

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mercedes Ellington

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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>	Ellington, Mercedes
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mercedes Ellington,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 12, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:34:24).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dancer and choreographer Mercedes Ellington (1939 - ), the granddaughter of Duke Ellington, was the first African American member of the June Taylor Dancers on The Jackie Gleason Show. She also opened The Duke Ellington Center for the Arts. Ellington was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 12, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_010
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer and choreographer Mercedes Ellington was born on February 9, 1939 in New York City to Ruth Silas Batts and trumpet player and conductor Mercer Ellington, son of renowned composer and bandleader Duke Ellington. Ellington was raised by her maternal grandparents Louise Petgrave Silas and Alfred Silas, who enrolled her in dance and ballet classes at an early age. Ellington received a scholarship to attend The Metropolitan Opera School of Ballet, but decided to enroll at The Julliard School at her father's insistence. She graduated with her B.A. degree in classical and modern dance in 1960.

Ellington's first professional role was in a production of *West Side Story* in Australia. She also appeared in productions of *On the Town* and *Pal Joey* at the New York City Center. In 1963, Ellington became the first African American member of the June Taylor Dancers, the featured performers on *The Jackie Gleason Show*. She danced with the June Taylor Dancers for seven years, until she moved on to perform in Broadway shows like *No, No Nannette*, *The Night That Made America Famous*, *The Grand Tour*, and *Happy New Year*. In 1981, Ellington starred in *Sophisticated Ladies* alongside her father, who conducted the Duke Ellington Orchestra. In 1983, she co-founded BalleTap, later named DancEllington, with Maurice Hines. Ellington produced award-winning choreography in musicals such as *Blues in the Night*, *Juba*, *Satchmo* and *Tuxedo Junction*. The organization dissolved in 1992, and Ellington went on to direct the Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS Tribute to the Spirit of Harlem in 2001. In 2004, Ellington founded Duke Ellington Center for the Arts, a non-profit organization dedicated to scholarship, education, and performance connected to the legacy of Duke Ellington.

Ellington's choreography and commitment to her grandfather's legacy earned her numerous honors and awards, including the Actor's Equity Association's Paul Robeson Award and the FloBert Lifetime Achievement Award. She also served as a judge for the Capezio Dance Awards, and as a member of the Screen Actors' Guild and the American Tap Dance Foundation. In addition, Ellington served on the local and national boards of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. In 2016, she also co-authored a book entitled *Duke Ellington: An*

*American Composer and Icon* with Stephen Brower.

Mercedes Ellington was interviewed by *The History Makers* on August 12, 2016.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mercedes Ellington was conducted by Harriette Cole on August 12, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Dancer and choreographer Mercedes Ellington (1939 - ), the granddaughter of Duke Ellington, was the first African American member of the June Taylor Dancers on The Jackie Gleason Show. She also opened The Duke Ellington Center for the Arts.

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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:

Ellington, Mercedes

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ellington, Mercedes--Interviews

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African American dancers--Interviews.

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African American Choreographers--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:

Dancer

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Choreographer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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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 Mercedes Ellington, August 12, 2016. 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 Mercedes Ellington, Section A2016\_010\_001\_001, TRT: 1:31:19 ?

Mercedes Ellington was born on February 9, 1939 in New York City to Ruth Silas Batts and Mercer Ellington. Her maternal grandfather, Alfred Silas, was a postal worker from New Orleans, Louisiana. Her maternal grandmother, Louise Petgrave Silas, grew up as an orphan in Jamaica, where she learned to cook authentic Jamaican food. She also worked as a poll volunteer during elections. Ellington's mother was raised in New York City, and formed a ballroom dance group that performed at the Savoy Ballroom, Renaissance Ballroom, and Audubon Ballroom. Ellington was raised by her maternal grandparents in the Sugar Hill neighborhood of New York City, where her neighbors included boxer Sugar Ray Robinson; the actor Mantan Moreland; and Stephanie St. Clair, the local number runner. Ellington began reading and dancing at an early age, and received dance lessons from ballerinas Marjorie Facey and Marion Facey. Ellington later attended Our Lady of Lourdes School, an integrated parochial school.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercedes Ellington, Section A2016\_010\_001\_002, TRT: 2:23:56 ?

Mercedes Ellington's father, Mercer Ellington, was the only child of Edna Thompson Ellington and musician Duke Ellington, although he was raised primarily by his mother after his parents' separation. He met Ellington's mother, Ruth Silas Batts, when they both attended Evander Childs High School in New York City. Ellington was raised by her maternal grandparents, while her mother attended nursing school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she later met, and married James A. Batts. Together, they had three children, including Federal Judge Deborah A. Batts. Ellington's father married Evelyn Harrison Ellington, and moved to the St. Albans neighborhood of Queens, where he played the trumpet in the Duke Ellington Orchestra. As a young child, Ellington rarely saw her paternal grandparents, but occasionally met the women in her grandfather's life, including Fredi Washington and Evie Ellis. Upon graduating from St. Walburga's Academy, Ellington enrolled in The Juilliard School.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercedes Ellington, Section A2016\_010\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:46 ?

Mercedes Ellington hoped to start her dance career immediately after high school, but followed the advice of her father, Mercer Ellington, and paternal grandfather, Duke Ellington, and enrolled at The Juilliard School. There, she studied ballet and modern dance, and learned the Graham technique from its originator, Martha Graham. For the first two years, she lived with her father and stepmother in the St. Albans neighborhood in New York City. Because of her tense relationship with her father and stepsiblings, Ellington decided to live in the school's International House for the following two years, where she befriended German dancer Pina Bausch. Ellington's first professional role was in a production of 'West Side Story' in Australia. After the production ended, Ellington returned to the United States against her grandfather's advice. Her relationship with her father improved; he divorced his first wife, and remarried Lene Scheid Ellington.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercedes Ellington, Section A2016\_010\_001\_004, TRT: 4:31:18 ?

Mercedes Ellington returned to New York City, and performed in ‘On the Town’ and ‘Pal Joey’ at the New York City Center. She joined the June Taylor Dancers on the ‘The Jackie Gleason Show,’ becoming its first African American dancer. She and the other dancers practiced eight hours a day to perfect the elaborate dance numbers, which often required them to play musical instruments as well. It was the first time Ellington was able to support herself through dance. The show ran for a year in New York City, before moving to Miami Beach, Florida. There, Jackie Gleason also hosted a big band show that featured the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra and the Count Basie Orchestra. Ellington’s father, Mercer Ellington, also performed in the show with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Ellington stayed for six seasons, and then accepted choreographer Donald Saddler’s offer to join the cast of the musical ‘No, No, Nanette’ on Broadway, and assist with the precision tap dances.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercedes Ellington, Section A2016\_010\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:38 ?

Mercedes Ellington learned many skills while working on ‘The Jackie Gleason Show,’ such as performing at a quick pace under overhead cameras, which were unconventional at the time. Ellington’s experience with synchronized dancing with the June Taylor Dancers helped her earn her a role in her first Broadway play, ‘No, No, Nanette,’ which ran for two years. The show was produced by Cyma Rubin, who was one of the few female producers at the time. Shortly after ‘No, No, Nanette’ ended, Duke Ellington, Ellington’s paternal grandfather, died, and her father, Mercer Ellington, inherited the Duke Ellington Orchestra. In 1981, Ellington earned a role in the production of ‘Sophisticated Ladies,’ and the Duke Ellington Orchestra was hired as the band. She supported herself between roles by working in retail and competing in ballroom dance competitions. Ellington was a member of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, The Actors Fund and the American Tap Dance Foundation.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercedes Ellington, Section A2016\_010\_001\_006, TRT: 6:29:14 ?

Mercedes Ellington performed in the musical ‘Sophisticated Ladies’ alongside stars like Gregory Hines, Judith Jamison, Hinton Battle and Phyllis Hyman. Her father, Mercer Ellington, directed the Duke Ellington Orchestra as the show’s featured band. When Gregory Hines was fired for his reluctance to learn the producers’ frequent impromptu script changes, Ellington and the other cast members refused to perform without him, and Hines was rehired by the producers. ‘Sophisticated Ladies’ produced 767 shows over its two year run. Afterwards, Ellington partnered with Maurice Hines, Jr. to found Ballet Tap USA. The company toured in Japan without Hines, who had begun filming for ‘The Cotton Club.’ In 1984, Ellington worked with Sheldon Epps to choreograph ‘Blues in the Night.’ She then choreographed ‘Juba,’ inspired by William Henry Lane, one of the first African Americans to perform in front of white audiences, and one of the fathers of modern tap dance.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercedes Ellington, Section A2016\_010\_001\_007, TRT: 7:27:49 ?

Mercedes Ellington choreographed the musical ‘Tuxedo Junction’ in Birmingham, Alabama, which was produced by James F. Hatcher, Jr. She was briefly engaged to musician Eric Butler in 1992, but they decided not to marry. In 2016, she and Steven Brower published ‘Duke Ellington: An American Composer and Icon,’ which featured pictures chronicling the life and career of Ellington’s paternal grandfather. Ellington also founded the Duke Ellington Center for the Arts to preserve her grandfather’s legacy. She describes her

siblings, including federal judge, Deborah A. Batts, and Paul Ellington, who managed the Duke Ellington estate and the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Ellington shares her advice to aspiring dancers and her approach to performances. She also reflects upon her life, legacy and the legacy of Duke Ellington.

Video Oral History Interview with Mercedes Ellington, Section A2016\_010\_001\_008, TRT: 8:10:24 ?

Mercedes Ellington narrates her photographs.