

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mildred Arbor

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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>	Arbor, Mildred, 1941-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Arbor,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 25, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:45:46).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Singer Mildred Gill Arbor (1941 - ) was a member of the classic Motown group, The Velvelettes. Arbor was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 25, 2014, in Flint, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_158
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Singer and performer Mildred Arbor was born in Mississippi to Dora and Reverend Willie Gill, Sr. In the early 1940s, when Arbor was still a child, her family moved from Mississippi to Kalamazoo, Michigan. She was raised in Kalamazoo and attended Western Michigan University.

At Western Michigan University, Arbor met Bertha McNeal and they formed a singing group in 1961 called the Velvelettes, which included Arbor's younger sister, Carol Street, McNeal's cousin, Norma Fairhurst, and Street's friend, Betty Kelley. After the quintet won an Alpha Phi Alpha talent contest at the University, fellow student and nephew of Berry Gordy, Robert Bullock, suggested they audition for Gordy's Motown Records. The Velvelettes signed to Motown in late 1962 and started recording in January of 1963. They recorded two singles in 1963: "There He Goes" and "That's The Reason Why." In 1964, the Velvelettes recorded and released the single "Needle In A Haystack" on Motown's VIP Records, which peaked at #45 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. The group then recorded "He Was Really Sayin' Somethin'," which peaked at #64 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and at #21 on the Billboard R&B Singles chart.

In September of 1964, Betty Kelley left the Velvelettes to join Martha and the Vandellas. The remaining four Velvelettes continued to perform and released the singles "Lonely Lonely Girl Am I" and "A Bird in the Hand (Is Worth Two in the Bush)" in 1965, and "These Things Will Keep Me Loving You," in 1966, which later became a hit in the United Kingdom peaking at #34 on the UK Singles Chart. The Velvelettes also performed on the Dick Clark Caravan of Stars tours, and the "chitlin circuit" that consisted of the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, New York; the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C.; the Uptown Theatre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; the Royal Theatre in Baltimore, Maryland; the Regal Theatre in Chicago, Illinois; and the Fox Theatre in Detroit, Michigan.

In the late 1960s, Arbor, Fairhurst and McNeal left the group and were replaced by Sandra Tilley and Annette Rogers-McMillan. Then, in 1969, Street married and disbanded the Velvelettes. Arbor went on to become a registered nurse at McLaren Hospital in Flint, Michigan, where she worked for over thirty years. She also retired from the Flint Board of Education Health Occupations as a program coordinator/instructor.

In 1984, four of the original Velvelettes, Arbor, Fairhurst, McNeal and Street, reunited. In 1990, the group re-recorded their original hits and new songs for the album *One Door Closes* for Motorcity Records. Motown Records then released *The Very Best of the Velvelettes* in 1999, *The Velvelettes: The Best Of* in 2001, and *The Velvelettes: The Motown Anthology* in 2004. The Velvelettes are the only Motown group of the classic era still performing with the “original” line-up.

Arbor has one daughter, two sons, and two granddaughters.

Mildred Arbor was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 25, 2014.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mildred Arbor was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 25, 2014, in Flint, Michigan, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer Mildred Gill Arbor (1941 - ) was a member of the classic Motown group, The Velvelettes.

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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:

Arbor, Mildred, 1941-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Arbor, Mildred, 1941---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:

Singer

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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 Mildred Arbor, June 25, 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).

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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 Mildred Arbor, Section A2014\_158\_001\_001, TRT: 1:33:33 ?

Mildred Gill Arbor was born on October 15, 1941 in Brandon, Mississippi to Dora McDonald Gill and Willie Gill. Her paternal grandfather, Reverend Willie Gill, was a landowner in Bogue Chitto, Mississippi. Arbor's parents both grew up in rural Mississippi. Shortly after they married, her father moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan. He later sent for Arbor and her mother. They initially lived with one of Arbor's aunts, who ran a boarding house in Kalamazoo. Arbor's parents established a cleaning service in town, and her father also worked for Ingersoll-Rand plc, where he manufactured tanks for the U.S. Army. Arbor's parents completed the sixth grade in Mississippi, and both sought further education in Kalamazoo. Her mother passed the civil service exam, and became a nursing attendant at the Kalamazoo State Hospital. Arbor's father opened a restaurant and a bakery. He also became an ordained reverend, and founded the Friendship Baptist Church in the building that once housed the restaurant.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Arbor, Section A2014\_158\_001\_002, TRT: 2:32:01 ?

Mildred Gill Arbor moved with her parents, Dora McDonald Gill and Willie Gill, to Kalamazoo, Michigan when she was an infant. Her mother ran a cleaning service in Kalamazoo, while her father worked at the Ingersoll-Rand factory and sold insurance. Arbor was the oldest of her parents' seven children. She accompanied her father on visits to churches in the community, which were part of his duties as the associate pastor of the Friendship Baptist Church. Arbor attended Lincoln Elementary School and Lincoln Junior High School, where she joined the choir and learned to play the harpsichord, violin and clarinet. She also played piano at her father's church. Arbor went on to attend the integrated Kalamazoo Central High School, where she was rejected from the synchronized swimming and cheerleading teams because of her race. Instead, she joined the school chorus. The group was selected to perform at a festival in Ohio, where Arbor met singer Gene Autry. She also sang at the opening ceremony of the Kalamazoo Mall.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Arbor, Section A2014\_158\_001\_003, TRT: 3:31:42 ?

Mildred Gill Arbor enjoyed listening to the 'Randy's Record Shop Show' on the radio in Kalamazoo, Michigan. However, she was forbidden from playing rock and roll music at home, due to her father's strict religious views. Arbor aspired to become a nurse like her mother, but was dissuaded by a guidance counselor at the integrated Kalamazoo Central High School. She was told there were no nursing programs nearby, and decided to attend Western Michigan University instead. There, Arbor met Bertha McNeal, a student from Flint, Michigan. Together, they formed a singing group called The Velvelettes with McNeal's cousin, Norma Fairhurst; Arbor's younger sister, Cal Street; and another student named Betty Kelly. They performed at a school talent show, where Berry Gordy's nephew encouraged them to audition at Motown Records. The group drove to Detroit, Michigan, and auditioned with the song 'There He Goes,' which was written by Fairhurst. The Velvelettes signed a contract with Motown Records in 1962.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Arbor, Section A2014\_158\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:29 ?

Mildred Gill Arbor and The Velvelettes toured for the first time in 1964 with Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars, which included The Supremes, Bobby Freeman, Johnny Tillotson and Dee Dee Sharp. The group was forced to make special accommodations while touring the segregated South, and they were once denied service in a restaurant. Arbor received minimal payment for her work on the tour. Even after their song 'Needle in a Haystack' became a hit later in 1964,

Arbor received little monetary compensation from Motown Records. At this point, Arbor remembers The Velvelettes' collaborations with Stevie Wonder. In September of 1964, Betty Kelly left The Velvelettes to join The Vandellas. Three years later, Arbor left the group and returned to Kalamazoo, Michigan, where she began working as a surgical technician. She earned a nursing degree, and became a nurse at a local hospital. In 1984, Arbor was contacted by Max Oates, a disc jockey from Flint, Michigan, who convinced The Velvelettes to reunite for a concert.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Arbor, Section A2014\_158\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:52 ?

Mildred Gill Arbor and The Velvelettes were based in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and only visited the Motown Records studios in Detroit, Michigan on the weekends. As a result, they were often neglected by the label executives, and decided to disband in the late 1960s. Their music gained popularity in Europe, and the group reunited in 1984. They rerecorded their original songs on the Nightmare Records label, which was based in London, England. In 1999, Motown Records released the album 'The Very Best of the Velvelettes,' a compilation the group's top songs. After reuniting, Arbor and The Velvelettes performed occasionally in Flint, Michigan, Canada and the United Kingdom. Arbor maintained her position as a full time nurse, and balanced the duties of both careers. She was also active with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Flint and Genesee County. Arbor talks about her children, and her hopes and concerns for the African American community. She also reflects upon her legacy and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Mildred Arbor, Section A2014\_158\_001\_006, TRT: 6:08:09 ?

Mildred Gill Arbor narrates her photographs.