

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Harold Wheeler

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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>	Wheeler, Harold
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 16, 2019 and October 3, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005 and 2019
<b>Physical Description:</b>	11 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:57:44).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Producer and composer Harold Wheeler (1943- ) was the youngest conductor on Broadway for Burt Bacharach's Promises, Promises, and has been nominated for six Tony Awards, winning the Drama Desk Award for Hairspray for Best Orchestrations in 2003. Wheeler was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 16, 2019 and October 3, 2005, in Encino, California and Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_224
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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 Orchestrations 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.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Harold Wheeler was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 16, 2019 and October 3, 2005, in Encino, California and Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Producer and composer Harold Wheeler

(1943-) was the youngest conductor on Broadway for Burt Bacharach's Promises, Promises, and has been nominated for six Tony Awards, winning the Drama Desk Award for Hairspray for Best Orchestrations in 2003.

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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:**

Wheeler, Harold

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Wheeler, Harold--Interviews

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African American musicians--Interviews

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African Americans in musical theater--Interviews

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African American composers--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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## **Occupations:**

Music Composer

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Music Producer

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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 Harold Wheeler, October 16, 2019 and October 3, 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 Harold Wheeler, Section  
A2005\_224\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:03 2005/10/03

Harold Wheeler was born on July 14, 1943 in St. Louis, Missouri to Roxetta McGee Wheeler and William Wheeler, Sr. His mother, who was half Native American, was born September 27, 1927 in Natchez, Mississippi to Jessie McGee and Willie McGee. Wheeler's father was born October 10, 1892 in the South, but fled north when he was accused of a crime he did not commit. He was light-skinned, and Wheeler believes he was targeted because of a relationship with a white woman. Wheeler's

parents met in St. Louis at a church function. Wheeler's mother opened a beauty parlor, and his father worked as a bartender and numbers runner. Wheeler recalls reciting the alphabet at his father's bar and doing homework in his mother's beauty parlor. His interest in music began when his father taught him to play the piano as a child.

Wheeler's father passed away in 1955. Wheeler's family lived in small flats, until his mother bought a larger home while Wheeler was in college.

African American musicians--Interviews.

African Americans in musical theater--Interviews.

African American composers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section  
A2005\_224\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:00 2005/10/03

Harold Wheeler was a child prodigy who played piano for his Sunday school at six years old. His mother, recognizing his talent, sheltered him from negative influences. Wheeler remembers being caught joy riding with a friend. Throughout his school years, Wheeler was placed in accelerated courses. He played piano accompaniment for the choir at Charles H. Sumner High School, performed with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, and led a doo-wop group. Wheeler was influenced by St. Louis natives such as Chuck Berry, John Hicks and Miles Davis. He trained in classical music and won many competitions. With his talent recognized from a young age, Wheeler did not consider any career paths besides music. Upon his music teacher's advice, Wheeler attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. Wheeler shares an anecdote from his college years when he was informed that Arthur Ashe was hitting on Wheeler's girlfriend back in St. Louis.

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section  
A2005\_224\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:33 2005/10/03

Harold Wheeler attended Howard University with TV producer HistoryMaker Charles F. Johnson, singer Roberta Flack and jazz musician Donny Hathaway. He did not find his coursework challenging or engaging. During college, Wheeler worked as a janitor and as a singing piano player in local clubs. After graduating in 1964, he

stayed in Washington, D.C. for a year, playing in clubs and joining civil rights protests. He lost a job after he was photographed with Stokely Carmichael at a rally. Wheeler moved to New York City where he attended the Manhattan School of Music and worked as a program director at CBS for three years. Realizing that he missed performing, Wheeler left CBS. While accompanying a singer who was auditioning for 'Promises, Promises,' Wheeler was discovered by Burt Bacharach and asked to play piano for the show. He was promoted to conductor, becoming the first black conductor and the youngest on Broadway. He also collaborated with HistoryMaker Melvin Van Peebles and performed with Liza Minnelli.

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section  
A2005\_224\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:50 2005/10/03

Harold Wheeler was the musical director for HistoryMaker Melvin Van Peebles' Broadway production of 'Ain't Supposed To Die a Natural Death.' Wheeler reminisces about jalapeno eating contests, riding his first motorcycle and learning about the movie business with Van Peebles. In the 1970s, Wheeler produced disco records for artists such as Gloria Gaynor, and composed jingles for over five hundred commercials, including one for Folgers Coffee. Wheeler orchestrated the music for the Tony award-winning musical 'The Wiz,' and also worked on 'Dream Girls,' 'The Full Monty' and 'Hairspray.' Wheeler was the composer for the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia. He recalls his speaking tours to historically black colleges and a relief benefit in Oxford, Mississippi where he served as the orchestra conductor. Wheeler also reflects upon serving as a role model for other young African Americans and the lack of visibility for many African Americans in the entertainment industry who work behind the scenes.

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section  
A2005\_224\_001\_005, TRT: 0:24:03 2005/10/03

Harold Wheeler produced records and worked as an arranger for many artists, including Gloria Gaynor, HistoryMaker Melvin Van Peebles, Engelbert Humperdinck and his studio group, Consumer Rapport. Wheeler describes his hopes and concerns for the African

American community. He also reflects upon his life, legacy and serving as a role model for young African Americans. He concludes the tape by narrating his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section A2005\_224\_002\_006, TRT: 6:29:35 2019/10/16

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section A2005\_224\_002\_007, TRT: 7:30:06 2019/10/16

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section A2005\_224\_002\_008, TRT: 8:30:32 2019/10/16

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section A2005\_224\_002\_009, TRT: 9:28:35 2019/10/16

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section A2005\_224\_002\_010, TRT: 10:28:55 2019/10/16

Video Oral History Interview with Harold Wheeler, Section A2005\_224\_002\_011, TRT: 11:09:32 2019/10/16