

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Olly Wilson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wilson, Olly, 1937-2018
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Olly Wilson,
Dates:	October 14, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:33:01).
Abstract:	Music professor and music composer Olly Wilson (1937 - 2018) was professor emeritus of music at the University of California, Berkeley. His recordings and compositions include, "Cetus," "Piano Piece," "Sinfonia," and, "In Memoriam Martin Luther King, Jr." Wilson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 14, 2005, in Berkeley, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_243
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Retired music professor and composer Olly Woodrow Wilson, Jr., was born on September 7, 1937, in St. Louis, Missouri, to Alma Grace Peoples Wilson, a seamstress, and Olly Woodrow Wilson, Sr., an insurance salesman and butler. Wilson's father had the reputation for having the best speaking voice and being the best singer in the family's church choir. Wilson's father insisted that all of his children learn to play the piano. As a result, Wilson learned to play the piano at the age of seven. Wilson attended and graduated from Sumner High School in 1955. He participated in a summer music theory program at Washington University the summer after graduation. Wilson applied and was accepted into Washington University in the fall of 1955. He was one of approximately ten African Americans enrolled at the university. Wilson graduated in 1959, earning his B.M. degree in music. He went on to earn his M.M. degree in music composition in 1960 from the University of Illinois.

In 1960, after receiving his master's degree, Wilson started to look for employment and was offered a teaching position at Florida A&M University. Wilson remained there for two years and returned to school and earned his PhD from the University of Iowa in 1964. Wilson then returned to teach at Florida A&M University for one year before being offered and accepting a position at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in 1965. He taught at Oberlin for five years, and in 1970, he joined the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1971, Wilson received a Guggenheim Fellowship and moved to West Africa to study African language and music firsthand. In 1972, he returned to the University of California, Berkeley, and continued to teach while setting up a program for music students to pursue their doctorate and other musical opportunities at the university. Wilson served as chairman of the music department between 1993 and 1997. He held the Jerry and Evelyn Hemmings Chambers Professorship in Music between 1995 and 1998. Wilson retired as professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2002.

Throughout his career, Wilson wrote articles for scholarly journals and recorded albums. Some of his recordings or compositions include *Cetus*, *Piano Piece*, *Sinfonia*, and *In Memoriam Martin Luther King, Jr.* Wilson won several

awards including the Elise Stoecker Prize from the Chamber Music Society of New York's Lincoln Center in 1992 and election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1995.

Wilson passed away on March 12, 2018 at age 80.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Olly Wilson was conducted by Loretta Henry on October 14, 2005, in Berkeley, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Music professor and music composer Olly Wilson (1937 - 2018) was professor emeritus of music at the University of California, Berkeley. His recordings and compositions include, "Cetus," "Piano Piece," "Sinfonia," and, "In Memoriam Martin Luther King, Jr."

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:

Wilson, Olly, 1937-2018

Henry, Loretta (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Wilson, Olly, 1937-2018 --Interviews

African American composers--Interviews

African American music teachers--California--Berkeley--Interviews

African American college teachers--California--Berkeley--Interviews

University of California, Berkeley--Faculty--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Music Composer

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 Olly Wilson, October 14, 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 Olly Wilson, Section A2005_243_001_001, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Olly Wilson was born on Septemeber 7, 1937 in St. Louis, Missouri to Alma Peoples Wilson and Olly Wilson, Sr. His mother grew up on a farm in Forrest City, Arkansas surrounded by extended family. She was the valedictorian of her high school, and she and many of her siblings attended Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas. Wilson's father grew up on a farm in Turner, Arkansas. He was the youngest in his large family and the only surviving son. His mother, who was Cherokee, died shortly after giving birth to him, and he was raised by his father and stepmother. He met Wilson's mother on a streetcar in Little Rock while attending Arkansas Baptist Church. The pair married and left school. They lived in the primarily black town of Kinloch, Missouri before settling in St. Louis. Wilson's mother worked as a domestic, and his father was a butler. Wilson remembers experiencing the racism of the Deep South while traveling with his father to visit his paternal step-grandmother.

African American composers--Interviews.

African American music teachers--California--Berkeley--Interviews.

African American college teachers--California--Berkeley--Interviews.

University of California, Berkeley--Faculty--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Olly Wilson, Section A2005_243_001_002, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Olly Wilson recounts a family story from his paternal grandfather about an enslaved relative who killed a white man while resisting abuse and then fled, never to be heard from him again. Wilson grew up in St. Louis, Missouri with four sisters. His sister, Marian Wilson, died when he was three years old, and he remembers attending her funeral. He also recalls washing dishes with his sisters. In St. Louis' black commercial district, he heard music, smelled barbecue and saw people selling live chickens, which his neighbors and family often killed and prepared for dinner. During World War II, he donated his new toy wagon as scrap metal for the war effort. His father worked for the U.S. Postal Service as a railway mail clerk, and Wilson was fascinated by the gun his father was given for the job. With the increased income from his father's job, his parents bought a new house in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in 1943. Wilson and his family attended First Baptist Church, and he describes the church's history.

Video Oral History Interview with Olly Wilson, Section A2005_243_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Olly Wilson attended First Baptist Church, pastored by Dr. J.M. Bracy. At the church, he encountered African Americans from all social classes. Because his father was an amateur musician, Wilson and his siblings were taught music from an early age. They attended the primarily-white Krieger School of Music, where they all learned piano. Wilson followed in his oldest sister's footsteps by playing first piano at Sunday school. He also took private lessons for the clarinet. He and his siblings often played accompanying their father's singing. Occasionally, Wilson visited his aunt in Chicago, Illinois. His uncle, a foundry builder, loved to listen to Wilson read poems. Compared to his community in St. Louis, Wilson felt intimidated by the South Side of Chicago, and he spent many of his days in the Museum of Science and Industry. As a teenager, Wilson taught himself how

to play popular music and began to perform around town. He recalls the rich history of St. Louis' music scene.

Video Oral History Interview with Olly Wilson, Section A2005_243_001_004, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Olly Wilson completed the accelerated program at Sumner High School. In 1955, he matriculated at Washington University in St. Louis, where he encountered a racist English professor. Upon graduating in 1959, he married his wife, Elouise Wilson. Wilson earned his master's degree from University of Illinois in 1960. With no job offers from any of the majority-white universities, he taught at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University for two years and completed his graduate studies at the University of Iowa before finally being hired at Oberlin Conservatory of Music in 1964. At Oberlin, he was one of only two black professors. In 1970, he was hired as an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley. The following year, he won a Guggenheim Fellowship to study in Ghana. After the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 1978 ruling, he became the first faculty assistant for affirmative action. Wilson also describes his musical influences and his retirement in 2002.

Video Oral History Interview with Olly Wilson, Section A2005_243_001_005, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Olly Wilson won the first international electronic music competition in 1967 with a piece called 'Cetus.' Three years later, he was commissioned to compose a piece for the Tanglewood Music Festival orchestra. The positive reviews for both compositions helped him secure his position at the University of California, Berkeley. He created 'Call and Response' in collaboration with Mary Lovelace O'Neal, an artist at Berkeley, by composing his response to one of O'Neal's paintings, to which she then replied with a painting influenced by his composition. His composition 'Hold On,' written for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, is based on a traditional spiritual. Wilson describes how spirituals, twentieth century European music, jazz, electronic music, and a strong oral tradition all influence his work. Wilson composed for symphonies and orchestras internationally, and hopes to continue composing in retirement. Wilson reflects upon the appeal of popular music and the state of the music industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Olly Wilson, Section A2005_243_001_006, TRT: 0:07:21 ?

Olly Wilson and his wife, Elouise Wilson, have two children, Dawn Wilson Johnson and Kent Allen Wilson. In his retirement, Wilson hopes to continue to write music and to spend more time with his family. He hopes to pass on to his six grandchildren his core values of integrity, honesty and self-improvement. Wilson concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.