

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Eloise Demaris Hughes

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Hughes, Eloise Demaris, 1916-2003
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Eloise Demaris Hughes,
Dates:	February 12, 2003 and January 23, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:59:23).
Abstract:	Dancer Eloise Demaris Hughes (1916 - 2003) is a former performer at Club DeLisa in Chicago, danced with legendary tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and worked with various other well-known performers. She traveled across the country, performing at the Apollo Theater in New York City and in California during the 1930s. Hughes was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 12, 2003 and January 23, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_017
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer Eloise Demaris Hughes was born in Mobile, Alabama, on February 1, 1916, to Ethel Rowena and John Henry Williams. The family, including her sisters Lenese Brown and Annita Ethel Vance, migrated to Chicago, where Hughes graduated from Wendell Phillips High School.

Hughes started dancing professionally in her twenties. Between 1934 and 1944,

she performed at Club DeLisa, the posh Chicago nightclub. There, she met show business stars like George Raft and John Barrymore, danced with legendary tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and worked with various other well-known performers such as Bessie Smith, Billy Eckstine, Dinah Washington and George Kirby. She traveled across the country, performing on stage at the Apollo Theater in New York City in 1935 and dancing in California in 1937. It was on the West Coast that she met Nat King Cole and his first wife, Nadine, and they became close friends.

For her efforts to further the cause of African American Catholics in Chicago, Hughes received the Augustus Tolton Award in 1996. In 1999, she attended the William Christopher Handy Music Festival in Florence, Alabama, where she took home top honors in the "Street Strut" contest. In 2000, she returned to become the festival's first female Grand Marshall, or "Grand Oobeedoo."

Hughes is married to Leon Leonard Hughes. They live in Chicago.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Eloise Demaris Hughes was conducted by Larry Crowe and Scott Stearns on February 12, 2003 and January 23, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer Eloise Demaris Hughes (1916 - 2003) is a former performer at Club DeLisa in Chicago, danced with legendary tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and worked with various other well-known performers. She traveled across the country, performing at the Apollo Theater in New York City and in California during the 1930s.

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

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:

Hughes, Eloise Demaris, 1916-2003

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Hughes, Eloise Demaris, 1916-2003--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

Occupations:

Dancer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Eloise Demaris Hughes, February 12, 2003 and January 23, 2003. 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 Eloise Demaris Hughes, Section A2003_017_001_001, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/01/23

Eloise Hughes was born on February 1, 1916 in Mobile, Alabama. Her paternal grandmother, Ella Williams, lived in Prichard, Alabama where her sons ran a grocery store and moonshine business. Her husband was Hawaiian and most of the Williams family passed for white. Her maternal grandmother, Annie Battiste was from Mobile, Alabama. She suffered from asthma. Her husband was of French and Native American descent. Hughes' father, John Henry Williams, was a quiet and hard-working man. He worked in a sawmill and later as a porter. Hughes' mother, Ethel Battiste Williams enjoyed a close relationship with her three daughters, Eloise, Lenese, and Annita. She died of cancer at the age of forty. Hughes describes her childhood in Mobile, Alabama, where Mardi Gras originated. She shares memories of Christmas and her family's flushing toilet on their back porch. Hughes attended Broad Street School as well as a private school in Mobile before her family moved to Chicago, Illinois to escape racial violence in the South.

Video Oral History Interview with Eloise Demaris Hughes, Section A2003_017_001_002, TRT: 0:30:27 2003/01/23

Eloise Hughes migrated to Chicago, Illinois from Mobile, Alabama at the age of eleven. Prominent figures in Chicago when Hughes was a child included lawyer William Grant "Habeas Corpus" Anderson and boxer Jack Johnson. Inspired by The Regalettes at the Regal Theatre, Hughes learned to dance at Mary Bruce's Dance Studio. In Chicago, Hughes attended Doolittle Elementary and Wendell Phillips High School. She talks about Dyett's orchestra, "Hi-Jinks" and attending Richard B. Harrison's play "The Green Pastures with Dyett and his wife. Hughes

dropped out of high school to work as a chorus girl in New York City. She later became one of six chorus girls in an innovative show produced by Leonard Reed which incorporated tap. The group danced in Chicago's Indiana Theatre as well as in various nightclubs: Dave's, Rhumboogie, and Swingland Café. The group traveled to New York's Apollo Theatre to compete with the Apollo Rockettes. They also appeared at Harlem Opera House. Hughes talks about the celebrities she met as a dancer and her role in the off-Broadway revival of "Shuffle Along". During the show, she became friends with Nadine Robinson, Nat King Cole's first wife.

Video Oral History Interview with Eloise Demaris Hughes, Section A2003_017_001_003, TRT: 0:30:59 2003/01/23

Eloise Hughes describes her friendship with Nadine Robinson as well as Robinson's marriage to and divorce from Nat King Cole. She also talks about her friendships with Nat King Cole's second wife Maria Hawkins Cole and Dinah Washington. She remembers Washington's music and cooking, and introducing the singer to her husband, Leon Hughes. Hughes' dancing career brought her into contact with many famous musicians like Billy Eckstine, Gene Ammons, Sonny Stitt, Harlan Floyd, Bennie Green, Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker. Many of the musicians and entertainers Hughes knew had drug habits. During her career, Hughes danced at nightclubs and music venues like the Congo Lounge, Colosimo's, and Club DeLisa. While she was a dancer, many Chicago nightclubs were operated by mobsters like James "Big Jim" Colisimo and Al Capone. In her work as a maid at the Alton Hotel, Hughes' mother, Ethel Battiste Williams made beds for Al Capone. Hughes also talks about Two-Gun Pete and George Kirby who she met at the Playboy Club in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Video Oral History Interview with Eloise Demaris Hughes, Section A2003_017_001_004, TRT: 0:30:07 2003/01/23

Eloise Hughes describes the Club DeLisa in Chicago, Illinois where she worked as a dancer. The Club DeLisa was home to musicians like Red Saunders, Albert Ammons, and John Barrymore. Hughes herself had the opportunity to perform in nightclubs in Chicago and in

New York. She compares the Chez Paree and Club DeLisa in Chicago to The Cotton Club and Connie's Inn in New York City. Hughes talks about traveling as a performer and her experience with racial discrimination. Hughes was a member of the "Wee Bits of Rhythm", renamed "The Rhythm Triplets". The group's first job was with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in 1935. On the verge of an European tour, the group disintegrated after a disagreement with Nazarro, which Hughes regrets. After leaving "The Rhythm Triplets" Hughes returned to Chicago where she worked as a bar maid and met her husband, Leon Hughes. They were married in 1954. Hughes quit dancing after working as a bar maid, which doubled and tripled her pay. Hughes also talks about her involvement in the Bud Billiken Parade and in Florence, Alabama's W.C. Handy Festival.

Video Oral History Interview with Eloise Demaris Hughes, Section A2003_017_001_005, TRT: 0:31:08 2003/01/23

Eloise Hughes describes her heart attack on August 29, 2003 and the subsequent lifestyle changes she made. The field of dancing is very different from when Hughes was a dancer in the 1930s and 1940s. Hughes' mother was very supportive of her dancing career, but her father never saw her dance. Hughes reflects upon her hopes and concerns for the African American community, her legacy, and how she would like to be remembered. She also narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Eloise Demaris Hughes, Section A2003_017_001_006, TRT: 0:10:11 2003/01/23

Eloise Hughes continues to narrate her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Eloise Demaris Hughes, Section A2003_017_002_007, TRT: 0:16:31

Eloise Hughes continues to narrate her photographs.