

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leon Huff

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Huff, Leon, 1942-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leon Huff,
Dates:	March 26, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:11:47).
Abstract:	Music producer Leon Huff (1942 -) cofounded the Philadelphia International Records label, which produced #1 R&B hits like The O' Jays' "Love Train," Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' "If You Don't Know Me By Now," Lou Rawls' "You'll Never Find Another Love Like Mine," and "TSOP," which became the theme to the television show Soul Train. Huff was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 26, 2013, in Moorestown, New Jersey. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_085
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

R&B record company owner Leon Huff was born in Camden, New Jersey on April 8, 1942. Huff was first exposed to music through his mother, who played the piano and the organ for the 19th Street Baptist Church choir. Huff began playing the piano at the age of five; he received basic lessons from his mother as well as formal teaching through the school system and private lessons. As a teenager, Huff participated in several "doo-wop" music groups throughout Camden. One of

his groups, “The Dynafloes,” auditioned for the popular television show, *Ted Mack’s Original Amateur Hour*.

In 1950, Huff and Kenneth Gamble came together in a vocal group called “The Romeos.” Huff had already worked in sessions with music producer Phil Spector in New York, including the Danny and the Juniors hit “Let's Go to the Hop.” Returning to Philadelphia, Huff did sessions for local label Cameo who were already successful with Chubby Checker and Bobby Rydell. Fellow Romeo, Kenny Gamble, co-wrote a song for Candy and the Kisses on which Huff performed. In 1966, Gamble and Huff formed Excel Records; and, in 1967, they produced the Soul Survivors’ hit single, “Expressway to Your Heart.” They continued working as independent producers with acts like Archie Bell and the Drells and Jerry Butler. They also had their own Neptune Label (through Chess Records) and Gamble records.

In 1971, Gamble and Huff formed their own label, Philadelphia International Records, and secured a distribution deal with CBS. The label produced #1 R&B hits such as The O’ Jays’ “Love Train,” Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes’ “If You Don't Know Me By Now,” Lou Rawls’ “You'll Never Find Another Love Like Mine,” and “TSOP,” which became the theme to the TV show Soul Train. Their signature sound incorporated sophisticated touches like strings, horn sections, and an always-insistent groove. A precursor to disco, when the clubs started playing an important role in the music business, Philadelphia International helped shape the direction with hits like 1974’s “TSOP,” which became the theme to the TV show Soul Train. During the 1980s, Huff continued to collaborate with Gamble, writing and producing tracks for Patti LaBelle, Phyllis Hyman, Lou Rawls, and The O’ Jays.

Gamble and Huff have been awarded the highest accolades in the music industry. In 1993, Huff, along with his songwriting and producing partners Kenny Gamble and Thom Bell, was inducted into the Philadelphia Music Foundation’s Walk of Fame; brass plaques with their names were placed on the sidewalk of Broad Street’s Avenue of the Arts in Philadelphia not far from Philadelphia International studios. Gamble and Huff were inducted into the National Academy of Songwriters’ Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In 1999, they received the Trustees Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences.

Musician Leon A. Huff was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 26, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leon Huff was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 26, 2013, in Moorestown, New Jersey, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Music producer Leon Huff (1942 -) cofounded the Philadelphia International Records label, which produced #1 R&B hits like The O' Jays' "Love Train," Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' "If You Don't Know Me By Now," Lou Rawls' "You'll Never Find Another Love Like Mine," and "TSOP," which became the theme to the television show Soul Train.

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:

Huff, Leon, 1942-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Huff, Leon, 1942---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Music Producer

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 Leon Huff, March 26, 2013. 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).

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 Leon Huff, Section
A2013_085_001_001, TRT: 1:28:39 2013/03/26

Leon Huff was born on April 8, 1942 in Camden, New Jersey to Beatrice Alberta Huff and Eugene Huff. Huff's mother was born in St. Petersburg, Florida, and studied piano from an early age. She eventually moved to Camden, where she graduated from Camden High School and enrolled at a nursing school. Huff's mother decided against pursuing a career in music in order to provide a stable living for her family. She continued playing the piano at local churches, including the Tenth Street Baptist Church, where Huff's family belonged to the congregation. Huff's father was born in Hull, Georgia, and moved to New Jersey with his three sisters: Nessie Huff, Bertha Huff, and Kate Huff. In Camden, he met and

married Huff's mother, and opened a barbershop in the basement of their home. Huff began playing piano as a small child, and joined the school band at Charles Sumner Elementary School in Camden. He continued to play music at Cooper B. Hatch Junior High School and Camden High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Huff, Section
A2013_085_001_002, TRT: 2:28:51 2013/03/26

Leon Huff's father, Eugene Huff, operated a barbershop in the basement of their family's home in Camden, New Jersey. Huff helped his father sweep the shop, and played piano for the guests. He began his education at Camden's Charles Sumner Elementary School, and became a drummer in the school band with the encouragement of his mother, Beatrice Alberta Huff. He went on to perform with the school dance band at Cooper B. Hatch Junior High School. He also played basketball throughout his childhood. Around 1958, Huff formed a band called The Dynaflows with Floyd Henley, Everett Cooper, Buster Williams and Harrison Artis. They won the Spring Festival band competition, and performed at the Camden Convention Hall with The Moonglows, Frankie Lymon and The Teenagers and Screamin' Jay Hawkins. The band also auditioned for 'The Original Amateur Hour.' Huff played in the marching band at Camden High School, where he graduated in 1960.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Huff, Section
A2013_085_001_003, TRT: 3:30:26 2013/03/26

Leon Huff was active with the music program and basketball team at Camden High School in Camden, New Jersey. After graduating in 1960, he found work at Camden's Cooper University Hospital, and performed with The Dynaflows in his free time. After Floyd Henley left the band, the remaining members renamed themselves The Lavenders. After signing their first recording contract, The Lavenders released 'The Slide,' which became a local hit. Huff went on to become a songwriter for Madara-White Productions, and worked at Phil Spector's studio in New York City's Brill Building. He played the keyboard on a number of records by The Ronettes, including 'Baby, It's You' and the Christmas album 'A Christmas Gift for

You from Phil Spector.’ Huff met Kenny Gamble in an elevator at the Brill Building, and later became the keyboardist for Kenny Gamble and the Romeos. After the group disbanded, Gamble and Huff began working together as a songwriting duo.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Huff, Section
A2013_085_001_004, TRT: 4:28:39 2013/03/26

Leon Huff began his songwriting career with Madara-White Productions in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He had his first Top 40 hit in 1964 with Patty and the Emblems’ ‘Mixed Up, Shook Up Girl.’ Huff then began writing with Kenny Gamble, with whom he formed Gamble Huff Productions, Inc. They created their signature upbeat tempo by pinning thumbtacks to the hammers of an upright piano. Gamble and Huff were introduced to the Soul Survivors by disc jockey Jerry Blavat, and went on to write the band’s hit single ‘Expressway to Your Heart.’ Their other early acts included The Intruders and Jerry Butler, for whom they wrote ‘Only the Strong Survive’ in 1968. They also wrote ‘Drowning in the Sea of Love’ for Joe Simon in 1971. Gamble and Huff went on to form Philadelphia International Records, where they signed a contract with The O’Jays in 1972. They also signed Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, and decided to replace the lead singer with the band’s former drummer, Teddy Pendergrass.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Huff, Section
A2013_085_001_005, TRT: 5:28:23 2013/03/26

Leon Huff founded Gamble Huff Productions, Inc. with Kenny Gamble in the late 1960s. They later renamed the company Philadelphia International Records. Initially, Gamble and Huff wrote songs for various labels, including Atlantic Records, Mercury Records and Spring Records. They eventually signed an exclusive contract with Columbia Records. Gamble and Huff went on to write records for The O’Jays like ‘Back Stabbers’ in 1972 and ‘Ship Ahoy’ in 1973, which was among the first popular music albums to depict slavery. Gamble and Huff also produced music for the Jackson family; and created the MFSB orchestra, which recorded the ‘Soul Train’ theme song. In 1978, they won a Grammy Award for Simply

Red's rendition of 'If You Don't Know Me by Now,' which was originally recorded by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes. Huff and Gamble ended their partnership in the mid-1980s. From that time, Huff focused on recording his own songs, like 'I Ain't Jivin', I'm Jammin'.'

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Huff, Section
A2013_085_001_006, TRT: 6:29:40 2013/03/26

Leon Huff met record producer Quincy Jones when he was nineteen years old. They were introduced by John Madara of Madara-White Productions, and remained close throughout Huff's songwriting career. As R and B music became more profitable in the late 1960s, music executive Clive Davis began looking to attract black talent to Columbia Records. He signed a contract with Huff and his partner, Kenny Gamble, which made Philadelphia International Records a subsidiary of Columbia Records. Gamble and Huff went on to produce over 150 gold and platinum albums. They ended their contract with Columbia Records after their top artist, Teddy Pendergrass, was paralyzed by a car crash in 1982. Huff continued to record instrumental music, while Gamble pursued a career in the real estate industry. At this point in the interview, Huff talks about the popularity of his music among sampling artists. He also remembers turning down a contract with Motown Records, whose owner, Berry Gordy, refused to share publishing rights.

Video Oral History Interview with Leon Huff, Section
A2013_085_001_007, TRT: 7:17:09 2013/03/26

Leon Huff's songwriting partner, Kenny Gamble, founded the Black Music Association to support the development of African American talent in the record industry. The organization was highly successful, and led to the establishment of black music departments at many major labels. During the 1970s, Gamble and Huff were investigated for involvement in payola during the 1970s. At the time, they were working for Columbia Records. Federal investigators offered Huff immunity in exchange for evidence against Gamble, but he refused. Neither Huff nor Gamble were charged with any crime. At this point in the interview, Huff reflects upon his songwriting career, which spanned over five decades. He also describes how

he would like to be remembered. Huff concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.