

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sylvester Monroe

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Monroe, Sylvester
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe,
Dates:	August 25, 2005 and November 30, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2005 and 2012
Physical Description:	12 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:46:21).
Abstract:	Author, newspaper editor, and magazine correspondent Sylvester Monroe (1951 -) has served as a correspondent and Bureau Chief in Newsweek's Boston bureau, and Los Angeles correspondent for TIME magazine. He later joined the Atlanta Journal – Constitution as Sunday editor for the National/Foreign Desk. Monroe was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 25, 2005 and November 30, 2012, in Atlanta, Georgia and San Francisco, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_204
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist and best selling author Sylvester Monroe was born August 5, 1951 in Leland, Mississippi. Raised by his mother, Hattie Mae Monroe Kelley, in Chicago's housing projects, Monroe attended John B. Drake and Douglas Elementary Schools. At Phillips High School, Monroe and two friends were introduced by a teacher to the United States Office of Economic Opportunity's "A Better Chance" program, which led to his enrollment and graduation from the elite college preparatory, St. George's School in 1969. After graduation, Monroe applied and was accepted into Harvard University. During the summers, Monroe interned at Foote, Cone and Belding and *Newsweek* magazine. Monroe graduated from Harvard University, cum laude with a B.A. in social studies in 1973.

Starting as a full time correspondent in *Newsweek's* Boston bureau, Monroe covered the Kenneth Edelin abortion trial and school desegregation in South Boston. He served as *Newsweek's* Chicago correspondent and from 1976 to 1978, as Deputy Bureau Chief from 1978 to 1983 and as Boston Bureau Chief from 1983 to 1985, when he joined *Newsweek's* Washington bureau. Monroe won several awards for his reporting on such stories as "Why Johnny Can't Write", "American Innovation", and the three part series "Why Public Schools are Flunking". Monroe covered Harold Washington's successful Chicago mayoral campaign in 1983 and Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's bid for the U.S. presidency in 1984. In 1987, *Newsweek* featured a cover story about Monroe's return to Chicago's housing projects to follow up on eleven of his childhood friends. The story, "Brothers" co-authored with *Newsweek* senior editor, Peter Goldman, developed into a best selling book, *Brothers: Black and Poor—A True Story of Courage and Survival*. Monroe joined *TIME Magazine* in 1989 as a Los Angeles-based correspondent. There, he worked as a principal reporter for post riot coverage of the Rodney King trial, as well as on the 1993 cover story, "Is L.A. Going to Hell?" and a 1994 feature about Minister Louis Farrakhan. Monroe became deputy managing editor of the *San Jose Mercury News* in 2001, but later that year joined the *Atlanta Journal – Constitution* as Sunday editor for the National /Foreign Desk. In 2006, Monroe joined the staff of *Ebony Magazine* as Senior

Editor, where he was political editor and covered Barack Obama's presidential campaign. Since leaving Ebony in 2009, he has worked as a freelance editor and writer for several publications including The Root.com and The Defendersonline.com. Most recently, Monroe has been a contract editor and writer on the Corporate Citizenship Team at Oracle Corp. and Oracle Education Foundation.

A former vice president of the National Association of Black Journalists, Monroe served on the board of St. Georges Preparatory School and is a frequently sought after as a public speaker.

Monroe, who still considers Chicago home, has a son, Jason and lives in Atlanta.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sylvester Monroe was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 25, 2005 and November 30, 2012, in Atlanta, Georgia and San Francisco, California, and was recorded on 12 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Author, newspaper editor, and magazine correspondent Sylvester Monroe (1951 -) has served as a correspondent and Bureau Chief in Newsweek's Boston bureau, and Los Angeles correspondent for TIME magazine. He later joined the Atlanta Journal – Constitution as Sunday editor for the National/Foreign Desk.

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:

Monroe, Sylvester

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Monroe, Sylvester--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

San Jose Mercury-news

Occupations:

Newspaper Editor

Magazine Correspondent

Author

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Sylvester Monroe, August 25, 2005 and November 30, 2012. 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 Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_001_001, TRT: 0:29:00
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Sylvester Monroe was born on August 5, 1951 in Leland, Mississippi. His mother, Hattie Monroe Kelley, was also born in Leland on August 25, 1932 to a family of sharecroppers. When her father inherited property from the owner of the land they farmed, townspeople contested the will, and he relinquished his claim. Monroe's mother reached her junior year of high school in Mississippi and completed high school in Chicago, Illinois six months after Monroe's birth. Monroe's father, Kittrel Peoples, was born on September 17, 1931. His mother died when he was young and his father raised him and his eight siblings. When he was a high school senior, Monroe's mother became pregnant. Unable to marry her, he joined the U.S. Air Force and fought in the Korean War where he was shot down and presumed dead. He survived and returned to Mississippi, but was unable to find Monroe's mother or her family since they had moved to Chicago. Monroe first met his father when he was twenty-eight. He describes how he resembles his parents.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_001_002, TRT: 0:28:30
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Sylvester Monroe grew up in various neighborhoods on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. He remembers one family trip to the South for a great-aunt's funeral. He entered Douglas Elementary School in Bronzeville, where he lived with his mother and her family for several years until a fight with one of his uncles led his mother to leave. With his mother, stepfather, oldest sister and brother, Monroe moved to Englewood, where he attended Yale Elementary School. After returning to Bronzeville, Monroe entered John B. Drake Elementary School before attending Douglas Elementary School again for seventh and eighth grade. Throughout his elementary and middle school years, Monroe had several influential teachers. Despite their poverty, he received love and support from his family members. Although he regularly attended First Southern Missionary Baptist Church, he became disillusioned with the church as he grew older.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_001_003, TRT: 0:28:30
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Sylvester Monroe and his two best friends competed to see who could read the most books the fastest. Although he loved music, Monroe quit singing in middle school after his voice changed, and he focused on sports rather than learning an instrument. At Wendell Phillips High School, he remained at the top of his classes while on the baseball and track teams. While living in the Robert Taylor Homes, Monroe joined the Black P. Stone Nation in order to travel to and from school. His Honors English teacher, Leroy Lovelace, helped him enter A Better

Chance, a summer program for disadvantaged youths to study at college campuses, and Monroe spent a summer at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Lovelace also applied for him to attend St. George's School in Middletown, Rhode Island, and Monroe was accepted there his sophomore year. At sixteen, he published his first article, 'Sylvester Says: "Ugh" To School Bell's Summon,' while working as a copy boy and messenger for the Chicago Defender.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_001_004, TRT: 0:29:30
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Sylvester Monroe arrived at St. George's School in Middletown, Rhode Island in September of 1966. Frightened at being so far from home in an unfamiliar environment, he became physically sick during his first weeks there. However, the school doctor informed him that he had caught a case of "nostalgia." Upon notifying his mother of his diagnosis, she refused to let him come home, insisting he remain at school. During his first semester, he ranked third in his class. While on summer breaks, he had to readjust to life in the Robert Taylor Homes after learning to adapt to his elite school environment. He also worked for the 'Chicago Defender,' where he met Audrey Weaver, who later became the paper's first black woman managing editor. At school, Monroe was a senior prefect and editor of the literary magazine. While interviewing alumni for an article, he met the advertising editor of Newsweek, who was impressed with his writing. In 1969, he became the third African American student to graduate from St. George's.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_001_005, TRT: 0:29:10
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Sylvester Monroe was hired as an intern at Newsweek magazine to cover the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. He entered Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1969. He first roomed with two white men, a former St. George's School classmate and a conservative Republican from Indiana. The following year, his roommates were philosopher Cornel West, Fox Sports anchor James Brown and a friend who was a campus radical. At Harvard, Monroe felt culturally isolated and frustrated with limiting definitions of blackness. After graduating, he became the youngest correspondent at Newsweek, and was one of six black correspondents in the company. After sixteen years at Newsweek, he joined Time magazine in Los Angeles, California where he also felt isolated as the only black employee in the Time, Inc. building above the position of receptionist. Monroe reflects upon the pitfalls African American men face as he compares his success to high school friends who also attended elite colleges.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_001_006, TRT: 0:29:10
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Sylvester Monroe majored in social studies at Harvard University, which allowed him to study economics, American history, and literature. He also encountered many influential black intellectuals, including Ewart Guinier, Orlando Patterson and HistoryMaker Archie C. Eppes, III. Monroe describes the revolutionary mindset of the 1970s and views about interracial relationships among African Americans in academia. Monroe once feared meeting other black students while walking with a white girl on campus, as dating interracial was hotly debated among students on campus. As a member of the Association for African and Afro-American Students at Harvard, Monroe learned the importance of solidarity and support. In his senior year, he wrote an article about his experience at Harvard that provoked ire among many of his fellow black

students, but won him the respect of Harvard business professor, Martin L. Kilson, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_001_007, TRT: 0:27:40
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Sylvester Monroe spent the summer before his freshman year of college interning with Foote, Cone, and Belding advertising agency, where he became friends with the vice-President of public relations, Albert P. Weisman. Although the agency offered Monroe a full-time job the following summer, Weisman and Hal Bruno of Newsweek urged him to finish college. He interned with Newsweek after his sophomore and junior years, and worked as a campus correspondent his senior year. Monroe and his roommates, Elliott Fenell and Cornel West, planned to enter graduate schools, but Fenell had a nervous breakdown and later died when his brother restrained him during a violent episode. Although he was accepted to the University of Chicago, Monroe deferred enrollment to work at Newsweek. As a reporter for their Boston bureau, he covered HistoryMaker Kenneth Carlton Edelin's abortion trial in 1974 and Boston's mandated school desegregation. He only narrowly escaped the riots in South Boston as students were bused from Roxbury.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_002_008, TRT: 8:31:19
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Sylvester Monroe joined the staff of Newsweek magazine in 1973, when more black correspondents were being hired and journalists were focused on covering Watergate and the energy crisis. In 1975, he reported on the trial of HistoryMaker Kenneth Carlton Edelin, whose manslaughter charge for performing an abortion was meant to test the recent Roe v. Wade decision. In 1976, he transferred to the Chicago bureau, where he was mentored by bureau chief Frank Maier and covered the Harold Washington mayoral campaign and election. Having grown up in Chicago and as a former resident of the Robert Taylor Homes, Monroe had insight into the culture of Chicago politics. His impoverished background and his elite education enabled him to connect with people across the social strata, which advanced his journalistic mission of bringing disparate groups together. In 1983, Monroe returned to Boston as bureau chief, but left almost immediately to cover HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's 1984 bid for the presidency.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_002_009, TRT: 9:31:26
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Sylvester Monroe covered HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign for Newsweek. While traveling on the campaign trail, Monroe saw the candidate's strengths as he built momentum and his constituency. The campaign failed, though, after the Washington Post ran an article regarding Jackson's alleged anti-Semitic comments. Monroe details the contradictory stories within the campaign's press corps and shares his own view about the ensuing coverage and Jackson. He also describes Jackson's political legacy. In 1985, Monroe was transferred from Newsweek's Boston bureau to Washington, D.C. where he worked as a White House correspondent. With negative stories about black men dominating the media and the editor of Newsweek reluctant to show African Americans on the magazine's cover, Monroe wanted to offer a more nuanced portrayal of the black community. He returned to the housing project where he grew up to report on the men of the Robert Taylor Homes, many of whom he had known as a child.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_002_010, TRT: 10:31:13
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Sylvester Monroe, along with a team of Newsweek reporters, interviewed several men who were long-time residents of the Robert Taylor Homes for a story called 'Brothers.' The article, the longest one ever published in the magazine at the time, appeared in the March 23, 1987 edition of Newsweek and was well-received. In 1988, Monroe and Peter Goldman adapted the magazine article into a successful book, 'Brothers: Black and Poor — A True Story of Courage.' In the late 1980s, Monroe worked at Newsweek's Washington, D.C. bureau and witnessed the onset of the crack epidemic. After leaving Newsweek for Time magazine in 1988, Monroe moved to Los Angeles, California where he covered the Rodney King riots, O.J. Simpson's trial, and several school shootings. With Time unwilling to publish in-depth stories about African Americans, Monroe began freelancing for Emerge magazine, edited by HistoryMaker George Curry. His Emerge article on the Million Man March made him a finalist for the National Magazine Award.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_002_011, TRT: 11:29:38
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Sylvester Monroe, as a Time correspondent, attended Nelson Mandela's speech upon his release from prison in 1990. When Time ran the Johannesburg bureau chief's piece instead of his, Monroe published his article in Emerge. In 1994, Monroe interviewed HistoryMaker Minister Louis Farrakhan for a Time cover story. Although Monroe had to win Farrakhan's trust while countering the magazine's attempts to highlight Farrakhan's most controversial aspects, he was ultimately proud of the story's balanced perspective. He believed his interview offered readers a chance to discern Farrakhan's character for themselves. After leaving Time in 2000, Monroe worked as a managing editor for the San Jose Mercury News until the tech bubble burst. He was a senior editor for the Tavis Smiley Show for two months before joining The Atlanta Journal-Constitution as its national Sunday editor. In 2006, he was hired as senior editor for Ebony magazine in Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Sylvester Monroe, Section A2005_204_002_012, TRT: 12:21:15
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Sylvester Monroe traveled to the Middle East with HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson and reported on his hostage negotiation efforts there for Ebony. After his return, Monroe served in a primarily editorial position at the magazine. In 2007, Monroe accompanied President Bill Clinton on his annual trip around Africa. His extensive travels led him to write 'The Africa You Don't Know,' which became a series in Ebony and won the National Association of Black Journalists 2008 award. Monroe covered HistoryMaker The Honorable Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, which inspired his cover story for Ebony, 'In Our Lifetime: Are We Really Witnessing the Election of the Nation's First Black President?'. Monroe reflects upon his concerns for the African American community, his legacy and how he would like to be remembered. He describes his two children and grandchildren.