

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Norma Fairhurst

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Fairhurst, Norma, 1943-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Norma Fairhurst,
Dates:	June 25, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2014
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:16:39).
Abstract:	Singer Norma Fairhurst (1943 -) was an original member of the Motown group The Velveettes, known for records like 'There He Goes' and 'Needle in a Haystack.' Fairhurst was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 25, 2014, in Flint, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2014_160
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Singer and performer Norma Fairhurst was born in Verona, Mississippi and raised in Flint, Michigan. Fairhurst and her cousin, Bertha McNeal, first sang in a group with their uncle called the Barbees, where they recorded an album for the Stepp label in 1957. Following high school and the breakup of the Barbees, Fairhurst enrolled as a student at Flint Junior College.

In 1961, while a freshman at Flint Junior College, Fairhurst was asked by her cousin to join a singing group at Western Michigan University with Mildred Arbor, Carolyn Street and Betty Kelley, which they named the Velveettes. After the quintet won a talent contest at the University, fellow student and nephew of Berry Gordy, Robert Bullock, suggested they audition for Gordy's Motown Records. The Velveettes signed to Motown in late 1962 and started recording in January of 1963. They recorded two singles in 1963: "There He Goes," which was written by Fairhurst, and "That's The Reason Why." In 1964, the Velveettes recorded and released the single "Needle In A Haystack" on Motown's VIP Records, which peaked at #45 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. The group then recorded "He Was Really Sayin' Somethin'," which peaked at #64 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and at #21 on the Billboard R&B Singles chart.

In September of 1964, Betty Kelley left the Velveettes to join Martha and the Vandellas. The remaining four Velveettes continued to perform and released the singles "Lonely Lonely Girl Am I" and "A Bird in the Hand (Is Worth Two in the Bush)" in 1965, and "These Things Will Keep Me Loving You," in 1966, which later became a hit in the United Kingdom peaking at #34 on the UK Singles Chart. In the late 1960s, Arbor, Fairhurst and McNeal left the group and were replaced by Sandra Tilley and Annette Rogers-McMillan. Then, in 1969, Carolyn Street married and disbanded the Velveettes. Fairhurst went on to become general manager of the Radisson Hotel in Flint, Michigan.

In 1984, four of the original Velveettes, Arbor, Fairhurst, McNeal and Street, reunited. In 1990, the group re-recorded their original hits and new songs for the album *One Door Closes* for Motorcity Records. Motown Records

then released *The Very Best of the Velveettes* in 1999, *The Velveettes: The Best Of* in 2001, and *The Velveettes: The Motown Anthology* in 2004. The Velveettes are the only Motown group of the classic era still performing with the “original” line-up.

Norma Fairhurst was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 25, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Norma Fairhurst was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 25, 2014, in Flint, Michigan, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer Norma Fairhurst (1943 -) was an original member of the Motown group The Velveettes, known for records like ‘There He Goes’ and ‘Needle in a Haystack.’

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:

Fairhurst, Norma, 1943-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Fairhurst, Norma, 1943---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

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 Norma Fairhurst, June 25, 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 Norma Fairhurst, Section A2014_160_001_001, TRT: 1:29:40 ?
Norma Fairhurst was born on October 24, 1943 in Verona, Mississippi to

Earlene Tardy Barbee and Arthur Barbee, Jr. Her maternal grandfather, Luther Tardy, was involved in politics in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Fairhurst's mother was born in Pine Bluff in 1920, and was raised by her paternal grandmother and aunt in Verona after her own mother died of pneumonia. She graduated from high school in Verona, and later worked in a factory in Washington, D.C. Fairhurst's father was born on his family's farm in Shannon, Mississippi in 1918. His father, Arthur Barbee, Sr., was a carpenter, and his mother, Cliffie Barbee, was a housewife. He met Fairhurst's mother at church in Mississippi prior to his service in the U.S. Army during World War II. When Fairhurst was five years old, she moved with her parents to the north end of Flint, Michigan, where her father found work as a metal fabricator at the General Motors Corporation. During her childhood, Fairhurst sang as a soloist at Flint's St. James C.M.E. Church.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Fairhurst, Section A2014_160_001_002, TRT: 2:29:00 ?

Norma Fairhurst grew up in Flint, Michigan during the height of the automotive industry boom. In the summers, she visited her paternal grandparents at their farm in Verona, Mississippi. Fairhurst began her education at Flint's Jefferson Elementary School. She was often distracted by concerns for her mother, who was physically abused by her alcoholic father. Fairhurst was also bullied by her peers because of her light complexion. Fairhurst's paternal aunt facilitated her early piano and vocal lessons, and she went on to sing in the glee club at Emerson Junior High School. Around that time, Fairhurst partnered with her uncle, Simon Barbee, and cousins, Bertha McNeal and Joyce Barbee, to form a vocal group called the Barbees. They performed at nursing homes and prisons throughout Michigan. While Fairhurst was a student at Flint's Southwestern High School, she often visited McNeal at Western Michigan University, where they were introduced to Robert Berry Bullock.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Fairhurst, Section A2014_160_001_003, TRT: 3:28:13 ?

Norma Fairhurst attended Southwestern High School in Flint, Michigan. During this time, she frequently visited her paternal cousin, Bertha McNeal, at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. There, they formed a singing group called The Velvelettes with Mildred Gill Arbor, Cal Street and Betty Kelly. Fairhurst wrote the melody for the song 'There He Goes,' which the group sang for their audition with Mickey Stevenson at Motown Records in Detroit, Michigan. After persuading her mother to sign, Fairhurst and The Velvelettes entered into a contract with the record company in 1962. The group went on to record successful singles like 'Needle In A Haystack,' to which founder Berry Gordy credited Motown Records' financial recovery in 1964. During their tour with The Temptations, The Velvelettes were supervised by the Motown Records etiquette director, Maxine Powell, under orders from Berry Gordy. At this point in the interview, Fairhurst reflects upon her decision to sign with Motown Records.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Fairhurst, Section A2014_160_001_004, TRT: 4:28:46 ?

Norma Fairhurst was an original member of the Motown Records group The Velvelettes. The group created their own choreography, and received etiquette training from Maxine Powell. They also bonded with Motown Records groups like Martha and The Vandellas and The Miracles. In 1964, The Velvelettes recorded the single 'Needle In A Haystack,' which became a hit song in England. When The Velvelettes disbanded in 1967, Fairhurst auditioned for Florence Ballard's spot in The Supremes. Dissuaded by the low salary, she focused on raising her family instead. Then, at her mother's insistence, she entered the workforce in Flint, Michigan. She worked as an accountant at the

United Way, and then worked in sales at the Flint and Genesee Convention and Visitors Bureau. She went on to become the director of sales and marketing at the Radisson Riverfront Hotel in Flint, where she was later promoted to general manager. The Velvelettes reunited in 1984, and rerecorded their hits with an English label called Nightmare Records.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Fairhurst, Section A2014_160_001_005, TRT: 5:17:01 ?

Norma Fairhurst was an original member of the Motown Records girl group The Velvelettes, along with her paternal cousin, Bertha McNeal, and sisters Mildred Gill Arbor and Cal Street. The group disbanded in the late 1960s, and reunited in 1984. In 2013, they attended the premiere of 'Motown: The Musical,' where Berry Gordy acknowledged The Velvelettes' role in the record company's financial recovery during the early 1960s. At the time of the interview, Fairhurst still performed occasionally with The Velvelettes. She devoted most of her time to caring for her parents, Earlene Tardy Barbee and Arthur Barbee, Jr., who were in hospice. At this point, Fairhurst talks about her children, as well as her parents' perspective on her career. She reflects upon her life, and concludes this part of the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Fairhurst, Section A2014_160_001_006, TRT: 6:03:59 ?

Norma Fairhurst narrates her photographs.