

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ernest Withers

PERSON

Withers, Ernest C., 1922-2007

Alternative Names: Ernest Withers;

Life Dates: August 7, 1922-October 15, 2007

Place of Birth: Memphis, Tennessee, USA

Residence: Memphis, Tennessee

Occupations: Photojournalist

Biographical Note

Photojournalist Ernest C. Withers was born on August 7, 1922, in Memphis, Tennessee. Withers got his start as a military photographer while serving in the South Pacific during World War II. Upon returning to a segregated Memphis after the war, Withers chose photography as his profession.

In the 1950s, Withers helped spur the movement for equal rights with a self-published photo pamphlet on the Emmett Till murder. Over the next two decades, Withers formed close personal relationships with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and James Meredith. Withers's pictures of key civil rights events from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the strike of Memphis sanitation workers are historic. Indeed, Withers was often the only photographer to record these scenes, many of which were not yet of interest to the mainstream press.

Withers photographed more than the southern Civil Rights Movement. Whether Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and other Negro League baseball players, or those jazz and blues musicians who frequented Memphis' Beale Street, Withers photographed the famous and not-so famous. Withers's collection includes pictures of early performances of Elvis Presley, B.B. King, Ike and Tina Turner, Ray Charles, and Aretha Franklin.

In his more than sixty-year career, Withers accumulated a collection of an estimated five million photographs; his works appeared in The New York Times, Jet, Ebony, Newsweek, and Life and were featured in touring exhibits and shows around the country. For his life's work, Withers was elected to the Black Press Hall of Fame and received an honorary doctorate from the Massachusetts College of Art.

Withers and his high school sweetheart, Dorothy Curry, raised eight children.

Ernest C. Withers passed away on Monday, October 15, 2007 at the age of eighty-five.

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