

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Melvin Van Peebles

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Van Peebles, Melvin, 1932-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Melvin Van Peebles,
Dates:	September 9, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:41:17).
Abstract:	Actor, film director, fiction writer, and playwright Melvin Van Peebles (1932 - 2021) was best known for his 1971 independent film, <i>Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song</i> , which was credited with helping start Hollywood's Blaxploitation era in the 1970s. He also wrote novels and two Broadway plays, and acted in several films. Van Peebles was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 9, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_100
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Filmmaker, author, and actor Melvin Van Peebles was born on August 21, 1932, in Chicago, Illinois. Growing up during World War II, he spent his adolescence with his father, a tailor. Van Peebles graduated from Township High School in Phoenix, Illinois, in 1949 and spent a year at West Virginia State College before transferring to Ohio Wesleyan University where he earned his B.A. degree in English literature in 1953.

During the late 1950s, Van Peebles served three and a half years as a flight navigator in the United States Air Force. After the military, he lived briefly in Mexico and San Francisco where he wrote his first book, *The Big Heart*, which was about the life of San Francisco's cable cars and their drivers. Moving to the Netherlands, he studied at the Dutch National Theatre before moving to France in the early 1960s. During this time, Van Peebles wrote several published novels in French, including *La Permission* in 1967. He filmed this story under the title, *The Story of the Three-Day Pass*, and it was selected as the French entry in the 1968 San Francisco Film Festival. It earned critical acclaim, which helped him obtain a studio contract with Columbia Pictures. In 1969, Van Peebles returned to the U.S. to direct and score his first Hollywood film *Watermelon Man*. The film was released in 1970, followed by his independent feature *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, probably his best known work. Some of his other films include *Don't Play Us Cheap* in 1973, *Identity Crisis* in 1989, *Gang in Blue* in 1996 and *Le Conte du ventre plein* in 2000.

As a playwright and composer, Van Peebles wrote two Broadway hit plays: *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* in 1971 and *Don't Play Us Cheap* in 1972, for which he earned a Tony Award nomination. As an actor, Van Peebles has appeared in several films including Robert Altman's *O.C. and Stiggs* in 1987 and Mario Van Peebles' *Panther* in 1995, which he also wrote and co-produced. In 2005, Van Peebles was the subject of a documentary entitled *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)*. He has been honored with numerous awards, including a Grammy and a Drama Desk Award. He received the Children's Live-Action Humanitas Prize

for *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* in 1987, and in 1999, he was awarded the Chicago Underground Film Festival's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Van Peebles lived in New York City.

Van Peebles passed away on September 21, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Melvin Van Peebles was conducted by Shawn Wilson on September 9, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actor, film director, fiction writer, and playwright Melvin Van Peebles (1932 - 2021) was best known for his 1971 independent film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, which was credited with helping start Hollywood's Blaxploitation era in the 1970s. He also wrote novels and two Broadway plays, and acted in several films.

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:

Van Peebles, Melvin, 1932-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Van Peebles, Melvin, 1932---Interviews

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews

African American motion picture actors and actresses--Interviews

African American dramatists--Interviews

African American novelists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Film Director

Writer

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 Melvin Van Peebles, September 9, 2006. 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 Melvin Van Peebles, Section A2006_100_001_001, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Melvin Van Peebles was born on April 21, 1932 in Chicago, Illinois to Edwin Griffin Peebles and Marion Peebles. His mother was born near the border of Texas and Louisiana. She was named Edwin because her father was hoping for a son, and thought assigning his child a name before birth would make the baby more likely to be a boy. Van Peebles' father was born in the South, and later moved to Chicago, where he had a tailor shop on the South Side. Van Peebles lived in Chicago's Washington Park neighborhood, where he watched knife fights from his bedroom, and saw Billy Eckstine and Dinah Washington promote their music at a local record shop. When he was ten years old, his family moved to Phoenix, Illinois, where they were one of the first black families in the neighborhood. Van Peebles took the train daily to Chicago to work at his maternal grandfather's barbershop and his father's shop. He recalls his first sexual experiences in the back of the tailor shop, and dating a woman in her forties as a teenager.

African American families--United States.

African American business enterprises.

Terrorists--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin Van Peebles, Section A2006_100_001_002, TRT: 0:30:07 ?

Melvin Van Peebles grew up in the Washington Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. He lived with his extended family, including his maternal grandparents and his aunt, Jane Thomas, who had a clubfoot and worked as a psychic. Van Peebles visited the South with his father, Marion Peebles, where he faced racial slurs at a post office. He attended an African Methodist Episcopal church with his family, but forsook religion after the minister threatened to beat him. Van Peebles moved with his family to Phoenix, Illinois at the age of ten. He worked at his father's tailor shop in Chicago, where he became a skilled secondhand clothing salesman. Van Peebles graduated from Thornton Township High School in Harvey, and enrolled at West Virginia State College in Institute, but had trouble making friends there. He transferred to Ohio Wesleyan University, where he joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps. He was once kicked out of a writing class, and was lectured by the dean for arguing in class and shaving his head.

African American families--United States.

African American churches.

Education, Higher--United States.

United States. Army--African Americans--Social conditions.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin Van Peebles, Section A2006_100_001_003, TRT:

0:29:26 ?

Melvin Van Peebles impressed a staff member of The Art Institute of Chicago with his intelligence during a grade school field trip, and was offered a scholarship to the museum's school. When he later attended Ohio Wesleyan University, he pursued his interest in the arts and majored in English literature. Graduating in 1953, Van Peebles joined the U.S. Air Force, where he served for three years as a flight navigator. He was stationed in Texas, where he was often accused of impersonating an officer by white locals who did not believe a black man could hold that rank. During Van Peebles' time in the military, he married Maria Marx, a white woman. After witnessing the deaths of several fellow servicemen, he decided not to reenlist in 1956 out of concern for his safety. Van Peebles and his wife moved to Mexico, where they had their first child, Mario Van Peebles. He eventually could not remain in Mexico without a visa, so he moved to San Francisco, California, and worked as a cable car gripman.

Education, Higher.

Segregation--Texas--History.

African American families--United States.

Interracial marriage--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin Van Peebles, Section A2006_100_001_004, TRT: 0:12:37 ?

Melvin Van Peebles worked as a gripman for the cable car system in San Francisco, California during the late 1950s, and wrote a non-fiction book, 'The Big Heart,' about the city's streetcars. He was approached by a fan of the book, who praised the layout and the captions and recommended that he explore making movies. Although Van Peebles knew little about filmmaking, he borrowed a 16 millimeter camera, calculated that he could make a movie on a budget of \$557, and began to teach himself the craft. He created three eleven-minute films while living in San Francisco. Van Peebles taught himself how to play the piano. He was fired from the cable car company because his white boss disapproved of a black man being a writer. Unable to find directing work in Hollywood, Van Peebles took a job at the Rincon Annex Post Office to support his family. He became interested in learning celestial mechanics after the launch of Sputnik 1, and used G.I. Bill funding to study in the Netherlands.

Film-making (Motion Pictures)

San Francisco (Calif.)--social life and customs.

Amsterdam (Netherlands)