

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Piano C. Red

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Red, Piano C., 1933-2013
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Piano C. Red,
Dates:	April 4, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:21:45).
Abstract:	Blues pianist Piano C. Red (1933 - 2013) played with blues legends such as Muddy Waters, B.B. King, KoKo Taylor, Buddy Guy, Little Walter, and Junior Wells. Wheeler was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 4, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_065
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Blues pianist James Wheeler, also known as Piano "C" Red, was born in Montevallo, Alabama, on September 14, 1933. At the age of twelve, Wheeler learned the basics of blues and boogie-boogie piano and just four years later moved to Atlanta, where he lived and performed for the next decade. It was in Georgia that he was given the name "Red," after the red suit he always wore on stage. The "C" (for Cecil, Wheeler's middle name) was added to differentiate Wheeler from another blues pianist from Georgia who went by the name Piano Red. Wheeler then relocated to Chicago and has lived there ever since. He performed with the legendary Count Basie Band at the High Chaparral in Chicago and appeared nightly at Joe Chamble's Club on 47th Street.

Wheeler was also a regular on the Maxwell Street blues scene, where many legendary blues performers got their start. In the early 1960s, Wheeler sat in with such greats as Elmore James, Eddie Taylor, Jimmy Rogers, Hound Dog Taylor and Sonny Boy Williams. He later played there with his own band, the Flat Foot Boogie Men. As the Maxwell Street Market area was threatened with redevelopment, Wheeler was active in efforts to help preserve the Maxwell Street Market and its longstanding role in the blues community. Even though the original market no longer exists, Wheeler and his band still play in and around the area, in addition to performing at other Chicago blues clubs.

Over the years, Wheeler has performed with many Chicago blues legends, including Muddy Waters, B.B. King, KoKo Taylor, Buddy Guy, Little Walter, and Junior Wells. He has also made recordings with Chess, Sound, Dawn, and Big Boy Records.

For more than forty years, Wheeler has worked as a cab driver by day and blues musician by night, and for this reason named his 1999 CD release *Cab Driving Man*. Because of his continued presence in the Chicago blues scene, Wheeler was featured in the June 1996 issue of *Living Blues*. Wheeler was also interviewed by Niles Frantz from WBEZ's *Eight Forty-Eight* program.

Wheeler was shot and paralyzed during a robbery at a gas station in Chicago on March 23, 2006. He passed away

on June 3, 2013.

James Wheeler was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 4, 2003.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Piano C. Red was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 4, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Blues pianist Piano C. Red (1933 - 2013) played with blues legends such as Muddy Waters, B.B. King, KoKo Taylor, Buddy Guy, Little Walter, and Junior Wells.

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:

Red, Piano C., 1933-2013

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Red, Piano C., 1933-2013--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Blues Pianist

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 Piano C. Red, April 4, 2003. 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 Piano C. Red, Section A2003_065_001_001, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Piano C. Red was born “James Wheeler” on September 14, 1933 in Montevallo, Alabama to Robert Wheeler and Lucille Evans. His great-grandmother, Emma Evans, was a religious woman who belonged to the Church of God. One of his uncles was a carpenter who served in the U.S. Army and played the piano. Red’s father was born in 1951 at the turn of the 20th Century. He worked as a

chauffeur for a shoe salesman and was also a log truck driver. Red's mother was born in 1915. She was a religious woman who liked to sing and play piano. Her uncle was a contractor who built a housing development in Alabama named Evansville. Red describes the sights, sounds, and smells of his childhood in Montevallo. He remembers long biking trips with friends over the hills from Montevallo Birmingham, Alabama. Red left home at the age of sixteen to pursue his interest in music in Atlanta, Georgia. He explains the origin of his stage name Piano C. Red.

Video Oral History Interview with Piano C. Red, Section A2003_065_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Piano C. Red rode his bike from Montevallo to Birmingham, Alabama as a youth to attend shows and movies featuring entertainers like Louis Jordan, Pigmeat Markham, and Little Esther. Red remembers a near-death experience crossing the mountains between Montevallo and Birmingham. He attended grade school and high school at Montevallo High School where his favorite subject was music. He bribed a friend, Fat Lily, with his father's moonshine to learn the boogie-woogie and play the piano. He had early dreams of becoming a musician and listened to boogie-woogie players like the child prodigy "Sugar Chile" Robinson, Fats Domino, Cecil Gant, Sunnyland Slim, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Erskine Hawkins. Red dropped out of high school and worked on an ice truck and in landscaping. During the 1950s, many young black men migrated to urban areas where they were employed in factory work. Red moved to Atlanta, Georgia to work in a machine shop before leaving for Chicago, Illinois. In Chicago, Red worked at Armour and Company and entered the city's music scene.

Video Oral History Interview with Piano C. Red, Section A2003_065_001_003, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Piano C. Red describes the early years of his music career in Chicago, Illinois during the 1950s where he relied on the generosity of Chicago nightclubs and a friend to practice on a piano. Red subsisted on the money he earned from playing in nightclubs several nights every week. After a dispute with his original band, Red formed "Piano C. Red and the Flat Foot Boogie Blues Band". When Jane Byrne was Mayor of Chicago, Red was hired by Illinois State Senator George W. Collins for an engagement at the Conrad Hilton Hotel. However, making a living as a musician was difficult and Red supplemented his income as a cabdriver. He describes Maxwell Street, known for its cheap commodities, Polish sausage, and blues music. Musicians like Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walter, Hound Dog Taylor, Lefty Dizz, and Elmore James played on Maxwell Street. Red describes memorable experiences from Maxwell Street like buying a cheap suit and setting up a bandstand where he played for twelve years. Red also talks about his songwriting process and a record deal with Chess Records that disintegrated after the death of Leonard Chess.

Video Oral History Interview with Piano C. Red, Section A2003_065_001_004, TRT: 0:28:45 ?

Piano C. Red talks about English musicians like the Rolling Stones who were influenced by the American blues. His first LP was released in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and he enjoyed the media exposure he received in English magazines. Red believes blues music resonates across the spectrum of human emotions and life events, but he recognizes the diminished popularity of the blues and changing tastes in music. Red hums the twelve-bar and eight-bar blues and talks about his CD "Cab Driving Man" which was released in 1999. Red explains his songwriting process and the meaning behind two songs on the CD: "New York and Chicago" and "Miss Annie Lou". Red loves the experience of performing in front of large audiences in venues like the Chicago Blues Festival in Grant Park. He describes the difficulty of getting hired at blues venues on

Chicago's North Side. Red also talks about Willie Dixon's legacy as a legend in blues history. Dixon wrote songs for musicians like Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Chuck Berry, Sonny Boy Williamson, and KoKo Taylor.

Video Oral History Interview with Piano C. Red, Section A2003_065_001_005, TRT: 0:25:15 ?

Piano C. Red describes the thrill of receiving standing ovations at the Chicago Blues Festival in Grant Park and at the Conrad Hilton Hotel where he performed for Mayor Jane Byrne. In 1999, Red released "Cab Driving Man" with Delmark Records. He shares anecdotes about blues musicians including Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Hound Dog Taylor, Elmore James, Lefty Dizz, Buddy Guy, Sam Lay, and B.B. King. Chicago's place in blues history was secured by musicians like Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Earl Hooker, and Junior Parker; and through the support of venues like the Regal Theatre, the Unleaded Blues Club, the Checkboard Lounge, and Kingston Mines. Red also reflects upon his hopes and concerns for the African American community, his legacy, how he would like to be remembered, and his parents' view of his success. He ends by narrating his photographs.