

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles F. Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, Charles, 1909-2006
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Johnson,
Dates:	October 8, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:54:36).
Abstract:	Television actor and television producer Charles F. Johnson (1942 -) produced the hit television series, <i>Magnum, P.I.</i> , in addition to enjoying a successful acting career. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 8, 2005, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_239
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Charles Floyd Johnson was born in Camden, New Jersey, to Bertha Ellen Seagers, a teacher, and Orange Maull Johnson, who went off to fight in World War II shortly before Johnson was born and returned to tell his son stories of the Tuskegee Airmen, although he himself was in the American cavalry in North Africa. Johnson's family initially encouraged him to be a lawyer; in order to give him the best possible educational preparation he was sent to Stony Brook in 1956 where he became the second African American student to attend the prestigious school. Johnson was an ambitious student, and was accepted at both Howard and Brown Universities after his graduation from Stony Brook.

In 1958, Johnson began attending Howard University alongside some well-known classmates that included Stokely Carmichael. Johnson worked in New York during the summers as a teacher for young children. During the Civil Rights Movement, Johnson was active in marches; he majored in political science, minored in history and education, and worked at the Library of Congress. Johnson was also involved in John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, and was even invited to Kennedy's inauguration. Despite his political aspirations, Johnson demonstrated a growing interest in communications, and joined the Howard Players upon arriving at Howard; he graduated with honors from the school in 1962.

That same year, though drawn to the New York theater world, Johnson was accepted to and enrolled in Howard University Law School with a full scholarship. While at law school, Johnson was published in the *Howard Law Journal*, and flourished under professors Herbert Reed and Patricia Harris. Shortly after taking the bar exam, Johnson was drafted during the Vietnam War; soon after, he married his girlfriend at the time, was sent to work as a clerk in New Jersey, and then shifted to work as a defense counsel largely for AWOL soldiers, for which he received an Army Commendation Medal.

After leaving the military, Johnson moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked as a copyright lawyer for three years; his work schedule allowed him to work in theatrical companies and study communications in his free time.

Johnson also did some work in television for a show entitled *Harambee* and worked for Howard University's radio station. At the end of his tenure with the copyright office, Johnson worked with a justice from Sweden, who invited him to work as a law intern in Stockholm. After working in Stockholm, Johnson almost took a job working in France, but changed his mind to follow his dreams and move to Los Angeles in early 1971.

With the aid of the G.I. Bill, Johnson applied to and attended the Professional Theater Workshop in Santa Monica, California, where he took acting classes for nine months. Thanks to his law degree, Johnson found an entry-level position at Universal Studios working in the mail room; two days after his mailroom experience began, a new job opened up, and Johnson began his climb to the top of the ladder, becoming a production coordinator in late 1971.

In 1981, Johnson moved to Hawaii, where he married his second wife, who stayed in Los Angeles. Johnson's career in Hollywood was accomplished and diverse; it included roles in such television programs as *JAG* and *Navy: NCIS*. Johnson also worked as a writer and producer in a wide variety of television programs, which included working as a prominent figure behind the notable television programs *The Rockford Files* and *Magnum, P.I.*

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles F. Johnson was conducted by Paul Brock on October 8, 2005, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Television actor and television producer Charles F. Johnson (1942 -) produced the hit television series, *Magnum, P.I.*, in addition to enjoying a successful acting career.

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:

Johnson, Charles, 1909-2006

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Johnson, Charles, 1909-2006 --Interviews

African American television producers and directors--Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Television Actor

Television Producer

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Charles F. Johnson, October 8, 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 Charles F. Johnson, Section A2005_239_001_001, TRT: 0:27:50
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Charles F. Johnson was born on February 12, 1942 to Bertha Seagers Johnson and Orange Johnson, Jr. in Camden, New Jersey. His mother's ancestors were enslaved in Delaware, and his paternal ancestors were part-Native American from Pennsylvania. Johnson's maternal grandmother, Letitia Seagers, was born in the 1900s in Middletown, Delaware. While she worked as a domestic in Delaware, her husband was a domestic for a wealthy family in Philadelphia. Johnson's paternal grandmother was a teacher while his grandfather was an A.M.E. minister. An only child, Johnson's mother was born into a segregated community in Wilmington, Delaware where she attended Howard High School. Johnson's father was born in 1918 in New Jersey, although he moved with his family to Middletown where he met Johnson's mother at church. Together, the couple attended Delaware State College in Dover. Johnson remembers growing up in Middletown and describes its community.

African American television producers and directors--Interviews.

African American actors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Johnson, Section A2005_239_001_002, TRT: 0:29:01
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Charles F. Johnson's parents graduated from Delaware State College in Dover in the early 1940s. During World War II, his father was in the U.S. Cavalry in North Africa where he interacted with the Tuskegee Airmen. Johnson's mother taught in Wilmington, Delaware, then transferred to a school in Middletown, Delaware where she taught second grade, including Johnson's class. In Middletown, Johnson grew up in a middle class, segregated community. He remembers being required to sit in the balcony at Everett Theater. As a child, his maternal grandfather encouraged him to pursue a career in law. Although he could have enrolled in college early, he decided instead to attend boarding school. In 1956, Johnson became the second African American student at The Stony Brook School in Long Island. He then matriculated at Howard University, attracted by its renowned commitment to the African American community. There, Johnson pledged Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and worked for John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Johnson, Section A2005_239_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40
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Charles F. Johnson worked at the Library of Congress and on John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign while attending Howard University. A political science

major, Johnson also developed an interest in communications and joined the Howard University Players. Although he wanted to pursue a theater career, he instead entered Howard University School of Law in 1962. In 1965, after marrying his first wife, he was drafted by the U.S. Army. Due to his law degree, Johnson served as defense counsel during the Vietnam War and handled hundreds of AWOL cases. After his deployment, Johnson was hired by the U.S. Copyright Office in Washington, D.C., where he continued working in theater and on the TV show 'Harambee.' He traveled to Sweden to research copyright law before moving to Los Angeles in 1971. While studying acting, he began working in the mailroom at Universal Studios. However, he was rapidly promoted to production coordinator, a position that propelled his career as a television and film producer.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles F. Johnson, Section A2005_239_001_004, TRT: 0:28:05
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Charles F. Johnson became a producer for the 1980s television series 'Magnum P.I.' Even though he was relatively inexperienced at producing, Johnson adapted quickly. He traveled worldwide, including to locations in Hawaii, London and Hong Kong, for the show. He developed a friendship and business partnership with actor Tom Selleck, with whom he and Chris Abbott formed TWS Productions. Following 'Magnum,' Johnson's production credits include 'B.L. Stryker,' 'The Rockford Files' and 'JAG.' George Lucas also recruited Johnson to produce his movie 'Red Tails,' based on the Tuskegee Airmen. Johnson describes his ongoing support for African Americans in Hollywood and the responsibilities of an executive producer. He talks about his second wife, Anne Burford Johnson; reflects upon his legacy; and concludes the interview by describing the book he hopes to write, a decade by decade history of African Americans in the entertainment industry.