

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Martha Jordan

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Jordan, Martha, 1927-2016
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Martha Jordan,
Dates:	April 6, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:58:25).
Abstract:	Entertainer and dancer Martha Jordan (1927 - 2016) appeared in one of the first all African American shows in Las Vegas, Smart Affairs, produced by Larry Steele, and was the founder and CEO of the Louie Jordan Commemorative Scholarship Fund. Jordan worked as a backup chorus dancer for music legends such as Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, and Pearl Bailey, in addition to touring with her husband, Louis Jordan. Jordan was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 6, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_126
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Martha Jordan was born on January 22, 1927, in St. Louis, Missouri. Jordan was adopted as a baby by Dr. Chalmers Weaver, a local dentist and his wife, Eliza. Jordan attended Simmons Elementary School, and because of her love for music, Jordan took tap and ballet classes as well as piano lessons. Jordan then attended Charles H. Sumner High School where she danced in the Y Circus, a type of

music revue that featured popular musicians of that time; she graduated in 1943, at age sixteen.

Jordan promised her parents that she would go to college if they allowed her to work at the Plantation Club in St. Louis as a dancer for one year. When that year ended, she did not attend college, and instead went to Chicago with show producer-dancer Hortense Allen Jordan to work at the Rhumboogie Club as a chorus girl. Jordan performed with the chorus line for shows that featured Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, and Pearl Bailey, who was one of her good friends. Jordan appeared in one of the first all African American shows in Las Vegas at the Dunes Hotel: *Smart Affairs*, produced by Larry Steele.

In the early 1960s, Jordan moved to Los Angeles during the decline in popularity of chorus line shows; there she took a real estate course and received her broker's license. At this time, Jordan became engaged to music great, Louis Jordan, and they married in 1966. Louis Jordan was famous for his recorded hits, *Let the Good Times Roll* and *Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby*. Jordan traveled and sang with the Louis Jordan Band and took care of the finances. Jordan stopped touring in the early 1970s and began working as an office manager for a Santa Monica elementary school. Louis Jordan passed away in 1975, and in 1980, Jordan moved to Las Vegas where she worked for the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department as a records technician. She then retired in 1990.

Jordan served as president of the Las Vegas Chapter of Links, Inc.; a member of the Girl Friends, Inc.; and founder and CEO of the Louie Jordan Commemorative Scholarship Foundation.

Jordan passed away on May 28, 2016 at age 89.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Martha Jordan was conducted by Denise Gines on April 6, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Entertainer and dancer Martha Jordan (1927 - 2016) appeared in one of the first all African American shows in Las Vegas, *Smart Affairs*, produced by Larry Steele, and was the founder and CEO of the Louie Jordan Commemorative Scholarship Fund. Jordan worked as a backup chorus dancer for music legends such as Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, and Pearl Bailey, in addition to touring with her husband, Louis Jordan.

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:

Jordan, Martha, 1927-2016

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Jordan, Martha, 1927-2016--Interviews

African American dancers--Interviews

Women dancers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dancer

Entertainer

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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 Martha Jordan, April 6, 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).

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 Martha Jordan, Section
A2007_126_001_001, TRT: 0:28:57 2007/04/06

Martha Jordan was born on January 22, 1927 in St. Louis, Missouri, and was adopted by Eliza Stone Weaver and Chalmers Weaver. Her adoptive maternal grandparents, Martha Stone and Frank Stone, were landowners in Webster Groves, Missouri, where Jordan's adoptive mother was born. Jordan's parents settled in St. Louis, where her father worked as a dentist. Her neighborhood included all-black movie houses, theaters and stores, where Jordan was insulated from much of the racial discrimination in St. Louis. As a child, Jordan took dance and piano lessons; was a member of the Girl Reserves of the Young Women's Christian Association; and attended Edward J. Simmons School and Charles H. Sumner High School in St. Louis. Her interest in music and dance began at an early age, and she performed with the Rhythmic Club and in the Y Circus through the Young Men's Christian Association. When she was a teenager, her father brought her and her girlfriends to listen to jazz at local nightclubs, although they were underage.

African American dancers--Interviews.

Women dancers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Martha Jordan, Section
A2007_126_001_002, TRT: 0:27:45 2007/04/06

Martha Jordan was adopted as a baby. In high school, Jordan learned of her adoption, and that her mother was the woman she had known all her life as Cousin Canary. She rejected her biological mother, and considered her adoptive parents to be her mother and father. In St. Louis, Missouri, Jordan attended Charles H. Sumner High School, where she once started a fad by wearing pants, which violated the dress code. Jordan enjoyed dancing, and saw performers like Chuck Berry and Louis Jordan at St. Louis' Club Riviera. During high school, she danced in the Y Circus, and entertained soldiers at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Jordan aspired to enter show business, and convinced her parents to allow her to postpone college. Instead, she danced for Hortense Allen Jordan at the Plantation Club in St. Louis and the Rhumboogie Café in Chicago, Illinois. Jordan briefly attended St. Louis University, but left to dance full time as a chorus girl for artists like Pearl Bailey and Larry Steele.

Video Oral History Interview with Martha Jordan, Section
A2007_126_001_003, TRT: 0:30:07 2007/04/06

Martha Jordan became a chorus girl at sixteen years old, and met many celebrities while touring. Her first job was dancing in Hortense Allen Jordan's show at the Plantation Club in St. Louis, Missouri. The chorus girls' rigorous schedule included three shows each night, and rehearsals for the next month's show during the day. From there, she travelled to Chicago, Illinois to perform at the Rhumboogie Café. Jordan also danced in theater productions, which had more lenient rehearsal schedules. Due to racial discrimination, Jordan never performed on television. Instead, she stayed within the nightclub circuit, where the venues were often owned by African Americans. Jordan moved to Las Vegas, Nevada to perform in Larry Steele's 'Smart Affairs' at the Dunes Hotel, and then to Los Angeles, California with Pearl Bailey. Due to a lack of job opportunities, Jordan earned

her real estate license in California. In 1966, Jordan married jazz musician Louis Jordan, and began touring with him.

Video Oral History Interview with Martha Jordan, Section
A2007_126_001_004, TRT: 0:27:14 2007/04/06

Martha Jordan travelled throughout the country as a chorus girl; and was always wearing makeup and a hat. Jordan learned this from Pearl Bailey, who always required her cast to look their best. In her career as a chorus dancer, Jordan worked with many notable musicians including Cab Calloway, William “Bob” Bailey and Nat King Cole. Jordan was a close friend of Sammy Davis, Jr., who once proposed to her, and also had a romance with Louis Armstrong, whom she considered a great man and musician. Jordan married Louis Jordan in 1966, and toured with him as a singer and the show’s bookkeeper. The two eventually settled in Los Angeles, California. After her husband’s death, Jordan moved to Las Vegas, Nevada, and worked for the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. She was involved in the Las Vegas chapter of The Links, Incorporated; established the Louis Jordan Commemorative Scholarship Foundation; and wrote her autobiography, ‘The Debutante That Went Astray.’

Video Oral History Interview with Martha Jordan, Section
A2007_126_001_005, TRT: 0:04:22 2007/04/06

Martha Jordan narrates her photographs.