

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. Mable John

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | John, Mable |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John, |
| Dates: | November 7, 2007 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2007 |
| Physical Description: | 8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:29:14). |
| Abstract: | R & B singer, pastor, and songwriter Reverend Dr. Mable John (1930 -) was the first female artist on Berry Gordy's new label Tamla in 1958. She later signed with Stax Records, and had success with songs like "Same Time, Same Place." John went on to cowrite fifty songs for Ray Charles from 1970 to 1977. She was the pastor and founder of Joy in Jesus Ministries in Los Angeles, California. John was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 7, 2007, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2007_326 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

R&B singer Mable John was born on November 3, 1930 in Bastrop, Louisiana to Mertis and Lillian John. As the eldest of ten children, John began singing with her siblings as a child, putting on programs and singing traditional gospel tunes while her mother played the guitar. John and her family moved to Arkansas, where her brother, the legendary singer and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, William "Little Willie" John was born. The family later moved to Detroit, Michigan. Inspired by her brother's success in the music industry, John started substituting for R&B singer Etta James as the opening act for "Little Willie" John's show when he came to town. In 1956, she worked as a secretary at the Friendship Mutual Insurance Company where her supervisor was Bertha Gordy, mother of the Motown music founder Berry Gordy.

In 1958, John became the first female artist on Gordy's new label Tamla. Although her first song, "Who Wouldn't Love a Man Like That", did not make the pop charts, it established John as a popular live performer. She sold out shows at the Apollo Theater in New York City and The Howard Theater in Washington, D.C. In 1965, John decided to change labels and signed with Stax Records where she believed her sound was more appropriate. John's first song under the Stax label, "Your Good This (Is About to End)" soared to number six on the R&B charts in the summer of 1966, and the following year, she released the single, "Same Time, Same Place". In 1968, John's brother William "Little Willie" John died in prison from unknown causes. Subsequently, John went into a deep depression. It was not until 1970, when Ray Charles offered her a job as the musical director of the Raelettes, that John continued her musical career. John was the co-writer of fifty songs for Ray Charles before leaving his organization in 1977. She then became the pastor and founder of Joy in Jesus Ministries in Los Angeles, California in 1986. John earned her doctorate in divinity from the Crenshaw Christian Center in 1993 and, in 1994, she was awarded the Pioneer Award by the Rhythm and Blues Foundation.

John lives in Los Angeles, California and has five adult children.

John was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 7, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John was conducted by Jacques Lesure on November 7, 2007, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. R & B singer, pastor, and songwriter Reverend Dr. Mable John (1930 -) was the first female artist on Berry Gordy's new label Tamla in 1958. She later signed with Stax Records, and had success with songs like "Same Time, Same Place." John went on to cowrite fifty songs for Ray Charles from 1970 to 1977. She was the pastor and founder of Joy in Jesus Ministries in Los Angeles, California.

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:

John, Mable

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

John, Mable--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

R & B Singer

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 Reverend Dr. Mable John, November 7, 2007. 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 Reverend Dr. Mable John, Section A2007_326_001_001, TRT: 0:28:25 ?

Reverend Dr. Mable John was born on November 3, 1930 in Bastrop, Louisiana to Lillie Robinson John and Mertis John, Sr. John's paternal grandfather, William John, was a Baptist deacon, and raised her father in Angie, Louisiana. There, her maternal grandparents, Eddie Robinson and Rebecca Robinson, were also active in the community, where John's mother was born. An avid singer, she was forbidden by her family from singing the blues, but often sang while alone in the cotton fields. John was born in Bastrop, and moved at two years old to Cullendale, Arkansas, where her father worked at a paper mill. John remembers celebrating the holidays with her family in Cullendale, where her mother made elaborate meals, including many types of homemade cakes and breads, to share with the community. In Cullendale, John's family were reputed for their generosity, and often opened their home to the itinerant workers passing through the town during the Great Depression.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John, Section A2007_326_001_002, TRT: 0:28:29 ?

Reverend Dr. Mable John's grew up in segregated Cullendale, Arkansas, where her family lived in a predominantly African American community. There, her parents had a reputation for helping the itinerant workers who passed through town during the Great Depression. Her mother, Lillie Robinson John, provided each man with a bath and full course meal, during which her father, Mertis John, Sr., sat and talked to him. John's parents were meticulous about the cleanliness of their home; and, in addition to her everyday chores, John often helped her mother in the kitchen. Her family belonged to the Holiness church, where she was influenced by the gospel music. She also listened to music at home with her family members, most of whom played an instrument. In Cullendale, John attended the Lafayette School, and aspired to become a nurse. At twelve years old, she moved with her family to Detroit, Michigan, where her father found work at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant in nearby Hamtramck, Michigan.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John, Section A2007_326_001_003, TRT: 0:29:14 ?

Reverend Dr. Mable John moved with her family at twelve years old to Detroit, Michigan, where her father worked at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant in nearby Hamtramck, Michigan. In her integrated neighborhood in Detroit, John experienced less racial discrimination than she had in segregated Cullendale, Arkansas. John attended Detroit's D. Bethune Duffield Elementary School and John J. Pershing High School, where she worked in the lunchroom to pay for her meals, and sang in the choir and glee club. John and her five siblings were all obedient, except for her brother, Little Willie John, who often left the house without permission to sing in competitions at Detroit's Paradise Theatre. After graduating, John enrolled in nursing correspondence courses; and, against her father's wishes, married Jesse Pearl Webster, who worked at the Great Lakes Steel Corporation in Ecorse, Michigan, and had a gambling addiction. After the birth of John's second son, she divorced Webster, and returned to her parents' home.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John, Section A2007_326_001_004, TRT: 0:29:12 ?

Reverend Dr. Mable John moved with her two sons, Jesse Webster and Joel Webster, to her parents' home in Detroit, Michigan after leaving her first husband, Jesse Pearl Webster. After completing her nursing courses, she worked as a private duty nurse, eventually saving enough money to move with her children to her own apartment. By this time, John's younger brother, Little Willie John, had become a well-known singer at Detroit's Paradise Theatre.

Soon, bandleaders like Lionel Hampton and Dizzy Gillespie began visiting the family's home to invite her brother on tour, but John's father always refused. Nevertheless, Little Willie John, who aspired to a singing career, left home, and signed a contract with Syd Nathan at King Records. John served as a music minister at her church, and was encouraged to enter the music industry herself by Berry Gordy, who had recently founded Tamla Records. After some training, Gordy booked John at nightclubs like Detroit's Flame Show Bar, where she opened for singer Billie Holiday.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John, Section A2007_326_001_005, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

Reverend Dr. Mable John was the first female solo artist to sign to Berry Gordy's Tamla Records label, which later became Motown Records. John toured with artists like Etta James, who suggested that John perform with her brother, Little Willie John, who was a popular singer. They had not previously thought of touring together, and did so from that time until her brother's death. Eventually, John left Motown Records to sign with producer Issac Hayes at Stax Records, whom she considered more compatible with her sound; and also began collaborating with Otis Redding and The Bar-Kays. In 1967, she was driving to meet Redding for a performance in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when his airplane crashed, killing him and several of The Bar-Kays. Shortly after, John's brother was found guilty of murder, and incarcerated at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla, Washington, where he died from pneumonia in 1968. Not wanting to perform without her brother, John decided to leave the music industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John, Section A2007_326_001_006, TRT: 0:28:59 ?

Reverend Dr. Mable John recorded at the Stax Records studio in Memphis, Tennessee, where she often stayed at the Lorraine Motel. There, she met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. prior to his assassination in 1968. That year, following the deaths of Otis Redding and her brother, Little Willie John, John decided to leave the music industry. While she was planning her brother's memorial service in Detroit, Michigan, Ray Charles called her several times to request help finding a lead singer for his backup vocalists, The Raelettes. Eventually, she was contacted by Charles' promoter, George Grogan, Jr., who told her that Charles wanted John herself to become the director and lead singer of the group. She flew to Los Angeles, California to negotiate her contract, which included stipulations about moral behavior on the part of the group members. John sang with The Raelettes until 1977, when she left the entertainment industry to pursue her calling as a minister.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John, Section A2007_326_001_007, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Reverend Dr. Mable John worked closely with Ray Charles for eight years as the director and lead singer of The Raelettes. She remembers Ray Charles' integrity; his strong relationship with his manager, Joe Adams; and her reluctance to leave The Raelettes. John was called to the ministry during her last performance with Charles, and left with his blessing. She went on to record several gospel songs with her sons, Limuel C. Taylor and Joel Webster. She also founded the Fourth House Music Company, which she ran for nearly ten years. While these projects were ongoing, John attended the University of California, Los Angeles and Los Angeles' Crenshaw Christian Center, where she earned a degree in ministry. Upon graduating, she founded the Joy in Jesus, Inc. church, and published a religious fiction book series through Random House Inc. John describes her

hopes and concerns for the African American community, and her advice to young people.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Mable John, Section A2007_326_001_008, TRT: 0:06:21 ?

Reverend Dr. Mable John reflects upon her values, life and legacy. She concludes the interview by sharing her message to future generations.