

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Eleo Pomare

---

## 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>	Pomare, Eleo
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Eleo Pomare,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 18, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:59:59).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Choreographer and dancer Eleo Pomare (1937 - 2008 ) founded his own successful company in Amsterdam. He co-founded the Association of Black Choreographers and later THE FLEET, a black dance magazine. Pomare was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 18, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_147
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Choreographer and dancer Eleo Pomare was born on October 20 1937 in Santa Marta, Colombia. His father, Tawny Forbes, was the captain of a civilian freighter that was torpedoed near Colón, Panama during World War II. Pomare, at age six, who was with his father during the attack, survived and moved to live with his mother, Mildred Pomare Lee, in Panama. In 1947 Pomare was sent, alone, to New York City to live with an aunt and uncle who cared for him until some years later when his mother also moved to New York. He attended the New Lincoln School in Harlem, and later both P.S. #184 and James Fenimore Cooper Junior High

School. At New York's famed High School of Performing Arts, Pomare was mentored by Verita Pearson, and was exposed to such guest teachers as Uta Hagen and Martha Graham. While still a student, Pomare taught dance to other youth at the Police Athletic League (PAL). Soon, his pupils were performing at churches, schools and nearby Fort Dix. Moving into a building that housed Syvilla Fort's studio near Town Hall, Pomare was exposed to the Durham technique by Walter Nicks and Talley Beatty. Graduating from the High School of Performing Arts in 1953, Pomare maintained his own dance company as he continued his training with Louis Horst, José Limón, Asadata Dafora, Pearl Reynolds and Curtis James. Pomare also befriended author James Baldwin, whose writing greatly influenced him.

In 1960, Pomare held his first major performance at the 92nd Street YMHA to favorable reviews. The following year he was awarded a John Hay Whitney Fellowship to study dance with Kurt Jooss in Essen, Germany. Pomare left the Jooss School and went on to reestablish the Eleo Pomare Dance Company, based in Amsterdam. He became a sensation in Europe. Using his own approach to choreography and teaching, he created his most celebrated works: *Missa Luba*, which combined the Catholic Mass with the music and voices of the Congolese Boys' Choir; *Blues for the Jungle*, which depicted the history of African Americans from the earliest days of enslavement to the fight for equal rights in the 1960s; and *Las Desenamoradas*, which was inspired by Garcia Lorca's play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

Over the years, Pomare received a number of dance fellowships including the aforementioned John Hay Whitney Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1972. The Eleo Pomare Dance Company toured North America, Europe, Australia, Asia, the Caribbean and Africa. They also performed in Lagos, Nigeria for FESTAC '77, the World Festival of African Arts. Some of his featured dancers include Dudley Williams, Loretta Abbott, Al Perryman, Dyane Harvey, Charles Grant, Chuck Davis, Martial Roumain, Carl Paris, Leni Wylliams and Diana Ramos. In 1986, Pomare created *Morning Without Sunrise*, set to music by Max Roach, in honor of the heroism of Nelson Mandela.

In 1968, Pomare, along with Carole Johnson, Rod Rodgers, Gus Solomon and Pearl Reynolds, formed the Association of Black Choreographers and *THE FEET*, a black dance magazine. The Eleo Pomare Dance Company celebrated twenty-five years of dance in 1983, and January 7, 1987, was declared Eleo Pomare Day by the borough president of Manhattan, David Dinkins.

Pomare was a highly sought after teacher and choreographer until his death on August 8, 2008, at the age of 70.

Eleo Pomare was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 18, 2007.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Eleo Pomare was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 18, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Choreographer and dancer Eleo Pomare (1937 - 2008 ) founded his own successful company in Amsterdam. He co-founded the Association of Black Choreographers and later THE FLEET, a black dance magazine.

---

## 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:**

Pomare, Eleo

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Pomare, Eleo--Interviews

---

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## **Occupations:**

Dancer

---

Choreographer

---

## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

---

## **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 Eleo Pomare, April 18, 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 Eleo Pomare, Section  
A2007\_147\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:17 2007/04/18

Eleo Pomare was born on October 20, 1937 in Santa Marta, Colombia to Mildred Pomare Lee and Tawny Forbes. Pomare's parents came from the small island of San Andres in Colombia, where there was a feud between their families. Pomare's maternal grandmother, Jessiett Pomare, was the island matriarch, and her family was wealthy and heavily influenced by the conventions of the island's Spanish and British colonists. Pomare's parents were forbidden to be together, and escaped to the Colombian mainland, where Pomare was born. His father

was a ship's captain and always at sea, and so Pomare met him only a few times. On one of these occasions, Pomare was sailing with his father through the Panama Canal Zone during World War II, when their ship was torpedoed. While Pomare was rescued, his father died in the attack. Pomare recovered in Panama, where he lived with his mother until the age of ten years old, when he came to the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Eleo Pomare, Section  
A2007\_147\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:38 2007/04/18

Eleo Pomare spent his early childhood in Colombia and Panama, where the culture was influenced by the African diaspora. The hybrid culture fostered Pomare's interests in dance and music, as he observed the blending of African rhythms and instruments with South American movements. At ten years old, Pomare moved to the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, where he lived with his maternal uncle, Barsabas Anab Pomare, who was a seaman. Pomare's mother joined him in New York City several years later. They resided near Lewis Michaux's African National Memorial Bookstore, where Pomare was exposed to the jazz music of Bessie Smith and the political ideology of Malcolm X. His adaptation to the culture of New York City soon led to a rift between him and his West Indian family. In school, Pomare moved quickly through the primary grades at P.S. 184 in New York City, due to his private school education in South and Central America.

Video Oral History Interview with Eleo Pomare, Section  
A2007\_147\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:02 2007/04/18

Eleo Pomare's interests in music and theater were fostered through local churches and his education in New York City. Although he was not religious, Pomare visited Grace Temple and Prophet James F. Jones' church to observe the emotions and theatrics of the church members. Pomare attended James Fenimore Cooper Junior High School and the High School of Performing Arts in New York City. He began his theater training in junior high school, where he performed in the school plays. At the High School of Performing Arts, Pomare studied theater and dance with classmates like Mercedes Ellington and Dudley Williams,

who both went on to acclaimed dance careers. During this time, Pomare was introduced to the techniques of Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, who were both anthropologists of dance. While in school, Pomare was primarily a performer, but developed an interest in production. He began teaching dance at the local Boys' Athletic League, and drew on his African and South American influences to develop a curriculum.

Video Oral History Interview with Eleo Pomare, Section  
A2007\_147\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:27 2007/04/18

Eleo Pomare attended the High School of Performing Arts in New York City, where he was both artistically and academically challenged in his studies of theater and dance. He took drama and dance classes with noted artists such as Uta Hagen and Martha Graham, as well as creative writing courses and other general education studies. While in school, Pomare volunteered as a dance teacher at the Boys' Athletic League in New York City, where he developed his own unique dance style. Long at odds with his family's traditional ideology and abusive parenting style, he eventually left his family home. He found an apartment in a small Harlem building that also housed the Syvilla Fort Studio of Theater Dance. There, he saw the Katherine Dunham technique performed by a group of African American dancers that included Talley Beatty and Walter Nicks. Dunham's technique, along with that of Pearl Primus, became the primary influences on Pomare's own dance style.

Video Oral History Interview with Eleo Pomare, Section  
A2007\_147\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:03 2007/04/18

Eleo Pomare started his first dance company while attending the High School of Performing Arts in New York City. The company rehearsed at local recreation centers after school, and performed in churches, recreation centers and military bases throughout the New York City area. After graduation, Pomare worked at R.H. Macy and Co. as an errand runner while he continued to direct the Eleo Pomare Dance Company. The company had its first major performance at the 92nd Street Young Men's Hebrew Association. Although the show was a success, Pomare felt restricted by the racial discrimination he

experienced in the American dance industry. He earned a fellowship from the John Hay Whitney Foundation to study in Germany at the Folkwang School of Music, Theatre and Dance under Kurt Jooss. Pomare and Jooss clashed over racial issues, and Pomare eventually left the school to form a company in the Netherlands. He remained in Europe until 1963, when author James Baldwin convinced him to return to the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Eleo Pomare, Section  
A2007\_147\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:48 2007/04/18

Eleo Pomare returned to America in 1963 at the behest of his friend, author James Baldwin, and rebuilt the Eleo Pomare Dance Company. Over the next decade, Pomare created his three masterpiece works. The first of these works was 'Missa Luba,' a reflection upon the Christian church and its colonization of Africa. Pomare's company performed the piece at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977, against the wishes of the program's leaders. Pomare's next production, 'Blues for the Jungle,' portrayed the history of African American oppression. The piece progressed through time, and included segments about a slave auction and the drug epidemic within the African American community. The third of Pomare's masterpieces was 'Las Desenamoradas,' which was based on Federico Garcia Lorca's 'The House of Bernarda Alba.' The piece told the story of a controlling woman and her daughters, which represented Portugal and its colonies, as well as Pomare's maternal grandmother.

Video Oral History Interview with Eleo Pomare, Section  
A2007\_147\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:55 2007/04/18

Eleo Pomare founded the Association of Black Choreographers with Rod Rodgers, Gus Solomons jr and Pearl Reynolds to help provide support for African American choreographers, and to establish the legitimacy of black dance. Many African American choreographers and dancers of the time did not explicitly identify as black, as they were working in an industry that was dominated by European aesthetics. Pomare turned from this aesthetic, and embraced his heritage by incorporating African and Latin influences in his choreography. The association also



created the Harlem Cultural Council Dancemobile in New York City. With the Dancemobile, Pomare's company and other black dance groups performed throughout the community to expose residents to new forms of dance. In 1972, Pomare received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation to further his dance career and his community service. At the time, few African American organizations received funding, as most of the money was allotted to white companies.

Video Oral History Interview with Eleo Pomare, Section  
A2007\_147\_001\_008, TRT: 0:30:49 2007/04/18

Eleo Pomare choreographed 'Morning Without Sunrise' on the theme of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment in 1986. While directing the Eleo Pomare Dance Company, Pomare continued to dance as he worked to create a company that performed emotional and truthful works of art. Notable members of his company included Dyane Harvey-Salaam, Diana Ramos and a number of African American men who died of HIV/AIDS. Pomare's company performed both in the United States and internationally. While performing at the Adelaide Festival in Australia, he protested the segregation of Aboriginal people from the theater. This protest led to the organization of the first Aboriginal dance company, the Bangarra Dance Theatre. At the time of the interview, Pomare continued to choreograph, although he no longer performed himself. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community, and concludes the interview by reflecting upon contemporary dance, his life and how he would like to be remembered.