

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Louis Stevenson

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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>	Stevenson, Robert Louis, 1944-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Louis Stevenson,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 7, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:56:38).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Film hairstylist Robert Louis Stevenson (1944 - ) was an Emmy award-winning Hollywood hairstylist who worked exclusively with Richard Pryor and Samuel L. Jackson. His film credits include, "A Time to Kill," "Which Way Is Up?" "Jackie Brown," and, "Coming to America." Stevenson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 7, 2007, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_197
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Film hairstylist, Robert Louis Stevenson, was born on April 20, 1944 in Louisville, Kentucky. Stevenson was raised in South Central Los Angeles, California and was the oldest of twelve children. He attended Jordan High School and enrolled in Compton College in 1963. Stevenson was drafted into The United States Military in 1965 during the Vietnam War and was unable to complete his undergraduate education. In the military Stevenson spent two years in Korea and eleven months in Oklahoma. Following his tour of duty, he trained at Flavio

School of Beauty.

Stevenson began his hairstyling career in 1971 working on the NBC television series *McMillan and Wife*. In 1976, Stevenson began working as Richard Pryor's hairstylist for the film *Car Wash*, and he continued as Pryor's hairstylist for the films *Greased Lightning* and *Which Way Is Up?*. Stevenson served as head of the hair department on several other films and television shows in the late 1970s and 1980s, including *The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Toy* and *Superman III*. In 1985, Stevenson was nominated for an Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Hairstyling for the Miniseries, *The Atlanta Child Murders*, and he won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Hairstyling for *The Jesse Owens Story* that same year. In 1988, he worked as head of the hair department on Eddie Murphy's film, *Coming to America*. In 1993, Stevenson was nominated again for an Emmy Award for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Hairstyling for a Miniseries or Special for *The Jacksons: An American Dream*. Stevenson has worked personally with Lawrence Fishburne and Angela Bassett. He also served as Samuel L. Jackson's hairstylist on several films including *1408*, *Home of the Brave*, *Black Snake Moan*, *Snakes on a Plane*, *Freedomland*, *XXX: State of the Union*, *The Man*, *Coach Carter*, *In My Country*, *S.W.A.T.*, *Basic*, *Formula 51*, *Changing Lanes*, *Unbreakable*, *Shaft*, *Rules of Engagement*, *The Negotiator*, *Eve's Bayou*, *Jackie Brown* and *The Long Kiss Good Night*. In addition, Stevenson has been a department head or supervising hairstylist on many memorable films including *Jarhead*, *Three Kings*, *Amistad*, *Waiting to Exhale*, *Dangerous Minds*, *What's Love Got to Do With It?*, *Sister Act*, *The Color Purple*, *Flashdance* and *Willie Dynamite*.

Stevenson has been married for thirty years to film publicist Rosalind Stevenson. They have four adult children and five grandchildren.

Robert Stevenson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 7, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Louis Stevenson was conducted by Ron Brewington on July 7, 2007, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Film hairstylist Robert Louis Stevenson (1944 - ) was an Emmy award-winning Hollywood hairstylist who worked exclusively with Richard Pryor and Samuel L. Jackson. His film credits include, "A Time to Kill," "Which Way Is Up?" "Jackie Brown," and, "Coming to America."

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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:

Stevenson, Robert Louis, 1944-

Brewington, Ron (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Stevenson, Robert Louis, 1944---Interviews

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African American barbers--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:**

Film Hair Stylist

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

StyleMakers

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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 Robert Louis Stevenson, July 7, 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).

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## 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 Robert Louis Stevenson, Section A2007\_197\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:20 2007/07/07

Robert Louis Stevenson was born on April 20, 1944 in Louisville, Kentucky to Christine Whitaker Stevenson and Willis Stevenson. Stevenson's maternal grandfather was Native American, although his mother was raised by her stepfather, Clarence Butler. After Steven's paternal grandparents died, Stevenson's father was raised by his sister. Stevenson's parents were both born in Louisville, and married as teenagers. His father joined the U.S. Navy at seventeen years old; and, upon his transfer to the Long Beach Naval Station, moved with his family to Los Angeles, California, where they lived with Stevenson's maternal grandmother, Eddie Butler. His father later worked as a truck driver and foreman, and learned Spanish while teaching his coworkers English. In Los Angeles, Stevenson attended Utah Street Elementary School, and visited the Christmas displays downtown each year. When he was six years old, his family moved to the Watts community, where he and his eleven siblings were raised. African American children.

Social life and customs--Los Angeles--California.

African American parents.

African Americans--Marriage.

African American families--California--Los Angeles.

United States. Navy--African Americans.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Louis Stevenson, Section  
A2007\_197\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:30 2007/07/07

Robert Louis Stevenson was the oldest of twelve children, and attended 102nd Street School after moving to Watts, California. He attended Edwin Markham Junior High School, followed by David Starr Jordan High School. There, Stevenson's peers included singers Brenda Holloway, Barrett Strong and The Whispers, and athletes Aaron Youngblood and Johnny Ray Peters inspired him to run track. During the summers, he worked at the Ace Hot Buttonhole Company and Myers Drum Company, and for his father's friend, entrepreneur Ted Levine, who taught him about business. When Stevenson was seventeen years old, his mother passed away. He blamed his father; and, after a physical altercation, Stevenson's maternal grandmother banished both of them from her home. Stevenson was taken in by the neighbors, and attended Compton College briefly before being drafted into the U.S. military. Upon his return, Stevenson worked for the Douglas Aircraft Company, while attending beauty school with funding from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act.

African American school children.

African American high school students.

African American fathers.

Housing projects--California--Watts.

Desertion and non-support--California--Los Angeles.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Louis Stevenson, Section  
A2007\_197\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:38 2007/07/07

Robert Louis Stevenson moved with his family to the new Jordan Downs housing projects in Los Angeles, California when he was in the fifth grade. His father, Willis Stevenson, worked hard to support the family, and struggled with alcoholism. When Stevenson's mother died, he blamed his father's drinking, and did not reconcile with his father until adulthood. Upon graduating from David Starr Jordan High School, Stevenson was awarded a track scholarship to Fresno State College, but

decided to attend Compton Community College for its proximity to Los Angeles. He pursued a degree in the graphic arts while also working at the Los Angeles International Airport, until being drafted into the U.S. Army. He was stationed in Louisiana, where he experienced segregation for the first time; and then served overseas in Korea, where he witnessed white Americans' racism against their Korean allies. Stevenson reflects upon his experiences in the U.S. military, and the benefits of the draft.

Housing projects--California--Watts.

Children of alcoholics--California.

United States. Army--African Americans.

Alcoholism.

Watts (Los Angeles, Calif.).

African American fathers--California.

Draft--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Louis Stevenson, Section  
A2007\_197\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:20 2007/07/07

Robert Louis Stevenson aspired to become a hairstylist upon learning about his friend's brother's success in the industry, and enrolled in beauty school after returning from the U.S. military. After marrying in 1965, he worked for a time at the Modine Manufacturing Company. In 1968, Stevenson partnered with a more experienced stylist to open a salon in Los Angeles, California. He applied for a job as a hairstylist for Universal Studios, and was asked to prove his versatility by styling a white woman's hair. One month later, he was hired to the company's apprenticeship program. While there were a few women of color working as hairdressers at Universal Studios, Stevenson was the first African American man in the position, and was barred from the Makeup Artists and Hair Stylists Guild due to racial discrimination. He began his career on the 'McMillan and Wife' television program in the 1970s. Stevenson also explains the difference between commercial hairstyling and styling for films and television.

Beauty shops--California--Los Angeles

African Americans--Marriage.

Universal Studios--Employees.

Hairdressing--Employees--Job descriptions.

Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.).

African American beauty operators--California.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Louis Stevenson, Section  
A2007\_197\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:20 2007/07/07

Robert Louis Stevenson divorced his first wife in 1974; and, shortly after, met Rosalyn Woodruff Stevenson, an extra on 'Emergency.' In the following years, they continued working together, and became friends. The couple married in 1977, and had their first child the next year. After her pregnancy, Woodruff worked on 'Good Times,' and then joined the Metro Goldwyn Mayer Inc. studios. She later studied publicity at the University of California, Los Angeles with financial assistance from Metro Goldwyn Mayer Inc., and became one of the first African American publicists to work for a major studio. In his career as a film hairstylist, Stevenson worked long hours, and was eventually admitted to the Makeup Artists and Hair Stylists Guild, where he became an active member. He describes his advice for aspiring film hairstylists, and talks about the history of black face in Hollywood. Stevenson also describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Beauty operators--California--Los Angeles.

Motion picture industry.

Divorce.

African Americans--Marriage.

United States--Race relations.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Louis Stevenson, Section  
A2007\_197\_001\_006, TRT: 0:25:30 2007/07/07

Robert Louis Stevenson met actor Richard Pryor while working at Universal Studios. Pryor offered Stevenson a position as a hairstylist on 'Which Way Is Up?' and he later worked with Pryor on 'Harlem Nights,' alongside Eddie Murphy, Della Reese, Robin Harris and Redd Foxx. During Stevenson's career in film hairstyling, he worked with actors like Angela Bassett and Samuel L. Jackson.



Tabloids often offered him money for gossip about his celebrity clients, but Stevenson always refused. He received an Emmy Award for 'The Jesse Owens Story,' in addition to two nominations for his other work. Stevenson describes his plans for retirement, which included teaching at the Makeup Artists and Hair Stylists Guild, and helping cancer patients care for their wigs. He describes how he would like to be remembered, and his advice for young people. Stevenson concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.

Pryor, Richard.

Harlem (New York, N.Y.)--Drama.

Gynecology--Study and teaching.

Emmy Awards.

Foxx, Redd, 1922-1991.