

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Romance Watson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Watson, Romance
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Romance Watson,
Dates:	June 1, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:54:01).
Abstract:	Singer Romance Watson (1930 -) was a member of the Roberta Martin Singers, a gospel music group. Watson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 1, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_144
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Gospel singer Romance Watson was born in Chicago, Illinois on January 4, 1930 to Laura and Amos Watson. He is the youngest of three siblings. Watson graduated Fuller Elementary and Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago in 1943 and 1950, respectively. In 1949, Watson became a member of the gospel music group the Roberta Martin Singers (RMS), led by its venerable namesake, pianist Roberta Martin. He would go on to perform with the co-ed singing group both nationally and abroad, recording gospel standards such as "Old Ship of Zion" (1949), "Yield Not To Temptation" (1947), "He Knows How Much You Can Bear" (1949), "Only a Look" (1949) and the composition, "The Lord Will Make a Way" (1951) for both the Religious and Apollo Records labels. The Roberta Martin Singers would go on to become one of the pre-eminent Gospel groups of the 1940s and 1950s, known for forsaking traditional gospel harmony for compositions that showcased members' distinct, individual voices. Additionally, the group performed with giants such as James Cleveland and Mahalia Jackson, among many others.

In 1954, Watson relocated from Chicago to Philadelphia and married Phyllis Hoggard a year later. He continued recording with the Roberta Martin Singers, which was under a recording contract with Savoy Records by 1957. He would appear on the group's first major hit, 1958's "God Specializes," which featured member Gloria Griffin on lead. Watson left the group and recorded soul music for Coral Records, a subsidiary of the hugely popular British record label Decca Records. In 1959, Watson appeared as a guest on the legendary music program *American Bandstand*. He would leave music altogether in 1961, accepting a job as a bus operator for the Philadelphia Transportation Company, later subsumed by the Southeastern Transportation Authority (SEPTA). In the 1990's, Watson reunited with members of the Roberta Martin Singers, participating in tributes to Martin, who passed away in 1969. In 1991, Watson performed with RMS singers in a tribute concert honoring their founder, which was sponsored by the Smithsonian. Watson also performed with revered Gospel musicians such as renowned singer-songwriter Bill Gaither. Watson has since retired from SEPTA. He and his wife live in Philadelphia and have four adult children.

Romance Watson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 1, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Romance Watson was conducted by Lynn Norment on June 1, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer Romance Watson (1930 -) was a member of the Roberta Martin Singers, a gospel music group.

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:

Watson, Romance

Norment, Lynn (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Watson, Romance--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

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 Romance Watson, June 1, 2012. 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 Romance Watson, Section A2012_144_001_001, TRT: 1:29:50
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Romance Watson was born on January 4, 1930 in Chicago, Illinois to Laura Watson and Amos Watson. His paternal great-great-great-grandfather, a slave, was transported from Africa to Georgia by ship. Watson's mother had Native American ancestry and grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, where she met Watson's father. They eventually moved to Chicago, where Watson's father, a laborer, helped build the Outer Drive Bridge. Watson was the second youngest of his parents' eleven children, and grew up on the South Side of Chicago at 42nd

Street and South Parkway. With his siblings and father, he formed the Watson Singers, a musical group that performed at the local churches. They sang with gospel legends like Sallie Martin and Thomas A. Dorsey, and broadcast their music from a station at the All Nations Pentecostal Church, which was pastored by Elder Lucy Smith. In 1949, Watson was invited to join the Roberta Martin Singers. He also recalls visiting his grandparents in Greenwood, South Carolina at four years old.

Video Oral History Interview with Romance Watson, Section A2012_144_001_002, TRT: 2:31:12
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Romance Watson grew up on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. He lived at 42nd Street and South Parkway, and often visited the Star Theater and Bowen Avenue, where many of his friends resided. Watson was a mischievous child, and was frequently disciplined by his parents. He learned to sing at four years old, and went on to play the piano and saxophone. He performed with his siblings and father as the Watson Singers. The gospel group was active for twelve years, and sang hymns like 'I'll Fly Away' and 'Over in Glory' at the St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, the 44th Street Baptist Church and the All Nations Pentecostal Church, where Watson met singer James Cleveland. The Watson Singers also traveled to Midwestern cities like Detroit, Michigan and St. Louis, Missouri. During this time, Watson attended Herman Felsenthal Elementary School and Melville W. Fuller Elementary School. He later enrolled at Wendell Phillips High School, where his classmates included football player Buddy Young.

Video Oral History Interview with Romance Watson, Section A2012_144_001_003, TRT: 3:30:05
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Romance Watson attended Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago, Illinois, where he was a member of the cheerleading team. He was suspended for misconduct during his junior year, and spent three years out of school. During that time, he worked at a National Tea Company grocery store in Chicago. He was acquainted with singer Sam Cooke, who lived in the neighborhood; and they dated the same girl. At his parents' insistence, Watson eventually returned to high school and graduated in 1950. Throughout this time, he performed with his siblings and father in their musical group, the Watson Singers. He also toured with the Roberta Martin Singers, a gospel choir that featured Sadie Durham, Eugene Smith and Norsalus McKissick. With the group, Watson visited the East Coast and performed in places like New York City and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They also toured the South, where Watson experienced southern segregation for the first time.

Video Oral History Interview with Romance Watson, Section A2012_144_001_004, TRT: 4:29:38
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Romance Watson performed from 1946 to 1968 with the Roberta Martin Singers, a gospel music group that featured Gloria Griffin, Norsalus McKissick, Lucy Smith Collier and Eugene Smith. During this period, Watson met his wife, Phyllis Hoggard Watson, at the Mount Carmel Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where her father, D.W. Hoggard, was a preacher. The couple married in 1955, and Watson began working as a milkman for Abbotts Dairies, Inc. He then met music promoter Yolanda Gregory, who introduced him to the executives at Coral Records, which was an affiliate of Decca Records. There, Watson made his first record, 'Come A Little Closer'/'Until the Real Thing Comes Along.' However, after Gregory testified in the congressional payola investigations, both she and Watson were blacklisted by the music industry. Watson then worked for the Yellow Cab Company and the Philadelphia

Transportation Company. At this time, he and his wife raised four children. They later separated after twenty years of marriage.

Video Oral History Interview with Romance Watson, Section A2012_144_001_005, TRT: 5:32:42 ?

Romance Watson served in the U.S. military from 1951 to 1953 at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, during the Korean War. Because of his musical talent, he was invited to join a Special Services unit that performed for the troops. He sometimes experienced racial discrimination, and was refused service at a restaurant in Rolla, Missouri. Following his service, Watson returned to Chicago, Illinois. Then, he moved with the Roberta Martin Singers to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and began his employment with the Philadelphia Transportation Company in 1964. After the Roberta Martin Singers disbanded in 1968, Watson continued to sing, often at funerals. In 1994, he participated in a four-day gospel event organized by Bill Gaither and Gloria Gaither in Anderson, Indiana. At this point in the interview, Watson sings a verse from the gospel hymn 'Tis the Old Ship of Zion.' He also remembers the bombing of MOVE, a black liberation group, by the Philadelphia Police Department.

Video Oral History Interview with Romance Watson, Section A2012_144_001_006, TRT: 6:20:34 ?

Romance Watson served as the choir director at the Genesis Baptist Church and Holy Temple Church of God in Christ in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He also directed the drama ministry at the Mount Airy Church of God in Christ in Philadelphia, where he mounted plays like 'The Man from Galilee.' Upon being diagnosed with prostate cancer, Watson underwent chemotherapy treatment. The cancer was in remission at the time of the interview. Watson talks about the importance of medical care, and his relatives' belief in faith healing. He also reflects upon his singing career and spirituality, as well as his childhood friendships and how he would like to be remembered. He recalls reconnecting with gospel singer Sallie Martin following her performance at a church in Philadelphia. Watson also shares his hopes for President Barack Obama, and concludes the interview by reflecting upon the importance of history.

Video Oral History Interview with Romance Watson, Section A2012_144_Watson_Romance_06_MED_001, TRT:

This tape was not published.