

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Knight, Merald Woodrow, 1942-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr.,
Dates:	August 28, 2013 and November 20, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	15 uncompressed MOV digital video files (7:30:53).
Abstract:	R & B singer Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. (1942 -) was a performer and founding member of Gladys Knight and the Pips. Knight was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 28, 2013 and November 20, 2013, in Henderson, Nevada and Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_244
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Rhythm and Blues Singer Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. was born on September 4, 1942, in Atlanta, Georgia. Knight's mother, Elizabeth Woods-Knight, was a nurse's aide, and his father, Merald Knight, Sr., was a restaurant supervisor. Knight's parents were also singers in the Wings Over Jordan gospel choir. In 1952, at the young age of ten, he and his sisters, Gladys and Brenda, and cousins William and Elenor, formed the musical group the Pips. Knight would go on to graduate from Samuel Archer High School in Atlanta in 1960.

Performing as a singer, Knight and the Pips, along with new members Edward

Patten and Langston George, began touring with Jackie Wilson and Sam Cooke in the late 1950s as an opening act. In 1961, the Pips produced their first R & B Top-20 hit with a version of Johnny Otis's *Every Beat of My Heart*. Then, in 1966, the Pips signed to Motown's subsidiary, Soul records. The group released their major hit single, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* in 1967. Hits that followed included 1968's *The Nitty Gritty*, 1969's *Friendship Train*, 1970's *If I Were Your Woman*, 1971's *I Don't Want To Do Wrong*, and the 1973 Grammy Award-winning *Neither One of Us (Wants to Be the First to Say Goodbye)*. In 1973, the Pips left Motown and signed with Buddah records. Their first album with Buddah was *Imagination*, which would become their best-selling album. *Imagination* included the 1974 Grammy-winning song *Midnight Train to Georgia*. Gladys Knight and the Pips continued to produce hits until 1989, when Gladys decided to leave the group.

Knight has received many awards and honors while involved with Gladys Knight and the Pips. The group has been honored with four Grammy Awards and seven American Music Awards. In 1989, the Pips were inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame, and in 1996, the group was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The Pips received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Rhythm and Blues Foundation in 1998. In 2001, they were inducted into the Vocal Group Hall of Fame, and, in 2006, the Pips were inducted into the Apollo Theater's Hall of Fame in New York.

Knight is married to Kathleen C. A. Knight, and they live in Henderson, Nevada.

Bubba Knight was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 28, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 28, 2013 and November 20, 2013, in Henderson, Nevada and Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 15 uncompressed MOV digital video files. R & B singer Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. (1942 -) was a performer and founding member of Gladys Knight and the Pips.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The

Restrictions on Use

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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.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Knight, Merald Woodrow, 1942-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Knight, Merald Woodrow, 1942---Interviews

Organizations:

Occupations:

R & B Singer

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 Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., August 28, 2013 and November 20, 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 Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_001_001, TRT: 1:29:05 2013/08/28

Merald “Bubba” Knight, Jr. was born on September 4, 1942 in Atlanta, Georgia. His father, Merald Woodrow Knight, Sr., was born in Cordele, Georgia on February 16, 1913 to Sally Knight and Samuel Knight, both of whom were born in Atlanta in 1887. Sally Knight was a teacher and Merald Knight, Sr. was one of the first African American postmen in Atlanta. Knight’s mother, Sarah Elizabeth Woods Knight, was born in East Pointe, Georgia on June 18, 1917 to Susie Woods Carlisle and Beatrice Woods, a railroad porter. Knight grew up in the Gray Street Projects with his siblings Brenda, Gladys, and David Knight in Atlanta, Georgia until he lit the apartment on fire while playing with matches and the family was forced to move to Merritts Avenue. Knight’s family attended Mount Moriah Baptist Church, where his parents both sang in the choir. When Knight was eight or nine years old, he lived with his grandmother, Sally Knight, while his sister, Gladys Knight, competed on Ted Mack’s “Original Amateur Hour” in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_001_002, TRT: 2:31:29 2013/08/28

Merald “Bubba” Knight, Jr. describes his childhood and his siblings. After temporarily living on Merritts Avenue, Knight’s family moved to a duplex on Chestnut Street in Atlanta, Georgia. Knight describes his older sister, Brenda, who created Shakeji, Inc. Knight recalls learning to sing “Ave Maria” in Latin with his sister Gladys Knight and learning of her singing talent at a young age. He also recalls singing with his sisters at church as the Knight

Children. When Gladys Knight was seven, she competed on Ted Mack's "Original Amateur Hour" and won. Knight recalls listening to his sister on the radio and the support that she received from Ruth Hall Hodges, an art teacher at Morris Brown College as well as the Atlanta community. After Gladys won the competition in 1952, the Knight Children added their cousins, Eleanor and William Guest, to the group and changed their name to "The Pips." One of their first major performances was at the Royal Peacock in Atlanta, Georgia.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_001_003, TRT: 3:28:25 2013/08/28

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. recalls changing the name of his family's singing group to "The Pips" in honor of Knight's cousin and manager, James "Pip" Woods. The Pips' first performance was at the YWCA on Tatnall street. Then, when Knight was around eleven years old, the group won a contest and performed at the Royal Peacock in Atlanta, Georgia. Knight attended English Avenue Elementary School, Henry McNeal Turner High School, and Samuel Howard Archer High School in Atlanta, Georgia. During summers, Knight's mother took the group to Detroit, Michigan, where they took music lessons from Maurice King. In 1958, the Pips made their first record of "Whistle My Love" and "Ching Chong." In 1959, Eleanor Guest and Brenda Knight left the group and were replaced by Edward Patten and Langston George. In 1961, the Pips performed on Henry Wynn's Supersonic Attractions tour with Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson, and recorded the song "Every Beat of My Heart," with Clifford "Fats" Hunter, who owned the Builder's Club in Atlanta.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_001_004, TRT: 4:31:18 2013/08/28

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. recorded "Every Beat of My Heart" with the Pips in 1961 on the HunTom label. After Knight's mother refused to sign with Ewart Abner of Vee-Jay Records in Chicago, Illinois, the record's producer, Clifford "Fats" Hunter, sold the master to Vee-Jay and it became a national hit. The Pips re-recorded the song after signing with Bobby Robinson of Fury Records in New York City, New York. At this point, the group changed its

name to Gladys Knight and the Pips and became successful on the theater circuit after performing at the Apollo Theater in New York City. In 1962, Gladys Knight left the group to raise her son, James Newman. The Pips, without Gladys, recorded “Darling” for Fury Records in 1962 and Gladys recorded “Come See About Me” in 1963. In 1964, Gladys Knight and the Pips reunited under manager Marguerite Mays, Willie Mays’ ex-wife, and recorded “Giving Up” with Larry Maxwell and Van McCoy at Maxx Records. The record was made popular by DJ Nathaniel “Magnificent” Montague.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_001_005, TRT: 5:33:23 2013/08/28

Merald “Bubba” Knight, Jr. was introduced to Charlie “Cholly” Atkins by Marguerite Mays after Gladys Knight and the Pips reunited in 1964. Atkins choreographed their routine and rehearsed the group for their second performance at the Apollo Theater in New York City, New York. In 1966, Gladys Knight and the Pips were approached by HistoryMaker Smokey Robinson to sign with Motown Records. Knight recalls Larry Maxwell of Maxx Records negotiating the contract with Motown and standing up for the Pips’ financial interests. Gladys Knight and the Pips worked with Johnny Bristol and Harvey Fuqua at Motown, but did not receive the same attention that acts like The Temptations, The Supremes, and the Four Tops were getting until they recorded “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” with producer Norman Whitfield in 1967. The group’s finances were being handled by Sidney Seidenberg and Floyd Lieberman. In 1973, the group left Motown and signed with Buddah Records after Motown improperly handled the group’s taxes.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_006, TRT: 6:30:08 2013/11/20

Merald “Bubba” Knight, Jr. talks about performers he worked with early in his career, including Moms Mabley at the Apollo Theater in New York City, New York and Billy Wright in Atlanta, Georgia. Knight describes the career of Gladys Knight and the Pips’ choreographer, Charlie “Cholly” Atkins and his dance partner, Charlie “Honi” Coles. He also describes the group’s manager,

Marguerite Mays, who was the ex-wife of Willie Mays. Knight recalls an experience at Fury Records when he discovered that producer Fats Lewis was bootlegging copies of their records without giving the group royalties. He also recalls meeting Marshall Sehorn, the representative from Fury Records who signed Gladys Knight and the Pips and who prepared them for the first performance at the Apollo Theater.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_007, TRT: 7:30:48 2013/11/20

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. met Sid Seidenberg through Marguerite Mays and Larry Maxwell while Gladys Knight and the Pips were signed with Maxx Records. Together with Floyd Lieberman, Seidenberg protected the business interests of the group by creating the company Perfection in Performance, Inc. In 1966, HistoryMaker Smokey Robinson approached Gladys Knight and the Pips to join Motown Records. The group also had an offer from Vee-Jay Records in Chicago, Illinois. Knight recalls Larry Maxwell's contract negotiations with Motown, and how he protected the group's financial interest. In 1966, Gladys Knight and the Pips recorded their first single with Motown, "Just Walk in in My Shoes," with Johnny Bristol and Harvey Fuqua. Knight recalls rehearsing with Charles "Cholly" Atkins at Motown and the other performers who were there. With the help of Motown's management arm, International Talent Management, Inc. (ITMI), the group performed at the Copacabana in New York City, New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_008, TRT: 8:33:32 2013/11/20

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. describes his experience working with Charles "Cholly" Atkins and the other groups that Atkins worked with, including Earl "Speedo" Carroll and the Cadillacs and The Temptations. While Gladys Knight and the Pips were signed at Motown, Knight took on a business role within the group and was voted president of their company, Perfection in Performance, Inc. Knight talks about Motown's move to Los Angeles, California and discovering the Jackson Five at the Regal Theater in Chicago, Illinois. In 1973, Gladys

Knight and the Pips left Motown after discovering that their manager, Taylor Cox, was spending the money that the group set aside for taxes. Knight reflects on other artists who left Motown and filed lawsuits against the label, including Holland-Dozier-Holland and the Isley Brothers. The group signed with Art Kass at Buddah Records, a distributing company run by Cecil Holmes, Art Kass, Milton Sincoff, Neil Bogart and Ron Wisner.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_009, TRT: 9:34:17 2013/11/20

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. recalls working with songwriter and producer Norman Whitfield at Motown Records. With Whitfield, the group recorded songs like "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" and "Friendship Train." Knight also recalls working with Clay McMurray and Pam Sawyer on the song "If I Were Your Woman." After a performance in the Motown Christmas Show at the Fox Theater in Detroit, Michigan, Knight recalls receiving constructive criticism from HistoryMaker Berry Gordy. In 1971, Don Cornelius approached Gladys Knight and the Pips to perform on his first syndicated episode of "Soul Train," which helped the show gain national funding from HistoryMaker George Johnson of Johnson Products. Knight names the hit songs that the group recorded at Motown, and talks about the difficulty of maintaining songwriting rights. In 1973, the group recorded two Grammy-winning records: "Neither One of Us (Wants to Be the First to Say Goodbye)" for Motown and "Midnight Train to Georgia" for Buddah Records.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_010, TRT: 10:34:17 2013/11/20

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. signed with Art Kass at Buddah Records in 1973. The label was a distributing company run by Cecil Holmes, Art Kass, Milton Sincoff, Neil Bogart and Ron Wisner, who were trying to become more of a traditional record production company. Cecil Holmes and Neil Bogart left Buddah to start Casablanca Records in 1973. Knight recalls winning two Grammy Awards in 1974, their short-lived summer replacement show on NBC, and the group's international success. He also talks about the group's lawyer, Irwin Spiegel Osher.

In 1974, Gladys Knight also married Barry Hankerson. In 1978, Gladys Knight left the Pips and the group broke up for the second time. Even though they were apart, the Pips continued to record together with Casablanca Records and Gladys Knight recorded with Columbia Records. In 1980, the group reunited at Columbia Records, where they worked with Sam Dees and Nickolas Ashford as well as HistoryMakers Larkin Arnold and Valerie Simpson.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_011, TRT: 11:30:07 2013/11/20

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. recalls his experience at Columbia Records starting in 1980, where Gladys Knight and the Pips worked with Leon Sylvers, III, Nickolas Ashford, and HistoryMaker Valerie Simpson. In 1983, the group recorded "Hero," which was rejected by HistoryMaker Larkin Arnold, but later released by Lou Rawls as "Wind Beneath My Wings," leading Knight to feel betrayed by Arnold and Columbia Records. Gladys Knight and the Pips left Columbia Records and recorded their final album, "All Our Love," in 1987 at MCA Records. Knight reflects on his decision to sign with Gerald Busby at MCA instead of Clive Davis at Arista, a decision which backfired when Busby quickly left MCA Records. In 1989, Gladys Knight and the Pips made one final tour to promote "Love Overboard" and broke up for the third and final time. Knight reflects on the success of Gladys Knight and the Pips, and how they helped propel his sister's success as a solo performer.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_012, TRT: 12:28:52 2013/11/20

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. reflects upon his marriages to Kathleen Knight. Knight first met Kathleen while on tour in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In between shows at the Copacabana in New York City, New York, Knight proposed to Kathleen, and she joined Gladys Knight and the Pips on tour as a wardrobe assistant to Gladys Knight while they raised money for a wedding. After they were married, the couple moved to Detroit, Michigan when Gladys Knight and the Pips signed with Motown Records in 1966. After eleven years of marriage, the couple divorced and Knight moved to Los Angeles, California,

where he received his real estate license and recorded two albums with the Pips at Casablanca Records. During this time, Kathleen remarried and was working at the Ford Motor Company, but her second marriage also ended in divorce. After fifteen years, Knight and Kathleen reunited in Kentucky in 1993; and, on January 1, 1996, the couple remarried in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_013, TRT: 13:32:33 2013/11/20

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. talks about his parents, Merald Knight, Sr. and Sarah Elizabeth Woods Knight. His father was a postal worker and a supervisor at Rich's Department Store in Atlanta, Georgia during the sit-ins. Knight recalls hiding in his father's car while he went to work at the post office and delivering packages with him on his route. After his father passed away, Knight's family, including his mother, his sister Brenda Knight, and his brother David Knight, moved to a compound that Knight owned in Las Vegas, Nevada. Knight recalls performing with his sister at the White House in front of President Bill Clinton and on her solo tour, and using humor in his performances. He reflects on the musical directors he has worked with, including Maurice King, Al Thompson, Stanley Lucas, Jimmy Newman, Joe Guercio, Matthew Pittman, Damion Hall, and HistoryMaker Benjamin Wright. He also shares memories of fellow Pips Edward Patten and William Guest, and reflects upon the loyalty and integrity of the group.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_014, TRT: 14:33:44 2013/11/20

Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr. recalls being offered the chance to sing background for James Brown after Gladys Knight and the Pips broke up and how he, William Guest, and Edward Patten declined the offer. Knight also reflects on the career of HistoryMaker B.B. King, who had been managed by Sidney Seidenberg and Floyd Lieberman. In 1977, Knight recorded "If I Could Bring Back Yesterday," and he reflects on how his separation from Kathleen Knight contributed to the power of his vocals on the record. Knight talks about performing at the Flamingo Las Vegas Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada from

around 2002 until 2006 and at the Tropicana Las Vegas Hotel and Resort in Las Vegas, Nevada. In 2000, Knight joined his sister in a touring production of “Smokey Joe’s Café,” and recalls his first performance of the musical at Caesar’s Palace Las Vegas Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. Knight shares his plans for the future and his opinions about song lyrics and the state of the music industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Merald "Bubba" Knight, Jr., Section A2013_244_002_015, TRT: 15:08:55 2013/11/20

Merald “Bubba” Knight, Jr. concludes his interview by reflecting upon the contributions of African Americans to the music industry and on his legacy.