

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Barbara Wright-Pryor

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wright-Pryor, Barbara, 1934-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Wright-Pryor,
Dates:	September 24, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:56:31).
Abstract:	School counselor and classical singer Barbara Wright-Pryor (1934 -) was a classical mezzo-contralto soloist. In addition to her singing career, Wright-Pryor taught in the Chicago Public Schools, was a member of the Board of Trustees for the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, served as president of the Chicago Music Association, and was a music critic for the Chicago Crusader. Wright-Pryor was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 24, 2006, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_106
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Classical soloist, educator, and music critic Barbara Wright-Pryor was born Barbara Wright in Stamps, Arkansas, to Bernyce Eleanor Hayes Wright and Joseph Dudley Wright. Growing up in Chicago's Ida B. Wells Projects, she idolized Marian Anderson. Wright-Pryor attended Willard School and graduated from Wendell Phillips Elementary and High Schools in 1951. A mezzo-contralto, Wright-Pryor studied voice as she pursued an undergraduate degree from

Roosevelt University, Chicago State University, and the Chicago Conservatory of Music, where she majored in vocal performance. She received her M.A. degree, magna cum laude, from Roosevelt University.

As a mezzo-contralto recitalist and soloist of oratorio, her first performance was with the Dorian Choral Ensemble. In 1961, she performed with Irving Bunton's Chicago Concert Chorale. Duke Ellington featured the group in his 1963 *My People* musical revue, celebrating the accomplishments of Blacks in the one hundred years since Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1968, Wright-Pryor was choral director for Ellington's Sacred Concert. Over the years, Wright-Pryor has performed with the members of Chicago's Lyric Opera, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Civic Orchestra of Chicago, South Shore Philharmonic, Southside Family Chamber Orchestra and String Quartet, and the Chicago Park District Orchestra. Her concert stage performances have featured Sir Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*; Rossini's *Stabat Mater*; J. S. Bach's *Cantata No. 54 for Contralto and Orchestra*, *Christmas Oratorio*, and *Mass in B Minor*; Handel's *Messiah* and the works of Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Verdi. Wright-Pryor has performed *Saul of Tarsus* by Betty Jackson King, and in addition to Betty Jackson King, composers Rollo Dilworth, Barry K. Elmore, Robert L. Morris and Howard Savage have dedicated compositions to her. For the 1998 Sixteenth International Duke Ellington Conference, Wright-Pryor served as producer/director and vocalist to restage Ellington's lost 1963 *My People* musical revue. Her musical accomplishments were achieved while serving for thirty-five years as counselor-educator with the Chicago Public Schools and adjunct professor at DePaul University.

A charter member of the Community Advisory Council of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO), Wright-Pryor helps monitor the CSO's progress in achieving its diversity agenda. She also serves on the Artistic Planning Committee of the Chicago Symphony. Wright-Pryor is a member of the Board of Trustees for the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, and for over a decade, she has been president of the Chicago Music Association, which was founded as the first branch of the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. in 1919. Wright-Pryor was honored by the Society for the Advancement of the Vivian G. Harsh Collection of Afro-American History and Literature of the Chicago Public Library in 1999, and they have requested her papers. She was inducted into Wendell Phillips Elementary and High Schools' Hall of Fame and received an honorary Doctor of Music degree in 1999. An expert and critic of African American contributions to classical music, Wright-Pryor serves as the classical music critic for the *Chicago Crusader*.

A soloist at Northfield Community and St. Mark United Methodist Churches, Wright-Pryor is married to organist George Williams.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Barbara Wright-Pryor was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 24, 2006, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. School counselor and classical singer Barbara Wright-Pryor (1934 -) was a classical mezzo-contralto soloist. In addition to her singing career, Wright-Pryor taught in the Chicago Public Schools, was a member of the Board of Trustees for the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, served as president of the Chicago Music Association, and was a music critic for the Chicago Crusader.

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:

Wright-Pryor, Barbara, 1934-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Wright-Pryor, Barbara, 1934---Interviews

African American women singers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Contraltos--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Student counselors--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Women music critics--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Chicago Public Schools

Occupations:

School Counselor

Classical Singer

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers|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 Barbara Wright-Pryor, September 24, 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 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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 Barbara Wright-Pryor, Section

A2006_106_001_001, TRT: 0:30:23 2006/09/24

Barbara Wright-Pryor was born on May 30, 1934 in Stamps, Arkansas to Bernyce Hayes Wright and Joseph Wright. Her maternal great grandfather was a slave on the Grigsby plantation in Forest, Mississippi. He was sold to the Hayes plantation in Homer, Louisiana, where he met and married another slave. Their son, Wright-Pryor's maternal grandfather, John Hayes, was born a slave and recalled slavery's abolition. Wright-Pryor's maternal grandmother was the daughter of a slaveholder and a slave. Her maternal grandparents left Louisiana to settle in Stamps, Arkansas. Wright-Pryor's mother attended Shover Street School and Arkadelphia Presbyterian Academy, where she played basketball. Her maternal uncle played piano for silent films, and her maternal great uncle fought in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of World War I. Her father was born in 1909 in Buckner, Arkansas, where Wright-Pryor recalls the store own by the grandmother and uncle of Maya Angelou. His father died when he was young, and his mother married twice more.

African American women singers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Contraltos--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Student counselors--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Women music critics--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Wright-Pryor, Section
A2006_106_001_002, TRT: 0:30:02 2006/09/24

Barbara Wright-Pryor describes Maya Angelou's family, and her family's relationship with the Johnsons and the Flowers. Wright-Pryor's parents met through their community in Arkansas. She reflects upon the negative portrayal of Stamps from Maya Angelou's 'I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings.' Wright-Pryor inherited her interest in music from her family. Her paternal grandmother sang in the church, and her maternal aunts and uncles played various instruments. She grew up surrounded by music at church and in her home. Wright-Pryor's parents moved to Chicago, Illinois seeking economic opportunity during the Great Depression. Wright-Pryor recalls living with her maternal grandparents in Arkansas, and their first

apartment in Chicago, a small four room apartment shared with seven other family members. She and her parents were among the first families approved to move into the Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago. Soon after, her parents separated. Wright-Pryor stayed in her mother's home, but remained close with her father.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Wright-Pryor, Section A2006_106_001_003, TRT: 0:28:46 2006/09/24

Barbara Wright-Pryor's mother worked at Alden's Incorporated, a mail order company, and realized that she could be economically independent while separated from Wright-Pryor's father. Wright-Pryor and her mother lived in the newly established Ida B. Wells Homes in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. She remembers the community at Ida B. Wells; how church was valued; and her contemporaries such as Troy Duster, Lester McKeever and Herb Kent. Wright-Pryor attended Bronzeville's Frances Willard School, Wendell Phillips Elementary School and Wendell Phillips High School. Though musically inclined, in high school she sang only in the girl's chorus. Her musical training mainly took place in the church. She was also involved with Tri-Hi-Y and the Abraham Lincoln Centre. She remembers William Warfield visiting her high school to perform an aria from George Frideric Handel's 'Messiah.' The music teachers were unable to accompany Warfield, so Wright-Pryor's friend was asked to play piano for him.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Wright-Pryor, Section A2006_106_001_004, TRT: 0:29:52 2006/09/24

Barbara Wright-Pryor remembers William Warfield singing Handel's 'Messiah' at Chicago's Wendell Phillips High School. She attended Chicago Teachers College in Chicago, Illinois, but left when she married Harry Pryor II. Wright-Pryor returned to Chicago Teachers College after her son was born. She majored in education with a focus on social science and English literature. Wright-Pryor's husband encouraged her to pursue singing, and her earliest performances were with his group, the Dorian Choral Ensemble. She sang in the Chicago church circuit with members of the Chicago Federation of Musicians Local 10-208, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the

Lyric Opera Orchestra. Wright-Pryor's choral group, Chicago Concert Choral, was chosen to sing in Duke Ellington's 'My People' for the Century of Negro Progress Exposition. When Ellington returned six years later to perform one of his sacred music concerts, Wright-Pryor was asked to be the choir director. She explains vocal training and how voices change with age.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Wright-Pryor, Section A2006_106_001_005, TRT: 0:29:26 2006/09/24

Barbara Wright-Pryor recreated Duke Ellington's 'My People' for the sixteenth international Duke Ellington conference in Chicago. She worked with some of the original cast, as well as Robert A. Harris and Ellington's granddaughter, Mercedes Ellington. The production encountered financial issues, and Wright-Pryor was never paid for her work. At the time of the interview, she was the president of the Chicago Music Association, the founding branch of the National Association of Negro Musicians. Established in 1919 by Nora Douglas Holt, the association provided training, promotion and performance opportunities to African American musicians. Its first scholarship was awarded to Marian Anderson to study in Europe with Kosti Vehanen. Theodore Charles Stone preceded Wright-Pryor as the president of the Chicago Music Association. He was a music critic for the Chicago Defender and Chicago Crusader. Upon his death, Wright-Pryor donated Stone's papers to the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library.

Video Oral History Interview with Barbara Wright-Pryor, Section A2006_106_001_006, TRT: 0:28:02 2006/09/24

Barbara Wright-Pryor describes the history of African American composers, including Chevalier J.J.O. de Meude-Monpas, Scott Joplin and Will Marion Cook. Their work was ignored by the majority music community, which led to the establishment of the Chicago Music Association and the National Association of Negro Musicians. Wright-Pryor reflects upon the differences in perception and performance between jazz and classical music. She lists her favorite composers and genres of music. Wright-Pryor married her second husband, George Williams, after they were both widowed. The couple met

in college and performed together for years. Wright-Pryor taught at George T. Donoghue Elementary School, where she was involved in Project Wingspread. She describes the successful medical career of one of the students who participated in the program. She reflects upon her life and legacy, and her hopes and concerns for the African American community. She concludes her interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.