

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Herb Kent

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Kent, Herb
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent,
Dates:	February 15, 2000
Bulk Dates:	2000
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:22:48).
Abstract:	Radio personality Herb Kent (1928 - 2016) also known as "The Cool Gent," was a radio broadcasting legend for WVON in Chicago. Kent has worked within many radio formats but no matter the platform, Kent's style of humor, critique, and banter was immediately recognizable to his loyal listeners. Herb Kent also became known as a prominent Civil Rights activist because of his outspoken views on the lack of social and economic equality in America. Kent was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 15, 2000, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2000_026
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born on October 5, 1928, Herb Kent was raised on Chicago's South Side, where he received early musical inspiration from the rhythm & blues clubs that dotted his neighborhood. Often, he stood outside the windows of these clubs listening to the tunes being played inside. As a young teen, he became involved in drama

workshops and studied classical music at Hyde Park High School. By age sixteen, Kent had already given an on-air performance on Chicago's prestigious WBEZ Radio station with his workshop. The year was 1944, and Kent's passion for radio was solidified.

During the remainder of the decade, he continued to participate in workshops, particularly with the Skyloft Players, a local theater company. He built scenery and performed in the ensemble along with the other players for several years. The theater was a perfect testing ground for the improvisational skill required to host a radio program, and in this environment Kent excelled. Finally, in 1952 he was given a salaried position as an on-air radio personality with WGES Radio, where he hosted a one-hour country and western show. He developed a distinctive on-air style and, with it, a substantial fan base. After three years with the station, he moved on to the Head Announcer position at WBEE Radio.

Throughout the following two decades, Kent hosted radio shows on several stations in Chicago. Though each station had a platform and a format of its own. Kent's style of humor, critique, and banter was immediately recognizable to his loyal listeners, no matter what station broadcast his shows. One of his most iconic stints was with WVON Radio between 1962 and 1970. Many members of the broadcasting community have stated that Kent greatly helped to launch the careers of such R&B artists as The Temptations, Minnie Ripperton, Curtis Mayfield, and Smokey Robinson because of his enthusiastic, on-air embrace of their music. During his broadcast on WVON, Kent became widely known as the "Voice of the People" for Chicago's South Side, the spokesperson for local African America. He became known widely as "Herb Kent, the Cool Gent", and even served as producer for an R&B group named The Cool Gents.

During the 1960s, Kent also became known as a prominent Civil Rights activist because of his outspoken views on the lack of social and economic equality in America. For several years, he broadcasted his WVON show live from a different high school each week so that he could provide community youth with an alternative to the typical Friday night activities. After his retirement, he continued his work with community leaders to create programs that provided a productive environment for South Side youth.

A few of Herb Kent's many awards and recognitions include his 1995 induction into the Museum of Broadcast Communications Radio Hall of Fame. In 1996, Kent witnessed the official dedication of a street on Chicago's South Side in his honor: "Herb Kent Drive". He was also recognized by the dedication of a United States postal stamp bearing his image which was included in the 1998 "Golden Days of Radio" series. The following year, Herb Kent was named the Honorary

Mayor of Bronzeville by the citizens of that South Side community.

At the time of the interview, Kent was a columnist at N'Digo Magazine, the Chicago-based African American periodical.

Kent passed away on October 23, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Herb Kent was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on February 15, 2000, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Radio personality Herb Kent (1928 - 2016) also known as "The Cool Gent," was a radio broadcasting legend for WVON in Chicago. Kent has worked within many radio formats but no matter the platform, Kent's style of humor, critique, and banter was immediately recognizable to his loyal listeners. Herb Kent also became known as a prominent Civil Rights activist because of his outspoken views on the lack of social and economic equality in America.

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:

Kent, Herb

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Kent, Herb--Interviews

African American radio broadcasters--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Radio personalities--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Radio Personality

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Herb Kent, February 15, 2000. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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

Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent, Section

Radio disc jockey Herb Kent begins by describing his childhood, focusing on living with a single mother and explaining the influence she had on him. Kent describes his experience at Hyde Park High School, a white school, explaining his success and his ability to thrive in an all-white environment. He talks about first becoming interested in radio while in high school, and going on the air for the first time as a teenager. Kent describes the environment of the Ida B. Wells housing project on Chicago's South Side in which he spent his teenage years. He describes his childhood personality, and talks about his mother's family background. Kent tells the story of first becoming inspired to pursue a career in radio. Finally, Kent talks about studying radio broadcasting at Northwestern University, with the intent of becoming a classical music announcer. He details the racism he encountered while pursuing this goal, despite his academic success.

Childhood and youth--Illinois--Chicago.

Single parent families.

Education, Secondary--Illinois--Chicago.

Public housing--Illinois--Chicago.

African American mothers.

Radio broadcasting--Illinois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent, Section
A2000_026_001_002, TRT: 0:28:44 2000/02/15

Herb Kent begins with a candid discussion of his personal views regarding racism, race relations, and cultural differences between whites and blacks. He describes the racial climate of Chicago as he observed it as a young man. Kent details his first experiences in black radio, focusing on the two disc jockeys who mentored him, Al Benson and Sam Evans. Kent describes the working conditions of the several radio stations for which he worked, detailing instances of racism. Kent talks about the success and fame of his mentors, and briefly discusses his public image. Finally, Kent describes in detail leaving one radio station to work with disc jockey Sam Evans at

WGES.

Race relations.

Chicago (Ill.)--Social conditions.

Radio broadcasting--Illinois--Chicago.

Benson, Al, 1908-1978.

WGES (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.).

Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent, Section
A2000_026_001_003, TRT: 0:27:54 2000/02/15

Herb Kent talks about the popularity of African American disc jockeys in Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s, particularly Al Benson. Kent describes his move to WBEE, a smaller radio station, explaining how he benefited from the increased salary and freedom he received at his new station. Kent has a long discussion about the popularity of "doo-wop" R&B groups in the 1950s, explaining how he helped expose such groups to both black and white audiences. Kent explains how unknown bands would use popular disc jockeys as a way to achieve fame. Kent explains how his popularity with both white and black audiences allowed him to easily transition from WBEE to an all-white station, WJOB.

African American radio stations.

Benson, Al, 1908-1978.

WBEE (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.).

WJOB (Radio station : Hammond, Ind.).

Popular music--African American influences.

Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent, Section
A2000_026_001_004, TRT: 0:28:01 2000/02/15

Herb Kent discusses how rock and roll music has changed from black music to white music. He describes a strike at WBEE, which led him to move to WHFC. Kent details how record producer Leonard Chess bought WHFC, changing it to WVON, which became the first twenty-four hour black radio station. Kent describes Chess's success in the music industry as a record producer and radio station owner. Kent briefly describes some of his colleagues at WVON. He details the success of WVON, crediting the vivid on-air personalities, community involvement, and

family-oriented programming. Kent relates some humorous stories about some of the characters he created for WVON, including the origin of Wahoo Man. Kent talks about popular African American disc jockeys in the Chicago area who influenced his career.

Rock music.

WVON (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.).

Chess, Leonard, 1917-1969.

WBEE (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.).

African American radio broadcasters.

Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent, Section
A2000_026_001_005, TRT: 0:30:30 2000/02/15

Herb Kent discusses the decline of WVON in the face of a changing industry, and details his own dismissal, explaining how he changed his broadcasting style to adapt to contemporary radio. This allowed him to maintain his popularity over a long period of time. Kent talks about some of the racism he faced during his time at other radio stations. He talks about his television career, particularly how his 'Steppin' at Club Seven' television program helped him become famous outside the African American community. Kent raises his concerns for the future of African Americans, focusing on the need for economic advancement. Kent discusses the effect of media conglomerates on the radio industry.

WVON (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.).

Radio broadcasting--Racism.

Television broadcasting.

African Americans--Social conditions.

Mass media--social aspects.

Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent, Section
A2000_026_001_006, TRT: 0:23:05 2000/02/15

Herb Kent talks about how technological advances will impact the radio broadcasting industry. He reflects on his popularity and explains how he is able to feel young at seventy years of age. He briefly mentions his mother and talks about how she viewed his success. Kent details some of his favorite musicians, recognizing their artistry and

talent. He discusses the enormous impact black music has made on American society, and explains the role of black disc jockeys in helping to promote black music, describing some of Chicago's most influential black disc jockeys.

Radio broadcasting.

Mass media and technology.

African American mothers.

Popular music--African American influences.

African American radio broadcasters.

Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent, Section
A2000_026_001_007, TRT: 0:16:30 2000/02/15

Herb Kent shares and describes personal photographs.
This tape was not published to THMDA.

Video Oral History Interview with Herb Kent, Section
A2000_026_001_008, TRT: 0:20:50 2000/02/15

Herb Kent shares and describes personal photographs.
This tape was not published to THMDA.