

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Pervis Spann

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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>	Spann, Pervis, 1932-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Pervis Spann,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 8, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:01:16).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Broadcast chief executive and radio personality Pervis Spann (1932 - 2022) was the "all-night blues man" for WVON in the 1960s. Spann later bought the station with Vernon Jarrett and Wesley South. Spann was also a promoter, manager and club owner working with the likes of B.B. King, the Jackson 5, and Aretha Franklin. Spann was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 8, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_010
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born in Itta Bena, Mississippi, on August 16, 1932, Pervis Spann distinguished himself as a broadcaster, exposing generations to the blues.

Spann worked hard from an early age, caring for his mother after she suffered a stroke. At age 14, he managed the Dixie Theater, a local all-black theater. In 1949, he moved with his mother and sister to Battle Creek, Michigan. However, Spann soon left to work in Gary, Indiana. Spann enlisted in the Army toward the end of the Korean War. After completing his service, he moved to Chicago and settled down. He became interested in broadcasting and attended the Midway Television Institute and the Midwestern Broadcasting School on the G.I. Bill.

In the 1950s, Spann was granted a four-hour overnight time slot on WOPA. In 1960, he organized his first concert, showcasing B.B. King and Junior Parker. In 1963, Phil and Leonard Chess bought the radio station, which became WVON, a 24-hour blues station. Spann became the "all-night blues man." He gained notoriety with an on-air 87-hour "sleepless sit-in," raising money for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Spann widened his sphere of influence during the 1960s, and began managing talented performers such as B.B. King. He booked major acts, including the Jackson 5 and Aretha Franklin. Spann also owned several South Side clubs in Chicago, including the Burning Spear.

In 1975, WVON was sold and changed frequency. Forming a business syndicate with Vernon Jarrett and Wesley South, Spann bought the license to the original frequency in 1979. Listeners to the new station, WXOL, heard an all-blues format and many of the same voices from the old WVON. The station reclaimed the old call letters in 1983. In the 1980s, Spann added another station to his radio empire, WXSS in Memphis. He later sold this station. His focus then turned to building WVON, with his daughter, Melody Spann Cooper, at the helm. He continued his career promoting the blues as the co-host of the popular cable TV program "Blues and More."

Pervis Spann was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 8, 2002.

Spann passed away on March 14, 2022 at the age of 89.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Pervis Spann was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on February 8, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Broadcast chief executive and radio personality Pervis Spann (1932 - 2022) was the "all-night blues man" for WVON in the 1960s. Spann later bought the station with Vernon Jarrett and Wesley South. Spann was also a promoter, manager and club owner working with the likes of B.B. King, the Jackson 5, and Aretha Franklin.

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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:

Spann, Pervis, 1932-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Spann, Pervis, 1932- --Interviews

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Radio personalities--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Radio stations--Chicago (Ill.)

African American executives--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Promoters--Interviews

Cotton picking--Social aspects--United States--Mississippi

Country life--United States--Anecdotes

Segregation--Southern States

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans

Korean War, 1950-1953--Personal narratives, American

Benson, Al, 1908-1978

Radio broadcasting--Illinois--Chicago

Chess, Leonard, 1917-1969

Music publicity

Music trade--Management

Concert agents--Vocational guidance

Brown, James, 1933-2006

King, B. B.

Cooke, Sam

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

## Occupations:

Radio Personality

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Broadcast Chief Executive

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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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 Pervis Spann, February 8, 2002. 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 Pervis Spann, Section A2002\_010\_001\_001, TRT: 0:27:29 ?

Radio personality Pervis Spann shares anecdotes of his family and young life in Itta Bena, Mississippi. He details his life picking cotton, often hundreds of pounds a day. Spann also recalls his job at the Dixie Theater, a segregated movie house, where he gained the white owner's trust and was rapidly promoted to the manager. Between his earnings from the theater and picking cotton, Spann was able to buy a 1937 Cadillac, a feat for a 15 year old boy.

Radio personalities--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.  
Radio stations--Chicago (Ill.).  
African American executives--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.  
African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.  
Promoters--Interviews.  
Cotton picking--Social aspects--United States--Mississippi.  
Country life--United States--Anecdotes.  
Segregation--Southern States.  
United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.  
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Benson, Al, 1908-1978.  
Radio broadcasting--Illinois--Chicago.  
Chess, Leonard, 1917-1969.  
Music publicity.  
Music trade--Management.  
Concert agents--Vocational guidance.  
Brown, James, 1933-2006.  
King, B. B.  
Cooke, Sam.

Video Oral History Interview with Pervis Spann, Section A2002\_010\_001\_002, TRT: 0:26:17 ?

Radio personality Pervis Spann describes his early years in Itta Bena, Mississippi, describing his personality as a child and living the small town life. Spann also remembers jobs he held throughout his youth, including working at a local theater and being a foreman at the age of sixteen. Spann then explains his move from Itta Bena to Gary, Indiana, and recalls his military service during the Korean War. Finally, Spann talks about his education at the Midway Television Institute in Chicago, where he became interested in television repair.

Video Oral History Interview with Pervis Spann, Section A2002\_010\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:51 ?

Radio personality Pervis Spann details his early days in radio broadcasting, explaining how he first became interested in broadcasting and attending Midwest Broadcasting School in Chicago, where he improved his diction and developed his technique. He explains how he got his first job at WOPA radio in Chicago, and talks about the popularity of disc jockey Al Benson. Spann then talks about his first meeting with Leonard Chess, and discusses his transition from WOPA to WVON. Finally, Spann talks about people with whom he worked at WVON and shares anecdotes from his time there.

Video Oral History Interview with Pervis Spann, Section A2002\_010\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:22 ?

Radio personality Pervis Spann details his career at WVON in the 1960s and 1970s, discussing his relationship with station owner Leonard Chess, and recalling various promotions and influential disc jockeys at the station. Spann details his career in concert promotion, discussing the strategies he used to overcome the challenges of booking famous musicians for concerts across the country. Spann recalls memorable concerts he promoted, including shows with Sam Cooke, James Brown, and B.B. King.

Video Oral History Interview with Pervis Spann, Section A2002\_010\_001\_005, TRT: 0:07:17 ?

Radio personality Pervis Spann is very guarded in his response to the interviewer's questions about a concert failure and interpersonal conflict at WVON radio.

