

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bill Duke

PERSON

Duke, Bill, 1943-

Alternative Names: Bill Duke;

Life Dates: February 26, 1943-

Place of Birth: Poughkeepsie, New York, USA

Work: Los Angeles, CA

Occupations: Actor; Film Director

Biographical Note

Film director and actor Bill Duke was born William Henry Hudson Duke, Jr. on February 26, 1943 in Poughkeepsie, New York to Ethel Louise and William Henry Hudson Duke, Sr. Duke earned his A.A. degree from Dutchess Community College before attending Boston University, where he originally enrolled as a pre-med student, but earned his B.A. degree in theatre. He received his M.A. degree in fine arts from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Duke later attended the American Film Institute.

Duke began his career as an actor in New York City with the Negro Ensemble Company, performing in plays such as LeRoi Jones' *Slave Ship* and Melvin Van Peebles' musical *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*. Duke's first movie role was in 1976 when he portrayed a young Black Muslim revolutionary named Abdullah Mohammed Akbar in *Car Wash*. Duke then held the recurring role of Luther Freeman in the series *Palmerstown, U.S.A.* before his directorial debut in 1982, directing episodes of *Knot's Landing*, *Falcon Crest*, and *Flamingo Road*. Some of Duke's most prominent work was his direction of teleplays for the PBS series *American Playhouse* including "The Killing Floor," which was chosen for Critic's Week at the Cannes Film Festival in 1985, "A Raisin in the Sun," which received an Emmy nomination, and "The Meeting." During the 1980s, Duke amassed more than 100 television directing credits, including more than seventy episodes of roughly twenty television series such as *Miami Vice*, *Dallas*, *Crime Story*, *Cagney and Lacey* and *Hill Street Blues*. Duke directed his first feature film in 1990, a film adaptation of Chester Himes' novel *A Rage in Harlem*. He went on to direct many other films including *Deep Cover*, *Sister Act 2*, *Hoodlum*, *Deacons for Defense*, and *Prince Among Slaves*. Duke was also featured in numerous television series, including in *Fastlane*, *Karen Sisco*, and *Black Lightning*, as well as in films like *Predator*, *Menace II Society*, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, and *High*

Flying Bird. In 1993, he co-authored *Black Light: The African American Hero* with Paul Carter Harrison and Danny Glover; and, in 1996, he published *The Journey: A Tale of Human Healing*. Duke published his memoir in 2018.

In 2004, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Duke to the California Film Commission. Duke also worked with non-profit and charity organizations such as Educating Young Minds, and has taught at several universities including Howard University and New York University School of Arts. In 2008, he founded the Duke Media Foundation, aimed at teaching new media skills to youth.

Duke is the recipient of numerous awards including the American Film Institute's Lifetime Achievement Award, the NAACP's Special Award for Outstanding Achievement, SCLC's Drum Major for Justice Film Award, and a Cable Ace Award. President Bill Clinton also appointed Duke to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Duke was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on September 19, 2008 and November 20, 2019.

Related Entries

Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

H.S.

Duchess Community College [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

A.A.

Boston University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

B.A.

New York University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

M.F.A.

Violet Avenue Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Negro Ensemble Company [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Actor

Howard University [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Instructor

[EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Actor; Director

American Film Institute [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

Educating Young Minds [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

Duke Media Foundation [MEMBEROF]
[from 2008 to ?]

Founder

National Endowment for the Arts [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Board Member

National Endowment of Humanities [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Appointee

California Film Commission [MEMBEROF]
[from 2004 to ?]

Board Member