

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with KEM

---

## 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>	Kem
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with KEM,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 23, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:10:34).
<b>Abstract:</b>	R & B singer and songwriter KEM (1967 - ) was a recording artist with Motown Records, and his albums include <i>Kemistry</i> , <i>Album II</i> , <i>Intimacy</i> , and <i>What Christmas Means</i> . Owens was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 23, 2014, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_183
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

R & B singer and songwriter Kim Lamont Owens (KEM) was born in Nashville, Tennessee. When he was young, his family moved from Nashville to the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Michigan. Owens began to explore the keyboard when he was four, and became fascinated by music in high school in the 1980s. However, upon graduation, he dealt with homelessness, addiction, and isolation from his family. Owens recovered in 1990 and took a job as a waiter at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Dearborn, Michigan. He also booked weddings and other shows that allowed him to perform original music.

In February of 2001, Owens self-released his first album, *Kemistry*, which sold

nearly 15,000 copies and piqued the interest of Motown Records. Motown signed Owens to a five-record deal in November of 2001 and re-released *Kemistry* in 2003. The album reached the Top 20 of the Top Hip-Hop/R&B Albums chart, its first single, "Love Calls," became a hit, and the record went gold. Owens' second CD, *Album II*, was released in 2005 and sold over 500,000 copies in the United States. The album included the hit single "I Can't Stop Loving You," a #1 at urban adult contemporary radio. In 2010, he released his third album, *Intimacy*, which debuted at #2 on the Billboard Top 200 Albums chart. The record's first single, "Why Would You Stay," spent several weeks at #1 on the Urban AC Radio charts. Owens went on to produce a Christmas album entitled *What Christmas Means* in 2012, and then a follow-up deluxe edition of the CD in October of 2013.

In 2012, Owens established Mack & Third, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting the homeless by gathering food and raising funds for Detroit's shelters and food banks. He also presents the annual 'Mack & Third' event, an all-day free concert to benefit and recognize the city's homeless citizens. Owens won the Billboard Music Award for Top Adult R&B Single of the Year in 2005, and was nominated for two NAACP Image Awards in 2006. He was also nominated in 2010 for a Soul Train Award for Best Male R&B/Soul Artist; two Grammy Awards for Best Male R&B Vocal Performance and Best R&B Song; and the BET Centric Award. Owens was nominated four more times at the 44th NAACP Image Awards in 2013.

Kem was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 23, 2014.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with KEM was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 23, 2014, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. R & B singer and songwriter KEM (1967 - ) was a recording artist with Motown Records, and his albums include *Kemistry*, *Album II*, *Intimacy*, and *What Christmas Means*.

---

## 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:

Kem

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Kem--Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

## **Occupations:**

R & B Singer

---

Songwriter

---

## **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 KEM, June 23, 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 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 KEM, Section A2014\_183\_001\_001,  
TRT: 1:28:34 2014/06/23

KEM was born on July 23, 1967 in Nashville, Tennessee to Elizabeth Hardy and Jesse Nance, Jr. KEM's mother was born in western Tennessee, and grew up in Nashville. There, her father taught at Fisk University, and founded the Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church. At seventeen years old, KEM's mother became pregnant by her high school biology teacher, whom KEM never met. For the first six months of his life, KEM lived with his maternal grandparents while his mother studied business at Tennessee State University. She eventually transferred to Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, where she met and married KEM's stepfather, Erick Hardy. The family returned to Nashville and resided with KEM's maternal grandfather, who taught KEM to play the piano. In 1975, his stepfather accepted a position at Rockwell International in Troy, Michigan, and his family settled in the nearby city of Pontiac, Michigan. There, KEM and his three sisters were raised in the racially diverse Ridgemont Drive housing development.

Video Oral History Interview with KEM, Section A2014\_183\_001\_002,  
TRT: 2:28:31 2014/06/23

KEM was raised by his mother and stepfather, Elizabeth Hardy and Erick Hardy, in Pontiac, Michigan. There, he worked at a Disabled American Veterans' hall. He enjoyed television shows like 'Good Times,' 'The Jeffersons' and 'The Flip Wilson Show,' and listened to music by the Jackson 5 and Michael Jackson. KEM learned to play the piano from his maternal grandfather at an early age; and, although he did not have a piano at home, he often practiced at his neighbors' homes and at school. KEM

began his education at Sarah McCarroll Elementary School and the Whitmer Human Resources Center in Pontiac. He struggled to learn because of undiagnosed childhood depression and attention deficit disorder, and was sent to the Michigan Institute for Child Development in Detroit during his middle school years. After moving with his family to Southfield, Michigan, KEM enrolled at Southfield High School, where he joined the choir and befriended future music producer Brian O'Neal.

Video Oral History Interview with KEM, Section A2014\_183\_001\_003,  
TRT: 3:28:34 2014/06/23

KEM attended Southfield High School in Southfield, Michigan. There, he began using drugs and alcohol to cope with his depression and attention deficit disorder, and left school without a diploma. Under pressure from his stepfather, he decided to move out of his parents' home and became homeless at nineteen years old. During this time, he roomed at the Salvation Army; the South Oakland Shelter in Royal Oak, Michigan; and the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries in Detroit, Michigan. For income, he delivered The Detroit News, the Detroit Free Press and The Wall Street Journal. After a night of sleeping on the streets of Detroit, KEM committed to sobriety in 1990. He secured work as a waiter at D. Dennison's Seafood Tavern in Farmington Hills, Michigan, and The Ritz-Carlton Dearborn in Dearborn, Michigan. KEM continued to pursue a singing career, and signed a recording contract with musician John Penn II's Undercurrent Records label. He was able to record a few songs, but did not release a full album at the time.

Video Oral History Interview with KEM, Section A2014\_183\_001\_004,  
TRT: 4:28:27 2014/06/23

KEM worked as a waiter at The Ritz-Carlton in Dearborn, Michigan while establishing his singing career. During this time, he joined the choir at the Renaissance Unity church in Warren, Michigan, and became the lead singer of a wedding band. He also worked at the American Blinds and Wallpaper factory in Plymouth, Michigan, and as a Mary Kay consultant with his mother, Elizabeth Hardy. She helped him secure a business loan to buy more Mary Kay products, but he purchased a keyboard piano

instead. After Undercurrent Records moved to Atlanta, Georgia, KEM decided to become his own manager. Unable to afford studio time, he recorded his performances at coffee houses, and then established a line of business credit to edit the songs professionally. He distributed the finished album, 'Kemistry,' to local businesses, often for free. The CD gained the interest of Shante Paige, who was the assistant to Motown Records executive Avery Lipman. KEM joined the label in 2001, and his 'Kemistry' album was re-released in 2003.

Video Oral History Interview with KEM, Section A2014\_183\_001\_005, TRT: 5:16:28 2014/06/23

KEM's first album, 'Kemistry,' featured songs like "Love Calls" and "Brotha Man." After the album's re-release on Motown Records in 2003, KEM began touring nationwide. In 2005, KEM recorded 'Album II,' which included the popular song "I Can't Stop Loving You." KEM went on to collaborate with artists like Frankie Beverly and Stevie Wonder, who played the harmonica on KEM's song "You Might Win." In 2010, KEM released 'Intimacy: Album III,' which he co-produced with jazz musician Rex Rideout. At the time of the interview, KEM was completing his fourth studio album, 'Promise to Love,' which was released in 2014. He reflects upon his professional legacy, and talks about his family. KEM concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.