

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Fayard Nicholas

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Nicholas, Fayard
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Fayard Nicholas,
Dates:	May 14, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:34:57).
Abstract:	Dancer Fayard Nicholas (1914 - 2006) is the elder member of famed tap-dancing duo, The Nicholas Brothers, and has appeared in dozens of films. Nicholas has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Nicholas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 14, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_048
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fayard Antonio Nicholas, eldest of the world famous, high-flying tap duo, "The Nicholas Brothers," spent his childhood on the road with his vaudevillian parents. He was born in their hometown of Mobile, Alabama, on October 20, 1914. His Father, Ulysses D. Nicholas, was a drummer and his mother, Viola Harden Nicholas, played piano. The two college educated musicians performed as the Nicholas Collegians or accompanied other acts or silent films. Nicholas' sister, Dorothy was born in 1920; the following year, Harold, who was named after silent film's Harold Lloyd, the "King of Daredevil Comedy," was born.

African American stars like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, The Step Brothers, and Butterbeans and Susie were young Nicholas' extended family. He studied their routines from the wings and yearned to be on stage. He and his siblings devised a song and dance act that gained his parents' approval, and the three debuted as "The Nicholas Kids" in Philadelphia around 1927. From this emerged "The Nicholas Brothers." The brothers always performed last because nobody wanted to follow the kids' show stopping tap moves, especially the spectacular double "flying splits." The Nicholas Brothers opened at Harlem's Cotton Club in 1931, where the performers were black and the patrons white. While performing there, the brothers met Harold Lloyd, Georgie Jessell, and Bob Hope. One of the most popular routines at the Cotton Club was "Minnie the Moocher" with Cab Calloway, in which young Harold mimicked the real Cab and challenges him to a scatting contest. They brought the house down with their frenetic dancing to "Bugle Call Rag,"

The Nicholas Brothers went on to dance in their first film; a short entitled *Pie Pie Blackbird* with Eubie Blake's Orchestra in 1932. That was followed by *Kid Millions* with Eddie Cantor in 1934, *The Ziegfield Follies* in 1936, and *Babes In Arms* in 1937. The brothers garnered speaking roles in *The Big Broadcast of 1936* and performed a number with Dorothy Dandridge, Harold's future bride, in 1941's *Sun Valley Serenade*. In 1943, the Nicholas Brothers starred in *Stormy Weather* with Fats Waller, Lena Horne, Cab Calloway and Katherine Dunham and thrilled audiences by dancing up a wall and back flipping to the floor in 1943's *Orchestra Wives*.

Nicholas served in the Army from 1943 to 1944. In 1948, the brothers sang and danced in a command performance for King Edward IV of England. They then toured South America, Asia and Europe in the 50s and 60s and made films including: *Bonjour Kathrin* in 1956 and *Musik im Blut* in 1956.

Nicholas returned to the United States starring on every major television variety program and headlining countless stage shows. Nicholas' first dramatic role was in 1970's *The Liberation of L.B. Jones*. Their tap students include: Janet Jackson, Debbie Allen, and Michael Jackson. The brothers have been honored by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Nicholas is now touring and lecturing about dance with his wife Katheryn Hopkins Nicholas. His brother, Harold, passed away in 2000. Nicholas passed away on January 24, 2006.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Fayard Nicholas was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 14, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer Fayard Nicholas (1914 - 2006) is the elder member of famed tap-dancing duo, The Nicholas Brothers, and has appeared in dozens of films. Nicholas has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Nicholas, Fayard

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Nicholas, Fayard--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dancer

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Fayard Nicholas, May 14, 2004. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Fayard Nicholas, Section A2004_048_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Dancer Fayard Nicholas describes his family background and describes his childhood of travel and show business, as part of the sibling act The Nicholas Brothers. Nicholas credits his parents for the support and encouragement needed to succeed in show business and also talks about his brother and co-performer Harold Nicholas. Nicholas explains how the duo got their first gig in Philadelphia, and then discusses their big break to stardom at the Cotton Club in Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with Fayard Nicholas, Section A2004_048_001_002, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Dancer Fayard Nicholas details his life in showbusiness as a child and youth as a member of the Nicholas Brothers. Nicholas describes his interactions with some of the most famous performers and entertainers of the 1930s during his signature performances at the Cotton Club and in the numerous films in which he and his brother appeared.

Video Oral History Interview with Fayard Nicholas, Section A2004_048_001_003, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Dancer Fayard Nicholas discusses his success and fame in the 1940s with his brother as The Nicholas Brothers, describing their film roles in 'Down Argentine Way', 'Sun Valley Serenade', and 'Stormy Weather', as well as the famous entertainers he met while filming his roles. Nicholas talks about the dangerous nature of his dance style and recalls the one time he incurred an injury while performing. Nicholas then details his time in the Army, having been drafted in 1943.

Video Oral History Interview with Fayard Nicholas, Section A2004_048_001_004, TRT: 0:31:17 ?

Dancer Fayard Nicholas discusses his performance career in the 1940s and 1950s with his brother, Harold, as part of the Nicholas Brothers. Nicholas recalls some of his memorable performances, including dancing for the King of England, and performing with Billie Holliday, Count Basie, and Josephine Baker. Nicholas describes his success on tours of the southern United States and Europe. He then describes the time when he returned to the States to perform in solo acts during the 1950s.

Video Oral History Interview with Fayard Nicholas, Section A2004_048_001_005, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Dancer Fayard Nicholas discusses his entertainment career as he began to perform more on television and in films rather than on stage. Nicholas talks about many of the movies in which he appeared, including his first dramatic role. Nicholas continues to talk about famous entertainers with whom he collaborated over the years, and also lists many of the Nicholas Brothers' honors and awards, including Kennedy Center Honors and a star on the Walk of Fame in Hollywood.

Video Oral History Interview with Fayard Nicholas, Section A2004_048_001_006, TRT: 0:06:20 ?

Dancer Fayard Nicholas offers his hopes for the black community, comments on how he would like to be remembered, and discusses his marriage to his wife, Katherine.