, she has held the Frank M. Updike Memorial Scholars position. Welcome, Professor.

Tammy L. Kernod...: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here with you.

Fred Lawrence: Tell us a little bit about music and its role in your childhood. Were you one of those kids who cannot even remember before you were singing, or was there a moment when you found yourself drawn to music?

Tammy L. Kernod...: You know what, I think I came into a world of music. My parents were voracious record collectors. My father sang, and my paternal grandmother played piano. So I was just surrounded by music consistently and constantly. So my mother tells me that I sang before I even could talk, that's the joke in the family, and I will tell you, I cannot remember a time where music wasn't present, and not just me being a practitioner of the music, but just hearing music. I have memories of waking up in the morning, getting ready to go to school and hearing AM radio. Hearing the Carpenters, hearing Stevie Wonder, hearing Loretta Lynn, the great diversity of AM radio in the '70s when you would hear all of this mix. And so those things are very vivid to me, they're very real to me. So you can just say that I was wired. I was wired for sound. I was wired for music from the very beginning.

Fred Lawrence: What was the road that led you to Virginia State University? Virginia State University, of course, is one of our celebrated public HBCUs, founded in 1882, early on in the Historically Black College and University movement and a land grant school, all publicly funded.

Tammy L. Kernod...: My parents didn't go to college. For various reasons their family dynamics prevented them from going to college, but my parents were intellectuals. My mother read voraciously, she wrote poetry and did all these things. So there was an expectation that was kind of planted early on, and as the oldest child and the experiment so to speak, I kind of knew that I was going. But there was an intersection

in my mind, in my consciousness very early that music was going to be a part of that college study, and so initially I wanted to go to Berklee College of Music, and my mother was like, "Where is that?" I said, "Boston." She said, "Find somewhere else," and she took out a map. I lied to you not. She took out a map of the state of Virginia and she said-

Fred Lawrence: You can go any place you want, but you're staying in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Tammy L. Kernod...: Exactly. You are not going to Berklee College of Music. So I had taken piano lessons by that time for over 13 years. I went on this mission to figure out where I wanted to go, and it was ultimately between Hampton University and Virginia State, and I attended a high school day at Virginia State, and it just felt so much like home. I felt like I could come there and be my authentic self. I didn't have to necessarily change or alter who I was, what my background was. I come from Danville, Virginia. Danville was known for its textile meals and tobacco fields.

And so I came from a very working class background, but people with a lot of pride about that, and so I felt like Virginia State was a good fit for me, and then when I got there and the culture, the environment, the legacy of music there. This is where jazz pianist and educator Billy Taylor graduated from. This is where opera singer Camilla Williams, who ironically was from my hometown of Danville, Virginia, this is where she had graduated from. So I felt honored to be accepted, because you never know if you're going to be accepted or not, not just from the standpoint of the university opening the door for me, but for that environment to welcome you.

Fred Lawrence: Clearly music plays a role, but music means musicology, music means piano, music means listening, music may mean other things. So how does that all start to come together over your time at Virginia State?

Tammy L. Kernod...: I went in wanting to be a concert pianist, but I got there, and I tell a lot of the young people I've encountered, I kind of changed my major three times in the first semester. The first piano teacher in college was telling me all the things I couldn't do and I wouldn't do. So there was no pedagogy of care, I know that now. And then I did what most young people do, you operate in fear. So I decided, well, maybe I should change my major to chemistry. And I only picked that because I made an A in chemistry, and chemistry was something I loved in high school, and then I was like, "I don't want to do this." So I went back to music and I majored in music education, but I would not have gotten to grad school, and this is why I am so passionate about undergraduate liberal education.

So I was taking all of these courses outside of music: English and chemistry and biology and all of these things, social science courses, but in my junior year, there were just a series of events that happened that really put me on a different road. I discovered this book written by Eileen Southern called *The Music of Black Americans*, and I was like,

"What is this?" And someone was like, "Oh, this is musicology. This is the study of the music, the culture," and it really started making me think differently. And at the same time, I had two experiences. I was in an exchange program with the University of Virginia. It brought a diverse array of students to the campus in hopes that we would consider graduate school.

So I spent a semester, a summer there at the University of Virginia taking courses. I came back in the fall and the chemistry professor that I had had my freshman year came to me and said, "I see something in you. Have you considered graduate school?" And I was like, "Well, I'm thinking about it," and at that time, he had a direct connect with Ohio State, and every year he would select students to go as part of what was called Minority Visitation days, but the caveat was you had to apply for a program that you were potentially interested in, and I applied for musicology because I was like, "I love history. I love music. This is a different way for me to be able to do this craft. I can still be a practitioner."

When you can reflect back and you see that certain things were kind of divinely ordered, there were so many things that were happening that were pushing me toward that, right? Imagine telling my parents the following year at graduation, "Oh. By the way, yeah, I'm not getting a job. I'm going to go to graduate school and I'm going to move to Ohio where I know absolutely no one and I'm going to study this thing called musicology." They were like, "You made this up. There's no such thing." I mean, they were like... Oh my God. They were so not happy with me. I'm just going to say it that way. I don't think they were necessarily angry, but they were just not happy and very disappointed and they made their feelings known.

But I was 21 years old. I'm sitting here and I'm saying, "I'm going to take this course of life when I know that I have an ace card in my hand because I have my licensure to teach. I can go right into the classroom and have a job, but I'm going to pursue this thing, musicology, and I'm going to go somewhere where I absolutely know no one," and people really thought I had lost my mind, but I had this mentality, like you know what? I want to try, and even if I fail, I can say I tried.

Fred Lawrence: So I want to ask that 21-year-old woman a question. Is she going to be a musicologist? Is she going to be a college professor? What did she think she's going off to Ohio State University to become?

Tammy L. Kernod...: She knew she was going off to be a historian, but what she wanted to do was to change the conversation in classrooms, and so she knew that she had to up her writing skills, so writing books and writing scholarship, but I think it was a part of me for a long time that held on to, "Well, I'm going back into that music education public school, and I'm going to take this knowledge I have of history and I'm going to combine it with performance and I'm going to have this choir, I'm going to have this music program, and it's going to be very developed," because that's what I experienced in the

public school system that I attended. I attended classes and schools that had very advanced music programs where we had guests who were Black opera performers who might've been passing through who were visitors and would come in and talk to us. That's how I first got introduced to opera and got introduced to some of the iconic arias in junior high, meeting these people and hearing this stuff.

And so I assumed that I would go back and be part of that because that's what I knew, and then once I got to Ohio State and I survived that first year, because that was a transition. I mean, it was a transition mentally, emotionally, because again, my parents are not on board with this. They're not paying for it, but they're not on board with it because they don't really get it. Everyone's telling me I'm wasting my time, and I get there, I'm the only African American student in the program, and then you think about how young I am. I'm trying to process who I am, but I'm experiencing this world of diversity, because I lived on campus and I lived in graduate housing, and I'm so glad I did because I met people from all around the world.

I realized it brought me to a deeper level of understanding. I am grateful for going to Ohio State, because people will tell you, "Well, I didn't study with the right people. I should have gone to this university. This is a scholar." There were people there who weren't doing what I did in the musicology program, but they said, "We will guide you. We will shepherd you." And then there was the great Black studies program, American history program, a women gender sexuality program. So man, I was just so determined. I was taking everything I could.

So let me tell you how crazy I was. Most master's degrees are anywhere from 40 to 45 hours. So when I come to the end of my master's degree, I have 75 hours. I'm going to maximize this experience, and when I tell you, all of those experiences still feed into me even today. People won't see this, but you are seeing, I have shelves of books behind me. There are books that I had in the first seminars I took at Ohio State in 1991 that are on these shelves, and they still are important to me, they still feed into my work. And I'll tell you this, and I'll be quiet after this. That level of resistance against something that I knew in my heart was something I needed to pursue forced me to create a personal mission statement. So I created a three-point mission statement. I still live by that today.

Fred Lawrence: Please. What were the three points?

Tammy L. Kernod...: The first thing I wanted to do is I wanted to change the conversations that were happening in the classroom. I couldn't understand why women musicians and people of color outside of jazz were not really being talked about in academic spaces. I understood that in order for that to happen, I had to create material culture. So the second thing was to be focused on a scholarly agenda. These are the things I want to focus on, these are the areas I wanted to develop in terms of material culture, because the thing that I was always told in classrooms where I was trying to integrate this stuff

into my papers or the conversation was that, "Oh, there's no scholarship on that," or, "That hasn't been written," or, "Black people never wrote their music down." I had a professor tell me that. I was like, "Oh, okay." So I understood that if I was going to achieve number one, it meant I had to do number two, which was the work. You got to produce.

The third thing was to change what we hear in the concert hall. Not to say that the canon is not important, but enlarging what that canon is, enlarging what people hear. And that piece only came, it only manifested in the last four years of my life, but the others from the very beginning, it was like I was hitting the ground trying to make it happen. My article on Nina Simone came out of a Black political thought class where I positioned her as part of this conversation of mid-century Black political thought. I was always trying to find ways to experiment with what I was doing. I can't tell you why I had that kind of motivation. I look back now and I think about things and I'm like, "Who was that person? "

Fred Lawrence: We've been talking about your impact on campus and teaching students, developing classes and coursework on campus. So let's take a look at another part of your impact beyond campus as a public-facing teacher, scholar, leader in the field of musicology, music education. I have two in mind and in particular, one is your role as curator of the I Dream a World Festival, the festival with the New World Symphony celebrating the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, and then the other is from 2012 to 2016, your role as a scholarly consultant at the extraordinary National Museum of African American History and Culture here in Washington D.C. for the exhibit's musical crossroads. Both of those are chances to have your, if you will, classroom, go out into the world. When we talk about the African American History and Culture Museum, I think about the insight of the incomparable Lonnie Bunch, who I'm honored to say is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and holder of Phi Beta Kappa's Distinguished Service to the Humanities Award, then the founder of that museum, and now the Secretary of the whole Smithsonian.

Lonnie Bunch said that of the various things he's most proud of with that museum, and of course that's a long list, but maybe the most important is the sheer number of people for whom that is the very first museum they ever visited, and he felt that the existence of that cultural institution didn't just open up that museum to a great number of people, but changed their lives in terms of what museums are for and how public-facing education constitutes part of their lives. So you were very involved as a consultant on that project. There's the Harlem Renaissance Project. Tell us a little bit about those and how you see those having an impact.

Tammy L. Kernod...: So let me just say, getting a call from the Smithsonian was like a dream. In fact, I thought it was a joke. Can I tell you that? So I'll be short, but I got this call in 2012, and I'm in Kansas. So I'm at the University of Kansas. I'm teaching, I'm the Langston Hughes

Visiting Professor there. And so I get this call one day and it's like, "This is the Smithsonian. We've been trying to contact you." I'm like, "Really? What?" And I'm thinking I'm being punked because it's the MTV show at that time.

Fred Lawrence: You're waiting for somebody to jump out and say, "Gotcha."

Tammy L. Kernod...: I'm like, "Yeah, stop playing with me," and I hung up.

Fred Lawrence: I'm glad they called back.

Tammy L. Kernod...: And they called back. They were like, "We got disconnected." I was like, "Yes, I'm sorry," and they're like, "So we sent this letter to you. Didn't you receive a letter?" And I was like, "I'm in Kansas." They're like, "Oh, we sent it to Oxford. Well, we want to invite you. Will you consider being part of the team that's going to put together the music exhibits?" And I'm trying to be so cool. I mean, I'm like, "Well, I think I can. Can you email me the letter?" I'm trying to be all professional.

Fred Lawrence: And what you really want to say is, "If you need me there this afternoon, I'm there."

Tammy L. Kernod...: I will fly, okay? With my arms, I'll flap my arms and fly. Yes. So I hung up the phone and I lied to you not, I dropped my phone and it cracked. So this is the memory for me because I'm like, "It's all the things." And when I tell you I felt like my life was coming full circle, let me tell you why. Smithsonian was the trip that was given to students who did well in the sixth and seventh grade. So my first real significant museum experience happened with the Smithsonian, sixth and seventh grade, take the bus ride to Washington, spend a whole day in Washington. It was something special. It unlocked for me my love for history, and so to be called into that kind of work! Immediately my friends are like, "Well, how much are they paying me?" I was like, "They can pay me in sandwiches. I don't care. It's the Smithsonian."

And I mean, honestly, I didn't get paid anything. So if you're thinking that, people out there, no, I didn't. It was about the service. I felt so honored to be called, to be part of telling a story, but to also see something rise out of the earth, because that's literally what I got to see from the very beginning. And so I met Lonnie on one occasion. We had a meeting, he was in that meeting, we were talking about vision, and I'm looking around this room and the talent and just the level of vision that was in that room, and so to see all of that come together, to see the acquisition of the artifacts that you see, those things were amazing to me, and a lot of the time I had to not fangirl out. I had to remember that I was there to help tell a story, and I was there to do work and not let the geeky nerdiness of me and history come out, but I mean, it was the deepest honor of my life.

I only got to see the floor I was on the day before it opened, and I happened to be in D.C. that day because I was doing something at Georgetown, and so they let me in and allowed me to walk around, and I tell you, I cried. So it was such an honor.

We did the festival the first year, and the festival is front-facing. So those who don't know, New World Symphony is a fellows program, so it's an educational program and it's a functioning orchestra, and they have this wonderful campus on South Beach, and so one of the things they said was, "This is not just about concerts. I need you to do lectures. I need you to come in. I need you to talk to them. I need you to talk to them about Blackness. I need you to talk to them about culture. I need you to talk to them about music in a way that they don't get in the conservatory, that's not a part of their experience."

It's not just about presenting concerts, it's about building relationships with the different communities, the different ethnic and racial communities that make up Miami, and so our concerts don't just happen on South Beach. There are different stories that are being told during this festival. So it has been a dream come true. But I have to remember that I have been blessed, that this started with piano lessons. This started with my mother sitting in a car for 30 minutes, winter, spring, summer, fall, never, never complaining. This started with my dad singing to me, singing with me, pressing me, and them just allowing me to be that person. You know how blessed that is? I encounter people every day who want to be artists whose parents tell them, "We will not pay for that. We will pay for you to be a business major, but we will not pay for you to be an artist." So they are miserable.

Fred Lawrence: And paying in lots of ways. There's literally paying, but there's that half hour sitting in the car, there's the time singing the same song for the 12th time. There's all those other ways of paying when they might say, "Come on, let's do something serious," but instead say, "No, I can see it in your eyes. This is serious to you and we're going to help you."

This being Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa, one of the things we like to do is help our listeners build their reading lists. So if you can give us a couple of good books for those folks who want to get themselves lit with music and learn a little more about it, but then also, I know some of our listeners today will have tuned in particularly because of their interest in jazz. So I'm going to take the prerogative of the host here of putting your book on the list and everyone should read it. What else would you put on the list for someone with little background and for somebody with a fair amount of background in music and even in jazz?

Tammy L. Kernod...: So can I go beyond jazz? Because I think there's some real timely books out there I think that people would enjoy. There's a book called *Race Music* by Guthrie Ramsey, and it's become like one of those necessary books. It's very interesting because he weaves in the story of the Great Migration with his own family story and how music was such a centralized part of migration. It really kind of traces his family's migration from the deep south to Chicago, and he brings it up to very contemporary times. So it's a very interesting, very accessible read.

There's a wonderful concert pianist/scholar by the name of Samantha Ege. She's Afro-British. She wrote a book called *South Side Impresarios*, and it is a wonderful book tracing the role of women musicians, women activists and educators in propelling the Chicago Renaissance. And so a lot of people talk about Florence Price today, and she lays out in this book not just Florence Price's move to Chicago, but what were these circles, this ecosystem that really propelled Florence Price. Her work is really intriguing, and it's really telling. If you are a rock and roll fan and you want to read a wonderful book that looks at rock and roll music, *Black Diamond Queens*. It's a book by Maureen Mahon. And I mean, she traces everything from Big Mama Thornton to Tina Turner and Betty Davis. Betty Davis was Miles Davis's second wife, who was so radical the US couldn't stand her, so she had to go to Britain in the UK. But she really explores what is this untapped history of Black women in rock and roll from the earliest iteration in the '50s all the way up to the 1980s.

Fred Lawrence: Those are great additions to our book list, and I thank you for that, but I particularly thank you for being a Visiting Scholar this year. Your enthusiasm for your subject matter is contagious, but your subject matter is so much broader than just the topics you talk about, and I think that's the major contribution, and I know that those who have been privileged to see you on campus have had the chance to learn from that as have your students, as have so many who've been the beneficiary of your work, for example, at the Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington. Thank you so much for joining me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. What a pleasure to be together.

Tammy L. Kernod...: Thank you. Can I just say one thing, that being a Visiting Scholar and being the Updike Scholar has just been a high point of my career and my life. I mean, I have been transformed by these visits this year, and the community of educators and students and staff, and just the ecosystems of the campus that I've gone to have just been so inspiring, and so I'm just grateful to have been part of this experience. Thank you for being in conversation with me.

Fred Lawrence: Well, we're glad to have you in the Phi Beta Kappa family, and now that you're in, we're not going to let you out.

Tammy L. Kernod...: I love it. I love it.

Fred Lawrence: Thanks so much for joining us today.

Tammy L. Kernod...: Thank you.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. “Changing the Conversation in Music Education with Tammy L. Kernodle” *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa,* The Phi Beta Kappa Society, September 8th, 2025. www.pbk.org.

Produced by:

PHANTOM CENTER