

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Harry Elston

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Elston, Harry
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Harry Elston,
Dates:	November 6, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:18:45).
Abstract:	R & B singer and songwriter Harry Elston (1938 -) co-founded the R & B group, Friends of Distinction. Some of the group's hits include "Love or Let Me Be Lonely," "Time Waits for No One" and "Going in Circles." Elston also co-founded the Mavericks Flat, a well-known L.A. night club, and the Negro Industrial and Economic Union. Elston was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 6, 2007, in Studio City , California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_325
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

R&B singer Harry James Elston was born on November 4, 1938 in Dallas, Texas to the musical family of Ernestine Cooksey and Leonard David Elston, Sr. Elston grew up in San Diego, California and attended Midway Elementary School and Point Loma High School. Elston began his career in the music industry around the ages of sixteen or seventeen with the Johnny Otis Caravan. Elston and the group he was in, Cel Foster and The Audios, came to San Diego to a talent search. The group was chosen for the Johnny Otis Caravan, which included other musical acts like Etta James and Jacki Kelso. By age twenty-five, Elston began working as the limousine driver for The Temptations. In 1963, Elston formed a R&B group called the Hi Fi's with Lamonte McLemore, Floyd Butler and ex-Miss California Bronze Talent Award winner, Marilyn McCoo. As a member of the Hi Fi's, Elston sang at local night clubs while taking lessons from a vocal coach. The Hi Fi's came to the attention of Ray Charles in 1964, and the following year, he decided to take the group on tour with him. Ray Charles went on to produce the group's single "Lonesome Mood". In 1966, due to internal disagreements, Elston and Floyd Butler decided to depart from the Hi Fi's and along with Jessica Cleaves and Barbara Jean Love they formed the Friends of Distinction.

Originally, Elston came up with the name Distinctive Friends, but Barbara Jean Love decided to reverse the words. In 1968, Hall of Fame football player Jim Brown met the group and introduced them to the staff at RCA Records. In 1969, Friends of Distinction released their first album entitled *Grazin'* on RCA Records. The album included the songs "Grazing in the Grass", of which Elston wrote and sang lead on, and "Going in Circles." *Grazin'* peaked at number five on the R&B charts. "Going in Circles" preceded the album, and it landed at number three on the charts. Friends of Distinction also released the songs "Love or Let Me Be Lonely", "Time Waits for No One" and "I Need You." When Barbara Jean Love became pregnant in 1970, Charlene Gibson replaced the vocalist, and the Friends of Distinction released *Real Friends* on RCA Records. Another change in Friends of Distinction occurred when Jessica Cleaves decided to leave the group and joined the R&B group Earth, Wind and Fire.

During the 1960s, Elston was also a prominent figure in the urban night life. Alongside, Jim Brown and John Daniels, Elston was instrumental in opening the Mavericks Flat, a well-known L.A. night club that is often referred to as the Apollo Theater of the west coast. In addition, Elston was instrumental in the formation of the N.I.E.U. (Negro Industrial and Economic Union). In 1992, Elston was co-writer of “It’s Over,” a single for Friends of Distinction. The current members of the group are Dorian Holley, Wendy Smith Brune, Berlando Drake and Harry Elston.

Elston lives in Studio City, California and Henderson, Nevada.

Elston was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 6, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Harry Elston was conducted by Jacques Lesure on November 6, 2007, in Studio City, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. R & B singer and songwriter Harry Elston (1938 -) co-founded the R & B group, Friends of Distinction. Some of the group's hits include "Love or Let Me Be Lonely," "Time Waits for No One" and "Going in Circles." Elston also co-founded the Mavericks Flat, a well-known L.A. night club, and the Negro Industrial and Economic Union.

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:

Elston, Harry

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Elston, Harry--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Friends of Distinction (Musical group)

Occupations:

R & B Singer

Songwriter

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 Harry Elston, November 6, 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 Harry Elston, Section A2007_325_001_001, TRT: 0:26:58 ?

Harry Elston was born on November 4, 1938 in Dallas, Texas to Earnestyne Cooksey Mays and Leonard Elston, Sr. His mother was raised on a farm near Dallas, where she was the youngest child and only daughter in a family of six children. At sixteen years old, she gave birth to Elston's older brother, Leonard Elston, Jr., and married Elston's father. Elston's father also grew up in Texas, where he had three sisters, and was close to his mother. Elston remembered him as a religious man, but later learned that his father had been promiscuous. When his parents divorced, Elston's family moved to California, where his mother moved in with her mother in Oakland. Elston and his siblings, including younger sister Evelyn Elston Olier, lived with their father and stepmother, Margaret Elston, in the racially diverse Frontier Housing project in San Diego, California. There, Elston attended Midway Elementary School. Later, Elston reunited with his mother and her husband, Negro League baseball manager William Mays.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Elston, Section A2007_325_001_002, TRT: 0:29:16 ?

Harry Elston often sang at Bethel Baptist Church in San Diego, California, where his family attended services. At San Diego's Dana Junior High School, Elston mostly focused on sports, and also began listening to doo-wop groups. He went on to attend Point Loma High School for one year; and, upon moving to a new home in San Diego's Logan Heights neighborhood, transferred to Abraham Lincoln High School. There, Elston formed a vocal group called The Belvederes with his brother and football teammates, Joe Vincent and J.D. Gibson, and performed at school functions and talent shows. After the group broke up, Elston was invited by lead singer Princell Foster to join Cell Foster and the Audios. With the group, Elston played around California and with The Johnny Otis Rhythm and Blues Caravan. During high school, Elston and his friends styled their hair in waves, despite the difficult chemical process, and often visited Tijuana, Mexico.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Elston, Section A2007_325_001_003, TRT: 0:28:46 ?

Harry Elston sang with Cell Foster and the Audios, and travelled to Los Angeles from San Diego, California to perform alongside the Johnny Otis Rhythm and Blues Caravan at nightclubs like Los Angeles' Five Four Ballroom. Upon graduating from high school in 1956, Elston wanted to leave San Diego, and joined the U.S. Air Force. He was trained at the Lackland Air Force Base in Bexar County, Texas, and then assigned to an administrative position in Seattle, Washington. There, he was accosted by another airman, who referred to him with a racial slur. Elston later transferred to the Travis Air Force Base in Solano County, California, where he was jailed for drug possession. Elston left the U.S. Air Force in 1960, and moved to Oakland, California, where he worked at the Children's Hospital of the East Bay. He also studied administration at a city college, and played baseball. While in Oakland, Elston also reconnected with his mother, Earnestyne Cooksey Mays, and stepfather, baseball player William Mays.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Elston, Section A2007_325_001_004, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Harry Elston moved from Oakland, California to Los Angeles, where he worked for Kaiser Permanente, and often saw celebrities like Diana Ross. During this time, Elston met Lamonte McLemore at a party, where they improvised songs together with Elston's friend Floyd Butler. Elston and McLemore moved into a house with Booker Griffin, Jr., who was active in local politics, and introduced Elston to football player and businessman Jim Brown. Elston also befriended many other musicians, and formed various vocal trios. They eventually formed the Hi-Fi's singing group, which was made up of Elston, McLemore, Lawrence Summers, Rex Middleton, Marilyn McCoo and Florence LaRue. After Ray Charles heard the group perform, he signed them to his record label. The Hi-Fi's recorded 'Lonesome Mood,' and joined Charles on tour. They also received lessons from vocal coaches Giuseppe Balestrieri and Rene DeKnight. Once, while travelling in California, Elston, Summers and Middleton were arrested for various outstanding warrants.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Elston, Section A2007_325_001_005, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Harry Elston was released on bail after his arrest in Los Angeles, California. After the Hi-Fi's tour ended in 1964, the group disbanded, and Elston moved to Los Angeles' Watts section, where he and Marilyn McCoo worked for the Westminster Neighborhood Association. In 1965, Elston and his friends took part in the Watts riots, although his bandmate Floyd Butler refused to join them. Lamonte McLemore, McCoo, Billy Davis, Sr. and Ronald Townson continued singing together, and formed the Versatiles. Elston helped found businessman Jim Brown's Negro Industrial and Economic Union, and was instrumental in opening the Maverick's Flat nightclub. He also worked as a limousine driver for The Temptations while they were in California. Later, Elston, Butler, Clarence McDonald, Jessica Cleaves and Barbara Jean Love formed their own vocal group, The Friends of Distinction. Jim Brown managed the group through his production company, Brown, Bloch and Coby; and they released their first song in 1968.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Elston, Section A2007_325_001_006, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Harry Elston wrote lyrics for Philemon Hou and Hugh Masekela's 'Grazing in the Grass,' which became The Friends of Distinction's first hit song. After Jim Brown and Paul Bloch organized a concert for the group at The Daisy club in Beverly Hills, they attracted the attention of record executives, and signed with RCA Records. The Friends of Distinction often performed with The 5th Dimension, and recorded songs like 'Going In Circles.' In 1970, Barbara Jean Love left the group due to her pregnancy, and was replaced with Charlene Gibson. The group also released their album 'Real Friends,' and Elston met jazz musician Miles Davis at the Sugar Shack in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1971, the group released the 'Friends and People' album. Elston also heard the early recordings of Earth, Wind, and Fire. After RCA Records failed to advertise The Friends of Distinction's album 'Reviviscence - Live to Light Again,' the group left the company, and Elston obtained a position at the Magic Cookie Company.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Elston, Section A2007_325_001_007, TRT: 0:26:02 ?

Harry Elston worked for The Magic Cookie Company, which was advertised by Los Angeles Lakers player Magic Johnson, and sold in California stores. Elston and Floyd Butler had an argument and parted ways, but became friends again in 1990. Later, Elston was visiting him at his home, when Butler suffered a heart attack, and passed away at the hospital. In 1996, Elston reformed The Friends of Distinction with Boce Robinson-Mitchell, Pattie Brooks and Drake Frye, and the group toured internationally. Elston describes his values, his advice to aspiring

entertainers and his plans for the future; and also reflects upon his hopes for the African American community, his life and how he would like to be remembered. Elston concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.