

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Kahil El'Zabar

PERSON

El'Zabar, Kahil, 1953-

Alternative Names: Kahil El'Zabar; Clifton Henry Blackburn

Life Dates: November 11, 1953-

Place of Birth: Chicago, Illinois, USA

Residence: Chicago, IL

Occupations: Jazz Percussionist

Biographical Note

Musician Kahil El'Zabar was born on November 11, 1953, in Chicago, Illinois, to Gwendolyn and Clifton Blackburn. He attended Kennedy-King and Malcolm X City Colleges of Chicago before enrolling at Lake Forest College, in Lake Forest, Illinois. El'Zabar also studied African music at the University of Ghana.

In 1969, El'Zabar performed with Eugene "Jug" Ammons in St. Louis and Cincinnati. In 1973, he founded the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble. El'Zabar also founded Ritual Trio and the Kahil El'Zabar Quartet. He has taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. El'Zabar is the author of the 1993 poetry book *Mis Taken Brilliance*. In 1997, El'Zabar served as the curator of the Traffic series at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. His fifty-plus album discography includes *We Is >> Live At The Bop Shop*, *Live at the River East Art Center*, *Big M: A Tribute to Malachi Favors*, *Ooh Live*, among others. El'Zabar is the founder of OOHnow, a cultural e-commerce network established in 2008. He also has served as the artistic director of the Chicago Academy of Music. El'Zabar was the subject of the documentary film *Be Known: The Mystery of Kahil El'Zabar*, by filmmaker Dwayne Johnson-Cochran. El'Zabar has performed with musicians including Stevie Wonder, Paul Simon, and Nina Simone.

El'Zabar joined the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in 1970, becoming chair in 1975. In 2002, he was named percussionist of the year by the Jazz Journalists Association. El'Zabar was named the 2006 Chicagoan of the Year by the Chicago Tribune. In 2008, he became the artist-in-residence of the City of Bordeaux, France, and, in 2014, was knighted by the French government, receiving the Chevalier Medal of Letters. El'Zabar serves on the advisory council of Art Meet DEI.

Kahil El’Zabar lives in Chicago, Illinois. He has eight children.

Kahil El’Zabar was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on April 5, 2003, and February 28, 2022.

Related Entries

St. Clotilde Church and School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Cathedral High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Kennedy–King College [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Malcolm X College [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Lake Forest College [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

University of Ghana [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

University of Nebraska, Lincoln [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Associate Professor

University of Illinois, Chicago [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 199408 to 200810]

Associate Professor

Steppenwolf Theatre Company [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Founder and Creator of Traffic Series

African Festival of the Arts [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Curator of the Festival

Ethnic Heritage Ensemble [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1973 to ?]

Founder

Ritual Trio [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Founder

Kahil El'Zabar Quartet [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

Founder

OOHnow [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 2008 to ?]

Founder

Chicago Academy of Music [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from ? to ?]

Artistic Director

City of Bordeaux, France [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 2008 to 2009]

Artist-in-Residence

Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Chairman

The Sundrummer [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Chairman

National Task Force on Arts Presenting in Education [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board member

National Campaign for the Freedom of Expression [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

Forum for the Evolution of Progressive Arts [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Chairman/Partner