

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
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Melvin Van Peebles,
Dates:	September 9, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	4 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:41:17).
Abstract:	Actor, film director, fiction writer, and playwright Melvin Van Peebles (1932 -) is best known for his 1971 independent film, <i>Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song</i> , which has been credited with helping start Hollywood's Blaxploitation era in the 1970s. He has also written 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 resides in New York City.

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 Betacam SP videocassettes. Actor, film director, fiction writer, and playwright Melvin Van Peebles (1932 -) is best known for his 1971 independent film, Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, which has been credited with helping start Hollywood's Blaxploitation era in the 1970s. He has also written 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

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

EntertainmentMakers

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 2/5/2013 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, September 9, 2006

Video Oral History Interview with Melvin Van Peebles, Section A2006_100_001_001, TRT: 0:29:07 2006/09/09

Melvin Van Peebles was born in Cook County Hospital and lived on the south side of Chicago until he turned ten years old. When he was ten, his parents moved to Phoenix, Illinois, a South suburb of Harvey, a suburb of Chicago from 58th Street between Calumet and Prairie. He witnessed burning crosses and remembered that his family was the first black family on their block. He was the only black in his class. His father, Marion Peebles, was a tailor and owned a tailoring shop on the south side of Chicago near 58th Prairie. Van Peebles worked for his dad from ten years old until he went away to college. He experienced a duality in early adolescence, which gave him stereovision. He possessed two ways of talking, experienced minor professional mobility in the suburbs and hardcore hood in the city. Van Peebles discussed his family, the people in the neighborhood where he worked, and his relationship with the clients and neighbors of the tailor shop and his unusual childhood.

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 2006/09/09

Melvin Van Peebles discussed his relationships as a young man, early education, and his early family life in Bronzeville and into adulthood. Van Peebles' family shared a multiple bedroom apartment on 58th near Prairie and Calumet, which was in the same building as his father's tailor shop. Van Peebles discusses an awakening experience during his childhood when he was around six or seven when he realized he wanted to be a minister. Van Peebles discussed growing up in Chicago around his father's tailor shop, living in the suburbs and attending school and how he dealt with a myriad of duplicity throughout his childhood and adolescence.

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 2006/09/09

Melvin Van Peebles discusses his experiences in college at Ohio Wesleyan. Van Peebles majored in English Literature and Art. Van Peebles planned to view exhibits in Europe so he saved money and purchased a ticket for his graduation. Unfortunately, he was drafted into the military. Van Peebles discusses experiences of being in the military, the specialties and dangers of his job in the military, his dating life and becoming a father. Van Peebles says segregation and racism was rapid in Texas and on the military base. Van Peebles got out of the military as soon as his duty ended. He moved to Mexico where his son, Mario, was born and lived until his visa expired. He then moved his family to San Francisco where he became a grip man on the cable car.

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 2006/09/09

Melvin Van Peebles continues discussing his job as a grip man driving cable cars throughout the San Francisco area. Van Peebles states he got the idea to write an article on the experiences of working on the cable car from a grip man's perspective. He created a photographic essay from the perspective of being a grip man. He published the book and it was very successful. Van Peebles was told his book read like a movie. That statement was the catalyst that helped Van Peebles decide to make movies. He became a self-taught filmmaker. After being fired from working the cable cars, Van Peebles moved to Holland with his family to study at the University of Amsterdam.

Film-making (Motion Pictures)

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

Amsterdam (Netherlands)