

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Prince Spencer

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Spencer, Prince
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Prince Spencer,
Dates:	November 3, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:48:26).
Abstract:	Dancer Prince Spencer (1917 - 2015) was a member of the dance troupe, The Four Step Brothers who appeared in a film with Bob Hope entitled "Here Come the Gals." The troupe toured Europe and performed for the Queen of England. Spencer appeared on the sitcom "Sanford & Son" and in the film "Harlem Nights." Spencer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 3, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_319
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer Prince C. Spencer was born on October 3, 1917 in Jenkinsville, South Carolina to Lottie and Bunyon Spencer. Spencer's family moved from South Carolina to Virginia, then moved to Boston, Massachusetts and finally settled in Toledo, Ohio. In 1941, Spencer joined the dance troupe, The Four Step Brothers, replacing longtime member Sylvester Johnson. The Four Step Brothers was a group of African American tap dancers that originated in the mid-1920s. They performed in several Hollywood films, and by 1946, had performed with Frank Sinatra. That same year, the group embarked on a six month European tour that included performances at the Parisian Le Lido and various other venues throughout Italy and Spain. The Four Step brothers served as trailblazers in the dance world, setting standards in their art and breaking down racial barriers. In almost forty years of performances onstage, in films and television, they danced throughout the world, inspiring others to emulate their tap and acrobatic feats.

The Four Step Brothers appeared uncredited in the 1947 film *That's My Gal*. The group returned to the silver screen in 1953, appearing alongside Bob Hope in a film entitled *Here Come the Girls*. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the group became frequent guest performers on the "Ed Sullivan Show" and also performed on Jack Benny's television show. They also toured Europe again in the 1950s, performing for the Queen of England.

The Four Step Brothers were awarded a Life Achievement Award from the Dance Masters of America in 1960. Spencer continued working in Hollywood, playing small roles and collaborating frequently on projects with comedian Redd Foxx. In 1985, the group received an additional life achievement award for helping to break the color barrier, and in 1988, they received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The following year, Spencer appeared as himself in the film *Harlem Nights* with Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor.

Prince Spencer was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 3, 2007.

Spencer passed away on October 29, 2015.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Prince Spencer was conducted by Jacques Lesure on November 3, 2007, in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer Prince Spencer (1917 - 2015) was a member of the dance troupe, The Four Step Brothers who appeared in a film with Bob Hope entitled "Here Come the Gals." The troupe toured Europe and performed for the Queen of England. Spencer appeared on the sitcom "Sanford & Son" and in the film "Harlem Nights."

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:

Spencer, Prince

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Spencer, Prince--Interviews

Tap dancers--Interviews

African American dancers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dancer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Prince Spencer, November 3, 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 Prince Spencer, Section A2007_319_001_001, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Prince Spencer was born on October 3, 1917 in Jenkinsville, South Carolina to Lottie Spencer and Bunyan Spencer, who were both also born in Jenkinsville. Spencer's mother was born to a white father and an African American mother, and had two brothers who passed as white. His father also had several brothers, most of whom moved to the North as adults. Spencer was the youngest of his parents' five children. When he was three years old, his family lived for a year in Virginia, and then relocated to Boston, Massachusetts. Eventually, they moved to an integrated street in Toledo, Ohio. There, his family attended the Warren A.M.E. Church, where dancing was discouraged. Even so, Spencer began dancing at an early age, and won a dance contest at seven years old. Later, he attended Toledo's Calvin M. Woodward Technical High School, and worked as an usher at the Rivoli Theatre. There, manager Howard Feigley introduced him to entertainer Ben Bernie, who invited Spencer to audition for his revue show.

Coal miners--Virginia.

African American families--Ohio--Toledo.

Toledo (Ohio)--Social conditions--20th century.

Video Oral History Interview with Prince Spencer, Section A2007_319_001_002, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

Prince Spencer began his professional dance career as a teenager, when he joined entertainer Ben Bernie's revue. In 1938, he danced in Major Bowes' 'Dixie Jubilee' show, which featured the music of pianist Putney Dandridge. The all-black cast appeared in formalwear during their first performance, but were forced to wear overalls and gingham for the subsequent shows. From 1941, Spencer performed as a solo act at venues like the Club Alabam in Los Angeles, California. Then, he joined Al Williams, Sylvester Johnson and Freddie James in The Four Step Brothers tap dance troupe, where he replaced Maceo Anderson, who left for the U.S. Army. The group performed in Hollywood with jazz musicians like Cab Calloway, and were hired by manager Edward Sherman for a tour in 1943. In 1946, they performed with singer Frank Sinatra, and began touring Europe. Also that year, James left the group, and Anderson returned. The Four Step Brothers appeared in the films 'That's My Gal' in 1947, and 'Here Come the Girls' in 1953.

Tap dancing--United States--History.

Four Step Brothers.

Video Oral History Interview with Prince Spencer, Section A2007_319_001_003, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

Prince Spencer and The Four Step Brothers appeared on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' several times, and performed with entertainers like comedian Milton Berle, singer Sophie Tucker and actor Danny Kaye throughout their career. Spencer met his wife, model Jeraldyn Spencer, in 1953; and often stayed at her home while performing in Los Angeles, California. In 1960, The Four Step Brothers won the Dance Masters of America Lifetime Achievement Award. Spencer left the group in 1968, and pursued a solo career at venues in Las Vegas, Nevada like the Silver Slipper and the Last Frontier Hotel. He invested in land in Nevada before moving to Chicago, Illinois, where he opened a supermarket with businessman Ernest T. Collins. Then, Spencer was hired as the assistant to actor Redd Foxx, working with him on 'Sanford and Son' and 'Harlem Nights.' Spencer recalls when Foxx was penalized by the Internal Revenue Service for unpaid taxes. He also remembers singer Sammy Davis, Jr., whom Spencer befriended when Davis was twelve years old.

Four Step Brothers.

Dance Masters of America.

Hollywood Boulevard (Los Angeles, Calif.).

African Americans--Illinois--Chicago--20th century.

Near South Side (Chicago, Ill.).

African American business enterprises--Illinois--Chicago.

Foxx, Redd, 1922-1991.

Video Oral History Interview with Prince Spencer, Section A2007_319_001_004, TRT: 0:21:57 ?

Prince Spencer and The Four Step Brothers received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1988. Spencer worked as the assistant to actor Redd Foxx until 1991. That year, Spencer and singer Della Reese-Lett, Foxx's costar on 'The Royal Family,' witnessed Foxx's death from a heart attack during rehearsals. Spencer then returned to Las Vegas, Nevada, where he worked as a casino host. Spencer talks about tap dancer Savion Glover, and the changes in the world of professional dance. He reflects upon his life and legacy, his hopes for the African American community and his plans for the future. He also shares his advice to aspiring dancers. Spencer concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.

Foxx, Redd, 1922-1991.

Nightclubs--New York (State)--New York--Drama.

Casinos--Employees--Nevada--Las Vegas.

Tap dancing--History.

African Americans in the performing arts--History.

African Americans--Conduct of life.