

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Billie Allen

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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>	Allen, Billie
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Billie Allen,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 16, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:15:02).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Actress and stage director Billie Allen (1925 - 2015 ) performed in The Wiz, Route 66, and Law and Order. Active in promoting the arts, Allen was a founding member of the Women's Project and Productions, and served as a founding member and co-president for the League of Professional Theatre Women. Allen was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 16, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_142
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actor, dancer, director Billie Allen was born Wilhelmina Louise Allen on January 13, 1925 in Richmond, Virginia to Mamie Wimbush Allen and William Roswell Allen. Allen grew up in Richmond's West End, attending Randolph Street School and Elba Elementary School before graduating from Armstrong High School in 1941. At Hampton University, Allen was inspired by Romare Bearden and mentored by Billie Davis. Drawn to show business, Allen moved to New York City in 1943 to take ballet classes and to study acting at the Lee Strasbourg

Institute. Soon, Allen was dancing professionally and auditioning for stage roles.

In 1949, Allen was featured in the film *Souls of Sin* with Jimmy Wright and William Greaves. In 1953, Allen performed in the Broadway play, *Take A Giant Step* with Lou Gossett, Godfrey Cambridge and Lincoln Kilpatrick. She was cast as “WAC Billie” in five episodes of television’s *Phil Silvers’ Show* from 1955 to 1959. During this period, she also played Ada Chandler in the soap opera, *The Edge of Night*. In 1964, Allen was cast in Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and in 1990, directed the play’s revival. She also portrayed “Vertel” in the movie *Black Like Me* in 1964 and appeared on stage in James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Since the 1960s, Allen was cast in a number of movies and television programs including *Route 66*, *Car 54*, *Where Are You*, *The Wiz*, *Winter Kills*, *The Vernon Johns Story*, *Eddie Murphy Raw*, and *Law and Order*. In the early 1980s, Allen directed the off-Broadway play *Home* featuring Samuel L. Jackson, and in 2001, she directed *Saint Lucy’s Eyes* starring Ruby Dee.

Allen was a founding member of the Women’s Project and Productions and served as a founding member and co-president of the League of Professional Theatre Women. In 1973, Allen with Morgan Freeman, Garland Lee Thompson and Clayton Riley founded Harlem’s Frank Silvera Writers’ Workshop. She interviewed Rosetta LeNoire, Julia Miles and Ruby Dee for the theatre archives of the Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, and in 1999 and 2000, served as a voting member of the Tony Awards nominating board. Allen married the late composer, Luther Henderson with whom she received the 2002 Audelco “VIV” Pioneer Awards. She had two children.

Allen passed away on December 29, 2015 at age 90.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Billie Allen was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 16, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actress and stage director Billie Allen (1925 - 2015 ) performed in *The Wiz*, *Route 66*, and *Law and Order*. Active in promoting the arts, Allen was a founding member of the Women's Project and Productions, and served as a founding member and co-president for the League of Professional Theatre Women.

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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:**

Allen, Billie

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Allen, Billie--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:**

Actress

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Stage Director

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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 Billie Allen, April 16, 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

## 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 Billie Allen, Section  
A2007\_142\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:18 2007/04/16

Billie Allen was born on January 13, 1925 in Richmond, Virginia to Mamie Wimbush Allen and William Allen. Starting with Allen's great-grandmother, four generations of her maternal family were alumnae of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. There, Allen's maternal grandfather, minister C.C. Wimbush, befriended the King family; and her maternal grandmother, Ella Wimbush, was a nurse. Allen's paternal grandmother, Mary Willie Jones, worked as a domestic in Atlanta. She came from a lower social class than Allen's paternal grandfather, Roswell Allen, and conceived Allen's father out of wedlock. Allen's parents, both born in Greenville, Georgia, met at the Hampton Institute. They married, and settled in Richmond, Virginia, where her father was an accountant at the Southern Aid and Insurance Company, and her mother taught. The family's doctor was Marie Jeanette Jones, a black woman. Allen's mother was active in the Civil Rights Movement, and mentored writer James E. Jackson, Jr. and NAACP leader Gloster B. Current.

Video Oral History Interview with Billie Allen, Section  
A2007\_142\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:55 2007/04/16

Billie Allen's parents, Mamie Wimbush Allen and William Allen, moved from Atlanta, Georgia to Richmond, Virginia, where her father secured a position at the Southern Aid and Insurance Company. Allen had two

siblings, LaMae Allen and Edward Allen. Her family lived in the West End of Richmond, where she attended the opera with her mother, acted in musicals at the True Reformer Building and swam in the Rappahannock River. Allen began her education at the Randolph Street School, and then transferred to the Elba School. She studied elocution under Broadway actress Fannie De Knight, who also directed her in children's plays. In addition, Allen took piano lessons, and was encouraged by her mother to emulate child piano prodigy Philippa Schuyler. With her family, Allen attended church each week, and enjoyed radio programs, although her parents banned her and her siblings from listening to 'Amos 'n' Andy,' as the show promoted racial stereotypes.

Video Oral History Interview with Billie Allen, Section  
A2007\_142\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:36 2007/04/16

Billie Allen was a teenager when the film 'Gone with the Wind' was released in 1939. She saw the movie several times, but did not aspire to the roles played by Butterfly McQueen and Hattie McDaniel. Instead, she admired African American entertainers like Lena Horne and Marian Anderson. Allen grew up in Richmond, Virginia, where the schools and streetcars were segregated. She attended the all-black Armstrong High School, where she took part in the Girl Scouts, ballet lessons and the glee club. Allen studied under numerous black teachers, including Leviticus Carney, who had trained at several Ivy League schools. She recalls the State of Virginia's policy of paying for African Americans to attend colleges in the North, rather than opening the public universities to them. Allen graduated in 1941, and enrolled at Virginia's Hampton Institute. There, she studied dance and visual art, and was mentored by Professor Willie Barbour Davis. She also dated Edwin Bertrand, a native of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Video Oral History Interview with Billie Allen, Section  
A2007\_142\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:48 2007/04/16

Billie Allen left the Hampton Institute after two years to pursue a theater career in New York City. There, she befriended modelling executive Barbara M. Watson, artist Romare Bearden and philosopher Alain Locke; as well as

African American actors Sidney Poitier, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. Early in the 1940s, Allen acted alongside Harry Belafonte, Etta Moten Barnett and Frederick O'Neal in 'Head of the Family.' In 1949, she secured her first film role in 'Souls of Sin,' which was produced by William D. Alexander. She auditioned in the early 1950s for director Elia Kazan, who urged Allen to study acting more intensely. For the next eight years, she trained under theater practitioner Lee Strasberg at The Actors Studio, where she met actor James Earl Jones. During this time, Allen lived on Long Island with her husband and two children, and once turned down work with the Negro Ensemble Company to care for her family. In 1955, Allen joined 'The Phil Silvers Show,' where she played a Women's Army Corps member.

Video Oral History Interview with Billie Allen, Section  
A2007\_142\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:05 2007/04/16

Billie Allen and Vinie Burrows were the first African American women to star in a soap company commercial during the 1950s. Allen later played the recurring role of Ada Chandler in the soap opera 'The Edge of Night,' opposite actor Herb Davis. In 1964, she portrayed Sarah, the lead role in Adrienne Kennedy's 'Funnyhouse of a Negro,' which concerned a young black woman in New York City struggling with her racial identity. Later that year, Allen acted in the premiere of 'Blues for Mister Charlie,' a play by James Baldwin about the murder of Emmett Till. In 1969, Allen performed opposite Jackie Mason in 'A Teaspoon Every Four Hours,' which had ninety-nine preview performances, and closed after its opening night. In 1973, she helped found the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop, where she worked with Lloyd Richards and Morgan Freeman to develop original plays. Allen's film roles included 'The Wiz' and 'Losing Ground,' an independent film partly set in her home at the Graham Court building in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Billie Allen, Section  
A2007\_142\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:46 2007/04/16

Billie Allen played Eddie Murphy's aunt in the opening scene of 'Eddie Murphy Raw' in 1987, and portrayed a judge in an episode of 'Law and Order' in 1991. She

enjoyed playing a variety of characters on stage and screen, but did not play prostitutes, as many such roles were written in a manner demeaning to African American women. Allen earned a living through residuals from shows such as 'The Phil Silvers Show,' and from teaching at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York. She joined the Tony Awards nominating board in 1999; and, along with her husband, Luther Henderson, received a Pioneer Award from the Audience Development Committee in 2002. During the 2000s, she directed the premiere of 'Saint Lucy's Eyes,' a play by Bridgette Wimberly; and helped Wimberly develop 'The Separation of Blood,' a play about blood transfusion innovator Dr. Charles R. Drew. Allen describes her hopes for the African American community, and reflects upon her legacy and family. She also narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Billie Allen, Section  
A2007\_142\_001\_007, TRT: 0:16:34 2007/04/16

Billie Allen narrates her photographs.