

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Odetta Gordon

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Odetta, 1930-2008
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Odetta Gordon,
Dates:	December 6, 2006 and March 17, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:44:28).
Abstract:	Folk singer and songwriter Odetta Gordon (1930 - 2008) is a Grammy nominee who performed at the March on Washington. Odetta was a National Medal of Arts and Humanities recipient and her album, Folk Songs became 1963's best selling folk album. Gordon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 6, 2006 and March 17, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_038
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Anointed as the queen of American folk music by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Odetta Gordon, a coloratura soprano, was born Odetta Holmes on December 31, 1930 in Birmingham, Alabama. When she lost her father, Rueben Holmes, at a young age, her mother, Flora, remarried and gave the children their stepfather's name, Felious. Moving to Los Angeles with her family in 1936 at age six, Odetta began studying classical music. After graduating from high school, she attended Los Angeles City College where she study classical opera before being introduced to folk music.

In 1947, Odetta began her professional touring in the musical Finian's Rainbow. Her first job as a folksinger came in San Francisco, where she quickly won over audiences. In 1953, when she came to New York, Harry Belafonte and Pete Seeger were instrumental in introducing her to larger audiences. In 1959, Belafonte included her in a major television special, which made her name nationally known. In 1954, Odetta recorded her first album for Fantasy Records. In 1963, she released Folk Songs, which became one of the year's best-selling folk albums.

As an activist for social change, Odetta performed at the 1963 March on Washington and took part in the March on Selma. She performed for President Kennedy and his cabinet on the nationally televised civil rights special, Dinner with the President. Her career blossomed during the golden years of folk music when she began recording albums for Vanguard Records. Odetta has sung with symphony orchestras and in operas all over the world and has been a featured performer everywhere in the country, including the Newport Folk Festivals and in her solo concerts at Carnegie Hall.

Odetta has also acted in films such as The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman and has starred in countless television specials, such as BBC-TV's Concert Special, Talking Bob Dylan Blues. She has also hosted the Montreux Jazz Festival. Having been inspired by the great contralto Marian Anderson and having herself inspired

such revered artists as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Janis Joplin, it is no wonder that among her countless other achievements, her album, *Blues Everywhere I Go* (2000), was nominated for a Grammy. In 1999, Odetta was awarded the National Medal of Arts & Humanities by President Bill Clinton and the first lady. On Saturday, March 24, 2007, Odetta was honored by the World Folk Music Association with a lifetime tribute concert called, *ODETTA – A Celebration of Life & Music* at the Northern Virginia Community College in Alexandria, Virginia.

Odetta passed away on December 2, 2008 at the age of 77.

Odetta was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on March 17, 2006.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Odetta Gordon was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 6, 2006 and March 17, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Folk singer and songwriter Odetta Gordon (1930 - 2008) is a Grammy nominee who performed at the March on Washington. Odetta was a National Medal of Arts and Humanities recipient and her album, *Folk Songs* became 1963's best selling folk album.

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:

Odetta, 1930-2008

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Odetta, 1930-2008 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Folk Singer

Songwriter

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 Odetta Gordon, December 6, 2006 and March 17, 2006. 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 Odetta Gordon, Section A2006_038_001_001, TRT: 0:29:09 ?

Odetta Gordon was born on December 31, 1930 in Birmingham, Alabama. Her early childhood was influenced by her maternal grandmother, Mama Lizzie, whom she regarded as her guardian angel. When she lost her father, Reuben Holmes, at a young age, her mother, Flora Saunders, married Zadock Felious. He developed lung disease from working in the steel mills, and, in 1936, the family moved to Los Angeles, California seeking a drier climate. There, her mother supported the family by working at the Turnabout Theatre in Hollywood. Gordon's interest in music was influenced by shows like the Grand Ole Opry and the Lux Radio Theatre, as well as African American singers such as Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson. At thirteen, she began voice lessons, paid for by her mother and Harry Burnett, co-founder of the Yale Puppeteers and the Turnabout Theatre. Despite positive role models such as her mother's strong female friends, Gordon's self-image was influenced by negative portrayals of African Americans in films.

Video Oral History Interview with Odetta Gordon, Section A2006_038_001_002, TRT: 0:30:03 ?

Odetta Gordon experienced racial discrimination for the first time in 1936, at the age of six, aboard a train from Birmingham, Alabama to Los Angeles, California. This incident, as well as her mother's criticism of her weight, greatly distressed Gordon as a child. Trained as a classical vocalist, she was rejected from the world of opera due racial discrimination and instead sang for musicals such as 'Finian's Rainbow' and 'Guys and Dolls.' Gordon's interest in folk music developed through experiences such as hearing Sonny Terry play the harmonica and joining a party of musicians while visiting friends in San Francisco. Gordon began her career in folk music as a singer at the Tin Angel nightclub in San Francisco. She was soon invited to sing at a Paul Robeson concert in Los Angeles. Through folk music, Gordon voiced her politics and healed her negative self-image. She pioneered the movement to wear natural hair and worked with the Library of Congress to preserve American folk music.

Video Oral History Interview with Odetta Gordon, Section A2006_038_001_003, TRT: 0:20:39 ?

Odetta Gordon moved from Birmingham, Alabama to Los Angeles, California in 1936, when she was six years old, and spent most of her childhood and early adulthood there. She recalls the streetcar that ran on Virgil Street in front of her home, the kumquat tree that hung over the fence on the way to the Vista Theatre, and the smell of her mother's cooking. Her family attended church on Sundays; they celebrated Easter with new clothes and an egg hunt, and Christmas with gifts. Early in her folk music career, she was invited to sing at a concert with Paul Robeson, who taught her about musicians' political responsibilities. Gordon expressed her politics by singing songs about the wrongful imprisonment and lynching of African Americans. In 1963, she sang "I'm on My Way" at the March on Washington. Gordon met civil rights leaders, like Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but was too shy to get to know them. She moved to New York, New York with her husband, where she remained following their divorce.

Video Oral History Interview with Odetta Gordon, Section A2006_038_002_004, TRT: 0:27:19 ?

Odetta Gordon began her professional career in 1947 in Los Angeles, California as a chorus singer in the musical 'Finian's Rainbow.' While in San Francisco,

California to sing with the chorus of the musical 'Guys and Dolls,' she was introduced to folk music. Gordon began her career as a folksinger at the Tin Angel nightclub in San Francisco, where she was discovered by Herbert Jacoby, owner of the Blue Angel supper club in New York City. In 1953, Gordon went to New York to perform at the Blue Angel, where she recorded her first album in 1954 and met prominent singers such as HistoryMaker Harry Belafonte and Pete Seeger. In 1959, Belafonte included her in a major television special on CBS, making her name nationally known. 'Odetta Sings Folk Songs' became one of the year's best-selling folk albums in 1963. She also performed at the March on Washington that year at the invitation of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who called her the queen of American folk music.

Video Oral History Interview with Odetta Gordon, Section A2006_038_002_005, TRT: 0:30:54 ?

Odetta Gordon worked with contemporary artists such as Jo Mapes, Larry Mohr, Frank Hamilton and Bob Gibson during her career as a folksinger. Gordon was dyslexic, so she did not often read, and her political activism took the form of song. She performed at the March on Washington in 1963 and the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965, although she never marched due to her fear of crowds. She performed for President John F. Kennedy and his cabinet on the nationally televised civil rights special 'Dinner with the President.' She appeared at Newport Folk Festival in Newport, Rhode Island, in solo concerts at Carnegie Hall in New York City, and in films such as 'The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman'. Gordon worked with Fantasy Records, Vanguard Records and MC Records, whom she chose to record her albums because they did not try to modify her style or image. Gordon married Danny Gordon in 1959, but they divorced due to the pressures of her career.

Video Oral History Interview with Odetta Gordon, Section A2006_038_002_006, TRT: 0:26:24 ?

Odetta Gordon's music inspired artists such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Janis Joplin. Gordon considers 'Odetta Sings Dylan', in which she covers Bob Dylan's songs, to be one of her favorite albums. Gordon also appeared in a number of films, including 'The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,' in which she played Big Laura. She received the National Medal of Arts and Humanities from President Bill Clinton in 1999, and, in 2000, her album 'Blues Everywhere I Go' was nominated for a Grammy Award. Gordon describes her hopes for the African American community. She also reflects upon her life, her future, her spirituality, and how she would like to be remembered. Gordon concludes the interview with a performance of 'Glory Hallelujah.'