

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Matthew Kennedy

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Kennedy, Matthew, 1921-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Matthew Kennedy,
Dates:	March 13, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:19:56).
Abstract:	Music professor, choral director, and pianist Matthew Kennedy (1921 - 2014) was the former director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers at Fisk University. Kennedy was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 13, 2007, in Nashville, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_086
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Retired director of the historic Fisk Jubilee Singers, Matthew Washington Kennedy was born on March 10, 1921 in Americus, Georgia. His parents were educator, Mary Dowdell Kennedy and mail carrier, Royal C. Kennedy, who died when Kennedy was fifteen months old. Kennedy attended McCoy Hill Elementary School between 1926 and 1934. A prodigy of piano and choral music, Kennedy was inspired by a Rachmaninoff concert in Macon, Georgia when he was eleven years old. Moving with his mother to New York City in 1934, Kennedy enrolled in DeWitt Clinton High School. With help from his music teacher, Lois Adler, Kennedy entered the Juilliard Institute of Music. Graduating from high school in 1939, he also earned a diploma in piano from Juilliard in 1940. Kennedy went on to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. While attending Fisk University, Kennedy became piano accompanist to the historic Fisk Jubilee Singers under the direction of Ms. J.A. Myers on their tour of Europe, North Africa and Israel. Drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943, he served in Southern Europe and North Africa before returning to graduate cum laude with his B.A. degree from Fisk University in 1947. Kennedy went on to earn his M.A. degree from Juilliard in 1950 and completed course work toward his Ph.D. from George Peabody College in Nashville.

Employed by Fisk University as an instructor in 1947, Kennedy became a member of its music faculty in 1954 as an associate professor. In 1956, he married piano soloist, Anne Gamble. Kennedy was appointed director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1957, and he mentored hundreds of young students for the next twenty-three years. In 1958, Kennedy made his own solo piano debut at Carnegie Recital Hall. Over the years, Kennedy toured the world as a soloist and as director of the Jubilee Singers. He was appointed acting chairman of the Fisk University Music Department from 1975 to 1978. Kennedy retired from Fisk University in 1986.

Kennedy has served on resource panels for the Tennessee Arts Commission and on boards of the Nashville Symphony Association and the John W. Work, III Memorial Foundation. He received the Achievement Award from the National Black Music Caucus of the Music Educators' National Conference, distinguished service awards from the National Association of Negro Musicians, Fisk University Alumni Association, and Omega Psi Phi

Fraternity. Kennedy holds lifetime memberships with the NAACP and the Fisk University General Alumni Association. He is a member of the Nashville Fine Arts Club where he serves as President. He is also a member of the Nashville Symphony Guild, Gamma Phi Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill and a recent inductee into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in Macon, Georgia.

In 2003, Kennedy released his first album, *Familiar Favorites*. It is dedicated to the memory of his late wife, Anne, and to their daughter, Nina who is also a concert pianist. In 2006, Kennedy received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, from Fisk University. In 2007, Kennedy's daughter made a film entitled, *Matthew Kennedy: One Man's Journey*, which won the Rosetta Miller-Perry Award for Black Filmmakers.

Kennedy was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 13, 2007. Kennedy passed away on June 5, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Matthew Kennedy was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 13, 2007, in Nashville, Tennessee, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Music professor, choral director, and pianist Matthew Kennedy (1921 - 2014) was the former director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers at Fisk University.

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:

Kennedy, Matthew, 1921-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Kennedy, Matthew, 1921---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Jubilee Singers

Occupations:

Choral Director

Pianist

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Matthew Kennedy, March 13, 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).

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 Matthew Kennedy, Section A2007_086_001_001, TRT: 0:29:46
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Matthew Kennedy was born on March 10, 1921 in Americus, Georgia to Mary Dowdell Kennedy and Royal Kennedy, Sr. Kennedy's mother was born to a wealthy farmer, Joseph Dowdell, in 1881. She had an older sister, Lillian Dowdell Patten, and several brothers; and received a teaching degree from Spelman Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. Kennedy's father was born in 1881 in Andersonville, Georgia. Kennedy's paternal uncles included William J. Kennedy, Jr., the president of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company; and George Kennedy, who was a preacher in Thomasville, Georgia. Kennedy's parents met at the Americus Institute, where his mother was his father's teacher. Kennedy's father went on to become a postal carrier, and passed away when Kennedy was one year old. Kennedy was raised by his mother and two older siblings in Americus; and began his musical training at four years old, after playing a spiritual by ear on the piano. His sister began teaching him, and a cousin eventually took over his instruction.

Video Oral History Interview with Matthew Kennedy, Section A2007_086_001_002, TRT: 0:29:19
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Matthew Kennedy was interested in music from an early age. He made up songs on the piano as a child; and first performed at the churches near his home in Americus, Georgia. Kennedy was mostly exposed to religious music as a child, although he heard other genres of music at his neighbors' homes. His family attended Americus' Bethesda Baptist Church, where Kennedy belonged to the junior quartet. He began his education at the McKay Hill School, where he had few friends, but excelled in his classes and won a spelling competition in the fifth grade. Kennedy remained at the McKay Hill School for junior high school; and continued to perform during this time, including on the local WENC Radio station in Americus. Many years later, Kennedy accompanied Eva Jessye and Hall Johnson's choir, and was influenced by their arrangements of African American spiritual music. He also explain the difference between spirituals, hymns and gospel music.

Video Oral History Interview with Matthew Kennedy, Section A2007_086_001_003, TRT: 0:29:53
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Matthew Kennedy focused on his musical training as a child in Americus, Georgia. There, he played the organ for a revue show at the Rylander Theatre; and studied piano under Kate Land, a white instructor, from the age of ten years old. Two years later, he attended a concert by Russian pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff at a segregated theater in Macon, Georgia. When Kennedy entered high school, his mother decided to move the family to New York City, where he would have better opportunities to study music. He attended DeWitt Clinton High School and boarded with a doctor's family, while his mother worked for Pratt and Whitney in New Haven, Connecticut. While in high school, Kennedy auditioned for a scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music. Although he was initially unsuccessful, he impressed one of the instructors, Lois Adler, who offered to pay for his tuition. In 1939, Kennedy graduated from high

school, and completed his training at the Juilliard School of Music.

Video Oral History Interview with Matthew Kennedy, Section A2007_086_001_004, TRT: 0:30:30
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Matthew Kennedy was attended New York City's Juilliard School of Music in the late 1930s, when he was one of the few African American students. Upon enrolling, he had no piano at home, but obtained one with the help of his teacher, Lois Adler. Kennedy completed his musical training in 1939, the same year that he graduated with honors from DeWitt Clinton High School. With Adler's encouragement, Kennedy was admitted to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he received a scholarship from the Rosenwald Fund. He volunteered for the U.S. Navy in 1940, but was rejected due to his poor eyesight. Upon matriculating at Fisk University, Kennedy became the piano accompanist to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who were then under the directorship of Henrietta Crawley Myers. Kennedy was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943, and served as a musician in a Special Services unit. In 1954, he became a professor at Fisk University, and began dating Anne Gamble Kennedy, whom he married.

Video Oral History Interview with Matthew Kennedy, Section A2007_086_001_005, TRT: 0:28:42
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Matthew Kennedy served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He was assigned to lead a unit of white soldiers in Virginia; but, soon after his arrival at the segregated camp, was reassigned to the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps and deployed to North Africa and France. Following his discharge, Kennedy completed his degree at Fisk University in 1946; and then, from 1948, earned a master's degree at the Juilliard School of Music. During this time, Fisk University disbanded the Fisk Jubilee Singers due to low profitability; and the group's director, Henrietta Crawley Myers, left the school to establish the Famous Jubilee Singers. The Fisk Jubilee Singers eventually reformed under the leadership of Professor John Wesley Work III. He retired in 1956; and named Kennedy, who taught at Fisk University from 1954, as the group's new director. The Fisk Jubilee Singers' repertoire included spirituals and classical music, as well as the song 'Steal Away,' which had been performed by the group's original members.

Video Oral History Interview with Matthew Kennedy, Section A2007_086_001_006, TRT: 0:29:50
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Matthew Kennedy made his debut as a professional concert pianist at New York City's Carnegie Hall in 1958; but chose to focus on his teaching career at Fisk University, where he directed the Fisk Jubilee Singers. At this point in the interview, Kennedy describes the history of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, which originally formed in 1871 to raise money for the school. Although the group's repertoire of spirituals went out of style for a time, they were popularized again by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. During Kennedy's twenty-three year as director, he witnessed Nashville's Civil Rights Movement, which was led by Diane Nash, Reverend James Lawson and Reverend James Bevel. Kennedy also served as the chair of the music department at Fisk University in 1975, and worked briefly at the Interlochen Center for the Arts in Michigan. He retired from Fisk University in 1986; and, in 2003, released his first album, 'Familiar Favorites.'

Video Oral History Interview with Matthew Kennedy, Section A2007_086_001_007, TRT: 0:21:56
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Matthew Kennedy served as the director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and a professor of music at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He taught many students during his tenure, including Carol Stone Gafford, Derrick Lee and

Delano O'Banion, all of whom went on to careers in music. Kennedy also completed doctoral coursework at the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, and served on the board of the John W. Work III Memorial Foundation. In 2003, Kennedy's daughter, Nina Kennedy, created a documentary film about his life. He reflects upon his hopes and concerns for the African American community; as well as his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered. Kennedy concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Matthew Kennedy, Section
A2007_086_Kennedy_Matthew_06_MED_001, TRT: 0:45:26