

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Donald White

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	White, Donald, 1925-2005
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Donald White,
Dates:	January 13, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:39:02).
Abstract:	Cellist Donald White (1925 - 2005) was the first African American member of the Cleveland Orchestra. After being hired by Maestro George Szell, he played with the orchestra for almost forty years. White was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 13, 2005, in Cleveland, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_015
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Retired Cleveland Orchestra cellist Donald White was a native of Richmond, Indiana. The middle of seven children, White started playing the cello when he was sixteen. After he was drafted into the United States Navy in 1943, White played bass tuba and peckhorn in the Navy band while continuing his cello studies; after leaving the U.S. Navy, he earned a music degree at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

In Chicago, White performed with an African American orchestra and the Chicago Civic Orchestra while studying cello with a member of the Chicago Symphony. Later, White studied privately in New York with Leonard Rose and Luigi Silva; he earned a fellowship from the University of Hartford, granting him the position of assistant principal cellist of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. White received his masters degree from the University of Hartford and worked four years with the University of Hartford Symphony Orchestra.

After a successful audition with Maestro George Szell, White was invited to join the Cleveland Orchestra in 1957; he was the first African American member of the orchestra. Before his retirement in 1995, White enjoyed a successful career with the orchestra, performing at Severance Hall in Cleveland and other venues throughout the world.

White and his wife, pianist, composer, and educator, Dolores White, lived in East Cleveland, Ohio, and raised two children, Diana and Darrow.

Donald White passed away on July 31, 2005, at the age of eighty.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Donald White was conducted by Regennia Williams on January 13, 2005, in Cleveland, Ohio, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Cellist Donald White (1925 - 2005) was the first African American member of the Cleveland Orchestra. After being hired by Maestro George Szell, he played with the orchestra for almost forty years.

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:

White, Donald, 1925-2005

Williams, Regennia (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

White, Donald, 1925-2005--Interviews

African American orchestral musicians--Interviews

Violoncellists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Cellist

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 Donald White, January 13, 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 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 Donald White, Section A2005_015_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Donald White was born July 9, 1925 in Richmond, Indiana. His mother, Ada Miller White, was born in Kentucky and raised in Anderson, Indiana. His father, Benjamin White, was born in Missouri. White's father was a janitor for International Harvester Company while his mother was a domestic at a local hospital. White grew up with six siblings on the outskirts of Richmond, Indiana

where he enjoyed playing baseball with friends. During holidays, his family often traveled to visit nearby relatives. In Richmond, he attended Nicholson Elementary School where he played the drums as a kindergartner. After learning to play the trumpet, he was convinced by the school band conductor to play the tuba. He took private cello lessons when he was sixteen years old. After graduating from Richmond High School, White was drafted into the segregated U.S. Navy during World War II. While in the Navy, he joined an all-black orchestra which, after boot training concluded, played at bond rallies in Chicago, Illinois.

African American orchestral musicians--Interviews.

Violoncellists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald White, Section A2005_015_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Donald White was discharged from the U.S. Navy after World War II. After studying for a year at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, White transferred to the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, Illinois before matriculating at Roosevelt College. At Roosevelt, he studied with Karl Fruh, a cellist with NBC Symphony Orchestra. White also was tutored by Nicolai Zedeler, a cellist in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and Dudley Powers, the Chicago Symphony's principal cellist. In Chicago, White worked intermittently for the U.S. Post Office. After graduating from Roosevelt, White relocated to New York, New York where he auditioned for the Civic Orchestra, worked in a dress factory and studied with Luigi Silva. White received a scholarship that enabled him to become assistant principal cellist of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. In 1957, Leonard Rose, one of his mentors, arranged for White to audition before George Szell of the Cleveland Orchestra and Musical Arts Association. Shortly after, White was hired.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald White, Section A2005_015_001_003, TRT: 0:27:30 ?

Donald White integrated the Cleveland Orchestra when he was hired in 1957. He travelled with the company to Birmingham, Alabama where integrated orchestras were barred at the time; however, the Cleveland Orchestra was allowed to play, and White was congratulated on his performance. White continued to experience prejudice as the only African American member of the Cleveland Orchestra for twenty years. George Szell, his liberal-minded music director, supported White throughout this time. White judged contests for the Sphinx Organization in Detroit, Michigan, which seeks to highlight musicians of color and promote classical music among young African American and Latino populations. After retiring from the orchestra in 1995, he taught at The Music Settlement in Cleveland, Ohio and the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio as well as other schools throughout the area. White shares his perspective on the Iraq War and talks about his family's musical careers. He concludes the tape by reflecting on his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Donald White, Section A2005_015_001_004, TRT: 0:12:02 ?

Donald White narrates his photographs.