

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Poyser

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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>	Poyser, James, 1967-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Poyser,
<b>Dates:</b>	May 6, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:06:29).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Songwriter, producer, and musician James Poyser (1967 - ) was co-founder of the Axis Music Group and founding member of the musical collective Soulquarians. He was a Grammy award-winning songwriter, musician and multi-platinum producer. Poyser was also a regular member of The Roots, and joined them as the houseband for NBC's The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. Poyser was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 6, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_143
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Songwriter, producer and musician James Jason Poyser was born in Sheffield, England in 1967 to Jamaican parents Reverend Felix and Lilith Poyser. Poyser's family moved to West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania when he was nine years old and he discovered his musical talents in the church. Poyser attended Philadelphia Public Schools and graduated from Temple University with his B.S. degree in finance.

Upon graduation, Poyser apprenticed with the songwriting/producing duo Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff. Poyser then established the Axis Music Group with his partners, Vikter Duplaix and Chauncey Childs. He became a founding member of the musical collective Soulquarians and went on to write and produce songs for various legendary and award-winning artists including Erykah Badu, Mariah Carey, John Legend, Lauryn Hill, Common, Anthony Hamilton, D'Angelo, The Roots, and Keyshia Cole. He was credited as writer/producer for multiple songs on Erykah Badu's debut album, *Baduizm*; has writer, producer and musician credits on Lauryn Hill's multiple Grammy-winning album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*; was a musician on Adele's acclaimed album, *21*; and served as executive co-producer and writer on Al Green's *Lay it Down*. He was also the executive producer on Badu's highly celebrated albums, *Mama's Gun* and *Worldwide Underground*.

He is an active session musician and has contributed to the works of other artists such as Norah Jones, Eric Clapton, Joss Stone, Ziggy Marley, Macy Gray and Femi Kuti. In addition, Poyser has toured, and played live as a keyboardist with Jay-Z, The Roots, Erykah Badu, and Aretha Franklin, among others. He is a regular member of The Roots, and has joined them on stage as the houseband for NBC's *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, and subsequently *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. Poyser's awards include a Grammy for Best R&B Song in 2003 for co-writing Erykah Badu and Common's hit "Love Of My Life."

He resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

James Poyser was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 6, 2014.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Poyser was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on May 6, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Songwriter, producer, and musician James Poyser (1967 - ) was co-founder of the Axis Music Group and founding member of the musical collective Soulquarians. He was a Grammy award-winning songwriter, musician and multi-platinum producer. Poyser was also a regular member of The Roots, and joined them as the houseband for NBC's The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon.

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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:

Poyser, James, 1967-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Poyser, James, 1967---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:

Producer

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Musician

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Songwriter

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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 James Poyser, May 6, 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).

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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 James Poyser, Section A2014\_143\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:36 ?

James Poyser was born on January 30, 1967 in Sheffield, England to Lilit Poyser and Felix Poyser. They grew up in Duanvale, Jamaica, where his father was a farmer. Soon after meeting, Poyser's mother introduced his father to the New Testament Church of God, a Pentacostal Christian religion. He then attended seminary, and became a minister. In the 1950s, Poyser's parents and some of his aunts and uncles immigrated together to Sheffield, England after England and other European nations opened their borders to laborers from Africa and the West Indies. There, his father pastored at New Testament Church of God Sheffield. When his parents decided to move to the United States, Poyser and his siblings lived with an aunt. In 1975, Poyser's father co-founded The New Testament Church of God in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. After receiving their visas in 1976, Poyser and his two siblings reunited with his parents in Philadelphia, where Poyser learned to play the drums at nine years old.

Video Oral History Interview with James Poyser, Section A2014\_143\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:54 ?

James Poyser completed the fourth grade at Add B. Anderson Elementary School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and then transferred to two other grade schools for the fifth through eighth grades. Even though the Cedar Avenue and Woodland Avenue gangs were prevalent in his community, Poyser avoided them by staying active in his father's church, The New Testament Church of God. There, he played the drums alongside his brother, who was the church musician; and later took piano lessons. In addition to her duties as first lady, Poyser's mother also worked as a nurse. Poyser attended George Washington Carver High School for Engineering and Science for two years before transferring to West Philadelphia Catholic High School for Boys. From there, he began studying chemical engineering at Drexel University in Philadelphia. At this point in the interview, Poyser talks about the shootout that occurred at MOVE headquarters in Philadelphia's Powelton Village neighborhood in 1978, and the subsequent police bombing in 1985.

Video Oral History Interview with James Poyser, Section A2014\_143\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:04 ?

James Poyser majored in chemical engineering at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While there, he studied different types of music, played piano for the college's gospel choir and took classical music lessons from Professor Charles H. Pettaway, Jr. Poyser then transferred to Philadelphia's Temple University to study finance, although he remained interested in music. He performed with artists like Vanessa Bell Armstrong, The New Jersey Mass Choir, Hezekiah Walker, Bruce Parham and CeCe Peniston. He also met Fatin Dantzler of Kindred the Family Soul and hip hop soul duo Zhane, who introduced him to DJ Jazzy Jeff. From this introduction, Poyser began working with A Touch of Jazz production company, and later founded Axis Music Group with singer and songwriter Vikter Duplaix, and Chauncey Childs, whom he knew from Temple University. The group later moved to the Philadelphia International Records building, where Poyser was mentored by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, creators of the Philly soul sound.

Video Oral History Interview with James Poyser, Section A2014\_143\_001\_004, TRT: 4:31:24 ?

James Poyser began producing music for independent artists at Axis Music Group in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1996, he was invited by singer Fatin Dantzler to work on songs for the vocal duo Jazzyfatnastees, who were signed by The Roots. Poyser became acquainted with the band's manager, Richard Nichols, who later asked him to consult on singer Erykah Badu's debut album, 'Baduizm.' He co-wrote a number of songs, including "Otherside of the Game"

and “Afro (Freestyle Skit).” Following the album’s success, music producer Leon Huff warned Poyser to be watchful of his finances. In the late 1990s, Poyser, Questlove, D’Angelo, James Yancey and J Dilla formed the neo soul band, Soulquarians, although the name was later fashioned as a collective term that included other neo soul artists. During this time, Poyser co-wrote the song “Chicken Grease,” which was recorded by D’Angelo. After co-producing Common’s song “Retrospect for Life,” Poyser also worked on his album ‘Like Water for Chocolate.’

Video Oral History Interview with James Poyser, Section A2014\_143\_001\_005, TRT: 5:26:03 ?

James Poyser first met singer Jill Scott while working at A Touch of Jazz production company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Years later, he was introduced to Lauryn Hill while writing ‘Retrospect for Life’ in 1997. The following year he co-authored ‘Superstar’ for “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.” He also worked on Common’s albums ‘Like Water for Chocolate’ and ‘Electric Circus.’ After co-writing D’Angelo’s song ‘Chicken Grease,’ Poyser joined his The Voodoo World Tour, which featured musicians like Pino Palladino, Roy Hargrove, Anthony Hamilton and Questlove. However, he left the tour early to produce the album ‘Mama’s Gun’ with Erykah Badu. During production, Poyser suffered a stress attack while trying to meet the record company’s deadline. He went on to work with Badu again on the song ‘Love of My Life (An Ode to Hip-Hop).’ It was released on the ‘Brown Sugar’ movie soundtrack, and gained mainstream success. Poyser also talks about DJ Frankie Knuckles’ music and the origin of Questlove’s nickname.

Video Oral History Interview with James Poyser, Section A2014\_143\_001\_006, TRT: 6:29:26 ?

James Poyser met Mary J. Blige during the recording of the single “Come Close,” which was featured on the Common’s 2002 album, ‘Electric Circus.’ Poyser also served as the associate producer on the album. In 2007, he married Tonita Poyser, and the two had a son, Jadyn Poyser, who was born premature. In 2011, Poyser played the piano as a member of the session band featured on Adele’s ‘21’ album. In 2009, The Roots’ band manager Richard Nichols invited Poyser to join them as the house band on ‘Late Night With Jimmy Fallon.’ He continued with the band when they transitioned to ‘The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon’ in 2014. Poyser also talks about difficult recording sessions, and challenges in the music industry caused by changing technology. He describes his future projects, including plans to study music arrangement and composition. Poyser also talks about the appropriation of neo soul by foreign artists; and producers and composers that he admires including Quincy Jones, Thomas Newman, Pharrell Williams.

Video Oral History Interview with James Poyser, Section A2014\_143\_001\_007, TRT: 7:10:02 ?

James Poyser reflects upon his life, including his concerns about aging in the music industry. He also talks about the legacy of the artists he’s known, such as Erykah Badu, Common and The Roots. Poyser concludes the interview by reflecting upon his own legacy as a musician and father.