

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter J. Turnbull

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Turnbull, Walter J.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Turnbull,
Dates:	July 31, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:08:42).
Abstract:	Choral director Walter J. Turnbull (1944 - 2007) is the founder and director of the Boys Choir of Harlem. Turnbull was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 31, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_175
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Founder and director of the Boys Choir of Harlem, Walter J. Turnbull was born in Greenville, Mississippi on July 19, 1944. He has traveled a long road from the fields of the South where he chopped cotton as a child to attend Coleman High School where he joined the choir directed by Herticene Jones. Jones, a demanding teacher, encouraged Turnbull to attend Tougaloo College where he graduated with honors in classical music and vocal performance.

Turnbull eventually settled in New York City where he aspired to have a career as an operatic tenor. He continued his musical training at Manhattan School of Music and began performing with the New York Philharmonic. His professional career was sidetracked after taking a job teaching music in the basement of the Ephesus Church in Harlem. The choir quickly moved from being a performing ensemble for the church services to one presenting concerts and recitals in public venues with its repertoire of Bach chorales, Mozart, spirituals and hymns. The choir was eventually named the Boys Choir of Harlem. In 1986, Turnbull created the Choir Academy of Harlem as a school serving fourth through eighth grades. The program has expanded over the years to become a college preparatory school serving over five hundred students in grades four through twelve.

In 1997, Turnbull was awarded the National Medal of Arts. In 1998, he received the Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities and the Readers Digest American Heroes in Education Award. He was also named to the New York Black 100 by the Schomburg Center. In 2003, Turnbull received an honorary doctorate of music degree for his lifelong commitment to music, both as an accomplished performer and as the founder of the Boys Choir of Harlem.

Turnbull passed away on March 23, 2007 at the age of 62.

Turnbull was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on July 31, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Walter J. Turnbull was conducted by Shawn Wilson on July 31, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Choral director Walter J. Turnbull (1944 - 2007) is the founder and director of the Boys Choir of Harlem.

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:

Turnbull, Walter J.

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Turnbull, Walter J.--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Boys' Choir of Harlem

Occupations:

Choral Director

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 Walter J. Turnbull, July 31, 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 Walter J. Turnbull, Section A2005_175_001_001, TRT: 0:29:59
?

Dr. Walter J. Turnbull was born on July 19, 1944 in Greenville, Mississippi to Lena Green Turnbull and Jake Turnbull, Jr. His mother was born in Long's Switch, Mississippi to Mary and Walter Green. She was a basketball star in Greenville, where she grew up with her two siblings. Turnbull's father was born to Francis Turnbull and Jake Turnbull, Sr., sharecroppers in Greenville. He

worked as a mechanic. Turnbull's parents separated when he was young. Turnbull first attended Julia Armstrong Elementary School, then Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist School. As an active member of Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church, he learned to sing and was encouraged to listen to classical music rather than popular songs. At Coleman High School, he joined the choir and was taught piano and mentored by his teacher, Herticene Jones. Band director Roy P. Huddleston also encouraged his musical studies. Turnbull received a full scholarship to Tougaloo College with the help of its music director, Ariel "Pops" Lovelace.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Turnbull, Section A2005_175_001_002, TRT: 0:29:13
?

Walter J. Turnbull remembers the lynching of Emmett Till. At Coleman High School, he sang classical music and spirituals, which he later taught to the Boys Choir of Harlem. At Tougaloo College, he studied singing under the tutelage of Ariel "Pops" Lovelace. Turnbull was also elected student body chief justice and president, and he graduated cum laude. During his college years, the Civil Rights Movement was very active in Mississippi. Turnbull recalls demonstrating, chasing the Ku Klux Klan off campus, and hearing about James Meredith's application to the University of Mississippi. With the help of Ernst Borinski, a sociology professor at Tougaloo, Turnbull spent two summers attending the Chautauqua Institution in western New York, where he was trained in singing and earned money by cleaning bathrooms. Turnbull recounts how, at Mannes College of Music, he was sent to an audition where he was immediately rejected due to his race.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Turnbull, Section A2005_175_001_003, TRT: 0:29:32
?

Walter J. Turnbull graduated from Tougaloo College in 1967. He attended the Manhattan School of the Arts in New York City, where he lived at International House and drove a cab part-time. Turnbull received opera training from HistoryMaker George Shirley, Dan Merriman, and Helen Vonney; studied acting at HB Studio; and performed in opera theatres around the city. During this time, Turnbull became active in the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church in Harlem, where, inspired by other boys choirs, he founded the Boys Choir of Harlem. Although the choir was initially limited to boys who were members of the church, Turnbull incorporated it in 1968 and allowed other boys to join. He sought to prove that African Americans could be a part of the classical music tradition while also teaching traditional African American music. In 1998, he received the Heinz Award. Turnbull also describes his method for teaching choir, the choir's distinct sound and its critical acclaim.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Turnbull, Section A2005_175_001_004, TRT: 0:28:20
?

Walter J. Turnbull published his autobiography 'Lift Every Voice: Expecting the Most and Getting the Best from All of God's Children' in 1995. He traveled with the Boys Choir of Harlem to both Europe and Japan, and enjoyed a trip to Haarlem, Holland, especially. He describes the financial setbacks experienced by the Boys Choir of Harlem due to an unsupportive board of directors, audits by the Internal Revenue Service, and the fallout from a counselor's sexual abuse of a choir member. In partnership with the New York City Department of Education, Turnbull established the Choir Academy of Harlem. Although he received support from the Department of Education, Turnbull also struggled to maintain the Boys Choir of Harlem's independence. Turnbull reflects upon his legacy, the importance of history, and his experience of being interviewed by

The HistoryMakers, for which he was recommended by HistoryMaker George L. Brown, a former chairman of the board for the Boys Choir of Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter J. Turnbull, Section A2005_175_001_005, TRT: 0:11:38
?

Walter J. Turnbull narrates his photographs.