

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lewis Myers

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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>	Myers, Lou, 1945-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lewis Myers,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 19, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:37:26).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Actor Lewis Myers (1935 - 2013 ) was best known for his role as Mr. Gaines on the television sitcom, 'A Different World.' His theatre credits include 'The First Breeze of Summer' and 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.' Myers was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 19, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_149
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actor and theatrical director Lou Myers was born Lewis Eddy Myers on September 26, 1935 in Laing, West Virginia. Myers was raised in nearby Cabin Creek by his mother, Dorothy Louise Brown Myers and his father, Otis Louis Myers, a mine worker fluent in German. Myers attended Wake Forest School and Washington High School. When his father died and his mother became ill, Myers moved to Cleveland, Ohio for work. There, he performed in Karamu Theatre's junior department production of *Take A Giant Step*. Myers joined the United States Air Force in 1951 where he received his GED. Discharged in 1953, Myers entered West Virginia State University earning his B.A. degree in sociology.

Moving to New York City, Myers worked for the New York City Board of Education and the New York City Department of Recreation. He narrated the production, *Negro Music In Vogue* and performed as "the griot" with Dinizulu's African Dance Company. In 1968, Myers auditioned for the Negro Ensemble Company's production of Genet's *The Blacks: A Clown Show* and was understudy to Louis Gossett, Jr. In 1976, Myers was cast in the Broadway production of Leslie Lee's *The First Breeze of Summer*, which was later televised. He was featured in the original cast of most of August Wilson's plays, including *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Myers gained notoriety for his role as Mr. Gaines on *The Cosby Show* spinoff, *A Different World* from 1988 to 1993. Among his myriad of movie credits are: *Cobb* (1994), *Bulworth* (1998), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), *Volcano* (1997), *The Fighting Temptations* (2003), and *Lackawanna Blues* (2005).

Myers won an NAACP Image Award for his role as "Stool Pigeon" in the August Wilson play, *King Hedley II*. He has also won the off-Broadway Audelco Award for his role in the play, *Fat Tuesday*. In 2005, the Appalachian Education Initiative listed Myers as one of fifty "Outstanding Creative Artists" from the State of West Virginia and featured him in their coffee table book *Art & Soul*. Myers is the founder of the Tshaka Ensemble. Myers has a grown son, Melvin Myers, a grandson and lives in Harlem where the neighborhood youth call him "Mr. Gaines."

Myers was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 19, 2007.

Lou Myers passed away on February 20, 2013.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lewis Myers was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 19, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actor Lewis Myers (1935 - 2013 ) was best known for his role as Mr. Gaines on the television sitcom, 'A Different World.' His theatre credits include 'The First Breeze of Summer' and 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.'

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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:

Myers, Lou, 1945-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Myers, Lou, 1945---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:

Actor

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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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 Lewis Myers, April 19, 2007. 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 Lewis Myers, Section A2007\_149\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

Lewis Myers was born on September 26, 1935 in Laing, West Virginia to Dorothy Brown Myers and Otis Myers. His maternal grandfather, musician George Brown, grew up in Buckingham County, Virginia, and fled the South at sixteen years old after a white girl showed romantic interest in him. He moved to

Cabin Creek, West Virginia, where he worked as a coal miner. Myers' mother was born in 1917; and, with her four younger brothers, attended the Wake Forest School in Laing. Myers' paternal grandfather, Buren Myers, was descended from slaves who came to West Virginia in the mid-19th century to support John Brown's armed abolitionist movement. He also had German ancestry, and taught Myers to speak German as a child. He married Myers' paternal grandmother, Laura Atkins Myers, and moved to the land she inherited in New London, North Carolina, where Myers' father was born in 1915. After attacking a white school bus, Myers' father was sent to West Virginia, where he worked as a coal miner with Myers' grandfather.

Video Oral History Interview with Lewis Myers, Section A2007\_149\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

Lewis Myers' parents, Otis Myers and Dorothy Brown Myers, married, and moved to Decota, West Virginia. His father worked as a machine cutter in the coal mines, where African American and Italian American union members often cooperated prior to the era when Italians were accepted as white. Myers' father owned a Chrysler car, and hosted dances for the community. Later, he developed cancer as a result of hazardous working conditions, and died at thirty-three years old. Myers was his parents' only child, and grew up in Cabin Creek, West Virginia, often visiting Charleston, West Virginia for the holidays. He was exposed to music through his parents, who listened to Sister Rosetta Tharpe records; and his maternal grandmother, who played gospel and blues guitar. He also attended an annual carnival, where he watched the 'Silas Green from New Orleans' show. Additionally, Myers talks about Lena Horne's government sponsorship as a pin-up girl for black soldiers, like Myers' uncle, during World War II.

Video Oral History Interview with Lewis Myers, Section A2007\_149\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

Lewis Myers grew up in Cabin Creek, West Virginia, where his family belonged to a Baptist church. There, he recited poetry in Sunday school, and worked as a janitor. Myers and his mother, Dorothy Brown Myers, often visited Charleston, West Virginia, where they purchased records by Louis Armstrong, Billy Eckstine and Marie Knight. Myers attended the Wake Forest School, where his second grade teacher taught lessons on Dutch and Native American culture. Myers attended the all-black Booker T. Washington High School in London, West Virginia until his mother fell ill. At that time, Myers moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he worked at a drugstore. He joined the U.S. Air Force in 1955, and was stationed at the Tachikawa Airfield in Japan. There, he protested against the base's racially segregated entrances. Myers left the U.S. military in 1958, and enrolled at West Virginia State College, where he majored in sociology and psychology, and studied under Professor James Kelly, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Lewis Myers, Section A2007\_149\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:08 ?

Lewis Myers attended West Virginia State College in Institute, West Virginia, where he majored in sociology and psychology. During his freshman year, his coursework led him to question his Baptist faith. After a mental breakdown, Myers spent two nights in the mental health ward of the Highland Hospital in Charleston, West Virginia, where he was threatened with a beating by his nurse and orderly. Later, Myers graduated, and moved to New York City to pursue an acting career. He initially secured a job at the New York City Board of Education and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, and later became involved in the arts, understudying with the Negro Ensemble Company and joining the groups Negro Music In Vogue and Dinizulu and His African Dancers. In 1975, Myers founded the Tshaka Ensemble Players. He describes his play 'Footsteps from Before,' which chronicled African American historical

figures like Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, Nat Turner and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Video Oral History Interview with Lewis Myers, Section A2007\_149\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:35 ?

Lewis Myers began his acting career at the Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio, where he studied under theater instructor Ann Flagg. After moving to New York City, he understudied Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. in the premiere production of 'The Blacks: A Clown Show' in 1961. Myers made his Broadway debut in 1975 in the Negro Ensemble Company production of 'The First Breeze of Summer.' The following year, he won an AUDELCO award for his performance as Whipping Sam in Roger Furman's musical, 'Fat Tuesday.' Myers understudied the first Broadway production of August Wilson's 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,' and acted in Wilson's other plays, including 'The Piano Lesson,' 'Fences' and 'King Hedley II.' In the late 1980s, he played Vernon Gaines on 'A Different World,' a spinoff of 'The Cosby Show' set at a historically black college. Myers' early film credits included 'Cobb' in 1994, and he continued his screen acting career from the 1990s. Myers also describes his hopes for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Lewis Myers, Section A2007\_149\_001\_006, TRT: 0:10:50 ?

Lewis Myers moved to New York City's Harlem neighborhood while acting in the Broadway musical 'The Color Purple' in 2005. He found the community to be welcoming and supportive, and continued to live there at the time of the interview. Myers reflects upon his life, legacy and family, and concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.