

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Melba Moore

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Moore, Melba
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Melba Moore,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 28, 2010 and February 4, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008 and 2010
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:49:56).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Stage actress, musical singer, and singer Melba Moore (1945 - ) won the Tony Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in Purlie. She was also a recording artist, and received a Grammy nomination for her song, 'Lean on Me.' Moore was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 28, 2010 and February 4, 2008, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_008
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Singer, stage actress, and musical singer Melba Moore was born Beatrice Melba Smith on October 29, 1945 in New York City. The daughter of Detroit bandleader, Ted Hill, Moore was raised by mother, Gertrude Melba Smith and stepfather, Clement Leroy Moorman, also professional musicians. As a youth, Moore's passion was dancing, however, when her stepfather made her take piano lessons, she began to admire jazz and blues pianists. Moore attended Newark, New Jersey's Waverly Elementary School and Cleveland Junior High School. After graduating from the High School of Performing Arts, she enrolled in Montclair

State Teachers College. Later, Moore went on to earn her B.A. degree in music.

Moore returned to the Newark Public Schools and student taught at the Pershine Avenue Elementary School. As a teacher, Moore began to perform with other teachers that formed a cultural performance group called Black Voices. In 1968, Moore began to work at various studios in Manhattan where she provided background vocals for the likes of Frank Sinatra and Aretha Franklin. While working at one such session, Moore was encouraged to audition for the Broadway musical *Hair* in 1968. She succeeded Diane Keaton in the lead role in 1969.

Moore went on to play recurring roles in several hit Broadway productions including *Purlie*, which she won a Tony Award for Best Supporting Actress in a Musical, *Inacent Black*, *Timbuktu* and *Les Misérables*. In 1975, alongside her then-husband Charles Huggins, Moore formed Hush Productions and signed R&B artist Freddie Jackson. That same year, she released her Grammy-nominated, debut album entitled *Peach Melba*. Throughout the 1980s, Moore made appearances on several television and movie productions including *Ellis Island*. In 2003, she was featured alongside Beyoncé Knowles and Cuba Gooding, Jr. as “Bessie Cooley” in *The Fighting Temptations*.

Moore lives in New York City.

Melba Moore was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 28, 2010.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Melba Moore was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 28, 2010 and February 4, 2008, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Stage actress, musical singer, and singer Melba Moore (1945 - ) won the Tony Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Purlie*. She was also a recording artist, and received a Grammy nomination for her song, 'Lean on Me.'

---

## 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:

Moore, Melba

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Moore, Melba--Interviews

---

African American actresses--Interviews

---

African American singers--Interviews.

---

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## **Occupations:**

Stage Actress

---

## **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 Melba Moore, April 28, 2010 and February 4, 2008. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual

## 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 Melba Moore, Section  
A2008\_008\_001\_001, TRT: 0:31:11 2008/02/04

Melba Moore was born on November 29, 1945 in New York City to Teddy Hill and Gertrude Smith Moorman, who performed under the name Bonnie Davis. Her mother was born in the Deep South, and spent time in New Orleans, Louisiana and Pipe Shop, Alabama before moving to New York City. There, she began her singing career with Teddy Hill and His Orchestra, which was led by Moore's biological father. Moore's father was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and later moved to New York City, where he became a big band leader and the manager of Minton's Playhouse, a prominent jazz club in Harlem. Shortly after Moore was born, her mother separated from her biological father and married Clement Leroy Moorman, who was also a musician. Moore's stepfather was born in Newark, New Jersey, and was a member of a musical group called the Piccadilly Pipers. He met Moore's mother when she auditioned for the ensemble. At this point, Moore recalls her parents' frequent travel to play at the jazz clubs in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Video Oral History Interview with Melba Moore, Section  
A2008\_008\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:05 2008/02/04

Melba Moore grew up in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, where she attended the St. Thomas the Apostle School. With her mother, singer Bonnie Davis, Moore attended performances at the Apollo Theater,

where she developed an interest in tap dance. She enrolled in dance lessons at the Mary Bruce School of Dance, and studied with members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Moore was also influenced by her stepfather, jazz musician Clement Leroy Moorman, and took piano lessons along with her half siblings. After her mother and stepfather married, Moore moved with her family to Newark, New Jersey, where she attended Cleveland Junior High School and the integrated Arts High School. She joined the vocal club and choir, and continued to develop her musical talent with the help from her peers and mentors. She also performed in the school's production of the opera 'Aida' by Giuseppe Verdi. Moore talks about her favorite black performers, including Eartha Kitt, Diahann Carroll and Lena Horne.

Video Oral History Interview with Melba Moore, Section  
A2008\_008\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:17 2008/02/04

Melba Moore graduated from Arts High School in Newark, New Jersey. Although she had aspirations of pursuing a career in music, she lacked the confidence to apply to music school, and her parents encouraged her to find a job with security and stable pay. Moore decided to enroll at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey, where she studied music education. She continued to perform and honed her musical abilities; and her stepfather, Clement Leroy Moorman, eventually recognized that Moore's true passion was performance. He introduced her to several talent agents, and she began to do backup vocal work as a studio musician. In the late 1960s, Moore joined Voices, Inc., an all-black performance ensemble that sang and dramatized African American history. Moore continued to do studio work as a backup vocalist; and, in 1968, landed her first Broadway role in 'Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical.'

Video Oral History Interview with Melba Moore, Section  
A2008\_008\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:00 2008/02/04

Melba Moore was raised by a nanny, Lulubelle Hattie Mae Stentley Hawkins, who was a former sharecropper from rural South Carolina. Hawkins was a strict disciplinarian; and, as a result, Moore struggled with her self-image as a child. However, as her career progressed, Moore

developed her confidence. In 1970, she landed a role in 'Purlie,' and became one of the first African American stars to emerge on Broadway. She won a Tony Award for best performance by a featured actress in a musical for the role. In 1972, 'The Melba Moore-Clifton Davis Show' premiered as a variety show co-starring Moore and actor Clifton Davis, whom she was dating. The show's success launched Moore's career as a solo musical artist, and she began appearing on television shows like 'The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson.' During this time, Moore struggled with drug addiction. After a medical emergency caused by a faulty birth control device, she returned to her mother's home in Newark, New Jersey and started on the path to recovery.

Video Oral History Interview with Melba Moore, Section  
A2008\_008\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:27 2008/02/04

Melba Moore became her own manager in 1973. She secured performance at a benefit concert at the Apollo Theater in New York City, where she met Charles Huggins. After marrying, Moore and Huggins built a multimillion dollar company called Hush Productions, and Moore revived her career as a vocalist with the release of the album 'Peach Melba,' which earned a Grammy Award nomination in 1975. Three years later, Moore performed in 'Timbuktu!' alongside Eartha Kitt and Geoffrey Holder. Her daughter, Melba Charli Huggins, was born in 1979, and Moore continued to tour as a solo artist while helping her husband manage the production company. During the early 1990s, Moore's husband divorced her suddenly, and stole her financial assets. He also ruined her reputation in the entertainment industry, and she lost custody of her daughter. She focused on developing her talent as an actress, and landed Broadway roles in 'From the Mississippi Delta' in 1993 and 'Les Miserables' in 1995.

Video Oral History Interview with Melba Moore, Section  
A2008\_008\_002\_006, TRT: 0:39:07 2010/04/28

Melba Moore divorced her husband, Charles Huggins, in 1991. Her daughter, Melba Charli Huggins, was unable to cope with the stress of the divorce, and became estranged from both parents. Moore struggled to revive her relationship with her daughter; and, due to financial

constraints, she began to focus on her work as an actress. She also started a new career as a gospel singer, and toured the South and Midwest performing in gospel plays. Through this experience, Moore reconnected with her faith. While on tour, Moore was contacted by her daughter, and the two redeveloped their relationship. Moore's daughter continued to visit her on the road, and Moore discovered that while her daughter was estranged, she was taken care of by Bill Cosby and Camille Cosby. In 1995, Moore created 'Sweet Songs of the Soul,' an autobiographic play that caught the attention of director Richard Jay Alexander, who cast Moore in his Broadway production of 'Les Miserables.' She went on to release the gospel album 'Nobody but Jesus.'

Video Oral History Interview with Melba Moore, Section  
A2008\_008\_002\_007, TRT: 0:28:20 2010/04/28

Melba Moore began her career as a gospel artist by touring the South and the Midwest during the early 1990s. While on tour, she rekindled her faith by sharing testimony and fellowship with other musical artists. During the 2000s, Moore continued to incorporate her faith into her career, and also worked on her craft as an actress. She was invited by Jackie Taylor and the Black Ensemble Theater in Chicago, Illinois to perform in the musical 'The Jackie Wilson Story' in 2002. The production toured nationally, including at performed at the Apollo Theater in New York City. In 2003, Moore landed a starring role opposite Shirley Caesar and Angie Stone in the film 'The Fighting Temptations,' which also starred Beyonce Knowles and Cuba Gooding, Jr. Moore reflects upon how her acting roles paralleled her life experiences. She also talks about living in the public eye, the Broadway revival of 'Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical' and the importance of music in the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Melba Moore, Section  
A2008\_008\_002\_008, TRT: 0:12:29 2010/04/28

Melba Moore reflects upon her life and legacy, as well as her hopes and concerns for the African American community. She talks about her family, and concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be

remembered.