***Interview with Maya Angelou***

***by Stephanie Renee***

**Angelou:** Hello good morning, good afternoon.

**Renée:** Good afternoon Ms. Maya Angelou it is an honor to get to speak with you today. I wanted to talk to you about legacy if I could. In lieu of the transition that many of our esteemed elders have been passing that have contributed greatly to the black experience in America and throughout the world, I wonder how you look at how you have joined with them and spoken into some of this incredible legacy that we now study and explore as a sign of who we are as a people. Very recently I remember looking at that wonderful photo of you and Amiri Baraka dancing in the Schaumberg and also I had the pleasure of seeing you perform with Common at the Urban League centennial opening. You’re one of the few folks we can point to that have been so relevant throughout my living history and beyond and I wonder how you think about that legacy of speaking into our existence.

**Angelou:** I’m going to give you something which is going to delight your heart as long as you live. There’s a statement, “*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*” which is, “I am a human being. Nothing human can be alien to me.” This statement was made by Terance. When you look in your encyclopedia under Terance with one “r” you will see in italics in Latin that statement “homo sum” and it says “terentius Afer”. He was an Afer. He was a slave sold to a Roman senator. He was freed by that senator. He became the most popular playwright in Rome. Five of his plays and that one statement have come down to us from 154 B.C. Isn’t that amazing?

**Renée:** That’s an incredible legacy that we don’t learn.

**Angelou:** I know. But I’m telling you so you tell somebody else. That’s the way we get it all done. The statement means that I can accept wisdom from anybody. From Li Po in China. I can accept wisdom from Gabrielle. I can take wisdom from Tolstoy. I can take wisdom from Afayro and St. Mother Theresa. I can take wisdom from W.E.B. Du Bois. I can take wisdom from Common. You see? It all belongs to me and it all belongs to you. The African American experience, because it’s closer to my contemporary experience, I can take that easily but I should be able to take all human experience and learn from it. He who does not learn from his history is doomed to repeat it and repeat it and repeat it ad nauseam.

**Renée:** I thought about you this morning when I saw one of the news headlines saying they believe they have found the remains of the Santa Maria from Columbus’ expedition off the coast of Haiti. Your career has been defined by no area of cultural or artistic exploration being foreign to you. I have a copy of your recording “black pearls”, your work in film, and the writings that you have done. Do you feel it’s important for those who have been actively involved in cultural traditions in the contemporary sense to find ways to assert themselves in various mediums?

**Angelou:** Absolutely, we’ve done youth a disfavor and a disfavor was done to us when we were told and then we went out to tell young people, “You don’t try to do everything. You’ll be a jack of all trades and a master of none.” That’s bologna. You should try to do everything that human beings do if it catches your fancy. I can paint. I’m never going to paint like John Biggers or Romare Bearden. I’m never going to sculpt like Elizabeth Cablet but I can sculpt. I have two hands and I can sculpt. I don’t play the piano but if I took my time I could play the piano. I do compose music and I do write lyrics. I had a song on the top ten. The song I wrote with Quincy Jones and one I’ve written with Roberta Flack and those I wrote with Valerie Simpson and Nick Ashford. So try everything, try, and pass it on. Take it as a blessing and pass it on.

**Renée:** I love that. There’s also this idea where we sometimes psyche ourselves out of the opportunity to reach an audience because we’re not sure if that’s the right venue for us to share our gifts. I’m reminded of a skit you did with Richard Pryor. He of course is well known as a comedian but the piece that you did with him was particularly emotional and poignant. If you will, speak a little bit about that experience and changing the scope of what was possible in that moment because of what you do and what you wanted to bring to that place.

**Angelou:** Well, Mr. Pryor called me and knew he was going to do a big show. I thanked him and told him I don’t do comedy and he said, “I don’t want comedy.” And I said thank the lord. He asked if I would come out to California and do the cameo for the part and I did. I got the task of talking about the “n” word and the use of it as I was talking to him as his wife, as the wife of Willy. Finally as I finished Mr. Pryor was weeping, sobbing in my arms. A few weeks later somebody told me that he had done the Barbara Walters show and said he’d never use the “n” word again. Now, I don’t know if that was true but I do know that he was sobbing in my arms. What I do know is you have to tell the truth, Ms. Rene, tell it as eloquently and beautifully and honestly as you can all the time. You may liberate somebody and if you can liberate one person he or she may go on to liberate ten thousand people.

**Renée:** In your relationship with Common, as an example of how we bridge the space between our elders and our younger people. As much as you have embraced him and have worked with him you also told him when you took issue with some of the subject matter that he uses. What advice can you give to people who are afraid to speak up, even when you love someone, about something that they do that you feel is taking them down a path you don’t feel is productive?

**Angelou:** You do them a service. Many people don’t know how to make friends because they can’t be honest. Other people say that they’re brutally frank. I think that’s stupid. You don’t have to be brutal about anything. You can find a way to tell the truth and save somebody. Help him or her to save themselves. You have to do the best you can. You must. You know I did a piece with Tupac Shakur and of course Chris Rock has come here and done it. The comedians the politicians and all of them, I want to tell the truth and I’m happy to say that many people want to hear my truth.