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

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Ernie Mae Miller

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ernie Mae Miller,

Dates: February 7, 2007

Bulk Dates: 2007

Physical Description: 4 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:53:20).

Abstract: 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.

Identification: A2007_051

Language: The interview and records are in English.

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.

### 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 Betacam 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.

### 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:**

Miller, Ernie

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews
Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 8/15/2011 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, February 7, 2007
Ernie Mae Miller shares information about her maternal and paternal grandparents, mother, father and siblings in great detail. Her description indicates that her family parents and grandparents were well educated. Miller discusses her school years and relationships with various family members, which indicates they are a close knit family. She has two sisters that are three to five years older than she. Miller provided a detailed family history. For example, one of her sisters was born in Galveston, Texas with forceps causing damage to her spinal column. Miller was took care of her, but now she is confined to a nursing home. She also talked about her parents’ divorce when she was around age six. Miller’s mother became a single parent, but was greatly assisted by Miller’s grand aunt, a professional homemaker, who raised her and her siblings and took good care of them.

African American families--Texas
African American education
African American parents--Divorce
African American single mothers--Texas
Sisters, African American--Texas
Birth defects

Ernie Mae Miller discussed everyday living and the beginnings of her musical interest. She recalls ice deliveries and the neighborhood grocery store with a weekly bill. Miller, musically inclined, sang in the choir during school, took piano lessons from Ms. LaCleed Smith (first music teacher), and later taught music at Prairie View. Miller listened to the radio, but, did not watch television. Miller enjoyed high school because of music. Her band director, Mr. B. L. Joyce, encouraged her to join band and play the horn. She played a “C” melody horn (no longer made). Miller discusses her religion (Baptist) and her Sunday school teacher, Ms. Mary Jane Sims. She detailed the origin of girl bands, attributed to World War II. Miller traveled the east coast with the girl band. They played at Tuskegee Institute and traveled across the country playing for other servicemen. She discusses segregation and racism while traveling.

Blues (Music)--United States
Childhood--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

Ernie Mae Miller discusses L.C. Anderson (grandfather), former Principal of Prairie View, and the girl band detailing their music, attire, and band gigs. She continued to discuss the Apollo Theater and music greats like Ella Fitzgerald. She mentioned band members bandleader Lucky Miller, Margaret Grisby, Cora Pride, Berdetta Davis, and Helen Cole. She discussed her first marriage to
James Canfield, a comedian and DJ. They had one son, Kenneth Canfield, and divorced. Miller later remarried Hammitt Miller, former mail handler and army corporal from Rockdale, Texas. They had five boys; Dwayne Miller, Emmitt Miller, Terrence Miller, Phillip Miller, and Gordon Miller. Hammitt died in 1977. Miller began performing in Texas clubs in 1949. She played at the Old New Orleans Club for about fifteen years, where she experienced the Red River flooding during the 1950’s. She performed at hotels including Driscoll, Sheraton, Hyatt, and Hilton and at Houston-Tillotson College a few times.

Prairie View A & M University

Music and race
African American women musicians--United States
Blues (Music)--Louisiana--New Orleans
African American families--Texas
African Americans couples--Divorce
Apollo Theater (New York, N.Y.)

Video Oral History Interview with Ernie Mae Miller, Section A2007_051_001_004, TRT: 0:27:20 2007/02/07

Ernie Mae Miller talks about talented musicians she has played with, including Alvin Patterson and Roy Patterson, a Tuskegee Airman, killed in plane accident. Miller also played with a Spanish band and all over the city of Austin, Texas for special events and holidays in 1970s. Miller listened to old songs of artists like Louis Jordan, Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughn, and Nancy Wilson. Miller met Billie Holiday, who had a meal served for Miller’s sixteen member girl band. Miller met many notable musicians, actors/actress, and artists to include Lionel Hampton, Vaughn Monroe, Dorothy Dunnigan, Dorothy Dandridge, and Sidney Portier. Miller played for former President Lyndon B. Johnson. Miller remembered growing up she did not attend operas or listen to symphonies and credits pianist Avery Paris as her mentor and influence. Miller never wrote her own music. Miller said she would not change anything about her life if she could do it over.

African American women musicians--Texas--Austin
Austin (Tx.)
African American jazz musicians
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973