

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Jerry Butler

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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>	Butler, Jerry
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 11, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:24:50).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Music composer, county commissioner, music producer, and singer The Honorable Jerry Butler (1939 - ) is a legendary soloist known as "the Iceman," and an original member of the Impressions. Butler is also the former Cook County commissioner. Butler was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 11, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_070
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Award-winning performer, producer and composer Jerry "The Iceman" Butler was born in Sunflower, Mississippi on December 8, 1939. He moved to Chicago, Illinois at the age of three and grew up in an area later known as the Cabrini-Green Housing Projects. Butler met Curtis Mayfield, with whom he began his musical career as part of a quintet called "Jerry Butler and The Impressions." In 1958, The Impressions had their first hit with the classic "For Your Precious Love," after which the group cordially split and 18-year-old Butler went on to pursue a solo career. Spanning five decades, Butler's musical career has produced over 50 albums, numerous hit songs and three Grammy Award nominations. Butler, a musical icon, is known for his smooth, distinguished voice.

Butler has had numerous hit songs go platinum during his career, including "For Your Precious Love" with The Impressions (1958), "He Will Break Your Heart" (1960), "Moon River" (1961), "Never Gonna Give You Up" (1967), "Hey Western Union Man" (1968), "Brand New Me" (1969), "Only The Strong Survive" (1969), and "Ain't Understanding Mellow" (1973). In addition to his recording credits, Butler has hosted and appeared on numerous television variety specials; been nominated for three Grammy Awards; and received various awards for singing, composing, and publishing, including several from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, two Billboard magazine awards, two Humanitarian Awards and several Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI) Awards. Butler was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991 and into the Rhythm and Blues Foundation in 1994, a non-profit organization for which he has served as the Chairman of the Board.

Influenced by the Civil Rights movement, Butler entered politics in the mid-1980s as a campaign supporter of Chicago's first African American Mayor, Harold Washington. Butler himself was first elected to public office in 1985 as the Cook County Commissioner, where he served three four-year terms. In 1993, at the age of 55, Butler received a Master's Degree in Public Administration from Governor's State College in University Park, Illinois. Butler and his wife, Annette, married in 1959, reside in Chicago and are parents to twin sons.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on June 11, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Music composer, county commissioner, music producer, and singer The Honorable Jerry Butler (1939 - ) is a legendary soloist known as "the Iceman," and an original member of the Impressions. Butler is also the former Cook County commissioner.

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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:

Butler, Jerry

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Butler, Jerry--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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Cook County (Ill.)

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**Occupations:**

County Commissioner

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Music Composer

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Music Producer

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Singer

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**HistoryMakers® Category:**

MusicMakers|PoliticalMakers

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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 The Honorable Jerry Butler, June 11, 2002. 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 The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_001,  
TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Jerry Butler describes his family's history. His mother, Arvelia Agnew Butler, was born on April 28, 1910 or 1911 in Mississippi to Amos Agnew and his wife. Butler's father, Jerry Butler, Jr., was born to Jerry Butler and his wife and died in 1954 when Butler was fourteen years old. Butler was born on December 8, 1939 and has one older sister, Dorothy Butler, a younger sister, Mattie Butler, and a younger brother, Billy Butler. After moving from Monroe County, Mississippi to Chicago, Illinois when he was three, Butler lived on the North Side in the Cabrini-Green Homes. As a child, Butler attended Edward Jenner Elementary School and James A. Sexton Elementary School. Here, he was inspired by a teacher named Ernestine Curry who taught his class about African American history. To support his family after his father died, Butler worked at a plastics factory and as a short order cook at the Lawson YMCA. Before joining The Impressions, Butler attended the Washburne Trade School with hopes of becoming a chef.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_002,  
TRT: 0:30:04 ?

Jerry Butler describes his career as a singer and songwriter with The Impressions. While attending Washburne Trade School, Butler worked in a mattress packing factory where he and his friend, Terry Williams, decided to visit the Traveling Souls Spiritualist Church. There they joined the Northern Jubilee Gospel Singers with Arthur and Richard Brooks, Curtis Mayfield, and Sam Gooden. Butler left the choir in 1954 when his father, Jerry Butler, Jr., died, but Arthur, Richard, and Gooden moved to Tennessee to form The Roosters. When they returned to Chicago in 1957, Butler and Mayfield joined the R&B group and were renamed The Impressions. With the help of their manager, HistoryMaker Eddie Thomas, they signed a deal with Chicago's Vee-Jay Records and released their hit single 'For Your Precious Love' in the spring of 1958. However, due to tensions within the group after being renamed "Jerry Butler and The Impressions," Butler left the group in the fall of 1958. On June 21, 1959, Butler married Annette Butler.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_003,  
TRT: 0:31:25 ?

Jerry Butler describes his success following his departure from The Impressions and his experience with Vee-Jay Records. Vee-Jay Records was a black owned label based in Chicago, Illinois run by Vivian Carter, James Bracken, Calvin Carter, and Ewart Abner which embraced all genres of music. In 1959, while Butler was on his honeymoon with his wife, Annette Butler, the electricity went out on stage and Butler's coolness under the circumstances led to Georgie Woods nicknaming him "The Iceman." As a solo musician, Butler had hits such as 'Moon River' and 'Only The Strong Survive,' and he worked with songwriters like Otis Redding, Kenneth Gamble, Leon Huff, and Curtis Mayfield. With Curtis and Eddie Thomas, Butler started Curtom Publishing Company in order to control the rights to their songs. During his solo career, Butler was managed by Irv Nahan and Phil Moore.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_004,  
TRT: 0:30:05 ?

Jerry Butler describes the rise and fall of Vee-Jay Records as well as the music scene in Chicago, Illinois. Vee-Jay Records was founded in 1953 by Gary, Indiana radio host Vivian Carter; her husband James Bracken; and her brother

Calvin Carter. In 1955, Ewart Abner joined the company as a manager, but later rose to become president of the label. Vee-Jay became a major R&B label with singers such as Thomas “Pookie” Hudson of The Spaniels in 1953. In 1958, Jerry Butler signed with them and remained with the label until they filed for bankruptcy in 1965. In the early 1960s, Vee-Jay also released successful tracks for The Beatles, The Four Seasons, Muddy Waters, Dusty Springfield, Gladys Knight and the Pips, the Staple Singers, and Wayne Shorter. Butler believes that the label could have grown stronger than other black owned labels such as Motown, but in 1963, Abner was fired for gambling with company funds and was replaced by Randy Wood, who moved the company from Chicago, Illinois to Los Angeles, California.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

Jerry Butler describes his career with Mercury Records after he left Vee-Jay Records as well as his relationships with songwriters Curtis Mayfield, Otis Redding, Kenny Gamble, and Leon Huff. In April of 1965, Butler co-wrote the hit song ‘I’ve Been Loving You Too Long’ with Otis Redding after a show in Buffalo, New York. In 1965, Butler also met a lawyer named Bill Matheson who was able to find unsigned contracts for some of Butler’s songs and renegotiate with Vee-Jay Records to prevent his being sold to another label. With Matheson as his manager, Butler signed with Irwin Steinberg of Mercury Records in 1966. In 1968, Butler met the songwriting duo of Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff at Pep’s Show Bar in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and recorded two successful albums with them, 1968’s ‘The Ice Man Cometh’ and 1969’s ‘Ice on Ice.’ Butler reflects on his collaborative process with Gamble and Huff.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:20 ?

Jerry Butler describes his solo career and the artists he collaborated with. After making two albums with Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff for Mercury Records, Gamble and Huff left and started Philadelphia International Records where they developed the Philadelphia Sound. Butler stayed at Mercury, where he ran a songwriting workshop from 1969 until 1976. Writers in this workshop included Chuck Jackson, Marvin Yancy, Terry Callier, Sam Brown, Homer Talbert, and Herscholt Polk. With Talbert and Polk, Butler scored a gold record in 1973 with ‘Ain’t Understanding Mellow.’ Butler left Mercury in 1975, and worked with Motown until 1977 under his former manager Ewart Abner. In 1977, Butler returned to work with Gamble and Huff at Philadelphia International until 1979. Butler remembers introducing Marvin Yancy to Natalie Cole at a concert at Philadelphia’s Latin Casino. He also talks about the 1964 recording of ‘I Stand Accused’ with Vee-Jay Records.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:47 ?

Jerry Butler shares stories about famous performers he met over the years and of being a musician. He recalls the recording of his last song with Vee-Jay Records, ‘I Stand Accused,’ and the benefit of Isaac Hayes covering it. Musicians who performed with him included Patti LaBelle and the Bluebelles and guitarist “Boogie” Bowles, who would later become Smokey Robinson’s guitarist. In 1970, Butler helped Don Cornelius launch ‘Soul Train’ nationwide by performing on the first show, helping ensure that Johnson Products would remain a sponsor after Gladys Knight and the Pips were unavailable. Also in 1970, Butler was invited by Amiri Baraka to perform at the Congress of Afrikan People in Atlanta, Georgia, where he was prevented from performing by an

unruly crowd and Minister Louis Farrakhan because his guitarist “Boogie” Bowles was white. Butler reflects on what he would have done differently in his musical career, his talent, and his love of performing.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_008,  
TRT: 0:29:18 ?

Jerry Butler talks about his transition from the music industry into politics. In the early 1980’s, Butler started a successful but short-lived beer distribution business called Iceman Beverage Company that serviced the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. In 1985, Butler was elected Cook County Commissioner, where he has served for over three decades. Butler reflects on fundraising during his first election campaign, what he has learned while in office, and what he still hopes to accomplish on the Cook County Board of Commissioners.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Jerry Butler, Section A2002\_070\_001\_009,  
TRT: 0:24:07 ?

Jerry Butler reflects upon his life and career, including his experience as a singer, the current state of the music industry, and the importance of the Rhythm and Blues Foundation. From 1995 to 2002, Butler was Chairman of the Board on the Rhythm and Blue Foundation, an organization which was started by Ruth Brown and Howell Begle that recognizes the contributions of R&B musicians and provides them with financial support. Butler also reflects on how his father Jerry Butler, Jr., would have felt about his career and his legacy.