

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ernie Mae Miller

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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>	Miller, Ernest Mae, 1927-2010
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ernie Mae Miller,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 7, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:53:19).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Jazz singer and jazz musician Ernie Mae Miller (1927 - 2010 ) began her solo career as a jazz pianist and vocalist after performing with an all girl band during World War II. She played for most of the prominent hotels, events and exclusive parties in the Austin, Texas community. Miller was the featured performer for fifteen years at the Old New Orleans Club in Austin. Miller was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 7, 2007, in Austin, Texas. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_051
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Ernest Mae Miller was born on February 7, 1927 to Lizzie Anderson Crafton and Otto Henry Crafton in Austin, Texas. Miller is the granddaughter of L.C. Anderson who was born into slavery, attended Fisk University, and became the third President of Prairie View Normal and Industrial College, the forerunner of Prairie View A & M University, succeeding his brother E.H. Anderson. Her grandfather would later become the principal of his namesake school, L.C.

Anderson High School in Austin, Texas from 1886 to 1920. Miller graduated from this high school in 1944 at age fourteen.

Miller began playing the piano by ear after listening to her grandmother's records on the family victrola. She was discovered to be musically gifted by the time she was five years old. After graduating from high school, Miller attended Prairie View A & M University where she was invited to play the baritone saxophone with the Prairie View Co-Ed Jazz Band.

The Prairie View Co-Eds were one of several African American all-girl bands that were popular with African American audiences in the mid-1940s. Miller traveled with the sixteen-piece band that performed for servicemen at army camps and forts all over the United States. The Prairie View Co-Eds performed in Tuskegee, Alabama on the same show with Bob Hope, Vaughn Monroe, and Anita O'Day in New York City and at the Plantation Club in St. Louis with Billie Holliday. Miller began her solo career as a jazz pianist and vocalist. She has played for most of the prominent hotels, events and exclusive parties in the Austin community. Miller was the featured performer for fifteen years at the Old New Orleans Club in Austin.

Though the Prairie View Co-Eds were never recorded and omitted from jazz and swing history, Miller has recorded two albums both titled *Ernie Mae at the Old New Orleans Club* and her career spanned over forty years. Ernest Mae Miller died on December 9, 2010 after battling a long illness. She was 83 years old.

Ernie Mae Miller was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 7, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ernie Mae Miller was conducted by Denise Gines on February 7, 2007, in Austin, Texas, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Jazz singer and jazz musician Ernie Mae Miller (1927 - 2010 ) began her solo career as a jazz pianist and vocalist after performing with an all girl band during World War II. She played for most of the prominent hotels, events and exclusive parties in the Austin, Texas community. Miller was the featured performer for fifteen years at the Old New Orleans Club in Austin.

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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:

Miller, Ernest Mae, 1927-2010

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Miller, Ernest Mae, 1927-2010--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:**

Jazz Musician

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Jazz Singer

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MusicMakers

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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 Ernie Mae Miller, February 7, 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 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).

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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 Ernie Mae Miller, Section  
A2007\_051\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:50 2007/02/07

Ernie Mae Miller was born on February 7, 1927 in Austin, Texas to Lizzie Anderson Crafton and Otto Crafton. Her maternal great-grandparents were slaves in Nashville, Tennessee, and took the surname of their slaveholder, who paid for the education of her grandfather, L.C. Anderson, and great-uncle, E.H. Anderson, at Fisk University in Nashville. Both of the Anderson brothers became principals at Prairie View State Normal School in Prairie View, Texas. Miller's maternal grandmother died in childbirth with Miller's mother, who was raised by Miller's great-aunt. Miller's mother taught at Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College, and later at the Texas Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Institute for Colored Youth in Austin. Miller's parents met while both were teachers at the institute, where her father had also studied after losing an eye. They settled in a majority African American neighborhood of Austin, where Miller grew up with her two sisters and maternal grandparents, and developed her early interest in music.

African American families--Texas.

African Americans--Education.

African American parents--Divorce.

African American single mothers--Texas.

Sisters, African American--Texas.

Birth defects.

Video Oral History Interview with Ernie Mae Miller, Section  
A2007\_051\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:50 2007/02/07

Ernie Mae Miller describes her childhood neighborhood in Austin, Texas, including the streetcar and street vendors like the ice man who frequented the area. Miller attended Austin's Olive Street School, where she sang in the choir. During this time, she began taking piano lessons from Laclede Smith and Clara Brown. She was invited to perform with the International Sweethearts of Rhythm after playing for the band's director, Laurence C. Jones, but her mother did not permit her to join. Miller attended Theodore Kealing Junior High School and L.C. Anderson High School, and excelled as the school band's tenor saxophonist. Miller then went on to attend Prairie View University in Prairie View, Texas, where she played baritone saxophone in the girls' jazz band after successfully auditioning with a song by Duke Ellington's band called 'Cotton Tail.' Miller performed throughout the country with the university's band; and visited jazz bars in New York City like Small's Paradise and the West End Bar with her bandmates.

Blues (Music)--United States.

Children--Texas--Austin.

World War, 1939-1945--Songs and music.

Prairie View A & M University.

African American women musicians.

Religion--United States--Baptist.

Discrimination in public accommodations--United States.

Soldiers--Recreation--United States--History.

Video Oral History Interview with Ernie Mae Miller, Section  
A2007\_051\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:20 2007/02/07

Ernie Mae Miller attended Prairie View University from 1944 to 1946, and played the baritone saxophone in the Prairie View Co-eds, the school's all-female jazz band. The band performed songs by Glenn Miller, Duke

Ellington, Count Basie and Fats Domino in all-black jazz clubs along the East Coast. The Prairie View Co-eds also performed at the Apollo Theater in New York City with Ella Fitzgerald, and on television with Lucky Miller. Miller remembers her fellow band members, including Margaret Grigsby, Bert Etta Davis and Helen P. Cole. Soon after graduating, Miller met her first husband, comedian James “Spizzy” Canfield, and had one son. They divorced, and Miller married Hammitt Miller, a postal worker with whom she had five more sons. Miller began performing in Austin’s nightclubs and hotels, including Dinty Moore’s and The Old New Orleans Club, where she recorded two albums. She recalls her most notable performances, including an occasion when the bar flooded, and her signature songs, such as ‘I’m A Woman.’  
Prairie View A & M University.

Music and race.

African American women musicians--United States.

Blues (Music)--Louisiana--New Orleans.

African American families--Texas.

Divorce.

Apollo Theater (New York, N.Y. : 125th Street).

Video Oral History Interview with Ernie Mae Miller, Section  
A2007\_051\_001\_004, TRT: 0:27:19 2007/02/07

Ernie Mae Miller met singer Billie Holiday while performing at the Plantation Club in St. Louis, Missouri with the Prairie View Co-eds jazz band. She also met Lionel Hampton, Vaughn Monroe, Dorothy Donegan and Sidney Poitier during her career. After leaving the Prairie View Co-eds, Miller mostly performed solo acts in all-black nightclubs near Austin, Texas, but occasionally played with bands like the Patterson brothers’ band and the E.R. Flores Band, with whom she learned Spanish music like boleros, rumbas and sambas. She was also influenced by pianist Avery Parrish from Erskine Hawkins’ band. Miller played for President Lyndon Baines Johnson and Texas Representative J.J. Pickle; and, in her later years, performed in Austin’s senior centers, like the Conley-Guerrero Senior Activity Center. Miller

reflects upon her life and her advice for aspiring musicians. She would like to be remembered as someone who brought happiness to others. Miller concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

African American women musicians--Texas--Austin.  
Austin (Tx.).

African American jazz musicians.

Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973.