

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Frankie Knuckles

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Knuckles, Frankie
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 23, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:57:29).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dj Frankie Knuckles (1955 - 2014 ) signed with Virgin Records in 1991, becoming one of the first DJs to sign to a major label. In 1997, he became the first DJ to win the Grammy Award for Best Remixed Recording, Non-Classical. Dunson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 23, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_235
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

DJ Frankie Knuckles was born in the Bronx, New York on January 18, 1955. The first music he was exposed to as a child came from his sister's jazz record collection. He was naturally creative and studied commercial art and costume design before he started spinning records as a teenager in 1971.

Knuckles' first DJing job came from Tee Scott, whom he credits as both a legend and a major influence on his own style. In 1972, Knuckles and childhood friend Larry Levan first worked together at the New York City club, The Gallery. When Levan left to work at Continental Baths in 1973, Knuckles followed to work as the alternate DJ to Levan. He remained at Continental Baths until the club closed in 1976. In March of 1977, Knuckles played the opening night of the Chicago private after hours club, US Studio -The Warehouse, which was located in a three-story factory building in Chicago's West Loop industrial area. In 1983, Knuckles opened his own club, The Power Plant which was located in an industrial space near the Cabrini Green housing projects.

After more than a decade behind the turntables in dance clubs, Knuckles began to record tracks as well as play them. In 1983, a 12-inch single of his Warehouse classic "Let No Man Put Asunder" was released on the Salsoul label. The song went on to become a house classic. Knuckles produced songs for local Chicago vocalists and wrote such tracks as "Baby Wants To Ride," "Bad Boy," "Cold World" and "Your Love," which was a breakthrough hit for Chicago native Jamie Principle. Knuckles released a hit with "You Can't Hide" in 1986. Knuckles closed the Power Plant that same year. In 1987, he returned home to New York City and secured gigs at the city's hottest clubs, including the Roxy and Sound Factory. Knuckles, joined David Morales, (one of the biggest names in house music), along with Judy Weinstein founded the Def Mix music production company in 1988.

In 1991, Knuckles signed with Virgin Records, becoming one of the first DJs to sign to a major label. In 1997, he became the first DJ to win a Grammy Award for "Remixer of the Year." Knuckles' 2002 album, *Motivation*, was his first release of completely original tracks, rather than a remix album. Knuckles kicked off the Def Mix 15th

Anniversary tour in Sydney, Australia in 2003. Knuckles has also remixed songs by superstars such as Janet Jackson, Diana Ross, Luther Vandross, Chaka Khan, En Vogue, and Michael Jackson.

Frankie Knuckles was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 23, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Frankie Knuckles was conducted by Anthony Poole on August 23, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Dj Frankie Knuckles (1955 - 2014 ) signed with Virgin Records in 1991, becoming one of the first DJs to sign to a major label. In 1997, he became the first DJ to win the Grammy Award for Best Remixed Recording, Non-Classical.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Knuckles, Frankie

Poole, Anthony (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Knuckles, Frankie--Interviews

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# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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# Occupations:

DJ

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# HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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# 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 Frankie Knuckles, August 23, 2013. 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).

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# 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.

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# Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles, Section A2013\_235\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:25  
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Frankie Knuckles was born on January 18, 1955 in New York City to Annabelle

Lyles and Frank Knuckles, Sr. His mother was born in Mobile, Alabama and raised by her grandparents, Bessie Lyles and Mim Lyles. His father was born in the Raleigh and Durham area of North Carolina. When Knuckles was a young child, his parents separated and he was sent to live with his maternal great-grandparents in Mobile. There, he attended a one room schoolhouse, and encountered the Ku Klux Klan who rode through his community at night. At seven years old, he returned to the South Bronx in New York City with his mother. Growing up, his mother encouraged his artistic talents, and Knuckles spent his free time sketching and designing clothes. The two shared a close bond, and enjoyed watching movies together. Each day after school, Knuckles took care of his mother, who suffered from chronic asthma. When he was ten years old, she passed away and he moved in with his sister and her family.

Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles, Section A2013\_235\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:33  
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Frankie Knuckles spent his early years in Mobile, Alabama where he lived with his maternal great-grandparents. While there, Knuckles was hit by a car, and suffered a broken leg. For fun, he listened to his great-grandparents' phonograph, and watched television programs like 'The Original Amateur Hour' and 'The Ed Sullivan Show.' He moved back to New York City with his mother and siblings, and settled in Fort Apache neighborhood of the South Bronx. There, he attended P.S. 60, where he was teased because of his southern accent. At John Dwyer Junior High School in the Bronx, Knuckles was pressured by coaches and teachers to play basketball because of his tall and athletic build. However, Knuckles was more interested in his artwork, and was encouraged by his teacher, Robert Marvin, to enroll at High School of Art and Design in Manhattan, New York. In addition to his artwork, Knuckles enjoyed his music classes, and played the upright bass in the school orchestra.

Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles, Section A2013\_235\_001\_003, TRT: 3:32:53  
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Frankie Knuckles lived with his older sister and her family in the South Bronx in New York City, after their mother died when he was ten years old. Due to his sister's demanding work as a nurse's aide at Jacobi Medical Center, and as a nursing student, Knuckles was tasked with caring for her children and completing the household chores. He was often abused by his sister, and used his art to cope. School served as a safe haven for him, where he learned to use pencils and watercolor paint in his artwork. His teachers encouraged him to pursue a career in art, and Knuckles was later accepted into the High School of Art and Design in New York City. During this time, Knuckles developed an interest in music as well, listening mostly to jazz, rhythm and blues and classical music. At fifteen years old, he began exploring the nightclub scene in New York City, where he met his best friend, deejay Larry Levan. The two often listened to music at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles, Section A2013\_235\_001\_004, TRT: 4:37:05  
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Frankie Knuckles attended the predominantly white High School of Art and Design in Manhattan, New York, during the height of the counter culture movement in the 1970s. There, he majored in commercial art and considered pursuing a career in fashion design. In the tenth grade, he moved out of his sister's apartment, and roomed with friends who had their own apartment in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. Knuckles worked at Bloomingdale's and Bonwit Teller and Company to support himself. He and Larry Levan started to explore the nightclub scene in Manhattan and the East Village,

later meeting deejay David Mancuso who hired Knuckles to host his Loft house parties. Soon, he became known as a promoter, and started working for the Gallery club. With the help of his friend, Tee Scott, Knuckles began deejaying at the Better Days bar in Midtown Manhattan, and later became the resident deejay at Continental Baths, a bathhouse and cabaret in New York where Bette Midler and Patti Labelle also performed.

Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles, Section A2013\_235\_001\_005, TRT: 5:25:58  
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Frankie Knuckles moved to Chicago, Illinois in 1977 to help open the Warehouse nightclub with promoter Robert Williams. There, he served as the resident deejay, and created what was later known as house music. To produce the new sound, Knuckles remixed tracks of mostly disco and funk music with beats that he made on a drum machine. Located on Chicago's West Side, the repurposed multi-level industrial warehouse was unlike any other club in the area, and served a diverse crowd in an otherwise heavily segregated community. Over time, Knuckles sought to improve the aesthetic image and visual appeal of the nightclub to appeal to international visitors, but his ideas were rejected by his business partners. After six years, he decided to leave the Warehouse in 1983; and, later that year, opened his own club called the Power Plant. He also deejayed at Carol's Speakeasy and Cheeks on Chicago's North Side. Knuckles describes the differences between the club scenes of New York City and Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles, Section A2013\_235\_001\_006, TRT: 6:33:25  
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Frankie Knuckles established his own club named the Power Plant in 1983 in Chicago, Illinois. He struggled to manage his duties as the resident deejay and owner; and ultimately decided to close the club in 1987. During this time, he honed his production and songwriting skills, and gained experience by working with house music artist Jamie Principle. Knuckles moved back to New York City to launch his production career, and joined David Morales and Judy Weinstein at Def Mix Productions. There, he did post-production work for many artists including Janet Jackson, Elton John, Michael Bolton and Diana Ross. In New York City, Knuckles quickly became a well-known producer, and was requested by artists like Toni Braxton, Michael Jackson and Luther Vandross, who was his childhood friend from the South Bronx. Knuckles describes the post-production process of remixing music. He also talks about the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the New York City creative community in the 1990s.

Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles, Section A2013\_235\_001\_007, TRT: 7:35:34  
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Frankie Knuckles worked with several artists as a member of Def Mix Productions. He produced Inner City's cover of "What Cha' Gonna Do with My Lovin,'" which was popular throughout Europe. After the success of that song and 'Keep on Movin' by Soul II Soul, Knuckles was offered a record contract with Virgin Records America, Inc. In 1991, he released his debut album 'Beyond the Mix,' which featured "The Whistle Song" that rose to number one on the U.S. Dance Club Songs Billboard chart. In 1998, Knuckles won the first Grammy Award for Best Remixed Recording, Non-Classical. Later in 2003, Knuckles and Def Mix Productions embarked on their 25th anniversary tour, which travelled throughout the U.S. and Europe. Knuckles and keyboardist Eric Kupper also remixed music together under the name Director's Cut. For his contributions to the development of house music, Knuckles was inducted into the Dance Music Hall of Fame in 2005. He reflects upon the current state of

house music and the future of the music industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Frankie Knuckles, Section A2013\_235\_001\_008, TRT: 8:11:36  
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Frankie Knuckles worked in the music industry as a deejay and producer for several years. He describes the process behind remixing a song, and the importance of selecting the right music for certain crowds. He also talks about his art and the power of music. He concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life and how he would like to be remembered.