

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mel Watkins

---

## 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>	Watkins, Mel, 1940-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 17, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:40:31).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Journalist and author Mel Watkins (1940 - ) was the first African American staff editor for The New York Times Sunday Book Review. He has edited, authored and co-authored numerous books and anthologies, including <i>On the Real Side: A History of African American Humor</i> , <i>Dancing with Strangers: A Memoir</i> , and <i>Stepin Fetchit: The Life &amp; Times of Lincoln Perry</i> . Watkins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 17, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_064
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist and author Mel Watkins was born on March 8, 1940 in Memphis, Tennessee to Pittman and Katie Watkins. Although born in Memphis, Watkins grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. In 1962, he received his B.A. degree in art history from Colgate University. While there, he worked a summer job as a copy boy for the New York *Daily News*.

Upon graduation, Watkins sold books in Harlem, New York for the Negro Book Club, and from 1963 to 1964, he worked as a claims examiner for the Federal Social Security Department. In 1964, Watkins was hired as a copy boy for *The New York Times*' Sunday sections. He was soon promoted to clerk for *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*. In 1968, Watkins was made a book editor, and became the first African American staff editor for *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*. As an editor and writer for the Sunday Book Review from 1968 to 1985, he contributed hundreds of book reviews and articles on literature, sports and entertainment. Later, he contributed obituaries of such artists as George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Rodney Dangerfield and Gwendolyn Brooks. Watkins also served as the book page editor for *Penthouse* magazine from 1977 to 1978, and as book page editor for *American Visions* magazine from 1986 until 1991. In addition, he worked as an instructor at Rutgers University in 1992 and 1993; in 2007, he was hired as National Endowment for the Humanities Professor of Humanities at Colgate University.

Watkins has edited, authored and co-authored numerous books and anthologies, including *To Be a Black Woman: Portraits in Fact and Fiction* (1971); *Black Review Number One* (1971); *Black Review Number Two* (1972); *Race and Suburbia* (1973); *African Art: From the Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection* (1987); *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying--The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (1994); *Dancing with Strangers: A Memoir* (1998); *The Bob Love Story: If*

*It's Gonna Be, It's up to Me* (2000); *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today* (2002); and *Stepin Fetchit: The Life & Times of Lincoln Perry* (2005). Watkins also wrote introductions for the first six volumes of the Howard University Press Library of Contemporary Literature Series in 1984. He was the recipient of an Alicia Patterson Foundation journalism fellowship in 1979, and, in 2002, his memoir, *Dancing with Strangers*, was the initial selection in Youngstown State University's annual Freshman Reading Dialogue. Watkins has also frequently appeared as a commentator on television documentaries focused on entertainment, show business personalities, and social issues.

Mel Watkins was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 17, 2014.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mel Watkins was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on February 17, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Journalist and author Mel Watkins (1940 - ) was the first African American staff editor for The New York Times Sunday Book Review. He has edited, authored and co-authored numerous books and anthologies, including *On the Real Side: A History of African American Humor*, *Dancing with Strangers: A Memoir*, and *Stepin Fetchit: The Life & Times of Lincoln Perry*.

---

## 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:

Watkins, Mel, 1940-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Watkins, Mel, 1940---Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

Journalist

---

## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

---

## 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 Mel Watkins, February 17, 2014. 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).

---

## 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 Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:47 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:27 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:14 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_004, TRT: 4:31:41 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_005, TRT: 5:32:44 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_006, TRT: 6:32:02 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_007, TRT: 7:30:33 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_008, TRT: 8:31:58 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Mel Watkins, Section A2014\_064\_001\_009, TRT: 9:32:05 ?