

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Harold Wheeler

PERSON

Wheeler, Harold

Alternative Names: Harold Wheeler; William Harold Wheeler, Jr.

Life Dates: July 14, 1943-

Place of Birth: St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Residence: Encino, CA

Occupations: Music Composer; Music Producer

Biographical Note

Producer and composer Harold Wheeler was born William Harold Wheeler, Jr. on July 14, 1943 in St. Louis, Missouri to Roxetta McGee and William Harold Wheeler, Sr. At Antioch Baptist Church, where the members included Chuck Berry and Ike and Tina Turner, Wheeler played the piano for Sunday school at age five. Wheeler attended Turner Branch Elementary School and graduated from Sumner High School in 1960. He then attended Howard University, where he

earned his B.A. degree in 1964. Wheeler earned his M.A. degree in music from Manhattan School of Music in 1968.

From 1968 to 1971, Wheeler worked as an assistant program director for CBS-FM Radio in New York. In 1971, Wheeler left CBS in order to compose his own music and coach other performers. That same year, composer Burt Bacharach hired Wheeler for his new musical Promises, Promises, making him the youngest conductor on Broadway. Wheeler was soon working with Michael Bennett composing dance music for A Chorus Line, going on to work with Bennett on Dreamgirls, Coco and SCANDAL. In 1971, Wheeler worked as musical director for Melvin Van Peeble's groundbreaking musical Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death, and for Don't Play Us Cheap in 1972. From 1971 to 1979, Wheeler composed jingles for Pepsi, Coca-Cola, TWA, United Airlines, McDonald's and Folgers. Wheeler's motion picture credits include: Straight Out of Brooklyn; Love! Valour! Compassion!; Spanish Judges; Cotton Comes to Harlem; Fortune and Men's Eyes; Hercules; City Slickers; Keeping the Faith; and The Kid. Wheeler was arranger and/or music director for special events such as the 1995 and 1996 People's Choice Awards; Motown 30 "What's Goin On?"; the 1996 Olympics; the 1996 and 2000 Democratic National Conventions; 2002 American Film Institute Awards; and the 2003 Academy Awards. Throughout his career, Wheeler arranged and produced for Debbie Allen, Anita Baker, Peabo Bryson, Aretha Franklin, Della Reese, Nina Simone, B.B. King, Smokey Robinson, Diana Ross, Freda Payne, Kathleen Battle, Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, Al Green, Englebert Humperdinck, Irene Cara, Joe Cocker, Dizzy Gillespie, Gloria Gaynor, Chita Rivera, Whitney Houston, and Stephanie Mills, among scores of other performers.

Nominated for six Tony Awards for his work on the musicals, Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, Hairspray, The Full Monty, Swing!, Little Me and The Life, Wheeler won

the Drama Desk Award for Hairspray for Best Orchestration in 2003.

Wheeler resided in Los Angeles with his wife, actress and musical star, Hattie Winston.

Harold Wheeler was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on October 3, 2005 and October 16, 2019.

Related Entries

Turner Branch Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Charles H. Sumner High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Turner Branch Big Picture Middle School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Howard University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Bachelor of Music

Manhattan School of Music [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Masters

Self Employed [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Orchestrator & Arranger

Self Employed [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Arranger and Producer

CBS-FM Radio [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Assistant Program Director