

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Otis Clayborn Williams

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## 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>	Williams, Otis
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Otis Clayborn Williams,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 1, 2008 and September 16, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:25:04).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Singer Otis Clayborn Williams (1941 - ) was an original member of the Motown Records R & B group, The Temptations. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 1, 2008 and September 16, 2008, in Los Angeles, California and West Hollywood, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_068
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Baritone vocalist and member of the legendary R&B group The Temptations, Otis Clayborn Williams was born on October 30, 1941 in Texarkana, Texas to Hazel Louise Williams and the elder Otis Miles. At the age of ten, Williams and his mother relocated to Detroit, Michigan, and he began using his mother's last name. In 1955, Williams attended Detroit's Northwestern High School where he became classmates with future-Temptations Melvin Franklin and Richard Street. As an adolescent, Williams became interested in music and joined with fellow classmates to form singing groups such as Otis Williams and the Siberians, The El Domingoes and The Distant.

As a member of The Distant, Williams sang baritone alongside Melvin Franklin and Al Bryant and was the co-writer of the group's hit song "Come On." However, his fame with The Distant became short lived once the group received an offer from the president of Motown Records, Berry Gordy. In 1961, Williams witnessed The Primes, an R&B group consisting of future-Temptations members Paul Williams and Eddie Kendricks, perform live and was encouraged to ask them to join with him, Franklin and Bryant in the creation of The Elgins. The group later changed their name to The Temptations, auditioned for Gordy and was offered a recording contract on the spot. As a member of The Temptations, Williams began performing at local clubs in Detroit, as well as singing backup for various Motown acts.

In 1961, Williams married Josephine Rogers, and that same year, Rogers gave birth to a son, Otis Lamont Williams. Then, in 1962, The Temptations earned commercial success by releasing their album *Dream Come True*. A year later, original member Al Bryant left the group and was replaced by tenor David Ruffin. Changes in the group's roster would continue and Williams would see as many as eighteen different group members throughout his tenure with The Temptations. After the death of original group member Melvin Franklin in 1995, Williams became the longest-tenured Temptation.

During the mid-1970s, The Temptations experienced some creative differences with Gordy. In 1976, they signed with Atlantic Records where they remained until 1979 when they returned to Motown. Although Williams would never sing lead on any of the group's songs, he has been featured on all of the groups' albums including *Meet the Temptations* (1964); *Temptin' Temptations* (1965); *Cloud Nine* (1969); *Psychedelic Shack* (1970); *Temptations Do the Temptations* (1976); *Bare Back* (1978); *Back to Basics* (1983); *Together Again* (1987) and *Phoenix Rising* (1998).

In 1988, Williams co-authored with Patricia Romanowski *The Temptations*, and, in 1998, NBC aired a two-part miniseries based on the book.

Williams lives with his wife, Goldie, in Los Angeles, California.

Williams was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 1, 2008.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Otis Clayborn Williams was conducted by

Jacques Lesure and Larry Crowe on April 1, 2008 and September 16, 2008, in Los Angeles, California and West Hollywood, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Singer Otis Clayborn Williams (1941 - ) was an original member of the Motown Records R & B group, The Temptations.

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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:**

Williams, Otis

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Burghlea, Neculai (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Williams, Otis--Interviews

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African American male singers--Interviews

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Rhythm and blues musicians--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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Temptations (Musical group)

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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 Otis Clayborn Williams, April 1, 2008 and September 16, 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 (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 Otis Clayborn Williams, Section A2008\_068\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:53 2008/04/01

Otis Clayborn Williams was born on October 30, 1941 in Texarkana, Texas to Hazel Williams Little and Otis Miles. Williams' mother was also born in Texarkana, and a teenager at the time of his birth. When Williams was young, his mother moved to Detroit, Michigan to find work. Williams primarily lived with his paternal grandmother, Della Gooden, in Texarkana. She was a stern

disciplinarian who often took him to church, where he sang in the choir. He also visited his maternal grandparents, Lucinda Eliga Williams and Frank Fisher, Sr. In Texas, he attended Sunset Elementary School, and listened to The Swan Silvertones and Mahalia Jackson. When he was ten years old, Williams joined his mother and stepfather, Edgar Little, in Detroit. There, he was introduced to rock and roll music. Williams met songwriter Lamont Dozier while attending Jefferson High School. After seeing Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers perform at the Fox Theatre, Williams decided to pursue music. He describes his younger brother and sister.

African American male singers--Interviews.

Rhythm and blues musicians--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Otis Clayborn Williams, Section A2008\_068\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:14 2008/04/01

Otis Clayborn Williams attended Northwestern High School in Detroit, Michigan, and enjoyed listening to local musical acts such as The Funk Brothers. He formed his first singing group, Otis Williams and the Siberians, and when bass singer Arthur Walton left, he was replaced by Melvin Franklin. The group performed at bars and lounges in Detroit, where they were approached by Northern Records owner, Johnnie Mae Matthews. They began recording with her as The Distant, and Williams was named leader because of his punctuality. After a disagreement over royalties, Williams left Matthews to join Berry Gordy at Motown Records, whom he had met after a show. By this time, original group member Richard Street had left, and Paul Williams and Eddie Kendricks joined Williams, Franklin, and Elbridge Bryant to form The Elgins, later renamed The Temptations. He remembers local Detroit deejays Frantic Ernie Durham, Joltin' Joe Howard and Larry Dixon; and Florence LaRue, Diana Ross and Mary Wilson of The Primettes.

Video Oral History Interview with Otis Clayborn Williams, Section A2008\_068\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:11 2008/04/01

Otis Clayborn Williams auditioned for William "Mickey" Stevenson at Motown Records, whose roster included bands such as Martha and The Vandellas, Mary Wells, and

The Marvellettes. In 1962, an altercation between Elbridge Bryant and Paul Williams after a performance at Chappy's Lounge that led to the firing of Bryant, who was then replaced by David Ruffin. In 1964, Smokey Robinson wrote The Temptations' first hit, 'The Way You Do the Things You Do.' The group often practiced at Williams' apartment where Paul Williams encouraged them to learn to dance. In 1965, The Temptations recorded the single 'My Girl,' accompanied by the Funk Brothers. The song sold over one million copies, and the group began touring with the Motortown Revue performing alongside Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross and Martha Reeves, who were competitive. On tour, the group often encountering racial tension in the segregated South. Williams recalls marrying Josephine Rogers Williams when she became pregnant with their son, Otis Lamont Williams.

Video Oral History Interview with Otis Clayborn Williams, Section A2008\_068\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:11 2008/04/01

Otis Clayborn Williams recalls songwriter Norman Whitfield's arrival to Motown Records in 1967. After The Temptations' release of 'Get Ready,' written by Smokey's Robinson, did not reach the top ten on the charts, The Temptations collaborated with Whitfield on the song 'Ain't to Proud to Beg.' In 1968, David Ruffin left the group when he could not become its only lead singer. The group's musical style began shifting to psychedelic soul with songs such as 'Cloud Nine' and 'Ball of Confusion.' Richard Street rejoined The Temptations when Paul Williams' health began to deteriorate. Paul Williams left the group in 1971, and died shortly after. The same year, Eddie Kendricks left to pursue a solo career, and The Temptations recorded 'Papa Was a Rollin' Stone.' Dennis Edwards and Damon Harris joined the group briefly before leaving in 1974. Williams also remembers the Detroit Riots, Motown Records' move to California, The Temptations' healthy competition with The Four Tops and performing with The Jackson Five.

Video Oral History Interview with Otis Clayborn Williams, Section A2008\_068\_002\_005, TRT: 0:27:45 2008/09/16

Otis Clayborn Williams remained with The Temptations through several changes in performers. In 1975, Glenn

Leonard joined, staying until 1982. Louis Price performed with the group from 1976 to 1979, at which point Dennis Edwards returned. Throughout the 1970s, The Temptations released several albums, including 'A Song for You' that reflected their older ballad style, and the funk style of the new decade. In the late 1970s, The Temptations were signed to Atlantic Records, before returning to Motown Records in 1980. In 1982, David Ruffin, Eddie Kendricks, and Edwards rejoined The Temptations for a reunion tour but old problems resurfaced, such as drug abuse. In the 1980s, The Temptations collaborated with Rick James on the song, 'Standing on the Top,' and continued releasing music. The Temptations featured a new set of performers in the 1990s. In 1995, Melvin Franklin passed away. Williams talks about the varied vocal styles within The Temptations, and the films inspired by the artists of Motown Records.

Video Oral History Interview with Otis Clayborn Williams, Section A2008\_068\_002\_006, TRT: 0:27:20 2008/09/16

Otis Clayborn Williams remembers the camaraderie between the original Temptations, and how the friendships were affected by drug abuse and stardom. After seeing how drug use changed other entertainers' personalities, Williams vowed to never succumb to drug addiction. Much of The Temptations sound originated from the vocal range of the original performers, with Melvin Franklin's bass and Eddie Kendrick's falsetto. The group's music was also impacted by collaborations with Motown Records' band, The Funk Brothers, including bassist James Jamerson. While touring in Europe, Williams saw a deeper interest in the Temptations amongst British fans. Williams was involved in several lawsuits, including one against former group member Dennis Edwards, and outside groups' attempts to use The Temptations' name. Williams reflects upon the importance of punctuality, and movies inspired by their career and group dynamics, including 'Temptations,' NBC's adaptation of Williams' book 'Temptation.'

Video Oral History Interview with Otis Clayborn Williams, Section A2008\_068\_002\_007, TRT: 0:27:30 2008/09/16

Otis Clayborn Williams had the same manager, Shelly



Berger, from 1966, and the two became close friends. While recording at Motown Records, Williams was often impressed by James Jamerson's innovative bass playing, although Jamerson had never received formal training. The Temptations' previous success with songwriter Norman Whitfield allowed them to release more political songs during the 1960s and 1970s. Marvin Gaye, however, struggled to release the single, 'What's Going On,' which Berry Gordy originally disliked because of its social commentary and departure from Gaye's previous music. From the 1980s to the time of the interview, Williams continued touring with The Temptations, mostly in the United States. The group won four Grammy Awards over their careers, including in 1969, 1971, and 2001. Williams reflects upon contemporary music, and his life and legacy. He also describes his family, and how he would like to be remembered individually, and how he would like The Temptations to be remembered.