

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Winfrey

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Winfrey, Robert, 1933-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Winfrey,
Dates:	December 7, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:16:18).
Abstract:	Education administrator, music composer, and music director Robert Winfrey (1933 -) served as the director of the world renowned Kuumba Singers of Harvard University, and is responsible for building a multicultural school music program in Boston, making music education available to all students at the high school level. Winfrey was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 7, 2005, in Milton, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_254
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Robert Winfrey, musician, composer, music teacher, musical arts director and choral director, has revolutionized the musical scene and music education in Boston, Massachusetts over a twenty-eight year period. A builder of a multi-cultural school music program in Boston, Winfrey made music education available to all students at the high school level. In addition to his work in the city of Boston, Winfrey served as the director of the world-renown Kuumba Singers of Harvard University for twenty-five years. His signature composition, *Let's Build A City*, is known and has been sung across the United States.

Winfrey was born in Atlanta, Georgia in June 1933. His parents, Pete and Ethel Winfrey, and two sisters, Frances and Betty lived in the Grady Holmes Housing Project during Winfrey's growing up. He was a neighbor of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s.

Winfrey graduated from David T. Howard High School in 1950 and from Morehouse College in 1955 with a degree in music composition. During his youth, he played piano and organ at Liberty Baptist Church, two blocks from Ebenezer Baptist Church.

From 1955 to 1957, Winfrey served in the U.S. Army as a minister of music to the chaplains of all faiths – Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. During his military service, he decided to become a music teacher.

In the summer of 1957, Winfrey studied music composition at Columbia University in New York City. Then, in the fall, he became the choral and band director at Hubbard elementary and high schools in Forsyth, Georgia. He returned to Columbia University in 1960 and earned his M.A. degree in music composition. For the next eleven years, he taught and directed the music program at Dunbar High School in Lynchburg, Virginia. In Lynchburg, Winfrey met Reverend Virgil Wood, pastor of Diamond Hill Baptist Church, and became Diamond's organist and minister of music. In 1970, he received a Tangley Oaks Fellowship for graduate studies in music education at

Columbia University where he developed an arts program for inner-city youth. Reverend Wood moved to Boston in 1963 and influenced Winfrey to join him in 1971. Winfrey reluctantly left Georgia with his wife Johnie (Evans) Winfrey and their two sons, Robert, born in 1968, and Peter, born in 1970.

In Boston, Winfrey taught music at Jeremiah Burke High School and directed Boston's Model Cities' "Teen Town" community arts program. At Burke, he established for the first time a choral ensemble and a band. Quickly his reputation and talent for developing singing groups spread across greater Boston. In 1975, the Boston Public Schools established a citywide music program, which became the Roland Hayes School of Music at Boston's Madison Park Campus High School. Winfrey was appointed to plan and develop the Hayes School of Music and he served as its director from 1977 to 1999.

In 1972, Reverend Wood asked Winfrey to compose an original song for a Black Expo sponsored by the Boston chapter of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The result was *Let's Build A City*, in which he changed 'City' to 'Nation'. The theme of this Winfrey composition was so impressive and important, that it was used in the inaugural ceremonies of three former big city mayors, Maynard Jackson of Atlanta, Thomas Bradley of Los Angeles and Coleman Young of Detroit. In 2005, Winfrey shared the message of this composition with the cities of Mobile, Alabama; Biloxi, Mississippi; and New Orleans, Louisiana after the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. The mayors of Mobile and Biloxi sent letters of appreciation to Winfrey for his thoughtful composition.

In 1973, Harvard University asked Winfrey to serve as the director of the Kuumba Singers. Under Winfrey's direction, the Kuumba Singers performed in cities and towns across America – including public and private schools, colleges, churches, cathedrals, concert halls, hospitals, nursing homes and prisons. In 1981-1982, the highlight of that tour season for Winfrey was their performance in King Chapel at Morehouse College -- Winfrey's alma mater.

In 1983, Winfrey was chosen as one of Greater Boston's Black Achievers. At the awards ceremony, the Kuumba Singers performed in his honor. Winfrey's greatest awards are the legions of students who are now achievers in both musical and non-musical endeavors.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Winfrey was conducted by Robert Hayden on December 7, 2005, in Milton, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Education administrator, music composer, and music director Robert Winfrey (1933 -) served as the director of the world renowned Kuumba Singers of Harvard University, and is responsible for building a multicultural school music program in Boston, making music education available to all students at the high school level.

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:

- Winfrey, Robert, 1933-
- Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)
- Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
 - Winfrey, Robert, 1933- --Interviews
-

Organizations:

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
 - The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
-

Occupations:

- Education Administrator
 - Music Director
 - Music Composer
-

HistoryMakers® Category:

- EducationMakers|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 Robert Winfrey, December 7, 2005. 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 Robert Winfrey, Section A2005_254_001_001, TRT: 0:30:43 ?

Robert Winfrey was born on June 14, 1933 in Atlanta, Georgia to Ethel Clark Winfrey and Pete Winfrey. Winfrey's maternal grandmother died in childbirth, so his mother spent her early years with family friends in Hawkinsville, Georgia before moving to Atlanta at eleven years old, where she was raised by a distant aunt. There, Winfrey's mother attended Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church, where she met his father. Later in life, she completed her high school education by attending night school, and reconnected with her father, Robert Clark. Winfrey's father was born in Atlanta, and he and his seven siblings were reared by their mother, Dicey Olive. He attended high school until the tenth grade, and then transferred to a vocational school to become a chef. Winfrey's father worked at two hospitals as a cook during the Great Depression, while Winfrey's mother worked when necessary. Noticing his early interest in music, Winfrey's mother encouraged him to take piano lessons with Mary Barber, and worked to buy him a piano.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Winfrey, Section A2005_254_001_002, TRT: 0:30:42 ?

Robert Winfrey grew up in the Grady Homes housing projects, and attended Yonge Street Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia. There, he admired the dedication of his first grade teacher, Rebecca Dickerson, who taught him how to write. On Sunday mornings, Winfrey listened to the Wings Over Jordan Choir on the radio on his way to Liberty Baptist Church. He learned to read music to accompany the children's choir, and his mother bought him his own piano for practice. Inspired by the music at church services, Winfrey began taking organ lessons. In his youth, he knew Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and delivered newspapers with his brother, A.D. King. As a teenager, Winfrey

played the organ for Reverend King's speaking engagements at various churches in Atlanta. Winfrey was an honor roll student at David T. Howard High School, where he learned poetry from his teacher, W.J. Rowe, and participated in plays and speech contests. He describes Atlanta's Auburn Avenue as well as his feelings about segregated buses.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Winfrey, Section A2005_254_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Robert Winfrey learned about African American history from plays at David T. Howard High School in Atlanta, Georgia. During this time, he also saw performances by singers Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson and Dorothy Maynor, and heard speakers like Mary McLeod Bethune and Dorothy Height. In high school, Winfrey took organ lessons at the Cable Piano Company in Atlanta. After graduating in 1950, Winfrey received a scholarship to study music composition at Morehouse College in Atlanta. Morehouse President Benjamin E. Mays encouraged Winfrey to play the organ, and Winfrey became the student band director. Upon graduating in 1955, Winfrey entered the U.S. Army, and was stationed at Fort Bliss in Texas. While completing basic training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina, he became the chaplain's assistant organist and the post commander's entertainer. After leaving the army, Winfrey briefly taught music in Georgia. He then enrolled at Columbia University in New York City to study music composition.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Winfrey, Section A2005_254_001_004, TRT: 0:30:13 ?

Robert Winfrey taught at Hubbard Elementary and High School in Forsyth, Georgia after leaving the U.S. Army. While attending Columbia University in New York City, Winfrey visited Abyssinian Baptist Church and New Canaan Baptist Church, where he reconnected with Reverend Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, whom he knew from Virginia. Winfrey also studied interpretative African American spirituals with composer Hall Johnson, and attempted to publish his early music compositions without success. After graduation, Winfrey married Johnnie Evans Winfrey in 1961, taught at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Lynchburg, Virginia and became the music director at Reverend Dr. Virgil A. Wood's church. With the Tanglely Oaks Fellowship, he was able to complete additional coursework at Columbia University. Winfrey then returned to Lynchburg, and developed a citywide arts program. At the insistence of Wood and Peter C. Siragusa, Winfrey relocated to Boston, Massachusetts to become the music director at Jeremiah E. Burke High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Winfrey, Section A2005_254_001_005, TRT: 0:30:22 ?

Robert Winfrey struggled to adjust to life in Boston, Massachusetts when he moved there in 1971 with his wife and two sons, Robert Scott Winfrey and Peter Winfrey. Winfrey considered returning to Atlanta, Georgia, but his friend, Douglas G. Foster, convinced him to stay. Winfrey taught a summer school music program for Boston Public Schools, and served as creative director of Paul Parks' Model Cities Program. Under Winfrey's direction, Jeremiah E. Burke High School performed at Massachusetts Music Educators Convention and Boston's Roxbury Presbyterian Church. Winfrey wrote the composition 'Let's Build A City,' and conducted the Boston Public Schools All-City Chorus' performances of the song at Boston Symphony Hall, and in Washington, D.C. at the invitation of Congressman Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. Winfrey describes his close friend Reverend Dr. Virgil A. Wood, who was involved with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Winfrey also compares school desegregation in Boston to his experiences in the South.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Winfrey, Section A2005_254_001_006, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Robert Winfrey served as coordinator during the establishment of the Roland

Hayes Division of Music at Madison High School in Boston, Massachusetts. When the school opened, Winfrey became its director, and Dr. Benjamin E. Mays spoke at the dedication ceremony. Its alumni included members of R&B female group, 9.9, and surgeon Karen Moody. Educator Walter J. Leonard encouraged Winfrey to become the music director of the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College who went on to perform with Coretta Scott King at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Harvard College Dean Archie C. Epps, III convinced Winfrey to postpone his retirement as director of the Kuumba Singers until 1998, and he retired from the Roland Hayes School of Music in 1999. Winfrey describes the founder and president of Berklee College of Music, Lawrence Berk, and actor and singer Carl Anderson, whom he taught in Lynchburg, Virginia. Winfrey also describes how he would like his leadership to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Winfrey, Section A2005_254_001_007, TRT: 0:14:28 ?

Robert Winfrey taught piano lessons to senior citizens and children, and played the organ at Mattapan Baptist Church in Milton, Massachusetts as well as at Roxbury Presbyterian Church in Boston, Massachusetts after his retirement. When Winfrey's student Carl Anderson passed away in 2004, Winfrey convinced Paul Laurence Dunbar Middle School for Innovation in Lynchburg, Virginia to dedicate their auditorium in Anderson's memory. Winfrey served as the keynote speaker at the dedication ceremony. He describes his hopes for the African American community, and reflects upon his life and how he would like to be remembered. Winfrey concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.