

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John Andrew Ross

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Ross, John Andrew
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John Andrew Ross,
Dates:	April 21, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:24:29).
Abstract:	Music composer and arranger and music director John Andrew Ross (1940 - 2006) was the music director at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts and lead two music ensembles, the Voices of Black Persuasion and the Contra-Band. Ross won the Coretta Scott King Book Award as well as a regional Emmy in 1981 with Billy Wilson for "Blues and Gone," part of the series Say Brother produced by Boston's PBS station, WGBH. Ross was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 21, 2005, in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_105
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Composer, arranger, organist, choral conductor, jazz musician and music educator, John Andrew Ross was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on December 15, 1940, to Olga Evelyn White and Melvin Everard Ross, a close friend of Langston Hughes. Ross knew Langston Hughes as “Uncle Langston” while growing up in Roxbury. Ross attended public schools, and in 1957, he enrolled in Boston University to

study church music. He received degrees from the College of Liberal Arts in 1960 and the School of Fine and Applied Arts in 1964.

Beginning in 1970 as music director at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts (ELSFA), Ross has worked with the ELSFA and its parent organization, the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA) and leads two music ensembles, the Voices of Black Persuasion and the Contra-Band. Ross has also served each Christmas season since 1970 as the musical director of the gospel play *Black Nativity* by Langston Hughes, which recasts the story of the birth of Jesus against a backdrop of African American culture.

In addition, Ross served the congregation of the First Parish Church in Brookline, Massachusetts, as minister of music. For nine years prior to his 1995 ordination, he was the church's music director. Active as a member of the American Guild of Organists and also as an arranger, Ross released the recording, *Comin' up Shouting: Gospel Songs and Spirituals Newly Arranged*. Together with folklorist John Langstaff, Ross arranged the music that accompanies two books, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: Heroes of the Bible in African-American Spirituals* and *What a Morning: The Christmas Story in Black Spiritual*.

Ross won the Coretta Scott King Book Award as well as a regional Emmy in 1981 with Billy Wilson for "Blues and Gone," part of the series *Say Brother* produced by Boston's PBS station, WGBH. He was also nominated numerous times for other regional Emmys. In 1990, Ross won Boston's Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Musical Achievement Award, and in 2000, he won the New England Conservatory's Anna Bobbit Gardener Lifetime Achievement Award.

Ross passed away on Monday, June 12, 2006.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John Andrew Ross was conducted by Robert Hayden on April 21, 2005, in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Music composer and arranger and music director John Andrew Ross (1940 - 2006) was the music director at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts and lead two music ensembles, the Voices of Black Persuasion and the Contra-Band. Ross won the Coretta Scott King Book Award as well as a regional Emmy in 1981 with Billy Wilson for "Blues and Gone," part of the series *Say Brother* produced by Boston's PBS station, WGBH.

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:

Ross, John Andrew

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ross, John Andrew--Interviews

Organists--Interviews

African American musicians--Interviews

African American arrangers (Musicians)--Interviews

African American conductors (Music)--Interviews

African American composers--Interviews

African American Families--Massachusetts--Boston

Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967

African Americans--Genealogy

Lincoln University (Pa.)

Brown, Ron, 1941-1996

Discrimination in education--Massachusetts--Boston--Roxbury

Boston University

Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts

Lewis, Elma

National Center of Afro-American Artists

Olatunji, Babatunde

Beatty, Talley

Long, Richard A.

Thurman, Howard, 1900-1981

African diaspora--History

United States--Civilization--African influences

African Americans--Relations with Africans

African Americans--Social life and customs

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Congregational Church and Society (Brookline, Mass.)

Occupations:

Music Director

Music Composer and Arranger

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 Andrew Ross, April 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 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 John Andrew Ross, Section A2005_105_001_001, TRT: 0:28:31 2005/04/21

John Andrew Ross discusses food and his penchant for cooking and fine dining. He then talks about his mother's family history and its deep roots in the Boston area. He then shares a story about his colorful grandmother and the famous lawsuit she filed against Portia Law School in the early part of the 20th century. Lastly, Ross discusses his

father's background.

Organists--Interviews.

African American musicians--Interviews.

African American arrangers (Musicians)--Interviews.

African American conductors (Music)--Interviews.

African American composers--Interviews.

African American families--Massachusetts--Boston.

Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967.

African Americans--Genealogy.

Lincoln University (Pa.).

Brown, Ron, 1941-1996.

Discrimination in education--Massachusetts--Boston.

Boston University.

Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts.

Lewis, Elma.

National Center of Afro-American Artists.

Olatunji, Babatunde.

Beatty, Talley.

Long, Richard A.

Thurman, Howard, 1900-1981.

African diaspora--History.

United States--Civilization--African influences.

African Americans--Relations with Africans.

African Americans--Social life and customs.

Video Oral History Interview with John Andrew Ross, Section
A2005_105_001_002, TRT: 0:28:56 2005/04/21

John Andrew Ross talks about his father's family background and the friendship established with poet Langston Hughes, who was his father's college roommate at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Ross then shares stories from his childhood, including memories of his childhood playmate, the late Democratic Party Chairman Ron Brown. Lastly, Ross talks about his years attending David A. Ellis Elementary School in Roxbury, Massachusetts and discusses how the influx of African Americans in the 1950s led to increased instances of racial

discrimination in the educational system.

Video Oral History Interview with John Andrew Ross, Section
A2005_105_001_003, TRT: 0:29:18 2005/04/21

John Andrew Ross describes the early musical influences he experienced as a child at home and in school. He then recalls his high school years at Roxbury Memorial High School and the role the church played in cultivating his creative talents. Ross then discusses his musical education at Boston University and the start of his career at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Lastly, Ross details the personal background and personality of Elma Lewis and her mission to bring the arts to underprivileged black youth.

Video Oral History Interview with John Andrew Ross, Section
A2005_105_001_004, TRT: 0:29:00 2005/04/21

John Andrew Ross talks about his thirty-five years at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts and National Center of Afro-American Artists, in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. He discusses the organizations' founding principles and accomplishments, including the success of the annual Christmas production of Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity*.

Video Oral History Interview with John Andrew Ross, Section
A2005_105_001_005, TRT: 0:28:44 2005/04/21

John Andrew Ross praises mentors, friends and colleagues, including drummer Michael Babatunde Olatunji, choreographer Talley Beatty, scholar Richard Long and theologian Howard Thurman. Ross discusses his interest in the African cultural links in the diaspora, and emphasizes the importance of educating African American children about both the African and the African American parts of their heritage.