

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Irma Thomas

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Thomas, Irma
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Irma Thomas,
Dates:	March 27, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:00:50).
Abstract:	Singer Irma Thomas (1941 -) had the biggest hit of her career with the single, "Wish Someone Would Care." The song reached number seventeen on Billboard's pop charts in the spring of 1964. Thomas went on to receive two Grammy nominations in 1989 and 1991. Thomas was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 27, 2008, in New Orleans, Louisiana. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_064
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Blues vocalist Irma Thomas was born Irma Lee on February 18, 1941, in Ponchatoula, Louisiana. She was raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, and attended New Orleans' McDonald 41 public school. Thomas displayed her early vocal talents as a teen. She sang with a Baptist church choir and a gospel quartet at Home Mission Baptist Church. Her very first recording was a school song, which was recorded at Cosmo's studio with fellow classmates. At the age of eleven, Thomas won The Ritz Theater's talent night and two years later, she auditioned for Specialty Records.

Her big break came in 1959 when she captured the attention of band leader Tommy Ridgley while she was a waitress at New Orleans' Pimlico Club. Thomas offered to sing with Ridgley and his band against the wishes of her boss, who fired her for singing instead of waiting on tables. Ridgley arranged a recording contract for her with a local label, Ron Records. Her debut single, Dorothy LaBostrie's "You Can Have My Husband, But Please Don't Mess With My Man" hit #22 on the Billboard R&B charts in May 1960. Thomas felt that Ron Records did not pay her the royalties she deserved, so she left them to join the Minit record label. Most of her early 1960s Minit recordings were written and produced by Allen Toussaint and were strong regional sellers. In 1963, Minit was bought by Imperial Records. Thomas' first single with Imperial, "Wish Someone Would Care," was the biggest hit of her career and reached #17 on Billboard's pop charts in the spring of 1964. Thomas released nine singles and two albums during her three-year period with the Imperial label. During the 1960s, Thomas was a popular performer on the Southern college circuit. In 1970, Thomas moved to California where she worked at a department store and as an automobile parts salesperson. During this time, she continued working club dates on weekends and also recorded for several labels, including Atlantic Records in 1971. In the mid-1970s, she moved back to New Orleans where she remained popular as a live performer.

Her comeback as a recording artist started in 1986 when she produced an album, *The New Rules*, with Scott

Billington of Rounder Records. Thomas received her first Grammy nomination in 1991. She received her second Grammy nomination in 1998 along with Marcia Ball and Tracy Nelson. She has continued to maintain an active recording and touring schedule since. Thomas married her manager, Emile Jackson, in 1977. Together, they owned and operated a night club in New Orleans called the Lion's Den until it was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Thomas has a total of seven children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Irma Thomas was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 27, 2008, in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Singer Irma Thomas (1941 -) had the biggest hit of her career with the single, "Wish Someone Would Care." The song reached number seventeen on Billboard's pop charts in the spring of 1964. Thomas went on to receive two Grammy nominations in 1989 and 1991.

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:

Thomas, Irma

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Thomas, Irma--Interviews

African American women singers--Louisiana--New Orleans--Interviews

Women blues musicians--Louisiana--New Orleans--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Singer

HistoryMakers® Category:

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

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Irma Thomas, March 27, 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 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 Irma Thomas, Section A2008_064_001_001, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Irma Thomas was born on February 18, 1941 in Ponchatoula, Louisiana to Vader Todd Milton. Her mother was born in 1916 in Anacoco, Louisiana, and was an avid newspaper reader, despite only completing the third grade. When Thomas was a baby, her mother married L.J. Milton. After they separated, Thomas' mother began a long term relationship with Percy Lee, a World War II veteran whom Thomas considered to be her stepfather. He was born in Greensburg, Louisiana in 1914. Thomas grew up in the segregated Louisiana, where the rules about race relations were never explained to her, or the other African American children. At five years old, Thomas was sent to live with her paternal grandparents in Greensburg while her parents worked. She later joined her parents in New Orleans, Louisiana, when she was nine years old. At home, she listened to her mother's singing, blues music played by her stepfather, and live music played around New Orleans. Thomas recalls visiting her maternal grandparents in Leesville, Louisiana.

African American women singers--Louisiana--New Orleans--Interviews.

Women blues musicians--Louisiana--New Orleans--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Thomas, Section A2008_064_001_002, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Irma Thomas enjoyed the Mardi Gras parades, including the unpredictable Zulu parade, each year as child. Thomas first attended schools in New Orleans before moving to Greensburg, Louisiana where she attended New Star School. Thomas then returned to New Orleans for the fifth grade. Her favorite subjects were English, social studies, and she enjoyed the practical lessons in home economics. Although Thomas sang throughout her childhood, she did not discover she had a talent for singing until her sixth grade teacher, Fern Glapion Brady, took her to a talent competition where she won third place; she later returned to place first. Thomas then auditioned for producer Harold Battiste, who turned her away because of her age. At thirteen years old, Thomas became pregnant with her first child, and dropped out of junior high school. She soon married, and began working at the Pimlico Club. Thomas recalls the smells of home cooking, and growing up in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Thomas, Section A2008_064_001_003, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Irma Thomas was hired as a waitress at the Pimlico Club in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1958, but when she was fired for singing rather than working, she joined Tommy Ridgeley's band. Ridgeley took her to audition for Ron Records, where she recorded her first single, 'Don't Mess with My Man.' The song was popular on the radio, but was later banned because it was considered inappropriate. Thomas later left Ron Records to join Minit Records, where she frequently worked with songwriter and producer Allen Toussaint. While performing in New Orleans, Thomas saw discrimination against darker skinned entertainers at Autocrat Social and Pleasure Club. As her sound took on more of a pop quality, she began to notice that her audience changed from mostly African American to white. Thomas also performed gospel music. The Rolling Stones covered Thomas' song, 'Time Is on My Side,' which broadened her fan base in Europe. She talks about the use of double entendres in music, and Imperial Records' acquisition of Minit Records.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Thomas, Section A2008_064_001_004, TRT: 0:31:40 ?

Irma Thomas worked with H. B. Barnum at Imperial Records; and performed with musicians Johnny Adams and Robert Parker at venues throughout the South, including U.S. military armories. Thomas also performed at the Regal Theater in Chicago, Illinois, and the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C. In the 1960s, Thomas worked with James Brown to record 'It's a Man's Woman's World,' and became his opening act. In 1967, Thomas briefly signed to Chess Records, before finding a sales job at a Montgomery Ward store in California when her recording contract ended. In 1976, she returned to her hometown of New Orleans, Louisiana, where she began dating her husband, Emile Jackson. In 1980, she signed with RCS Records, and released the single 'Safe with Me.' In 1986, she recorded albums 'The New Rules' and 'The Way I Feel' with Rounder Records. In 2005, Thomas' home and club, Lion's Den, were devastated by Hurricane Katrina. After two nominations, Thomas won a Grammy Award in 2006. She also reflects upon her life.

Video Oral History Interview with Irma Thomas, Section
A2008_064_Thomas_Irma_06_MED_001, TRT: 0:49:24