

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Shelley Fisher

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616<br>info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com  |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Fisher, Shelley, 1942-   |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Shelley Fisher,   |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | November 23, 2013  |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2013   |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:33:48).  |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Singer, pianist, and Shelley Fisher (1942 - ) toured nationally and internationally for over thirty years. He also acted in various stage productions and films, and authored a autobiography titled 'A Motherless Child.' Fisher was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 23, 2013, in Las Vegas, Nevada. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2013_317  |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.  |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Singer and pianist Shelley Fisher was born on April 6, 1942 in Clarksdale, Mississippi. In 1953, he moved to Chicago and grew up on the city's West Side. Fisher studied music theory, composition and vocal technique in the Chicago Junior College System, and at Roosevelt University's Chicago Conservatory of Music. He received his A.A. degree in music education and social science from Crane Junior College in 1963.

Upon graduation, Fisher became the featured vocalist with the Morris Ellis Orchestra in Chicago. In 1966 he had a principal role in Oscar Brown, Jr.'s musical production "Summer in the City." Fisher went on to open for Stevie Wonder at the original Regal Theater in Chicago. He then moved to Los Angeles in 1970, where he played the piano and sang for the "jet set." In 1972, Fisher co-starred in the comedy motion picture *Calliope*. He also played the role of the piano player in *The Three Wishes of Billy Grier*, starring Ralph Macchio, and in *Letter to Three Wives*, with Loni Anderson. Fisher wrote and performed the original music for the motion picture *Drifting Clouds*.

In 1977, Fisher returned to Chicago, where he taught in two Chicago public schools. In 1985, Fisher launched Vantown Productions, Inc., a publishing and production company. He has composed and published many musical titles, including *Yesterday's Dreams* (Lou Rawls on Capital Records), *Plainsville, USA* (Jimmy Randolph on Motown Records), *King Size Bed* (The Valentine Brothers on Sony Records), and *Girl, I Love You*, which launched the career of Chicago R&B legend, Garland Green.

From 1978 through 1999, Fisher worked abroad, namely in Osaka, Japan, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and Oslo, Norway. In 1997, he wrote, arranged and produced *CELEBRATION, A Tribute to Nat "King" Cole*, a Las Vegas style program produced at NRK TV (Norwegian TV). Fisher toured in Europe and broke two attendance records with performances in Den Hague, Holland and at Puntaldia, the jazz music festival on the island of Sardinia, Italy.

In 2000, Fisher moved to Las Vegas, where he performed at New York, New York, the MGM Grand, the Venetian,

and the MGM/Mirage hotels. He has shared billing or recorded with other well-known artists like Earth, Wind & Fire, The Dells, Eartha Kitt and B.B. King. Fisher has also recorded two full-length CDs: 2003's *Driving Home*, and 2004's *Stories*.

Shelley Fisher was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 23, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Shelley Fisher was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on November 23, 2013, in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer, pianist, and Shelley Fisher (1942 - ) toured nationally and internationally for over thirty years. He also acted in various stage productions and films, and authored a autobiography titled 'A Motherless Child.'

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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:

Fisher, Shelley, 1942-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Fisher, Shelley, 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:

Pianist

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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 Shelley Fisher, November 23, 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 Shelley Fisher, Section A2013\_317\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:56 ?

Shelley Fisher was born on April 6, 1942 in Clarksdale, Mississippi to Martha Ann Robinson Fisher and Shelley Fisher, Sr. His father was born in Starkville, Mississippi to a teenage mother named Icybell Hemphill Fisher. She later married sharecropper Silas Fisher, who raised Fisher's father as his own. Fisher's maternal grandfather, George Robinson, was a preacher and his maternal grandmother, Mariah Robinson, was a homemaker in Coahoma, Mississippi, where Fisher's mother was born. She died when he was two months old, at which time Fisher was sent to live with his paternal grandparents in Crenshaw, Mississippi while his father was stationed overseas during World War II. To escape the psychological and physical abuse of his paternal grandmother, Fisher joined his father and stepmother, Ida Mae Jones Fisher, in Chicago, Illinois. There, his father worked at Westinghouse Electric Corporation, and became a 33rd degree Mason, serving as the grandmaster of Chicago's Most Worshipful St. John's Grand Lodge.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelley Fisher, Section A2013\_317\_001\_002, TRT: 2:31:37 ?

Shelley Fisher moved to Chicago, Illinois to live with his father, stepmother and stepbrothers when he was eight years old. Growing up, he accompanied his stepbrother to the Midwest Gym, where boxers like Sugar Ray Robinson and Kid Gavilan also trained. Fisher operated the freight elevator at the gym in exchange for free lessons. He also developed an interest in music by Dee Clark, Ray Charles and Jerry Butler. At twelve years old, Fisher became involved with Chicago's 14th Street Clovers gang, who often fought with the Imperial Chaplains gang in the area. He attended Chicago's Farragut High School, where he focused more on socializing and gang related activities than his schoolwork. However, his criminal involvements and the rising gang violence prompted Fisher to seek a more productive alternative. He then participated in the Boys' Brotherhood Republic after school program, where he was inspired to enlist in the U.S. Air Force. With his father's permission, he joined at sixteen years old.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelley Fisher, Section A2013\_317\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:07 ?

Shelley Fisher enlisted in the U.S. Air Force at sixteen years old, and completed basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Six months later, he was honorably discharged, at which point he returned to Chicago, Illinois. He found work selling magazine subscriptions door to door with a company that sent him to New York City and St. Louis, Missouri, where one of his customers was singer Chuck Berry. When he returned to Chicago, he worked briefly at the Turner Manufacturing Company, and eventually took the civil service exam to become a mail carrier. During this time, he completed his GED, and enrolled at Crane Junior College in Chicago, where he encouraged by his professor, James Mack, to sing professionally. He then began performing in shows with musicians like Earth, Wind and Fire founder Maurice White and saxophonist Gene Ammons. He later took lessons at the Chicago Musical College under the tutelage of Gisela Goettling. Fisher also talks about Chicago's black music scene of the 1960s.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelley Fisher, Section A2013\_317\_001\_004, TRT: 4:31:28 ?

Shelley Fisher attended the Chicago Musical College in Chicago, Illinois. During that time, he played music around the city at venues like the Sutherland Hotel and Stan's Pad. In 1966, he landed a role in Oscar Brown, Jr.'s musical 'Summer in the City,' and gained notoriety for his performance of 'Elegy (Plain Black Boy).' Fisher went on to release his version of 'Elegy' on his own label, Aries Records. He was then invited to open for Stevie Wonder at Chicago's Regal Theater, and to perform as the featured vocalist with the Morris Ellis

Orchestra. Around this time, Fisher also produced music with Melvin Collins and Joshie Jo Armstead, and wrote original music like the song 'Girl, I Love You,' which launched the career of Garland Green. In 1970, he moved to Los Angeles, California, where he worked with Eartha Kitt and Lou Rawls. Fisher later became the resident piano player at the Sportsman's Lodge in Los Angeles, and was cast in his first onscreen role in the 1972 film 'Calliope.'

Video Oral History Interview with Shelley Fisher, Section A2013\_317\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:00 ?

Shelley Fisher lived in Los Angeles, California, where he worked with Berry Gordy and his wife, Raynoma Gordy Singleton, at Motown Records. There, Fisher began recording demos for Marvin Gaye and Diana Ross. In the early 1970s, Fisher struggled with substance abuse, which was exacerbated by his relationship with actress Jacqueline Dalya. After the two separated, Fisher moved back to Chicago, Illinois in 1977 to focus on his career. He started a blues music program for children in the Cabrini-Green Homes housing projects of Chicago. During the three month stint, he taught at Schiller Elementary School and Newberry School, where students learned to write, perform and express themselves through blues music. In 1978, he moved to Osaka, Japan on a three month contract to play at venues like the King George club. Fisher stayed in Japan for three years until moving back to Chicago to renew his visa. From there, his agent, Melba Caldwell, booked him a show in Winnipeg, Canada, which resulted in a tour across Canada.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelley Fisher, Section A2013\_317\_001\_006, TRT: 6:32:23 ?

Shelley Fisher worked as the resident piano player at Puffin's Dining Room and Lounge in the Pacific Palisades Hotel in Vancouver, Canada. While there, he was also cast in movie roles such as in 'The Three Wishes of Billy Grier' and 'A Letter to Three Wives.' In 1985, Fisher began a tour of popular hotels throughout Scandinavia and Europe like the Britannia Hotel in Trondheim, Norway and the Original Sokos Hotel Vaakuna in Helsinki, Finland. In Finland, he met director Aki Kaurismäki who offered him a part as the pianist in the 1996 movie 'Drifting Clouds,' which went on to receive a special mention at the Cannes Film Festival. Fisher also wrote the original music for the film, including the composition 'Lonesome Traveler.' After spending twenty-three years abroad, Fisher decided to return to the United States, and settled in Las Vegas, Nevada, where he became the resident pianist at The Mirage in 2000. In 2004, Fisher sustained injuries from a car accident that ended his piano career.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelley Fisher, Section A2013\_317\_001\_007, TRT: 7:28:17 ?

Shelley Fisher started to focus on developing his craft as a singer after a car accident in 2004 ended his career as a piano player. Fisher built a repertoire of songs entitled 'Dem Boys From Chicago,' sampled from his favorite performers like Lou Rawls, Joe Williams and Nat King Cole. He toured with the compilation on the Carnival Cruise Line and throughout Las Vegas, Nevada, where he headlined places like the Starbright Theater. Fisher talks about writing his autobiography 'A Motherless Child,' and his children; Monique Fisher Calloway, Martha Fisher and William Persson. He reflects upon his legacy and career, as well as his hopes and concerns for the African American community. Fisher concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.