Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James McQuay

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator: James McQuay
Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay,
Dates: September 21, 2007
Bulk Dates: 2007
Physical Description: 4 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:00:46).
Abstract: Furrier James McQuay (1924 - ) opened his first shop. Furs by James, in Harlem, New York in 1950. His furs can be seen in the 1970s films Cleopatra Jones and Foxy Brown. McQuay was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 21, 2007, in Mt. Vernon, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification: A2007_269
Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Furrier James McQuay was born on November 15, 1924 in Baltimore, Maryland to Sarah and Thomas McQuay. Shortly after birth, McQuay and his family moved to Yonkers, New York. He grew up in a small black community on the second floor of a three-family housing unit. Heavily influenced by his mother and grandmother, they provided him with examples of hard-work and determination. He attended Hawthorne Junior High School and graduated in 1943 from Yonkers High School. Prior to graduation, McQuay began working for Nathan Ginsburg in 1939, a local Yonkers furrier. McQuay and Ginsburg cultivated a friendship that lasted generations. It was through Ginsburg that McQuay realized that he had a dream to own a fur shop.

Immediately after graduating from Yonkers High School, McQuay was drafted into World War II, where he served in the South Pacific until 1946. Upon McQuay’s return, he went back to school working for Nathan Ginsburg, before venturing out on his own four years later. In 1950, McQuay opened his first shop in 1950, Furs by James. He became one of, if not the only, African American furriers in New York City. The store remained open for six years before McQuay closed it in 1956 to open another store of the same name in Mt. Vernon, New York. Furs by James stayed open for seven years, until he closed it in 1963 to pursue freelance opportunities. By the early 1970s, McQuay’s furs could be seen in many blaxploitation films of the time, including "Cleopatra Jones" and "Foxy Brown." In the early 1980s, McQuay participated in the Congressional Black Caucus’ annual fashion show as the only furrier.

Throughout his career, McQuay has received numerous accolades for his achievements, including being featured in "Essence" magazine and in the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.’s “Furs, the Final Touch” fashion show.

James McQuay was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on September 21, 2007.
Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James McQuay was conducted by Adrienne Jones on September 21, 2007, in Mt. Vernon, New York, and was recorded on 4 Betacam SP videocassettes. Furrier James McQuay (1924 - ) opened his first shop. Furs by James, in Harlem, New York in 1950. His furs can be seen in the 1970s films Cleopatra Jones and Foxy Brown.

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:

McQuay, James
Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)
Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
James McQuay--Interviews

Organizations:
HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers

BusinessMakers

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 8/15/2011 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, September 21, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay, Section A2007_269_001_001, TRT: 0:29:32
2007/09/21

James McQuay discusses his family background, childhood experiences, and his involvement in World War II. He reflected on his mother and grandmother’s influence in his life, showing him a strong example of hard work. McQuay then detailed his experiences as a black student in Yonkers public schools at P.S. #3, Hawthorne Junior High School, and Yonkers High School. The black students
were mainly ignored, except for one teacher at the elementary level who seemed to show interest in black youth. McQuay also discussed his entry into the furrier business influenced by his mentor, Mr. Nathan Ginsburg, a white furrier who invited McQuay to apprentice under him. McQuay provides a detailed discussion of his being draft into World War II and his military tour of duty.

**African American families--New York (State)--Yonkers**

**Yonkers Public Schools (N.Y.)**

**Education--New York (State)--Yonkers**

**Fur Trade--New York**

*Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay, Section A2007_269_001_002, TRT: 0:30:53 2007/09/21*

James McQuay discusses his involvement in the segregated military. He details his life upon his return from the military to Yonkers, New York where he interned with his mentor Mr. Nathan Ginsburg. McQuay worked for Mr. Ginsburg until 1950. McQuay opened his own furrier business, Furs by James. McQuay discussed the start-up of his business and his relocation to attract a larger black clientele. He found a location on Broadway in Harlem. During his first year in business, McQuay repaired furs instead of selling them, as he did not yet have a reputation in the community. McQuay continued to speak about fashion shows that help to build his business.

**Fur Trade--New York**

**African American soldiers--Social conditions--20th century**

**Minority business enterprises--New York (State)**

*Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay, Section A2007_269_001_003, TRT: 0:29:09 2007/09/21*

James McQuay discusses the beginnings and growth of his businesses. He details the challenges of being a black business owner. He talked about publicizing his business and working with the Ebony Fashion Fair show. He shares his hiring procedures, safety issues in the furrier business, and the challenges of running a small business. McQuay discussed his marriage to Doris McQuay. He continued with the expansion of his business. He concludes with the Civil Rights Movement, the upward mobility of African Americans, and the Animal Rights Movement. He argued that blacks continued to purchase furs in spite of the Animal Rights Movement due to the long standing denial of the financial ability to purchase furs.

**Fur Trade--New York**

**Animal rights movement--United States**

**African American business enterprises--New York (State)**

**Civil rights movements--United States--20th century**

*Video Oral History Interview with James McQuay, Section A2007_269_001_004, TRT: 0:31:12 2007/09/21*

James McQuay discussed race relations in Yonkers in the 1980s. McQuay talked about his brother’s experience as the second black fire fighter in Yonkers and his sister becoming a nurse. McQuay also discussed the migration of blacks from Yonkers to Mt. Vernon. McQuay continued the interview with the movies his fur coats were featured in including "Foxy Brown" and "Cleopatra Jones." McQuay described the fashion shows he produced for the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington, DC, and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority in New York. McQuay declares his mother’s influence on his overall life and work ethic.
McQuay shared a photo collection, including photos of McQuay, Ebony Fashion Shows, and celebrities wearing his furs such as Bill Cosby and Patti Labelle on the cover of "Upscale Magazine."

African American families--New York (State)--Yonkers
Celebrities--Clothing
African Americans--Social conditions--New York (State)--Yonkers
African Americans--Migrations--New York
Fashion shows--United States