

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sonny Turner

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616<br>info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com   |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Turner, Sonny   |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Turner,  |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | November 2, 2007  |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2007  |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:29:37).   |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Singer Sonny Turner (1939 - 2022) was a member of the R & B musical group, The Platters. Turner was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 2, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2007_318   |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.   |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

R&B singer Charles Arnold “Sonny” Turner was born on September 24, 1939 in Fairmount, West Virginia. Turner’s mother, Pearl, was a gospel singer and his father Carl, was a boxer. In 1949, Turner moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended Case Woodland Elementary School and graduated from East Technical High School.

Turner began his entertainment career in the mid-1950s by performing with a local R&B group named the Metrotones, which included Andy Forester, James Fryerson, Leonard Veal, and Lavinia Eaton. The group performed at high school assemblies and local amateur vocal contests. They also opened up for The Five Keys, The Moonglows, The Flamingos, and Buddy Johnson. The Metrotones broke up when Andy Forester and James Fryerson were drafted into the United States Army. Turner then performed as a solo artist and master of ceremonies inside of local lounges and bars. He served as the opening act at the Chatter Box in a musical show that featured Billie Holiday and Arthur Pricesock.

Turner met Bill Crane, the talent scout for the R&B group, The Platters, while performing as an opening act for Redd Foxx. Crane became so impressed by Turner’s performance that he asked Turner to audition as the group’s lead singer. Afterwards, Turner, his mother and Bill Crane caught an overnight train to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and met with Platter’s manager, Buck Ramm and the group’s members David Lynch, Herb Reid, Zolar Taylor, and Paul Robbie. That evening, The Platters were appearing at an upscale nightclub in Milwaukee called Club Henrys. Turner sang “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” in between the group’s performances. Ex-Platter member, Tony Williams, the original lead singer on “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” was present in the club. Although Williams’ presence caused Turner to become reluctant, he performed and was congratulated by Williams who was behind the stage curtains. The group had a meeting in the dressing room that night, and Turner was made an official member of The Platters. Turner’s first show came in Washington, D.C. when the Platters were the closing performance for a musical show that featured Sammy Davis, Jr. The group also toured internationally and performed for dignitaries in Poland, Russia, Mexico, and Rome.

Turner married ex-Metrotone, Lavinia Eaton in 1957. That same year, the married couple had a baby girl named Tammie. The following year, Lavinia gave birth to another baby girl named Kyle. After his divorce from Lavinia, Turner married Arlean Fairley in 1970, and had a baby boy named Jason. Turner later was married to Roxie Turner.

Sonny Turner was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 2, 2007.

Sonny Turner passed away on January 13, 2022 at the age of 82.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sonny Turner was conducted by Jacques Lesure on November 2, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Singer Sonny Turner (1939 - 2022) was a member of the R & B musical group, The Platters.

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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:

Turner, Sonny

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Turner, Sonny--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:

Singer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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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 Sonny Turner, November 2, 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).

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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 Sonny Turner, Section A2007\_318\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:38 ?

Sonny Turner was born on September 24, 1939 in Fairmont, West Virginia. His mother, Pearl Davis Turner, was born in Louisville, Kentucky. She was a good student who loved singing in the school choir. She resembled her own mother in being spiritual and nonjudgmental. Turner's maternal grandmother was the matriarch of the family with a calm yet authoritative spirit. His father, Carl Price Turner, was born in Georgia. He was drafted into the U.S. Army and later became a boxer. Both parents were athletic, playing various sports. Turner's early years were spent in Fairmont where he rode a bike in the house when he was not supposed to and decorated family Christmas trees with his homemade ornaments. When Turner was around six years old, his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio where Turner and his two older brothers, Carl and Freddie, were raised in a racially diverse neighborhood. Although Turner and his neighborhood friends were poor, they were also sheltered from larger social tensions of the time.

African Americans--Ohio--Social life and customs.

Race relations--Ohio--Cleveland.

African American families.

African American children--Ohio.

African American children--West Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Turner, Section A2007\_318\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:45 ?

Sonny Turner was a shoe shiner in his childhood. He learned the craft while working at Millionaire's Barbershop in Cleveland, Ohio. Turner's brothers taught him how make a shoeshine box, carry it and effectively approach people. Turner then began soliciting customers and shining shoes downtown. He had his first encounter with racism when a white man walked by, told a singing Turner to shut up and when he didn't, the man hit him on the head. Turner's mother encouraged him to join the church choir after hearing his singing. Turner's love for singing grew in the church. He was profoundly moved when the congregation sang spirituals together. At Kinnard Junior High School, Turner joined The Metrotones when their lead singer left the group. The teachers trained Turner and his friends about pitch, harmony and intonation. Turner describes the teachers who supported and encouraged him as well as singers who influenced him such as Nat King Cole and Louis Armstrong.

African Americans--Ohio--Cleveland--Social life and customs.

African American teenagers--Ohio.

African Americans--Crimes against--Ohio--Cleveland.

African Americans--Religion.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Turner, Section A2007\_318\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:47 ?

Sonny Turner witnessed his older brother's experimentation with drugs as a young boy. Although men in the community talked sense into the older brother after chasing away the addict who initiated the drug use, the experience scared Turner so that he resolved to avoid addiction. As a teenager, Turner admired performers like Nat King Cole and began adopting their well-groomed style. After graduating from East Technical High School in Cleveland, Ohio, Turner chose to work at local music venues and learn about life firsthand rather than attend college. While working as the master of ceremonies at the Chatterbox, he met Billie Holiday, whose advice to stay away from drugs solidified his earlier decision.. While performing as the opening act for Redd Foxx at the Music Box, Turner was noticed by Bill Crane, who offered him the opportunity to sing with The Platters by replacing departing member, Tony Williams. After auditioning

in front of the band, he was praised by Tony Williams and hired that same night.  
African American entertainers.  
Popular culture--20th century.  
African Americans--Social life and customs.  
Washington, Dinah, 1924-1963.  
Bailey, Pearl.  
Dandridge, Dorothy, 1922-1965.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Turner, Section A2007\_318\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:35 ?

Sonny Turner joined The Platters on tour after being immediately hired at his audition. Although his mother passed away shortly after, she was able to see him embark on his successful music career. The Platters accepted Turner right away. His first gig with them was at the Club Lotus in Washington, D.C. where he gave a solid performance. While touring the South, the band encountered racism and once had to fight a truck driver who attacked a member of The Shirelles. While that normally would have risked violent retribution from local law enforcement, The Platters' fame protected them. Turner traveled overseas for the first time to appear with the band at the London Palladium in England. He realized there was more racial tolerance in Europe. Turner remarried and move to Los Angeles, California, the home base for the rest of the band. After The Platters broke up, Turner started Sonny Turner and Sound Limited in the early 1970s. Winning an important showcase helped them gain steady work in Las Vegas, Nevada.

African Americans--Crimes against.  
African American entertainers.  
African American couples.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Turner, Section A2007\_318\_001\_005, TRT: 0:26:31 ?

Sonny Turner and Sound Limited played regularly in Las Vegas, which gave Turner a chance to meet and perform with many celebrities, including Buddy Hackett and Tom Jones. Once, after introducing Elvis Presley, Turner asked for Presley's belt. Presley declined because it was a gift. A couple years later, Presley presented Turner with a replica of the belt as a gift. Since the 1970s, Turner has continued to tour with his renamed band, the Sonny Turner Show. He recently reunited with former bandmate Herb Reed for a PBS production that brought together many well-known doo-wop groups. Turner is a supporter and advocate for the Truth in Music Act, a law that prohibits people from performing under a famous band's name without two or more of the former performers. Turner talks about the current status of former Platters members and the music industry. He reflects upon his legacy, his hopes for the African American community and his advice for aspiring entertainers.

Music trade--Law and legislation.  
Vocational guidance--Music trade.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Turner, Section A2007\_318\_001\_006, TRT: 0:06:21 ?

Sonny Turner narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Turner, Section A2007\_318\_Turner\_Sonny\_06\_MED\_001, TRT: 0:39:25

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Turner, Section A2007\_318\_Turner\_Sonny\_06\_MED\_002, TRT: 0:51:53