

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willie Kitchens

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## 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>	Kitchens, Willie, 1956-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willie Kitchens,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 27, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:52:53).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Gospel musician, music director, and singer Willie Kitchens (1956 - ) sang with the musical group, The Impressions, and served as executive director of the Bethlehem Center Mass Choir and minister of music to the Bethlehem-Wiley United Methodist Church. Kitchens was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 27, 2005, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_171
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born on January 6, 1956, to a musical family in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Willie David Kitchens, Jr., fell in love with music at an early age. At age seven, Kitchens began singing at community churches with his sisters and his father, a guitarist with the gospel group Five Sons of Calvary. Kitchens soon became a member of the Rosebud Choir at his family's church, Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist. Willie Kitchens, Sr. taught his son to play guitar when he was ten, and at sixteen the younger Kitchens joined the Five Sons of Calvary as bass guitarist and

background vocalist.

With the Five Sons, Kitchens performed with groups including the Swan Silvertones, the Brooklyn All-Stars, and the Jackson Southernaires. Diversifying his repertoire, Kitchens joined the funk band at Howard High School as lead guitarist and lead vocalist while continuing to perform gospel at church and with the Five Sons. After graduating high school, Kitchens attended the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

At age twenty-four, Kitchens began to concentrate on gospel performance. Over the years, he taught himself to play the harmonica, piano, and electric keyboards. Kitchens performed and ministered everywhere from “Bobby Jones Gospel” to colleges, to prisons.

In 1995, Kitchens became Music and Performing Arts Director for the Bethlehem Center, a ministry in inner-city Chattanooga; there he created a traveling youth choir for children from two to eighteen years of age and opened the Bethlehem Recording Studio for the Bethlehem Center’s radio and television programs. Kitchens’s choir recorded four albums, three of them at the Bethlehem Recording Studio. Kitchens also performed for luminaries including South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In December 1999, Kitchens joined Samuel Gooden, Fred Cash, and Vandy Hampton in the Impressions, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame rhythm and blues group that launched Curtis Mayfield’s career. In 2001, the Impressions toured with Eric Clapton.

Kitchens served as lead vocalist for the group—the role that Mayfield filled from 1963-1970. Kitchens, a long-term resident of Chattanooga, Tennessee, left the Impressions in 2002 and went on to work for the Bethlehem Center, where he served as the executive director of the Bethlehem Center Mass Choir and minister of music to the Bethlehem-Wiley United Methodist Church.

Willie Kitchens was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 27, 2005.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willie Kitchens was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 27, 2005, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Gospel musician, music director, and singer Willie Kitchens (1956 - ) sang with the musical group, The Impressions, and served as

executive director of the Bethlehem Center Mass Choir and minister of music to the Bethlehem-Wiley United Methodist Church.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Kitchens, Willie, 1956-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Kitchens, Willie, 1956---Interviews

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African American male singers--Interviews

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African American gospel singers--Interviews

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Rhythm and blues musicians--United States--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Impressions (Musical group)

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## **Occupations:**

Gospel Musician

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Music Director

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Singer

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MusicMakers

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## **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 Willie Kitchens, July 27, 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).

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## **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.

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## **Detailed Description of the Collection**

### **Series I: Original Interview Footage**

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Kitchens, Section  
A2005\_171\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:11 2005/07/27

Willie Kitchens Jr. was born on January 6, 1956 in Chattanooga, Tennessee to Lena Pearl Wise and Willie Kitchens, Sr. His father was born in Sandersville, Georgia in 1927 and his mother was born in Sandersville in 1929. Kitchens' parents migrated to Chattanooga approximately in 1950, and his father was hired at the DuPont Chemical Company. Kitchens inherited his musical talent from both sides of his family. His father played the organ and the

guitar with the gospel group, Five Sons of Calvary, who recorded and sang with some major artists like Shirley Caesar. On his mother's side, seven of his maternal uncles played the guitar and the keyboard, and music was a family pastime. Kitchens talks about WLAC radio station in Nashville, Tennessee and describes his earliest childhood memory, the sights, sounds, and smells of his neighborhood in Chattanooga and the city's racial demographics in the 1960s. Kitchens' attended Howard High School, whose student population went from first grade to twelfth grade.

African American male singers--Interviews.

African American gospel singers--Interviews.

Rhythm and blues musicians--United States--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Kitchens, Section  
A2005\_171\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:20 2005/07/27

Willie Kitchens, Jr. sang in the choir at Howard High School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and in the Rosebud choir at Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist Church. Though his parents divorced, his father was active in Kitchens' life and taught him to play the guitar when Kitchens was about seven years old. His mother bought him his first guitar and Kitchens tried to imitate musicians like Shirley Caesar and the Swan Silvertones that he heard on the radio. When he was in ninth grade his father invited him to play bass guitar with his gospel band. Later, Kitchens enrolled in the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, but left after a year. He worked as a musician with the First Baptist Church of Bozontown and played secular music with local musicians to earn money. In 1980, he recorded his first gospel album with the Ambassadors of Christ. A career highlight was being featured on HistoryMaker Bobby Jones' show. Kitchens describes civil rights activity in 1960s Chattanooga and the influence of blues music.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Kitchens, Section  
A2005\_171\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:10 2005/07/27

Willie Kitchens, Jr. appeared twice on HistoryMaker Bobby Jones' gospel show, once with the Ambassadors of Christ and a second time as a solo artist. He became the

minister of music at Church of the First Born in 1985, then the minister of music at Friendship Community Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1989. Kitchens talks about the history of the Bethlehem-Wiley United Methodist Church of Chattanooga where he worked after leaving Friendship Community. He began directing the Bethlehem Mass Youth Choir in about 1998. In 1999, he was invited to become a member of The Impressions. He first performed as the lead vocalist with The Impressions in Macon, Georgia and then toured with The Impressions in Europe with Eric Clapton. Kitchens talks about finding his own sound, lists noteworthy past and present members of the Impressions including HistoryMakers Jerry Butler, Samuel Gooden, and Fred Cash, describes highlights of his experience as a member and talks about being inducted into the Vocal Group Hall of Fame.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Kitchens, Section  
A2005\_171\_001\_004, TRT: 0:25:12 2005/07/27

Willie Kitchens, Jr.'s favorite Impressions' song to perform is 'People Get Ready.' He talks about Curtis Mayfield and how he also wrote original songs for The Impressions. He describes his musical philosophy, shares his advice to young singers and musicians and expresses his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He also comments on what he would do differently in his life, reflects upon his legacy and talks about the support of his family and why he appreciates the opportunity to work with The Impressions. Kitchens describes how he would like to be remembered and narrates his photographs.