

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Howard Armstrong

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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>	Armstrong, Howard, 1909-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Howard Armstrong,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 12, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:07:15).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Painter and country and blues musician Howard Armstrong (1909 - 2003 ) was one of the world's greatest fiddle players. Armstrong played a total of twenty-two instruments and was fluent in seven languages. Two PBS documentary films were made about Armstrong including, "Louie Bluie." Armstrong was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 12, 2003, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_077
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Howard "Louie Bluie" Armstrong was born on March 4, 1909, in Dayton, Tennessee, to Daisy and Thomas Armstrong. Armstrong's great-grandfather was a slave owner, and his grandparents were slaves. His father, a gifted musician, artist and preacher, worked as a furnace man at the LaFollette Iron and Coal Company in eastern Tennessee to support his wife and nine children. He taught his children to play a variety of musical instruments, and Armstrong learned to play the mandolin, fiddle and guitar, among others during his childhood. Armstrong's

father had a gift for languages and learned to speak Italian, German, Polish and Spanish from the European immigrants working at the blast furnace. Armstrong shared this gift with his father. It was during his childhood that Armstrong also started drawing and painting, using homemade paints and brushes.

As a teenager Armstrong played blues, country, hokum and ragtime with his brothers in local bands, and in 1929 he recorded with bluesman Sleepy John Estes and string band leader Yank Rachell. With Ted Bogan and Carl Martin he formed the Martin, Bogan & Armstrong Trio and in 1933 they migrated north to Chicago, performing at the World's Fair, working as street musicians and recording music.

After serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, Armstrong worked as an assembly-line spot welder for the Chrysler Corporation in Detroit to support his family. After he retired in 1971, the Martin, Bogan & Armstrong Trio reunited, performing and recording several albums throughout the decade until Martin's death in 1979.

Armstrong was fluent in seven languages and was know for his fiddle and mandolin playing, but could play twenty-two different instruments. He was the subject of two documentary films, *Louie Bluie* (1985) and *Sweet Old Song* (2002), and received a National Heritage award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Armstrong passed away June 30, 2003 at age 94.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Howard Armstrong was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 12, 2003, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Painter and country and blues musician Howard Armstrong (1909 - 2003 ) was one of the world's greatest fiddle players. Armstrong played a total of twenty-two instruments and was fluent in seven languages. Two PBS documentary films were made about Armstrong including, "Louie Bluie."

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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:**

Armstrong, Howard, 1909-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Armstrong, Howard, 1909- --Interviews

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Fiddlers--Interviews

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Instrumentalists--Interviews

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Mandolinists--Interviews.

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African American musicians--Interviews

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African American painters--Interviews

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Pearl Harbor (Hawaii), Attack on, 1941

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Christianity--United States

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Multilingualism

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Ragtime music--Detroit (Mich.)

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Blues (Music)--Detroit (Mich.)

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Country music--Detroit (Mich.)

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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:**

Painter

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Country and Blues Musician

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

## **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 Howard Armstrong, April 12, 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).

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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 Howard Armstrong, Section  
A2003\_077\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/04/12

Howard Armstrong lists his favorites and details his

family origins. Armstrong then recalls his paternal grandparents being of Scotch-Irish descent. He then talks about his father being an ex-slave and both parents coming from African and Native American origins. Later he talks about his father's personality and shares a tale about his father's work in the blast furnaces in La Follette, Tennessee. Armstrong then talks about his mother's strict religious beliefs and the Bible stories he read to his mother. Lastly, he details how his father, after changing jobs, introduced him to performing music in public.

Fiddlers--Interviews.

Instrumentalists--Interviews.

Mandolinists--Interviews.

African American musicians--Interviews.

African American painters--Interviews.

Pearl Harbor (Hawaii), Attack on, 1941.

Christianity--United States.

Multilingualism.

Ragtime music--Detroit (Mich.).

Blues (Music)--Detroit (Mich.).

Country music--Detroit (Mich.).

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Armstrong, Section  
A2003\_077\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:15 2003/04/12

Howard Armstrong talks about his parents, his eight siblings and their musical abilities. He then recalls his mother's job as a head cook in a hotel and his early exposure to finer dining. Armstrong then details his meeting opera star, Grace Moore, and earning money while performing music with his brothers. He then lightly reflects on his high school experience and finally details his experiences in college at Tennessee State University in Nashville.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Armstrong, Section  
A2003\_077\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/04/12

Howard Armstrong gives his views about religion in relation to growing up where the Scopes "Monkey Trial" occurred. He then talks more about growing up in a strict religious household. Armstrong then talks about his desire

to pursue a professional music career and the other musicians he met along the way. He later talks about forming a quartet with Ted Bogan, Carl Martin and Bill Ballinger and their experiences on the road. Finally, Armstrong talks about his group's decision to perform music in foreign languages and the advantages it presented.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Armstrong, Section A2003\_077\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:25 2003/04/12

Howard Armstrong talks more about his musical group and the experiences they encountered while performing at the Century of Progress fair in Chicago in 1933. He then discusses his change in jobs, his move to Hawaii and witnessing the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Armstrong then talks about his return to Tennessee and details how he met his first wife. He then talks about reuniting with his musical group in Chicago. Finally, Armstrong talks about getting the urge to travel and going to Detroit without his family.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Armstrong, Section A2003\_077\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/04/12

Howard Armstrong talks about his experiences as a musician and his thoughts about modern black music. He then talks about what he hopes his legacy might be and if he would have lived his life differently. Armstrong then recalls his favorite musicians, past and present. Howard Armstrong shares extensively his philosophy about marriage. He later recalls his music group's reunion in his hometown of La Follette, Tennessee. Lastly, Howard Armstrong, with the help of his wife Barbara Ward Armstrong, describes the photographs he provided.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Armstrong, Section A2003\_077\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:00 2003/04/12

Howard Armstrong with his wife, Barbara Ward Armstrong, describe the drawings and photographs he provided.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Armstrong, Section A2003\_077\_001\_007, TRT: 0:09:35 2003/04/12

Howard Armstrong, with his wife Barbara Ward Armstrong, describe more of the photographs he provided.

