



# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sylvia Waters

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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>	Sylvia Waters
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 27, 2010
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2010
<b>Physical Description:</b>	2 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:03:43).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dance group manager and dancer Sylvia Waters (1940 - ) was a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and has directed the Ailey II dance company from its inception in 1975. Waters was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 27, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2010_108
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dance group manager and dancer Sylvia Waters was born in Harlem New York on January 22, 1940. Her parents were Benjamin Franklin Waters and Britannia Rachel Waters. She began dancing at Edward Stitt Junior High School and joined an after school dance group when she was twelve years old. She went on to attend The Julliard School, where she studied with Martha Graham, Jose Limon, and Anthony Tudor. She received her B.A. degree from Julliard in 1962 and continued her study at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. In 1964, Waters danced with Donald McKayle's dance company and toured Europe performing in Langston Hughes' "Black Nativity." Subsequently, Waters moved to Paris, France for three years, where she appeared on television and danced with the Paris Opera Ballet under Michael Descombey.

Waters performed at the 1968 Summer Olympics located in Mexico City, Mexico in Maurice Bejart's "Ballet of the Twentieth Century". Alvin Ailey's "Revelations" was also performed at the event. Upon her return to the United States, Waters began touring as a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. In 1974, the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, later renamed Ailey II, was founded in order to provide a bridge for Ailey dance students into the professional world. A year after its creation, Waters became the artistic director. Ailey II has since toured all over the country as one of the most successful dance companies in the United States.

Waters has received numerous awards, including an honorary doctorate from the State University of New York at Oswego, the Dance Magazine Award, Syracuse University's Women of Distinction Award, and the Legacy Award from the Twentieth Annual International Association of Blacks in Dance Festival. She has also served as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts and was a guest lecturer at Harvard University in 2001.

Sylvia Waters was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on August 27, 2010.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sylvia Waters was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 27, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 2 Betacam SP videocassettes. Dance group manager and dancer Sylvia Waters (1940 - ) was a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and has directed the Ailey II dance company from its inception in 1975.

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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:

Waters, Sylvia

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Waters, Sylvia--Interviews

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African American dancers--Interviews.

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Choreographers--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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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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ArtMakers

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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 Sylvia Waters, August 27, 2010. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 8/8/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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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, August 27, 2010

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_001\_001, TRT: 0:32:09  
2010/08/27

Sylvia Waters describes her childhood and family background. Every summer until the age of twelve, she was sent to Virginia to visit her grandparents. Waters appreciates these summers as valuable learning experiences, during which she learned about farm life in Onancock, Virginia, performed several chores, and discovered jazz music. She recalls being enthralled by the Christmas performance at Radio City Music Hall as a child. Waters joined the modern dance club at Stitt Junior High School. During high school, Waters fell in love with dance and applied to take classes at the New Dance Group studios. She paid for these classes using her allowance. Waters remembers the first time she saw Alvin Ailey in 1955; she was fifteen at the time. They crossed paths while walking on 57th Street. As a dancer, Waters recalls that Ailey's dancing technique was quite masculine, but still very graceful. Waters reminisces about her preparation for the audition to the Julliard School.

African American families--New York (State)--New York

African American grandmothers--Virginia

African Americans--Virginia--Onancock

Eastern Shore (Md. and Va.)--Social life and customs.

Eastern Shore (Md. and Va.)--History--20th century.

Harlem (New York, N.Y.).

Princess Anne Academy (Princess Anne, Md.)

Radio City Music Hall (New York, N.Y.)

New Dance Group (New York, N.Y.)

Ailey, Alvin.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvia Waters, Section A2010\_108\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:34  
2010/08/27

Waters describes her experience at The Julliard School. Her only criticism of the dance program was the dearth of performance opportunities. Several of her instructors were dancers in Martha Graham's company, including Graham herself. She recalls the first performance of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958, especially the first performance of Blues Suite. Waters describes the circumstances of her graduation from Julliard in 1962. Although she had successfully completed a strenuous program and received a prestigious degree, Waters' father encouraged her to take the civil servants' exam as a backup plan. She refused, determined to make her living as a dancer. Waters describes the European tour with Langston Hughes' Black Nativity and living in Paris for three years. She recalls inadvertently meeting Josephine Baker after a performance at The Olympia. Waters addresses the collegiality amongst black performers (especially in New York) during this time and mentions several performers who lived in Harlem during her youth.

Julliard School.

Graham, Martha.

Ailey, Alvin.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Baker, Josephine, 1906-1975.