



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:	Prince Spencer
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Prince Spencer,
Dates:	November 3, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	4 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:48:26).
Abstract:	Dancer Prince Spencer (1917 -) 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.

Spencer lives in Las Vegas, Nevada.

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

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 Betacam SP videocassettes. Dancer Prince Spencer (1917 -) 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

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 8/29/2011 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, November 3, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with Prince Spencer, Section A2007_319_001_001, TRT: 0:29:15
2007/11/03

Prince Spencer slates the interview and describes his family's background. His mother was biracial, and two of his maternal uncles passed for white. Spencer notes that he did not see his mother's relatives regularly. His father, Bunyon, was a miner, and the Spencer family had to move frequently when he was looking for employment. The family left North Carolina when Prince was three and lived in Virginia and Massachusetts before settling in Toledo, Ohio. Spencer remembers his earliest dance experiences, performing around Toledo. He recalls that Toledo was a segregated city at the time, but he did not notice it very much as a child as he was well dressed and well behaved; therefore, he frequently performed in white establishments.

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
2007/11/03

Prince Spencer discusses his parents' reaction to his dancing ambitions. His father, Bunyon, was skeptical at first, but Spencer's mother was always supportive, and she frequently made his costumes. Spencer notes that he did not pay much attention to discrimination during his early career. His only focus was to dance. Spencer details his early solo career as a tap dancer and his tour with "Major Bowes' Dixie Jubilee". Spencer joined The Four Step Brothers in 1941, an African American dance team that had already been in existence for over fifteen years at that time. When the group was founded, it was simply called The Step Brothers, but the name was changed later to avoid confusion with another tap dancing group of the same name. The group was also known as "The Eight Feet of Rhythm" and "America's Great Dance Team."

Tap dancing--United States--History.

Four Step Brothers.

Video Oral History Interview with Prince Spencer, Section A2007_319_001_003, TRT: 0:28:10
2007/11/03

Prince Spencer discusses his most memorable performances as a member of the Four Step Brothers. The group performed for the Queen of England. They also appeared in the films "That's My Gal" and "Here Come The Girls." Spencer stresses that all members of the Four Step Brothers were true gentlemen. They never did drugs or participated in an illicit lifestyle. The group received a Life Achievement Award from The Dance Masters of America in 1960. Spencer left the group in 1968. He opened a supermarket on Chicago's South Side for several years. It was one of the first black-owned supermarkets in the state. Once the neighborhood began to decline in the 1970s, Spencer sold the store, moved to California and went back to the entertainment business. He reestablished his friendship with comedian Redd Foxx who would cast Spencer in small roles on his shows.

Four Step Brothers.

Dance Masters of America.

Hollywood Boulevard (Los Angeles, Calif.)(Nashville, Tenn.)

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

2007/11/03

Prince Spencer continues to discuss his friendship and professional relationship with Redd Foxx. Spencer also had a bit role playing himself in Foxx's final film, "Harlem Nights". He continued to collaborate with Foxx until his death in 1991, after which Prince Spencer worked as a casino host in Las Vegas, Nevada. He continued to do this for several years, even after he suffered a stroke. Spencer has retired, although he makes occasional appearances to discuss the history of African American tap dance. He explains the ways in which dance and the entertainment industry has evolved. To conclude, Spencer discusses his legacy and his hopes for the African American community.

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.