

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Alfreda Burke

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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>	Burke, Alfreda, 1961-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 20, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:11:47).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Singer Alfreda Burke (1961 - ) has performed with a number of symphony orchestras, as well as performing with her husband, Rodrick Dixon, in productions of <i>Too Hot to Handel: The Jazz-Gospel Messiah</i> , and <i>Prague PBS Special, Hallelujah Broadway</i> . Burke was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 20, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_231
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Opera singer Alfreda Burke was born in Chicago, Illinois on June 17, 1961. Her father, John H. Burke, Jr., was a pastor; her mother, Mamie Burke, a church administrator. She received her BM and MM degrees from Roosevelt University Chicago Musical College (1984, 1987).

Burke made her Carnegie and Orchestra Hall debuts in Strauss' *Elektra* in 1995 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra led by Daniel Barenboim. She has also performed with numerous orchestras and at various venues in North America and Europe, including the Auditorium Theatre (1995); the Chicago Symphony Center (1997); the Chicago Symphony at Ravinia; the Kennedy Center (1998); the Detroit Opera House/DSO/Rackham Symphony Choir (2002); the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra (2003); the Chorus Angelorum (2003, 2010); the Cincinnati Pops Symphony Orchestra (2011); the Chicagoland Pops Orchestra (2004); the Lancaster Festival (2003); the Umbria Music Festival (Italy) (2007); the Prague Philharmonic (2010); the TodiMusicFest (2007); the Millennium Park Gala (2008); the Miss World (China) (2012); and the NATO Chicago Summit (2012).

Burke's oratorio, opera, concert and musical theater engagements include the Dame Myra Hess Memorial Concerts broadcast on WFMT-FM; Mozart's *Requiem*; Handel's *Messiah*; Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Beethoven's *Mass in C*; Poulenc *Gloria*; Mahler's *2nd & 8th Symphonies*; Strauss' *Elektra*; Puccini's *Turandot*; Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta*; Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*; Menotti's *Amahl & the Night Visitors*; Rutter's *Requiem*; Boulez's *Le Visage Nuptial*; Gershwin's *Porgy & Bess*; Bernstein's *West Side Story*; and Kern's *Show Boat* (Prince). She was featured in CSO's Symphony Center Inaugural Festival and Radiothon.

In 2002, Burke and her husband, opera singer Rodrick Dixon, performed in *Too Hot to Handel The Jazz-Gospel Messiah* at the Detroit Opera House and the Auditorium Theatre (2006). Burke performed with Tenors Cook, Dixon & Young (formerly the Three Mo' Tenors) as a featured soloist.

Burke's work in recordings, music video, television, radio, film and commercials, includes Celine Dion and R.

Kelly's *I'm Your Angel*; *The Visit*; *The Visitors*; *Unconditional Love*; guest soloist appearances on WTTW/Odyssey's broadcast, *30 Good Minutes*; solo CD, *From the Heart*; the Prague PBS Special *Hallelujah Broadway*; and the Chicago Olympic 2016 Bid Anthem, *I Will Stand*. Some of Burke's other engagements include the Auditorium Theatre & DiBurke Inc. co-produced show "Songs of A Dream," CD release, and national tour; and Old St. Patrick's Church production of *Siamsa na nGael* at Symphony Center.

Burke has taught music and voice at a number of institutions, including Evanston/Skokie District 65 (1985-1996); the CSO Musicians Residency at South Shore Cultural Center (1996-1998); the Wheaton College Conservatory Voice Faculty (1998-2009); the Carl Sandburg High School (2004-2007); the Chicago State University Voice Faculty (2007-2008); the Young Musicians Choral Orchestra, Berkeley, California (2009-2012); the Wright State University Music & Medicine Symposium (2009-Present); and master classes throughout the US.

Burke is a Roosevelt University CCPA Advisory Board member and served on the Chicago 2016 Olympic Bid Arts & Culture Advisory Committee. In 2005, Burke was an Alumna Ambassador for Roosevelt University's 60th Anniversary.

Opera singer Alfreda Burke was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 20, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Alfreda Burke was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 20, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer Alfreda Burke (1961 - ) has performed with a number of symphony orchestras, as well as performing with her husband, Rodrick Dixon, in productions of *Too Hot to Handel: The Jazz-Gospel Messiah*, and Prague PBS Special, *Hallelujah Broadway*.

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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:

Burke, Alfreda, 1961-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Burke, Alfreda, 1961- --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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## Occupations:

Singer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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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 Alfreda Burke, August 20, 2013. 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 Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:23 ?

Alfreda Burke was born on June 17, 1961 in Chicago, Illinois to Mamie Ruth Lewis Burke and John Henry Burke, Jr. Burke's mother was born on June 26, 1929 in Winona, Mississippi to Peter Lewis, an oil mill worker, and Ella Jane Edwards Lewis, a nurse and midwife. Mamie Burke attended Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Burke also narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:35 ?

Alfreda Burke talks about her mother, Mamie Ruth Lewis Burke, including her musical background. When Mamie Burke was a child, she was accidentally tossed into a fireplace and was burned on her face. She later lost all of her things when a fire destroyed her house after she had packed to enroll at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi. After graduating from Rust College, Mamie Burke moved to Chicago, Illinois, where she met Burke's father, John Henry Burke, Jr. Burke's father was born on January 6, 1922 in Des Moines, Iowa to Pearl Sumler and John Henry Burke, Sr. and he attended Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. He served in the U.S. Army Air Force Band during World War II and traveled as a jazz trombone player before settling in Chicago and meeting Mamie Burke at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, where Reverend Joseph Wells married them in 1957 and ordained John Burke, Jr. as a minister. Burke reflects on her childhood as a "preacher's kid" in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:09 ?

Alfreda Burke grew up in Chicago, Illinois, where she and her sister, Renee Burke Davis, attended Head Start and Mary Church Terrell Elementary School in the Bronzeville neighborhood until second grade. Burke describes being educated at home before enrolling in school as well as her mother's involvement in the PTA. From third through eighth grade, Burke attended Rudyard Kipling Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois. Around 1972, Burke's father became the preacher at First Mennonite Church in Chicago, Illinois. Burke talks about her favorite school subjects, her early musical education, and the diversity of her school and church. She attended Lindblom Technical High School in Chicago, Illinois, where she studied commercial art and music with Anne Greaney and Robert Ekstrom, with the intention of becoming a visual artist. While still in school, Burke worked at the Department of Health and Human Services. In 1979, she enrolled at Chicago Musical College at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:28 ?

Alfreda Burke attended Lindblom Technical High School in Chicago, Illinois and the Chicago Musical College of Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois, where she majored in Music Education and Comprehensive Special Education. She talks about some of the ensembles she sang in, including church choir, high school choir, the Wooten Choral Ensemble, and the Summer Workshop Chorale. At Roosevelt University, Burke studied voice under Alice Dutcher Thornton,

who was an Alexander technician, and talks about her vocal health now that she is her mother's caretaker. Burke describes elements of her musical education, including moveable do sight-reading, methods of music education, music history, and the research that informs a musician's interpretation of a piece. She also discusses famous African American sopranos like Leontyne Price, Jessye Norman and Kathleen Battle, and the different types of operatic sopranos.

Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:21 ?

Alfreda Burke shares her appreciation for the voices of children and talks about maintaining a healthy voice while crossing musical genres. Burke also recalls meeting Chicago Mayor Harold Washington and singing for him at rallies. Burke was a student teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, and received her Bachelor of Music degree from the Chicago Musical College of Roosevelt University in 1984. She began working for the Evanston/Skokie School District 65, and taught Kindergarten through eighth grade music at Martin Luther King, Jr. Laboratory School in Evanston, Illinois under Principal Corrine Schumacher. While teaching, Burke continued her studies in voice at Roosevelt University. She received her Master of Music degree in 1987 after performing in a voice and piano recital. She talks about the dramatic nature of opera, and the importance of phrasing and acting in operatic performance. She also talks about her teachers and mentors, including Robert Long, Louise Parkin, and Margaret Hillis.

Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_006, TRT: 6:30:42 ?

Alfreda Burke performed with Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in works such as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Mahler's Second and Eight Symphonies, and semi-staged productions of Beethoven's opera "Fidelio" and Mozart's operas "The Marriage of Figaro," "Così fan tutte," and "Don Giovanni." She describes her experience performing in these semi-staged operas as well as in oratorios. In 1995, Burke sang in Richard Strauss' "Elektra" with Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Symphony Center in Chicago, Illinois as well as at Carnegie Hall in New York City. She talks about learning German and other foreign languages as a singer, and reflects on a comment Barenboim made about bringing more of a gospel sound to her operatic singing. In 1995, Burke also joined the cast of Harold Prince's production of "Show Boat" at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, and also joined the National Tour at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_007, TRT: 7:28:27 ?

Alfreda Burke performed in "Show Boat" at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, Illinois and on the National Tour from 1995 until 1998 and she talks about the two film versions of the musical and its well-known songs. In December of 1992, Burke met HistoryMaker Rodrick Dixon through their friend Stephen Powell. Burke recalls their first date on January 1, 1993 and their six year courtship, ending with their wedding at First Mennonite Church in Chicago, Illinois in 1998. From 1997 until 2009, Burke taught voice at Wheaton College Conservatory of Music in Wheaton, Illinois. In 2002, Burke and Dixon began performing "Too Hot to Handel" annually at the Detroit Opera House in Detroit, Michigan; and, in 2006, they began to perform it annually at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. She talks about the work, which is a genre-bending reimagining of Handel's "Messiah" by Bob Christianson and Gary Anderson. In 2002, Burke and Dixon founded DiBurke, Inc. and she recorded her album "From the Heart."

Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_008, TRT: 8:28:19 ?

Alfreda Burke served as an alumni ambassador for the sixtieth anniversary of

Roosevelt University in 2005. She and her husband, HistoryMaker Rodrick Dixon, also teach gifted young musicians every summer at Daisy Newman's Young Musicians Choral Orchestra in Berkeley, California. In 2010, Burke and her husband recorded the album and PBS special "Hallelujah Broadway" in Prague, Czech Republic with Anthony Kearns and Linda Eder. The project was produced by Bill Hughes, and was recorded in the Church of St. Simon and St. Jude. Burke and Dixon have also performed "Hallelujah Broadway" with the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra at Riverbend Music Center in Cincinnati, Ohio and at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. The couple also performs at the Symphony Center in Chicago, Illinois for "Siamsa na nGael." Burke talks about the show they are currently working on, "Songs of a Dream," about their own life story as well as future projects and organizational involvements.

Video Oral History Interview with Alfreda Burke, Section A2013\_231\_001\_009, TRT: 9:16:23 ?

Alfreda Burke talks about the orchestras she performed with and shares her hopes and concerns for the African American community. She also reflects on her career, her legacy, and her feelings on the label "crossover artist." Burke concludes the interview by reflecting on her family and how she would like to be remembered.