

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Briggs, Karen (Violinist)
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 4, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:48:44).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Violinist Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs (1963 - ) is most known for her 1993 performance during Yanni's 'Live at the Acropolis.' She has also performed with Soul II Soul, the Wu Tang Clan, En Vogue and Chaka Khan. Briggs was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 4, 2004, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_191
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Violinist Karen “Lady in Red” Briggs was born in New York City on August 12, 1963, and grew up in Portsmouth, Virginia. At an early age, Briggs displayed a natural talent for the violin and began playing many pieces by ear. While in high school, she received her first paying job, performing at a wedding for twenty dollars.

After graduating from high school in 1981, Briggs attended Norfolk State College where she majored in music education and mass media. In 1983, during her sophomore year in college, she began playing with the Virginia Symphony where she performed for four years. She returned to New York City where she won three *Amateur Nights at The Apollo Theater*. After getting married in 1988 and moving to Los Angeles, California, Briggs began performing regularly at the jazz club Marla’s Memory Lane. In 1989, Briggs embarked on her first professional tour with Soul II Soul, performing throughout America and Japan. In 1991, Briggs successfully auditioned for Yanni, the Greek-American new age keyboard composer. Briggs most notable performance was during *Yanni Live: At the Acropolis* wearing the now infamous red dress. Following this performance, she spent the next thirteen years touring and recording with Yanni, in *Tribute* which was performed both at the Taj Mahal in Agra, India and in the Forbidden City, in China.

Briggs made her Carnegie Hall debut in 1994, performing with pianist Dave Gruisin. She has also performed with a number of other artists over the years, including Stanley Clarke, the Wu Tang Clan, En Vogue and Chaka Khan. At the time of the interview, some of her current projects included recording with Hidden Beach Records and performing with the Unrapped Band.

Karen Briggs was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 4, 2004.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 4, 2004, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Violinist Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs (1963 - ) is most known for her 1993 performance during Yanni's 'Live at the Acropolis.' She has also performed with Soul II Soul, the Wu Tang Clan, En Vogue and Chaka Khan.

---

## 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:

Briggs, Karen (Violinist)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Briggs, Karen (Violinist)--Interviews

---

African American musicians--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

## Occupations:

Violinist

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

---

## 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 Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs, October 4, 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 Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs, Section A2004\_191\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:24 ?

Karen “Lady in Red” Briggs was born August 12, 1963 in New York, New York. Her mother, Ruthie Powell, was born in Accomack County, Virginia in November of 1927 and worked as a candy stripper and a healthworker for the elderly and disabled. Her father, Frank Briggs, Jr., was born in New York City on April 7th during the late 1920s. He played the saxophone and sang in a doo-wop group with his brothers. Her paternal grandfather, Frank Briggs, Sr., was a

Pentecostal minister and traces his ancestry to a Bishop Mackey who lived in Virginia in the nineteenth century. Briggs' family contained numerous musicians, many of whom were affiliated with the church. Her family lived in Harlem and Englewood, New Jersey, where Briggs remembers riding her tricycle down the attic stairs, having her stomach pumped after brushing her teeth with poison, and sticking a hairpin into an electrical socket. She then moved to Accomack County where her extended family lived on the same block. She recalls jokes shared at family reunions.

African American families--New Jersey--Inglewood.

African American parents--Virginia.

Doo-wop (Music).

African American musicians--Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs, Section A2004\_191\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:42 ?

Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs began playing violin at Alfred J. Mapp Junior High School in Portsmouth, Virginia and became head of the student orchestra. She was introverted and focused on music throughout her school years, but overcame peers' racial discrimination by excelling in music. Briggs discovered jazz violin when she bought a Noel Pointer album on a whim during a school trip to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She first played improvisational violin while competing in a pageant at Woodrow Wilson High School in Portsmouth, Virginia and placed first runner-up. Shortly after, she booked her first paying gig as a wedding performer. At fifteen years old, she played regularly with her saxophonist father at jazz jam sessions. She became hooked on performing due to an audience's enthusiastic response to her performance of Dizzy Gillespie's 'A Night in Tunisia.' A high school counselor discouraged her from applying to music conservatories, so upon graduating in 1981, she entered Norfolk State College in Virginia.

African American women violinists--Virginia.

Introversion in children.

Pointer, Noel.

Gillespie, Dizzy, 1917-1993.

Violin music (jazz)--Performance.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs, Section A2004\_191\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs studied music at Norfolk State College in Norfolk, Virginia but felt stifled by the school's lack of emphasis on performance and adherence to classical styles. Briggs joined the Virginia Symphony Orchestra during her sophomore year. After feeling unwelcome there due to racial discrimination, Briggs decided to pursue her true calling of jazz violin and moved to New York, New York. There, Briggs won amateur nights at the Apollo Theater three times and worked as a booking agent at the Sounds of Brazil. In 1988, Briggs moved to Los Angeles, California to be with her husband and began playing regularly at Marla's Memory Lane and Jazz Supper Club. In 1990, Briggs embarked on her first professional tour with Soul II Soul as a member of a 100 piece ensemble; Briggs toured the United States and Japan but was unable to finish the tour after being injured in a car accident near Chicago, Illinois. She also toured with the keyboardist Milcho Leviev and the Sofia Symphonic Orchestra in Bulgaria.

Norfolk State University (Va.).

African American college students--Virginia--Norfolk.  
Virginia Symphony.  
African American jazz musicians--New York (N.Y.).  
Jazz clubs--California--Los Angeles.  
Soul II Soul (Musical group).  
Levie, Milcho.  
Wheeler, Nedra, 1961-.  
Concert tours--Bulgaria.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs, Section A2004\_191\_001\_004,  
TRT: 0:31:14 ?

Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs auditioned for Yanni's tour in 1991 around the time of her divorce and her mother's death. Despite a shaky audition, her ability to perform 'Within Attraction' by ear earned her a spot on the tour. Briggs won Yanni's respect despite their conflicts. She was made a soloist at the suggestion of Yanni's girlfriend, Linda Evans, for his 'Live at the Acropolis' PBS special filmed in Athens, Greece. Linda Stokes designed the eponymous red dress for Briggs' performance. When the special aired in 1993, Briggs found herself famous. She appeared on 'The Oprah Winfrey Show' and 'The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.' Briggs spent most of the next eleven years touring the world with Yanni. She gave birth to her daughter in 1996; since then, her daughter has been exposed to various cultures while accompanying Briggs on tours. In 1999, Briggs joined with Stanley Clark, Lenny White, Richie Kotzen and Rachel Z to form the jazz fusion band Vertu and release an album that captured her unique musical style.

Yanni.  
Jazz--Auditions.  
Evans, Linda, 1942-  
Oprah Winfrey show (Television program).  
Tonight show (Television program).  
Jazz-rock (Music).  
Clark, Stanley, 1957-.  
White, Lenny.  
Kotzen, Richie.  
Z., Rachel.  
Vertú (Musical group).

Video Oral History Interview with Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs, Section A2004\_191\_001\_005,  
TRT: 0:29:17 ?

Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs toured with jazz fusion band Vertu until the band dissolved. Briggs then took a hiatus to review her career and her plans, during which time her father underwent triple bypass surgery. During his recovery, Briggs was able to spend time with her father and see another side of him. Since ending her collaboration with Yanni, Briggs has been featured on three volumes of Hidden Beach Recordings' Unwrapped Band project, which features jazz instrumentalists playing rap grooves. At the time of the interview, Briggs had recently appeared at various jazz festivals, including one in Bermuda, and signed a solo record deal with Hidden Beach. Briggs reflects upon her life and career, her musical philosophy, and her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Vertú (Musical group).

Alcoholic fathers--Family relationships.

Violin music (Jazz).

Stringed instrument music.

Slavery--America--History.

Video Oral History Interview with Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs, Section A2004\_191\_001\_006,  
TRT: 0:16:57 ?

Karen "Lady in Red" Briggs describes the collection of string instruments she acquired from various countries and her musical career's impact on her family members. She reflects upon her legacy and how she would like to be remembered. Briggs also plays a tune on her violin. She concludes her interview by narrating her photographs.

African American fathers.

Pastorius, Jaco.

Yanni.

Self-realization.

Music--Performance.