

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Philip Cohran

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cohran, Phil, 1927-2017
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran,
Dates:	December 11, 2006 and January 18, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2006 and 2007
Physical Description:	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:55:04).
Abstract:	Trumpet player Philip Cohran (1927 - 2017) played trumpet, zithers and harp in Sun Ra's cutting edge, "Astral Infinity Arkestra," and was the founding director of the Afro-Arts Theatre in Chicago. He also formed The Artistic Heritage Ensemble, which served as a basis for the group Earth, Wind and Fire. Cohran was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 11, 2006 and January 18, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_158
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Chicago music legend Philip Cohran was born Philip Thomas Cohran on May 8, 1927, in Oxford, Mississippi. His parents, Frankie Mae Green Cohran and Philip Thomas Cohran, who had ancestral ties to Rust College, sent their only child to the Oxford Training School and later to school in Troy, Missouri. Cohran attended Vashon High School in St. Louis, but graduated from Lincoln University Laboratory High School in 1945. Music teachers Ruby Harris Gill and Lewis A. Laird identified chemistry major Cohran as a Lincoln University prodigy. Drawn increasingly to music, Cohran played trumpet with a number of groups in the St. Louis area during the late 1940s.

In 1950, Cohran joined Jay McShann's touring swing band, playing with Charlie Parker and Walter Brown. He recorded with McShann for Houston's Peacock Records where he backed up Big Mama Thornton and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. Drafted that year, Cohran trained Naval bands at Annapolis, Maryland. Discharged in 1952, Cohran moved to Chicago where he studied the Schillinger system and played with Jimmy Bell and Walter Perkins. For the balance of the 1950s, Cohran was a part of Sun Ra's cutting edge Astral Infinity Arkestra where he played trumpet, zithers and harp on recordings such as *Rocket Number Nine* and *We Travel the Spaceways*. Cohran remained in Chicago when Sun Ra moved to Montreal in 1962, and briefly joined the Nation of Islam. A remarkable autodidact, Cohran amassed a huge library of books and media. His studies and research on science, health, history and music made him a community guru.

In 1966, Cohran's Artistic Heritage Ensemble included Amina Claudine Myers, Ajramu, Larry King, Eugene Easton, Don Myric, Aaron Dodd, Bob Crowder, Pete Cosey, Charles Hany, Louis Satterfield, Verdeen White and Maurice White. The latter three later formed the nucleus of the musical group Earth, Wind and Fire, utilizing the thumb piano sounds pioneered by Cohran. One of his 1966 concerts at 63rd Street Beach in Chicago drew 3,000 people. As founding director of the Afro Arts Theater in 1967, Cohran hosted a weekly cultural extravaganza that featured poets like, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Carolyn Rodgers and Useni Eugene Perkins; dancers like

Darlene Blackburn and Alyo Tolbert; and musicians from the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) that he founded with Muhal Richard Abrams. In 1968, Cohran left Affro Arts to teach at Malcom X College. From 1975 to 1977, Cohran operated Transitions East, a Chicago South Side venue featuring music and health food. In the 1980s, Cohran twice co-chaired Artists for Harold Washington. In 1987, he composed the award-winning music for the *Sky Show* at Chicago's Adler Planetarium. His music has been featured in countless venues including the Chicago Jazz Festival. Honored numerous times for his musicianship and teaching, Cohran was honored with the name "Kelan" by Chinese Muslims while on tour in 1991.

Cohran passed away on June 28, 2017 at the age of 90.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Philip Cohran was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 11, 2006 and January 18, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Trumpet player Philip Cohran (1927 - 2017) played trumpet, zithers and harp in Sun Ra's cutting edge, "Astral Infinity Arkestra," and was the founding director of the Afro-Arts Theatre in Chicago. He also formed The Artistic Heritage Ensemble, which served as a basis for the group Earth, Wind and Fire.

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:

Cohran, Phil, 1927-2017

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Cohran, Phil, 1927-2017 --Interviews

African American jazz musicians--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African American music teachers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Trumpet players--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Trumpet Player

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 Philip Cohran, December 11, 2006 and January 18, 2007. 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 Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Philip Cohran was born on May 8, 1927 in Oxford, Mississippi to Frankie Green Rogland and Philip Cohran, Sr. His maternal great-grandfather was a musician, and his maternal grandfather, Hugh West, was a mechanic who worked on an early cotton gin. West did not raise Cohran's mother and uncle, Jack Green, who were born out of wedlock near Lexington, Mississippi. After their own mother died, Cohran's mother and uncle were sent to live with their maternal Aunt Put in Oxford. There, Cohran's mother was the valedictorian of her high school. Upon learning of her success, West contacted Cohran's mother and uncle to offer funding for their education. Later, Cohran grew up in Oxford, where his maternal uncle was a successful gambler. However, his uncle was blinded in an accident, and died of alcoholism in St. Louis, Missouri. Cohran also describes the deaths of his childhood friends, including one who was institutionalized, and another who was lynched after James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi.

African American jazz musicians--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African American music teachers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Trumpet players--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_001_002, TRT: 0:29:16 ?

Philip Cohran's surname originated with his paternal ancestor, Jennie, who was enslaved by the Cowhorn family in Virginia, and the name changed over time to Coren, and then to Cohran. His paternal great-great-great-grandfather, Lee Coren, supported Hiram Rhodes Revels' Congressional campaign during Reconstruction, and received farmland in Mississippi, which remained in the family. Cohran's grandfather worked on the farm, while his grandmother, father and uncles attended Rust University in Holly Springs, Mississippi. In Oxford, Mississippi, Cohran's mother and uncle were respected members of the community. Wanting to offer funding for their education, Cohran's maternal grandfather, Hugh West, went to his bank in Memphis, Tennessee to withdraw funds. While in Memphis, West was killed by unknown persons, and Cohran's mother never received the money. Cohran's parents met in Oxford, and were briefly married. After their separation, Cohran grew up with his mother, and often visited his maternal grandparents' farm.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_001_003, TRT: 0:28:52 ?

Philip Cohran's mother married restaurateur James Rogland, one of only two African American storeowners in Oxford, Mississippi, when Cohran was a young boy. Oxford was a close-knit community, where neighbors raised their children together. Cohran often spent time at his stepfather's restaurant, and thus never went hungry during the Great Depression. At five years old, Cohran won a city-wide talent contest, and began studying music. A local piano teacher was his first instructor, but Cohran quit due to her strictness. His family then moved to Troy, Missouri to work at Camp Derricotte, a summer camp. Cohran

describes the history of the area, including its large Native American population. He also talks about the descendants of people sold on the white slave market in St. Charles, Missouri. Cohran attended Troy's public elementary schools, and then enrolled at Lincoln University Laboratory High School, a boarding school operated by Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_001_004, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Philip Cohran attended Lincoln University Laboratory High School in Jefferson City, Missouri, where he surprised his music teacher, Rubye Harris Gill, and classmates with his musical talent. Cohran was a proficient sight reader, and played in the style of the greats he heard on the radio, like Fletcher Henderson, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. In 1945, Cohran graduated high school, and briefly studied chemistry at Jefferson City's Lincoln University. Wanting to focus on his music, Cohran left the school in 1946, and moved to St. Louis, Missouri. During the day, he worked as a porter on the SS Admiral on the Mississippi River. At night, he played the trumpet at local jazz clubs like the Blue Flame Club in East St. Louis, Missouri. In 1950, Cohran joined Jay McShann's band, which was originally organized by Charlie Parker. For two years, they toured the country with artists like Big Mama Thornton. Cohran also recorded with the band for Peacock Records.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_001_005, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Philip Cohran was drafted to the U.S. Army in 1950, just before it was racially integrated. He was placed in an all-white troop because of his Scottish surname, and where he stayed for several days before he was moved to an all-black unit. Learning that Cohran was a trumpeter, his lieutenant assigned him to play the bugle for the post. Cohran was soon asked to form a band of six men to represent the U.S. Army at the United States Naval School of Music in Washington, D.C. There, Cohran and his band studied composition and sight reading, and travelled the country to perform at U.S. Army funeral services. After leaving the U.S. military, Cohran returned to St. Louis, Missouri with plans to form his own band. Cohran played for a time with Jimmie Bell's band, until he became overwhelmed by the corruption and drug culture of St. Louis. Then, Cohran moved to Chicago, Illinois to study the Schillinger System of Musical Composition. He met musicians like Muddy Waters and Little Walter, and found a job at a steel mill.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_002_006, TRT: 0:29:37 ?

Philip Cohran played trumpet with John Gilmore in Chicago, Illinois. During a performance at Chicago's Sutherland Hotel, Gilmore introduced Cohran to musician Sun Ra. Soon after, Cohran joined Sun Ra's Astro Infinity Arkestra. Sun Ra began his music career in Birmingham, Alabama with John Tuggle "Fess" Whatley, and moved to Chicago in 1956. Cohran's lifestyle and music were heavily influenced by Sun Ra's Egyptian and astronomical philosophy. Rehearsals for the Astro Infinity Arkestra were long and exhausting. The band practiced for six hours each day, and performed for six hours most nights. While playing with the Astro Infinity Arkestra, Cohran invented the violin uke and the frankiphone, both of which were used on the band's records. Cohran was inspired to create the frankiphone after a friend gave him a collection of African folk instruments. He named the instrument after his mother, Frankie Green Rogland, and played it on his walks through the South Side of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_002_007, TRT: 0:29:36 ?

Philip Cohran played the trumpet in Sun Ra's Astro Infinity Arkestra with saxophonist John Gilmore and bassist Johnny Pate in Chicago, Illinois. Cohran adopted Sun Ra's philosophy, which was based on Egyptian traditions and

astronomy. After several years, Cohran wanted to find his own sound, and left the Astro Infinity Arkestra to form his own band. At this time, Cohran also married his wife. Increasingly interest in studying astrology, sound and African history, Cohran joined the Nation of Islam, as he felt their ideas were aligned with his own. He also appreciated the discipline found within the organization. Though the church, Cohran worked with Malcolm X to record his speeches, and recruited new members on Saviours' Day. In recognition of his dedication, the leaders of the mosque gave Cohran the opportunity to become a minister of the church. However, Cohran then decided to leave the Nation of Islam, as he felt the church leaders did not support his plans for a music ministry.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_002_008, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

Philip Cohran worked with Malcolm X during his involvement with the Nation of Islam. Cohran was a strong supporter of Malcolm X's ideas, and talks about his wrongful portrayal as a villain in the media of the time. In 1965, Cohran learned of Malcolm X's assassination from a radio broadcast, and wrote 'The Malcolm X Memorial (A Tribute in Music)' in his memory. That same year, Cohran formed the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) with Louis Hall, drummer Steve McCall and composer Muhal Richard Abrams to support African American musicians, who were becoming increasingly prominent with the growth of the Black Arts Movement. The group required its members to perform their own compositions, rather than jazz standards. While a member of the AACM, Cohran played at the M.W. St. John's Grand Lodge in Chicago, Illinois, where he used incense during a concert for the first time. Cohran left the AACM after six months, as he disliked some members' avant-garde compositions.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_002_009, TRT: 0:29:51 ?

Philip Cohran saw Oscar Brown, Jr. perform 'Joy '66' in Chicago, Illinois, and brought his band to audition for Brown's theater company. Brown could not afford to hire a twelve piece band, but asked Cohran to write several songs for a show based on the life of Paul Laurence Dunbar, which became 'Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow.' In the fall of 1966, Cohran and Brown presented the show to Emile Serposs of the Chicago Board of Education, and obtained funding to perform at the Chicago Public Schools and the Museum of Science and Industry. When the production closed, Cohran was asked to create a program about the origins of music, called 'The Magic of Music.' However, the school board objected to the show's content, and eliminated his funding. That summer, Cohran performed a series of shows at Chicago's 66th Street Beach, and attracted a large following. With their encouragement, he founded the Afro-Arts Theater to create a permanent space for the celebration of black culture on Chicago's South Side.

Video Oral History Interview with Philip Cohran, Section A2006_158_002_010, TRT: 0:30:11 ?

Philip Cohran founded the Afro-Arts Theater on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois to educate the African American community and strengthen its sense of identity. In addition to theatrical productions, the theater's programming included international speakers, health classes and music lessons. The theater offered courses in languages like Swahili and Arabic, the latter of which was taught by Warith Deen Mohammed. The theater was also politically engaged, and hosted lecturers like Mayor Richard Hatcher's public relations manager and black power activist Stokely Carmichael. In 1969, Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley claimed the Afro-Arts Theater was discriminating by not allowing entry to the press, and forced the institution to close. Cohran describes the backlash he received after the theater's closure. From that time, Cohran taught at Chicago's

Malcolm X College. He also continued to play with his band, the Artistic Heritage Ensemble. The band included Verdine White, who later played with Earth, Wind and Fire.