

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willie Kitchens

PERSON

Kitchens, Willie, 1956-

Alternative Names: Willie Kitchens; Willie Kitchens, Jr.

Life Dates: January 6, 1956-

Place of Birth: Chattanooga, Tennessee, USA

Residence: Chattanooga, TN

Work: Chattanooga, TN

Occupations: Gospel Musician; Music Director; Singer

Biographical Note

Born on January 6, 1956, to a musical family in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Willie David Kitchens, Jr., fell in love with music at an early age. At age seven, Kitchens began singing at community churches with his sisters and his father, a guitarist with the gospel group Five Sons of Calvary. Kitchens soon became a member of the Rosebud Choir at his family's church, Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist. Willie Kitchens, Sr. taught his son to play guitar when he was ten, and at sixteen the younger Kitchens joined the Five Sons of Calvary as bass guitarist and background vocalist.

With the Five Sons, Kitchens performed with groups including the Swan Silvertones, the Brooklyn All-Stars, and the Jackson Southernaires. Diversifying his repertoire, Kitchens joined the funk band at Howard High School as lead guitarist and lead vocalist while continuing to perform gospel at church and with the Five Sons. After graduating high school, Kitchens attended the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

At age twenty-four, Kitchens began to concentrate on gospel performance. Over the years, he taught himself to play the harmonica, piano, and electric keyboards. Kitchens performed and ministered everywhere from "Bobby Jones Gospel" to colleges, to prisons.

In 1995, Kitchens became Music and Performing Arts Director for the Bethlehem Center, a ministry in inner-city Chattanooga; there he created a traveling youth choir for children from two to eighteen years of age and opened the Bethlehem Recording Studio for the Bethlehem Center's radio and television programs. Kitchens's choir recorded four albums, three of them at the Bethlehem Recording Studio. Kitchens also performed

for luminaries including South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In December 1999, Kitchens joined Samuel Gooden, Fred Cash, and Vandy Hampton in the Impressions, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame rhythm and blues group that launched Curtis Mayfield's career. In 2001, the Impressions toured with Eric Clapton.

Kitchens served as lead vocalist for the group—the role that Mayfield filled from 1963-1970. Kitchens, a long-term resident of Chattanooga, Tennessee, left the Impressions in 2002 and went on to work for the Bethlehem Center, where he served as the executive director of the Bethlehem Center Mass Choir and minister of music to the Bethlehem-Wiley United Methodist Church.

Willie Kitchens was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on July 27, 2005.

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