

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Eddie Levert

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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>	Levert, Eddie, 1942-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 28, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:21:17).
<b>Abstract:</b>	R & B singer Eddie Levert (1942 - ) was a founding member of The O’Jays, one of the most prominent R&B music groups of the 1970s. Levert was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 28, 2013, in Henderson, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_242
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Singer, and member of the famed O’Jays, Edward “Eddie” Levert, was born June 16, 1942, in Bessemer, Alabama. When Levert was eight years old, he moved with his family to the town of Canton, Ohio, where he attended McKinley High School. At a young age, Levert and childhood friend Walter Williams began performing as a gospel duo. As teenagers, the two were inspired to form a singing group after seeing a performance by Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers. Levert and Williams brought together fellow students Bobby Massey, William Powell, and Billy Isles, to form their first group, The Triumphs.

In 1960, The Triumphs signed with Syd Nathan, owner of King Records, and the group was renamed The Mascots. The next year, The Mascots recorded their first single, “Miracles”, which was deemed a local success, and drew the attention of famed Cleveland disc jockey Eddie O’Jay. Because O’Jay was an essential in the group’s managing and mentoring, The Triumphs decided to change their name to The O’Jays, as a tribute. That same year, the O’Jays began working with producer H.B. Barnum and Little Star Records. Shortly after, The O’Jays signed with Imperial Records, and released their debut single, *Lonely Drifter*, with the released their first album, *Comin’ Through* following in 1965. After a rocky start- including the withdrawal of Billy Isle from the group- The O’Jays met Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff. Then a part of the production team at Neptune Records, Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff went on to create their own label, Philadelphia International, after Neptune shut down in 1971, taking The O’Jays with them. Under the new label, The O’Jays recorded their first big hit, *Back Stabbers* (1972). While with Philadelphia International, The O’Jays recorded nearly thirty charting singles, and several number one songs. *Back Stabbers* reached number one on the R&B charts, and number three on the Billboard Top 100 chart. In 1973, The O’Jays released *Love Train*, and the single became a number one hit on both the Hot 100 and R&B charts. In 1975, co-founder William Powell was forced to leave The O’Jays due to illness, dying of cancer two years later. After Powell’s death, The O’Jays released their fifth album, *Family Reunion*, which reached number seven on the Billboard Top 200.

The O’Jays have received the Rhythm & Blues Foundation’s Pioneer Award (1998), and were inducted into the

Vocal Group Hall of Fame. In 2005, they were also inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In 2009, BET awarded the group the Lifetime Achievement Award, and the group is still actively touring.

Eddie Levert is the father of three sons—Eddie Jr., Gerald, and Sean—all of whom are/were currently active in the music industry. In 2006, Gerald, an accomplished R&B singer, died at the age of 40. Two years later, son Sean, also an R&B artist, died at the age of 39. Eddie Jr. is currently the CEO of Levert Entertainment, a record label headquartered in Los Angeles, California.

Eddie Levert was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 28, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Eddie Levert was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 28, 2013, in Henderson, Nevada, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. R & B singer Eddie Levert (1942 - ) was a founding member of The O’Jays, one of the most prominent R&B music groups of the 1970s.

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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:

Levert, Eddie, 1942-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Levert, Eddie, 1942- --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:

R & B 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 Eddie Levert, August 28, 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 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_001, TRT: 1:31:10 ?

Eddie Levert was born on June 16, 1942 in Bessemer, Alabama to Blanche Boykins McCloudy and Tommie Levert, Sr. He was named after his paternal grandfather, Ed Levert. His parents separated when he was young, and he was initially raised by his maternal grandmother, Mozell Johnson Carter. She was a strict disciplinarian, and lived in a shotgun house in Bessemer. There, Levert and his brothers, Tommie Levert, Jr. and Andrew Levert, picked watercress at the nearby ponds, and participated in hog slaughtering with the community. They also sometimes went hungry, and were terrorized by the Ku Klux Klan. At seven years old, Levert and his brother moved to their mother's home in Detroit, Michigan. There, they were physically abused by their alcoholic stepfather. After a particularly severe incident, they retaliated and beat their stepfather with a baseball bat. They were then sent to live with their father, who was a steelworker in Canton, Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:32 ?

Eddie Levert and his brothers moved to live with their father and stepmother, Tommie Levert, Sr. and Annie Frank Levert, in 1949. Levert's father worked in the steel mills of Canton, Ohio, and lived in an integrated, working class community. Levert began singing at seven years old, when he met his future bandmate, Walter Williams. The pair went on to form a gospel group with Levert's younger brother, Andrew Levert. Levert began his education at the J.J. Burns School in Canton, where he performed for the first time as the lead in 'The Ugly Duckling.' During the ninth grade, Levert and Williams met Bill Isles, William Powell and Bobby Massey, with whom they formed The Triumphs. In 1958, the band drove to New York City to audition at Decca Records. They were denied a contract, and the label producers stole one of their songs. Shortly afterwards, The Triumphs signed with King Records in Cincinnati, Ohio, where their original song 'Here Comes the Rain' became a local hit.

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:30 ?

Eddie Levert and The Triumphs changed their name to The Mascots in 1960, after signing a contract with King Records. The change was suggested by label executive Syd Nathan, who wanted to own the rights to the band's name. While visiting Detroit, Michigan, Levert met Eddie O'Jay, who encouraged him to train with producer H.B. Barnum on the West Coast. The Triumphs contacted Barnum and moved to Los Angeles, California, where they changed their name to The O'Jays and impersonated famous East Coast groups to earn extra money. After three years, Levert and the remaining band members returned to Ohio to pursue their preferred style of music, which was more similar to artists on the East Coast. There, The O'Jays secured appearances at the Apollo Theater, Uptown Theater and Howard Theatre through the Queen Booking Corporation. Levert married Martha Levert in California, and their sons, Gerald Levert and Sean Levert, were born in Ohio in 1966 and 1968.

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:51 ?

Eddie Levert and The O'Jays met music producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff at the Apollo Theater in New York City. The O'Jays worked with Gamble and Huff to record 'Deeper (In Love With You),' which became a hit song in 1969. However, they stopped receiving payments after the death of Chess Records executive Leonard Chess, who distributed Gamble and Huff's music at the time. Levert and The O'Jays then returned to Ohio and took a hiatus. After one year, Gamble and Huff contacted them about a contract with CBS Records,

and the band reluctantly reunited. In 1972, The O'Jays began working with choreographer Cholly Atkins, and signed to Gamble and Huff's Philadelphia International Records. They went on to release such hits as 'Love Train' and 'Give the People What They Want' during the 1970s. Levert also talks about the changes in The O'Jays' lineup. Bill Isles left the group to return to California, and William Powell left after being diagnosed with cancer.

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_005, TRT: 5:31:08 ?

Eddie Levert and The O'Jays became massively successful in the mid-1970s. They released hit songs like 'Back Stabbers' and 'Love Train,' and toured extensively. Levert helped develop the idea for the group's signature double lead vocals; and, as a result, he received writing and producing credits from the start of the group's career. With his newfound wealth, Levert purchased luxury vehicles and a lavish home in Shaker Heights, Ohio. In 1977, The O'Jays fired their promoters and launched a solo tour, which failed to sell tickets. They had a comeback with the release of the smash hit 'She Used to be My Girl' in 1983. During this time, Levert struggled with drug use, and had an affair with the mother of his son's best friend. Hoping to heal the rift in his family, Levert brought his sons on tour, and helped them secure a contract with Atlantic Records. At this point, Levert reflects upon how his decisions negatively impacted his family, and remembers creating the song 'Family Reunion.'

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_006, TRT: 6:30:09 ?

Eddie Levert and The O'Jays appeared on numerous television programs, including 'The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson,' 'The Phil Donahue Show' and the 'Late Show with David Letterman.' They also performed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. with Jon Stewart in 2010. At this point in the interview, Levert describes his experiences of racial discrimination as a black musician, including from white bands like The Rolling Stones, who often performed 'Love Train' but refused to tour with The O'Jays. He also talks about the production of The O'Jays' current show, which opened with the songs 'Unity,' 'Survival' and 'Give The People What They Want.' Additionally, Levert talks about the use of racial and gender slurs in the African American community, and the appeal of The O'Jays' music. He also reflects upon his leadership style and his relationship with bandmate Walter Williams, whom he befriended as a child at the J.J. Burns School in Canton, Ohio.

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_007, TRT: 7:30:27 ?

Eddie Levert's sons, Gerald Levert and Sean Levert, founded the R and B trio LeVert with Marc Gordon in 1984. Levert was instrumental in the formation of the group. He developed the name LeVert during his early career, and gave it to his sons after helping them secure a contract with Atlantic Records. Initially, Levert was concerned about his sons' musical aspirations, and encouraged them to pursue a college education before entering the recording industry. After his sons became successful, he continued to support them, and he recorded and toured with Gerald Levert during the 1990s. At this point in the interview, Levert reflects upon his relationship with his sons. He remembers his favorite tracks in his sons' repertoire, and talks about the significance of the song 'Wind Beneath My Wings.' Levert also talks about his experiences of racial discrimination at the time of the interview, and shares his views on the importance of history.

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_008, TRT: 8:29:01 ?

Eddie Levert sustained a severe foot injury at a pool party in the early 2000s. During his recovery, he became closer to his girlfriend and caregiver, Raquel Capelton, whom he married in 2005. As a result of the injury, Levert was unable

to perform choreography or tour with his son, Gerald Levert. However, the two continued travelling together, and met the former South African President Nelson Mandela in 2006. Later that year, Gerald Levert passed away in his sleep because of a fatal interaction of his prescription medications. After his death, Levert encouraged his younger son, Sean Levert, to reorganize their vocal trio, LeVert. Two years later, Sean Levert died of withdrawal from anxiety medication while in prison, after his correctional officers refused to provide access to a health worker. His death led to the passage of Ohio HB 249. At this point in the interview, Levert reflects upon his sons' suffering, and talks about the importance of his faith.

Video Oral History Interview with Eddie Levert, Section A2013\_242\_001\_009, TRT: 9:19:29 ?

Eddie Levert talks about the music of white R and B artists like Robin Thicke, who were often produced by African American musicians. He also describes the qualities of authentic rhythm and blues music, which was sung by Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield and Jerry Butler, as well as some white vocalists like Michael McDonald. At this point in the interview, Levert talks about his plans for the future, and his concerns for the African American community. He concludes the interview by reflecting upon his career and legacy.