

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Della Reese-Lett

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Reese, Della
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Della Reese-Lett,
Dates:	June 18, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	Betacame SP videocassettes ().
Abstract:	Television actress and singer Della Reese-Lett (1931 - 2017) has been performing and recording music since 1953 and was the first African American woman to host her own television program. Reese was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Reese-Lett was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 18, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_087
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

The name Della Reese is synonymous with entertainment and excellence. Starting her career in entertainment as a singer, she developed her own style with romantic ballads and other songs that utilized her unique blend of jazz, blues and gospel and phrasing that to this day makes for a sound that is unmistakably Della Reese.

Reese, born Deloreese Patricia Early in Detroit, Michigan, began singing in church when she was six years old. Throughout her formative years, Reese sang gospel music, and at age thirteen, she was hired by the late Mahalia Jackson to sing with her group. Her big break came when she won a contest that gave her a week singing at Detroit's famed "Flame Show Bar." That week soon became eight weeks. This experience and others exposed Reese to the talents and styles of such music greats as Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday, Al Hibbler, Billy Eckstine and others.

In 1953, Reese moved to New York City and became a vocalist with the Erskine Hawkins Orchestra, and shortly thereafter, signed a recording contract with Jubilee Records. Reese had her first major hit with "And That Reminds Me (of you)." That same year, she was voted "The Most Promising Singer" by *Billboard*, *Cashbox*, and *Variety*, as well as the Disc Jockeys of America and the Jukebox Operators Association.

Reese signed a new recording contract in 1959, with RCA, and subsequently enjoyed her biggest hit, a tune adapted from Puccini's *La Boheme*, entitled "Don't You Know". Acknowledgement from the music industry followed as she was nominated for a Grammy Award as best female vocalist. This led to Reese performing for the next nine years in Las Vegas, Nevada. In the thirty years that followed "Don't You Know," Reese has continued recording.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, Reese launched a successful television career. She appeared on many television shows that are now considered classics, including *The Perry Como Show*, *The Jackie Gleason Show*, as well as more than twenty appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Her success continued over the years, with numerous

appearances on television and in movies. In 1994, Reese was tapped to star in the hit series *Touched by an Angel*. Reese was honored for her talents in 1994 with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

In addition to her singing and acting, Reese led a deeply spiritual life. In 1986, she was ordained as a minister by the Rev. Dr. Johnnie Colemon, and she gave weekly sermons at her church, Understanding Principles For Better Living, in Los Angeles.

Reese was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 18, 2004.

Reese passed away on November 19, 2017 at age 86.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Della Reese-Lett was conducted by Lorraine Toussaint on June 18, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on Betacame SP videocassettes. Television actress and singer Della Reese-Lett (1931 - 2017) has been performing and recording music since 1953 and was the first African American woman to host her own television program. Reese was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

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:

Reese, Della

Toussaint, Lorraine (Interviewer)

N/A (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Reese, Della--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Television Actress

Singer

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers|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 Della Reese-Lett, June 18, 2004. 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