

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Keter Betts

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Betts, Keter
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Keter Betts,
Dates:	May 28, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:53:29).
Abstract:	Bassist Keter Betts (1928 - 2005) played professionally from 1949, appearing on more than 100 recordings while touring with the likes of Dinah Washington, Charlie Byrd, Woody Herman and Ella Fitzgerald. Betts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 28, 2003, in Silver Spring, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_110
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Legendary jazz bassist William Thomas "Keter" Betts was born July 22, 1928, in Port Chester, New York. While running an errand for his mother while in the fifth grade, Betts came across a parade. Instead of continuing on his way, he followed the parade all over town, entranced by the music. That incident marked the beginning of his love affair with music.

Starting out on the drums, Betts tired of carrying the set up and down the four floors to his family apartment, and in 1946, he switched to the bass. When Betts was only nineteen, he landed his first professional gig, playing for thirteen weeks in Washington, D.C., with saxophonist Carmen Leggio. After touring the country from 1949 to 1951, Betts met jazz singer Dinah Washington and toured with her from 1951 until 1956. The next five years found Betts working in the hottest clubs in the country and touring Europe and South America with Charlie Byrd and Woody Herman. In 1964, Betts joined up with Ella Fitzgerald for a short tour. He would rejoin her several more times, and their career together would span twenty-four years.

Betts was an instructor of music at Howard University in Washington, D.C., since 1963, and also instructed young adults through various programs, including the Washington Performing Arts Society's Concerts in Schools and Prince George's County's Arts Alive. Despite appearing in more than 100 recordings, it was not until 1998 that Betts released his first solo album, *Bass, Buddies & Blues*, and followed it up a year later with *Bass, Buddies, Blues Beauty Too*.

Betts was a member of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Big Band and was inducted into the Washington Area Music Association Hall of Fame. Betts performed annually at the All-Star Christmas Jazz Jam on Millennium Stage from 2000 to 2004.

Betts passed away on August 6, 2005 at age 77.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Keter Betts was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on May 28, 2003, in Silver Spring, Maryland, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Bassist Keter Betts (1928 - 2005) played professionally from 1949, appearing on more than 100 recordings while touring with the likes of Dinah Washington, Charlie Byrd, Woody Herman and Ella Fitzgerald.

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:

Betts, Keter

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Betts, Keter--Interviews

African American jazz musicians--Interviews

Bass guitarists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Bassist

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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 Keter Betts, May 28, 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 Keter Betts, Section A2003_110_001_001, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Keter Betts was born as William Thomas Betts on July 22, 1928 in Port Chester, New York. His mother, Mariah Betts, was a domestic who had moved from Wilmington, South Carolina with her sisters Isabel, Dorcas (phonetic) and

Elizabeth Betts. Betts received his nickname from a friend of his mother's as a shortened form of the name "Mosquito." When he was in fifth grade, Betts was sent to the grocery store to buy a bottle of milk and a loaf of bread, when he was taken by the drums in a parade. He followed the parade around town for four hours and decided that he wanted to become a musician. Arriving home, Betts was first disciplined and then given a snare drum by his mother. Betts was raised by his mother and her sisters and, as a teenager, he began taking drum lessons in New York City and visiting The Roxy, The Strand, The Paramount, The Capitol, and The Apollo while hearing new jazz bands on his way home.

African American jazz musicians--Interviews.

Bass guitarists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Keter Betts, Section A2003_110_001_002, TRT: 0:30:15 ?

Keter Betts played drums throughout high school, where he was also director of the chorus and played tuba in the marching band. After graduating in 1946, Betts switched to bass after having lunch with Cab Calloway's bassist, Milt Hinton, in New York City when his drummer, Panama Francis, was unavailable. Betts also switched to bass because his family moved to a fourth floor walk-up apartment and he did not want to carry his drums up the stairs. He bought a brand new Kay Bass with money that he borrowed from his aunts. Betts reflects on his mother's support for his bass playing, and the fiscal responsibility he learned from his mother and aunts. In September of 1947, Betts played his first professional show at a club at Seventh and T Street in Washington, D.C. with saxophone player Carmen Leggio, pianist Louis Daley, and drummer Junebug Lindsey. Betts reflects on how playing drums influenced his bass playing, as well as the influence of pianist Tommy Flanagan.

Video Oral History Interview with Keter Betts, Section A2003_110_001_003, TRT: 0:28:48 ?

Keter Betts began playing bass in 1946 and his first professional gig was thirteen weeks at a club at Seventh and T Street in Washington, D.C. in 1947 with Carmen Leggio. To build his musical "chops," Betts played at jam sessions and clubs around Westchester County, New York. Betts reflects on the abundance of jazz clubs around Washington, D.C.'s U Street. Around 1949, Betts played with Rick Henderson when bandleader Earl Bostic asked him to play as part of his band. Betts toured the major theater circuit with Bostic and bandleaders like Cootie Williams. While playing with Bostic in 1951, Betts and drummer Jimmy Cobb were approached to play with Dinah Washington, where Betts learned how to be a singer's bassist. Washington encouraged Betts to marry Mildred Grady Betts and paid for their wedding in 1953 at Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York in addition to their wedding reception at Birdland. Betts reflects on his travels with different bands during his career.

Video Oral History Interview with Keter Betts, Section A2003_110_001_004, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Keter Betts played with Dinah Washington from 1951 until 1956. He reflects on how she took care of her band as family, her outward persona, and her career's tragic end because of drug use. He also reflects on how growing up as an only child made him more adept at settling disagreements among the band members. In 1954, Betts played on Washington's album "Dinah Jams" with Clark Terry and Clifford Brown. He continued to travel across the United States with Washington, including many performances in the South. He was impressed the sights and by spectators who just wanted to dance. Betts reflects on how different singers make songs their own. In 1956, Betts left Washington's band to stay at home and raise his children. In 1961, he traveled with Charlie Byrd to South America for three months where he served as a cultural ambassador for

the United States Information Agency. Here, he and Charlie Byrd discovered the bossa nova that he would later introduce to the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Keter Betts, Section A2003_110_001_005, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Keter Betts performed in England on his first international tour in 1959 with Woody Herman, Nat Adderley, and Bill Harris. In 1961, he toured for three months as part of a trio with guitarist Charlie Byrd in South America as part the United States Information Agency program. In Bahia, Brazil, Betts was introduced to the bossa nova, and he reflects on the melodic nature of Brazilian music and the romance of the Portuguese language. After returning to the U.S., Betts and Byrd approached Riverside Records to produce a bossa nova album, but Riverside Records was not interested. Stan Getz approached them and, in 1962, they recorded “Jazz Samba” for Verve Records. Charlie Byrd later sued Verve because he and Betts did not make any money off of the album. Betts reflects on representing the U.S. to South American audiences during the Civil Rights Movement, and the racial progress he saw on tour during his career. In 1964, Betts was asked by his friend and golf partner Ray Brown to join Ella Fitzgerald’s band.

Video Oral History Interview with Keter Betts, Section A2003_110_001_006, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Keter Betts began playing with Ella Fitzgerald in October of 1964 and played with her for a total of twenty four years before she retired in 1993. With her, he toured internationally with musicians like Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown, Count Basie, Roy Eldridge, Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis, Tommy Flanagan, Bobby Durham, Joe Pass, and Gus Johnson. He reflects on Ella’s career before he joined her, when she inherited Chick Webb’s band in 1939, and how female musicians are treated by agents and bookers. He reflects on performing with Ella in big hotels and in Europe, and on his enjoyment of performing. He also reflects on the different styles of singers he played with, including Ella, Dinah Washington, Chris Connors, Esther Phillips, Grady Tate, Johnny Hartman, and Letta Mbulu. He remembers playing in Sparks, Nevada at John Ascuaga’s Nugget Casino and a farcical concert in Europe where sequins fell all over the stage. In 1978, Tommy Flanagan left Ella’s band and Betts took on the role of training new members.

Video Oral History Interview with Keter Betts, Section A2003_110_001_007, TRT: 0:30:12 ?

Keter Betts played with Ella Fitzgerald until she retired in 1993. He remembers getting accustomed to playing with Ella Fitzgerald after having played with Dinah Washington and the difference in their styles. He reflects on the time he spent on tour and on playing with people like Ella Fitzgerald and Tommy Flanagan who were at the top of their game. After Flanagan left Ella’s band in 1978, Fitzgerald became dependent on Betts for support and later refused to play concerts without him. Betts reflects on older musicians like Lionel Hampton and Cab Calloway who act younger when performing. He also reflects on playing Pearl Bailey’s final concert in 1990 and Ella’s final concert in 1993. Betts lists some of his favorite male vocalists including Billy Eckstine, Johnny Hartman, Al Hibbler, Jimmy Witherspoon, Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, and Jesse Belvin. In 1994, Betts’ mother died, followed shortly by Ella’s death in 1996 and his wife’s death in 2000. Betts recorded his first solo album in 1998.

Video Oral History Interview with Keter Betts, Section A2003_110_001_008, TRT: 0:22:44 ?

Keter Betts reflects on his plans for retirement and the regrets he has about his career. He describes the opportunities his mother had to see him play with Dinah Washington at Birdland and with Ella Fitzgerald at Carnegie Hall and her pride in his career. He also reflects upon his legacy and the future of jazz bass players. He ends the interview by playing his bass and by narrating his photographs.

