

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with S. Pearl Sharp

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Sharp, S. Pearl
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp,
Dates:	April 27, 2005 and February 26, 2018
Bulk Dates:	2005 and 2018
Physical Description:	12 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:49:49).
Abstract:	Playwright, film actress, stage actress, and poet S. Pearl Sharp (1942 -) was among the cast of Gordon Parks' The Learning Tree, and Minstrel Man. Sharp has also published six books and produced and directed eight films and stage plays. Sharp was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 27, 2005 and February 26, 2018, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_110
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Writer, actor and filmmaker Saundra Pearl Sharp was born on December 21, 1942 in Cleveland, Ohio to Clarence and Faythe Sharp. Sharp's family was active in the local NAACP, and she was raised in Antioch Baptist Church. Sharp graduated from John Adams High School in 1960, and attended Bowling Green State University, where she pursued a double major in music education and radio-TV production. She became the first Black member of the BGSU chapter of Pi Kappa Lambda, the music honor society, and produced a children's story series and music interviews on the campus radio station. During the summer, Sharp interned at WABQ-AM in Cleveland, under the tutelage of Valena Minor Williams, LeBaron Taylor and Jack Gibson.

Graduating in 1964, Sharp moved to New York City, where her first job was as a copywriter for *T.V. Guide*. She studied acting under the Poverty Program's HARYOU-ACT with Cleveland's Karamu Theatre alumni Al Fann and Minnie Gentry. She performed in J.E. Franklin's *Black Girl*, in the chorus of the Pearl Bailey company of *Hello Dolly* from 1967 to 1968, Uniworld's radio serial *Sounds Of The City*, and in Gordon Parks' film, *The Learning Tree*. Sharp also starred in the TV movies *Minstrel Man* (1976) and *Hollow Image* (1980), had recurring roles on *Wonder Woman* (1978), *St. Elsewhere* (1984/87) and *Knots Landing* (1985), and was a leading commercial spokeswoman.

A poet from childhood, Sharp attended John O. Killens' Writers Workshop at Columbia University where she completed two volumes of poetry and her first play, *The Sistuhs*, in addition to forming the literary performance troupe Poets & Performers. In the mid-1970's Sharp moved to Los Angeles. She created Poets Pay Rent, Too, and served as publisher/editor of Robert E. Price's *Blood Lines* (1978), *Directory of Black Film/TV Technicians and Artists, West Coast* (1980), *The BAD-C (Black Anti-Defamation Coalition) Media Matters Newsletter* (1981-84) and *The Black History Film List* (1989). Publisher Glenn Thompson re-issued her 1978 poetry volume *Soft Song* (1978, 1991) and published *Typing in the Dark* (Harlem River Press, 1991) and the non-fiction *Black Women for Beginners* (Writers & Readers, 1993). Sharp was a co-founder, with Robert E. Price, of the Black Anti-Defamation

Coalition which monitored the image of Blacks in the media (1980-85).

In 1980 Sharp shifted her focus to filmmaking, studying at Los Angeles City College. Her films include *Back Inside Herself* (1984), *Life Is A Saxophone* (1985), *Picking Tribes* (1988), *It's OK to Peek* (1996), *The Healing Passage/ Voices From The Water* (2004); and for the City of Los Angeles, *Central Avenue Live!* (1996) and *Fertile Ground: Stories from the Watts Towers Arts Center* (2005).

Sharp was an essayist and commentator on NPR from 2003 to 2009, and has served as a volunteer segment producer for KPFK-FM, Pacifica Radio Network. Her non-fiction writings are collected in *The Evening News-Essays And Commentaries From NPR And Other Clouds* (2015).

S. Pearl Sharp was interviewed for *The HistoryMakers* on April 27, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with S. Pearl Sharp was conducted by Harriette Cole and Larry Crowe on April 27, 2005 and February 26, 2018, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 12 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Playwright, film actress, stage actress, and poet S. Pearl Sharp (1942 -) was among the cast of Gordon Parks' *The Learning Tree*, and *Minstrel Man*. Sharp has also published six books and produced and directed eight films and stage plays.

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:

Sharp, S. Pearl

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sharp, S. Pearl--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Playwright

Film Actress

Stage Actress

Poet

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers|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 S. Pearl Sharp, April 27, 2005 and February 26, 2018. 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 S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_001_001, TRT: 0:28:31 ?

S. Pearl Sharp was born on December 21, 1942 as Saundra Sharp in Cleveland, Ohio. Sharp's mother, Faythe McIntyre, was born in 1918 in Chicago, Illinois. While her mother, Ethel Miller, toured the country with a black opera company, McIntyre lived with her grandmother in Cleveland where she graduated from Central High School and studied speech therapy at Fenn College. Sharp's father, Clarence Sharp, was born Clarence Sinkford in Tiptop, Virginia. As a teenager, he fled to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to escape a group of white people wanting to harm him. To protect himself, he changed his last name to Sharp. While working in the Cleveland shipyards, he met Sharp's mother. They divorced after three years, and Sharp did not reconnect with her father until adulthood. Sharp enjoyed listening to her family sing while doing chores and to her mother read the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen as bedtime stories. As a member of the Gilpin Players, Sharp's mother studied acting with Frances E. Williams.

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_001_002, TRT: 0:28:38 ?

S. Pearl Sharp grew up in the Central Avenue projects in Cleveland, Ohio. She remembers the noise of the projects, the NAACP meetings held in her home, and a racist incident at her nursery school. Around 1950, Sharp's family moved to the mostly-white Mount Pleasant neighborhood, where she was enrolled in the Major Work program, an advanced education program designed to prepare gifted students for college. Sharp participated in many extracurricular activities including speech choir, Girl Scouts, dance and music. Her family was involved with Karamu House and the NAACP. At John Adams High School, Sharp excelled in arts and language but struggled with her advanced science and math classes. During the Civil Rights Movement Sharp picketed a local Woolworth's, nearly attended the March on Washington, started a junior NAACP chapter, and met the Little Rock Nine. She remembers watching Edward R. Murrow's interview with Malcolm X and 'The Nat King Cole Show' with her family, and describes their reactions.

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

S. Pearl Sharp's junior NAACP chapter hosted the members of the Little Rock Nine in Cleveland, where she spoke to them before her chapter's banquet. Sharp attended Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, where she majored in music education and was a host for the school's radio station. Interviewing actress Miriam Makeba for the radio station led her to minor in

radio and television production. The university's integration of student housing led to conflicts and conversations with white students on race. Sharp faced discrimination when a white student in the music honor society tried to bar her admission and when a male professor in the television department excluded her and another female student from class meetings. In addition to multiple production jobs and coursework, Sharp sang with dance bands on the weekends in Toledo, Ohio. In 1964, Sharp graduated from Bowling Green State University and moved to New York City, where she worked as a copywriter at TV Guide Magazine.

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_001_004, TRT: 0:30:26 ?

S. Pearl Sharp attended Bowling Green State University with football player HistoryMaker Bernie Casey. Sharp was the first African American copywriter at TV Guide magazine and guest starred on an episode of the children's show 'Captain Kangaroo.' She attended Al Fann and Minnie Gentry's acting classes at HARYOU-ACT. Sharp and her classmates formed the acting troupe Al Fann & Co. In 1965, Sharp took part in many community theatre projects, including productions of 'A Raisin in the Sun' and poetry readings with Felipe Luciano and HistoryMakers Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. Sharp formed Poets and Performers to showcase the work of the participating poets. Sharp also appeared in the first all-black company of 'Hello Dolly,' starring Pearl Bailey. Bailey routinely clashed with the company and the press. While working as an assistant for Babs Olantunji, Sharp helped design his dashikis. She describes the conflict between New York City's white-produced theatre and the Black Arts Movement's community theatre.

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_001_005, TRT: 0:29:41 ?

S. Pearl Sharp was in the first all-black commercial for Crisco oil. She appeared with an afro, which was controversial on set. She also played the first African American Avon lady. Sharp's casting was part of an effort increase the number of African Americans in entertainment unions. In 1967, Sharp landed the role of Prissy in HistoryMaker Gordon Parks' movie 'The Learning Tree' by auditioning in place of a teen model who was out of town. She describes Parks' support for integrating entertainment unions. In John Oliver Killens' writing workshop, Sharp wrote the play 'The Sistahs.' The play premiered in 1975 at Howard University, but it flopped because the director added dialogue to the original script. The show later had successful runs directed by Sati Jamal and Dick Anthony Williams. Upon moving to Los Angeles, California, Sharp was cast in 'The Minstrel Man,' which was shot in Mississippi in 1977. She recalls the open hostility towards the production as a reminder that not much had changed in the South.

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_001_006, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

S. Pearl Sharp was a founding member of the Black Anti-Defamation Coalition (BADC). The coalition was formed to petition NBC to change its mini-series 'Beulah Land,' which romanticized slavery in the antebellum South. The group included psychologist Dr. Gareth Murray and entertainment industry figures like Robert Price, Arabella Chavers Julien, Arnold Bankston and Nick LaTour. Initially the NAACP assisted BADC, but the two groups disagreed about TV shows like 'Webster.' For five years, BADC protested works they felt misrepresented African Americans, including a proposed biopic on Malcolm X starring Richard Pryor. In her acting career, Sharp had recurring roles on soap operas like 'Knots Landing' and 'St. Elsewhere' and appeared in commercials for products like Betty Crocker. Sharp also wrote the BADC newsletter 'Media Matters,' helped Robert Price publish his collection of poems and stories titled

‘Bloodlines,’ and developed the reference book ‘The Directory of Black Film/TV Technicians and Artists.’

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_002_007, TRT: 7:28:06 ?

S. Pearl Sharp performed in the Broadway productions of ‘Hello, Dolly!,’ ‘Black Girl’ and ‘To Be Young, Gifted and Black’ in New York City in the late 1960s. She was then cast in photographer Gordon Parks’ 1969 film, ‘The Learning Tree.’ Sharp went on to act in the ‘Our Street’ series for Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting, and ‘Minstrel Man,’ which was filmed in Mississippi. Around this time, she audited John Oliver Killens’ writing class at Howard University in Washington, D.C.; and she also became the first African American actress to represent Avon Products, Inc. Upon moving to Los Angeles, she networked with members of the Al Fann Theatrical Ensemble, like Adam Wade, Vernee Watson-Johnson and Tamu Blackwell. In 1980, Sharp helped found the Black Anti-Defamation Coalition, which emerged in the wake of the protests against the ‘Beulah Land’ series’ misrepresentation of black America. Sharp and actress Beah Richards later co-authored the essay collection, ‘There’s a Brown Girl in the Ring.’

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_002_008, TRT: 8:31:21 ?

S. Pearl Sharp began writing poetry as a young child. She went on to attend Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio from 1960 to 1964. During this period, Sharp worked as an announcer for WGBU Radio, a classical music station where she interviewed singer Miriam Makeba, and professors in the music department at Bowling Green State University. Upon moving to New York City, Sharp became active in the literary scene along with poets Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. She went on to found her own spoken word group, Poets and Performers, which included actors Bill Duke and Norman Matlock. In 1970, Sharp self-published her first book of poetry, ‘From the Windows of My Mind.’ Also around this time, she was active in the campaign to elect Kenneth Gibson as the first African American mayor of Newark, New Jersey. Additionally, she was involved in the Black Arts Movement in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood. Sharp also describes her younger sister, Emily M. Newsome, and actress Beah Richards.

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_002_009, TRT: 9:30:37 ?

S. Pearl Sharp was active in the Black Arts Movement in New York City. During this period, she wrote a poem for the radio journalist and community activist Bob Law titled ‘It’s the Law: A Rap Poem.’ It was later published in two textbooks produced by Macmillan Publishing Company. In 1975, Sharp moved to Los Angeles, California, where her mother’s former acting instructor, Frances E. Williams, introduced her to other African American artists like Maya Angelou and Beah Richards. At this point, Sharp talks about her interactions with black Russians like writer James Lloydovich Patterson. To supplement her income as a commercial actress, Sharp wrote for Voice Incorporated and TV Guide. In 1980, she enrolled in film classes at Los Angeles City College; and for her final exam, she directed the short film ‘Back Inside Herself,’ which featured Barbara O. Jones. She then received funding from the Black American Cinema Society to start work on her documentary of poet Kamau Daaood, ‘Life Is a Saxophone.’

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_002_010, TRT: 10:27:53 ?

S. Pearl Sharp was a founding member of Reel Black Women, a support group for African American women in the filmmaking industry. In an effort to promote the hiring of African American production workers, she developed the ‘1980 Directory of Black Film/TV: Technicians, West Coast,’ for which she received

support from industry professionals like Alex Haley, Charles F. Johnson and Hal Williams. Sharp then sold the book to television and film executives. In 1985, she created and directed a documentary of the poet Kamau Daaood called 'Life Is a Saxophone,' which featured the production talents of Russell Williams, II. Sharp was active in the Black Anti-Defamation Coalition, which sought greater representation of black Americans in the television and film industries. She also became involved in the Aquarian Spiritual Center in Los Angeles, California; and she produced segments for the radio program, 'Sojourner Truth with Margaret Prescod.' Sharp talks about her friendship with the activist Mildred Pitts Walter.

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_002_011, TRT: 11:33:37 ?

S. Pearl Sharp was a member of the Aquarian Spiritual Center in Los Angeles, California, which was created by Bernice Goodwin Ligon and Alfred Ligon in 1941. Under the direction of publisher Glenn Thompson, Sharp authored the 'Black Women For Beginners' book in 1993; and her book was later included in the Random House 'For Beginners' series. Sharp worked on various other projects, including the Juneteenth Audio Books, which produced the audio versions of Susan Taylor's 'In the Spirit,' and Bebe Moore Campbell's 'Your Blues Ain't Like Mine: A Novel.' With support from Sandra Evers-Manly, the founder of the Black Hollywood Education and Resource Center, Sharp created her film 'The Healing Passage: Voices from the Water,' which featured notable African Americans like Oscar Brown, Jr., Chester Higgins, Jr. and Yosef ben-Jochannan. At this point in the interview, Sharp talks about the legacy of Mayme Clayton, who inspired Sharp's documentary interest in African American collectors.

Video Oral History Interview with S. Pearl Sharp, Section A2005_110_002_012, TRT: 12:22:15 ?

S. Pearl Sharp completed her film, 'The Healing Passage: Voice from the Water,' in 2004. The film went on to achieve success at the Denver Pan African Film Festival; the New York African Film Festival; and the Roxbury Film Festival in Boston, Massachusetts. Around this time, Sharp became a commentator on 'The Tavis Smiley Show' on National Public Radio (NPR). After Tavis Smiley left NPR, Sharp began hosting the program 'News and Notes,' which was also produced by Roy Hurst. In 2015, five years after she left NPR, Sharp self-published the collection, 'The Evening News - Essays and Commentaries from NPR and Other Clouds,' based on her experiences at the news organization. Sharp also founded her own consultancy, The Gate is Open, which specialized in creativity coaching. Sharp reflects upon how she would like to be remembered, her life and legacy. She also describes her advice to black aspiring entertainment industry professionals; and she concludes the interview by reflecting upon her health and spirituality.