

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Homer Bryant

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Bryant, Homer
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Homer Bryant,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 23, 2010
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2010
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:42:33).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dancer and dance instructor Homer Bryant (1950 - ) performed with the Dance Theater of Harlem and founded the Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center. Bryant was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 23, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2010_102
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dance founder and instructor Homer Bryant was born in the Virgin Islands on the Isle of St. Thomas in 1950 and became involved in dance in middle school. His teacher arranged for him to dance at the Jacob's Pillow Dance School where he studied under some of the most prominent modern dance pioneers. Bryant then came to the attention of dancer and choreographer Arthur Mitchell, founder of the Dance Theater of Harlem, the first African American classical dance company in the United States. Mitchell extended an invitation to Bryant to come to New York and study with the company, which he accepted.

In 1972, Bryant began his professional career when he won an audition to replace a member of the company. He continued to dance and tour professionally with the Dance Theater of Harlem and took a hiatus in 1978 to perform in the Broadway musical *Timbuktu!* alongside Eartha Kitt. He also appeared in the film version of the musical *The Wiz* along with Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. He then worked with Donald McKayle's dance company and while on tour came to Chicago and danced briefly with Maria Tallchief's Chicago City Ballet.

In 1981, Bryant returned to New York to oversee the Dance Theater of Harlem's pre-professional workshop ensemble. Four years later, Bryant moved to Chicago to start his own dance company and school, Bryant Ballet. In 1993, Bryant began working with Cirque de Soleil, a relationship that continued for three of Cirque de Soleil's most popular productions, *Mystere*, *Alegria*, and *Quidam*. Bryant also served as ballet master for the Joel Hall Dancers and Dance Chicago.

In 1997, in recognition of the school's influence, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley issued a proclamation officially renaming Bryant's school the Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center. The next year, Bryant served as lead artist for the city of Chicago's Gallery 37.

Bryant has received the Chicago Cultural Alliance's Lifetime Achievement Award. He also was featured in the short documentary *Raising the Barre: The Homer Bryant Story* in 2009.

Homer Bryant was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 23, 2010.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Homer Bryant was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 23, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Dancer and dance instructor Homer Bryant (1950 - ) performed with the Dance Theater of Harlem and founded the Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center.

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# 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®.

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# 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.

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# Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

## Persons:

Bryant, Homer

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Bryant, Homer--Interviews

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# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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## The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Dance Theater of Harlem

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### Occupations:

Dancer

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Dance Instructor

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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## 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 Homer Bryant, August 23, 2010. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Homer Bryant, Section A2010\_102\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:17 ?

Homer Bryant was born on March 29, 1950 in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas to Elesta Steele and Solomon Bryant. His maternal grandfather, Edgar Steele, married Alberta Donovan Steele of the British Virgin Islands, and they settled on St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where he was employed as a carpenter. Bryant's mother left school to work in Puerto Rico, where she met Bryant's father, who was a sailor in the U.S. Navy. Bryant was raised by his mother on St. Thomas, and rarely saw his father, who served on the U.S.S. Randolph during World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Bryant began dancing at an early age. He was influenced by television programs featuring dancers like Fred Astaire, and by West Indian celebrations like the annual Carnival, which included parades and calypso music. Bryant also talks about the history of the U.S. Virgin Islands, and remembers exploring the pirate castles of Bluebeard and Blackbeard.

Video Oral History Interview with Homer Bryant, Section A2010\_102\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

Homer Bryant grew up in the town of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where tourism was the primary industry. He attended the Saints Peter and Paul Catholic School, and began his dance training at Studio Five with financial help from a friend's mother. After six months, Bryant's dancing ability earned him a scholarship at the studio. His first dance instructor, Jane Miles, raised funds for him to attend the summer program at Jacob's Pillow Dance in Becket, Massachusetts. Bryant decided to move to the mainland United States to pursue classical ballet training, and joined his relatives' household in Brooklyn, New York, where he enrolled at Erasmus Hall High School. He trained under ballet teacher Celene Keller, who recommended that he join Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem, a multicultural studio that focused on adapting ballet techniques for dancers of all body types.

Video Oral History Interview with Homer Bryant, Section A2010\_102\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Homer Bryant graduated from Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn, New York, and enrolled at the nearby Adelphi University. After nine months, he left to join the Manhattan Festival Ballet in Youngstown, Ohio. He then returned to Jacob's Pillow Dance in Becket, Massachusetts, where he was introduced to Arthur Mitchell and the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Bryant joined the company after returning to New York City, where they held their debut performance at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1971. The troupe often embarked on domestic and international tours, where the dancers sometimes faced discrimination because of their race. Bryant temporarily left the company to perform in projects like 'The Wiz,' 'Timbuktu!' and 'Evolution of Jazz.' On the set of 'The Wiz,' Bryant became acquainted with choreographer Geoffrey Holder, who then invited Bryant to perform in 'Timbuktu!', where he was mentored by Eartha Kitt. Bryant went on to teach master classes at the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with Homer Bryant, Section A2010\_102\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:47 ?

Homer Bryant met his wife, model and dancer Rhonda Samson Bryant, at the Dance Theatre of Harlem in New York City. They had their only child, Alexandra Bryant, while Bryant was touring with the cast of 'Timbuktu!' His daughter suffered from cerebral palsy, and Bryant enrolled at the Chicago School of Massage Therapy to learn therapeutic techniques. While living in Chicago, he also performed in 'Evolution of the Blues,' and danced with the Chicago City Ballet under Maria Tallchief. Bryant then returned with his family to New York City, where he led the Dance Theatre of Harlem Workshop Ensemble. After retiring from performance, he began teaching dance at the Victoria Arts Collaborative in Victoria, Canada, where he met a choreographer

from Cirque du Soleil. Bryant eventually returned to Chicago, where he taught the Chicago Public Schools Advanced Arts Program at Gallery 37, and founded the Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center. He went on to receive the Chicagoan of the Year award.

Video Oral History Interview with Homer Bryant, Section A2010\_102\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:33 ?

Homer Bryant founded the Bryant Ballet School in 1996 in Chicago, Illinois. The school was later renamed the Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center, and was located in the basement of the Dearborn Station. Although funding was scarce for African American dance organizations, Bryant maintained the studio and sought out scholarships for disadvantaged students. His company toured internationally, including a performance on St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where Bryant honored his mother, Elesta Steele. Bryant also held lecture demonstrations in the Chicago Public Schools, and assisted with the 'Chicago Has Talent' competition, which was organized by basketball player Dwyane Wade. Bryant talks about his daughter, Alexandra Bryant, who had recently passed away at the time of the interview. He also describes his hopes and concerns for the African community, and concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Homer Bryant, Section A2010\_102\_001\_006, TRT: 0:13:27 ?

Homer Bryant narrates his photographs.