Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers ® Video Oral History with Stanley Nelson

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616
info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Nelson, Stanley

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson,

Dates: April 3, 2006

Bulk Dates: 2006

Physical Description: 4 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:56:50).

Abstract: Film producer Stanley Nelson (1951 - ) has produced several award-winning documentaries, including 'Two Dollars and a Dream: The Story of Madame C.J. Walker', and 'The Murder of Emmett Till'. With his wife, he is a founder of the nonprofit documentary film production company Firelight Media. Nelson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 3, 2006, in Berkeley, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2006_059

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Veteran filmmaker Stanley Earl Nelson, Jr., was born on June 8, 1951, in New York City. He attended New Lincoln School, a Manhattan private school, from kindergarten through high school. He attended Beloit College in Wisconsin, and later transferred to six different colleges including New York University, Morris Brown, and Hunter College. In 1976, he received his B.F.A. degree from the Leonard Davis Film School at the City University of New York.

Upon graduating, Nelson worked as an assistant editor with documentary filmmaker William Greaves. He also worked for several years at United Methodist Communication, a communication branch for the United Methodist Church. By 1989, Nelson wrote, produced, and directed his first documentary feature, 'Two Dollars and a Dream: The Story of Madame C.J. Walker', a story of the nation's first self-made African American female millionaire. This documentary later won the CINE Golden Eagle Award and was cited as the Best Production of the Decade by the Black Filmmaker Foundation.

Nelson began working as a television producer at PBS on the series 'Listening to America with Bill Moyers'. Nelson went on to produce and direct the 1999 Emmy nominated documentary entitled 'The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords', and the 2000 Black International Cinema Festival award winning documentary 'Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind'. Nelson and his wife, Marcia A. Smith, then formed the nonprofit documentary film production company Firelight Media. Firelight Media received funding from 'American Experience' to produce the critically acclaimed 2003 documentary entitled 'The Murder of Emmett Till'. The film won several awards including an Emmy for Best Directing-Nonfiction, the Sundance Film Festival 2003 Special Jury Prize, and the George Foster Peabody Award. In addition, the U.S. Justice Department has recently reopened the 1955 murder investigation of Emmitt Till, citing the presence of new evidence exposed in Nelson’s documentary.
Nelson has taught film production and broadcast journalism at facilities in Rwanda and at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Nelson received fellowships at the American Film Institute, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the 2002 MacArthur Foundation Genius Fellowship. In 2004, Nelson was honored with the Educational Video Center's Excellence in Community Service Award. In 2006, he completed the documentary entitled, 'Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple'.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Stanley Nelson was conducted by Loretta Henry on April 3, 2006, in Berkeley, California, and was recorded on 4 Betacam SP videocassettes. Film producer Stanley Nelson (1951 - ) has produced several award-winning documentaries, including 'Two Dollars and a Dream: The Story of Madame C.J. Walker', and 'The Murder of Emmett Till'. With his wife, he is a founder of the nonprofit documentary film production company Firelight Media.

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:

Nelson, Stanley, 1955-

Henry, Loretta (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:


African Americans--Interviews
Nelson, Stanley, 1955---Interviews

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews

African American television producers and directors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
Firelight Media

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 1/21/2013 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, April 3, 2006

Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson, Section A2006_059_001_001, TRT: 0:28:50 2006/04/03

Stanley Nelson was born June 8th, 1951 in New York City. He explains that his full name is Stanley Earl Nelson, Jr. but that he prefers to go by the shorter version, Stanley Nelson. He also shares his family background beginning with his mother. His mother’s name was A’Leila (née Ransom) Nelson. She was born in Indianapolis, Indiana and when she became an adult she moved to Washington, D.C. and worked as a librarian at the Library of Congress during the WWII era. Her father, Freeman B. Nelson, was a lawyer and general manager of the Madame C.J. Walker Company, which manufactured cosmetic products for women. She met Nelson’s father, Stanley Nelson, Sr. in D.C., where he was studying to become a dentist. Immediately after Nelson’s father graduated dental school, he and his wife moved to New York City. Nelson recalls his growing up in New York City’s Washington Heights. His mother stayed home and took care of the children while his father worked. Nelson had two sisters and a brother; his older sister was Lynn Nelson; his younger sister was Jill Nelson and his brother Ralph Nelson was four years younger than him. Nelson recalls that in some ways he and his siblings were on their own in the huge city of New York but nonetheless enjoyed their independence.

African American librarians.
Library of Congress.
African American dentists.
African American families--New York (State)--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson, Section A2006_059_001_002, TRT: 0:30:10 2006/04/03

Stanley Nelson attended six colleges between 1969 and 1976, including Beloit College, Morris Brown College, New York University, Hunter College and City College. In 1976, he graduated from City College after attending film school at the Leonard Davis Center for the Performing Arts. He explains that the primary reason he graduated from City College was because of the interest he developed in filmmaking. The idea of filmmaking appealed to Nelson; he enjoyed going out with a camera and shooting scenes, as well as watching movies as part of his coursework. Nelson also discusses getting his first job out of college. After an exhaustive and unsuccessful job hunt, he called his mother who happened to be reading an article about an African American filmmaker named William Greaves. She suggested that her son go see Greaves; and when he called up information and got the filmmaker’s number, Nelson discovered that he was standing in a phone booth two blocks away from Greaves’ office. Subsequently, Nelson went to Greaves’ home and through talking with him secures a job.

New York University.
Film + media studies.
City University of New York. City College.
Greaves, William.

Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson, Section A2006_059_001_003, TRT: 0:28:30 2006/04/03
Stanley Nelson discusses his work on the 1989 documentary film about Madame C.J. Walker, “Two Dollars and a Dream”. Nelson wanted to turn the stories he had heard from his family member who worked for her company into an independent film. What’s more, she was listed in the Guinness Book of records as the first woman to earn a million dollars and Nelson thought that this accomplishment was the basis for a great documentary film. Nelson notes that the film was an incredible success and won a bunch of awards, including Production of the Decade and Best Production of the Year from Black Filmmakers Foundation. Nelson also talks about his next films, which included, “Freedoms Bags,” “Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords,” and “Methadone: Curse or Cure?” Nelson went on to work as a television producer at WNET on the series “Listening to America with Bill Moyers”. Nelson talks about his experience in working for the show, including a bit of helpful advice he put to good use.

Two dollars and a dream (Motion picture).
United Methodist Church (U.S.). Division of Television, Radio, and Film Communication.
Black Filmmakers Foundation (New York, N.Y.)
Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.)--Employees.
Listening to America (Television program).

Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson, Section A2006_059_001_004, TRT: 0:29:20 2006/04/03

Stanley Nelson talks about his work on the 2003 film, “The Murder of Emmett Till” and the MacArthur Foundation Genius Fellowship Award he received around roughly the same time. He did another film called “A Place of Our Own” about his family and his father, Stanley Nelson, Sr., which was released in 2004. The film was both historical and personal, and centered on the African American community in Martha’s Vineyard that Nelson’s family was part of. Nelson discusses his recent films like “Sweet Honey and the Rock: Raise Your Voice,” Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes,” and “Jonestown: The Life and Death of the People’s Temple”, which at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival and San Francisco Film Festival. Nelson talks about his wife, Marcia Nelson and their three kids, as well as film projects he would like to work on in the future.

Till, Emmett, 1941-1955--Death and burial.
Documentary films--Production and direction.
A Place of Our Own (Motion picture).
Martha's Vineyard (Mass.).