

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Art Gilliam, Jr.

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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>	Gilliam, Art, Jr. 1943-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Art Gilliam, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 26, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:35:39).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Radio station owner Art Gilliam, Jr. (1943 - ) was president, CEO and owner of Gilliam Communications, Inc. and WLOK, the first African American-owned Memphis radio station and the city's first locally owned station. He was the first African American to write for <i>The Commercial Appeal</i> and the first African American on-air reporter and anchor on Memphis television at WMC-TV. Gilliam was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 26, 2014, in Memphis, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_086
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Radio station owner Art Gilliam was born on March 6, 1943 in Nashville, Tennessee to Leola Hortense Caruthers and Herman Arthur Gilliam, Sr. Gilliam attended the Westminster School in Connecticut, and, at the age of sixteen, enrolled in Yale University. He graduated with his B.A. degree in economics from Yale University in 1963 and then joined the U.S. Air Force Reserve. Gilliam went on to receive his M.B.A degree from the University of Michigan in 1967.

Upon graduation, Gilliam returned to Memphis, Tennessee to work with his father at Universal Life Insurance Company, where he remained until 1975. In 1968, he began writing a weekly editorial for *The Commercial Appeal* and was hired by WMC-TV in Memphis as the weekend news anchor. Gilliam was the first African American to write for *The Commercial Appeal* and the first African American on-air reporter and anchor on Memphis television at WMC-TV. Then, from 1975 to 1976, he worked as an administrative assistant to U.S. Congressman Harold Ford, Sr.

In 1977, he launched Gilliam Communications, Inc. and bought the WLOK radio station. In doing so, WLOK became the first African American-owned Memphis radio station and the city's first locally owned station. As president and CEO of Gilliam Communications, Inc., Gilliam has also operated radio stations in New Orleans, Louisiana, Jacksonville, Florida, and Savannah, Georgia. He also sponsors the annual WLOK Stone Soul Picnic, which draws thousands of attendees.

Gilliam's WLOK has earned the title of #1 Gospel Station in the nation by *Religion & Media Quarterly* for several consecutive years; and, in 1997, was recognized by the Tennessee Historical Commission as a Tennessee Historical Landmark. Gilliam has also received the Black History Men of Honor Leadership Award, the Gospel

Bridge Lifetime Achievement Award, the Rainbow/PUSH Martin Luther King, Jr. Award, the Memphis Advertising Federation's Silver Medal Award, and the Downtown Memphis Commission's Visionary Award. He was also honored with the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Outstanding Community Service Award, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Citizen of the Year Award, Phi Beta Sigma African American Male Image Award, and the Delta Sigma Theta's Outstanding Community Service and Florence Cole Talbert McCleave Awards. In addition, Gilliam was recognized as one of the "Top 25 African Americans in Radio" by *Radio Ink Magazine's*, and one of "Ten Outstanding Young Men in America" by the United States Jaycees.

Gilliam has sat on the boards of the Memphis Advertising Federation, the Society of Entrepreneurs, Memphis Zoo, Inc., the National Federation of State Humanities Council, and Lemoyne-Owen College. He served as chairman of the Black Business Association of Memphis and the Tennessee Humanities Council, and was an advisory board member of the University of Memphis College of Communications and the Memphis Sheriff's Department. Gilliam is also a member of the Tennessee Association of Broadcasters, Leadership Memphis, NAACP, and Leadership Music – Nashville.

Art Gilliam was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 26, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Art Gilliam, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 26, 2014, in Memphis, Tennessee, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Radio station owner Art Gilliam, Jr. (1943 - ) was president, CEO and owner of Gilliam Communications, Inc. and WLOK, the first African American-owned Memphis radio station and the city's first locally owned station. He was the first African American to write for *The Commercial Appeal* and the first African American on-air reporter and anchor on Memphis television at WMC-TV.

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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:

Gilliam, Art, Jr. 1943-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Gilliam, Art, Jr. 1943---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:

Radio Station Owner

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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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 Art Gilliam, Jr., April 26, 2014. 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 Art Gilliam, Jr., Section A2014\_086\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:19 ?

Art Gilliam, Jr. was born on March 6, 1943 in Nashville, Tennessee to Leola Caruthers Gilliam and Herman Gilliam, Sr. His maternal grandfather, Porterfield Caruthers, worked as a Pullman porter, while his grandmother, Susie Caruthers, ran a hairdressing business and raised their children in Nashville. Gilliam's mother attended Nashville's Pearl High School, and went on to receive graduate degrees in English from Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College and Columbia University. Gilliam's paternal grandparents, John Gilliam and Maggie Gilliam, lived in Newberry, South Carolina, where his grandfather worked in the construction industry. Gilliam's father played baseball in the Negro Leagues, and later became a Pullman porter with help from Gilliam's maternal grandfather. After marrying Gilliam's mother, Gilliam's father joined the Universal Life Insurance Company as an agent. He was eventually promoted to vice president, and moved with his family to the company's headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee.

Video Oral History Interview with Art Gilliam, Jr., Section A2014\_086\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:26 ?

Art Gilliam, Jr. moved with his family from Nashville to Memphis, Tennessee when he was six years old. That year, he enrolled at the all-black Hamilton High School, and was placed in the fourth grade. Gilliam enjoyed studying geography, and was influenced by his family's annual road trips to visit family and national landmarks. In Memphis, Gilliam's family belonged to the congregation of the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church. They also listened to WDIA Radio, which was the nation's first radio station for the black community. At the time, the city was strictly segregated, and Gilliam was once removed from a public bus for refusing to give up his seat. Following the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, Gilliam's parents sent him to the predominantly white Westminister School in Simsbury, Connecticut. There, he was one of a few African American students. After graduating in 1959, Gilliam continued his education at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

Video Oral History Interview with Art Gilliam, Jr., Section A2014\_086\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:27 ?

Art Gilliam, Jr. completed the last three years of high school at the Westminister School in Simsbury, Connecticut. During the summers, he returned to his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, where he was once removed from a public bus by police officers for refusing to give up his seat. After graduating in 1959, Gilliam studied economics at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. He planned to work with his father, Herman Gilliam, Sr., at the black-owned Universal Life Insurance Company. In New Haven, Gilliam frequented the barbershops and restaurants on Dixwell Avenue, which was the center of the city's small black community. He also attended a lecture by President John Fitzgerald Kennedy on the New Haven Green. After graduating in 1963, Gilliam entered the graduate program in actuarial science at the University of Michigan

in Ann Arbor, where he heard Malcolm X speak. Wanting to avoid the Vietnam War, he took a year off to enlist in the U.S. Air Force Reserves. Gilliam received his master's degree in 1967.

Video Oral History Interview with Art Gilliam, Jr., Section A2014\_086\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:30 ?

Art Gilliam, Jr. earned an M.B.A. degree from the University of Michigan in 1967, and then became an actuary at the Universal Life Insurance Company in Memphis, Tennessee. Following the death of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, Gilliam contacted the city's newspaper, The Commercial Appeal, to advocate for more diversity in its content. In response, Gilliam was asked to write a column about the African American community in Memphis and its leaders, including Reverend James Lawson. As a result of this opportunity, Gilliam was recruited to anchor the Saturday news at WMC-TV in Memphis, making him the city's first African American anchor. Gilliam continued to work at the insurance company, newspaper and television station until 1975, when he moved to Washington, D.C. to serve as an administrative assistant to U.S. Congressman Harold Ford, Sr. While working on Capitol Hill, Gilliam learned that Memphis' WLOK Radio was for sale. He founded Gilliam Communications, Inc. and purchased the station in 1977.

Video Oral History Interview with Art Gilliam, Jr., Section A2014\_086\_001\_005, TRT: 5:28:28 ?

Art Gilliam, Jr. purchased WLOK Radio in Memphis, Tennessee in 1977. As a result, the station became the first black locally owned radio station in Memphis. Gilliam's first act as president was to reinstate the Rainbow PUSH Coalition show, which was taken off the air by previous management. He also changed the station's format from R and B to gospel, and added the on air personalities of C.J. Morgan and Melvin Jones. Gilliam went on to create Memphis' Stone Soul Picnic, which was an all-day gospel music festival. He also formed the Gilliam Music recording company, and briefly owned the WHGM Radio station in Savannah, Georgia. In 2002, Gilliam produced the PBS special 'The WLOK Story' in celebration of the station's twenty-fifth anniversary. At this point, Gilliam remembers the election of W.W. Herenton as Memphis' first black mayor, and describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He also reflects upon his career, and talks about the consolidation of the radio industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Art Gilliam, Jr., Section A2014\_086\_001\_006, TRT: 6:12:29 ?

Art Gilliam, Jr. served on a number of corporate and nonprofit boards, including the Society of Entrepreneurs and the Assisi Foundation of Memphis, Inc. At this point in the interview, he talks about the state of the radio industry, and the competition for advertising revenue. He describes his plans for the future, and talks about his parents' thoughts on his career. Gilliam also reflects upon his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.