

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with George E. Lewis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lewis, George, 1952-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with George E. Lewis,
Dates:	October 24, 2016
Bulk Dates:	2016
Physical Description:	4 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:00:32).
Abstract:	Trombonist and music composer George E. Lewis (1952 -) was a leading figure in the field of computer music and improvisation. He composed hundreds of compositions, and served as the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University. Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 24, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2016_107
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Trombonist and musical composer George E. Lewis was born on July 14, 1952 in Chicago, Illinois to Cornelia Griffith Lewis and George Lewis. He graduated from the University of Chicago Laboratory School in 1969, and went on to receive his B.A. degree in philosophy from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut in 1974. Later, he received his D.Mus. degree from the University of Edinburgh in 2015.

Lewis was first taught to play the trombone at the University of Chicago Laboratory School; he later took private lessons with graduate students. At the age of nineteen, he joined the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and studied at the Association's School of Music. There, he learned composition with Muhal Richard Abrams and trombone with Dean Hey. Lewis began to explore computer programming in the early 1970s. Between 1985 and 1987, he wrote the software program Voyager, which was designed to improvise and interact with human musicians. In a recording entitled "Voyager", released in 1993, Lewis and saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell played duets with the computer software program. Lewis continued to produce music during this time, and became a curator of music at the New York non-profit arts organization The Kitchen in 1990. In 1991 he was named a professor of Music, Critical Studies/Experimental Practice at the University of California-San Diego. In 2004, he became the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at New York's Columbia University, where he was named director of the Center for Jazz Studies in 2007. Lewis produced hundreds of compositions over his career.

Lewis wrote numerous journal articles and one book on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. In 2015, he co-edited a two-volume collection entitled *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*. Lewis received numerous awards for his work, including several grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Cal Arts Alpert Award in the Arts in 1999, and a 2002 MacArthur Genius Fellowship. In 2015, he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. Lewis toured extensively across North America, Europe, and Asia, and his work was performed by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and others. His book, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental*

Music received the American Book Award and American Musicological Society's Music in American Culture Award.

Lewis and his wife, Miya Masaoka, have a son named Tadashi.

George E. Lewis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 24, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with George E. Lewis was conducted by Harriette Cole on October 24, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 4 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Trombonist and music composer George E. Lewis (1952 -) was a leading figure in the field of computer music and improvisation. He composed hundreds of compositions, and served as the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University.

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:

Lewis, George, 1952-

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Lewis, George, 1952---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Music Composer

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 George E. Lewis, October 24, 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).

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 George E. Lewis, Section A2016_107_001_001, TRT: 1:32:19 ?

George E. Lewis was born on July 14, 1952 in Chicago, Illinois to Cornelia Griffith Lewis and George Lewis. His maternal grandparents, Jessie Griffith and Quiller Griffith, raised nine children on a farm in Colbert, Georgia, where Lewis' mother was born in 1930. Lewis' father was born in 1924 in Tarboro, North Carolina; and was raised by his aunt after being abandoned by his father, Russell Little. Lewis' parents both moved to Chicago, where they married in 1952. His mother worked for the Spiegel Inc. catalog company, while his father worked at the post office. They raised Lewis in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood, where he often completed errands for the family. He was already able to read when he began his education at the all-black Walter Scott School, and was often bored in class as a result. At the advice of his third grade teacher, Miss Vining, Lewis transferred to the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, where he was taught by Louise Pliss and Fay Abrams.

Video Oral History Interview with George E. Lewis, Section A2016_107_001_002, TRT: 2:28:28 ?

George E. Lewis grew up in the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois during the 1960s. He attended the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, where he studied German with Margaret Seckel, and music under Frank Tirro. Lewis' father, George Lewis, advised him not to play the trumpet, citing Louis Armstrong's lip damage; and so Lewis decided to learn the trombone. As a high school student, he joined the school's musical ensembles; and, alongside fellow trombonists Ray Anderson and Roscoe Giles, continued his musical training under Dean Hey. Lewis also cofounded a political magazine with his African American peers, including Brenda Williams and Prentiss Taylor; and wrote about the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Lewis graduated in 1969, and enrolled on a National Achievement Scholarship at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. During his freshman year, he aspired to major in music, and studied literature under Professor Houston A. Baker, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with George E. Lewis, Section A2016_107_001_003, TRT: 3:28:13 ?

George E. Lewis enrolled in 1969 at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. There, he met pianist Anthony Davis, who was the son of Professor Charles T. Davis; and joined his band. He also played with free jazz musicians Sam Rivers, Alan Silva and Sunny Murray. Lewis took a leave of absence following his sophomore year in 1971, and returned to his hometown of Chicago, Illinois, where he worked at a steel plant. He also joined the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), which was led by musicians Muhal Richard Abrams and Charles Stepney. The group rehearsed at the Child City daycare center, and Lewis played his first AACM concert at The Pumpkin Room in Chicago. At the time of his involvement, the AACM was influenced by Africana scholars like Yosef ben-Jochannan, Jacob H. Carruthers, Jr., Cheikh Anta Diop and Chancellor Williams. The association also emphasized music composition, and played only original works in concert.

Video Oral History Interview with George E. Lewis, Section A2016_107_001_004, TRT: 4:31:32 ?

George E. Lewis returned in 1972 to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Upon the recommendation of jazz musicians Muhal Richard Abrams and Philip Cohran, Lewis changed his major from music to philosophy. He studied under phenomenologists David Carr and Thomas Clifton, and wrote about the experience of musical improvisation. Lewis was selected to join the Skull and Bones secret society, where he was placed in charge of music, and met conservative commentator William F. Buckley and President George H.W. Bush. Upon graduating in 1974, Lewis obtained a position at an insurance company in Chicago, Illinois. There, he continued to play the trombone; and,

after a successful show with Morris Ellis' band, was recommended to join the Count Basie Orchestra. With Count Basie's band, Lewis often performed experimental solos, to the chagrin of senior trombonists Bill Hughes and Al Grey. However, Basie encouraged Lewis, who continued to experiment with free form jazz.