

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willie Brown, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Brown, Willie, 1930-2014
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willie Brown, Jr.,
Dates:	September 23, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:08:30).
Abstract:	Opera singer Willie Brown, Jr. (1930 - 2014) performed in several operas, including, "Carmen," and, "Aida," and was the only full time African American Fine Artist employed by Chicago's Lyric Opera. Brown also served as a Chicago public school teacher. Brown passed away on February 7, 2014. Brown was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 23, 2006, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_103
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Bass soloist and educator Willie Brown, Jr. was born on August 17, 1930 in New Orleans, Louisiana to Odessa Jackson Brown and Willie Chester Brown, both church soloists. He sang his first solo, *Heaven's Radio* in kindergarten. Brown attended Sylvania F. Williams School in New Orleans and spent some of his elementary years in Redondo Beach and Los Angeles, California. Attending Nelson Junior High School in New Orleans, Brown performed as a church soloist and in school operettas. He formed the group, Willie Brown and the Boys, before graduating from Booker T. Washington High School in 1949. His education at Xavier University was interrupted by service in the United States Army in 1953, but he returned to graduate with a B.A. degree in music education in 1957. Brown went on to earn a Masters degree in musical performance from Governors State University in Illinois and later a Ph.D. in music from Birmingham, Alabama's Faith College. At Xavier University's Opera Workshop, Brown performed the title role in the opera *Riggoletto*, "Figaro" in *The Marriage of Figaro* and "Escamillo" in *Carmen*.

Moving to Chicago in 1957, Brown served as a Chicago public school teacher, while building a reputation as a church and classical soloist. In the early 1960's, he gained national exposure as a guest soloist on NBC television's *Dave Garroway Show*. In 1967, he was invited as special guest of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to perform for the SCLC Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. Brown performed with the black McLin Opera Company and the Light Opera Company and performed over two thousand times as a professional with Chicago's Lyric Opera Company where he was the only full time African American artist. His Lyric Opera credits include solos as "Escamillo" in *Carmen* and as the priest in *Aida*. Brown was also a soloist in *Tales of Hoffmann*, *Pagliacci* and *Cavallieria Rusticana*. Brown often performed Handel's *Messiah*, *Requiem*, *Seven Last Words of Christ*, *St. Paul* by Mendelssohn and *Strabat Mater* as an oratorio bass soloist. His musical repertoire included operatic arias in Italian, French and German and oratorio arias in Latin. Brown also performed cantatas, English, Italian and German folk songs, American show songs, spirituals, gospels, hymns and popular songs. Brown's concert credits included Notre

Dame University, International Parliament of Religion, and the Chicago Gospel Fest. The Bravo Chapter of the Lyric Opera, the Chicago Board of Education Music Department, and the Chicago Board of Administrative Affairs invited Brown as a special guest performer.

Brown was the winner of numerous awards for his solos including the “Best Male Singer” from the R. Nathaniel Dett Scholarship Award, the B Sharp Best Singer Scholarship and the 1996 James P. Lyke African American Male Image Award. He was the director of the Angels Choir of Chicago’s Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Brown passed away on February 7, 2014 at age 83.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willie Brown, Jr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 23, 2006, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Opera singer Willie Brown, Jr. (1930 - 2014) performed in several operas, including, "Carmen," and, "Aida," and was the only full time African American Fine Artist employed by Chicago's Lyric Opera. Brown also served as a Chicago public school teacher. Brown passed away on February 7, 2014.

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:

Brown, Willie, 1930-2014

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Brown, Willie, 1930-2014 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Opera Singer

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 Willie Brown, Jr., September 23, 2006. 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 Willie Brown, Jr., Section A2006_103_001_001, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Willie L. Brown, Jr. was born on August 17, 1930 in New Orleans, Louisiana to Odessa Jackson Brown and Willie L. Brown, Sr. His paternal great grandmother was Cherokee and helped to raise Brown's father, as his parents died early. His father left home with Brown's uncle when he was only a teenager. He did not attend school, but was a talented carpenter. Brown's father was friends with Brown's maternal uncle, and it was through him that his parents met. Brown's maternal grandparents, Susie Roberson Jackson and Emerson Jackson, helped raise him in New Orleans' Uptown neighborhood. Jackson was a handsome and clean-cut Baptist preacher, and Brown sang in his church. Brown's mother and aunt, Mattie Jackson Walters, were also singers. Brown remembers visiting his maternal uncle, a sharecropper on an old plantation, and brother-in-law to Mahalia Jackson. Brown's mother worked as a laundress in New Orleans during World War II. His parents divorced when he was four years old, and his father moved to Chicago, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Brown, Jr., Section A2006_103_001_002, TRT: 0:28:58 ?

Willie L. Brown, Jr. and his mother lived with his uncle in the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans, Louisiana. He describes the geographic and racial makeup of the different neighborhoods in New Orleans. Brown moved into the Lafitte Projects in Downtown, New Orleans, where the homes had electric appliances and yards. Brown remembers being dropped as a baby, participating in staged weddings, and singing in the first grade. His family, teachers and church leaders all encouraged him to pursue singing, comparing him to Paul Robeson. He attended Gloryland Mt. Gillion Baptist Church and Sylvania F. Williams Elementary School. Brown was already able to read when he began elementary school, which he credits to his strong memory and his determination to succeed. Brown worked as a water boy at the docks in New Orleans, bringing water to the men working on the banana and peanut boats from Central America. He recalls the smell of the rotten peanuts at the bottom of the boats, and picking blackberries in the 7th Ward.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Brown, Jr., Section A2006_103_001_003, TRT: 0:28:05 ?

Willie L. Brown, Jr. lived in California from the second to the fifth grade. His teachers and family recognized his talent for singing, and he followed in the footsteps of his mother and aunt who sang at church. He moved back to New Orleans, where he attended Bienville Elementary School, Medard H. Nelson Elementary School and Booker T. Washington High School. He faced discrimination because of his dark complexion, and it was only through singing that Brown was able to overcome the resulting depression. In high school, Brown created a quartet, Willie Brown and his Boys. The quartet performed at the Dew Drop Inn, and went to the New Rhythm Club to listen to The Ink Spots, Johnny Moore's Three Blazers and other jazz singers. Upon graduation in 1949, Brown received a partial scholarship to attend New Orleans' Xavier University of Louisiana, where he frequently conflicted with the choir director, Norman Bell. Brown was the choir's best sight-reader, and used the Solfege system to memorize music quickly.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Brown, Jr., Section A2006_103_001_004, TRT: 0:28:34 ?

Willie L. Brown, Jr. sang in the choir at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, Louisiana where he met Norman Francis and John H. Stroger, Jr. With the choir, he performed on the 'Today Show' with Dave Garroway, at St. Louis

Cathedral and in the French Quarter. Unable to graduate in four years, Brown was drafted in the U.S. Army. He was stationed at the newly integrated Carswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth, Texas, where he sang in competitions and attended a training school. After his discharge, Brown returned to New Orleans to finish his undergraduate degree, and met Warner Saunders. His parents were reunited in Chicago, Illinois, so upon graduation he joined them there. In Chicago, he worked as a substitute teacher, post office worker and choir director at Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church. Brown had difficulty passing the teacher examination due to racial discrimination, but passed the National Teacher Examination in 1977. He performed with the Lyric Opera of Chicago from 1968 to 1999.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Brown, Jr., Section A2006_103_001_005, TRT: 0:28:14 ?

Willie L. Brown, Jr.'s sang opera for over thirty years with the Lyric Opera of Chicago as well as New Orleans companies. 'Carmen' was one of his favorite operas, and he played the role of Escamillo in multiple productions. In one production with the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, he played alongside opera legend Debra Brown. Brown also liked to perform 'Rigoletto,' as he related his experiences in New Orleans to the life of the titular character. His other roles included Ramfis in 'Aida'; Figaro in 'The Marriage of Figaro'; and Alfio in 'Cavallieria Rusticana.' Brown and Reverend Dr. Lena McLin performed for Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in Atlanta, Georgia and at the Quinn Chapel A.M.E. Church in Chicago, Illinois. He did not often travel for performances due to his fear of airplanes. Brown reflects upon his opera career, and the differences between the stage and film versions of 'Carmen Jones' and 'Porgy and Bess.' He remembers meeting his idol, Paul Robeson, in New Orleans.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Brown, Jr., Section A2006_103_001_006, TRT: 0:28:29 ?

Willie L. Brown, Jr. met his idol, Paul Robeson, when he came to perform in New Orleans, Louisiana. While he never met William Warfield, Brown was often compared to him, especially their renditions of George Frideric Handel's 'Messiah.' Brown was a member of the Lyric Opera of Chicago and sang in more operas than any other African American man during his career. As one of the few black singers, Brown experienced discrimination from directors and cast members. He was disguised with light makeup to blend in with the white cast in 'Satyagraha,' an opera about Mahatma Gandhi by Philip Glass. Despite these affronts, Brown enjoyed performing at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. He remembers the logistics of performing with live horses on stage; prompter mistakes; and the volunteers who served as extras. Brown shares advice for aspiring opera singers, and describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He concludes this part of the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie Brown, Jr., Section A2006_103_001_007, TRT: 0:17:30 ?

Willie L. Brown, Jr. talks about his wife's conversion to the Jehovah's Witnesses, and its effect on their marriage. He describes how African American youth were often perceived at the time of the interview. Brown reflects upon how he would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.