

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mickey Stevenson

## 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>	Stevenson, William R.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mickey Stevenson,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 17, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:35:29).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Music executive Mickey Stevenson (1937 - ) was head of artists and repertoire at Motown Records, working with the Funk Brothers and the Motown Revue's orchestra as well as with Diana Ross and the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, The Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and Martha and the Vandellas. Stevenson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 17, 2016, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_136
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Music executive Mickey Stevenson was born on January 4, 1937, in Detroit, Michigan, and raised by his mother, blues singer Kitty “Brown Gal” Stevenson, and stepfather Ted Moore. From the age of eight, Stevenson performed in a singing trio with his younger brothers. In 1950, the group won first place at Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater in New York City. However, Stevenson’s musical career halted in 1953 when his mother, the group’s coach and producer, passed away from cancer. Stevenson attended Detroit’s Northeastern High School.

Stevenson joined the U.S. Air Force in 1956, where he was part of a special unit that organized entertainment for the troops. While on furlough in 1958, Stevenson saw a performance by the Four Aims—later known as the Four Tops—which inspired him to leave the military and pursue a career in music. Stevenson joined the Hamptones, touring with famed bandleader Lionel Hampton. Upon his return to Detroit, Stevenson met Berry Gordy, who told him of his plans to start a record label. Stevenson briefly worked as a producer and songwriter for Carmen Carver Murphy’s gospel label, HOB Records, until 1959, when Gordy hired him to head the artists and repertoire department at Motown Records. As Motown’s A&R executive, Stevenson was responsible for talent scouting, auditions, and managing the artistic development of recording artists and songwriters. Stevenson was also responsible for organizing and establishing the company's in-house studio band, known as the Funk Brothers. Stevenson worked on Motown’s first number one hit: the 1961 song “Please Mr. Postman” by the Marvelettes, and went on to work with such classic Motown acts as Diana Ross and the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, the Temptations, the Four Tops, Stevie Wonder, Mary Wells, the Contours, Martha and the Vandellas, and Gladys Knight and the Pips. Stevenson toured the country with the Motortown Revue, and created the Motown Orchestra to play during the shows, while also serving as the orchestra’s conductor at the suggestion of Smokey Robinson. In 1968, Stevenson was replaced by Eddie Holland of Holland-Dozier-Holland, Motown’s top production team, as head of artists and repertoire. He then worked briefly as head of MGM’s Venture Records, and recorded his only album, *Here I Am* in 1972. Stevenson later began producing stage musicals.

Stevenson was honored during the opening of Detroit's Motown Museum in 2003.

Mickey Stevenson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 17, 2016.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mickey Stevenson was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 17, 2016, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Music executive Mickey Stevenson (1937 - ) was head of artists and repertoire at Motown Records, working with the Funk Brothers and the Motown Revue's orchestra as well as with Diana Ross and the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, The Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and Martha and the Vandellas.

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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:

Stevenson, William R.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Stevenson, William R.--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:

Music Executive

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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 Mickey Stevenson, November 17, 2016. 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 Mickey Stevenson, Section A2016\_136\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:00  
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Mickey Stevenson was born on January 4, 1937 in Detroit, Michigan to William

Stevenson and Catherine Brown Stevenson. His mother was born in Alabama, and started her singing career after moving to Detroit. She performed under the stage name Kitty Brown Gal Stevenson, and was featured as the main act at Detroit's Flame Show Bar. During her career, she performed with Dinah Washington, Duke Ellington and Maurice King. Stevenson's father was also an entertainer. He performed as a tap dancer, and worked at a retail store in downtown Detroit, where he met his Stevenson's mother. Stevenson's parents divorced when he was young. Although he and his siblings lived with their mother, Stevenson's father remained an active part of his life. He purchased Stevenson's first bass guitar, and assisted with his lessons. Stevenson's mother also encouraged his musical talents. She organized The Stevenson Trio, which consisted of Stevenson and his brothers, and helped them win the amateur competition at the Apollo Theater.

Video Oral History Interview with Mickey Stevenson, Section A2016\_136\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:42  
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Mickey Stevenson grew up in Detroit, Michigan during the 1940s. He lived in a one-bedroom apartment with his brothers, mother, uncle and maternal grandmother. Stevenson began his education at the George W. Balch School, and went on to attend Sidney D. Miller Junior High School. He often spoke out against his white teachers' racist behavior, and developed a reputation for misbehavior. At Northeastern High School, Stevenson formed a singing group called the Meadowlarks, who competed against Smokey Robinson's group, the Matadors. Stevenson was eventually expelled from Northeastern High School. He was sent to the majority-white Chadsey High School, where he began studying to become a chef. During this time, Stevenson was frequently arrested for looting burned out buildings, which were common on the east side of Detroit. He recalls his determination to avoid working in a factory, and talks about the exploitation of black workers in Detroit.

Video Oral History Interview with Mickey Stevenson, Section A2016\_136\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:41  
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Mickey Stevenson was active in the church and the Boy Scouts during his childhood in Detroit, Michigan. He and his brothers were raised by their mother, Catherine Brown Stevenson, and stepfather, Ted Moore, who was a cab driver and a devoted husband. However, after Stevenson's mother died, his stepfather left the children to be raised by their maternal grandmother. In the mid-1950s, Stevenson was arrested for car theft, and decided to join the U.S. Air Force to avoid further criminal activity. His grandmother forged his documents, which allowed him to join while underage. He was stationed near Cheyenne, Wyoming, where he had his first child with his wife, Betty Ann Wright Stevenson. Stevenson quickly rose through the ranks, but eventually decided to leave the military and pursue a career in the music business. When he returned to Detroit, he started singing with Lionel Hampton and The Hamptoners. He later joined Bobby Day and The Satellites, with whom he sang backup on the hit song 'Rockin' Robin.'

Video Oral History Interview with Mickey Stevenson, Section A2016\_136\_001\_004, TRT: 4:34:55  
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Mickey Stevenson toured the black clubs of the Chitlin' Circuit with Bobby Day and the Satellites during the mid-1950s. After the tour ended, Stevenson left the group and returned to Detroit, Michigan. There, he separated from his wife, Betty Ann Wright Stevenson, and started working as an agent for black entertainers. Stevenson helped his clients secure engagements at white-owned clubs, and ensured that they were paid and treated fairly. Around 1958,

Stevenson was introduced to Berry Gordy at Benny Mullins' barbershop. He learned that Gordy was starting a record label, and arranged an audition to show Gordy his songs and compositions. Gordy turned Stevenson down as an artist, but offered him a position as head of artists and repertoire for the Motown Records label. At this point in the interview, Stevenson also talks about Detroit's black entertainment district, Paradise Valley, and remembers the limited opportunities available to African Americans in the city.

Video Oral History Interview with Mickey Stevenson, Section A2016\_136\_001\_005, TRT: 5:33:11  
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Mickey Stevenson became the head of artists and repertoire for Motown Records in 1960. Because of his reputation in Detroit's music scene, Smokey Robinson suggested that Stevenson be responsible for recruiting the musicians to form a studio band. Stevenson went on to assemble The Funk Brothers, who provided the instrumentation for all Motown artists. The band included bassist James Jamerson, drummer Benny Benjamin and pianists Joe Hunter and Earl Van Dyke. During this time, Stevenson also worked with Marvin Gaye to develop a singing style that focused on rhythm and blues. Stevenson produced Gaye's first hit single, 'Stubborn Kind of Fellow,' which reached the top ten of the Billboard rhythm and blues chart in 1962. Afterwards, Gaye wanted to record a jazz album, but Stevenson insisted that they focus on rhythm and blues and pop music. At this point, Stevenson talks about cultivating the Motown sound, and remembers marketing the label's music.