

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with A. B. Spellman

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Spellman, A. B., 1935-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with A. B. Spellman,
Dates:	December 15, 2004 and December 7, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:52:19).
Abstract:	Federal government official and author A. B. Spellman (1935 -) is a writer who contributes to various magazines and published his book, <i>Four Lives in the Bee-Bop Business</i> , in 1966. Spellman has taught African American studies at Harvard University, and was the director of several projects for the National Endowment of the Arts. Spellman was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 15, 2004 and December 7, 2004, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_251
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Alfred Bennett (A.B.) Spellman, Jr. was born on August 7, 1935 in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Both his parents were educators. He earned his high school diploma from P.W. Moore High School, where he was a member of the basketball team, glee club and oratorical club.

In 1956, Spellman earned his B.S. degree in political science from Howard University. While at Howard, he was active in the chorus, the Howard Players, and he began his writing career. After graduating, Spellman enrolled in the Howard University Law School. In 1959, Spellman worked as a writer, reviewing jazz artists and music for various magazines such as *Metronome* and *Downbeat*. In 1964, he published his first and only book of poems entitled *The Beautiful Days*.

In 1966, Spellman's writing career took off when he published his first full-length book, *Four Lives in the Bee-Bop Business*, an in-depth look at the lives of jazz musicians Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Herbie Nichols and Jackie McLean. The following year, Spellman joined a group of black poets touring the nation's historically black colleges. From 1968 until 1969, he worked as a political essayist and poet for *Rhythm Magazine*, and in 1969, Spellman conducted a lecture series throughout the country teaching at various colleges including Morehouse, Emory and Rutgers. In 1972, Spellman was hired to teach African American studies at Harvard University, where he remained until 1975. That year, he became director of the Arts in Education Study Project for the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) in Washington, D.C. In 1978, Spellman became the director of the NEA's Arts Endowment Expansion Program, a position he held until 1993. Continuing his work with the NEA, Spellman next became the special assistant to the chairman and acting deputy chairman for programs. Between 1994 and 1996, he served as associate deputy for program coordination at the NEA, and then became the director of the NEA's Office of Guidelines and Panel Operations. In 1998, Spellman was appointed the deputy chairman for the Office of

Guidelines, Panel and Council Operations for the NEA.

Spellman continues to be an avid writer, and he serves on numerous arts panels and is a member of the Rockefeller Panel on arts, education and Americans, the Jazz Advisory Group and the Advisory Group on the African-American Museum of the Smithsonian Institute.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with A. B. Spellman was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton and Racine Tucker-Hamilton on December 15, 2004 and December 7, 2004, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Federal government official and author A. B. Spellman (1935 -) is a writer who contributes to various magazines and published his book, *Four Lives in the Bee-Bop Business*, in 1966. Spellman has taught African American studies at Harvard University, and was the director of several projects for the National Endowment of the Arts.

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:

Spellman, A. B., 1935-

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Tucker-Hamilton, Racine (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Spellman, A. B., 1935---Interviews

African American authors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

National Endowment for the Arts

Occupations:

Federal Government Official

Author

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|MediaMakers

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 A. B. Spellman, December 15, 2004 and December 7, 2004. 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 A. B. Spellman, Section A2004_251_001_001, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

A. B. Spellman was born in August 7, 1935 to Rosa Bailey Spellman and Alfred Spellman, Sr. in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. His mother was born in Elizabeth City to an unmarried, interracial couple. Her stepfather initially struggled to accept her, and she was sent to stay with relatives on Long Island, New York for a short time. Growing up, she was teased by other children because of her lighter skin. Spellman's paternal grandfather worked in a lumber mill in Elizabeth City, where Spellman's father also worked during his childhood. Although his mother's and father's families were uneducated, Spellman's parents pursued education. While her sisters became farmers, his mother attended Elizabeth City State Teachers College when Spellman was in high school. She then taught in Gretna, Virginia. Spellman's father was assistant principal at a consolidated school for African Americans in Elizabeth City. Spellman recounts a local scandal involving the school's administration and his memories of his grandfather.

Video Oral History Interview with A. B. Spellman, Section A2004_251_001_002, TRT: 0:30:01 ?

A. B. Spellman grew up in Elizabeth City, North Carolina where he remembers frequenting an all-black movie theater and attending fish fries. An early reader and obedient student, Spellman attended a public elementary school in Elizabeth City. Concerned about his education, his parents transferred him to a Catholic school in the sixth grade where he became fascinated with religious ritual. During elementary and high school, Spellman enjoyed listening to jazz and bebop on the radio. He was also an avid reader and enjoyed fiction like Erskine Caldwell's 'Tobacco Road,' although he was not exposed to African American authors until college. At P.W. Moore High School, he played basketball, sang in the glee club and participated in oratorical competitions. However, he did not find his high school curriculum challenging. After graduating in 1952, he matriculated at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Spellman describes his younger brother, Roland Spellman.

Video Oral History Interview with A. B. Spellman, Section A2004_251_001_003, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

A. B. Spellman studied political science at Howard University, although he initially planned to study medicine. He was taught by HistoryMaker John Hope Franklin, who often referred to the ongoing Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka proceedings in his lectures, the poet Sterling Brown and Owen Dodson, a creative writing professor. Spellman also befriended LeRoi Jones, whose literary interests inspired Spellman's, and joined the Howard Players. After graduating in 1956, he attended Howard University School of Law. However, he left shortly after upon realizing that he truly wanted to pursue writing. In 1957, he moved to New York City's Greenwich Village, where he worked at the Eighth Street Bookshop and wrote for prominent jazz publications, like Metronome and Down Beat. While his parents did not initially understand his ambition to be a writer, his literary success eventually garnered their support. He also describes publishing his book of poetry, 'The Beautiful Days.'

Video Oral History Interview with A. B. Spellman, Section A2004_251_002_004, TRT: 0:31:02 ?

A. B. Spellman's book, 'Four Lives in the Bebop Business,' documents the life histories of Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Jackie McLean and Herbie Nichols and their careers as bebop musicians. Spellman conducted research for the book by interviewing the four musicians while he was living in New York City. After the book's publication, Spellman continued writing and had a morning show on New York's WBAI Radio where he was one of the first on-air broadcasters to play world music. During this time, Spellman was active in New York City's arts scene, which became more politically involved as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. In 1967, Spellman and other poets toured HBCUs in the South where he met SNCC members, including his future wife, Karen Edmonds Spellman, at Atlanta's Paschal's Restaurant. Spellman wrote a skit for SNCC's annual fundraiser and contributed to its Rhythm Magazine. He was a writer-in-residence at the Atlanta University Center, where he taught African American culture and jazz history.

Video Oral History Interview with A. B. Spellman, Section A2004_251_002_005, TRT: 0:30:31 ?

A. B. Spellman taught courses in African American culture and jazz history at Morehouse College. He remembers Samuel L. Jackson, a student at Morehouse at the time, training with theater professor Carlton W. Molette. Spellman was fired after participating in student demonstrations calling for the merger of HBCUs in Atlanta. He then spent a year lecturing at Emory University, Douglass College and Livingstone College before obtaining a visiting lectureship at Harvard University's Department of Afro-American Studies. In Boston, he was a commentator on WGBH's radio program 'Say Brother.' Unhappy with Harvard's lack of support, he and his family relocated to Washington, D.C. where he joined the National Endowment for the Arts and directed the Arts in Education Study Project and the Expansion Arts program. At the time of the interview, he was working on the NEA's Jazz Masters Awards. Spellman reflects upon the NEA's evolution since the 1970s and describes the impact of the Black Arts Movement in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with A. B. Spellman, Section A2004_251_002_006, TRT: 0:22:04 ?

A. B. Spellman describes his manuscript for a book of poetry that he was working on at the time of the interview. While reflecting upon his career with the National Endowment for the Arts, he notes the importance of arts education and the benefits his own children received through their musical education and creative pursuits. Spellman also offers advice for those aspiring to a career in a creative field. He reflects upon his life and his hopes and concerns for the African American community. Spellman concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.