

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Maxine Powell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Powell, Maxine, 1915-2013
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Powell,
Dates:	January 21, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:01:07).
Abstract:	Etiquette director and talent agent Maxine Powell (1915 - 2013) was the etiquette director for Motown Records where she taught posture and other etiquette techniques to Motown recording artists, including Marvin Gaye and Diana Ross. In addition to her activities with Motown, Powell founded the Maxine Powell Finishing and Modeling School in Detroit. Powell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 21, 2005, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_024
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Motown talent agent Maxine Powell was born in Texarkana, Texas, and raised in Chicago, Illinois, by her aunt, Mary James Lloyd, who taught etiquette and refinement. Powell attended Keith and Willard elementary schools. Before Powell graduated from Hyde Park High School in 1933, her aunt passed away. Powell attended Madame C.J. Walker's School of Beauty Culture and worked as a manicurist to finance her acting studies; for eight years, she studied elocution with James Baron, playwright, producer, and director of the Negro Drama League. Powell also took dance and movement lessons from Chicago legend, Sammy Dyer.

Soon, Powell developed a one-woman show called *An Evening with Maxine Powell* complete with pantomime and skits and performed with the first African American group to perform at the Chicago Theatre. At the same time, Powell taught etiquette as a personal maid to wealthy clientele and held fashion shows featuring the Fashionettes.

After reading a magazine article about John White's nine-story, 200 room Gotham Hotel, Powell visited Detroit for eleven days in 1945; soon after she moved to Detroit and was teaching self-improvement and modeling classes. In 1951, Powell established the Maxine Powell Finishing and Modeling School. In 1953, Powell bought and remodeled a huge house on Ferry Street which became the largest banquet facility in Detroit for African Americans. As a member of the Zonta Club, Powell brought black productions and artists to Detroit venues; as head of her own agency, she was the first to place black models with several of Detroit's automobile companies and in mainstream print ads. In 1964, Motown founder Berry Gordy's sister, Gwen Gordy Fuqua, a top Powell model, convinced Gordy to establish a Powell finishing school for Motown talent. Powell taught Marvin Gaye posture and how to sing with his eyes open. Diana Ross, The Temptations, and Martha Reeves acknowledge Powell as the one who taught them how to enter a room and work with their fans.

From 1971 to 1985, Powell taught personal development at Wayne County Community College. After 1985, Powell began working as a consultant on an individual basis.

Maxine Powell passed away on October 14, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Maxine Powell was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 21, 2005, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Etiquette director and talent agent Maxine Powell (1915 - 2013) was the etiquette director for Motown Records where she taught posture and other etiquette techniques to Motown recording artists, including Marvin Gaye and Diana Ross. In addition to her activities with Motown, Powell founded the Maxine Powell Finishing and Modeling School in Detroit.

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:

Powell, Maxine, 1915-2013

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Powell, Maxine, 1915-2013--Interviews

Talent scouts--Interviews

Image consultants--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Motown Record Corporation

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 Maxine Powell, January 21, 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 Maxine Powell, Section A2005_024_001_001, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Maxine Powell was born May 30, 1915 in Texarkana, Texas to Gladys James Blair and Clarence Blair. Powell was told her mother was dead but at twenty-two years old, found out she was still alive. Her father passed away when she was seven years old. Powell was raised by her maternal aunt, Mary James Lloyd, in Chicago, Illinois from the age of six months. Powell's aunt was a kind but firm disciplinarian who emphasized hospitality and good manners. Her aunt made wine for church services and often hosted the minister for dinner. She was also a member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks and travelled often for their meetings. Powell grew up in Chicago with her aunt, aunt's husband and their adult daughter in the household. She attended the Keith School, an all-white school in Chicago. From listening to her aunt and her friends talk about racial discrimination, Powell became determined to help African Americans.

Talent scouts--Interviews

Image consultants--Interviews

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Powell, Section A2005_024_001_002, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Maxine Powell attended Keith School and Frances Willard School in Chicago, Illinois for her elementary education. She also regularly attended church and prayer meetings with her family. When trying to understand the origin of racial discrimination, her research at the library led her to discover commonalities among humankind. She concluded that social conditions were responsible for racism and that refinement could elevate African Americans beyond their assigned status. While attending Hyde Park High School, Powell earned money through hair styling and manicures. At age fourteen, she began studying elocution with dramatist and playwright James Baron. Upon graduation, Powell acted in two one-woman shows, appeared at the Chicago Theatre and performed with Baron's company in Indiana and Wisconsin. Her experience in theatre helped her develop the Maxine Powell System. Powell speculates on how racial discrimination leads to self-destructive tendencies in the African American community of her childhood and today.

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Powell, Section A2005_024_001_003, TRT: 0:30:48 ?

Maxine Powell's aunt and uncle passed away while she was in high school. She moved with a friend into an apartment on South Parkway in Chicago, Illinois. While living there, she met Lois Parham and Ruth Nemo, sisters who were highly successful milliners on the South Side of Chicago. They eventually adopted Powell after her aunt and uncle's deaths. Powell acted with the Negro Drama League under the direction of James Baron, learned tap dance from choreographer Sammy Dyer and performed at Club DeLisa in Chicago until she was fired for being too young. Powell studied at a cosmetology school associated with Madam C.J. Walker near Bronzeville's Regal Theater in Chicago. To support herself, Powell worked in a pickle factory and a date factory until she became a personal maid for a working class white woman who had married a wealthy man. Powell instructed her on how to dress and host dinner parties. She remembers an encounter with a rude guest at one of the dinner parties.

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Powell, Section A2005_024_001_004, TRT: 0:31:22 ?

Maxine Powell signed up to join the Women's Army Corps around the time of World War II but was convinced not to enter by her adoptive guardians Lois Parham and Ruth Nemo. After completing a cosmetology course at Madam C.J. Walker's School of Beauty Culture in Chicago, Illinois, she vacationed at the Gotham Hotel in Detroit, Michigan. There, she met Leila King, niece to the owners of Stinson Funeral Home in Detroit, and the hotel's owner, John White. Upon being invited to work as a manicurist in the hotel barbershop, Powell moved to Detroit and lived at the Gotham. She redecorated her room, which inspired the owner to add similar decorative flourishes to the other hotel rooms. She served as the entertainment director for an African American Zonta International chapter in Detroit. After leaving the Gotham, she opened an etiquette school in her Detroit apartment during the 1950s. She taught Aretha Franklin, among others. Powell also describes class barriers within the African American community of her youth.