

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr.

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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>	Rush, Bobby
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 12, 2017
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2017
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 uncompressed MOV digital video files (1:54:18).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Blues musician Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr. (1933 - ) formed Bobby Rush and the Four Jivers and spent over fifty years in the music industry. He was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 2006 and won a Grammy Award for his album Porcupine Meat in 2017. Rush was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 12, 2017, in Jackson, Mississippi. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2017_220
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Blues musician Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr. was born on November 10, 1933 in Haynesville, Louisiana to Mattie Spivey Ellis and Emmett Ellis, Sr. He attended public school in Haynesville until he was eleven years old, at which point he halted his education to help support his family.

Ellis received his first guitar at seven years old, and was taught to sing and play music by his father. He aspired to become a blues musician after hearing the music of Muddy Waters and other artists on the radio. After leaving school at eleven years old, Ellis began working at a cotton gin to help his family financially. In 1947, Ellis moved to Sherrill, Arkansas with his family and found work as a sharecropper. He continued playing guitar during this time, and started his professional music career in 1950, when he played with Elmore James at a club in Arkansas. When he was eighteen years old, he migrated to Chicago, Illinois, and formed the band Bobby Rush and the Four Jivers, which included Pinetop Perkins, Freddie King and Little Walter. He began recording blues music at Chess Records, but was denied work after the Chess brothers learned that he could read. In 1954, he integrated the Bourbon Street nightclub and his band became a regular act there. He recruited comedian Dick Gregory to perform at Bourbon Street. Ellis met Jimmy Reed at Vee-Jay Records, and opened for Reed at a major Chicago venue in 1957. During the course of his career, Ellis befriended other popular blues musicians such as Muddy Waters and B.B. King. In 2015, he played at King's final show, and performed a harmonica tribute when King passed away shortly afterwards.

Ellis has been widely celebrated for his role in blues music history. In 2006 he was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame. The following year he became the first blues artist to perform in China, which earned him the unofficial title as the International Dean of the Blues. In 2015, he was the recipient of two Blues Music Awards in the categories of Soul Blues Male Artist and B.B. King Entertainer of the Year. The same year, he was inducted into the Official Rhythm and Blues Music Hall of Fame. Ellis won a Blues Music Award and his first Grammy Award in 2017 for

his album *Porcupine Meat*, and received an award for Historical Album of the Year for *Chicken Heads: A 50 Year History of Bobby Rush*. His green-studded suit depicted on the inside cover of *Porcupine Meat* was donated to the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History.

Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 12, 2017.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr. was conducted by Randall Pinkston on December 12, 2017, in Jackson, Mississippi, and was recorded on 4 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Blues musician Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr. (1933 - ) formed Bobby Rush and the Four Jivers and spent over fifty years in the music industry. He was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 2006 and won a Grammy Award for his album *Porcupine Meat* in 2017.

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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:

Rush, Bobby

Pinkston, Randall (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Rush, Bobby--Interviews

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Blues Musician

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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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 Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr., December 12, 2017. 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 Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr., Section A2017\_220\_001\_001,

TRT: 1:29:43 ?

Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr. was born on November 10, 1933 in Haynesville, Louisiana to Mattie Spivey Ellis and Emmett Ellis, Sr. His maternal great-grandmother was a slave, and had children by a white man called Van Spivey. Ellis' mother was born to Sarah Spivey and Amos Spivey in Colquitt, Louisiana in 1906. That same year, Ellis' father was born in Homer, Louisiana to Emma Ellis and Charley Ellis, who worked as a fishmonger and sharecropper. Ellis' father had thirty-one siblings, and was educated through the third grade. He became a preacher in Colquitt, where he raised ten children with Ellis' mother. She was often perceived as white because of her light hair and eyes, and sometimes pretended that Ellis' father was her chauffeur to protect him from jealous whites. When Ellis was eleven years old, he left school and secured a position at a cotton gin. There, he gathered information from the white owners about the crop market, which his father passed on to black farmers in the community.

Video Oral History Interview with Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr., Section A2017\_220\_001\_002, TRT: 2:27:54 ?

Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr.'s white maternal great-grandfather, Van Spivey, divided his land in Louisiana and Mississippi equally between his white and black descendants. However, Ellis' mother and her siblings were forcibly taken to Arkansas by their white relatives in an effort to keep them from their inheritance. Later, Ellis' mother obtained her twelve acres of land. Ellis received his first guitar at seven years old. From an early age, he listened to WLAC Radio and WOKJ Radio, where he first heard the blues music of artists like Muddy Waters. Under their influence, Ellis aspired to become a blues musician, and learned to play guitar and sing from his father. In 1947, Ellis' family moved to Sherrill, Arkansas, where they worked as sharecroppers. In 1951, Ellis relocated to Chicago, Illinois. He began recording blues music at the white-owned Chess Records, but was denied work after the Chess brothers learned that he could read.

Video Oral History Interview with Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr., Section A2017\_220\_001\_003, TRT: 3:27:21 ?

Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr. began his career as a blues musician in 1950, when he played with guitarist Elmore James at a club in Arkansas. In 1951, Ellis moved to Chicago, Illinois, where he formed Bobby Rush and the Four Jivers. The blues band featured pianist Pinetop Perkins, guitarist Freddie King and singer Little Walter. Later, Ellis met Jimmy Reed at Chicago's Vee-Jay Records. He was influenced by Reed's style on the guitar, and his band opened for Reed at a major venue in Chicago in 1957. At this point in the interview, Ellis reflects upon his friendship with blues musicians Muddy Waters and B.B. King. In 2015, King recruited Ellis to perform with him during his final hometown show in Indianola, Mississippi. When King passed away three months later, Ellis played a harmonica tribute at his funeral. In 2017, Ellis won the Grammy Award for Best Traditional Blues Album for his album, 'Porcupine Meat.'

Video Oral History Interview with Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr., Section A2017\_220\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:20 ?

Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr. learned to play the harmonica from his father, Emmett Ellis, Sr. After moving to Chicago, Illinois, Ellis' musical style was influenced by blues guitarist J.B. Lenoir. In 1953, Lenoir recruited Ellis to perform at a segregated club in Chicago, where he played guitar behind a curtain for an all-white audience. In 1954, Ellis integrated Chicago's Bourbon Street nightclub. He auditioned for the gig with a group of white musicians, and then

showed up to perform with an all-black band. Their performance was popular with the all-white crowd, and Ellis' band was booked as a regular act. Later, Ellis recruited comedian Dick Gregory perform at Bourbon Street. The club's owners were associated with the mafia, and helped Ellis secure the licenses for his master recordings from Chess Records. At this point, Ellis talks about the importance of music publishing rights. He concludes the interview by sharing his advice to aspiring musicians.<sup>3</sup>

Video Oral History Interview with Emmett "Bobby Rush" Ellis, Jr., Section  
A2017\_220\_Ellis\_Emmett\_06\_MED\_001, TRT: 0:56:57