

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John Levy

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Levy, John, 1912-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John Levy,
Dates:	October 7, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:32:37).
Abstract:	Music manager John Levy (1912 - 2012) is renowned for his work as a manager with clients including Cannonball and Nat Adderley, Nancy Wilson, Ramsey Lewis, Herbie Hancock, Roberta Flack, and Wes Montgomery. Levy also played bass for the George Shearing Quartet and the Stuff Smith Trio. Levy was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 7, 2004, in Altadena, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_197
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Renowned music manager John Levy was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on April 11, 1912. His mother was a midwife and nurse and his father was an engine stoker on the railroad. At the age of six, the Levy family moved to Chicago, and as he went through school, a teacher encouraged him to find a stable job at the post office.

Levy, however, had dreams of music, and by 1944 he was in New York playing bass for the Stuff Smith Trio at the Onyx Club. Over the next few years, Levy played with a number of other jazz notables, including Ben Webster, Errol Garner and Milt Jackson, as well as with Billie Holiday at her comeback performance at Carnegie Hall in 1948. In 1949, Levy joined the George Shearing Quartet, and as they toured the country he took on the role of road manager. In 1951, he put performing aside and became a full-time manager for the group, becoming the first African American to work as a personal manager in the pop and jazz music industry. Over the ensuing years, he represented a number of other jazz stars, including Nat and Cannonball Adderley, Nancy Wilson, Ramsey Lewis, Herbie Hancock, Roberta Flack and Wes Montgomery to name just a few.

Levy is still active as a manager after more than fifty years in the business. He has also recently written a book on his experiences in the record industry entitled *Men, Women and Girl Singers: My Life as a Musician Turned Talent Manager*. Former Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley honored him by proclaiming a John Levy Day, and in 1997 he was inducted into the International Jazz Hall of Fame.

Levy passed away on January 20, 2012 at the age of 99.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John Levy was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 7, 2004, in Altadena, California, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Music manager John Levy (1912 - 2012) is renowned for his work as a manager with clients including Cannonball and Nat Adderley, Nancy Wilson, Ramsey Lewis, Herbie Hancock, Roberta Flack, and Wes Montgomery. Levy also played bass for the George Shearing Quartet and the Stuff Smith Trio.

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:

Levy, John, 1912-2012

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Levy, John, 1912-2012--Interviews

African American jazz musicians--Interviews

Music trade--Management

New Orleans (La.)--Social life and customs

Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs

African Americans--Genealogy

Riots--Illinois--Chicago--History--20th century

Education--Illinois--Chicago

Music trade--Vocational guidance

Stuff Smith Quartet

Garner, Erroll

Byas, Don

Webster, Ben, 1909-1973

Thompson, Lucky, 1924-2005

Shearing, George

Lewis, Ramsey

Jamal, Ahmad, 1930-

Wilson, Nancy, 1937-

Staton, Dakota

Music--Economic aspects

Hall, Arsenio

Adderley, Cannonball

Mbulu, Letta

Semenya, Caiphus

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Music Manager

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 John Levy, October 7, 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

Video Oral History Interview with John Levy, Section A2004_197_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Music manager John Levy describes his experiences growing up in New Orleans and Chicago. Levy recalls vivid memories of Mardi Gras and other celebrations in New Orleans, and describes his neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. Levy also details the backgrounds of his mother and father.

African American jazz musicians--Interviews.

Music trade--Management.

New Orleans (La.)--Social life and customs.

Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs.
African Americans--Genealogy.
Riots--Illinois--Chicago--History--20th century.
Education--Illinois--Chicago.
Music trade--Vocational guidance.
Stuff Smith Quartet.
Garner, Erroll.
Byas, Don.
Webster, Ben, 1909-1973.
Thompson, Lucky, 1924-2005.
Shearing, George.
Lewis, Ramsey.
Jamal, Ahmad, 1930-.
Wilson, Nancy, 1937-.
Staton, Dakota.
Music--Economic aspects.
Hall, Arsenio.
Adderley, Cannonball.
Mbulu, Letta.
Semenya, Caiphus.

Video Oral History Interview with John Levy, Section A2004_197_001_002, TRT: 0:30:06 ?

John Levy describes his youth and school experiences in Chicago, Illinois. He tells of the 1919 race riot, the neighborhood gangs that roamed the South Side, describes his elementary and high school environments, and shares memories of his early musical endeavors.

Video Oral History Interview with John Levy, Section A2004_197_001_003, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

John Levy describes his early years in the music business, when he started out as a bass player for artists such as Stuff Smith, Erroll Garner, Don Byas, Ben Webster, and Lucky Thompson. Levy recalls one night in New York when he filled in as bass player in George Shearing's band, which was the beginning of a lifelong friendship and business relationship. Levy explains why he chose to stop playing bass and become Shearing's full-time manager. Levy also names many of the artists he subsequently worked with, including Ramsey Lewis, Ahmad Jamal, Nancy Wilson, and Dakota Staton.

Video Oral History Interview with John Levy, Section A2004_197_001_004, TRT: 0:30:39 ?

John Levy outlines problems and difficulties that arise in the course of the artist-manager relationship, most of which relate to money. Levy describes his own ethical stance about managerial compensation, and explains why many artists do not trust managers. Levy describes in depth his relationships with Nancy Wilson and Arsenio Hall, which have become true friendships.

Video Oral History Interview with John Levy, Section A2004_197_001_005, TRT: 0:31:07 ?

John Levy continues to discuss relationships he's formed as an artist manager, mentioning Nancy Wilson, Cannonball Adderley, and international musicians like Letta Mbulu and Caiphus Semenya. Levy then reflects on his life and career, expressing his hopes for the black community and considering his own legacy.