

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Will Griffin

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Griffin, William, 1970-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin,
Dates:	May 9, 2014
Bulk Dates:	2014
Physical Description:	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:35:09).
Abstract:	Entertainment chief executive Will Griffin (1970 -) served as president and chief operating officer of Simmons Lathan Media Group and founded, in partnership with Russell Simmons and Stan Lathan, Hip Hop On Demand, where he acts as chairman and chief executive officer. Griffin was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 9, 2014, in Round Rock, Texas. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2014_127
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Media entrepreneur William Griffin was born on November 25, 1970 in Austin, Texas. Griffin received his B.A. degree from Dartmouth College, where he was a member of the college's top-ranked debate team and editor-in-chief of the *Black Praxis*. Griffin then received his J.D. degree from Harvard Law School and authored the *Harvard Report on Urban Music*. He also completed the Entrepreneurship Curriculum at Harvard Business School and served as director of the Harvard Consultation Project.

Griffin began his professional career as a financial analyst in the Structured Finance Group at Goldman, Sachs & Company. He subsequently worked in the Entertainment and Media Practice Group of McKinsey & Company and then joined News Corp/Fox Entertainment Group, where he was director of the eDirect initiative. In 2000, Griffin was hired as general manager and executive vice president of business development for eUniverse Network, where, in two quarters, he developed and implemented the turnaround strategy that led to profitability for the industry's largest digital entertainment company. Then, after producing films with Reuben Cannon and Bishop T.D. Jakes, Griffin was named president and chief operating officer of Simmons Lathan Media Group, a film and television production and acquisitions company that develops and distributes urban content across a variety of media platforms. In 2005, he founded, in partnership with Russell Simmons and Stan Lathan, Def on Demand (later named Hip Hop On Demand) on Comcast, the industry's only African American owned Video-on-demand channel, where he serves as chairman and chief executive officer.

Griffin's projects have won numerous awards including two NAACP Image Awards (*Run's House* and *Bishop T.D. Jakes' Woman Thou Art Loosed: The Movie*) and the IAB/Brandweek Mixx Silver Award for Interactive Television for Hip Hop On Demand.

Will Griffin was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 9, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Will Griffin was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 9, 2014, in Round Rock, Texas, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Entertainment chief executive Will Griffin (1970 -) served as president and chief operating officer of Simmons Lathan Media Group and founded, in partnership with Russell Simmons and Stan Lathan, Hip Hop On Demand, where he acts as chairman and chief executive officer.

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:

Griffin, William, 1970-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Griffin, William, 1970---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Media Executive

Entertainment Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers|MediaMakers

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 Will Griffin, May 9, 2014. 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 Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_001, TRT: 1:30:19 ?

Will Griffin was born on November 25, 1970 in Austin, Texas. His mother, Patricia Seaton Griffin, and father, Rodney Griffin, were both from Texas. His maternal great-grandfather earned his Ph.D. from the University of Southern California and was principal of Jack Yates High School in Houston, from which

Griffin's mother and father graduated. Griffin's maternal grandfather was a middle school principal and his grandmother was a school teacher. Griffin's paternal grandmother was also teacher in Houston Public Schools. His paternal grandfather was a mechanic during WWII. His father's sister integrated the dormitories at the University of Texas at Austin. In high school, his father took part in one of the first integrated chess tournaments in Houston. He then attended UT-Austin, where he met Griffin's mother. Griffin's father was involved with the Democratic Party and knew HistoryMaker Pluria Marshall through their mutual involvement with Operation Breadbasket in Texas. Griffin talks about politics in Texas.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_002, TRT: 2:28:36 ?

Will Griffin was able to find his great-grandfather's dissertation in the University of Southern California's archives in Los Angeles. Griffin reflects upon the importance of familial legacies and passing his family history to his children. Griffin's parents met as students at the University of Texas at Austin. His mother aspired to become a veterinarian, to achieve her father's unfulfilled dream, but got pregnant during her freshman year with Griffin's older sister, Elizabeth, and left school. Griffin's parents married but separated and later divorced. Griffin talks about his similarities to his parents' personalities and his mother's strict house rules and punishments. He also talks about his father's lack of financial support, his mother's jobs and her weekend show on a local black community radio station in Austin, KAZI. Griffin talks about his sister, the places they lived in Austin and his earliest childhood memory of learning to count at his grandmother's home in Houston, Texas.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_003, TRT: 3:28:53 ?

Will Griffin recalls the sights, sounds and smells of his childhood in Austin, Texas. He attended Ebenezer Baptist Church School, T.A. Brown Elementary, and Harris Elementary, where he played sports and discovered that he had a dyslexia and dysgraphia. In elementary school, he received good grades in everything besides behavior. Griffin recalls some of his elementary school teachers. Griffin's mother placed him in Bible study with a Jehovah's Witness in addition to attending their home church, which was Baptist. Griffin attended Pearce Junior High School, where he first became exposed to popular culture. Michael Jackson was very popular at the time. His mother also had a large record collection. At Pearce, a teacher described him as a "doer," which motivated him to spend as much time out of the home as possible. After Pearce, he went to Lyndon B. Johnson High School, an integrated magnet school. Griffin describes personality differences between himself and his older sister.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_004, TRT: 4:28:24 ?

Will Griffin began learning Texas state history in the seventh grade. He talks about Lyndon Baines Johnson, after whom his high school was named. Griffin also talks about Austin's black community radio station, KAZI, which was founded by John and Jeannette Warfield. Following his mother, who hosted a show, he hosted the station's youth show, 'Teen Scene' during high school. Griffin also worked at a local grocery store in Austin, H-E-B. As a freshman at LBJ High School, Griffin ran for class president. He lost, but the debate coach was impressed with his speech and recruited him. He describes his experience on the debate team, attending debate camps, and his hopes for attending Harvard University. Griffin's hopes for Harvard were ended after he was stripped of his class presidency as a senior. He explains why he was removed from that position by the principal and reflects on teaching his children to stay away from trouble. Following the scandal, Griffin applied for and was admitted to Dartmouth

College.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_005, TRT: 5:28:16 ?

Will Griffin attended Dartmouth College. He describes his parents' lack of financial support and arriving on campus the summer after graduating from high school in Austin, Texas. Among Griffin's mentors at Dartmouth were Ken Strange, who was the debate coach, Neal Katyal, who was later the Acting Solicitor General, and Lee Pelton, who was the first African American dean of the college. He cites Pelton's unconditional support as a factor in his success at Dartmouth. Griffin majored in anthropology and wrote an ethnography of black Muslims in Harlem. He did research in New York while registering voters for the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. He talks about the Nation of Islam, HistoryMaker Louis Farrakhan, and Spike Lee's 'Malcolm X.' Griffin talks about the Nation's influence within hip hop, Texas rap group Geto Boys, and the popularity of reggae and hip hop at Dartmouth in the 1990s. He also describes how HistoryMaker Rev. Jesse L. Jackson's speech style influenced his own and others.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_006, TRT: 6:28:41 ?

Will Griffin was a member of the African American Society at Dartmouth College. He was also editor of the association's journal, Black Praxis, which featured contributions from students, professors and African Americans of note, including Arna Bontemps, who was a professor at Dartmouth at the time, and HistoryMaker Manning Marable. Griffin describes a controversy over free speech involving the African American Society and the Dartmouth Review, a conservative weekly paper. He talks about support from black professors on campus, including HistoryMaker George Langford. Griffin graduated in 1994 and worked for Goldman Sachs in New York City for one year, where he roomed with Dan Sparks, who later testified before Congress during the subprime mortgage crisis of the late 2000s. Griffin entered Harvard Law School in 1995. In his first year, he published a report on black music with the help of HistoryMaker Clarence Avant. He studied under Allen Dershowitz and HistoryMaker Dennis Hightower, among others.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_007, TRT: 7:28:16 ?

After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1998, he worked for McKinsey & Company in Los Angeles, California. He then worked for News Corporation, where he was heavily involved at Fox Studios. He talks about Fox News' increase in influence over the years and the role of the 2000 U.S. presidential elections in particular in increasing viewership. He talks about his involvement with eDirect and News Corporation's attempts at remaining competitive on the market. Griffin went on to work for eUniverse, the company that was responsible for MySpace, as general manager. He describes his interest in gaining as much experience as possible in running a business before venturing out on his own. Griffin began working with Bishop T.D. Jakes and HistoryMaker Reuben Cannon in 2001, raising money for 'Woman, Thou Art Loosed.' He talks about Jakes' film, book, and conference, and receiving mentorship from Cannon.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_008, TRT: 8:29:42 ?

Will Griffin became President and CEO of Simmons Lathan Media Group in 2002 after being introduced to HistoryMakers Stan Lathan and Russell Simmons by HistoryMaker Reuben Cannon. He talks about the 'Def Comedy Jam' and 'Def Poetry Jam' series. He also talks about his involvement in The HistoryMakers' three-part DVD series produced by Simmons Lathan in 2005. The same year, Griffin created his own company, Def on Demand, an on-

demand hip hop channel through Comcast that features music videos, dance battles, rap battles and interviews. The name was later changed to Hip Hop on Demand. Griffin talks about advocating for more black-owned independent channels with HistoryMaker Alfred Liggins, III. He explains why it is difficult for such channels to survive in the market and the need to provide them with support and infrastructure. Griffin also talks about how the Internet, and Netflix specifically, provide platforms for media.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_009, TRT: 9:31:25 ?

Will Griffin talks about consulting for various media companies, including PlayStation and advertising agency UniWorld. He explains why companies trust him and his work. He also talks about UniWorld founder and HistoryMaker Byron Lewis and his importance in media. Griffin laments the decline of Jet magazine, which was made digital-only at the time of the interview. He talks about the importance of culturally-aware advertising practices in maintaining community institutions like Jet. Griffin talks about his family and his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He reflects upon his life, things he would have done differently, and his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Will Griffin, Section A2014_127_001_010, TRT: 10:12:37 ?

Will Griffin reflects upon his graduation from Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1998. He also talks about his family and how he would like to be remembered.