

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Erich Jarvis

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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>	Jarvis, Erich D., 1965-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Erich Jarvis,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 20, 2012
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2012
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:44:47).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Neurobiologist Erich Jarvis (1965 - ) was an expert on song-associative learning in songbirds and in 2005, he led a team which created a new nomenclature for the bird brain. Jarvis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 20, 2012, in Durham, North Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2012_041
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Neurobiologist Erich D. Jarvis was born on May 6, 1965, in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City to musicians James Jarvis and Sasha Valeria McCall. Growing up in an artistic but poverty-stricken household, Jarvis found an early passion for dance, which led him to the High School of the Performing Arts. He graduated from high school in 1983 and turned down an audition for the African American dance company, Alvin Ailey to attend Hunter College. As an undergraduate, he worked as a Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) Fellow and researched protein synthesis genes in bacteria. After obtaining his B.A. degree in mathematics and biology in 1988, Jarvis pursued his Ph.D. degree

in molecular neurobiology and animal behavior at The Rockefeller University where he researched vocal learning in songbirds. He received his Ph.D. degree in 1995 and stayed at The Rockefeller University to conduct postdoctoral research.

After completing his postdoctoral research, Jarvis joined the faculty of The Rockefeller University as an adjunct assistant professor and also participated in the Science Outreach Program of New York where he taught laboratory skills to inner city high school students. He left Rockefeller in 1998 to become an assistant professor in the Department of Neurobiology at Duke University. Jarvis also served as an assistant professor in the Department of Cognitive Neuroscience and the Center for Bioinformatics and Computational Biology. In 2005, he led the Avian Brain Nomenclature Consortium, a team of twenty-eight neuroscientists, who proposed a new nomenclature for the bird brain to better reflect a bird's similarities with mammals in cognitive abilities. Jarvis also became a tenured associate professor at Duke in 2005 and in 2008, he was chosen to become an Investigator for the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. He has been an invited contributor for several books and has published more than fifty scholarly articles.

Jarvis has been recognized as a young pioneer in his field, and his research and study of songbird neurology has won him many awards including the National Science Foundation Alan T. Waterman Award, the Dominion Award: Strong Men and Women of Excellence: African American Leaders and the National Institute for the Humanities' Director's Pioneer Award in 2005. He has served as the director of the Neuroscience Scholars Program for The Society of Neuroscience, a member of Duke University's Council on Black Affairs and a founding member of the Black Collective at Duke. Jarvis and his wife, Miriam Rivas, live in Durham, North Carolina and have two children.

Erich Jarvis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 20, 2012.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Erich Jarvis was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 20, 2012, in Durham, North Carolina, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Neurobiologist Erich Jarvis (1965 - ) was an expert on song-associative learning in songbirds and in 2005, he led a team which created a new nomenclature for the bird brain.

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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:**

Jarvis, Erich D., 1965-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Jarvis, Erich D., 1965---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:**

Neurobiologist

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ScienceMakers

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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 Erich Jarvis, February 20, 2012. 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 Erich Jarvis, Section  
A2012\_041\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:50 2012/02/20

Erich Jarvis shares his extensive knowledge of his family history. His mother's family is of the same lineage as that of the famous jazz singer Thelonious Monk. Both of Jarvis' parents grew up in New York in the 1950s and 1960s. Both were also activists during this time of social revolution. His mother was active with Soka Gakkai International and his father was active with the Black Panthers. Both of Jarvis' parents also have ethnically diverse heritages. Jarvis can trace both sides of his family back to the days of slavery and tells rich stories of his family's survival.

Affirmative action programs.

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Video Oral History Interview with Erich Jarvis, Section  
A2012\_041\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:37 2012/02/20

Erich Jarvis continues his discussion about his family's history. He has African, Native American, and European roots. Jarvis tells stories of an ancestor, Della Blackman, who was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. He also talks about his family's Igbo and Yoruba ancestry. Jarvis talks about his father's intelligence, but also about his drug use and mental illness. Jarvis tells how his parents met at what is now the High School of Performing Arts in New York,

New York. Jarvis also talks about his brothers and sisters.  
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Video Oral History Interview with Erich Jarvis, Section  
A2012\_041\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:33 2012/02/20

Erich Jarvis talks about his childhood. Because his family moved around so much, Jarvis spent part of his childhood in the Bronx, part in Harlem and part in Queens. Jarvis' parents separated when he was six years old. Jarvis' father, James Jarvis, was a member of the Black Panthers. He abused drugs and became very abusive to Jarvis, his mother, and his siblings. His father's struggles with drug abuse and schizophrenia caused his separation from Jarvis' mother and estrangement from his family. After his parents separated, Jarvis had intermittent contact with his father. However, Jarvis maintained a close relationship with his grandparents throughout his childhood. Jarvis also talks about being bullied in elementary school and his aspirations to be a magician.

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Video Oral History Interview with Erich Jarvis, Section  
A2012\_041\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:54 2012/02/20

Erich Jarvis talks about his time at the High School of Performing Arts. His interest in dance was spawned by the movie 'Saturday Night Fever' as a teenager. He demonstrated an uncommon aptitude for dance and was awarded scholarships to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's youth program and the Joffrey Ballet. He also performed with the Westchester Ballet Company and took part in several dance competitions in Hartford, Connecticut. As a teenager, Jarvis was also active in the

Soka Gakkai organization. As he neared the end of high school, however, Jarvis decided that he could make a bigger contribution to the world as a scientist. He then pursued science at Hunter College, where Jim Townsell and Rivka Rudner were his mentors.

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Video Oral History Interview with Erich Jarvis, Section  
A2012\_041\_001\_005, TRT: 5:28:26 2012/02/20

Erich Jarvis talks about his reunion with his father in his college years. During this time, Jarvis' father tutored him in math and physics. As an undergraduate Jarvis won first place in a National Institutes of Health competition for his research on *Bacillus subtilis*. Jarvis also met his wife while attending Hunter College. Jarvis went on to Rockefeller University in New York, New York to get his Ph.D. He studied how Zebra Finches and canaries learn and vocalize sound. Canaries, unlike Zebra Finches, continue to learn new songs throughout their lifetime. He found that the difference is not found in the brain circuitry, but in the regulation of activity dependent genes.

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Video Oral History Interview with Erich Jarvis, Section  
A2012\_041\_001\_006, TRT: 6:29:16 2012/02/20

Erich Jarvis describes in detail his hypothesis about vocal learning species. He finds that songbirds have two brain sub-pathways that enable them to vocalize. The anterior pathway, pre-motor circuit, is responsible for the formation of the motor memory for vocal imitation. The posterior, or primary motor cortex is responsible for moving the muscles that produce the sound. Jarvis talks

about animal intelligence, and their ability to understand the sounds that they imitate. Jarvis' research supports the hypothesis that the base of bird brains is similar to the base of human brains. Jarvis further discusses the history of brain mapping and the mapping similarities among vocal learning species.

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Video Oral History Interview with Erich Jarvis, Section  
A2012\_041\_001\_007, TRT: 7:29:12 2012/02/20

Erich Jarvis talks about some of the practical aspects of his research. He has found that only vocal learning species are able to move in rhythm to music. He also notes that there is a possibility that gesturing, singing, and speech are related. Jarvis also talked about his current research to influence the brain activity in animals to become more human-like. His goal is to produce more advanced vocalization in animals. Jarvis also discusses other possible applications for his research. His research could find new vocal circuits in the brain for vocal imitation behavior. This could be beneficial for patients who have suffered a stroke, experience trauma, or suffer from a genetic disease. Jarvis continues to work at Duke University in North Carolina.

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Video Oral History Interview with Erich Jarvis, Section  
A2012\_041\_001\_008, TRT: 8:19:59 2012/02/20

Erich Jarvis talks about his concern for the African American community. Jarvis notes a lack of self-esteem in the African American communities and feels that more African Americans should learn more science and math.



Jarvis has had his own experience with low self-esteem. Looking back at his successes helped Jarvis to overcome that. He feels that similar successes would help others overcome low self-esteem. Jarvis is pleased to see greater diversity at Duke, and would like to see more African Americans pursue higher education in the sciences.

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