Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Helen Jones Woods

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Helen Jones Woods

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods,

Dates: October 6, 2007

Bulk Dates: 2007

Physical Description: 4 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:41:47).

Abstract: Licensed practical nurse and trombonist Helen Jones Woods (1923 - ) is the original trombonist of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm. She was part of the first group of African American women to tour with the USO during World War II. Woods is the mother of media mogul, Cathy Hughes. Woods was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 6, 2007, in Omaha, Nebraska. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2007_281

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Licensed practical nurse and trombonist Helen Elizabeth Jones Woods was born in 1923 in Meridian, Mississippi. Woods began her life in a Mississippi orphanage for white children. When it became obvious that she was not white, Woods was adopted by Professor Laurence Clifton Jones, the founder and director of Piney Woods Country Life School, and his wife. After the sudden death of Jones’ wife, Woods, at the age of four, became part of the general population of the school where she enjoyed music and special programs. Helen Keller, George Washington Carver and other luminaries visited the Piney Woods campus. Woods was a member of the school’s traveling and fundraising band, Cotton Blossom Singers, which was directed by Consuela Carter. In 1937, Jones formed the Swinging Rays of Rhythm, another all-girl band led by Carter. The band toured extensively throughout the eastern United States to raise money for the school. In 1941, Woods and several other girls left Piney Woods when they found out that some of them would not graduate because they had been touring with the band instead of going to class.

The band relocated to Arlington, Virginia where it was renamed The International Sweethearts of Rhythm due to the diverse racial and ethnic composition of its members. Comprised of African American, Asian, Mexican, Native American, and Caucasian girls ranging in age from fourteen to nineteen years old, the sixteen-piece band continued under the management of Dan Gerry. Although the band’s lineup changed frequently, it attracted many talented musicians. The original members included Woods on trombone, Pauline Braddy on drums and Willie May Wong on saxophone. Anna Mae Winburn, former leader of the Cotton Club Boys in North Omaha, Nebraska, was appointed the band leader. The band’s first composer was Eddie Durham, with Jesse Stone taking over in 1941. Later members included trumpeter-vocalist Ernestine “Tiny” Davis and saxophonist Vi Burnside. The band headlined venues such as the Apollo Theater and Washington, D.C.’s Howard Theatre, where in 1941 it
set a box office record of 35,000 patrons in a single week. As a member of the band, Woods was one of the first African American women to tour with the United Services Organizations (USO) during World War II, traveling to France and Germany. Groundbreaking in its all-female and racially integrated lineup, The International Sweethearts of Rhythm also received great critical acclaim for its musical talent.

After the original band dissolved in 1949, Woods traveled to Omaha where she eventually settled down and married William A. Woods, the first black man to get an accounting degree from Creighton University. Woods served as a licensed practical nurse at Douglas County Hospital for twenty-three years, retiring in the 1970s. She is the mother of four children, including media mogul Cathy Hughes. Woods was inducted into the Omaha Black Music Hall of Fame in 2007.

Helen Jones Woods was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on October 6, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Helen Jones Woods was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 6, 2007, in Omaha, Nebraska, and was recorded on 4 Betacam SP videocassettes. Licensed practical nurse and trombonist Helen Jones Woods (1923 - ) is the original trombonist of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm. She was part of the first group of African American women to tour with the USO during World War II. Woods is the mother of media mogul, Cathy Hughes.

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:

Woods, Helen Jones
Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

- African Americans--Interviews.
- Helen Jones Woods--Interviews.
- African American jazz musicians--Interviews.
- African American women musicians--Interviews.
- African American nurses--Interviews.

**Organizations:**

- HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)
- The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
- International Sweethearts of Rhythm

**HistoryMakers® Category:**

- MedicalMakers
- 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**


**Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 8/9/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging
Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage, October 6, 2007

Helen Jones Woods begins the interview by discussing her family background. Since Woods was adopted at a young age by Laurence Clifton Jones and his wife, she talks about their family history rather than that of her birth parents. Woods describes her father’s motivations for founding Piney Woods School. Poor black Mississippians could not afford to send their children to school and even struggled to earn enough money to feed them. Black families thus welcomed the educational opportunities available at Piney Woods. Jones also shares her memories of the school, recounting stories about student chores and entertainment.

African American families.
Piney Woods School.
Jones, Laurence Clifton, 1884-1975.
Adoption--United States.
African American childhood.

Helen Jones Woods recounts her early interest in music. She began playing music around the age of six or seven, preferring to play the trombone over the violin suggested by her father. Laurence Jones was an avid fundraiser, who invited renowned speakers, such as Helen Keller, to raise money for Piney Woods. Woods then describes the teachers, buildings and a typical school day at Piney Woods. She shifts to talking about her professional music career in the band, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, whose original members were Piney Woods students. Dan Garey instigated the band’s relocation to Washington, D.C., where he became their music arranger and booked gigs. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm played in various black theaters, such as Washington D.C.’s Howard Theatre. Woods traveled in Germany and France with the United Services Organizations (USO) during World War II. Woods reminisces about playing with Jackie “Moms” Mabley in Washington D.C.

African American childhood.
Piney Woods School.
International Sweethearts of Rhythm.
African American women musicians.
Women jazz musicians.
Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Helen Jones Woods

United Service Organizations (U.S.).
Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods, Section A2007_281_001_003, TRT: 0:29:08 2007/10/06

Helen Jones Woods speaks briefly about memories of her mother and then focuses on her experiences in the band, International Sweethearts of Rhythm, during World War II. Woods enjoyed being in the band because it gave her the opportunity to meet performers such as the Nicholas Brothers and little-known but talented black female musicians. Being a member of the band also allowed her to travel internationally to Germany and France. She recalls meeting soldiers during her United Service Organizations (USO) trips during World War II. Woods left the band in the late 1940s and settled down in Omaha, Nebraska, where she met her husband and began a career as a nurse. Woods concludes by discussing the importance of her four children.

International Sweethearts of Rhythm.
United Service Organizations (U.S.).
African American musicians.
Women jazz musicians.
African American families--Nebraska.
African Americans--Marriage.
African American nurses.

Video Oral History Interview with Helen Jones Woods, Section A2007_281_001_004, TRT: 0:14:05 2007/10/06

Helen Jones Woods discusses her family, including her two sons, two daughters and six grandchildren. At the conclusion of the interview, Woods shows photographs of her parents, Piney Woods and the International Sweethearts of Rhythm.

African American families--Nebraska.
Women jazz musicians.