

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Melody Spann-Cooper

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Spann-Cooper, Melody, 1964-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Melody Spann-Cooper,
Dates:	March 4, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:09:41).
Abstract:	Broadcast chief executive Melody Spann-Cooper (1964 -) owned WVON Radio in Chicago Spann-Cooper was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 4, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_036
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

As president and general manager of Chicago's WVON-AM, Melody Spann-Cooper heads the only African American-owned radio station in the nation's third-largest market. She is the first black woman in Chicago to hold this distinction.

In 1999, Spann-Cooper purchased a controlling interest in the Midway Broadcasting Company, the parent company of WVON, and was named Chairman of the Board. With the purchase, Spann-Cooper overcame the odds in a sector where minority ownership of commercial stations has fallen since the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Reform Act favoring media conglomerates. Under Spann-Cooper's leadership as program director, WVON's revenues skyrocketed from \$700,000 in 1994 to \$2.4 million in 2002. Her extensive involvement in the community, along with WVON's high quality coverage of issues vital to African Americans' lives, has been crucial to the station's success.

Spann-Cooper was educated in Chicago Catholic institutions from elementary school through Loyola University, where she earned her B.A. in criminal justice. But Spann-Cooper's education in radio began closer to home - on the knee of her father, legendary Chicago disc jockey Pervis Spann, known in radio circles as "the Blues Man." With her father as mentor, Spann-Cooper began working at WVON at age fifteen, earning a full-time job as an on-air radio personality in 1980. In 1986, Spann-Cooper was named news director, and in 1994 she became president and general manager, a position she still holds in addition to chairman of the board and station owner. She vows to continue the march forward at the station, setting her sights on obtaining a twenty-four-hour broadcast license and expanding her public affairs and cultural programming.

In addition to extensive community service work, Spann-Cooper is a much sought-after panelist, political commentator and frequent guest on public radio and television talk shows such as CNN's *Crossfire*. She is a past vice president of broadcast affairs for the Chicago Association of Black Journalists.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Melody Spann-Cooper was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 4, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Broadcast chief executive Melody Spann-Cooper (1964 -) owned WVON Radio in Chicago

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:

Spann-Cooper, Melody, 1964-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Spann-Cooper, Melody, 1964---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Broadcast Chief Executive

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 Melody Spann-Cooper, March 4, 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 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 Melody Spann-Cooper, Section A2003_036_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Melody Spann-Cooper describes her parents. Her mother, Lovie Robertson Spann, was born in Itta Bena, Mississippi, and migrated to Chicago at the age of six. Her father, HistoryMaker Pervis Spann, was born in 1932 in Itta Bena, Mississippi, where he picked cotton to make extra money. He relocated North after accumulating nearly \$500 to avoid trouble from whites. Spann married Lovie Roberts in 1954, and then joined the U.S. Army. After completing his service, Spann started his radio career in Chicago, eventually becoming the voice of WVON. The Spanns gave birth to Melody Spann-Cooper on August 8,

1964. Pervis Spann was not present at the birth, as he was participating in a sleepless sit-in to raise money for the SCLC. Spann-Cooper grew up in the Gresham-Auburn neighborhood, and was raised primarily by her mother, as her father was a workaholic. In 1978, Spann-Cooper converted to Catholicism to better her chances of being accepted to Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School. She graduated from there in 1982.

Video Oral History Interview with Melody Spann-Cooper, Section A2003_036_001_002, TRT: 0:28:14 ?

As a child, Melody Spann-Cooper enjoyed singing, dancing, and attending church. In 1978, she enrolled at McAuley Liberal Arts High School, where she focused on her social life rather than academics. She also dreamt of becoming a news anchor, and was influenced by media personalities like HistoryMakers Carole Simpson and Merri Dee. However, her father, HistoryMaker Pervis Spann, insisted she pursue business or law. After graduating from McAuley High School in 1982, Spann-Cooper enrolled at Loyola University Chicago, and majored in criminal justice. Spann-Cooper's first year was traumatic: she lost her childhood friends; her mother was hospitalized for alcoholism; and she was raped. In 1983, Spann-Cooper witnessed the election of Mayor Harold Washington; in 1984, she was stricken with rheumatoid arthritis. Spann-Cooper was closely mentored by Dr. Carol L. Adams, then the director of Loyola's African American Studies program, and graduated with her B.A. degree in criminal justice in 1988.

Video Oral History Interview with Melody Spann-Cooper, Section A2003_036_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Spann-Cooper talked about the history of WVON. Owned by Leonard and Phil Chess, WVON went on the air in 1963. Known for its rhythm and blues music, the "Voice of the Negro" featured personalities like Spann-Cooper's father, HistoryMaker Pervis Spann, and HistoryMaker Herb Kent. In 1971, WVON was sold to Globetrotter Communications. Globetrotter Communications fired the staff, and changed WVON's frequency from 1450 to 1390. Pervis Spann and Wesley South applied for a license to broadcast from the 1450 frequency, and began airing music under "WXOL" in the mid-1970s. WVON purchased by Gannett in 1977, and the call letters "WVON" were dropped in 1984, enabling WXOL's call letters to change to WVON. In 1986, Spann-Cooper was promoted to news director at WVON, and in 1989, its program director. In this position, she was mentored by Wesley South. After South quit in 1994 due to his contentious relationship with Pervis Spann, Spann-Cooper became president of WVON. She later purchased WVON in 2000.

Video Oral History Interview with Melody Spann-Cooper, Section A2003_036_001_004, TRT: 0:29:55 ?

Melody Spann-Cooper talked about WVON's well-known personalities, including Cliff Kelley and Monique Caradine, the later of whom brought a younger demographic to WVON. Both personalities helped to make WVON more inclusive. Spann-Copper also talked about WVON's loyal following. Since 1986, WVON has promoted a talk radio format, which is crucial to raising issues important to Chicago's African American community. Spann-Cooper commented on how the station responds to the political landscape, and the station's decision to support HistoryMaker Roland Burris over Paul Vallas in the 1998 Illinois gubernatorial race. According to Spann-Cooper, WVON's role in the community is to raise issues, and give community support. She also commented on the African American community's need to make informed political decisions. Spann-Cooper is concerned for the African American

community's lack of fiscal responsibility and unwillingness to stand up for itself.

Video Oral History Interview with Melody Spann-Cooper, Section A2003_036_001_005, TRT: 0:13:02 ?

As owner and president of WVON, Melody Spann-Cooper likes to help her listeners with “small” things, like getting their Social Security benefits. Spann-Cooper's goals for WVON include getting the station on its own frequency, and returning to a 24-hour format. Spann-Cooper would like to be remembered as someone who was fair, and left behind a legacy of keeping WVON alive and helping the African American community. She closes the interview by narrating her photographs.