

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Aleong, Aki
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong,
Dates:	April 26, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	11 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:12:56).
Abstract:	Television actor and music executive Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong (1934 -) appeared in numerous television and film roles in a career that spanned almost fifty years. In addition to his accomplishments in the realm of visual media, Aleong also served in a variety of executive roles within the recording industry, and released hit records as an artist. Aleong was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 26, 2005, in Culver City, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_108
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actor and record executive Aki Aleong was born on December 19, 1934 in Port of Spain, Trinidad, to Henry Leong (Aleong), a cook from Hong Kong, and Agnes Vera Gonsalves from St. Vincent, British West Indies; he was originally called Assing Aleong by his father and Leonard Gonzales by his mother. Aleong attended Progressive Education Institute in Trinidad as a youth. After moving to Brooklyn, New York, with his mother in 1949, Aleong graduated from Boys High School; in 1951, he started taking classes at Brooklyn College while working in a hardware store.

Responding to a casting call for an Asian character, Aleong was cast as the Goat Boy in the 1954 Broadway production of *Teahouse of the August Moon* on Broadway. In 1956, Aleong made his first live television appearance in *The Letter*, an episode of NBC's *Producers' Showcase*. In 1957, Aleong was cast in the movie *Motorcycle Gang*. Throughout his career, Aleong performed in over than 200 different television programs, including: *Ben Casey* (1961); *The Outer Limits* (1963); *The Virginian* (1967); *L.A. Law*(1986); *Babylon 5* (1994); *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* (1996); and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2001). Aleong's movie credits include: *Never So Few* (1959); *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987); *Farewell to the King* (1989); *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1993); *Tidal Wave: No Escape* (1997); *A Breed Apart* (1998); *Missing Brendan* (2003); *House of Sand and Fog* (2003); and *Sci-Fighter* (2004).

Also a musician, Aleong wrote the hit songs Trade Winds and Shombalor; in 1963 he formed Aki Aleong and the Nobles. Leaving the movie business in 1967, Aleong worked as the west coast R&B sales and promotion manager for Capitol Records; an assistant vice president of promotion for Polydor Records; an assistant vice president of sales for Liberty/United Artist Records; the president of Pan World Records and Pan World Publishing (BMI); and a record producer for VeeJay Records. Aleong worked with The 5th Dimension, The Ojays, and Bobby Womack,

and produced the Roy Ayers album *Red Black and Green*. Aleong also managed Norman Connors in 1976, and produced Connors's gold record *You are My Starship*.

Onetime chairman of the Fraternity of Recording Executives, Aleong returned to acting in 1983. Aleong served on the boards of the Screen Actors Guild and the Media Action Network for Asian Americans and was the executive director for Asians in Media.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 26, 2005, in Culver City, California, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes. Television actor and music executive Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong (1934 -) appeared in numerous television and film roles in a career that spanned almost fifty years. In addition to his accomplishments in the realm of visual media, Aleong also served in a variety of executive roles within the recording industry, and released hit records as an artist.

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:

Aleong, Aki

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Aleong, Aki--Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

African American singers--Interviews

African American motion picture actors and actresses--Interviews

African American sound recording executives and producers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Television Actor

Music Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers|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 Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, April 26, 2005. 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 Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_001, TRT: 0:29:46 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong was born on December 19, 1934 in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago to Agnes Gonsalves Aleong and Henry Aleong. His mother, was of Carib, African and Portuguese descent and grew up in the impoverished St. Vincent, British West Indies. She did not attend school, and eventually moved to Trinidad to earn more money. His father was from Hong Kong and worked as a cook in Port of Spain. Aleong's father first denied that Aleong was his, but he eventually married Aleong's mother, and they had six more children. As a child, Aleong spent most of his time at school and with private tutors. His father worked long hours. When he was home, Aleong enjoyed watching him make noodles and process and smoke opium. Aleong and his mother moved to Brooklyn, New York City when he was a teenager. Aleong describes differences in Trinidadian and American perceptions of race, learning that while Trinidadians were called by their skin color, African Americans were called "Negro" because "black" was offensive.

African American actors--Interviews.

African American singers--Interviews.

African American motion picture actors and actresses--Interviews.

African American sound recording executives and producers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_002, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong's father's surname was accidentally changed from Leong to Aleong due to a Trinidadian immigration agent not understanding his Chinese title. Aleong recalls the smell of his father cooking opium and the music of the annual Carnival in Trinidad. As a child, he and his family occasionally attended an Anglican church, although they were also baptized Catholic at the insistence of a local priest. After grammar school, Aleong attended Progressive Educational Institute in Port of Spain, where he prepared to take the Cambridge Oxford Entrance Examination. Although he had little time for hobbies or leisure due to his demanding studies, he did win a singing contest on a local radio station with his rendition of 'I Love You for Sentimental Reasons.' In 1949, he moved to Brooklyn, New York City. His mother worked as a maid, and he attended the nearby Boys High School. In his new surroundings, he struggled to understand American colloquialisms and customs.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_003, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong had a difficult time making friends as a young immigrant in Brooklyn, New York. While in high school, Aleong worked at a hardware store to earn money to help his struggling family. He graduated Boys

High School at sixteen after attending for two years. As a teenager, he and his neighborhood friends formed a gang called the Bandanas. Bolero Martinez, one of the gang leaders and a fierce fighter, took Aleong under his wing, and Aleong stayed with him after leaving his mother's house. While attending Brooklyn College, Aleong started to socialize more. His English professor recruited students to audition as dancers for an upcoming production, and Aleong was cast as a satyr in William Shakespeare's 'The Winter's Tale.' The play's director and his college classmates encouraged his dancing. Aleong recounts how he tried to support Martinez once he became successful. However, he was unable to help his former friend recover from addiction, and he lost contact with him.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_004, TRT: 0:29:44 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong worked odd jobs during his summer breaks at Brooklyn College. As he grew more interested in dance, he frequently skipped his other classes. He studied ballet and Afro-Cuban dance at Henry Street Settlement House. He took over playing the drums for the Afro-Cuban class when the hired drummer failed to appear. The drummer he replaced later introduced Aleong to an actress who encouraged him to audition for 'Teahouse of the August Moon.' In 1956, he was cast as the goat boy in the show's travelling company. He saw his first Broadway play when he remained in the theater after his audition to watch the show. In addition to performing the role of the goat boy, Aleong was also responsible for taking care of the goat that appeared in the show. While touring in Los Angeles, California, Aleong met Marlon Brando, who later played Sakini in the movie version of 'Teahouse.' Although Aleong was friends with Brando, he was frustrated that an Asian actor never played the lead.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_005, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong stayed in Chicago, Illinois for almost a year. He studied at the Goodman Theater and sang and danced at the Preview Room with BarBara Luna and Pat Suzuki when not performing in 'Teahouse of the August Moon.' After the musical closed, Aleong returned to New York City to appear in William Wyler's production of 'The Letter' for the TV show 'Producers' Showcase.' He then starred in "The Enemy," a play by Pearl S. Buck, which aired on 'Robert Montgomery Presents.' When he moved to Los Angeles, California to appear in 'No Down Payment,' he experienced housing discrimination that mimicked the situation depicted in the film. Aleong acted in a movie with Frank Sinatra, who signed him to a record deal. Aleong's 'Trade Winds, Trade Winds' was the first Asian American record to reach the Billboard charts. However, a conflict between Sinatra and Desi Arnaz led to Aleong losing his recording contract. He also describes the legacies of Bill Cosby and HistoryMaker Berry Gordy.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_006, TRT: 0:28:23 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong appeared in the film 'Never So Few' with Frank Sinatra in 1959. In his TV roles, Aleong primarily played Asian characters of various nationalities, despite his African heritage and Spanish surname. While working for Polydor Records in the 1970s, Aleong promoted James Brown's 'Get on the Good Foot.' As a promoter, he witnessed record companies exploiting the African American community and limiting opportunities for black people within the industry. The companies allocated less advertising money for black records and gave free promotional records to white-owned chains rather

than black-owned music stores. As co-chair on the Screen Actors Guild Ethnic Minorities Committee in the 1980s, Aleong worked to increase the visibility of minorities on TV, mostly through a program of training and auditioning people of color for advertisements. He describes advertisers' interests in representing diversity as a means to reach new markets, and his experience as a multiracial actor in Hollywood.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_007, TRT: 0:30:07 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong appeared in an episode of 'The Virginian' in 1967. Although Aleong expected the episode to be about a Chinese man persevering against racial discrimination, the final version featured a white hero instead. Frustrated with Hollywood's racism and busy with separating from his wife, Aleong quit acting that same year. He then worked at Liberty UA Records. At PolyGram Records, he promoted several prominent artists, including HistoryMaker Roy Ayers and Bobby Womack. In the music industry, Aleong witnessed the exploitation of black disc jockeys and white-owned companies acquiring black-owned record labels. With his friend HistoryMaker Reverend Al Sharpton, Aleong promoted the 1974 film 'The Education of Sonny Carson' in Brooklyn. Aleong was unofficially barred from the music business in the 1970s after serving as president of Fraternity of Recording Executives. He then managed jazz musician Norman Connors, and after that, worked as an ambulance driver.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_008, TRT: 0:28:41 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong produced an album for doo wop group Sherriff and the Ravels in 1959. After leaving acting, Aleong worked in sales and headed the R&B promotional department at Capitol Records. He promoted jazz musician Pharoah Sanders. Aleong was a manager for jazz musician Norman Connors, but Connors left him with the debt for promotional expenses. Aleong worked as an ambulance driver, then returned to acting. In the 1980s, he was cast in an episode of the soap opera 'Guiding Light.' He landed a role in the three-man play 'The Interview,' and played a doctor in 'As the World Turns.' During this time, he joined the National Board of the Screen Actors Guild. In 1982, Aleong returned to Los Angeles, California and continued his TV acting. In 2000, he was elected president of Media Action Network For Asian Americans to bring more diversity to TV. Aleong remembers working with Ray Charles.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_009, TRT: 0:28:53 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong tried to subvert stereotypical depictions of Asians with his portrayal of Colonel Mitamura in the 1989 movie 'Farewell to the King.' When elected head of the Screen Actors Guild Ethnic Minorities Committee in 2002, he joined a media coalition to pressure TV networks to represent diversity more accurately. For this coalition, Aleong created subcommittees for Latino, Asian, and Native American actors. Through this work, he gained insight on the unique concerns facing each group. Aleong explains why having more people of color in production and in positions to select and fund projects will lead to more diverse roles and a wider array of stories for minority actors. Aleong also reflects upon being perceived as Asian American rather than black, the challenges of representing Asian Americans in the media and his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_010,

TRT: 0:29:09 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong fathered six children. When he and his wife divorced in the late 1960s, he was not able to sustain a close relationship with them. His eldest died of AIDS, and the remaining five were still living at the time of the interview. Aleong shares his plans for producing a movie called 'Chinaman's Chance: America's Other Slaves,' a Western set in the 1860s. The story follows a Chinese immigrant who narrowly escapes death several times when hunted by a vigilante mob after being falsely accused of murder. Aleong hoped to revitalize the Western movie genre and represent the era more accurately by featuring a multicultural cast. Aleong describes the need for diverse stories featuring people of color in order to contradict stereotypes, and criticizes the tendency to limit people of color to certain plots and genres. He reflects upon his legacy, his life, and how he would like to be remembered. He also shares his unrealized dream of creating an autonomous state for African Americans.

Video Oral History Interview with Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong, Section A2005_108_001_011,
TRT: 0:19:39 ?

Aki Leonard Gonzales Aleong narrates his photographs.