

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ramsey Lewis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lewis, Ramsey
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis,
Dates:	December 12, 2001, December 20, 2004 and June 29, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2001 and 2004
Physical Description:	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:37:28).
Abstract:	Jazz pianist Ramsey Lewis (1935 - 2022) formed the Ramsey Lewis Trio in 1956. The Trio, composed of Eldee Young and Red Holt, played in famous New York jazz clubs and toured as full-time jazz musicians. Lewis had a daily radio show, 'The Ramsey Lewis Morning Show' in Chicago and a weekly syndicated jazz show. He was named artistic director of the Ravinia Jazz Festival in 1992. Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 12, 2001, December 20, 2004 and June 29, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2001_040
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

World-famous jazz musician and composer Ramsey Emmanuel Lewis, Jr. was first given piano lessons at age four. He was born in Chicago on May 27, 1935, to hard-working, self-educated Southern farm workers who met in church.

Lewis attended Chicago Music College Preparatory School from 1947 to 1954. He credited his music teacher, Dorothy Mendelsohn, with teaching him how to listen with his inner ear. Other than his father's Duke Ellington, Art Tatham and Mead Lux Lewis records, Lewis had no special exposure to jazz. After graduating from Wells High School in 1954, Lewis' first music job was as an accompanist at the Zion Hill Baptist Church. He enrolled in Chicago Music College, but left at age eighteen to marry. In 1956, he formed the Ramsey Lewis Jazz Trio and signed with Chess Records in 1957 for the Trio's first album. The Trio, composed of Eldee Young and Red Holt, played in famous New York jazz clubs and toured as full-time jazz musicians. Lewis recorded for Columbia Records from 1971 to 1974 and signed with GRP Records in 1991. He is the winner of three Grammy Awards, and from 1967 to 1976 earned five gold records. His major hits include "The In Crowd," "Wade in the Water" and "Hang On Sloopy."

Since 1957, Lewis performed concerts in all the major clubs, jazz festivals and summer venues in the United States and with more than twenty-five symphony orchestras. He had a daily radio show, *The Ramsey Lewis Morning Show* in Chicago and a weekly syndicated jazz show. From 1990 to 1999, he hosted BET's *Jazz Central*. He was named artistic director of the Ravinia Jazz Festival in 1992.

Lewis was on the board of the Merit Music Program, which provides free music lessons to youth; Cycle, an inner-

city self-help high school program; and the Ravinia Mentor Program. He served as honorary chairman of the Cares for Kids Foundation. He was named 2000's Radio Personality of the Year.

Lewis, who lived in Chicago, was married to Janet Tamillow Lewis and was the father of seven children, grandfather of twelve and great-grandfather of one.

Ramsey Lewis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 12, 2001, June 29, 2004, and December 20, 2004.

Lewis passed away on September 12, 2022 at the age of 87.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ramsey Lewis was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on December 12, 2001, December 20, 2004 and June 29, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Jazz pianist Ramsey Lewis (1935 - 2022) formed the Ramsey Lewis Trio in 1956. The Trio, composed of Eldee Young and Red Holt, played in famous New York jazz clubs and toured as full-time jazz musicians. Lewis had a daily radio show, 'The Ramsey Lewis Morning Show' in Chicago and a weekly syndicated jazz show. He was named artistic director of the Ravinia Jazz Festival in 1992.

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:

Lewis, Ramsey

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Lewis, Ramsey--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Jazz Pianist

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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 Ramsey Lewis, December 12, 2001, December 20, 2004 and June 29, 2004. 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).

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 Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_001_001, TRT: 0:30:15 ?
Ramsey Lewis narrates his photogrpahs.
- Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_001_002, TRT: 0:29:02 ?
Jazz musician and composer Ramsey Lewis talks about growing up in Chicago, Illinois on the Near North Side, where his family lived several years in the Cabrini-Green housing project. He describes his home life, participation in Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church, friends, school, and especially talks about his early musical training. Lewis recounts how he began piano lessons at age four with the church organist, Ernestine Bruce, and at about age twelve began studying with Dorothy Mendelsohn, who taught him to "hear with his inner ear"--to feel the music he was playing. Lewis also talks about his parents' rural backgrounds in Georgia and Mississippi.
- Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_001_003, TRT: 0:22:15 ?
Jazz musician and composer Ramsey Lewis talks about his teenage years, his musical mentor Dorothy Mendelsohn, his father's love for gospel music, and his start in jazz. He relates how at age fifteen he was invited by fellow church musician Wallace Burton to join his jazz septet, the Cleffs; at the first rehearsal it became apparent that, despite his talent in gospel music, the young classically trained musician had no experience playing jazz; Burton coached him in improvisation and music charts and suggested recordings to buy, and kept him in the Cleffs. This group included Eldee Young and Isaac 'Redd' Holt, who would become the other two members of the Ramsey Lewis Trio, formed after the others in the Cleffs were drafted during the Korean War. Lewis describes how the trio was discovered some years later by disc jockey Daddy-O Daylie, who got them an audition for Chess Records and a record contract in 1957.
- Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_002_004, TRT: 0:30:50 ?
Jazz musician and composer Ramsey Lewis recalls the early years of the Ramsey Lewis Trio from their first recording 'Gentlemen of Swing' on Chess/Arco in 1956 up through their 1965 hit 'The In Crowd'. He talks about the formation of the group, the assistance and advice from Chicago radio disc jockey Holmes 'Daddy-O' Daylie, their live performances in jazz clubs in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and their increasing acclaim that spread from Chicago to other jazz centers in America. He goes on to describe the frictions that developed among the group members Lewis, Eldee Young and Redd Holt, and finally led to the break up of the group in late 1965.
- Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_002_005, TRT: 0:28:10 ?
Jazz musician and composer Ramsey Lewis discusses the Ramsey Lewis Trio's musical influences and style, their successful shows at Birdland in 1959, their huge 1965 hit with 'The In Crowd', the trio's break up at the height of their success and subsequent lawsuits. He discusses Chess Records jazz releases on their Arco subsidiary, Daddy-O Daylie's involvement with Chess and his continued help with getting more recognition for the Ramsey Lewis Trio. Lewis also talks about his own early jazz influences.
- Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_002_006, TRT: 0:30:15 ?
Jazz musician and composer Ramsey Lewis talks about the line-up change after the break-up of the original Ramsey Lewis Trio. He discusses his work with

Maurice White, praises White's subsequent band, Earth Wind and Fire, and recalls the recording session for 'Sun Goddess' and 'Hot Diggit'. Lewis also credits producer and arranger Charles Stepney, with whom he worked on several albums. Lewis also turned to Stepney for arrangements and compositions for his appearances with symphony orchestras, and he contrasts the experience of playing with orchestras with that of playing with jazz bands

Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_002_007, TRT: 0:13:10 ?

Jazz musician and composer Ramsey Lewis talks about signing to Columbia after the Chess label had been sold to a conglomerate following the death of Leonard Chess. Lewis expresses himself as very happy working with Clive Davis and Bruce Lundvall, Columbia executives who were jazz lovers. He gives an overview of his recordings in the early-to-mid 1970s, and discusses the expansion of his musical line-up after the success of 'Sun Goddess' which used vocals.

Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_003_008, TRT: 0:31:27 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_003_009, TRT: 0:31:28 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Ramsey Lewis, Section A2001_040_003_010, TRT: 0:30:36 ?