

**The following interview with
ALLEE WILLIS
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on March 27, 2019**



Library of Congress: How did you first come to work with Earth, Wind & Fire?

Allee Willis: A friend of mine was friends with Verdine White, Maurice White's brother, who was the bass player for Earth, Wind & Fire at that time and is the leader of the group now. She put me with Verdine to write for a group he was producing at that time named Pockets and for a solo singer named Shelly, who he eventually married. So we were writing for them and from the first day, he said, "I'm gonna tell my brother about you."

At the time, I was this starving songwriter, living on food stamps and Medi-Cal, healthcare we had in California at the time. Earth, Wind & Fire was my favorite group so I thought, "NO! This is never going to happen. It's too big."

But about a week and a half later, my phone rang and this—this is the whole conversation:

[I say,] "Hello?" and he said, "This is Maurice White and I want to know if you want to write the entire next Earth, Wind & Fire album with me?"

It was the MOST SURREAL MOMENT OF MY LIFE! There I was, seconds before, I was thinking what I was going to spend my food stamps on....

I went to the studio the next day. Ironically, it was within walking distance, just a couple of blocks away, from my apartment. And as I walked in the studio, they are working on an intro to a song, and I hear the happiest sounding music I have ever heard in my life! And I remember thinking, "Dear God, let this be what he wants me to work on!"

[Maurice] turned to me and introduced me to the rest of the group and then he said about the song, "I want to call it 'September' and the opening line is, '*Do you remember....*'"

(Actually, less than two weeks ago—and I thought I lost this 40 years ago—I found my original folder with all my notes from that song! I'm staring at them right now!)

Maurice handed me a little sheet from a lined-pad of paper. He had written down his ideas for three verses:

“Do you remember the 21st day of September...”

And I told him to change “day” to “night”—because it’s more romantic....

He had several pages of lines, a bunch of lines, and we took some words from there, stretched them into lines that rhymed, and put them into the song...

“Holding hands with your heart to see you...”

I had an immediate reaction to the lyrics. You see, I was a journalism major in college—and I do music AND lyrics. Sometimes people think I just do lyrics and I want to scream from the rooftops: “I WRITE THE MUSIC TOO!” Not that I’m going to bitch about not writing the music to “September,” which is beyond brilliant and uplifting.

Anyway.... There were these [original] lyrics on the sheet Maurice handed me ...

*“Our hearts were ringing....
Never a cloudy day...”*

I re-wrote them with him, and being a journalism major, at the time, I felt EXTREMELY STRONGLY that lyrics had to be seriously intelligent. Seriously intelligent! Constantly! Constantly! Not just sing-songy lyrics kind of lyrics!

Of course, when you write with someone, the artist, in the studio, you are there to serve *them*. Now, in contrast, I wrote “Boogie Wonderland” with Jon Lind, and we brought it to the group. If you compare that song with “September,” it is in stark contrast lyrically. But Maurice just didn’t want to be pushed on this. But I wanted to make [the lyrics] more sophisticated and be in full sentences....

LOC: Was “September” always intended to be a single?

AW: “September” was the one new single that was going to go on Earth, Wind & Fire’s “Greatest Hits, Volume I” album. Then we were going to write the songs for the band’s next album, “I Am, at the same time.

I had been brought in to help the band broaden its audience beyond from what we would now call their primary “urban” audience. David Foster was brought in at the same time to help with that expansion and crossover as well.

So, Maurice and I started writing the lyrics to “September” plus ten other songs....

For me, one of the very first questions Maurice asked me was if I knew about Eastern philosophies.

I didn’t even know what he was talking about. I was about as evolved as Pop Rocks.

The day we started, he gave me a list of books (I still have it) and he told me to go to a store in LA called The Bohdi Tree bookstore. And it was the type of store that just *reeks* of incense and is 100% spiritual and if you were one of the two people doing yoga in LA at that time, that is where you hung out. [But] I'm much more comfortable in a candy store!

I got the books. The first one was titled "The Greatest Salesmen in the World" by Og Mandino. And I opened that book and I went into a panic! OH MY GOD! I didn't even know what to... It was all metaphors and ancient Egyptians. And I just wanted to watch "Soul Train"!

Actually, I think that's why we made such a perfect team—we were at the opposite end of each other....

You know, I don't want to leave Al [McKay] out of this. I think he's one of the greatest songwriters ever! He has always written these compulsively happy songs. But his part was done before I got there. The basic rhythm track was done... Al was a massive part of "September."

So we spent three to four months writing "September" and the other songs on "I Am." "September" had to be done--finished first--since it was going on the "Greatest Hits" album.

We did argue about the lyrics—and Maurice was like, "No! No! This is perfect!" I am eternally happy that I *lost* the argument to kill some of the sing-songy lyrics.

I usually also write the melody. That's most of what I do. And as you do the melody, as you hum it, you experiment with nonsensical syllables (not yet lyrics) to see what falls into the groove. And as Maurice started the lyrics, he sings this "*Ba-dee-ya*" in the chorus. And I didn't like it. I knew this was a stone-cold hit and that nobody was going to know what that meant. And he was like, "It's fine, it's fine. It won't affect the meaning of the song."

Finally, after begging for months to change that lyric, the very LAST night—the master has to be done by midnight and it's around 10 o'clock—I go into the studio and he's doing the final vocal and I drop to my knees and clutch his thigh (Maurice White had the best thighs in the music industry!) and I say, "PLEASE CAN WE CHANGE 'BA-DEE-YA' TO REAL WORDS?"

Maurice tells this story in his 2016 book and he says I was crying when I begged him. I don't remember it as THAT embarrassing but it was a moment I'll never forget.

LOC: But it didn't change, did it?

AW: No, [and] he said something that forever changed my outlook on songwriting. I condense what he said to me as never let the lyrics get in way of the groove. If the melody, beat, and spirit are there then everyone will know--emotionally they will know--what you're saying....

And I have lived by that the rest of my career. Lyrics can be clunky sometimes because someone is trying to make too much sense, or fit in a four-syllable word when a two-syllable one feels better....

"September" really should have been simple to write.... But it took 20 single-spaced pages to write! "*Ba-dee-ya!*" It's my favorite phrase ever invented... And it changed my life.

One of my favorite things about the song now is that people really do think it's really words that are being said. They think he's singing "Party on!" or it's "Ah-ah-ah-ah."

LOC: The song has so endured...

AW: I know! It gets bigger every year, too! I think there's 25 movies now that it's featured in. A lot of films will use "Boogie Wonderland" and "September" together.

I think the song's just eternally uplifting. It's impossible to be depressed when you hear it. And I observe that every day [because] I hear it every day. I'm in the grocery store and I hear it and then I see people bobbing their heads to it. I've always joked that if you played "September" at a funeral, even the corpse's toe would be tapping.

And the opening first line—"Do you remember..."—is as recognized as the chorus and that seldom happens.

The song is associated with happiness—it's at weddings, bar mitzvahs, barbecues, parties. The dance floor is empty until they put it on. This one is inescapable. And I never get sick of hearing it no matter how many times I hear it. I don't think it's the best *song* I ever worked on but I do think it's the best *record* I ever worked on. And I'm more grateful for that song than anything I've ever done. It's the gift that keeps on giving. And then you have to think: a white Jewish girl as a songwriter is co-writing this?...

Sometimes when I meet people and I tell them I'm a songwriter, they'll ask, "Oh, have you written anything I would know?" And I give a whole different answer depending if I like them or not. But if I really want to bring them to their knees, I say: "September" first.

A year or so ago I was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame and, at the end of the night, as I'm gathering up my things and getting ready to go, Jermaine Dupri and Usher *smash* into me and say, "YOU WROTE 'SEPTEMBER'?"

LOC: Is there such a thing as an "Allee Willis Style"?

AW: I think people know my style and recognize my melodies. There's also a tone to my lyrics—which "September" is a bit of an exception from—and it's: If your life isn't working, get off your ass and do something! If the world is falling apart, you can't fall apart. Rise to your potential—that's what I helped bring to [the musical] "The Color Purple" that I co-authored. I mean that character, Celie,—Having to rise from the dead practically to have an effect and change everyone around her.

Musically, I'm obsessed with "hooks": everything needs to be a hook.... It's like when I wrote "What Have I Done to Deserve This?" with Pet Shop Boys and they sang it with Dusty Springfield. In that song, there's a verse; then there's a B-section (which is the rap, basically, surprising for a white artist at that time); then there's this sweet chorus that Dusty sang; and then this connective: "*What have I? What have I? What have I done to deserve this?*" And then *there's the fade.*

For many writers, that would have been turned into five different songs but not me! I read in an interview that when Neil [Tennant] sings it, he panics because he doesn't know which part of it is the chorus!

It took us three and half years to make that record happen because Dusty didn't want to make another record again. We did it first at a demo session with me singing the Dusty parts, including the sugary sweet chorus (because one person in the song still wants to be in the relationship), parts of the verses, and then the end which seemed like the best time for riff-ing.

That's how I was writing back then and some people aren't used to writing that way. I tried to do it then... and did it with "September."

