

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with B Michael

---

## 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>	Michael, B, 1957-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with B Michael,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 10, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:29:30).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Fashion designer B Michael (1957 - ) was a noted milliner and couturier, and created the b michael AMERICA brand. Michael was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 10, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_106
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fashion designer B Michael was born in 1957 and raised in Durham, Connecticut. His mother was a real estate agent and his father, a certified public accountant. B Michael found early design inspirations in his mother's creativity and keen sense of style. He attended the University of Connecticut and also studied at the New York Fashion Institute of Technology.

B Michael was first hired as an account executive for a Wall Street firm, but decided to pursue a career as a millinery designer. He started designing hats under Oscar de la Renta, Louis Feraud, and Nolan Miller for the 1980s television soap opera *Dynasty*. Following his success on the show, B Michael became creative director for the Aldo Hat Corporation. In 1989, he decided to launch his namesake millinery line and in 1999 developed and launched his first couture collection with the help of PR Guru Eleanor Lambert.

B Michael's collections have garnered appreciative fans including socialites and personalities such as Cicely Tyson, Ashley Boudier, Amy Fine Collins, Tamara Tunie, Beyoncé, Nancy Wilson, Susan Fales-Hill, President Barack Obama's poet laureate Elizabeth Alexander, and Lena Horne, among many others. He also designed Whitney Houston's costumes for the motion picture, *Sparkle*. He has shown his b michael AMERICA Couture collection in Beijing, China, Korea and Shanghai, and his ready to wear fashion line b michael AMERICA RED sells in Macy's department stores across the United States.

In 1998, B Michael was granted membership in the prestigious Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA). He has served as a guest lecturer at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. He also serves on the advisory boards of Dream Yard Project, YAGP (Youth America Grand Prix) and the Cicely Tyson School of Performing and Fine Arts. In addition to his work and community activism, B Michael is an avid collector of vintage books, artifacts and photography.

B Michael lives in New York City with his life partner Mark-Anthony Edwards and their two daughters, Saferra and Mychal.

B Michael was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 8, 2014.

---

# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with B Michael was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on May 10, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Fashion designer B Michael (1957 - ) was a noted milliner and couturier, and created the b michael AMERICA brand.

---

# 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:

Michael, B, 1957-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Michael, B, 1957---Interviews

---

# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

## The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

### Occupations:

Fashion Designer

---

### HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers

---

## 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 B Michael, May 10, 2014. 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 B Michael, Section A2014\_106\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:16 ?

B Michael was born on March 31, 1957 in Connecticut. His maternal family lived in Connecticut for three generations, while his father moved to Connecticut from Florida with his family. Michael's maternal grandfather was Cape Verdean, and had relatives in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Michael and his four brothers were raised by his parents in West Haven, Connecticut, where his paternal grandparents lived nearby. From an early age, Michael had an interest

in fashion and kept a millinery sketchbook. He shared magazines with his mother and grandmother, and enjoyed watching 'I Love Lucy.' Michael attended May V. Carrigan Intermediate School and Harry M. Bailey Junior High School in West Haven. When he was thirteen years old, his family moved to Durham, Connecticut, where he was active in the choir and theater at Coginchaug Regional High School. During Michael's senior year, his paternal grandfather died, and he returned to West Haven to support his grandmother. He graduated from West Haven High School.

Video Oral History Interview with B Michael, Section A2014\_106\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:25 ?

B Michael was thirteen years old when he began accompanying his paternal grandmother to Kramer's, a high end clothier in New Haven, Connecticut. There, his grandmother emphasized the value of quality garments and timeless style. Upon graduating from high school in the mid-1970s, Michael wanted to move to New York City, but his guidance counselors suggested that he attend the University of Connecticut. After a brief enrollment, he returned to West Haven, Connecticut to focus on his interest in fashion. Encouraged by his grandmother's friends, Michael contacted milliner Ann Albrizio with his designs, and was invited to study at the Fashion Institute of Technology while working for her company. In the mid-1980s, costume designer Nolan Miller saw Michael's work at the Lonette Millinery Company store in Los Angeles, California, and recruited him to make the hats for the 'Dynasty' television show. Michael's hats went on to be featured at the Ebony Fashion Fair.

Video Oral History Interview with B Michael, Section A2014\_106\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:21 ?

B Michael's millinery was featured in Ebony magazine, and he developed a close relationship with Eunice Johnson during his early career. At the time, he sold millinery to independent stores throughout the country, and designed for the popular soap opera, 'Dynasty.' In 1987, Michael was hired as the creative director of the Canadian Hat Company. In 1988, he returned to New York City to work for the Aldo Hat Corporation, which distributed millinery to high end retailers like Saks Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom and Bonwit Teller and Company. Michael also traveled to Paris, France to create couture millinery for Balmain under the direction of Oscar de la Renta. As his interests expanded, he approached the Aldo Hat Corporation about creating a clothing line. They offered to form a three-way partnership, which Michael rejected at the advice of his manager, Audrey Potts. Michael joined the Council of Fashion Designers of America in 1998. The next year, he left the Aldo Hat Corporation to launch his own brand.

Video Oral History Interview with B Michael, Section A2014\_106\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:38 ?

B Michael met Eleanor Lambert through the Council of Fashion Designers of America. She recruited fashion editors to attend the launch of b michael AMERICA, and introduced Michael to designer John Anthony and fashion journalist Elsa Klensch. They assisted with Michael's first New York Fashion Week show, and became supporters of his projects. For the initial launch of b michael AMERICA, Michael created a couture collection of twenty-five garments. Although his first New York Fashion Week show received strong reviews from fashion editors, his second collection was burdened by his staff's conflicting visions. Nevertheless, the success of the first collection carried the company, and Michael learned to focus on his clean, architectural aesthetic. As the business grew, Michael attracted a diverse clientele, and maintained his relationships with early supporters from Connecticut and prominent women of color. He dressed celebrities like Cicely Tyson, with whom he formed a close relationship.

Video Oral History Interview with B Michael, Section A2014\_106\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:03 ?

B Michael founded b michael AMERICA in 1999, and initially focused on couture garments. His first collection garnered widespread critical acclaim, and Michael rose to prominence in the fashion world. In 2002, Michael agreed to create a bridge collection for Saks Fifth Avenue, which he hoped would provide financial stability for the b michael AMERICA Couture line. However, Michael conflicted with his manufacturing partners, and the line ended after a few years. During this time, he continued to design and show couture collections. In 2007, Michael met entrepreneur Mark-Anthony Edwards in an elevator after a cocktail party. They developed a romantic partnership, and Michael asked Edwards to become the CEO of b michael AMERICA. With his guidance, Michael redesigned the corporate structure and developed a new business plan for the company. Inspired by Ralph Lauren's model, Michael transitioned the company into a vertically integrated lifestyle brand, and secured a partnership with Macy's, Inc.

Video Oral History Interview with B Michael, Section A2014\_106\_001\_006, TRT: 6:31:06 ?

B Michael and Mark-Anthony Edwards began implementing the new business plan for b michael AMERICA in 2009. Their model emphasized a sustainable financial plan, and used manufacturers in the Garment District of New York City. They secured sponsorships for their New York Fashion Week shows, and began showing under the Mercedes-Benz umbrella to attract more press. Michael and Edwards also approached Macy's, Inc. with a plan to develop lifestyle lines and the b michael AMERICA RED collection, and hired brand ambassadors to manage their relationship with the company's retail stores. The RED collection launch was hosted by philanthropist Kathryn Chennault. In 2012, Michael was invited by Debra Martin Chase to help design Whitney Houston's wardrobe for the film 'Sparkle.' His clothing was also worn by television news anchor Brenda Wood. At this point in the interview, Michael reflects upon the history of black fashion design, and talks about the industry's future.

Video Oral History Interview with B Michael, Section A2014\_106\_001\_007, TRT: 7:28:41 ?

B Michael befriended Lena Horne after designing a hat for her in 1990. They were introduced by Carol Craig, whom Michael met at Patrick Kelly's funeral. Following the death of Ebony founder Eunice Johnson in 2010, Michael's garments were featured in exhibits about her life and work at the Chicago History Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Additionally, one of his couture gowns was included in the exhibit on Nancy Wilson at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. Michael was active with the Multicultural Audience Development Initiative of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he served on the planning committee for a tribute to black designer Arthur McGee. At this point in the interview, Michael reflects upon his career, and shares his thoughts about racial stereotypes in the fashion industry. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American fashion community, and reflects upon his life and relationship with Mark-Anthony Edwards.