

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Billy Davis, 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>	Davis, Billy, Jr.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 29, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:08:17).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Singer Billy Davis, Jr. (1938 - ) is a Grammy Award-winning musician and an original member of The 5th Dimension. He is also co-author, with his wife Marilyn McCoo, of Up, Up and Away...How We Found Love, Faith and Lasting Marriage in the Entertainment World. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 29, 2014, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_179
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Singer Billy Davis, Jr. was born on June 26, 1938 in St. Louis, Missouri to William Davis, Sr. and Norris Wilbur. Davis started singing in gospel choirs at an early age. He attended Washington Technical High School in St. Louis and sang with a band called the Emeralds. In 1958, Davis and his father opened a nightclub, where he worked and performed music. In 1961, he was drafted into the United States Army and formed another band, The Kingsmen, while stationed in Germany.

In 1965, Davis moved to Los Angeles, California seeking a recording opportunity with Motown Records. While waiting for his chance to go into the studio with one of their producers, he and friend Lamonte McLemore decided to start a singing group as a hobby. The Versatiles was formed, which included Davis, McLemore, Marilyn McCoo, Florence LaRue, and Ron Townson. The group signed to the Soul City label, changed their name to The 5th Dimension, and recorded their first hit in 1966, "Go Where You Wanna Go." In 1967, they released "Up, Up, and Away," which won four Grammy Awards and was the title track to The 5th Dimension's first hit album. In 1969, The 5th Dimension released *The Age of Aquarius*. The album's first single, "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In," became a mega-hit and occupied the number one spot on the charts for six weeks. It earned the group two more Grammy Awards, including Record of the Year.

In 1969, Davis married bandmate Marilyn McCoo, and in 1975, they left The 5th Dimension. Together, they released 1976's *I Hope We Get To Love In Time*, featuring the single, "You Don't Have to Be a Star (To Be in My Show)." The song went straight to number one on the Billboard Hot 100 and earned the duo a Grammy Award for Best R&B Performance by a Duo, Group or Chorus. Davis and McCoo went on to host *The Marilyn McCoo & Billy Davis Jr. Show* on CBS in 1977.

In 1982, Davis returned to the studio and recorded a solo gospel album called *Let Me Have a Dream*, which was

co-produced by the world-renown Gospel artist, the Rev. James Cleveland. In the 1990s, he continued to sing and explored a career in musical theatre, starring in *Dreamgirls* in North Carolina in 1993, and *Blues in the Night*, at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego, California in 1994. He later founded the Soldiers For the Second Coming Music Ministry and co-authored the book *Up, Up and Away...How We Found Love, Faith and Lasting Marriage in the Entertainment World* with McCoo in 2004.

Davis has also earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and The 5th Dimension was inducted into the Vocal Group Hall of Fame in 2002. He received an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore in 2012.

Billy Davis, Jr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 29, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Billy Davis, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 29, 2014, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer Billy Davis, Jr. (1938 - ) is a Grammy Award-winning musician and an original member of The 5th Dimension. He is also co-author, with his wife Marilyn McCoo, of *Up, Up and Away...How We Found Love, Faith and Lasting Marriage in the Entertainment World*.

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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:

Davis, Billy, Jr.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Davis, Billy, Jr.--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:

Singer

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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 Billy Davis, Jr., July 29, 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 Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:11 ?

Billy Davis, Jr. was born in St. Louis, Missouri on June 25, 1938. His mother, Norris Oldham Davis, was born in 1913 in St. Louis to dancer Ruby Oldham. She did not know her father, and was raised by her grandmother, a domestic worker. Davis' mother had her first child by the age of fourteen and would go on to raise seven children. Davis' father, William Davis, Sr. was born on June 9, 1909 in a town outside of Little Rock, Arkansas to Zora Banks, a Native American woman, and Phil Davis. As a youth, William Davis, Sr.'s family migrated from Arkansas to Missouri after Davis' uncle had an altercation with a white man. Worried about backlash, Davis' paternal great-grandfather, resettled the family in Kinloch, Missouri, an all-black town where he worked breaking horses and lived to be 113 years old. Davis talks about entrepreneurship in his paternal family, and the lumberyard business operated by his father and his uncle in St. Louis.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_002, TRT: 2:27:46 ?

Billy Davis, Jr.'s father and uncle operated Davis Brothers Lumber, a lumber company in St. Louis, Missouri where Davis and his brothers worked as youth. Their duties included hauling lumber and finding kindling in the woods. Davis' parents were married for sixty-eight years and raised seven children together. Although two of the children were not his father's biological children, Davis' father raised them as his own. Davis describes his parents' personalities and his siblings. As a boy, Davis enjoyed watching westerns and once sang a cowboy folk song, 'O Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,' in front of his kindergarten class. After his teacher discovered he could sing, Davis was encouraged to sing in school throughout his grade school years at Cole School in St. Louis. Local businesses in St. Louis during Davis' childhood included Ralston Purina, Busch Brewery, Pevely Dairy, Scullin Steel and the Brown Shoe Company, which sold Buster Brown shoes. Davis recounts racial divisions in St. Louis.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:35 ?

Billy Davis, Jr. attended a spiritualist church and a Catholic church before joining a Baptist church as a youth in St. Louis, Missouri. He was also a member of the St. Gospel Singers which performed in several churches. In St. Louis, he attended Cole School during his elementary and junior high school years. He was also an avid baseball player and fan. However, music was his passion and he pursued singing. As a youth in St. Louis, Davis met two of his future 5th Dimension bandmates, HistoryMaker Lamonte McLemore and Ronald "Ron" Townson. During his teenage years, Davis admired musicians like Sonny Til and The Orioles, The Drifters, and Nat King Cole; he also followed disc jockeys like E. Rodney Jones and Dave Dixon. While at Washington Technical High School in St. Louis, Davis formed a band called the Emeralds. He dropped out of school after his father, who supported his musical pursuits, was injured at work. Davis then worked to support his family and was able to dedicate more time to his music.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_004, TRT: 4:31:45 ?

Billy Davis, Jr. dropped out of high school in 1955 to work as a metal plater after his father sustained a work injury. In 1958, after his father's recovery, Davis and his father purchased the Havana Club in St. Louis, Missouri which became a performance venue for Davis' singing group, the Emeralds. The group

later became the St. Louis Gospel Singers. In 1961, Davis was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Berlin Crisis. Initially stationed at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, he moved to Fort Knox in Kentucky, and then the Merrell Barracks in Nuremburg, Germany. In Germany, Davis formed the Kingsmen, a band which played at various clubs in Germany. When returning from Germany in 1963, Davis performed at the Apollo Theater in New York City before heading home to St. Louis where he opened the Oriole nightclub with his father. He also formed another band, Billy Davis, Jr. and the All-Stars. Davis separated from his first wife in 1964. In 1965, he headed to Los Angeles, California with HistoryMaker Lamonte McLemore.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:17 ?

Billy Davis, Jr. and HistoryMaker Lamonte McLemore formed the Versatiles in Los Angeles, California in 1965. McLemore brought former members of the Hi-Fi's Ron Townson and HistoryMaker Marilyn McCoo into the group; HistoryMaker Florence LaRue joined through an audition. McCoo and Davis talk about why the group was named the Versatiles and describe their own voices. The group was mentored by Rene DeKnight, a member of the Delta Rhythm Boys. In 1966, the Versatiles came under the management of Marc Gordon, former president of Motown's Los Angeles office. The group was then signed to a label under Liberty Records and changed its name to The 5th Dimension. In 1967, they recorded their first album 'Up, Up and Away' with songs written by Jimmy Webb and Willie Hutch. The album was nominated for six Grammy awards. Singles on the album included 'Go Where You Wanna Go' and 'Up, Up and Away.' The group's second album, 'The Magic Garden,' was released in 1967. Though well-received, it was not as commercially successful.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_006, TRT: 6:27:27 ?

Billy Davis, Jr. and Marilyn McCoo talk about their music careers with The 5th Dimension. Working with Bones Howe, the group released its second album, 'The Magic Garden' in 1967. The group's first million-selling single was 'Stoned Soul Picnic,' and it gained national exposure by performing on television shows like, 'American Bandstand,' 'Where the Action Is,' and 'Soul Train.' In 1969, the group released its biggest hit, 'Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In' which was inspired by songs from 'Hair,' the Broadway musical. Davis and McCoo also tell the story of their relationship. They became friends after meeting in 1965, fell in love, and were married in 1969. That year, The 5th Dimension recorded 'Wedding Bell Blues.' In 1970, Ed Sullivan produced, 'The 5th Dimension: An Odyssey in the Cosmic Universe of Peter Max.' The special paired the group with Peter Max, an illustrator and graphic artists. On later albums, McCoo enjoyed singing torch songs like 'One Less Bell to Answer' and 'Love's Lines, Angles and Rhymes.'

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_007, TRT: 7:36:26 ?

Billy Davis, Jr. and Marilyn McCoo continue to talk about their musical careers. In 1975, The 5th Dimension signed with ABC records and worked with songwriter Jimmy Webb to create the album 'Earthbound.' The album did not do well commercially and as tensions rose, McCoo and Davis left the group. McCoo and Davis now think 'Earthbound' was an excellent project. In 1976, they recorded a duo album, 'Hope We Get to Love in Time.' The album's single 'You Don't Have to Be a Star (to Be in My Show),' won a Grammy. In 1977, they did one season of, 'The Marilyn McCoo and Billy Davis, Jr. Show.' McCoo went on to host 'Solid Gold.' In 1982, Davis, recorded a gospel album, 'Let Me Have a Dream' with James Cleveland. Davis and McCoo performed for Pope John Paul II in 1987 and for President George H.W. Bush in 1989. The 5th

Dimension reunited 1990 and received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame the next year. In 1981, McCoo and Davis became Christians, and in 1991, McCoo recorded gospel album 'The Me Nobody Knows.'

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_008, TRT: 8:29:35 ?

Billy Davis, Jr. and Marilyn McCoo talks about their careers in the entertainment industry. In 1992, McCoo received a Grammy award for her work on HistoryMaker Quincy Jones' album, 'Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration.' In 1995, she was cast as Julie La Verne, a mulatto woman in the Broadway production of 'Show Boat.' McCoo replaced Lonette McKee, the first black woman to play the role of Julie. In 1999, Davis and McCoo joined the touring production of 'Hit Me With a Hot Note!-The Duke Ellington Songbook' in celebration of the Duke's centennial. The two also appeared as guest stars on 'The Jamie Foxx Show.' Davis was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1999. In 2004, the couple released a book 'Up, Up and Away: How We Found Love, Faith, and Lasting Marriage in the Entertainment World.' In 2008, in celebration of their fortieth anniversary, the couple released a CD, 'Many Faces of Love.' The two reflect upon their legacy, what they would do differently, and their hopes and concerns for the black community.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Davis, Jr., Section A2014\_179\_001\_009, TRT: 9:07:15 ?

Billy Davis, Jr. performed in many plays, and played James Thunder Early in a North Carolina production of 'Dreamgirls.' He also acted in 'Blues in the Night' at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, California. Davis and his wife, Marilyn McCoo never had children together, but McCoo helped Davis raise his son from a previous marriage. The two operate a praise ministry called 'Soldiers for the Second Coming,' which performs in different churches. McCoo is on the board of the Los Angeles Mission in California; the mission addresses drug abuse and homelessness in the city. McCoo and Davis have reconnected with former bandmates from the 5th Dimension including HistoryMakers Florence LaRue and Lamonte McLemore, and now have strong relationships with them. They conclude the interview by describing how they would like to be remembered.