

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Kahil El'Zabar

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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>	El'Zabar, Kahil, 1953-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 5, 2003 and February 28, 2022
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003 and 2022
<b>Physical Description:</b>	14 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:38:55).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Musician Kahil El'Zabar (1953 - ) is the founder of the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble, the Kahil El'Zabar Quartet, and Ritual Trio. He has taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. El'Zabar was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 5, 2003 and February 28, 2022, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_072
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Musician Kahil El'Zabar was born on November 11, 1953, in Chicago, Illinois, to Gwendolyn and Clifton Blackburn. He attended Kennedy-King and Malcolm X City Colleges of Chicago before enrolling at Lake Forest College, in Lake Forest, Illinois. El'Zabar also studied African music at the University of Ghana.

In 1969, El'Zabar performed with Eugene “Jug” Ammons in St. Louis and Cincinnati. In 1973, he founded the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble. El'Zabar also founded Ritual Trio and the Kahil El'Zabar Quartet. He has taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. El'Zabar is the author of the 1993 poetry book *Mis Taken Brilliance*. In 1997, El'Zabar served as the curator of the *Traffic* series at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. His fifty-plus album discography includes *We Is >> Live At The Bop Shop, Live at the River East Art Center, Big M: A Tribute to Malachi Favors, Ooh Live*, among others. El'Zabar is the founder of OOHnow, a cultural e-commerce network established in 2008. He also has served as the artistic director of the Chicago Academy of Music. El'Zabar was the subject of the documentary film *Be Known: The Mystery of Kahil El'Zabar*, by filmmaker Dwayne Johnson-Cochran. El'Zabar has performed with musicians including Stevie Wonder, Paul Simon, and Nina Simone.

El'Zabar joined the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in 1970, becoming chair in 1975. In 2002, he was named percussionist of the year by the Jazz Journalists Association. El'Zabar was named the 2006 Chicagoan of the Year by the *Chicago Tribune*. In 2008, he became the artist-in-residence of the City of Bordeaux, France, and, in 2014, was knighted by the French government, receiving the Chevalier Medal of Letters. El'Zabar serves on the advisory council of *Art Meet DEI*.

Kahil El'Zabar lives in Chicago, Illinois. He has eight children.

Kahil El'Zabar was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 5, 2003, and February 28, 2022.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Kahil El'Zabar was conducted by Adele Hodge and Larry Crowe on April 5, 2003 and February 28, 2022, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 14 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Musician Kahil El'Zabar (1953 - ) is the founder of the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble, the Kahil El'Zabar Quartet, and Ritual Trio. He has taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

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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:

El'Zabar, Kahil, 1953-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hodge, Adele (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

El'Zabar, Kahil, 1953- --Interviews

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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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Ethnic Heritage Ensemble

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# Occupations:

Jazz Percussionist

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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 Kahil El'Zabar, April 5, 2003 and February 28, 2022. 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 Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Kahil El'Zabar was born Clifton Henry Blackburn on November 11, 1953 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Gwendolyn Marie Finch Blackburn, was born in Chicago in 1936. His father, Clifton Henry Blackburn, Sr. was also born in Chicago in 1933 and had been a jazz drummer. Blackburn Sr. played with notable jazz artists including Dizzy Gillespie, Von Freeman, Fats Navarro and others. He worked backstage as a guard at Chicago's Regal Theater. Where El'Zabar and his siblings were able to attend performances for free. El'Zabar attended Copernicus Elementary School in Chicago and struggled with dyslexia. The Blackburn family moved from Chicago's Englewood neighborhood to Chatham, where El'Zabar attended the St. Clotilde Catholic School and received proper support for his dyslexia after previously being labeled learning disabled. El'Zabar attended Cathedral High School on a basketball scholarship. He describes his introduction to jazz music and playing gigs with his father as a teenager.

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:33 ?

Kahil El'Zabar toured with saxophonist Von Freeman immediately following his graduation from Cathedral High School in Chicago, Illinois and traveled to Paris, France with saxophonist Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre at the age of seventeen. At the age of eighteen, El'Zabar married Kai El'Zabar and the two enrolled at Lake Forest College in Illinois. He spent his last year of college on a foreign exchange program at the University of Ghana; and, he never finished college. He traveled to Paris again, where he met James Baldwin and immersed himself in the jazz scene. In Chicago, he joined Sun Drummer, worked with HistoryMaker Haki Madhubutti at the Institute of Positive Education, and became chairman of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in 1975. El'Zabar describes a transcendent moment he had while playing with the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble; he describes the jazz musicians that have influenced him; and he describes the feeling he tries to capture in his music. El'Zabar has six children.

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:56 ?

Kahil El'Zabar formed the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble in 1973 following his experience as an exchange student in Legon, Ghana. He was named chairman of the Association for the Advancement of Creative musicians (AACM) in 1975. During the 1970s, El'Zabar began designing "Afro slick" clothing for other musicians such as Donny Hathaway and Nina Simone. During the 1980s and '90s, El'Zabar taught at several universities including the University of Illinois at Chicago. From 1996 to 1999, he collaborated with the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, to develop 'Traffic,' a multi-arts radio show that featured artists Amiri Baraka, David "Honeyboy" Edwards and others. In the early 2000s, El'Zabar formed JUBA-- Joined Universal Breathing Ascending, whose style combines jazz, house, and hip hop genres. He talks about the influence of the African Diaspora in hip hop music, the state of arts education in America and his youthful perspective. He explains his philosophy as a musician and what artists can contribute to society.

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:26 ?

Kahil El'Zabar was involved in scoring 'Mo' Money' for Columbia Pictures and 'Love Jones' for New Line Cinema. He was named music director of the Broadway production of the 'Lion King,' but was frustrated by the way the African American musicians in the production were mistreated. He was forced to resign after he assaulted Nick Castle. El'Zabar explains the contributions of the African American community to: American art, American pop culture,

American film and technological advancements. He also explains how rock and roll evolved from the bebop generation and beatnik subculture of the late 1940s and 1950s. El'Zabar describes African Americans rich cultural heritage and critiques contemporary African American culture.

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:03 ?

Kahil El'Zabar helped organized Chicago's Underground Jazz Fest from 1980 to 1983 which showcased African American artists who were not represented in the Chicago Jazz Festival. El'Zabar published a collection of poetry, 'Mis Taken Brilliance,' for Third World Press in 1993. In 2002, he was named Percussionist of the Year by the International Association of Jazz Critics. El'Zabar describes his role as a multi-percussionist, and list percussion instruments he plays and record labels he has recorded for including Justin Time Records, Delmark Records, Silkheart, and others. He critiques traditional American values and the difficulty African American musicians have had transcending popular culture. El'Zabar also explains how he developed an arts administration curriculum, explains Dizzy Gillespie's contribution to American music and explains why he decided to wear his tinted glasses at all times following a conversation with Miles Davis.

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_001\_006, TRT: 0:18:59 ?

Kahil El'Zabar narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_002\_007, TRT: 7:27:56 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_002\_008, TRT: 8:31:09 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_002\_009, TRT: 9:29:10 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_002\_010, TRT: 10:32:30 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_002\_011, TRT: 11:30:03 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_002\_012, TRT: 12:33:07 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_002\_013, TRT: 13:29:22 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Kahil El'Zabar, Section A2003\_072\_002\_014, TRT: 14:16:51 ?