

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Burrell

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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>	Burrell, Charlie
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles Burrell,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 21, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:21:58).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Classical bassist Charles Burrell (1920 - ) is a jazz virtuoso and professional classical bass player with the Denver Symphony Orchestra. One of the first blacks admitted to the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Burrell has mentored and taught some of the finest musicians in the country. Among his students are bassists Tony Knight of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, Major Holly, and the late Ray Brown. Burrell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 21, 2002, in Denver, Colorado. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_113
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Charles Burrell has enjoyed an outstanding career as a bassist for the Denver Symphony Orchestra and is also considered a master jazz bassist; one of the few musicians to have mastered both genres. Born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1920, Burrell was raised in Depression-era Detroit, Michigan. His mother, Denverado, the daughter of an A.M.E. minister from Denver, Colorado, provided inspiration and direction despite the family's poverty.

In grade school, Burrell excelled in music. When he was twelve, he heard the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra under renowned conductor Pierre Monteux on the family's crystal radio. He resolved to play one day for an orchestra under the direction of Monteux, whom he began to idolize. He developed his skills on the bass at Detroit's famous Cass Tech High School, where eighteen of the principal musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra taught. Principal bassist Gaston Brohm agreed to teach Burrell if he would promise not to play the classics for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Burrell considers Oscar Legassy of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra his best teacher and greatest influence. After high school, Burrell landed a job playing jazz in Detroit's Paradise Valley at a club called B.J.'s.

At the start of World War II, Burrell was drafted into the all-black naval unit at Camp Robert Smalls, at Great Lakes Naval base near Chicago. There, he played in the unit's all star band with Clark Terry, Al Grey and O. C. Johnson and took classes at Northwestern University and with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. After the war, Burrell used the G.I. Bill to attend Wayne State University in Detroit. He excelled in his music courses, but was discouraged by the racism of his advisors. In 1949, Burrell joined his mother's relatives in Denver, Colorado, and was soon hired by the Denver Symphony Orchestra. Eventually, he fulfilled his dream of playing for Pierre Monteux by joining the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. In 1965, he returned to the Denver Symphony Orchestra and met his wife, Melanie, a cellist.

One of the first blacks admitted to the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Burrell has mentored and taught some of the finest musicians in the country. Among his students are bassists Tony Knight of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, Major Holly, and the late great Ray Brown. Other musicians guided by Burrell are jazz pianist George Duke and Burrell's niece, jazz vocalist Diane Reeves.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles Burrell was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 21, 2002, in Denver, Colorado, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Classical bassist Charles Burrell (1920 - ) is a jazz virtuoso and professional classical bass player with the Denver Symphony Orchestra. One of the first blacks admitted to the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Burrell has mentored and taught some of the finest musicians in the country. Among his students are bassists Tony Knight of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, Major Holly, and the late Ray Brown.

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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:

Burrell, Charlie

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Burrell, Charlie--Interviews

African American musicians--Interviews

Bass guitarists--Interviews

African American jazz musicians--Interviews

African Americans--genealogy

Segregation--Michigan--Detroit

Fatherless families--Michigan--Detroit

African Americans--Michigan--Detroit--Social Conditions

Jazz--Michigan--Detroit.

Discrimination in education--Michigan--Detroit

World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American

United States.--Navy--African Americans

Wayne State University

Denver Symphony Orchestra

Discrimination in higher education--Michigan--Detroit

Alabama--Race relations

Bass guitar--Methods

Bass guitar--Instruction and study

Monteux, Pierre, 1875-1964

San Francisco Orchestra

McKibbon, Al

Mingus, Charles, 1922-1979

Music and race

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Music--Social Aspects--United States

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Music--Instruction and study

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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:

Classical Bassist

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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 Charles Burrell, June 21, 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 Charles Burrell, Section A2002\_113\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:17 ?

Bass player Charles Burrell talks about his parents' origins and the hardships the family faced while living in a segregated area of Detroit. He then talks about his siblings' accomplishments and failures and coping with an absentee father. Burrell also details his Detroit neighborhood and shares his first exposure to music. He then talks about his personality as a child and what he and his siblings did to pass the time. Burrell then reflects on his mother's personality and her influence on the family. Lastly, he talks about his first exposure to classical music at age twelve.

African American musicians--Interviews.

Bass guitarists--Interviews.

African American jazz musicians--Interviews.

African Americans--Genealogy.

Segregation--Michigan--Detroit.

Fatherless families--Michigan--Detroit.

African Americans--Michigan--Detroit--Social conditions.

Jazz--Michigan--Detroit.

Discrimination in education--Michigan--Detroit.

World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.

United States. Navy--African Americans.

Wayne State University.

Denver Symphony Orchestra.

Discrimination in higher education--Michigan--Detroit.

Alabama--Race relations.

Bass guitar--Methods.

Bass guitar--Instruction and study.

Monteux, Pierre, 1875-1964.

San Francisco Orchestra.

McKibbin, Al.

Mingus, Charles, 1922-1979.

Music and race.

Music--Social aspects.

Music--Instruction and study.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Burrell, Section A2002\_113\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Charles Burrell talks about his siblings and his weight concerns as a child. He then details the schools he attended in Detroit and the musical education he received while at Cass Technical High School. Burrell then shares the story of when he decided to become a professional musician and recalls the racial climate of the 1930s that prevented him from pursuing a classical career. He then details the neighborhood of Paradise Valley in Detroit and the first steady job he received as a jazz bassist. Burrell reflects on his high school music teachers and their discriminatory behavior towards him. Lastly Burrell details his military service in World War II as part of the first all-black naval training unit in Great Lakes, Illinois. He then recalls all the famous jazz musicians who

were enlisted with him.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Burrell, Section A2002\_113\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Charles Burrell details his music experiences while in the Navy in Illinois. He then talks about the orchestral experience he obtained while on furlough and how it prepared him for his music education at Wayne State University in Detroit. He then recounts the discriminatory behavior he encountered at Wayne that caused him to leave college. Next he talks about his experiences as a bassist with the Denver Symphony Orchestra and details a story about the discriminatory behavior he faced while on tour in the 1950s. Burrell talks about his ex-wives and in-laws. He then recalls the Jim Crow laws he faced when he traveled to Alabama to court his first wife. Burrell then fondly recalls his career and the moment he fulfilled his lifelong dream, one that he'd had since he was twelve years old. Lastly, Burrell talks about his music technique and more recent noted bass players.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Burrell, Section A2002\_113\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:56 ?

Charles Burrell talks about his career move from the Denver Symphony Orchestra to the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. Burrell then reflects on more noted music students he instructed over the years. Later he discusses the treatment of blacks in the mostly white classical music industry, and shares a story about the mistreatment of a fellow orchestra member. He then talks about the importance of a well-balanced classics education and his disappointment in the few number of blacks in the industry. Burrell talks about his friend and mentor, jazz bassist Al McKibbin and talks extensively about the different styles of jazz music. Lastly he gives his opinion about today's classical music scene.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Burrell, Section A2002\_113\_001\_005, TRT: 0:25:20 ?

Charles Burrell discusses his practice regimen, now that he has retired from the orchestra. He then talks about his encounters with the jazz musician Charles Mingus, and his belief that Mingus's inability to deal with race hurt his career. He then briefly talks about his grandmother with whom he lived on his early move to Denver. Burrell recalls the work atmosphere in the symphony in the 1950s and the exercise regimen that allowed him to play bass for forty years. He then reflects on how he might be remembered and his legacy. Lastly, he discusses the photographs he provided.