

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Tavis Smiley

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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>	Smiley, Tavis, 1964-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Tavis Smiley,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 26, 2001
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2001
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:04:22).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Publishing chief executive and television host Tavis Smiley (1964 - ) was a correspondent for ABC on Prime Time Thursday, and Good Morning America, as well as a commentator for CNN. Smiley also hosted his own signature show on NPR, <i>The Tavis Smiley Show</i> from NPR, a first for an African American. He has authored five books, including <i>How to Make Black America Better</i> . Smiley has used his visibility to convince prominent marketing and advertising firms to spend more money in the black community. Smiley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 26, 2001, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2001_069
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

The third oldest of ten children, Tavis Smiley grew up near an Air Force base in Kokomo, Indiana, where his father was a master sergeant and his mother a Pentecostal minister. Smiley took an interest in politics from an early age, and in high school was voted class president and "Most Likely to Succeed". He attended Indiana University where the death of a classmate at the hands of the police first made him aware of the issues facing the African American community. Convinced that he wanted to pursue a political career, he spent a semester as an intern in the office of Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, and graduated from Indiana University with a degree in Law and Public Policy.

After graduating, he returned to Los Angeles where he worked as an advisor to the City Council president and ran unsuccessfully for a council seat. Soon after his electoral defeat, Smiley started the Smiley Report, a 60 second radio news commentary. The report's popularity earned Smiley his own television talk show on Black Entertainment Television, *BET Tonight with Tavis Smiley*. The show was extremely popular among African Americans and Smiley earned national recognition for an eclectic program that featured interviews with the likes of Bill Clinton, Ice Cube and Pope John Paul II. In April 2001, thousands of Smiley's viewers were outraged when BET terminated his contract.

Since his departure from BET, Smiley is now a correspondent for ABC on Prime Time Thursday and Good Morning America, as well as a commentator for CNN. Smiley also hosts his own signature show on NPR, *The Tavis Smiley Show* from NPR, a first for an African American. He has authored five books, including *How to Make Black America Better*, and also writes for *USA Weekend*.

Throughout his career, Smiley has used his visibility to lead numerous successful public advocacy campaigns, among them, saving the popular Fox television show *Living Single* from a scheduled cancellation, convincing Sotheby's to donate slave artifacts intended for auction to an African American history museum, and pressuring prominent marketing and advertising firms to spend more money in the black community. In 1999, he founded The Tavis Smiley Foundation, which funds programs that develop young leaders in the black community.

Smiley's success has brought him numerous awards and honors. He received a Black Emmy Award in 2000, as well as a Congressional Black Caucus Harold Washington Award the same year. In 2001, he was honored with the NAACP President's Image Award, the Brotherhood Crusade's 2001 Walter Bremond Pioneer of African American Achievement Award and the Los Angeles Press Club Headliner Award.

Smiley lives and works in Los Angeles.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Tavis Smiley was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on June 26, 2001, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Publishing chief executive and television host Tavis Smiley (1964 - ) was a correspondent for ABC on Prime Time Thursday, and Good Morning America, as well as a commentator for CNN. Smiley also hosted his own signature show on NPR, The Tavis Smiley Show from NPR, a first for an African American. He has authored five books, including *How to Make Black America Better*. Smiley has used his visibility to convince prominent marketing and advertising firms to spend more money in the black community.

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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:

Smiley, Tavis, 1964-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Smiley, Tavis, 1964---Interviews

African American television personalities--Interviews

Talk shows--United States

Interviewing on television

Children--Religious life--United States

African Americans--Indiana--Social conditions--20th century

Segregation in education--Indiana

African Americans--Religion

Children of divorced parents--United States--Interviews

Indiana University

Bradley, Tom, 1917-1998

Elections--United States

Joyner, Tom, 1949-

Black Entertainment Television

African American consumers

Consumer Advocacy

**Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

# Occupations:

Television Host

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Publishing Chief Executive

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# HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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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 Tavis Smiley, June 26, 2001. 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 Tavis Smiley, Section A2001\_069\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

In this portion of the interview, Tavis Smiley discusses his childhood and adolescence, focusing on the roles of church and family in shaping him as a person. Smiley gives brief sketches of his mother, father, and grandmothers, and describes the responsibilities he felt being the oldest son out of ten children. Smiley discusses moving from Mississippi to Indiana, and his subsequent experiences at an all-white school and an all-black church. He describes his impoverished living conditions in Indiana and states that faith, family, and

friends kept him strong in spite of poverty. Smiley speaks of his parents' commitment to education and his strong ambition to make a positive contribution to the nation.

African American television personalities--Interviews.

Talk shows--United States.

Interviewing on television.

Children--Religious life--United States.

African Americans--Indiana--Social conditions--20th century.

Segregation in education--Indiana.

African Americans--Religion.

Children of divorced parents--United States--Interviews.

Indiana University.

Bradley, Tom, 1917-1998.

Interns--Interviews.

Elections--United States.

Joyner, Tom, 1949-.

Black Entertainment Television.

African American consumers.

Consumer education.

Video Oral History Interview with Tavis Smiley, Section A2001\_069\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:16 ?

In this portion of the interview, which focuses on Tavis Smiley's interest in local politics as a young man, Smiley begins by discussing his initial interest in public service and politics as a teenager. He describes his experiences as a college student at Indiana University and his internship with the Mayor of Bloomington, Indiana. Smiley explains how his parents' sudden divorce affected him. Smiley spends a good deal of time discussing his internship with Mayor Tom Bradley of Los Angeles in autumn 1985. Smiley talks about why an intership with Bradley appealed to him, his duties as an intern, and how he was nearly not accepted to the position.

Video Oral History Interview with Tavis Smiley, Section A2001\_069\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:23 ?

This portion of the interview starts with Tavis Smiley continuing to discuss his internship with Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley. Smiley explains how he earned enough money to make the internship possible. He details what he learned during his time under Bradley and how this experience led him to run for City Council. Smiley talks about how his defeat propelled him into his radio career. Smiley details the humble start of his radio career and how he eventually gained enough support to rise to national prominence. He explains how he had to change his mode of discourse when making the transition from politics to the radio. In the final minutes of this portion, Smiley talks about his collaborations with radio host Tom Joyner and how he used the radio as a tool to empower African Americans nationwide.

Video Oral History Interview with Tavis Smiley, Section A2001\_069\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:03 ?

In this portion of the interview, Tavis Smiley continues discussing his collaboration with radio host Tom Joyner. He details their advocacy for African American consumers against computer retailer CompUSA, which nearly caused ABC to cancel Joyner's radio show. Smiley cites the resulting African American response as a catalyst of change. Smiley discusses his dismissal from his talk show on BET, and how the dismissal inspired him to continue his advocacy work. He outlines his future goals and discusses what he hopes will be his

legacy. This portion closes with Smiley explaining the stories behind numerous photos. The photos include pictures of himself with Rosa Parks, Bill Clinton, his grandmother, Lorraine Toussaint, Pope John Paul II, Fidel Castro, Geraldo Rivera, and Tom Bradley.

Video Oral History Interview with Tavis Smiley, Section A2001\_069\_001\_005, TRT: 0:05:36 ?

Tavis Smiley continues to tell the stories behind the pictures shown. Smiley shows pictures of himself with Benazir Bhutto, Bishop Noel Jones and Randall Robinson, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Tom Joyner and John H. Johnson.