

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bernice Johnson Reagon

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Reagon, Bernice Johnson, 1942-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon,
Dates:	November 21, 2003 and September 22, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:44:48).
Abstract:	Curator, music composer, and history professor Bernice Johnson Reagon (1942 -) founded Sweet Honey in the Rock, an award-winning a cappella quintet that performs traditional African and African American music. She has been curator emeritus at the Smithsonian since 1993. Reagon also enjoyed a distinguished career as a professor of history at American University from 1993 to 2002. Reagon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 21, 2003 and September 22, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_231
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born on October 4, 1942, Bernice Johnson Reagon grew up in Albany, Georgia, where she became involved in the civil rights movement. As a student at Albany State College in 1961, Reagon was arrested for participating in a SNCC demonstration. She spent the night in jail singing songs and after her arrest joined the SNCC Freedom Singers to use music as a tool for civic action. Reagon earned her B.A. in history from Spelman College in 1970. In 1973, she founded Sweet Honey in the Rock, an award-winning a cappella quintet that performs traditional African and African American music. Reagon received her doctorate in U.S. history, with a concentration in African American oral history, from Howard University in 1975.

Reagon composed and produced much of the Sweet Honey in the Rock's renowned repertoire. She has also composed music for several film projects, including the Emmy-winning *We Shall Overcome*. From 1974 to 1993, Reagon worked as a folklorist, program director and curator for the Smithsonian Institute and helped develop the Peabody Award-winning radio program *Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions* for the Smithsonian and National Public Radio. She has been curator emeritus at the Smithsonian since 1993.

Reagon also enjoyed a distinguished career as a professor of history at the American University from 1993 to 2002. Her writings on African American music and the songs of the civil rights movement have been published in a number of journals and books. Bernice Johnson Reagon was the William and Camille Cosby Endowed Professor in the Fine Arts at her alma mater, Spelman College, for the 2002-2003 academic year.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 21, 2003 and September 22, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Curator, music composer, and history professor Bernice Johnson Reagon (1942 -) founded Sweet Honey in the Rock, an award-winning a cappella quintet that performs traditional African and African American music. She has been curator emeritus at the Smithsonian since 1993. Reagon also enjoyed a distinguished career as a professor of history at American University from 1993 to 2002.

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:

Reagon, Bernice Johnson, 1942-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Reagon, Bernice Johnson, 1942---Interviews

African American women singers--Interviews

Museum curators--Interviews

American University (Washington, D.C.)--Faculty--Interviews

Georgia--Social Life and customs

Education, rural--United States

Discrimination in education--Georgia

African Americans--Civil rights--Songs and music

Albany State College

Freedom Singers

Civil rights movement

Folk music--United States

Protest songs--United States--History and criticism

Spelman College

Race awareness--United States

African Americans--Music--History and criticism

Spirituals (Songs)--History and criticism

Rap (Music)

Masculinity in music

Sexism in music

AIDS (Disease) and art--United States

September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Smithsonian Institution.

Occupations:

Music Composer

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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 Bernice Johnson Reagon, November 21, 2003 and September 22, 2003. 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 Bernice Johnson Reagon, Section A2003_231_001_001, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Bernice Johnson Reagon details her family genealogy and the loving family atmosphere where she grew up in rural Georgia. She describes her parents and their hardscrabble backgrounds. Reagon also describes her educational experiences in a segregated one-room schoolhouse where teachers secretly taught black history.

African American women singers--Interviews.

Museum curators--Interviews.
American University (Washington, D.C.)--Faculty--Interviews.
Georgia--Social Life and customs.
Education, Rural--United States.
Discrimination in education--Georgia.
African Americans--Civil rights--Songs and music.
Albany State College.
Freedom Singers.
Civil rights movements.
Folk music--United States.
Protest songs--United States.
Spelman College.
Race awareness--United States.
African Americans--Music.
Spirituals (Songs).
Rap (Music).
Masculinity in music.
Sexism in music.
AIDS (Disease) and art--United States.
September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, Section A2003_231_001_002, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Bernice Johnson Reagon details her school life and her parents' efforts to overcome the pervasive racism and discrimination in Georgia schools. Reagon describes her early interest in music and singing, telling of her participation in both school and church singing groups, and recalling her fame at being a precocious singer.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, Section A2003_231_001_003, TRT: 0:30:08 ?

Bernice Reagon shares stories of her life in music and civil rights in the early 1960s. She describes her first experiences with civil rights demonstrations that eventually led to her expulsion from Albany State College. Reagon crossed paths with SNCC field coordinator Cordell Reagon who suggested the formation of a freedom singers group. From that collaboration, the SNCC Freedom Singers were born. Reagon also shares her thoughts and reflections on the civil rights movement in that era.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, Section A2003_231_001_004, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Bernice Reagon delves into her history as a SNCC Freedom Singer, explaining the organization's formation and purpose. She also details her courtship and marriage to SNCC field coordinator Cordell Reagon and the birth of their children. Reagon also examines the importance of freedom songs and their role in the civil rights movement, such as the classic "We Shall Overcome".

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, Section A2003_231_002_005, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Bernice Reagon delves into her undergraduate and graduate education and how her worldview was shaped by the revolutionary events occurring around her. Reagon also describes the formation of another singing group, the Harambee

Singers. of particular note are Reagon's anecdotes when she examined the connection to chemically relaxing her hair and her role in the civil rights movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, Section A2003_231_002_006, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Bernice Reagon describes her life as a PhD candidate at Howard University. She details her efforts to integrate oral history into her curriculum and to make it a viable part of the history program at Howard. Reagon also shares her views on the role of black folk music and its role in transmitting black history.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, Section A2003_231_002_007, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Bernice Reagon reflects on the past 30 years of Sweet Honey in the Rock. She describes how it grew from her past experiences in the SNCC Freedom Singers and the Harambee Singers. Reagon values the feedback received from fans around the globe, especially when they are able to sing her songs back to her. Reagon also offers her thoughts on the misogyny present on some contemporary music--rap in particular--and contrasts the difference of what music meant to her as a youth and what it expresses to 21st century youths.

Video Oral History Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, Section A2003_231_002_008, TRT: 0:16:15 ?

Bernice Reagon sums up her career as a singer and songwriter in Sweet Honey in the Rock and what it's all meant. She reflects on her latest album, 'The Women Gather', which came out in response to crises like the September 11 attacks and corporate scandals. She also discusses Sweet Honey's role in AIDS prevention through organizations like Balm in Gilead and other outreach efforts. Reagon said she will leave summations of legacy and how she will be remembered to those who will write her epitaph. Reagon lives life every minute and leaves nothing behind, which is just the way she wants it.