

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Doris Humphries

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Humphries, Doris, 1924-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Doris Humphries,
Dates:	July 30, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:25:58).
Abstract:	Dancer and dance instructor Doris Humphries (1924 -) toured with music legends such as Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstein, and Dizzy Gillespie. Later, in a duo known as Tony and Tanya Belle, she became well known for her innovative coupling of Latin and soul. Humphries worked with the City of Chicago to create outreach programs with her group, The Closet Performers. Humphries also taught courses at Chicago-area colleges and cultural centers. Humphries was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 30, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_114
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer and dance instructor Doris Humphries was born in Chicago, Illinois, on September 10, 1924. As a child, Humphries would mimic the dancers that she saw in the movies, and, to reproduce the tapping sound of the tap dancers, she attached bottle caps to the soles of her shoes. At the age of eleven, Humphries began taking lessons from legendary choreographer Sadie Bruce; at fourteen, she took up rhythm skating with a group called The Musketeers. While attending Englewood High School in Chicago, Humphries met up with her dancing partner, Junior; the two would go on to be known as Dinky and Junior.

Following their graduation from high school, Junior and Humphries auditioned for Berle Adams of the prestigious William Morris Agency; he quickly signed them, and they began touring the United States dancing with bandleader Louis Jordan. As they toured, the duo performed with Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstein, and Dizzy Gillespie. In 1945, Humphries met Sergeant Hedrick Humphries, and the two were married the following year. Humphries went into retirement to raise her family, but after the birth of her third child, she returned to dancing. In the 1950s, Doris organized a dance troupe named Humphries' Hi-Heels, with original members Mable Mitchell, Ann Mosley, and Sue Redd. They performed in social clubs on the Southside of Chicago into the early 1960s. Continuing her training, Humphries also enrolled in Jimmy Payne's Afro-Cuban dance class, where she met her next dance partner. The two created a duo known as Tony and Tanya Belle, with which they gained fame for their innovative coupling of Latin and soul.

In 1986, Humphries was awarded a grant from the City of Chicago to create an outreach program; her group, The Closet Performers, was an immediate success, with students in her classes ranging from age three to ninety-two. In 2004, Humphries again contributed to the dance education of Chicago residents by opening the Chicago Human

Rhythm Project's Fourteenth Annual Dance Festival with an appearance as a panelist for a discussion on African American Women in Tap. In addition to her work with the City of Chicago, Humphries continued teaching ballroom, Latin, and tap dancing, at the South Shore Cultural Center for over ten years, as well as classes at Oak View Park Center and Moraine Valley College.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Doris Humphries was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 30, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer and dance instructor Doris Humphries (1924 -) toured with music legends such as Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstein, and Dizzy Gillespie. Later, in a duo known as Tony and Tanya Belle, she became well known for her innovative coupling of Latin and soul. Humphries worked with the City of Chicago to create outreach programs with her group, The Closet Performers. Humphries also taught courses at Chicago-area colleges and cultural centers.

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:

Humphries, Doris, 1924-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Humphries, Doris, 1924---Interviews

African American dancers--Interviews

African American dance teachers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews

Women tap dancers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dancer

Dance Instructor

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Doris Humphries, July 30, 2004. 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 Doris Humphries, Section A2004_114_001_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Doris Humphries was born on September 10, 1924 on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois. Her mother, Bertha Robinson Blanks, born in Lecompte, Louisiana in 1902, was the oldest of nine siblings and migrated to Chicago with her family. Humphries's maternal grandfather was a janitor in several buildings in Chicago. Her father, Bertis Blanks, was born in 1900 in Meridian, Mississippi. He migrated to Chicago and became a chauffeur for gangsters, contemporaries of Al Capone. Humphries was raised during the Great Depression and she remembers buying groceries using food stamps and moving frequently between Chicago's South and West Sides. She began school at William H. Brown Elementary School, then attended Austin O. Sexton and Corpus Christi Elementary Schools. Humphries was a shy child who enjoyed dancing, putting on shows in her grandfather's backyard and going to see stage shows and movies. She also remembers running after the ice man, dressing up to visit downtown Chicago and converting to Catholicism as a child.

African American dancers--Interviews.

African American dance teachers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews.

Women tap dancers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Doris Humphries, Section A2004_114_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Doris Humphries was raised on both the South and West Sides of Chicago, Illinois during the Great Depression, and she recalls many families slept in Washington Park on hot nights. When Humphries was eight years old, her younger sister died. Humphries attended Corpus Christi Elementary School, then Lucy Flower Technical High School and graduated from Englewood High School. During high school, she roller skated with the group called the Musketeers and met her first dance partner; the two choreographed tap routines to Gershwin songs and routines with leaps and spins. After graduating from high school, they auditioned for Berle Adams. Their first booking was at the Rhumboogie Café. In 1944, they had their first out-of-town booking at Club Plantation in St. Louis, Missouri and were on the marquee with Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine and Dizzy Gillespie. Due to rude crowds the entire set broke their contract early. Humphries admired tap dancers like the Nicholas Brothers, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Eleanor Powell.

Video Oral History Interview with Doris Humphries, Section A2004_114_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Doris Humphries was a member of the dancing duo the Manhattan Debs who traveled across the country performing for about two years in the 1940s. They often stayed in the homes of African Americans while on the road. Humphries remembers experiencing racial discrimination while performing in Nashville, Tennessee; she was forced to go to the back of the bus and ostracized at a white

Catholic church she attended. The first time the Debs performed at the Apollo Theater they gave an awful performance; the second time, they were called back for an encore. The Debs were introduced to bandleader Louis Jordan through their agent Berle Adams and were part of Jordan's routine for "Caldonia," which was featured in the movie 'Swing Parade of 1946'. Once when performing in California, Humphries witnessed a white celebrity try to embarrass Jordan after Jordan outshone him. Humphries reflects upon the limitations that were placed on black performers in the 1940s and remembers meeting the Nicholas Brothers and Noble Sissle.

Video Oral History Interview with Doris Humphries, Section A2004_114_001_004, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Doris Humphries performed "Caldonia" with Louis Jordan in the movie 'Swing Parade of 1946.' She was star struck by The Three Stooges who were on set with them, but never met the film's stars Gale Storm and Phil Regan. During her years in show business, Humphries met Flash McDonald, Peg Leg Bates, Sarah Vaughan and Sammy Davis, Jr., but knew Jordan and Billy Eckstine best. She was sheltered from the unsavory aspects of the business. Humphries retired in 1946, after two years performing, and married Sergeant Hedrick Humphries, a fellow Chicagoan. She concentrated on raising her children and later, began organizing community theater workshops and a fine arts program for children which operated out of Little Flower Parish in Chicago, Illinois. She also organized student performances through the Better Boys Foundation during the 1960s. Humphries took Afro-Cuban dance at Jimmy Payne's studio where she met Tony Cortez; the two formed a Latin dance duo, Tony and Tanya Belle, and performed around Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Doris Humphries, Section A2004_114_001_005, TRT: 0:28:48 ?

Doris Humphries was still teaching ballroom and Latin dance at the time of the interview. She gave birth to four children; her first child died in infancy. Her only daughter, Kathleen Humphries, works in advertising. Humphries describes her concerns for the African American community and how she would like to be remembered. She also reflects upon her life, legacy and career, and concludes by narrating her photographs.