

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bernie Casey

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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>	Casey, Bernie
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bernie Casey,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 4, 2005 and October 8, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:09:27).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Film actor and football player Bernie Casey (1939 - 2017 ) played for the San Francisco 49ers and the L.A. Rams before turning to acting in film and television. As an artist, Casey produced more than thirty solo exhibitions and served for twenty years as chairman of the board at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Savannah, Georgia. Casey was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 4, 2005 and October 8, 2005, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_229
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Bernie Casey was born Bernard Terry Casey on June 8, 1939, in the small coal mining community of Wyco, West Virginia, to Frank Leslie Casey and Flossie Coleman Casey. While Casey was still a youth, he and his family moved to Columbus where he attended Garfield Elementary School, Champion Junior High, and Columbus East High School. Casey had already shown an aptitude for painting and drawing, and soon developed his athletic abilities as well,

particularly for basketball and football.

Casey attended Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio in 1957, thanks in part to an athletic scholarship, where he remained intent on becoming an artist. Casey excelled in football while attending BGSU, and was considered a key player in the school's 1959 championship season. Casey was named a member of the Little All American Team, and was also competitive in track and field. Casey received his B.S. degree in Art Education from BGSU in 1961, and later received his Master of Fine Arts degree from the same school.

In 1961, after receiving his B.S. degree, Casey was drafted into the NFL in the first round by the San Francisco 49ers, with whom he would spend six seasons, followed by two years with the Los Angeles Rams. In the off-season, Casey returned to Bowling Green State University, in order to complete his M.F.A. degree, which he received in 1966. After his standout 1967 athletic season in which Casey caught 53 passes for a career-high 871 yards and eight touchdowns, Casey was named to the 1968 Pro Bowl team. Shortly thereafter, Casey became disillusioned with the NFL and professional sports in general, and decided to return to his creative pursuits.

In 1969, Casey appeared in his first film, *Guns of the Magnificent Seven*, a sequel to *The Magnificent Seven*; that same year, he wrote *Look at the People: Poems and Paintings*, a book of art and poetry. Casey would publish two similar books later on in his career: *Where is the Revolution? And Other Poems* in 1973, and *Silent Screams* in 1983. In 1971, Casey produced an independent film entitled *Bernie Casey: Black Artist*, which focused on his thoughts and observations as a painter. As an artist, Casey has produced more than 30 solo exhibitions; he received an honorary doctorate degree from The Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Savannah, Georgia, where he served for twenty years as chairman of the board and advocated for arts education.

Casey has made over fifty-seven appearances in film and television, including the movies *Cleopatra Jones*, *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*; and TV programs such as *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *L.A. Law*. In 1997, Casey produced, wrote, directed and acted in *The Dinner*, an allegorical drama.

Casey passed away on September 19, 2017.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bernie Casey was conducted by Paul Brock on October 4, 2005 and October 8, 2005, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Film actor and football player Bernie Casey (1939 - 2017 ) played for the San Francisco 49ers and the L.A. Rams before turning to acting in film and television. As an artist, Casey produced more than thirty solo exhibitions and served for twenty years as chairman of the board at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Savannah, Georgia.

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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:**

Casey, Bernie

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Casey, Bernie--Interviews

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African American actors--Interviews

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African American football players--Interviews

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African American artists--Interviews

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African American poets--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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National Football League.

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**Occupations:**

Football Player

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Film Actor

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**HistoryMakers® Category:**

## **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 Bernie Casey, October 4, 2005 and October 8, 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 Bernie Casey, Section  
A2005\_229\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:55 2005/10/04

Bernie Casey was born on June 8, 1939 in Wyco, West Virginia to Flossie Coleman Casey and Frank Casey. His maternal grandparents, Charles Coleman and Pera Lee Coleman, raised eight children in Logan, West Virginia. Casey's parents met at the marriage of his maternal aunt and paternal uncle, and were married themselves when his mother was eighteen years old. They settled in Wyco, where Casey's father worked in the coal mines. His father was once wounded by a pick ax in a mining accident, and had to recover quickly. Casey's family was often in debt, as they bought most of their goods on credit at the company store. His family also participated in Wyco's hog butchering festivals, where the community feasted on souse meat and chitlins, and then smoked and salted the surplus meat. When Casey was three years old, he moved with his parents and sister, Franketta Casey, to Columbus, Ohio. There, they purchased a duplex building on the city's East Side, and his father worked for the Buckeye Steel Castings Company.

African American actors--Interviews.

African American football players--Interviews.

African American artists--Interviews.

African American poets--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernie Casey, Section  
A2005\_229\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:54 2005/10/04

Bernie Casey attended the all-black Garfield Elementary School in Columbus, Ohio, which was located next door to his family's home. Casey was left-handed, but a teacher forced him to write with his right hand. Even so, he excelled in drawing, and was often selected to illustrate holiday scenes and maps on the chalkboard. Although his community on the East Side of Columbus was predominantly black, many of the neighborhood store owners were Jewish, while the local produce vendors were Italian. He often travelled on segregated buses to visit his maternal uncle, preacher Thurman Coleman, Sr., in Louisville, Kentucky. Casey went on to attend Champion Junior High School under Principal J. Arnett Mitchell, a feared disciplinarian. After a growth spurt in the ninth grade, he joined the school basketball team, and helped

win the citywide championship tournament. In 1954, Casey enrolled at East High School, where the mostly African American student body was taught by a nearly all-white faculty.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernie Casey, Section  
A2005\_229\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:55 2005/10/04

Bernie Casey's mother, Flossie Coleman Casey, abandoned his family when Casey was thirteen years old, which motivated him to succeed in academics, athletics and the arts. They later reconciled when Casey was an adult. Casey attended East High School in Columbus, Ohio, where he competed on the basketball, football and track teams. Casey's mechanical drawing teacher, Mr. Wade, was the school's only black faculty member. An all-state football player, Casey received a scholarship to Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. He planned to major in art, despite his father's misgivings. Upon graduating high school in 1957, Casey enrolled at the nearly all-white Bowling Green State University, where the only black male students were on athletic scholarships. During Casey's junior year, the football team won the NCAA College Division championship. He regularly experienced racial discrimination from the faculty, including a sociology professor who refused to grade black students above a C.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernie Casey, Section  
A2005\_229\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:03 2005/10/04

Bernie Casey was a star football player at the nearly all-white Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio from 1957 to 1960. Students segregated themselves at the cafeteria, and Coach Doyt Perry urged Casey to end his friendship with a white girl, until Casey threatened to quit the team. Casey studied art under Professor Willard Wankelman, and graduated in 1961. He was then selected by the San Francisco 49ers in the first round of the National Football League draft, and played for Coach Jack Christiansen. During the offseason, he completed a M.F.A. degree at Bowling Green State University. Casey began his painting career in San Francisco, California, where he had his first solo show at the John Bolles Gallery. He also exhibited work in Los Angeles at the Ankrum Gallery and

the Museum of African American Art, where he was featured in a show with fellow black athletes Ernie Barnes and Milan Tiff. After Casey was traded to the Los Angeles Rams, he studied acting with blacklisted actor Jeff Corey.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernie Casey, Section  
A2005\_229\_002\_005, TRT: 0:30:20 2005/10/08

Bernie Casey pursued both his National Football League (NFL) career and his work as a painter during the 1960s, and attributes his success in both to his self-discipline. He was not passionate about football, and retired from the NFL's Los Angeles Rams in 1968 to become an actor. Casey studied acting for several years so as not to rely on his reputation as an NFL star at auditions. In 1969, he obtained his first role in the film 'Guns of the Magnificent Seven.' Soon after, he appeared in '...tick...tick...tick...' with football player Jim Brown, and 'Brian's Song' with actors Billy Dee Williams and James Caan. In 1978, artist Richard Rowan and his wife, Paula Wallace, founded the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia. Casey served on the college's board for two decades, where he oversaw the growth of the college's enrollment from 7 students to 5500 students, and recruited New York Knicks player Cazzie Russell and Boston Red Sox player Luis Tiant as athletic coaches.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernie Casey, Section  
A2005\_229\_002\_006, TRT: 0:29:00 2005/10/08

Bernie Casey acted in the movie 'Brian's Song,' and recalls how actor James Caan received a hard hit from one of the Chicago Bears while filming a football scene. Casey appeared in several blaxploitation films, like 'Hit Man' and 'I'm Gonna Git You Sucka,' and explains that studios mandated similarly low budgets for white niche movies. Casey sought out roles as historical African Americans, such as Maurice Stokes in 'Maurie'; Joe Louis in 'Ring of Passion'; and a member of a slave revolt in 'A House Divided: Denmark Vesey's Rebellion.' Casey also played the lead character in an NBC drama about a black widower father, 'Harris and Company,' directed by Ivan Dixon. NBC was unwilling to commit to a serious show with a black cast, and cancelled it after four episodes. Casey often turned down parts in comedies such as 'Good

Times' and 'That's My Mama,' because he found such portrayals of African Americans to be demeaning. He also struggled to overcome being perceived as a football player rather than an actor.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernie Casey, Section  
A2005\_229\_002\_007, TRT: 0:10:20 2005/10/08

Bernie Casey acted in the 'Roots: The Next Generations' miniseries in 1979. He describes his belief that 'Roots' did not accurately depict American slavery in order to placate the white television audience. He also talks about the history of violence against Africans and Native Americans by whites from the time of Christopher Columbus, and how its legacy continued at the time of the interview. Casey concludes the interview by reflecting upon his own legacy as an artist and educator.