

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William "Buddy" Collette

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Collette, Buddy, 1921-2010
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with William "Buddy" Collette,
Dates:	April 20, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:08:48).
Abstract:	Jazz musician William "Buddy" Collette (1921 - 2010) became the first African American musician to perform on television on the Groucho Marx show, "You Bet Your Life." Collette was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 20, 2007, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_153
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Jazz musician William “Buddy” Collette was born on August 6, 1921 in Los Angeles, California to Willie Hugh and Goldie Marie Collette. Collette cultivated his love for music at a young age, taking up the alto-saxophone and forming his first group at age twelve. This group included Britt Woodman on the trombone and Charles Mingus on the bass. By age seventeen, Collette was performing professionally and soon thereafter, he served in the U.S. Navy as a bandleader during World War II.

After returning from the war, Collette began playing with the Stars of Swing, a jazz quartet featuring saxophonist Dexter Gordon, bassist Charles Mingus, and drummer Chico Hamilton. The group helped to keep bebop music alive in Los Angeles during the mid-1940s in the historic Center Avenue neighborhood. In 1949, Collette performed around Los Angeles with a variety of jazz musicians including Edgar Hayes, Louis Jordan, Benny Carter, and Gerald Wilson. By 1950, Collette was working as a studio musician, and became the first African American musician to perform on television on the Groucho Marx show *You Bet Your Life*. In 1954, Collette worked as a disc jockey under the pseudonym of Sleepy Stein and released an album entitled *Tanganyika*, with a group consisting of Collette, drummer Chico Hamilton, trumpeter John Anderson, pianist Gerald Wiggins, guitarist Jimmy Hall, and bassist Curtis Counce. In 1955, Collette gained national recognition after he became a founding member of Chico Hamilton’s legendary quintet. In 1956, Collette recorded his first album, *Man of Many Parts*, as a bandleader. Later that year, Collette followed his debut album with *Nice Day with Buddy Collette*, which led to a string of albums throughout 1958 and 1959 including *Calm Cool and Collette*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *Jazz Loves Paris*.

By 1966, Collette had become a noteworthy educator in Los Angeles. He also freelanced, worked in the studios, played in clubs and taught aspiring jazz musicians. Collette’s students included such renowned woodwind players as Eric Dolphy, Charles Lloyd, Frank Morgan, Sonny Criss and James Newton.

In 1988, Collette recorded *Flute Talk*, his first album as a bandleader since 1964. Collette also produced a spoken word record on his experiences with jazz in 1994, *Jazz for Thousand Oaks* in 1996, and *Live from the Nation's Capital* in 2000.

Collette passed away on September 19, 2010 at the age of 89.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with William "Buddy" Collette was conducted by Jacques Lesure on April 20, 2007, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Jazz musician William "Buddy" Collette (1921 - 2010) became the first African American musician to perform on television on the Groucho Marx show, "You Bet Your Life."

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:

Collette, Buddy, 1921-2010

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Collette, Buddy, 1921-2010--Interviews

African American jazz musicians--Interviews

Saxophonists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Jazz Musician

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 William "Buddy" Collette, April 20, 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 William "Buddy" Collette, Section A2007_153_001_001, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

William "Buddy" Collette was born on August 6, 1921 in Los Angeles, California to Goldie Dorris Collette and Willie Collette. After the death of Collette's maternal grandmother, Mable Dorris, his mother lived in a foster home in Kansas City, Kansas until her father, Arthur Dorris, remarried and moved the family to Los Angeles. There, his mother's family moved into a house owned by Collette's paternal grandparents, Matilda Collette and William Collette, which led to his parents' meeting. After marrying, Collette's parents moved to Los Angeles' Watts community, where he was raised. Much of Collette's early childhood was spent with his extended family. Once, while visiting his Aunt Opal, Collette was hit by a car, and walked away unharmed. On another occasion, he stole apricots from the local general store, and his father asked a neighbor to pretend to be the police to frighten him. Collette began playing the piano at eight years old, with his mother's encouragement.

African American families--California.

African Americans--Migrations--History--20th century.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Buddy" Collette, Section A2007_153_001_002, TRT: 0:29:06 ?

William "Buddy" Collette grew up in the close-knit, multicultural community of Central Gardens, in the Watts section of Los Angeles, California. He attended 96th Street Elementary School, and then David Starr Jordan High School. There, his peers included Joe Adams, who became Ray Charles' manager; and Britt Woodman, who went on to play in Duke Ellington's orchestra. Collette was interested in music from an early age. He studied piano with a woman from his paternal grandmother's church, and taught himself to play the saxophone. Proud of their son's musical talent, Collette's parents told future record company owner Ducey Williams about his accomplishments; and, the next day, Williams gave Collette his collection of stock music. He was also acquainted with jazz pianist Art Tatum, who was a friend of his uncle. Collette began his music career by busking with his friend, Charles Mingus, on the Pacific Electric Railway, where they attracted numerous fans.

African American jazz musicians--California--Los Angeles.

African American men--Family relationships.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Buddy" Collette, Section A2007_153_001_003, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

William "Buddy" Collette attended David Starr Jordan High School in Los Angeles, California, where he focused on his music under the mentorship of the Woodman brothers. Collette studied their performances, and took clarinet lessons from William Woodman, Jr. Collette convinced his friend, Charles Mingus, to learn to play the bass, and the pair began performing at family friends' house parties. Collette graduated from high school in 1941, and briefly attended Los Angeles City College. He then enlisted in the U.S. Navy Reserve, where he served as a bandleader. Initially, Collette had difficulty directing the band members; but, with his teaching, they soon achieved a unified sound. The U.S. military was segregated at the time, and Collette recalls the discriminatory treatment of the African American troops. Upon leaving the military, Collette enrolled at the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music and Arts in preparation for a career as a studio musician.

Depressions--1929--United States.

World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.

Music--Instruction and study.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Buddy" Collette, Section A2007_153_001_004, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

William "Buddy" Collette served as a bandleader in the U.S. Naval Reserve, and then returned to Los Angeles, California, where he organized a new band called the Stars of Swing. The group included saxophonist Lucky Thompson, pianist Spaulding Givens, drummer Oscar Bradley as well as Collette's childhood friend and longtime musical partner, bassist Charles Mingus. For his own part, Collette incorporated flute arrangements into the band's songs, which had rarely been done before. After two months of rehearsals, the band secured their first booking at the Downbeat nightclub in Los Angeles. Tensions arose among Thompson and other band members after he changed the band's name to Lucky Thompson and His All Stars just before the show. Eventually, Thompson was replaced by saxophonist Teddy Edwards. In addition to playing with his band, Collette taught workshops for aspiring musicians at Los Angeles' Crystal Tea Room, and created the multicultural Community Symphony Orchestra.

Musicians--Labor unions--California.

Integration--United States.

Mingus, Charles, 1922-1979.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Buddy" Collette, Section A2007_153_001_005, TRT: 0:29:18 ?

William "Buddy" Collette met Jerry Fielding, the conductor of Groucho Marx's 'You Bet Your Life' television program, through a mutual friend. In 1948, Collette accepted Fielding's invitation to join the show's orchestra, and became the first African American musician on a national television broadcast. Collette recalls filming with the orchestra for the first time; when, rather than rehearse beforehand, Fielding simply gave Collette a book of music, explained the structure of the show and sent him to the taping. On set, Collette was accepted by the white musicians, and helped integrate the American Federation of Musicians Local 47 union in 1953. After Collette protested the lack of diversity in the orchestra at the Academy Awards in 1964, he was hired as one of the first African American musicians to play for the show. While playing on 'You Bet Your Life,' Collette performed with several other bands, including Buddy Collette and His Swinging Shepherds, with whom he recorded two albums.

Musicians--Labor unions--California.

You bet your life. (Television program).

Discrimination in public accommodations.

Marx, Groucho, 1890-1977.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Buddy" Collette, Section A2007_153_001_006, TRT: 0:31:14 ?

William "Buddy" Collette played in the orchestra on Groucho Marx's 'You Bet Your Life' program, and was the first African American musician on national television. He also performed live, and was on his way to a show in San Diego, California when the Watts uprisings broke out in Los Angeles in 1965. Throughout the 1970s, Collette played in nightclubs with cellist Fred Katz and drummer Chico Hamilton, and on television programs like 'The Flip Wilson Show.' He also became the head of the music department at California State College at Los Angeles, and taught music at several other universities in

California. In the 1980s, Collette was elected to the board of directors of the American Federation of Musicians Local 47, which he helped integrate in 1953. In 1994, he founded JazzAmerica to provide instruction and scholarships to young musicians. Collette reflects upon his life and legacy, as well as his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Flip Wilson show (Television program).

Riddle, Nelson.

African Americans on television.

May, Billy.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Buddy" Collette, Section A2007_153_001_007, TRT: 0:11:49 ?

William "Buddy" Collette narrates his photographs.

Photos