

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese

---

## 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>	Kool Moe Dee (Musician)
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 12, 2005 and December 6, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:54:33).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Hip hop artist Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese (1963 - ) was the first rapper to perform at the Grammys. His 1987 album, How Ya Like Me Now, went platinum, and his 1989 album, Knowledge Is King, went gold. DeWese was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 12, 2005 and December 6, 2005, in Alpine, New Jersey. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_253
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Hip Hop Pioneer Kool Moe Dee was born Mohandas DeWese on August 8, 1963, in New York City. His early music career began at Norman Thomas High School in the late 1970s. Having grown up in Manhattan, DeWese was an early favorite at block parties in Harlem performing with high school buddies L.A. Sunshine and Special K plus DJ Easy as the Treacherous Three. After receiving his high school diploma, he attended the State University of New York at Old Westbury and graduated with his B.A. degree in communications.

In 1978, The Treacherous Three was officially formed. An introduction to Bobby Robinson by Spoonie G led to the Treacherous Three's debut on wax in 1980 with "The New Language of Rap." The single was released on Robinson's Enjoy Records. In 1981, two more singles followed, "Body Rock" and "Feel the Heart" before the group's contract was sold to Sugar Hill Records. The Treacherous Three split up in the mid-1980s after recording several singles for Sugar Hill Records.

For his solo debut, DeWese enlisted an unknown producer, seventeen-year-old Teddy Riley. "Go See the Doctor" followed and became an underground hit. By 1986, Kool Moe Dee was signed to Jive Records, and his self-titled debut album appeared that same year. In 1987, with an album entitled, How Ya Like Me Now, DeWese went platinum and was followed in 1989 by the gold certified Knowledge Is King, for which he became the first rapper to perform at the Grammy Awards ceremonies. Also in 1989, DeWese worked on several important projects including the single "Self-Destruction," and Quincy Jones' all-star Back on the Block album, which united Hip Hop stars with their musical forebears. After moving to Los Angeles, DeWese appeared in several movies including Panther in 1995 and Crossroads in 2002.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 12, 2005 and December 6, 2005, in Alpine, New Jersey, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Hip hop artist Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese (1963 - ) was the first rapper to perform at the Grammys. His 1987 album, *How Ya Like Me Now*, went platinum, and his 1989 album, *Knowledge Is King*, went gold.

---

## 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:

Kool Moe Dee (Musician)

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Kool Moe Dee (Musician)--Interviews

---

African American musicians--Interviews

---

Rap musicians--United States--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

Hip Hop Artist

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

---

## 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 Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, December 12, 2005 and December 6, 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 Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, Section  
A2005\_253\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:01 ?

Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese was born on August 8, 1963 in New York City to Josette and William DeWese. DeWese's maternal ancestors were from the West Indies. His mother was eloquent, had a strong sense of humor, and

approached life with a balance of optimism and pessimism. Her favorite television shows included 'Julia' and 'Dark Shadows.' She hoped to be an actress, but early motherhood kept her from pursuing this dream. DeWese's father was born in 1928 in Manhattan. He taught DeWese courage in the face of adversity and was never one to back down from confrontations, even with the police. However, DeWese describes his parents as functioning alcoholics. With his two siblings, DeWese grew up in Harlem where he developed his analytical personality and sense of community. In recalling his childhood peer group, DeWese notes that they were not overly concerned with school, but were also not delinquents. He also shares his perspective about church and Harlem's hustler culture.

African American musicians--Interviews.

Rap musicians--United States--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, Section A2005\_253\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese grew up in Harlem, New York. His early musical interests included Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Earth, Wind & Fire and jazz, which his mother enjoyed. An obedient and quizzical student, DeWese applied to Norman Thomas High School for Business and Commercial Education, in part because of its majority-female population. DeWese's father admired Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali's anti-Vietnam War stance, which DeWese also respected. DeWese witnessed Ali's loss to Joe Frazier in the Fight of the Century. Although DeWese initially joined in the outcry denouncing Frazier's win, his father convinced him to accept the results while teaching DeWese a lesson about truth and integrity. DeWese also admired the Black Panther Party for their free breakfast program and commitment to political education. DeWese remembers his confusion around societal standards that held light skin as more attractive than dark skin, his early dating experiences, and his subsequent approach to relationships.

Video Oral History Interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, Section A2005\_253\_002\_003, TRT: 0:29:37 ?

Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese grew up attending block parties in Harlem, New York where he was introduced to break beats. In 1977, DeWese first heard Lovebug Starski, who inspired DeWese's interest in emceeing. DeWese remembers seeing Grandmaster Flash perform at one of Starski's shows in Harlem. Unlike Starski, Flash performed with a crew. As a result, DeWese was decided he wanted a crew of his own. During this time, he attended Norman Thomas High School for Business and Commercial Education along with his future partner, Special K, and classmates from Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx. The lunchroom at Norman Thomas doubled as a space where students played music. There, with his friend, Dano B as DJ, DeWese performed his rhymes for the first time. DeWese distinguishes the style and vibe of Manhattan's hip-hop culture from the other New York City boroughs. DeWese talks about external validation and the origin of the term hip-hop.

Video Oral History Interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, Section A2005\_253\_002\_004, TRT: 0:29:22 ?

Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese met Spoonie Gee, emcee and one of the founding members of the Treacherous Three, while boxing at the Police Athletic League in New York City. In Harlem, DeWese's friend DJ Easy Lee was the first DJ who invited DeWese to the stage. During this time, DeWese attended New York City's Norman Thomas High School, where he premiered his fast rhyme technique while performing in the lunch room in 1979. With his

classmate LA Sunshine and Spoonie Gee, DeWese formed the Treacherous Three. The hip-hop trio excelled at storytelling and rhyming. When Spoonie left the group to pursue his solo career, Special K, another of DeWese's classmates, joined the crew. Spoonie briefly returned to the group, and, due to his recording success, the group was renamed Spoonie Gee and the Treacherous Three. In 1980, they released their first record, 'New Rap Language,' the A-side to Spoonie's 'Love Rap.' DeWese also distinguishes between hustling and emceeing and reflects upon the early hip-hop generation.

Video Oral History Interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, Section A2005\_253\_002\_005, TRT: 0:29:57 ?

Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese recorded 'New Rap Language' with Spoonie Gee and the Treacherous Three at Unique Recording Studios. A few months later, Spoonie returned to his solo career, and DeWese, LA Sunshine and Special K continued as the Treacherous Three. LA served as the group's booking agent and landed them a gig in Poughkeepsie in 1980. The crowd's positive response helped DeWese fully realize his passion for rhyming. In 1981, the group recorded 'Feel the Heartbeat,' and its popularity surpassed even Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. During this time, DeWese dropped out of Norman Thomas High School when a guidance counselor discouraged his musical career. Although his father did not dispute DeWese's decision, his parting words inspired DeWese to continue his education. He passed the GED and enrolled at State University of New York College at Old Westbury while continuing to record and perform with the Treacherous Three. He also describes the first time he heard their recording on the radio.

Video Oral History Interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, Section A2005\_253\_002\_006, TRT: 0:30:52 ?

Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese attended State University of New York at Old Westbury while performing and recording with the Treacherous Three. In 1985, the group's recordings aired on Mr. Magic's hip-hop program on New York's WBLS Radio. That year, the Treacherous Three recorded their final record, 'Gotta Rock.' Although DeWese wanted to continue, Special K and LA Sunshine were dissuaded by the record industry's practice of withholding the group's royalties and other mistreatment, and the group disbanded. As a result, DeWese pursued his solo career. His 1987 release 'How Ya Like Me Now,' showcased his lyrical ability. DeWese compares himself to Rakim, another hip-hop artist known for his superior lyricism, and LL Cool J, a then-emerging artist. He comments on LL Cool J's talent and personality, and remembers when LL attempted to visit him at his dorm at Old Westbury. DeWese also talks about the success of hip-hop artists in the mid-1980s, such as Doug E. Fresh, Slick Rick, Big Daddy Kane and Run-D.M.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, Section A2005\_253\_002\_007, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese entered into a rap battle with LL Cool J, who dissed DeWese's album sales on his record, 'Jack the Ripper.' After the success of his album 'How Ya Like Me Now,' DeWese responded to LL's insult with 'Let's Go.' DeWese recalls LL winning at the Soul Train Music Awards when they were nominated for the same category. When their audiences grew tired of DeWese and LL's battle, DeWese ceased to produce diss records. DeWese's efforts to make more socially conscious music was not supported by his label, Jive Records. In considering his contribution to the Grammy Award-winning album 'Back on the Block,' and his relationship with HistoryMaker Quincy Jones, DeWese reflects upon how chance shapes one's career. DeWese

shares his hopes for the hip-hop community, his desire for successful artists to pool their resources in addressing social problems, and his perspective on gangster rap and the music industry. In 2003, DeWese published 'There's a God on the Mic: The True 50 Greatest MCs.'

Video Oral History Interview with Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese, Section A2005\_253\_002\_008, TRT: 0:22:53 ?

Mohandas "Kool Moe Dee" DeWese describes the evolution of hip-hop culture since the 1970s, including how Eminem's success opened doors for black hip-hop artists. He talks about racism in the entertainment industry and reflects upon American politics, particularly hip-hop's role in addressing social issues. DeWese concludes the interview by describing the global impact of hip-hop and its historical significance.