

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. Lena McLin

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	McLin, Lena J. (Lena Johnson), 1928-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Lena McLin,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 5, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:21:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	High school music teacher and pastor Reverend Dr. Lena McLin (1928 - ) served as the music department chair at the Kenwood Academy in Chicago. At Kenwood Academy, McLin's revolutionary curriculum helped launch the careers of singer and actor Mandy Patinkin; Metropolitan Opera star Mark Rucker; jazz singers Maggie Brown and Kim English; and rhythm and blues artist Robert “R” Kelly. In addition to her teaching activities, McLin founded the Trinity Congregational Church in Chicago, where she also served as the minister of music. McLin was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 5, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_001
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Musician, teacher, and composer, Reverend Lena McLin, was born September 5, 1928, in Atlanta, Georgia, to parents Benjamin J. and Bernice Dorsey Johnson. McLin's parents were close to Reverend A.D. Williams and Reverend William

Holmes Borders; her childhood friends included young Martin Luther King, Jr. and his sister Christine. When she was five, McLin was sent to Chicago to live with her uncle, Thomas A. Dorsey, known as the father of gospel music; there she attended McCosh Elementary School and served as a young accompanist for her uncle's famed Pilgrim Baptist Church choir. After moving back to Atlanta, McLin graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1947. At Spelman College, McLin earned her bachelor of music degree in 1951; she also studied in Chicago at the American Conservatory of Music, Roosevelt University, and Chicago State University.

McLin started her teaching career at Julius H. Hess Upper Grade Center in 1959, moving to Hubbard High School in 1960. As a founder of the McLin Ensemble and the McLin Opera Company, McLin created performance opportunities for African American musicians. McLin taught at John Marshall Harlan High School from 1963 to 1970, leaving to teach at the new Kenwood Academy. At Kenwood Academy, acting as music department chair, McLin created a pilot curriculum that included all types of music, from classical to popular, helping to launch the careers of singer and actor Mandy Patinkin; Metropolitan Opera star Mark Rucker; jazz singers Maggie Brown and Kim English; and rhythm and blues artist Robert "R" Kelly. In 1977, McLin published a music history for youth entitled *Pulse: A History of Music*.

As a founder of Trinity Congregational Church, McLin also worked as minister of music. In 1982, McLin became founding pastor of Holy Vessel Baptist Church. McLin has published over 400 compositions, including tributes to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gwendolyn Brooks; her compositions range from solo voice pieces to full orchestrations. Sought after nationally as a speaker and workshop leader, McLin is the recipient of the Outstanding Teacher Award in 1983 and numerous other awards and honorary degrees. McLin has raised a son and a daughter, and remains a resident of Chicago's South Shore community.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. Lena McLin was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 5, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. High school music teacher and pastor Reverend Dr. Lena McLin (1928 - ) served as the music department chair at the Kenwood Academy in Chicago. At Kenwood Academy, McLin's revolutionary curriculum helped launch the careers of singer and actor Mandy Patinkin; Metropolitan Opera star Mark Rucker; jazz singers Maggie Brown and Kim English; and rhythm and

blues artist Robert “R” Kelly. In addition to her teaching activities, McLin founded the Trinity Congregational Church in Chicago, where she also served as the minister of music.

---

## **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:**

McLin, Lena J. (Lena Johnson), 1928-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

McLin, Lena J. (Lena Johnson), 1928---Interviews

---

African American music teachers--Interviews

---

African American women clergy--Interviews

---

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## **Occupations:**

High School Music Teacher

---

Pastor

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

EducationMakers|ReligionMakers

---

## **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 Reverend Dr. Lena McLin, January 5, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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 Reverend Dr. Lena McLin, Section A2005\_001\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:40 2005/01/05

Reverend Dr. Lena McLin was born on September 5th, 1928 in Atlanta, Georgia. Her mother, Bernice Dorsey Johnson, was born in Atlanta around 1903. She was one of seven siblings, all of whom were musicians. Her family lineage traces back to escaped slaves who settled in Villa Rica, Georgia until moving to Atlanta about 1900. McLin's grandfather and great-grandfather were Baptist preachers; her uncle, Thomas A. Dorsey, is credited as the inventor of gospel music. Dorsey first became known for his music while he was the musical director for Ma Rainey, under the name Georgia Tom. During the Great Depression, he created gospel songs using rhythms from the blues in his compositions, including "Take My Hand,

Precious Lord,” which he wrote after his wife and newborn son died during childbirth. McLin’s father, Benjamin Johnson, was born before 1900 in Atlanta where he attended Morehouse College and founded Greater Mount Calvary Baptist Church. She grew up alongside Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his siblings.

African American music teachers--Interviews.

African American women clergy--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Lena McLin, Section A2005\_001\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:10 2005/01/05

Reverend Dr. Lena McLin grew up on Hunter Street in Atlanta, Georgia. She was a childhood friend of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his siblings. McLin, like King, was raised to respect authority; King was noted even then for his brilliant mind and passion for reading. Growing up in Atlanta, McLin frequented Greater Mount Calvary Baptist Church where her father preached and her mother played piano. She also listened to Joe Louis’s boxing bouts on the radio and was subjected to hearing the racist diatribes of Eugene Talmadge. She moved to Chicago, Illinois at about six years old to live with her uncle, gospel composer Thomas A. Dorsey. She found the city a kinder environment but still segregated. McLin attended McCosh Elementary School, where she liked her music teacher but was taunted by students for her dark skin tone. When her uncle remarried, McLin returned to Atlanta and graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1947. While there, she exhibited a passion for fairness and justice.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Lena McLin, Section A2005\_001\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:50 2005/01/05

Reverend Dr. Lena McLin earned money as a teenager by playing piano for Greater Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Her earnings enabled her to attend Spelman College, where she majored in music under department chair Kemper Harreld and minored in history. An injury to her hand during freshman year ended her plan to focus on piano performance. Instead, McLin sang with the girls’ chorus and the mixed chorus with boys from nearby Morehouse College. She returned to Chicago,

Illinois to study for a master's degree at American Conservatory of Music, but quit after she learned the school was not accredited. She became fascinated with opera, her favorite being 'Cavalleria rusticana' by Pietro Mascagni, and founded the McLin Ensemble opera company. After criticizing an assembly at Julius H. Hess Upper Grade Center, McLin was hired by the principal to teach music and improve the assembly performances, which she did. She continued teaching music John Marshall Harlan High School and Kenwood Academy.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Lena McLin, Section A2005\_001\_001\_004, TRT: 0:27:30 2005/01/05

Reverend Dr. Lena McLin wrote the cantata "Free At Last!" and the song "If They Ask You Why He Came" in honor of her childhood friend, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., after his assassination. During her tenure at Kenwood Academy in Chicago, Illinois, McLin taught a number of students who became successful musicians, including R. Kelly, Mark Rucker, and Nicole Heaston. She wrote 'Pulse: a History of Music' to expose students to a wide variety of genres. McLin first wrote it to serve as a textbook for her class, but it has been used by teachers nationwide. McLin began composing for Trinity Congregational Church in Chicago, where she was minister of music and particularly specialized in cantatas. She continued to write music when she founded her own church, Holy Vessel Baptist Church, in 1982. At the time of the interview, she served as its pastor and music minister. She describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, her theological philosophy and the musical talent of Leontyne Price.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Lena McLin, Section A2005\_001\_001\_005, TRT: 0:26:20 2005/01/05

Reverend Dr. Lena McLin brought celebrities, including HistoryMaker Quincy Jones, Yusef Lateef, and Chaka Khan, to share their experiences with her music students at Kenwood Academy in Chicago, Illinois. McLin disagreed with the City of Chicago's decision to change the name of the Thomas A. Dorsey Music Fest to the Chicago Gospel Music Festival, but was pleased to see Chicago expand its performance venues in the 1990s and 2000s. She reflects

upon her life and legacy, and describes how she would like to be remembered. McLin narrates her photographs and performs one of her musical compositions on the piano.