

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Michael White

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	White, Michael, 1954-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Michael White,
Dates:	June 7, 2010
Bulk Dates:	2010
Physical Description:	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:27:02).
Abstract:	Jazz musician and music professor Michael White (1954 -) was professor of Spanish and African American music at Xavier University of Louisiana, and bandleader of the Original Liberty Jazz Band in New Orleans, Louisiana. White was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 7, 2010, in New Orleans, Louisiana. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2010_041
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Music professor and jazz musician Michael White was born on November 29, 1954 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Descended from early jazz notables such as bassist Papa John Joseph and clarinetist Willie “Kaiser” Joseph, White did not know of his background, but saw his aunt, who played classical clarinet, as his influence. White too played clarinet in the noted St. Augustine’s High School Marching Band and took private lessons from the band’s esteemed director, Lionel Hampton, for three years.

White balanced school with his interest in the clarinet. He went on to obtain his B.A. degree from Xavier University in 1976 and his M.A. degree in Spanish from Tulane University in 1979. That same year, White joined the Young Tuxedo Brass Band, and two years later, White founded The Original Liberty Jazz Band with the aim of preserving the musical heritage of New Orleans. In 1984, White earned his Ph.D. degree in Spanish from Tulane University and began teaching Spanish and African American music at Xavier University. Around this time, White started collaborating with jazz great Wynton Marsalis; in 1989, White was featured on Wynton Marsalis’ seminal recording, *Majesty of the Blues*, and that same year, the two worked together on “A Tribute to Jelly Roll Morton,” performed at New York’s Lincoln Center, in which White served as musical director.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. White was living in a one-story home in the Gentilly district of New Orleans, near the London Avenue Canal, and his home was destroyed by the flooding. White was a collector of jazz artifacts and history, but lost all thirty years of jazz memorabilia in the flooding, including interviews of early jazzmen, a clarinet mouthpiece that once belonged to Sidney Bechet, approximately 9000 records and CDs, and a collection of over five dozen vintage clarinets. Still, White embraced jazz’s spirit of improvisation and released his most recent album, *Blue Crescent*, in 2008, which consists of mainly original compositions and was met with critical acclaim.

The recipient of a 2008 National Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment of the Arts, White has

performed at Carnegie Hall and the Newport Jazz Festival. In 1987, the French Government bestowed upon White the rank of Chevalier of Arts and Letters. As a resident artist at the Lincoln Center, White has served as musical director for several of their concerts, including 1992's Blue Clarinet Stomp and 1994's Cornet Kings Before Armstrong. White serves as Commissioner of the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Interior, and in 2002 he was appointed as the first incumbent of the Rosa and Charles Keller Endowed Chair in the Humanities at Xavier University. Most recently, in 2010, White was named Humanist of the Year by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

Michael White was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 7, 2010.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Michael White was conducted by Denise Gines on June 7, 2010, in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Jazz musician and music professor Michael White (1954 -) was professor of Spanish and African American music at Xavier University of Louisiana, and bandleader of the Original Liberty Jazz Band in New Orleans, Louisiana.

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:

White, Michael, 1954-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
White, Michael, 1954- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Jazz Musician

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 Michael White, June 7, 2010. 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 Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_001, TRT: 0:28:07 ?

Michael White was born on November 29, 1954 in New Orleans, Louisiana to Helen Forcia White and Oscar White, Jr. His maternal ancestors migrated to New Orleans from St. John the Baptist Parish and St. James Parish. His maternal grandmother was Creole, and worked as a domestic for the family of businessman Edgar B. Stern, Sr. She believed in the importance of education, while White's maternal grandfather emphasized the value of hard work. White's mother was born in 1922, and grew up in New Orleans' Uptown section, where she saw jazz performances by Percy Humphrey and Willie Humphrey. After studying home economics at Xavier University of Louisiana, she taught at the veterans baking and cooking school in New Orleans. Her brother, Clarence Forcia, Jr., practiced medicine in Alexandria, Louisiana; and her sister, Natalie Forcia, taught elementary school. White's maternal cousins included jazz legends like string bassist Papa John Joseph, trumpeter Renald Richard and tenor saxophonist Plas Johnson.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_002, TRT: 0:28:33 ?

Michael White's father, Oscar White, Jr., was raised in a Protestant household in the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans, Louisiana. He served in the U.S. military during World War II, and went on to work as a letter carrier for the U.S. Post Office Department. He married White's mother in the 1940s, and went on to serve as a Boy Scout troop leader and a member of the Knights of Peter Claver, a Catholic lay organization. With financial support from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, he purchased a home on Lizardi Street in the 9th Ward of New Orleans, where White spent the early years of his childhood. His family later relocated to the Uptown area, where they lived with his maternal grandmother and aunt. White remembers listening to his aunt play the clarinet, and his grandmother's successful candy making business. With his mother, White attended New Orleans' Mardi Gras parades, where he first witnessed a performance by the St. Augustine High School Marching 100.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_003, TRT: 0:29:22 ?

Michael White was initially raised in a predominantly African American community in the 9th Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana, where his neighbors included the legendary pianist Fats Domino. A quiet and conscientious student, White began his education at a private Catholic school in New Orleans called the St. David School, where he played the lead in a production of 'Pinocchio.' His early awareness of race was influenced by television programs like 'Sing Along with Mitch,' on which singer Leslie Uggams made regular appearances; as well as commercial advertisements for hair products like Brylcreem and Vitalis. He was also influenced by his experiences at segregated lunch counters and doctors' offices. At this point in the interview, White talks about the Creole identity and the history of placage. He also describes the fictional character Morgus the Magnificent, a mad scientist who first appeared on television in New Orleans during the late 1950s.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_004, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Michael White lived in the 9th Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana until he reached the second grade. At that time, he moved to the predominantly white Carrollton neighborhood with his family, including his younger sister, Janice White Brady. Their home was frequently vandalized, and they were banned from many local businesses because of their race. White continued his education at the Holy Ghost School, a majority-black Catholic school in the nearby Uptown section of New Orleans. During the eighth grade, he transferred to the St. Joan of Arc

Catholic School, where he took weekly clarinet lessons, and performed in a parade for the first time. He went on to attend New Orleans' St. Augustine High School, where he continued his clarinet instruction under Edwin Hampton, the director of the St. Augustine High School Marching 100 band. White also remembers the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963, and the impact of Hurricane Betsy in 1965.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_005, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Michael White attended St. Augustine High School, an all-boys Catholic school in New Orleans, Louisiana. He participated in the color guard, and received private clarinet lessons from Edwin Hampton, the director of the St. Augustine High School Marching 100. During his junior year, White joined the marching band's competitive clarinet section. He was also selected to perform with an eighteen-piece brass band at a local convention, where he played jazz standards like 'Bourbon Street Parade' and 'When the Saints Go Marching In.' White also discovered his aptitude for the Spanish language at St. Augustine High School. Upon graduating in 1972, he matriculated at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, where he majored in Spanish. His primary mentor was Carroll Mace, who taught Spanish, and White also studied philosophy under Father Jerome Ledoux. His classmates included future academics like Brother Herman Johnson, John E. Ware and Kenneth Boutte, Sr.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_006, TRT: 0:31:59 ?

Michael White studied Spanish at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. During that time, he joined jazz legend Ernest "Doc" Paulin's brass band, where he served as the clarinetist, and played alongside older and more experienced musicians like trumpeter Eddie Richardson and tenor saxophonist Leroy "Batman" Rankin. During his senior year of college, White met the noted jazz musician Danny Barker, who recruited him to join the Fairview Baptist Church Brass Band. Upon graduating from Xavier University in 1976, White obtained a fellowship from the Ford Foundation, and went on to earn a Ph.D. degree in Spanish from New Orleans' Tulane University. At this point in the interview, White talks about the events where brass bands performed in New Orleans, including social club parades, jazz funerals and church parades. He also describes the traditional jazz funeral dirge, and demonstrates the clarinet part, which mimicked the sound of mourners crying.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_007, TRT: 0:29:53 ?

Michael White played the clarinet from an early age, and was introduced to the professional jazz community in New Orleans, Louisiana during the mid-1970s. Around that time, he joined a brass band led by trumpeter Ernest "Doc" Paulin, with whom he played at traditional events like social club parades, jazz funerals and church parades. At this point in the interview, White describes the structure and significance of New Orleans' social and pleasure club parades, which customarily featured brass jazz bands. He also talks about the history of jazz, including its origin in the Uptown area of New Orleans; and the collective improvisational style and African diasporic influences that characterized New Orleans jazz. He differentiates New Orleans jazz from white Dixieland music, which is often misidentified as traditional jazz. White also talks about the movement of jazz from New Orleans to northern metropolises like New York City and Chicago, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_008, TRT: 0:30:17 ?

Michael White played the clarinet in a brass band led by Ernest "Doc" Paulin in New Orleans, Louisiana from 1975 to 1979. Disturbed by the increasing violence during their parade performances, he decided to leave the band. White

then joined New Orleans' American Federation of Musicians Local 174-496 union, where he was afforded opportunities to play with well-established musicians like bassist Chester Zardis and pianist Sweet Emma Barrett. Inspired by his interest in music history, White sought out older jazz musicians at venues like Preservation Hall and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. There, he met early 20th century trumpeters Kid Sheik Cola and Kid Thomas Valentine, the latter of whom invited White to join his band. White remembers a party where he performed songs from clarinetist George Lewis' popular jazz record, 'Burgundy Street Blues.' He also talks about the generational differences between New Orleans jazz musicians, and his role in the preservation of traditional New Orleans jazz.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael White, Section A2010_041_001_009, TRT: 0:30:31 ?

Michael White was invited to play the clarinet on jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis' record, 'The Majesty of the Blues,' in 1989. He went on to play with Marsalis' band at numerous jazz festivals, including the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the JVC Jazz Festival and the Boston Globe Jazz Festival. White also served as the musical director for Marsalis' concert featuring the music of Jelly Roll Morton in 1993, and for 'Cornet Kings Before Armstrong: Music of Buddy Bolden, Freddie Keppard and King Oliver' at New York City's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in 1994. White talks about Marsalis' success and early disinterest in traditional New Orleans jazz. In addition to his career as a clarinetist, White studied jazz history during his graduate program at Tulane University in New Orleans. He talks about forming the Original Liberty Jazz Band; his first record, 'Shake It and Break It'; and Duke Ellington's New Orleans jazz influences.