

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Emil Wilbekin

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## 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>	Wilbekin, Emil Kraig, 1967-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 12, 2014 and June 16, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:46:36).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Journalist and magazine executive Emil Wilbekin (1967 - ) was a founding editor of Vibe magazine and served as its editor-in-chief from 1999 to 2003. He has also worked as vice president of brand development for Vibe Ventures and Marc Ecko Enterprises, editor-in-chief of Giant magazine, managing editor of Essence.com, and editor-at-large of Essence magazine. Wilbekin was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 12, 2014 and June 16, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_204
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist and magazine executive Emil Kraig Wilbekin was born on September 16, 1967 in Cleveland, Ohio. His father, Harvey, was a lawyer and structural engineer; his mother, Cleota, a law judge and sociologist. In 1989, Wilbekin graduated with his B.S. degree in Mass Media Arts from Hampton University, where he was also editor of the *Hampton Script*. He went on to receive his M.S.

degree in journalism from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism in 1990.

Upon graduation, Wilbekin remained in New York City and worked as an in-house editorial assistant at *Metropolitan Home* and freelanced for a number of publications, including *People Magazine*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Associated Press*, and *The New York Times*. In 1992, Wilbekin became a founding editor of *Vibe* magazine. He went on to serve as *Vibe*'s associate editor and style editor, and then as fashion director; in 1999, he was named editor-in-chief. In 2002, under Wilbekin's leadership, *Vibe* won the coveted National Magazine Award for General Excellence from the American Society of Magazine Editors. Then, in 2003, he became vice president of brand development for Vibe Ventures, where he oversaw Vibe.com, mobile, books, and Vibe TV, and executive produced the first Vibe Awards.

In 2004, Wilbekin left Vibe and was hired as vice president of brand development for Marc Ecko Enterprises and became a contributor and editorial board member of *Complex* magazine. He then went on to serve as a reporter for AOL Black Voices; a freelance writer for *Out* magazine; a consultant for Microsoft; and a consultant for Epiphany Media, where he worked in writing, curation and brand development. In 2008, Wilbekin was named editor-in-chief of *Giant* magazine and Giantmag.com, and in 2009, was made managing editor of Essence.com. He was then appointed as editor-at-large of *Essence* magazine in 2012. Wilbekin resigned in 2014 and became an independent consultant and editorial content executive.

Wilbekin has served on the boards of LIFEbeat - The Music Industry Fights AIDS, The Stonewall Foundation, the American Society of Magazine Editors, the Design Industries Fighting AIDS (DIFFA), and the Black AIDS Institute. His honors include the Pratt Institute's Creative Spirit Award, the Howard University Entertainment, Sports, and Law Club Media Award, The Anti Violence Project's Courage Award, and The Hetrick Martin Institute's Emory Award. *Out* magazine named Wilbekin as one of 100 most influential gay people in America in 2002, and he was inducted into the Hampton University Mass Media Arts Hall of Fame in 2007.

Emil Wilbekin was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 16, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Emil Wilbekin was conducted by Harriette Cole on August 12, 2014 and June 16, 2014, in New York, New York, and was

recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Journalist and magazine executive Emil Wilbekin (1967 - ) was a founding editor of Vibe magazine and served as its editor-in-chief from 1999 to 2003. He has also worked as vice president of brand development for Vibe Ventures and Marc Ecko Enterprises, editor-in-chief of Giant magazine, managing editor of Essence.com, and editor-at-large of Essence magazine.

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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:**

Wilbekin, Emil Kraig, 1967-

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Wilbekin, Emil Kraig, 1967---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:**

Journalist

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Magazine Executive

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MediaMakers

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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 Emil Wilbekin, August 12, 2014 and June 16, 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).

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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 Emil Wilbekin, Section  
A2014\_204\_001\_001, TRT: 1:27:35 2014/06/16

Emil Wilbekin was born on September 16, 1967 in Cleveland, Ohio. His mother, Cleota Proctor Wilbekin was raised in a middle-class family in Des Moines, Iowa and worked as an administrative law judge for the State of Ohio. Her mother, Julia Proctor, migrated from Alabama to Kewanee, Illinois and settled in Des Moines with her father, Stanley Proctor. Wilbekin's father, Harvey Wilbekin, was born in the U.S. Virgin Islands' St. Croix. He attended Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, and earned an engineering degree from New York University's Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute of and a law degree in Cincinnati, Ohio. Wilbekin was born to bi-racial parents and adopted by Emil and Cleota Proctor at six months old. He was raised in Cincinnati and describes the sights, sounds and smells of his childhood. His family lived in a modern Redwood home with an indoor

swimming pool, designed by Wilbekin's father. His early childhood memories include traveling to Des Moines and to St. Croix for Carnival and Three Kings Day.

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section  
A2014\_204\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:45 2014/06/16

Emil Wilbekin describes Kennedy Heights, his childhood neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio. He had a learning disability and attended Our Redeemer Lutheran School and Walnut Hills High School. Wilbekin was elected president of the local chapter of Jack and Jill of America, Inc. and attended Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia in 1985. He studied mass media arts as an undergraduate student. He aspired to start his own magazine and become a millionaire by the age of thirty. Wilbekin earned his B.A. degree in 1989 and studied British media and advertising abroad in London, England. He came to terms with his sexuality while in Europe, after seeing a teaser for the film 'Looking for Langston.' He describes his 'coming out' to his parents as well as the similarities between African American and West Indian culture. Wilbekin attended Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York and earned his M.S. degree in journalism in 1990.

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section  
A2014\_204\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:47 2014/06/16

Emil Wilbekin describes his interests in media as an undergraduate at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. Wilbekin worked as editor of the student newspaper, The Hampton Script, and describes the influence of assistant professor Lottie Knight. He interned at the Cincinnati Inquirer and was mentored by black journalists to look into magazines. Wilbekin earned his B.A. degree in mass media arts in 1989 and was accepted into the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. He spent the summer of 1989 in London, England at Company Magazine studying British advertising and media. He earned his M.S. degree in journalism in 1990 and was hired as an editorial assistant with Metropolitan Home magazine. Wilbekin made friends with Ricky Lee, a then-editor at Vanity Fair, with Jonathan Van Meter at 7 Days magazine, and others.

Wilbekin talks about being openly gay and about Metropolitan Home magazine's partnership with the Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS (DIFFA).

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section A2014\_204\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:42 2014/06/16

Emil Wilbekin was invited by Jonathan Van Meter to join the staff of Vibe magazine in 1992. Vibe's concept had been pitched by HistoryMaker Quincy Jones to Time Warner as an urban music and lifestyle magazine similar to Rolling Stone. Wilbekin worked on its test issue and at People magazine briefly before returning to Vibe after the project had been 'green lighted'. Wilbekin started as an associate editor and transitioned to new talent editor of the "Next" column, where he covered then-up-and-coming artists like Usher and Brandy. In 1994, he wrote a cover story on Mary J. Blige for the release of her sophomore album 'My Life.' Wilbekin was named Vibe's fashion director in 1997 and attended his first fashion week in Milan, Italy with HistoryMaker Quincy Jones. His father, Harvey Wilbekin, had died of a heart attack shortly before. In 1999 on-assignment in Paris, Wilbekin received a call from former Vibe editor-in-chief Danyel Smith that she was resigning and that he had been recommended to replace her.

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section A2014\_204\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:43 2014/06/16

Emil Wilbekin describes his vision for Vibe magazine after becoming editor-in-chief in 1999. Vibe won an American Society of Magazine Editors award in 2002; and, in 2003, Wilbekin became vice president of brand development for Vibe Ventures. He talks about bringing Bevy Smith into the style department and Time Warner's sale of Vibe to Miller Publishing in 1996. Wilbekin also recalls the night rapper Biggie Smalls, the Notorious B.I.G., was murdered outside of a Vibe after-party in 1997. He describes his tenure as fashion director of Vibe and the business acumen of HistoryMakers Keith Clinkscales and Leonard Burnett, Jr. Wilbekin talks about Vibe magazine's reputation in long-form journalism, and also about its first editor-in-chief, Johnathan Van Meter. Wilbekin got involved in HIV/AIDS literacy organizations

including Lifebeat – Music Fights HIV/AIDS, founded in 1992. He left Vibe Magazine in 2004 for Marc Ecko Enterprises where he was named vice president of brand development.

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section  
A2014\_204\_001\_006, TRT: 6:21:25 2014/06/16

Emil Wilbekin worked at Ecko Enterprises as vice president of brand development for one year and re-transitioned into freelance writing. Wilbekin wrote for AOL Black Voices and for Microsoft in 2007, blogging about LeBron James' life off the basketball court. In 2008, Wilbekin was named editor-in-chief of GIANT magazine, a subsidiary of HistoryMaker Cathy Hughes' company, Radio One; and, in 2009, was recruited as managing editor of Essence.com. Wilbekin redesigned the website and increased the magazine's digital presence. He transitioned to Essence editor-at-large, assigned to cover-design and overseeing Essence's signature events. He remembers the controversy surrounding Essence's hiring of Elliana Placas, a white woman, as fashion director in 2010, and describes his future plans at the time of the interview. Wilbekin considers his legacy, what his father would think about his career, and describes his mother's compassion.

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section  
A2014\_204\_002\_007, TRT: 7:30:06 2014/08/12

Emil Wilbekin talks about his parents' activity in Cincinnati, Ohio's African American professional community. His mother, Cleota Wilbekin, was active in several organizations including The Links, the Top Ladies of Distinction, the Women of Color Quilters Network and the Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) Sorority. Two of her quilts have been hung in the Smithsonian Institute—she also completed a quilt for HistoryMaker Marcus Samuelsson. Wilbekin describes his childhood activities as well; he was a member of the Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts and president of the local Jack and Jill of America organization. Wilbekin remembers spending time with his parents, including Saturday afternoons at his father's law practice. He talks briefly about his maternal and paternal family ancestry and notable extended family members including all-star baseball player Dave Winfield and basketball player



Scottie Wilbekin. He also remembers being babysat by HistoryMaker Nikki Giovanni as a small child.

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section  
A2014\_204\_002\_008, TRT: 8:29:53 2014/08/12

Emil Wilbekin talks about his social circle in New York City. He established relationships in the arts and entertainment community with music industry veteran Jocelyn Cooper—the woman credited with discovering D’Angelo and founder of the music festival Afropunk—as well as gallerist Nicola Vassell. Wilbekin talks about the significance of The Coffee Shop eatery to discovering new talent in New York City. He began his career as an associate editor at Vibe and transitioned to new talent editor, and covered Maxwell before he had signed a record deal. Wilbekin was named fashion director and describes his first cover shoot with Biggie Smalls and Faith Evans for Vibe’s October 1995 issue, where he collaborated with Sean “Diddy” Combs and celebrity stylist Groovey Lew. Wilbekin talks about the tension between high fashion and hip hop culture, and some designers’ efforts to distance themselves from the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section  
A2014\_204\_002\_009, TRT: 9:29:27 2014/08/12

Emil Wilbekin talks about styling cover shoots as editor-in-chief of Vibe and iconic celebrity covers, including Naomi Campbell and Sean “Diddy” Combs. Wilbekin joined Essence.com as managing editor in 2009 and transitioned to Essence editor-at-large, a position he held until March 2014. After leaving Essence, Wilbekin launched World of Wilbekin, “WOW,” an online arts and culture curating and sharing platform. Wilbekin reflects on his time at Vibe, including changes at the magazine and its growth under his leadership. HistoryMakers Keith Clinkscales and Leonard Burnett, Jr. were severed from Vibe after its sale from Time Warner to Miller Publishing in 1996. Wilbekin describes the internal dynamics between the business and editorial sides of the magazine. He also talks about maintaining journalistic integrity amidst blurred lines between celebrity and journalism and mediating tense situations at Vibe as editor-in-chief.

Video Oral History Interview with Emil Wilbekin, Section  
A2014\_204\_002\_010, TRT: 10:31:13 2014/08/12

Emil Wilbekin talks about hip hop culture's appeal to upper middle-class African Americans, negative aspects of hip hop culture and trends that emerged from the culture. He describes Vibe magazine's role as an interpreter of hip hop culture and reflects on its legacy. He also explains his digital platform "WOW," the World of Wilbekin, and narrates his photographs.