

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Malik Yusef Jones

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Jones, Yusef
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Malik Yusef Jones,
Dates:	July 17, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:30:25).
Abstract:	Spoken word artist Malik Yusef Jones (1971 -) was a Peabody Award nominee, has worked and toured with music acts such as Kanye West, Mary J. Blige and Keyshia Cole, was the Truth Award "Spoken Word Artist of the Year" between 2001 and 2005, and has appeared on Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam. Jones was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 17, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_090
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Spoken word artist Malik Yusef was born Malik Yusef Jones on April 4, 1971 in Chicago, Illinois. Yusef was raised on Chicago's Southside in the neighborhood commonly referred to as the "Wild 100's." As a teenager, Yusef became a member of the Islamic street gang, the Blackstone Rangers. During this time, he also overcame his challenge with dyslexia. Yusef began performing spoken word in open mic venues in the late 1980s. He had his first big break in 1997 when Ted Witcher, director of the film, *Love Jones*, recognized his poetry and hired him to coach the film's lead actor, Larenz Tate. In 2002, Yusef along with jazz saxophonist Mike Phillips collaborated on the song "This Is Not A Game," which was selected by Michael Jordan to appear on the CD that came with the purchase of limited edition Jordan 17 sneakers. That same year, he performed his poem entitled "I spit..." on the Grammy-winning second season of HBO's *Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam*. He released his debut album in the compilation of *The Great Chicago Fire; A Cold Day in Hell* in 2003. Yusef has performed at "The Art of Love Tour" featuring Raheem DeVaughn and Chrisette Michele; the "Real Thing Tour" featuring Jill Scott & Raheem DeVaughn; "Touch the Sky Tour" featuring Kanye West & Keyshia Cole; the Carl Thomas & Mary J. Blige Tour; and the Glow in the Dark Tour featuring Kanye West. In 2007, Yusef collaborated with Director Frey Hoffman for the film adaptation of his poem "Hollywood Jerome." Kanye West and Yusef released the album *Good Morning & Good Night* in 2008.

Yusef received a Peabody Award nomination in 2000 and was the Truth Award "Spoken Word Artist of the Year" from 2001 to 2005. In 2006, Kanye West's CD, *Late Registration*, which featured Yusef's poetry on the song "Crack Music" was awarded a Grammy Award. That same year, Yusef won an Independent Film Project Award for *Hollywood Jerome*. He was also awarded the "Best Poet" by the Chicago Music Awards from 2002 to 2008.

Yusef is the father of three children and resides in Chicago, Illinois.

Yusef was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 17, 2008.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Malik Yusef Jones was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 17, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Spoken word artist Malik Yusef Jones (1971 -) was a Peabody Award nominee, has worked and toured with music acts such as Kanye West, Mary J. Blige and Keyshia Cole, was the Truth Award "Spoken Word Artist of the Year" between 2001 and 2005, and has appeared on Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam.

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:

Jones, Yusef

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Jones, Yusef--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Spoken Word Artist

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 Malik Yusef Jones, July 17, 2008. 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 Malik Yusef Jones, Section A2008_090_001_001, TRT: 0:30:02
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Malik Yusef Jones was born on April 4, 1971 in Chicago, Illinois to Earline Jackson Jones and Hubbard Jones. His maternal great-grandparents came from Mississippi to Chicago, where they lived in the newly built Robert Taylor

Homes. Jones' paternal family included the Jones Brothers, who were well-known policy kings. His paternal great uncle, Hubbard Smith, had frequent conflicts with the police, and was eventually jailed in a psychiatric facility. Jones' paternal grandmother, dancer Rita Smith, was rarely at home during his father's childhood, so Jones' father cared for his grandmother and younger sister. He attended Robert Lindblom Technical High School, and studied sheet metalworking at the Washburne Trade School. Jobs were scarce, and his father faced discrimination from his white coworkers. Jones' father belonged to the Simba Wachanga and SNCC, and was acquainted with activists Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. As a youth, Jones accompanied his uncles to Chicago's Mosque Maryam, where he once saw Muhammad Ali.

Video Oral History Interview with Malik Yusef Jones, Section A2008_090_001_002, TRT: 0:29:30
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Malik Yusef Jones' father, Hubbard Jones, was involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) efforts to build Malcolm X College in Chicago, Illinois. He was introduced to Jones' mother, Earline Jackson Jones, after meeting her brother at a SNCC rally. At the time, she was pregnant with Jones' older brother. Jones' parents separated after he was born, and he lived with his mother, brother and maternal grandmother until his parents reunited when he was five years old. While his father was at work, Jones was abused by his mother, who broke his nose and burnt him with an iron. She suffered from depression, and also neglected Jones' siblings, who were mocked for their disheveled appearance at Fridtjof Nansen Elementary School. There, Jones' classes became increasingly difficult because of his undiagnosed dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. When Jones was fifteen years old, he worked at a car wash, where he began selling narcotics.

Video Oral History Interview with Malik Yusef Jones, Section A2008_090_001_003, TRT: 0:30:07
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Malik Yusef Jones lived in a two-story house in Chicago, Illinois, and occasionally helped his father, Hubbard Jones, with home improvement projects. He accompanied his uncles to Mosque Maryam until he was ten years old. From that time, his mother, Earline Jackson Jones, brought him and his siblings to the Greater Harvest Missionary Baptist Church, where they were bullied for their Islamic names. Jones later returned to the Nation of Islam. When he was twelve years old, Jones' neighborhood became the territory of the Gangster Disciples, but he and the other boys on his block joined the Blackstone Rangers instead. He traveled through multiple gang territories on his route to Chicago Vocational High School, where many of the students were affiliated with gangs. Jones enjoyed learning about William Shakespeare; but, because of his learning disabilities, struggled in school. After his freshman year, Jones attended only to socialize and sell drugs, and eventually left school without graduating.

Video Oral History Interview with Malik Yusef Jones, Section A2008_090_001_004, TRT: 0:30:14
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Malik Yusef Jones stopped attending Chicago Vocational High School in 1987. He devoted his time to the Blackstone Rangers gang, which used many of the practices and symbols of the Moorish Science Temple. The gang established a reputation for keeping the neighborhood clean and safe, and implemented community programs like a choir and a free breakfast initiative. With the crack cocaine boom of the early 1990s, Chicago's gangs invested heavily in the drug trade. Jones traveled to nearby states to sell narcotics, and generated a thirty to fifty thousand dollar profit each month. He describes the political and social conditions that propagated the drug trade, and targeted people of color. He also

witnessed the prevalence of the drug trade in the white community. In 1993, at the height of the drug war, Jones began writing poetry as a coping mechanism. He wrote his first poem in a letter to his high school girlfriend, and later wrote a poem to his abusive mother.

Video Oral History Interview with Malik Yusef Jones, Section A2008_090_001_005, TRT: 0:29:26
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Malik Yusef Jones wrote the poem 'If Roses Came In Black' to address the exclusion of African Americans from television. Inspired by his father's Afrocentric ideals, Jones focused the poem on a celebration of black women. He also wrote 'Touching Africa' for his son's mother, Lisa; and 'The Ceremony,' a poem depicting a Native American wedding. He mentioned his poetry to a client, who suggested he perform at an open mic night at the Green Mill Cocktail Lounge on Chicago's North Side. Marc Smith, the creator of the poetry slam, invited Jones to a poetry slam recorded by ABC. Jones also performed at the Spices Jazz Bar, a primarily African American lounge. Jones took a hiatus from writing when new regulations forced the Spices Jazz Bar to close briefly. He gained notoriety when his poetry slam performance aired on television, and elicited the jealousy of Regie Gibson, a prominent African American slam poet who frequented the Spices Jazz Bar.

Video Oral History Interview with Malik Yusef Jones, Section A2008_090_001_006, TRT: 0:29:59
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Malik Yusef Jones criticized the crowd at the Spices Jazz Bar in Chicago, Illinois for their hostility towards a woman who was the lounge's only white patron. Instead of performing his poem 'How Does It Feel to be Black,' Jones scolded slam poet Regie Gibson for his unwelcoming behavior. Afterwards, Gibson harbored a grudge, and tried to embarrass Jones by offering him a part in Theodore Witcher's film, 'Love Jones.' Jones promoted the film to his friends and contacts; but, when it aired, his part was almost completely cut, and his name was misspelled in the credits. Despite his embarrassment, Jones was widely recognized for his role. Jones was introduced to the music industry by his friend, rapper Tupac Shakur. He was featured on Common's album in 1997, and collaborated with musical artist Erykah Badu before she gained prominence. Jones was also acquainted with musicians like Nelly, the Notorious B.I.G. and Carl Thomas. He talks about rap lyrics, which he often considered misogynistic.

Video Oral History Interview with Malik Yusef Jones, Section A2008_090_001_007, TRT: 0:31:07
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Malik Yusef Jones toured with the rapper Common, and recited a poem for singer Carl Thomas' album 'Emotional,' which sold 2 million copies. In 2000, Jones created an album in collaboration with several musicians from Chicago, Illinois. He worked with emerging artist Kanye West, with whom he began a longstanding partnership. Jones describes West's musical genius, and their shared experience of synesthesia. He compares various forms of music, including rap, hip-hop, poetry and spoken word. Spoken word and rap, he explains, are both kinds of poetry, although rap is structured by a syncopated beat. Jones also talks about the negative potential of rap music, and the violent and materialistic messages that sometimes accompany the genre. He describes his hopes for his own music and spoken word, which he intended to uplift and encourage others. Jones talks about his three children, Jabriel Jones, Nasir Jones and Kilam Jones. He reflects upon his life, and describes how he would like to be remembered.