

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with H. B. Barnum

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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>	Barnum, H. B.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with H. B. Barnum,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 16, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:10:00).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Music producer H. B. Barnum (1936 - ) has arranged music for many notable jazz, R & B and pop musicians over several decades, and has won international awards for his musical compositions for commercials. Barnum was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 16, 2008, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_110
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Legendary music producer and arranger H. B. Barnum has worked with an extraordinary cross-spectrum of performers in his long career. Barnum was born Hidle Brown Barnum, Jr., on July 15, 1936, in Houston, Texas. At age four, he won a nationwide talent contest for his singing and piano playing, which launched a film and radio career that included appearances on *Amos 'n' Andy* and *The Jack Benny Program*. Barnum recorded his first solo album at the age of fourteen as Pee Wee Barnum. He attended Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, California.

In 1955, Barnum co-founded the short-lived doo-wop group, The Dootones, at the request of Dootone label owner, Dootsie Williams. When the group broke up, he joined another doo-wop group, The Robins. Barnum began producing for The Robins in 1958, and also recorded a single on his own. Barnum had his first major hit as a producer when Dodie Stevens' "Tan Shoes and Pink Shoelaces" reached the U.S. Top 5 in 1959. Although he recorded three albums during the 1960s – *The Record*, *The Big Voice of Barnum – H. B.*, *That Is*, and *Everyone Loves H. B. – Barnum*, *That Is* – as well as the hit single "Lost Love," his work as a producer and an arranger began to outpace his musical career. Barnum's reputation flourished after he joined Capitol Records, where he often worked in collaboration with producer and longtime friend David Axelrod, forging an innovative orchestral jazz-funk sensibility much copied and sampled in later decades. Barnum has arranged for many notable musicians including Gladys Knight & The Pips, Johnny Bristol, Lamont Dozier, Jimmy Norman, Aretha Franklin, Count Basie, Etta James, Nancy Wilson, Martha Reeves, The Temptations, The Jackson 5, The Marvelettes, O.C. Smith, Frank Sinatra, Lou Rawls, The Supremes, Al Wilson, B.B. King and Puff Daddy. By the mid-1970s, Barnum switched from pop music to television, scoring countless series and specials in addition to composing numerous advertising jingles. He won international awards for his musical compositions for commercials. Barnum has claimed to be responsible for around 100 gold LPs and 160 gold singles.

Beginning in 1967, Barnum has held an annual Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless in his Los Angeles

community. In 1981, he founded and began directing H. B. Barnum's Life Choir, a large well-known gospel group that assists him in helping feed nearly one thousand needy people every Thanksgiving. Barnum has also served as minister of music at St. Paul's Baptist Church of Los Angeles.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with H. B. Barnum was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 16, 2008, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Music producer H. B. Barnum (1936 - ) has arranged music for many notable jazz, R & B and pop musicians over several decades, and has won international awards for his musical compositions for commercials.

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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:

Barnum, H. B.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Barnum, H. B.--Interviews

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African American sound recording executives and producers--Interviews

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Arrangers (Musicians)--Interviews

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African American composers--Interviews

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Advertisers--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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## Occupations:

Music Producer

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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 H. B. Barnum, 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 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).

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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.

# Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with H. B. Barnum, Section A2008\_110\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

H. B. Barnum was born on July 15, 1936 in Houston, Texas to Alma Williams Barnum and H. B. Barnum, Sr. His mother had fifteen siblings, and grew up in Houston, where she attended Phillis Wheatley High School. At fourteen years old, she married Barnum's father, a preacher and graduate of the Louisiana Negro Normal and Industrial Institute. They lived for a time in Natchitoches, Louisiana, before moving to Brady, Texas. When Barnum was three years old, his mother absconded with him and his sister, Billie Barnum, whom she left in the care of Barnum's maternal grandmother in Houston. Then, Barnum and his mother hitchhiked to Phoenix, Arizona, where he auditioned for 20th Century Fox. They moved to Los Angeles, California, where Barnum acted on radio shows like 'The Jack Benny Program' and 'Amos 'n' Andy,' and met comedian Eddie "Rochester" Anderson. During this time, Barnum lived with his mother and sister in Los Angeles' Aliso Village housing project, where they befriended record label owner Jack Lauderdale.

African American sound recording executives and producers--Interviews.

Arrangers (Musicians)--Interviews.

African American composers--Interviews.

Advertisers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with H. B. Barnum, Section A2008\_110\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

H. B. Barnum grew up in Los Angeles, California, where he often stood outside the Million Dollar Theatre and Orpheum Theatre to listen to the music. Barnum worked as a radio actor on the 'The Jack Benny Program' and 'Amos 'n' Andy,' where he was influenced by African American comedians like Nick Stewart, who later opened Los Angeles' Ebony Showcase Theatre. Barnum began his education at 20th Street Elementary School; and, after moving to Aliso Village, attended Utah Street Elementary School and Hollenbeck Junior High School. There, Barnum played football and ran track, and was frequently disciplined by the vice principal, Van Dyer. During this time, Dyer told Barnum about Manual Arts High School, a majority white school in a wealthy neighborhood. After witnessing a friend die during a fight, Barnum decided to enroll at Manual Arts High School. He falsified his address to register, and hitchhiked to school each day. He also joined the school band, led by John Ferrar; and learned to play the tuba.

Video Oral History Interview with H. B. Barnum, Section A2008\_110\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

H. B. Barnum attended Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, California. There, he was encouraged by band director John Ferrar, and learned to play numerous instruments. He also joined the football team, and aspired to work for the FBI. During this time, Barnum began playing with local bands like The Robins, and occasionally traveled with them on tour. They usually played at clubs, where Barnum stayed in the back rooms due to his young age. Upon graduating from Manual Arts High School, Barnum partnered with Ronald Barrett, Arthur G. Wright, Jimmy Benson and Glenn Wade to form H. B. Barnum and the Circats. The band began touring, and challenged local athletes for free publicity. Barnum also performed in revue shows, often playing with multiple acts each night. During his travels, Barnum frequently encountered

racism in the South. He was almost killed when a riot broke out because of interracial dancing in Nashville, Tennessee, and he was threatened by the police in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Video Oral History Interview with H. B. Barnum, Section A2008\_110\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

H. B. Barnum toured the South as a musician during the 1950s. On several occasions, he was targeted by police officers who extorted money from him. Barnum sang doo wop with The Dootones, and played alongside musicians like Jackie Wilson, Etta James, Al Hibbler and Bill Doggett, for whom he eventually began arranging songs. In 1958, Barnum released 'Blue Mood / Tia Juana' on Imperial Records, and then founded his own Little Star Records label. In 1959, Barnum was training to join the FBI, when Dodie Stevens' 'Pink Shoe Laces,' which Barnum co-wrote with Micki Grant, became a hit single. He returned to Los Angeles, California, where he collected his royalties and made several records, which were mostly unsuccessful. Barnum attempted to resume his career as a stage musician at a country music club in Los Angeles; but, upon arrival, was threatened by the all-white patrons. He continued to arrange music, and began recording parody songs, including 'El Pizza' and 'Peanut Butter,' which became popular in Europe.

Video Oral History Interview with H. B. Barnum, Section A2008\_110\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

H. B. Barnum served as the pianist for singer Dinah Washington after her usual accompanist, Elmo Hope, became incapacitated. He received an invitation to tour with her, despite beginning the set in the wrong key. Barnum went on to meet producer David Axelrod, with whom he recorded Lou Rawls' 'Live!' album in 1966. He also recorded the O'Jays' first song on his label, Little Star Records; and made a record for O.C. Smith, which he sold to radio deejays around the country with the help of music promoter Pervis Spann. Barnum also wrote musical arrangements for commercial advertisements. In 1967, Barnum visited a house for sale in the Hollywood Hills, and impressed the woman who owned it when he recognized and played her Hammond B-3 organ. She then convinced her husband to help Barnum acquire a loan for the property. There, Barnum hosted annual Thanksgiving dinners, and was eventually joined by his elderly Aunt Lil, a paternal relative whom he met in 1972.

Video Oral History Interview with H. B. Barnum, Section A2008\_110\_001\_006, TRT: 0:27:30 ?

H. B. Barnum learned to arrange music under the mentorship of trumpeters Neal Hefti and Ernie Freeman. Early in his career, Barnum performed with Sammy Davis, Jr. at Harrah's Las Vegas Hotel and Casino in Nevada, and with pianist Sonny Anderson and singer Tina Mason at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. Barnum also worked closely with Motown Records artists and writers. In his later career, Barnum became an orchestral conductor. He worked with the Cincinnati Orchestra, where the orchestra members disdained his musical background until witnessing his skills as a multi-instrumentalist. Barnum also formed the LIFE Choir, which began as an informal singing group for his friends. The choir gained popularity, and eventually performed at awards shows and established a mentorship program. Barnum describes his work on Micki Grant's Broadway musical, 'Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope'; and the challenges of negotiating musicians' contracts. He also talks about his sister, Billie Barnum, who worked as a background singer.

Video Oral History Interview with H. B. Barnum, Section A2008\_110\_001\_007, TRT: 0:20:00 ?

H. B. Barnum arranged music for gospel singer Aretha Franklin. Franklin often cancelled shows; and, after changing a performance in Paris, departed from France without notifying Barnum and the rest of her musicians, who had to negotiate with the show's promoters to obtain enough money to leave the

country. Barnum also remembers encountering problems with criminals at music shows in Kansas City, Missouri. Barnum reflects upon his life and legacy, including his sons, H. B. Barnum III and Daniel Barnum. He concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.