

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Avery

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Avery, James, 1945-2013
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Avery,
Dates:	June 24, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:18:04).
Abstract:	Television actor James Avery (1945 - 2013) was most famous for playing the role of Uncle Phil in <i>The Fresh Prince of Bel Air</i> , but also appeared on <i>L.A. Law</i> and <i>Nightcourt</i> . Avery performed at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and later combined his love for travel and his television experience in the acclaimed PBS series, <i>Going Places</i> . Avery was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 24, 2003, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_138
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born on November 27, 1945, in Atlantic City, New Jersey, James Avery left his hometown after high school to serve in the U.S. Navy in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969. Avery then settled in San Diego, where he wrote poetry and television scripts, winning an Emmy Award for his production of *Ameda Speaks: Poet James Avery*. Avery also received a scholarship from the University of California at San Diego, where he obtained his B.A. degree in drama and literature in 1978. Avery was awarded an honorary doctorate from Virginia State University in 1996.

Throughout his career, spanning over thirty years, as a writer working with a collective group in San Diego, Avery also worked as an actor in television, film, and theater productions. Avery's first acting part came in the role of God in the play *JB* in 1971 at San Diego Community College. After performing in his first acting role, Avery went on to star in the UPN comedy series *Sparks* from 1996 to 1998; and had recurring roles on *The Legend of Tarzan*, Showtime's *Soul Food*, and *The Division* on the Lifetime Network. Avery was best known for his role as the uncle of Will Smith's character on the popular sitcom, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Avery also played roles as judges on *L.A. Law*, *Night Court*, and *Murder One*. Avery's movie credits included *Dancing in September*; *Dr. Dolittle 2*; and *License to Drive*. Avery performed on stage at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, playing the lead in *Othello*, among other roles; at the Back Alley and Met Theatres in Los Angeles; and in other productions across the country.

Avery, a seasoned traveler, indulged his passion acting as host of the critically acclaimed PBS series *Going Places*; the program, once public television's highest-rated series, enabled viewers to see different places in the world through Avery's eyes. As host of *Going Places*, Avery had the opportunity to visit such diverse locales as Turkey, Bali, Madrid, and Yellowstone National Park.

Avery was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 24, 2003.

Avery passed away on December 31, 2013 at age 65.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Avery was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on June 24, 2003, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Television actor James Avery (1945 - 2013) was most famous for playing the role of Uncle Phil in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, but also appeared on *L.A. Law* and *Nightcourt*. Avery performed at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and later combined his love for travel and his television experience in the acclaimed PBS series, *Going Places*.

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:

Avery, James, 1945-2013

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Avery, James, 1945-2013 --Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

African American television personalities--Interviews

Shakespearean actors and actresses--Interviews

Television actors and actresses

African American homeless children

Tet Offensive, 1968

Vietnam War, 1961-1975

Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.)

Blacks--Race identity--United States

Television comedies

Travelogues (Television programs)

African American families

Single-parent families

Childhood

Homelessness

Poverty--United States

Atlantic City (N.J.)

Atlantic Coast (N.J.)

Underachievers

African American young men

African American youth

Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.)

Situation comedies (Television programs)

Smith, Will, 1968-

Fresh Prince

African Americans in the performing arts--United States

African Americans in television broadcasting

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Television Actor

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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 James Avery, June 24, 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 James Avery, Section A2003_138_001_001, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Former star of The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, James Avery, shares several poignant stories from his hardscrabble childhood. Born to a single mother and a father who denied paternity, Avery recalls his difficult early years of homelessness and poverty. His mother's decision to move to Atlantic City proved instrumental in providing a better life for her young son, James. Avery recalls in great detail the wondrous sights and sounds of his youth on the Atlantic seashore.

African American actors--Interviews.

African American television personalities--Interviews.

Shakespearean actors and actresses--Interviews.

Television actors and actresses.

African American homeless children.

Tet Offensive, 1968.

Vietnam War, 1961-1975.

Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.).

Blacks--Race identity--United States.

Television comedies.

Travelogues (Television programs).

African American families.

Single-parent families.

African American children.

Homelessness.

Poverty--United States.

Atlantic City (N.J.).

Atlantic Coast (N.J.).

Underachievers.

African American young men.

African American youth.

Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.).

Situation comedies (Television programs).

Smith, Will, 1968-.

Fresh prince of Bel Air (Television program).

African Americans in the performing arts--United States.

African Americans in television broadcasting.

Video Oral History Interview with James Avery, Section A2003_138_001_002, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Actor James Avery continues with his description of his childhood in Atlantic

City, New Jersey. He discusses his education and battles with accusations of acting white. Avery notes he was an underachiever, but didn't allow those labels to stop him from completing his education.

Video Oral History Interview with James Avery, Section A2003_138_001_003, TRT: 0:30:44 ?

Television actor James Avery describes his rebellious nature as a teen, which led him to confrontations with others while in high school and college. Frustrated by his relationship with his mother, Avery joined the Navy during the height of the Vietnam War. He discusses his involvement in several covert operations near Laos and Cambodia and efforts during the infamous Tet Offensive in 1968. After serving his for four years, Avery enrolls in the University of California, San Diego and details the changes the war made in him.

Video Oral History Interview with James Avery, Section A2003_138_001_004, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Actor James Avery details his life as a young stage actor then later as a television character actor. Classically trained in England and a member of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Avery felt stifled by the limitation of the acting troupe and decided to give Hollywood a try. Avery was fortunate to find steady work on a number of popular series, including LA Law, Simon & Simon, and Hill Street Blues, among others.

Video Oral History Interview with James Avery, Section A2003_138_001_005, TRT: 0:30:31 ?

Actor James Avery describes his life as a black actor in search of roles with dignity and meaning. While in a network sitcom, by chance, Avery auditioned for the role of the father and butler for an up and coming rapper, Will Smith. After telling this impertinent young man who had his feet on the table to sit up and remove his feet, Avery landed the role of the imperious but loving Uncle Phil on the NBC sitcom, The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.

Video Oral History Interview with James Avery, Section A2003_138_001_006, TRT: 0:29:13 ?

Actor James Avery shares some of his disappointments in his acting career. He details the political machinations at UPN which led to the demise of his well rated show, Sparks. Avery also discusses issues of race, which pervade the television industry in terms of casting, and the creation of television situation comedies or sitcoms.

Video Oral History Interview with James Avery, Section A2003_138_001_007, TRT: 0:19:22 ?

Actor James Avery shares his thoughts on acting, blacks in Hollywood, and his mother's acceptance of his acting career. The segment closes with several photos from Avery's personal collection.