

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Marla Blakey

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Blakey, Marla, 1949-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Marla Blakey,
Dates:	August 9, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:42:48).
Abstract:	Choreographer and dancer Marla Blakey (1949 -) staged shows for many important jazz, Motown, and pop performers. Blakey was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 9, 2005, in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_191
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer, choreographer, and theatrical producer Marla D. Blakey was born on April 26, 1949, in Washington, D.C. Blakey grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, where, as a teen, she created stage shows with neighborhood children at St. Mark's Social Center, part of the church program ministered by her legendary grandfather, Reverend Samuel L. Laviscount, pastor of St. Mark's Congregational Church.

At the age of sixteen following her graduation from Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Boston, Massachusetts, Blakey went, with her mother's permission, directly to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where she performed as a dancer at Club Harlem. There, Blakey performed with Sammy Davis, Jr., Billy Eckstein, Sarah Vaughan, and the bands of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, among many others. Blakey was still under twenty years of age when she danced in Las Vegas, Miami and Chicago; after performing around the United States, she went to Europe, dancing in Amsterdam, London, Germany, Belgium, and Italy. While in Europe, Blakey put together her own dance group and produced and booked shows at U.S. Army bases. After a few years in Europe, Blakey returned to Boston where she opened her own dance studio, and formed the Marla Blakey Dancers.

In 1975, Blakey moved to Los Angeles to advance her career; it was there that she choreographed and staged shows for artists such as Donna Summer, Anne Murray, Aretha Franklin, Bette Midler, David Bowie, Sting, and several Motown artists. During this time period, Blakey choreographed and staged her first television special *Motown Returns to the Apollo* for NBC. Blakey's career on stage, as a producer, and her affinity for jazz music was forged through the influence of her father, Ruble Blakey, who sang with Lionel Hampton's band; she first met her father at the age of twelve in Paris, France, where he was working as a booking agent for some jazz greats.

During Blakey's thirty years of travel, performing, and producing shows, her heart was never far away from her childhood years on the Island of Martha's Vineyard, where her mother owned a summer home. In 1988, Blakey moved to Martha's Vineyard to become a year round resident. On Martha's Vineyard, Blakey continues to be a prolific and significant producer, director, and choreographer; each summer she brings productions to the island's

performing arts centers and playhouses.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Marla Blakey was conducted by Robert Hayden on August 9, 2005, in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Choreographer and dancer Marla Blakey (1949 -) staged shows for many important jazz, Motown, and pop performers.

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:

Blakey, Marla, 1949-

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Blakey, Marla, 1949- --Interviews

African American dancers--Interviews

Women choreographers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dancer

Choreographer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Marla Blakey, August 9, 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 Marla Blakey, Section A2005_191_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Marla Blakey was born on April 26, 1949 at Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C. to Merle Laviscount Jones and Ruble Blakey. Her maternal grandfather was Reverend Samuel Laviscount, pastor of St. Mark Congregational Church in Roxbury, Boston, Massachusetts. Her mother's family was well known in the civil rights community, and they established the St. Mark Social Center, where Blakey put on shows with other neighborhood children. Her mother worked as an accountant in Boston. Blakey's father, a notable jazz singer and booking agent, was born in Bowling Green, Kentucky and had Native American maternal ancestry. Blakey first met her father at twelve when she travelled to Paris, France to spend the summer with him. While staying with him in Quartier Pigalle, Blakey began learning about show business and met many black expatriate artists. Blakey's father spent the final year of his life at Blakey's home on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Upon her father's passing, Blakey spread his ashes in Paris.

African American dancers--Interviews.

Women choreographers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Blakey, Section A2005_191_001_002, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Marla Blakey's grandfather, Reverend Samuel Laviscount, was known in Boston, Massachusetts for his powerful presence, which he passed on to her. She began dancing in Amsterdam, the Netherlands while visiting her father, a booking agent. Growing up in Boston, Blakey attended William Lloyd Garrison Elementary School and was surrounded by many luminaries in her neighborhood, including HistoryMaker Elma Lewis. After briefly attending The Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, Blakey learned jazz and tap at Stanley Brown Dance Studio. At Jeremiah E. Burke High School, she and classmate Donna Summers produced theatre shows. Upon Blakey's high school graduation at sixteen, she was hired by Larry Steele to perform in 'Smart Affairs' at Club Harlem in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She toured as a showgirl, performing in Chicago, Illinois, New York, New York, and Miami, Florida. The all-black ensemble faced discrimination in Las Vegas, Nevada, where the female performers were jailed overnight for lacking proper work permits.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Blakey, Section A2005_191_001_003, TRT: 0:28:37 ?

Marla Blakey, as a member of Larry Steele's 'Smart Affairs,' earned four hundred dollars a week while performing up to three shows a night in addition to daytime rehearsals. At Club Harlem in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the showgirls were required to stay at the bar after performing to attract customers. After leaving 'Smart Affairs,' she formed the Marla Blakey Dancers, held classes at the Marla Blakey Dance Studio in the Chickering Piano Factory lofts in Boston, Massachusetts, and taught master classes at local universities. In the early 1970s, she brought the Marla Blakey Dancers to Club Harlem. After disbanding her company, she went to Hollywood in Los Angeles, California, where former classmate Donna Summer hired her for choreography. As a choreographer, Blakey trained new artists at Motown, did music videos for ZZ Top and Fleetwood Mac and the television special "Motown Returns to the Apollo." Although Blakey returned to Boston for family holidays, she spent a great deal of her young life away from home.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Blakey, Section A2005_191_001_004, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

Marla Blakey worked with The Police, Aretha Franklin, The Temptations, Sister Sledge and other stars during her career as a choreographer. After thirteen years in Hollywood in Los Angeles, California, Blakey decided to return home. In 1988, she moved to Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, where her mother owned a house. As few black theater productions had taken place on the island, Blakey,

in a directorial debut, decided to produce Ntozake Shange's 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf' with the help of Liz White and Doris Pope Jackson. The show was supported by many in the community and premiered at the Old Whaling Church in Edgartown, Massachusetts as a massive success. Blakey went on to produce other shows, including ones for Martha's Vineyard Playhouse. In reflecting on her show business career, Blakey notes how she avoided scandal and earned her successes on merit, but believes she did not have the drive for personal success that was required to break through as a star.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Blakey, Section A2005_191_001_005, TRT: 0:29:16 ?

Marla Blakey has produced six jazz shows in the fifteen years that she has lived on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. The first took place in 1999. Many of the shows were funded by Blakey herself, while others were produced in collaboration with Featherstone Center for the Arts in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. The productions featured internationally recognized musicians, including Shawnn Monteiro, Stan Strickland, and Saul Davis, many of whom Blakey knew from her childhood in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. Blakey has helped other African American women enter show business, including Sheila Allen, an entrepreneur in Oak Bluffs who Blakey cast in a production of 'Jar the Floor,' and Felicia Taylor, a young singer that Blakey planned to include in her upcoming jazz show at the time of the interview. Blakey reflects upon her life, her approach to show business, her time on Martha's Vineyard, her plans for the future, and her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Blakey, Section A2005_191_001_006, TRT: 0:13:02 ?

Marla Blakey co-wrote 'The Dancers.' The play, which was about the performance world, drew upon Blakey's own knowledge of life as a dancer. She produced it at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, as well as bringing it to Atlanta, Georgia, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In imparting advice to young people interested in performance careers, she notes the importance of learning one's craft as well as understanding how show business operates. Blakey describes how she would like to be remembered and concludes her interview by narrating her photographs.