

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Katherine Schaffner

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Schaffner, Katherine, 1944-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Schaffner,
Dates:	March 5, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:18:10).
Abstract:	Singer Katherine Schaffner (1944 -) was an original member of the musical group, The Marvelettes. Schaffner was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 5, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_074
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Original member of the Marvelettes, Katherine Anderson Schaffner was born Katherine Elaine Anderson on January 16, 1944, in Ann Arbor, Michigan to Robert Timothy Calvin "T.C." Anderson and Florence Smith Anderson. Raised in the Detroit suburb of Inkster's Carver Homes, Schaffner attended Carver Elementary School, Ford Junior High School, Fellrath Junior High School and Inkster High School. At age seventeen, she was drafted as a back up singer for friends Gladys Horton and Georgia Dobbins for the Inkster High School talent show in 1961. Their group included Georgeanna Tillman and Wyanetta (often spelled "Juanita") Cowart. The five teenagers called themselves the Casinyets for "Can't Sing Yets." They won fourth place, but with the help of their teacher, Shirley Sharpley, who knew Berry Gordy's driver, Jon O'Den, they were able to land an audition with Motown Records. Motown's featured stars in 1961 were Smokey Robinson and the Miracles and Mary Wells. Dobbins modified a William Garrett song for the group and the result was *Please Mr. Postman*. Impressed, Gordy signed them on 1961, renaming the group the Marvelettes.

Please Mr. Postman became the number one song in the nation after thirteen weeks. As a Marvelette, Schaffner received Motown training in voice, etiquette and fashion. Soon, the Marvelettes were touring with the Motown Review. They performed at Washington, D.C.'s Howard Theatre, Harlem's Apollo Theatre, Chicago's Regal Theatre and other African American and teen venues. The Marvelettes went on to record hit singles such as *Playboy* and *Beachwood 4-5789*, which became the most popular phone number in America. Supported by the songwriting talents of Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, Marvin Gaye and Smokey Robinson, the Marvelettes were an essential female part of Gordy's "sound of young America," along with Martha Reeves and the Vandellas and The Supremes. During the 1960s, the Marvelettes recorded hit after hit, including *Too Many Fish in the Sea* in 1964, *Don't Mess with Bill* in 1965, *The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game* in 1967, *My Baby Must Be a Magician* in 1968 and *That's How Heartaches are Made* in 1969.

Schaffner, now retired from show business, is the mother of two adult children, Keisha and Kalaine Schaffner. She is also the grandmother of one grandson, Toure Schaffner.

Schaffner was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 5, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Katherine Schaffner was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 5, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Singer Katherine Schaffner (1944 -) was an original member of the musical group, The Marvelettes.

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:

Schaffner, Katherine, 1944-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Schaffner, Katherine, 1944- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Marvelettes

Occupations:

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 Katherine Schaffner, March 5, 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 Katherine Schaffner, Section A2007_074_001_001, TRT: 0:28:33 ?

Katherine Schaffner was born on January 16, 1944 in Ann Arbor, Michigan to Florence Smith Anderson and Robert Anderson. Her paternal great-grandfather,

former slave George Anderson, married Mary Anderson after emancipation. In Due West, South Carolina, Schaffner's paternal grandfather worked as a cook at the local college. Her father was born in Donalds, South Carolina; and, as a young man, followed his older brother to Ann Arbor, where he found work in the construction industry. Schaffner's mother was born in Columbia, South Carolina. At seven years old, she moved to Ann Arbor with her mother, Bettie Preston Garnett. She went on to work as a domestic, and later in a factory, where Schaffner's father was also employed. They met and married; and, soon after, moved to Inkster, Michigan, a town established by industrialist Henry Ford for African American automobile workers. There, Schaffner grew up in the Carver Homes housing development, and was the oldest of her parents' four children.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Schaffner, Section A2007_074_001_002, TRT: 0:29:09 ?

Katherine Schaffner grew up in Inkster, Michigan, where she attended Carver Elementary School, and sang in the choir at Smith Chapel A.M.E. Church. She listened to music on WCHB Radio, the area's only black-operated radio station; and watched 'The Ed Sullivan Show', although it rarely featured African American entertainers. Schaffner attended Henry Ford Junior High School for one year; and, after it closed, transferred to Fellrath Junior High School. Although singing was popular among her peers, Schaffner never considered a musical career for herself. She aspired to be a legal secretary, and sometimes did office work at school. Schaffner learned from her father to defend herself, and was involved in fights at school on occasion. Nonetheless, she was a good student, and was encouraged by her counselors at Inkster High School to pursue higher education. However, she had few professional role models, as most of Inkster's educated citizens left the town in search of better opportunities.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Schaffner, Section A2007_074_001_003, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

Katherine Shaffner was recruited by her classmate, Gladys Horton, to join The Casinyets singing group with Georgeanna Tillman, Juanita Cowart and Georgia Dobbins. The group entered the talent show at Inkster High School in Inkster, Michigan; and, although they did not win, a teacher recognized their potential, and brought them to audition for Motown Records, which at the time produced artists like Mary Wells, and Smokey Robinson and The Miracles. Motown founder Berry Gordy offered The Casinyets a contract, and all but Dobbins signed. Dobbins was replaced with Wanda Young, but remained involved with the group. She renamed them The Marvelettes, and wrote their first song, 'Please Mr. Postman.' In 1961, the single became the first on Motown Records to sell over 1 million copies. With her father's support, Shaffner left school at sixteen years old to tour with The Marvelettes. She also recalls caring for her younger siblings, and her involvement with the Girls Scouts.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Schaffner, Section A2007_074_001_004, TRT: 0:28:26 ?

Katherine Schaffner and The Marvelettes released 'Please Mr. Postman' in 1961, after which Motown Records quickly gained popularity. Touring with The Marvelettes was strenuous, as few hotels allowed African American guests. In the South, their tour bus was once mistaken for Freedom Riders, and attacked. Juanita Cowart left the group following a nervous breakdown, and Georgiana Tillman departed after being diagnosed with lupus and sickle cell anemia. Gladys Horton performed until a few months into her pregnancy; and, while Schaffner and Wanda Young continued to perform, Young began abusing alcohol and drugs. The Marvelettes disbanded in 1970, and Schaffner focused on

raising her children in Las Vegas, Nevada, where she lived with her husband, Joe Schaffner. In 1977, she moved her family to Inkster, Michigan after her maternal grandmother, Bettie Preston Garnett, fell ill. Schaffner recalls meetings musical artists Tommy Hunt, Gladys Knight and The Drifters; and reflects upon the legacy of Motown Records.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Schaffner, Section A2007_074_001_005, TRT: 0:22:33 ?

Katherine Schaffner and The Marvelettes initially choreographed their own dance routines, as Motown Records did not hire choreographer Cholly Atkins until 1964. Around that time, the record company also recruited Maurice King as a vocal trainer, and Maxine Powell as an etiquette instructor. Despite the role of The Marvelettes' hit song, 'Please Mr. Postman,' in Motown Records' success, the group received little recognition for their part in music history. Only in 2004 did The Marvelettes receive a Gold record certifying the sale of 1 million copies of 'Please Mr. Postman' in 1961. Schaffner talks about the music of the 1960s, and 'Now That I Can Dance,' a play about the history of Motown Records. She describes her family, as well as her hopes and concerns for the African American community. Schaffner also reflects upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered; and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.