

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Cissy Houston

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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>	Houston, Cissy
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Cissy Houston,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 15, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:10:25).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Singer Cissy Houston (1933 – ), mother of singer Whitney Houston, released the first gospel album on a major label, <i>A Joyful Noise</i> (1959), as a member of The Drinkard Singers along with her siblings. Houston won Grammy Awards for <i>Face to Face</i> (1996) and <i>He Leadeth Me</i> (1997). Houston was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 15, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_123
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Singer Cissy Houston was born Emily Drinkard on September 30, 1933 in Newark, New Jersey to Delia Mae McCaskill Drinkard and Nicholas Drinkard. With her father's encouragement, Houston formed the gospel singing group The Drinkard Four with her sister, Anne, and her brothers, Larry and Nicky. The group performed regularly at New Hope Baptist Church in Newark. When Marie Epps, Ann Moss, and Houston's sister, Lee Drinkard, joined them, the group was renamed The Drinkard Singers.

In 1957, Houston performed with The Drinkard Singers at the Newport Jazz Festival in Newport, Rhode Island. Two years later, their live album *A Joyful Noise* was released on RCA Records, making it the first gospel record to appear on a major label. In 1963, Houston cut her first solo record *This Is My Vow* on M&M Records under the name Cecily Blair. That same year, she formed The Sweet Inspirations with Doris Troy and nieces Dee Dee Warwick and Dionne Warwick. Houston released several solo singles until 1967, when The Sweet Inspirations, then composed of Sylvia Shemwell, Estelle Brown, and Myrna Smith, released their self-titled debut album on Atlantic Records. They also sang backup for Aretha Franklin and Van Morrison. In the coming years, the group recorded *Songs of Faith & Inspiration* (1968), *What the World Needs Now is Love* (1968), *Sweets for My Sweet* (1969) and *Sweet Sweet Soul* (1970), as well as accompanied Yusef Lateef, Jimi Hendrix, George Benson, Wilson Pickett, Dusty Springfield, Brook Benton, Dee Dee Warwick and Carmen McRae. After working with Elvis Presley in 1970, Houston decided to leave the group to spend time with her three children and focus on her solo career. That year, she released her debut solo LP, *Presenting Cissy Houston* on Janus Records. Houston remained with Janus Records until 1975, when she left to work with jazz flutist Herbie Mann. Houston then appeared in *The Wiz* (1978) and recorded *Cissy Houston* (1977), *Think It Over* (1978), and *Step Aside for a Lady* (1980).

There were several successful singers in Houston's family, including daughter Whitney Houston, nieces Dee Dee Warwick and Dionne Warwick, and renowned soprano Leontyne Price, who was a cousin of the Drinkard family.

Houston was appointed the founding president and CEO of the Whitney Houston Foundation for Children in 1988. Houston received two honorary doctorates, as well as the Medal for Distinguished Humanitarian Leadership, and the Rhythm and Blues Foundation Pioneer Award. In 1997 and 1998, Houston won the Grammy Award for Best Traditional Gospel Album for *Face to Face* (1996) and *He Leadeth Me* (1997).

Cissy Houston was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 13, 2016.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Cissy Houston was conducted by Dionne Warwick on December 15, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 4 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer Cissy Houston (1933 – ), mother of singer Whitney Houston, released the first gospel album on a major label, A Joyful Noise (1959), as a member of The Drinkard Singers along with her siblings. Houston won Grammy Awards for *Face to Face* (1996) and *He Leadeth Me* (1997).

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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:

Houston, Cissy

Warwick, Dionne (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Houston, Cissy--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 Cissy Houston, December 15, 2016. 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 Cissy Houston, Section A2016\_123\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:53 ?

Cissy Houston was born on September 30, 1933 in Newark, New Jersey to Delia Mae McCaskill Drinkard and Nicholas Drinkard. Her maternal grandmother was Emma Houston McCaskill. Her paternal grandfather, John Drinkard, Jr., had Native American ancestry, and married Susan Bell Fuller Drinkard. Houston's parents raised eight children together, of whom Houston was the youngest. She grew up in an integrated neighborhood in Newark, where she attended the Charlton Street School and was an active congregant at St. Luke's Methodist Church. Houston's father encouraged her to sing, and she formed a gospel quartet called the Drinkard Four with her siblings when she was six years old. Houston's mother suffered from strokes, and died when Houston was eight years old. After her father died in 1951, Houston moved in with her sister and nieces, Arthur Lee Drinkard Warrick, Dionne Warwick and Dee Dee Warwick. A few years later, Houston married Freddie Garland and gave birth to their son, Gary Garland.

Video Oral History Interview with Cissy Houston, Section A2016\_123\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:26 ?

Cissy Houston began performing with the Drinkard Four at six years old. The gospel group was composed of her family members, and sang at churches in Newark, New Jersey. Following their appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1957, The Drinkard Singers became the first gospel group signed by RCA Victor records. They went on to perform with acts like The Soul Stirrers at Madison Square Garden in New York City. During this time, Houston attended the Charlton Street School and South Side High School in Newark, where she was influenced by her music teacher, Dorothy J. Schneider. In 1963, Houston met and married John Houston, with whom she had two children, including singer Whitney Houston. That year, Houston left The Drinkard Singers, and began a solo career under the name Cecily Blair. She also recorded backup vocals for Burt Bacharach with her nieces, Dionne Warwick and Dee Dee Warwick. Then, Houston formed The Sweet Inspirations, who sang backup vocals for artists like Aretha Franklin and Elvis Presley.

Video Oral History Interview with Cissy Houston, Section A2016\_123\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:32 ?

Cissy Houston's group, The Sweet Inspirations, sang backup vocals for musicians like Luther Vandross, Elvis Presley, Aretha Franklin, Dusty Springfield and Jimi Hendrix. Houston also appeared in Bert Berns' movie, 'Bang! The Bert Berns Story,' and performed internationally at events like the World Popular Song Festival in Tokyo, Japan. During this time, Houston oversaw five choirs at the New Hope Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey, where she founded the Dr. Cissy Houston Academy to support young vocalists. At this point in the interview, Houston remembers her daughter, singer Whitney Houston. She talks about her daughter's career and recognitions, including her first Grammy Award, which was presented by her cousin, singer Dionne Warwick. Houston reflects upon her life, legacy and career, as well as the legacy of her family. She shares a message to her grandchildren, and talks about the importance of history. Houston also describes how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Cissy Houston, Section A2016\_123\_001\_004, TRT: 4:43:34 ?

Cissy Houston narrates her photographs.