

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Benjamin Wright

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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>	Wright, Benjamin, 1946-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 18, 2007 and July 22, 2017
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007 and 2017
<b>Physical Description:</b>	14 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:21:05).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Music arranger, music director, and conductor Benjamin Wright (1946 - ) became the musical director for The Temptations, Gladys Knight and The Pips, Aretha Franklin, Barry White and The Love Unlimited Orchestra. He has arranged music on the albums by Michael Jackson, Outkast, and Justin Timberlake. Wright was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 18, 2007 and July 22, 2017, in Sun Valley, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_146
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Music director, arranger, and conductor Benjamin Franklin Wright, Jr. was born on July 11, 1946 in Greenville, Mississippi. Wright started his music career while in high school, performing as a drum major in the marching band and singing Doo Wop in a group he and his friends started. Wright attended the Chicago Conservatory of Music and received his Ph.D. from the Pentecostal Bible College in Tuskegee, Alabama.

After high school, Wright embarked on his first major musical tour with rhythm and blues icon Ted Taylor. During the tour, Wright played piano and sang back-up for the band. The Ted Taylor Tour allowed Wright to experience music arrangement for the first time, and his subsequent success within the industry took him on the road with James Brown, Otis Redding, Billy Stewart and Gladys Knight and The Pips. Shortly after Wright's touring period, he was drafted into the United States Air Force. While there, Wright met "Fats" Ford, a trumpet player who played with Duke Ellington. Ford eventually introduced Wright to Duke Ellington, an experience that changed his life forever. After Wright's honorable discharge from the military in Alabama, he worked for several years with Bobby Moore and The Rhythm Aces, before working on the hotel circuit and jazz trios throughout the country. In 1969, Wright worked as a copyist for notable musical arrangers such as Charles Stepney, Gene Barge, Donny Hathaway and Richard Evans. Concurrently, Wright performed with Pieces of Peace, a group of musicians who recorded music sessions for Jackie Wilson, The Chi-Lites, Jerry Butler, Curtis Mayfield and The Impressions. After traveling overseas with Pieces of Peace at the end of 1971, Wright enrolled in the Chicago Conservatory of Music, and shortly thereafter formed the Benjamin Wright Orchestra. In 1975, Wright moved to Los Angeles, California and became the musical director for The Temptations, Gladys Knight and The Pips, Aretha Franklin, and Barry White and The Love Unlimited Orchestra. In 1979, Wright acted as the string arranger for Michael Jackson's first solo album, *Off the Wall*, where he met producer Quincy Jones. Between 1982 and 1983, Wright opened the Ritesonian Recording Studio, and in 1987, he went back on the road as the musical director for Gladys Knight and The Pips to do a year of one-night-only performances. In 2003, Wright and long time friend and former singer with

The Temptations, Louis Price, formed the Price/Wright Orchestra. Then, in 2004, Wright wrote five new arrangements for singer Brandy and produced three songs with Otis Williams for The Temptations. Wright has also done arrangements on Outkast and Justin Timberlake's Grammy-winning albums *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, and *Justified* respectively. In 2005, Wright was honored by being invited to write and conduct the Norwegian Radio Symphony Orchestra for the Patty LaBelle segment of the Nobel Peace Prize celebration in Oslo, Norway.

Wright was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 18, 2007 and March 9, 2017.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Benjamin Wright was conducted by Harriette Cole and Paul Brock on April 18, 2007 and July 22, 2017, in Sun Valley, California, and was recorded on 14 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Music arranger, music director, and conductor Benjamin Wright (1946 - ) became the musical director for The Temptations, Gladys Knight and The Pips, Aretha Franklin, Barry White and The Love Unlimited Orchestra. He has arranged music on the albums by Michael Jackson, Outkast, and Justin Timberlake.

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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:

Wright, Benjamin, 1946-

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Wright, Benjamin, 1946---Interviews

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African American composers--Interviews

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African American musicians--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 Director

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Conductor

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Music Arranger

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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 Benjamin Wright, April 18, 2007 and July 22, 2017. 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 Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:33  
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Benjamin Wright was born on July 11, 1946 in Greenville, Mississippi. His mother, Colonus Miller, was born on June 10, 1911 in Mississippi to John Miller and his wife and worked as a domestic. Wright's father, Benjamin F. Wright, Sr., was born on July 10, 1904 in Mississippi to Peter Wright and Lillian Wright and worked as a carpenter. Wright has no memories of his grandparents. His siblings include a brother, Paul, who died when he was two years old around 1950, an older sister named L.V. Martin, and a younger sister named Percy Jean Knight. Before Wright was born, his parents lived in Chicago, Illinois, but they returned to Mississippi in 1946. Wright attended Julia L. Armstrong Elementary School in Greenville, Mississippi, where he was drawn to music and football. He also attended St. John Missionary Baptist Church, where he joined the choir around the age of ten. Wright's older sister had a piano and took lessons, and he would often play her piano in secret as a child.

African American composers--Interviews.

African American musicians--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:33  
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Benjamin Wright attended Coleman High School in Greenville, Mississippi, where he sang in the choir with Willie Richardson and HistoryMaker Walter J. Turnbull. In eighth grade, Wright joined a doo-wop group called "The Soothers," where he eventually became the piano player. Wright learned more about music through his choir, and was asked to conduct the choir while the director was sick. However, he was anxious to join the school band instead. In eleventh grade, Wright joined the band as a bass drummer, but also learned to play the tympani and the trombone. On weekends, Wright also played organ in his band director's swing band and was a prominent fixture in his church choir. While attending school, Wright also worked with his father. Starting in seventh grade, Wright chopped cotton during the summers and remembers avoiding snakes. After a few years, Wright began helping his father with his independent contractor carpentry business.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:43  
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Benjamin Wright grew up in Greenville, Mississippi. He recalls his consciousness of racism and the Civil Rights movement, segregated bathrooms, the murder of Emmett Till, and the Freedom Riders. He recalls the dangers of walking past the white school, E.E. Bass, on the way to Coleman High School

and how his parents tried to protect him from white hostility after the Freedom Riders arrived. During his senior year, Wright became drum major in his high school band and continued to play in swing clubs around Greenville, Mississippi. Wright matured quickly through playing in clubs and became less interested in playing with friends his own age. His first experience composing music occurred when the band director asked him write an arrangement of a number one hit for the marching band to play. He was further encouraged to compose by hearing the orchestra in a concert of Handel's "Messiah."

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:52 ?

Benjamin Wright began writing music while a student at Coleman High School in Greenville, Mississippi while planning on becoming a full-time musician. During his senior year, was expelled from high school after an incident at a swing band gig in Cleveland, Mississippi. Wright's mother met with the superintendent to get Wright back into school and was successful in arguing his case, but Wright opted to take a test to receive his high school diploma instead and did not walk with his graduating class in 1965. Inspired by Down Beat magazine and the success of local blues musician and HistoryMaker B.B. King, Wright and his friend Jerry Wilson planned on joining Bobby "Blue" Bland's band when they came to Greenville on tour. When Bland cancelled, Wright and Wilson joined Ted Taylor's touring band playing organ and saxophone. Wright recalls his experiences with racism and his bandmates' drug problems.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:05 ?

Benjamin Wright toured with Ted Taylor during the summer of 1965. During the tour, the road manager looked after Wright to make sure that he stayed safe. Wright shares the impact that seeing his bandmates on drugs had on him. In Nashville, Tennessee, Wright recorded with Ted Taylor and Peggy Lee, and his friend, Jerry Wilson, left the band to finish high school. Around August of 1965, Wright marched with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and played a show at Rickwood Field in Birmingham, Alabama with James Brown and Mitty Collier. After leaving Birmingham, the tour traveled to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he received his draft notice to fight in Vietnam. To avoid the Army, Wright enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in Jackson, Mississippi. In Jackson, he discovered that he had a scholarship to Jackson State College, but was unable to enroll quickly enough to avoid his service. On October 6, 1965, Wright was stationed in Montgomery, Alabama, where he was forced to sleep under a Confederate flag on his first night.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:47 ?

Benjamin Wright continued to study music while serving in the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam War. He was stationed in the communications center at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. While he could not join the band, Wright took music theory courses offered by the Department of Defense and correspondence courses from Carl Fischer Music and the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. During this time, Wright also met Duke Ellington. After Wright received his Vietnam assignment, his mother became ill. Wright drove to Greenville, Mississippi to drive his mother to the hospital, and on the way encountered a racist gas station owner who refused them service. Wright returned to the Air Force Base, but his mother died on the day before he was supposed to go to Vietnam and he was granted Humanitarian Deferment until two days before he left the Air Force. Wright toured with Bobby Moore

and The Rhythm Aces before joining Skip McQueen's trio and Jerry Wilson's Pieces of Peace.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:20  
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Benjamin Wright recalls meeting Duke Ellington while in the U.S. Air Force and the impression it made on him. In 1969, Wright moved to Chicago, Illinois and began playing with and arranging for Jerry Wilson's band, Pieces of Peace. Members of the group included Donny Hathaway, Bernard Reed, John Bishop, and Louis Satterfield. Wright describes his marriage to his high school sweetheart Deloris Wright and the beginning of his family in Chicago. In Chicago, Wright enrolled at the Chicago Conservatory in 1970, where he clashed with his teachers who he felt were out of touch with practical musicianship. Wright remained at the conservatory for nine months, until he traveled to Singapore with Pieces of Peace. After returning, the band broke up and Wright continued to write arrangements for major labels in Chicago, Illinois. He became music director for The Dells, which sparked his first trip to Los Angeles, California. In 1975, Wright left Chicago, Illinois and moved to Los Angeles.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_002\_008, TRT: 8:29:07  
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Benjamin Wright toured with singer Ted Taylor before he was drafted to serve in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. Following the death of his mother Colonus Miller Wright, he was given an eighteen month humanitarian deferment, at which time he remained stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. At the end of the deferment, he was discharged. Wright then moved to Jackson, Florida to join the musical group, Bobby Moore and the Rhythm Aces. He toured with the group throughout the South for less than a year. Upon his return to Montgomery, Wright received a telegram from music manager and producer Skip McQuinn asking if he would join his group. Wright accepted and moved to Columbus, Georgia. Together, Wright and McQuinn frequently played nightclubs owned by prominent crime families. Wright also reflects upon the racism and discrimination in the U.S. Army, and describes his return to civilian life and racist encounters, which included an altercation with an air policeman.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_002\_009, TRT: 9:29:57  
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Benjamin Wright played the organ in a trio group along with friend and guitarist Skip McQuinn. The trio toured along the East Coast, and frequented nightclubs owned by mob bosses. Wright eventually moved to Chicago, Illinois to launch his recording career. In Chicago, he joined Maurice White's group Pieces of Peace, where he was able to explore his musical talent in composition and arrangement. Wright left the group after their European tour citing irreconcilable differences. At this time, he also enrolled in correspondence classes at the Berkelee School of Music. Wright's first recording opportunity came when musician Syl Johnson asked him to write the music for a single. This collaboration increased his profile in Chicago, and Wright became the copyist to record producer Charles Stepney. Wright also played with Jackie Wilson and Jerry Butler, later becoming the music director for The Dells. Wright also talks about abstaining from drugs and alcohol while working in the music industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_002\_010, TRT: 10:30:08  
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Benjamin Wright enrolled at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago,

Illinois. Even though he obtained a perfect score on the entrance exam, he encountered a teacher that doubted his musical abilities. During this period, Wright left the program to join Pieces of the Peace on their yearlong European tour. When they return to the United States, Wright left the group and started his own called The Benjamin Wright Orchestra. The group played popular nightclubs in Chicago, and became the house band for The High Chaparral nightclub, a venue that seated fifteen hundred people. In 1975, Wright decided to move to Los Angeles, California, where he found work as a musical arranger. The spontaneous move to Los Angeles led to his divorce with his wife; and he also lost custody of his children. Wright slept in his car and lived in dilapidated housing until he was able to buy several units of property in Los Angeles. As an arranger, Wright worked with Earth, Wind and Fire, Aretha Franklin and Michael Jackson.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_002\_011, TRT: 11:23:31  
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Benjamin Wright was recruited by Motown Records artist and repertoire manager Mickey Stevenson to become the music director for The Temptations. Wright stayed with The Temptations from 1976 to 1979, working with choreographer Cholly Atkins on the musical arrangements. Wright also helped manage the group on tour when Atkins was absent. After he left Motown Records, Wright worked with gospel artist Rance Allen at Stax Records in Memphis, Tennessee. Shortly after, he received a call from Quincy Jones who hired him to write songs for Earth, Wind and Fire. Jones went on to commission Wright for several of his other artists including Michael Jackson. Wright was the musical arranger on the hit tracks, 'Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough' and 'Rock with You' on Jackson's breakout album 'Off the Wall' in 1979. At this point in the interview, Wright describes how he negotiated his rates as a composer and arranger. He also recalls meeting Quincy Jones for the first time.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_002\_012, TRT: 12:29:31  
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Benjamin Wright worked with Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson on the album 'Off the Wall' in 1979. In 1982, Wright started Ritesonian Recording Studio and worked with acts like The Whispers, Lakeside, Shalamar and Carrie Lucas. Later in 1987, he served as the musical director and conductor of a PBS television special called 'Night of the Divas' in honor of Marian Anderson, the first African American classical singer. The following year, Wright joined Gladys Knight and The Pips on the road as their musical director. In this role, he reconfigured the band with ten members including five keyboard players. Wright also went on to work with Patti LaBelle, and perform for President William Jefferson Clinton at the White House. Throughout his career as an arranger, he's worked with Toni Braxton, Dru Hill, Mary Mary, Chaka Khan, Destiny's Child and Brandy. Wright was also called to arrange and compose Faithful Central Bible Church's Easter program at The Forum in Inglewood, California.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_002\_013, TRT: 13:29:43  
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Benjamin Wright was honored by the Pentecostal Bible College in Tuskegee, Alabama in 2002. At this portion of the interview, he talks about his work arranging music for churches. Wright goes on to talk about his faith and family, and demonstrates his musical philosophy. He then shares his personal work philosophy, talks about his plans for the future and reflects upon his legacy. Wright concludes this interview by reflecting upon his life, and sharing his

advice for African Americans interested in pursuing careers in music. He also describes how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Benjamin Wright, Section A2007\_146\_002\_014, TRT: 14:07:15  
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Benjamin Wright narrates his photographs.