

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William Greaves

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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>	Greaves, William
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with William Greaves,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 17, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:01:50).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Documentary filmmaker, stage actor, and film director William Greaves (1925 - 2014 ) began his career as an actor, but turned to film making. In 1963, he went to work for the United Nations Film and Television Department in the African Academy of Arts and Research, and later formed William Greeves Productions. Greaves has produced more than 200 documentary films, and has received more than seventy international film festival awards. Greaves was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 17, 2003, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_082
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Filmmaker William Greaves was born in New York City to parents from Jamaica and Barbados. Growing up in Harlem, Greaves attended Stuyvesant High School, and after graduating in 1944, attended the City College of New York. Greaves spent 1948 studying under German-born avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter. After appearing in the musical *Finian's Rainbow*, Greaves was invited to join the

prestigious Actors Studio in New York, where he trained with Marlon Brando and Shelley Winters.

Greaves began his career as an actor, and appeared in the Broadway hit, *Lost in the Stars*, as well as films such as 1948's *Souls of Sin*. Relocating to Canada in 1952, Greaves worked for the National Film Board as a writer and director. While in Canada, Greaves studied under John Grierson, regarded as the father of modern documentary film making. After returning to the United States in 1961, Greaves joined the International Civil Aviation Organization as a public information officer producing films for the organization, and in 1963 he went to work for the United Nations Film and Television Department in the African Academy of Arts and Research. Greaves formed William Greaves Productions in 1964, and soon thereafter began producing his own works. Greaves' first feature film, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, was released in 1968, the same year he began producing television's *Black Journal*, a monthly television newsmagazine airing on public television. *Black Journal* aired until 1970, and received an Emmy in 1969.

After leaving *Black Journal*, Greaves returned to independent film making with his 1971 *Ali, the Fighter*. Since then, Greaves has been prolific in his art, producing films such as *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*, *From These Roots*, and his most recent work, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*. In all, he has produced more than 200 documentary films and has received more than seventy international film festival awards. He has been inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, received special tribute at the first Black American Independent Film Festival in Paris, and has received an "Indy," the Life Achievement Award of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers. Greaves has been a member of the Actors Studio for fifty-five years, and is the chairman of the Film Committee of the Princess Grace Foundation. Greaves and his wife, Louise, resided in New York.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with William Greaves was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 17, 2003, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Documentary filmmaker, stage actor, and film director William Greaves (1925 - 2014 ) began his career as an actor, but turned to film making. In 1963, he went to work for the United Nations Film and Television Department in the African Academy of Arts and Research, and later formed William Greeves Productions. Greaves has produced more than 200 documentary

films, and has received more than seventy international film festival awards.

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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:**

Greaves, William

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Greaves, William--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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William Greaves Productions.

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## **Occupations:**

Documentary Filmmaker

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Stage Actor

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Film Director

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

EntertainmentMakers

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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 William Greaves, April 17, 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 William Greaves, Section  
A2003\_082\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:15 2003/04/17

William Greaves talks about his parents' Caribbean Island origins and shares that he may be related to an infamous 17th-century Scottish pirate. Greaves continues to discuss his parents and how they arrived in Harlem. He then details the cultural exposure he received while growing up during the Harlem Renaissance. Greaves talks about his interactions with various intellectuals in Harlem as well as his cultural contemporaries. He then discusses the impact Africanist William Leo Hansberry had upon his education and career direction. Lastly, Greaves talks about the activities of John Henrik Clarke designed to inform others of African Americans' true place in world history.

Video Oral History Interview with William Greaves, Section  
A2003\_082\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:15 2003/04/17

William Greaves discusses his parents' active role in his

educational experiences and his displeasure with America's current media and educational systems. Greaves then details the schools he attended while growing up in Harlem. He then shares a story about the scholarship he received and his experience studying art under the sculptor William Artis. Greaves details his brief career as a dancer and the African choreographers he performed with as part of the dance company of the African Academy of Arts and Research. Greaves talks about his acting career in the 1940s and recalls the theatrical plays and movies in which he had roles. He then recalls an acting audition that was racially demeaning and tells of how he abandoned his acting career for a career in filmmaking. Lastly, Greaves recalls his filmmaking education in New York and he explains his leaving the United States for employment opportunities in Canada.

Video Oral History Interview with William Greaves, Section  
A2003\_082\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:15 2003/04/17

William Greaves discusses the changes in the political and racial climate in the 1960s and 1970s and how it influenced his decision to return to the U.S. from Canada. He then details the documentaries he produced for Canada's governmental agencies as well as the United Nations. Greaves shares a story about his experience with the poet Langston Hughes while filming the World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, in Dakar, Senegal in 1966, one of his first filmmaking assignments after returning to the United States. He then talks about his decision to form his own film production company after not being allowed enough creative control over his films by U.S. governmental agencies. Greaves details some of the documentaries he produced and speaks at length about his experiences with the 1970s television series, 'Black Journal.' He discusses today's television networks and their attempt to quash programming that shares a similar viewpoint and format as 'Black Journal.' Lastly, Greaves shares a story about the television networks' lukewarm response to his 1972 documentary, 'Nationtime, Gary,' and the desire to incorporate portions of his film into a network broadcast thirty years later.

Video Oral History Interview with William Greaves, Section

A2003\_082\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:45 2003/04/17

William Greaves discusses some of his more notable films and discusses the uniqueness of his avant-garde film titled, 'Symbiophychotaxiplasm: Take One.' He talks about cinéma vérité, the documentary filmmaking style that stresses unbiased realism, and how his film inspired such famous film directors as Martin Scorsese and Steven Soderbergh. Greaves then discusses his experiences with Muhammad Ali and the initial difficulties he had with filming the boxing champ. He then details how his boxing documentary inspired such fictional movies as 'Rocky' and 'Raging Bull.' William Greaves then discusses his longest documentary on United Nations Undersecretary General Ralph Bunche, and the twelve years it took to complete the film series. He then details his experiences with actor Anthony Quinn, and how he persuaded him to participate in a film project. Lastly, Greaves discusses the importance of the need for black documentary filmmakers and their importance in raising the cultural consciousness of America's black community.

Video Oral History Interview with William Greaves, Section  
A2003\_082\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:45 2003/04/17

William Greaves gives advice to future black filmmakers on the responsibility to correct the misinformation told about African Americans over the years. He then talks about his intellectual role models and 'William Greaves Aesthetic,' the ability to reflect positive images of blacks and to raise the cultural consciousness. Greaves then gives quick impressions of a number of notable people in the arts and filmmaking who are friends or with whom he shared experiences. He then discusses his concerns for the future of the black community and its image in the media. William Greaves shares a story about his parents' reaction to his success and subsequent acceptance of his career path. Lastly, he talks about his legacy and the hope that his films will inspire others to make similar films with a positive message.

Video Oral History Interview with William Greaves, Section  
A2003\_082\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:45 2003/04/17

William Greaves discusses how he would like to be

remembered, mainly through the many films he produced over the years. Greaves then describes the photographs he provided from his career and personal life.

Video Oral History Interview with William Greaves, Section  
A2003\_082\_001\_007, TRT: 0:03:50 2003/04/17

William Greaves describes more of the photographs he provided from his personal and professional life.