

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Abiodun Oyewole

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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>	Oyewole, Abiodun
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 13, 2006, February 22, 2007 and March 21, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006 and 2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	14 Betacame SP videocassettes (6:23:11).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Poet and spoken word artist Abiodun Oyewole (1948 - ) is a founding member of the American musical speling group, The Last Poets. The group's message, deeply rooted in Black Nationalism, quickly became recognized within the African American community. Oyewole was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 13, 2006, February 22, 2007 and March 21, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_164
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Abiodun Oyewole was born Charles Davis on February 25, 1948 in Cincinnati, Ohio. At the age of three, he moved to Queens, New York, with his maternal aunt and her new husband. He was greatly influenced by the jazz and gospel music they played and by poets like Langston Hughes. At fifteen, he and a friend attended a Yoruba Temple in Harlem, New York. There, a Yoruba priest performed a ceremony, giving him the name Abiodun Oyewole, by which he is best known. Oyewole began learning about the Yoruba gods and developed a spiritual connection to the religion, which stressed the significance of praying to one's ancestors for guidance and strength. Oyewole is a founding member of the American musical speling group, The Last Poets. On May 19, 1968, the anniversary of Malcolm X's birthday, Oyewole and two others David Nelson and Gylan Kain read poetry in tribute to Malcolm X at a memorial for him, and the group was born. The group's message, deeply rooted in Black Nationalism, quickly became recognized within the African American community. The Last Poets along with the artist Gil Scott-Heron are credited as having had a profound effect on the development of hip-hop music. In 1970, the Last Poets were signed by jazz producer Alan Douglas and released their first album. This album includes their classic poem *Niggers are Scared of Revolution*. The Last Poets' spoken word albums preceded politically laced Rhythm and Blues projects, such as Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, and foreshadowed the work of hard-hitting rap groups like Public Enemy and Dead Prez.

After being sentenced to four years in a North Carolina prison for larceny, Oyewole was forced to leave The Last Poets. He served two and half years of his sentence and during that time attended a nearby college where he earned his B.A. degree. He went on to earn his Ph.D. from Columbia University in New York City, where he has served as a faculty member. Oyewole rejoined The Last Poets, during its 1990s resurgence. The Last Poets took part in Lollapalooza in 1994 and released a new album entitled *Holy Terror* in 1995 and a book called *On a Mission: Selected Poetry and a History of the Last Poets* in 1996. Oyewole continues to tour various venues giving lectures on poetry and politics.

Oyewole lives in New York City.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Abiodun Oyewole was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 13, 2006, February 22, 2007 and March 21, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 14 Betacame SP videocassettes. Poet and spoken word artist Abiodun Oyewole (1948 - ) is a founding member of the American musical spieling group, The Last Poets. The group's message, deeply rooted in Black Nationalism, quickly became recognized within the African American community.

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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:

Oyewole, Abiodun

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Oyewole, Abiodun--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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## Occupations:

Spoken Word Artist

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Poet

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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## 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 Abiodun Oyewole, December 13, 2006, February 22, 2007 and March 21, 2007. 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).

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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 Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:12  
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Abiodun Oyewole was born on February 25, 1948 in Cincinnati, Ohio. While incarcerated in North Carolina, he listened to the music of Jon Lucian, and decided to travel as much as possible upon his release. He and Lucian eventually met at a production of 'Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope,' and became friends. Oyewole travelled to several countries, and especially appreciated the islands he visited, including Lucian's home on St. Thomas, as well as Barbados, Trinidad, and Aruba. In Morocco, he met the teenage son of a member of parliament who showed him much of the country, including Kenitra, Tetouan, Fez and Rabat. Oyewole describes his love of cooking. His signature dishes included potato salad and salmon croquettes, and he developed recipes for croquettes that used curry powder and scallions. He lists many of the proverbs that he follows, and talks about incorporating them into his courses at Columbia University in New York City. He also shares his opinions on parenting.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:14  
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Abiodun Oyewole's mother, Mattie Robinson Dawson, was born in 1926 in Atlanta, Georgia. After her mother's death, she moved with her father, Charles Robinson, to Cincinnati, Ohio. A musician in an army band during World War I, he owned a candy store in Cincinnati, and later a restaurant. Oliver Street was Cincinnati's black business district, which Oyewole compares to Tulsa, Oklahoma's black Wall Street. Oyewole's mother lived nearby with her father, although social services was suspicious of a single African American man raising a daughter. She later moved in with her sister, who was sixteen years her senior. When she was twenty-one years old, she met Oyewole's father, James Smith, at church. That year, Oyewole was born at the Catherine Booth Home, an institution for unwed mothers in Cincinnati. His mother was socially ostracized, and became depressed, so Oyewole was cared for by his aunt, Elvenia Robinson Davis. At three years old, he moved to Queens, New York with his aunt and her husband, Joseph Davis.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:17  
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Abiodun Oyewole attended P.S. 48 in Queens, New York, and admired his fifth grade teacher, Miss Gayle. Oyewole also looked up to a Frankie, a young man who babysit him while his maternal aunt worked. While playing with his cousin and Frankie, Oyewole was hit in the face with a swing, leaving a dimple on his right cheek. His family listened to jazz, and visited his aunt's home on 142nd Street in Harlem, where Oyewole saw Malcolm X at the Hotel Theresa. Oyewole's uncle barbecued whole pigs on holidays, and made wine from grapes grown in their yard, which he gave to police officers, mail carriers and neighbors during the family's Christmas celebrations. At age ten, he was baptized at Southern Baptist Church by Reverend C.B. Wilson, and recalls struggling to hold his breath underwater. After the ceremony, he went to the Gospel Caravan show at Harlem's Apollo Theater, where he saw a man fall from the balcony. He remembers how he was affected by his baptism, and lessons from his maternal aunt and uncle.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:06  
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Abiodun Oyewole aspired to be a doctor as a child, because he wanted to heal people. However, he discovered his vocal talent at Southern Baptist Church, where he impressed the congregation with his recitation of the Lord's Prayer. As

a child, Oyewole feared his uncle, who he saw physically evict a tenant who refused to pay rent, and who discouraged him from attending college. Oyewole's aunt sent him to Woodycrest boarding school in the Bronx, New York. There, he discovered his physical strength when while fighting with other students. He was abused by his guidance counselor, who was given a leave of absence. Oyewole also shares his opinions on sexuality, and describes his relationships with women. He went on to attend New York City's Haaren High School with Sylvester Stallone, where they both unsuccessfully auditioned for a role in the movie 'Up the Down Staircase.' He looked up to his teacher, Ann Carpenter, who later founded Harlem Preparatory School with her husband, Edward Carpenter.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_001\_005, TRT: 0:18:16  
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Abiodun Oyewole was introduced to poetry when, as a fifth grade student, he was asked to write a poem for the sixth grade graduation ceremony. He sought the help of his librarian, Mr. Orr. As a freshman at Haaren High School, Oyewole established his reputation by winning a fight with a senior who tried to take his seat. His English teacher, Mr. Richstone, assigned extensive reading, and urged his students to master the English language. In Ann Carpenter's class, Oyewole earned extra credit on a vocabulary assignment for writing a poem about his relationship with his girlfriend, and Carpenter encouraged Oyewole to continue composing poetry. Outside school, Oyewole enjoyed visiting New York City's Harlem and Greenwich Village neighborhoods with his friends. In Harlem, he met a Yoruba priest who introduced him to African religion, and gave him a Yoruba name. At first, Oyewole was insulted by the priest's attempt to rename him, but decided to adopt the name a few years later at an event with The Last Poets.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_002\_006, TRT: 0:28:18  
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Abiodun Oyewole was considered politically outspoken at Haaren High School, although he wrote mostly romantic poetry, until the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King inspired him to write about politics. Although he did not agree with all of King's positions, his death led Oyewole to reflect upon American greed and violence. Upon graduation, Oyewole attended Buena Vista College in Storm Lake, Iowa for one year, and organized protests against the state's requirement that students attend chapel. Unhappy at the school, Oyewole returned to New York City, where he met David Nelson while working as a recreation assistant at Double Block Recreational Educational Program. In 1968, Nelson invited Oyewole to perform with him at a rally honoring Malcolm X, which led them to found The Last Poets. Oyewole talks about the role of race in his poetry, particularly in the poem 'Another Mountain.' He describes how performances were received in Harlem, Washington D.C. and elsewhere at the time of the interview.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_002\_007, TRT: 0:29:40  
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Abiodun Oyewole's parents taught him to love his racial identity. While in high school, Oyewole was given an African name by a Yoruba priest he met in Harlem, although he did not assume the name until he joined The Last Poets. After high school, Oyewole attended Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa for one year, and during that time, often came into conflict with the dean. He also played football, and was cast in Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible.' In 1968, David Nelson invited Oyewole to perform with him and Gylan Kain at a rally on

Malcolm X's birthday. Inspired by Black Power protests at Howard University, as well as The Isley Brothers' song, 'It's Your Thing,' Oyewole performed 'What's Your Thing Brother?' Joined by the drummer Nilaja Obabi, Oyela, Kain and Nelson began performing around New York City as The Last Poets. They established their venue, the East Wind, where they organized workshops on politics, writing and music; held theatrical and jazz performances; and regularly hosted parties.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_002\_008, TRT: 0:30:10  
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Abiodun Oyewole worked for the Harlem Domestic Peace Corps, an anti-poverty program created by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., while performing with The Last Poets. After David Nelson quit the group, Felipe Luciano took his place. When Luciano and Gylan Kain left, Oyewole recruited Umar Bin Hassan and Jalal Mansur Nuriddin to join The Last Poets. In 1968, Oyewole, Hassan and Nuriddin recorded an album with drummer Nilaja Obabi, who continued to play with The Last Poets. Oyewole left after completing the record, 'The Last Poets,' as he felt Nuriddin was too interested in fame. Oyewole then joined the Harlem Community for Self Defense, and helped organize its protest against the construction of the Harlem State Office Building. They renamed the lot Reclamation Site Number One, and lived in temporary shelters there to prevent construction. While Oyewole was demonstrating at the site, the police seized his car. They alleged to have found drugs, bullets and a gun inside in an attempt to force Oyewole to flee the city.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_002\_009, TRT: 0:29:52  
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Abiodun Oyewole fled New York City after his car was impounded, fearing a police raid of the Harlem Community for Self Defense's Reclamation Site Number One. He went to Raleigh, North Carolina, where he enrolled at Shaw University. He founded a Yoruba society as an alternative to Greek fraternities and sororities. However, some members wanted to acquire guns, and robbed two gun stores. Two members were arrested and could not afford bail, so they decided to rob the local Ku Klux Klan (KKK) headquarters. The robbery was interrupted, and Oyewole fled after exchanging fire with the KKK. He buried the money in the woods around Raleigh before being arrested. Oyewole was incarcerated, and upon his release, returned to Shaw University. As a student, he programmed two radio shows, which were broadcast to the prison. He read from books that were not available to inmates, including Richard Wright's 'Native Son' and Sam Greenlee's 'The Spook Who Sat by the Door.' Oyewole reflects upon being a revolutionary and an artist.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_002\_010, TRT: 0:09:21  
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Abiodun Oyewole narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_003\_011, TRT: 0:30:06  
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Abiodun Oyewole respected Gylan Kain's poetry, and considered him a genius. Initially, Kain did not want The Last Poets to record an album, as he thought it would undermine their message. Tension arose among the original lineup, and David Nelson was replaced by Felipe Luciano. Eventually, Kain moved away to Greenwich Village, and Luciano left to found the Young Lords. Oyewole was left at the East Wind as the final member of The Last Poets. He resolved to revive the group, and recruited Umar Bin Hassan and Jalal Mansur Nuriddin to join. In 1969, they recorded an album with producer Alan Douglas called 'The

Last Poets,' which included the poems "Run, Nigger" and "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution." It was released in 1970, while Oyewole was in prison in North Carolina. Oyewole also describes the African societies he founded at universities in North Carolina, like Bennett College and Johnson C. Smith University, and how they were influenced by African studies scholars Yosef Ben-Jochannan and John Henrik Clarke.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_003\_012, TRT: 0:30:04 ?

Abiodun Oyewole spent thirty-eight days in a North Carolina jail while waiting for his trial. After he cursed at a visiting preacher, he was placed in solitary confinement for several days, but gained the favor of the head jailer, Mr. Harris, after helping to calm a noisy inmate. Sentenced in 1970 to serve twelve to twenty years for larceny at Central Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina, Oyewole resolved to use his time in custody to improve his poetry. He began writing a book, and worked on his compositions with a fellow inmate, Jonathan Byrd. He heard about the release of The Dead Poets' album through Byrd, who quoted Oyewole's poem "New York, New York." Oyewole received a five thousand dollar royalty payment for his work on the album. He left it in the care of his wife, Biji Davis, who he married in 1968 after the birth of their son, Pharoah Davis. Oyewole successfully applied for the prison's school release program, and finished his degree at Raleigh's Shaw University while commuting from Central Prison.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_003\_013, TRT: 0:29:12 ?

Abiodun Oyewole hosted two radio shows at Shaw University while participating in Central Prison's study release program. His shows featured readings of novels by Richard Wright and Sam Greenlee, and the poetry of Langston Hughes, actor Bernie Casey and student Doris Kemp, as well as his own work. Oyewole incorporated Kemp's poetry into his play 'Comments,' which was a response to Ntozake Shange's 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide.' Rather than return to The Last Poets after his release from prison, Oyewole created the African Revolutionary Ensemble, a company of musicians, poets, dancers and other performers. They recorded an album with producer Larry Phillips, and performed in New York City and around North Carolina. The African Revolutionary Ensemble was scheduled to perform with Stevie Wonder at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but the show was cancelled after Wonder was injured in a car accident. Oyewole returned to live in New York City in 1973.

Video Oral History Interview with Abiodun Oyewole, Section A2006\_164\_003\_014, TRT: 0:29:23 ?

Abiodun Oyewole returned to New York City in 1973. He worked for Columbia University's Community Education Exchange Program, helping his students obtain GED certifications. When the university eliminated the program, students protested, but Oyewole could only support them from afar due to his parole status. He taught creative writing at Columbia University for a time, but eventually left the school. Unwilling to leave his university apartment, Oyewole successfully applied to Columbia University's Charles H. Revson Fellowship, and began studying for a graduate degree. He also worked at the school's Science Technology Entry Program. In the 1990s, Oyewole reunited with The Last Poets' original members, Gylan Kain and David Nelson, but they were unable to make an album together after unsuccessful negotiations with producers. He describes changes in The Last Poets' lineup and poetry since their

first album. Oyewole began performing with Umar Bin Hassan and Babatunde Olatunji, who was his son's drum instructor.