

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ernest Withers

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Withers, Ernest C., 1922-2007
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ernest Withers,
Dates:	June 28, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:59:20).
Abstract:	Photojournalist Ernest Withers (1922 - 2007) documented the Civil Rights Movement and rising musical stars in Memphis. In his more than sixty-year career, Withers accumulated a collection of an estimated five million photographs. Withers was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 28, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_147
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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 Emmitt 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.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ernest Withers was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 28, 2003, in Memphis, Tennessee, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Photojournalist Ernest Withers (1922 - 2007) documented the Civil Rights Movement and rising musical stars in Memphis. In his more than sixty-year career, Withers accumulated a collection of an estimated five million photographs.

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:

Withers, Ernest C., 1922-2007

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Withers, Ernest C., 1922-2007 --Interviews

African American artists--Interviews

African American photographers--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

African American families

African Americans--Genealogy

Lynching--History

African American fathers

Mothers--Mortality

Discrimination

Segregation

African Americans--Politics and government

Brothers

Sisters

African American young men

African American youth

Photojournalists--Interviews

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans

Memphis (Tenn.)

African Americans in the mass media industry--Interviews

Till, Emmett, 1941-1955--Death and burial

Race relations in the United States

Southern States--Race relations--History

Montgomery (Ala.)

Montgomery Bus Boycott, Montgomery, Ala., 1955-1956

University of Mississippi

Evers, Medgar Wiley, 1925-1963

Parker, Mack Charles

King, Martin Luther,--Jr.,--1929-1968--Assassination

Sanitation Workers Strike, Memphis, Tenn., 1968

Civil rights movement

National Civil Rights Museum

Discrimination in employment

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Photojournalist

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Ernest Withers, June 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 Ernest Withers, Section A2003_147_001_001, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Photographer Ernest Withers describes his family's history and particularly the lynching of his great-great-grandfather in Mississippi around the time of the U.S. Civil War. Withers describes his own father as a hard-working post office employee who provided well for his large family. Withers recalls, in vivid detail, his mother's death when he was only seven years old. He discusses the significant role of industry in his childhood neighborhood of Memphis, Tennessee; he remembers the volume of men who were injured in the pervasive automobile industry. Withers describes the segregated health care of the day and considers the inequity with respect to his stepmother's premature death. He describes himself as having been an ordinary kid who took part in typical neighborhood recreations and an average Manassas School student who came up after his more scholarly siblings. Withers recalls his parents' interest in politics and particularly in the Republican Party.

African American artists--Interviews.

African American photographers--Interviews.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

African American families.

African Americans--Genealogy.

Lynching--History.

African American fathers.

Mothers--Mortality.

Discrimination.

Segregation.

African Americans--Politics and government.

Brothers.

Sisters.

African American young men.

African American youth.

Photojournalists--Interviews.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.

Memphis (Tenn.).

African Americans in the mass media industry--Interviews.

Till, Emmett, 1941-1955--Death and burial.

Southern States--Race relations--History.

Montgomery (Ala.).

Montgomery Bus Boycott, Montgomery, Ala., 1955-1956.

University of Mississippi.

Evers, Medgar Wiley, 1925-1963.

Parker, Mack Charles.

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968--Assassination.

Sanitation Workers Strike, Memphis, Tenn., 1968.

Civil rights movements.

National Civil Rights Museum.

Discrimination in employment.

Video Oral History Interview with Ernest Withers, Section A2003_147_001_002, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Ernest Withers names his five siblings; there are four sons and two daughters in the Withers family. Withers discusses his school life and remembers two influential figures, a teacher and a principal. He describes that while he expressed an early interest in becoming a pilot, his circumstances led him to begin taking photographs while in the eighth grade. Withers recalls that after a stint in the U.S. military, he and his brother invested in property in Memphis, Tennessee and Withers opened a photography studio there. He discusses the black media's demand for his services. Withers goes on to discuss the Emmett Till murder case that brought attention to race relations in America. Withers describes that he was one of the few who photographed the trial of those accused of the boy's murder. Withers's photographs were distributed to various newspapers across the country.

Video Oral History Interview with Ernest Withers, Section A2003_147_001_003, TRT: 0:29:25 ?

Photographer Ernest Withers discusses his coverage of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott and other historical events from the 1950s. He describes that many of the photographer positions he has held offered little job security; he criticizes the black press for an inadequate pay rate. Withers remembers the excitement around the integration of Ole Miss, the University of Mississippi. He recalls the danger involved in shooting other racially-charged events of the 1950s/1960s, including the trials for the murders of Medgar Evers and Mack Parker. Withers remembers lighter moments in his career, including photographing musical icons. Withers describes being nearby the Memphis, Tennessee, site of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, assassination. He remembers the March 28, 1968, sanitation workers' march and its concomitant violence as the preamble to King's death. He recalls the scene of the assassination; Withers was among the few given access to the site.

Video Oral History Interview with Ernest Withers, Section A2003_147_001_004, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Photographer Ernest Withers recalls the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis, Tennessee. Withers describes having photographed King's highly attended funeral services. He discusses the significance of Room #306 of the Lorraine Motel and takes credit for the initial idea that the hotel be transformed into a site commemorating the Civil Rights Movement; the hotel was ultimately transformed into the National Civil Rights Museum. Withers discusses other monumental events in several decades' history of Memphis, Tennessee. He also discusses incidents from his three years as a Memphis police officer, including a confrontation with a white fellow officer that got Withers fired from the force. He describes his professional achievements, including four published books and international travels. Withers

considers his photographic coverage of the Civil Rights era to be his legacy. He also describes having played a part in more current political decision making in Memphis, Tennessee. Withers would like to be remembered as a successful father and husband who has lived a moral and courageous life. Withers presents photographs that chronicle his career and family