

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jeni LeGon

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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>	Le Gon, Jeni, 1916-2012
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jeni LeGon,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 28, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:36:15).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Film actress and tap dancer Jeni LeGon (1916 - 2012 ) started her career in Count Basie Orchestra's chorus line. In her first screen role, LeGon danced with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the only black woman to do so on screen, in "Hooray for Love." In the 1950's, LeGon founded a school of dance, and by the 1960's, she toured with Jazz Caribe. Her twenty-four film credits include, "Broadway Melody," "This Was Paris," and "Start Cheering, Fools for Scandal." LeGon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 28, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_113
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer, actress, and dance instructor Jeni LeGon was born Jennie Ligon on August 14, 1916, in Chicago, Illinois. Later, in London, she learned that she was descended from General Henry Beauchamp Lygon, the 4th Earl of Beauchamp, through her father, Hector Ligon, a "Geechie" from the Georgia Sea Islands. LeGon grew up with her older sister Mary Belle in Chicago's overcrowded Black Belt. Practicing and performing with other children, LeGon received her first formal training from Mary Bruce's School of Dance. She often skipped school to learn new dance routines from the movies, and she graduated from Sexton Elementary School in 1928. In 1930, at age thirteen, she successfully auditioned for the Count Basie Orchestra's chorus line. Leaving Englewood High School a year later, LeGon was already a cutting edge professional dancer with a repertoire of knee drops, flips, slides, mule kicks, and flying splits, which she performed wearing pants.

In 1931, LeGon became a member of the family oriented Whitman Sisters troupe, which traveled the South. With her half sister, Willa Mae Lane, she formed the LeGon and Lane tap duo in 1933. In 1935 Hollywood, Earl Dancer, the former manager of Ethel Waters, discovered LeGon. Dancer helped LeGon to be the first black woman to sign an extended contract from MGM, though it was shortly cancelled. In her first screen role, LeGon danced with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (the only black woman to do so on screen) in *Hooray for Love*, which also featured Fats Waller.

Her twenty-four film credits include: *Broadway Melody of 1936*, *This Was Paris*, (1937), *Start Cheering, Fools for Scandal* (1938), *I Can't Give You Anything But Love* (1940), *Birth of the Blues*, *Sundown*, *Arabian Nights* (1941), *While Thousands Cheered*, *Stormy Weather* (1943), *Hi De Ho* (1945), *Easter Parade* (1948), *I Shot Jesse James* (1949) and *Somebody Loves Me* (1952).

LeGon married composer Phil Moore in 1943 and they co wrote "The Sping" which Lena Horne sang in *Panama Hattie*. She also starred in Fats Waller's Broadway musical, *Early to Bed* and took African dance lessons from Katherine Dunham that same year. In 1953, LeGon appeared with Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte as a teacher in *Bright Road*. Her next U. S. film role would not come until Snoop Dogg's 2001 film, *Bones*. In the 1950's LeGon founded a school of dance and appeared in television's *Amos and Andy*. By the 60's she toured with Jazz Caribe. In 1969, LeGon settled in Vancouver, British Columbia teaching tap, point and Dunham technique. In the 1970s, LeGon worked with Troupe One, a youth theatre group and traveled to London with the Pelican Players in the 80s.

The Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame and the National Congress of Black Women have honored LeGon. In 2002, Oklahoma City University conferred upon her a doctorate of performing arts in American Dance. In 1999, the National Film Board of Canada released Grant Greshuk's prize-winning documentary, *Jeni LeGon: Living in a Great Big Way*.

Jeni Legon passed away on December 7, 2012.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jeni LeGon was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 28, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Film actress and tap dancer Jeni LeGon (1916 - 2012 ) started her career in Count Basie Orchestra's chorus line. In her first screen role, LeGon danced with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the only black woman to do so on screen, in "Hooray for Love." In the 1950's, LeGon founded a school of dance, and by the 1960's, she toured with Jazz Caribe. Her twenty-four film credits include, "Broadway Melody," "This Was Paris," and "Start Cheering, Fools for Scandal."

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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:

Le Gon, Jeni, 1916-2012

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Le Gon, Jeni, 1916-2012--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:

Tap Dancer

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Film Actress

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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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 Jeni LeGon, July 28, 2004. 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 Jeni LeGon, Section A2004\_113\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Tap dancer and entertainer Jeni LeGon begins by recalling her family background, describing her mother, father, and grandparents. She also shares stories about her ancestry, including her connection to the Earl of Beauchamp. LeGon remembers her childhood growing up in Chicago, Illinois and her early love of the performance arts. She recalls performing song and dance shows with other neighborhood kids that became quite popular on the South Side.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeni LeGon, Section A2004\_113\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Tap dancer and entertainer Jeni LeGon continues to describe her childhood on Chicago's South Side. She talks about performing with her family and describes the social network in her community. LeGon then describes her first break in dancing, when she was hired to dance for Count Basie's big band. She also details how she got her start as a vaudeville dancer with the Whitman Sisters dance troupe. LeGon shares stories of memorable performances as she traveled through the South.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeni LeGon, Section A2004\_113\_001\_003, TRT: 0:27:11 ?

Tap dancer and entertainer Jeni LeGon details her transition from the Whitman Sisters dance troupe to her film career in Hollywood. She describes her early film career as the first African American woman to sign with MGM Studios and tells of the many films in which she performed. LeGon then discusses her performance in the hit film 'Broadway Melody', and explains how her film success led to her performing overseas in London, England. LeGon then describes her dance style and favorite steps while continuing to discuss her performances in films and on stage in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeni LeGon, Section A2004\_113\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Tap dancer and entertainer Jeni LeGon recalls her work with such influential artists as Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, Fats Waller, Katherine Dunham, ex-husband Phil Moore, and the Nicholas Brothers. She describes her performances in films such as 'Stormy Weather' and 'Dishonor Bright'. LeGon also describes the social climate in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s, noting that racial discrimination was prevalent and that performers generally did not socialize with one another.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeni LeGon, Section A2004\_113\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Tap dancer and entertainer Jeni LeGon recalls the latter part of her career, including her work on 'Amos 'n Andy,' her career as a dance teacher, her tour with Jazz Caribe in 1969, and the documentary about her life called 'Living in a Great Big Way.' She discusses racism in the performing arts, and explains how black entertainers set trends that were widely imitated in the white entertainment world. LeGon then describes her move to Vancouver, Canada, where she

became a dance instructor.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeni LeGon, Section A2004\_113\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:47 ?

Tap dancer and entertainer Jeni LeGon discusses her career pursuits in Vancouver, Canada, where she formed a youth theater called Troupe One and taught tap dance. LeGon describes the social climate in Vancouver and considers her options for retirement. She then shares her hopes for the African American community, stressing the need for political action at the highest levels of government to improve the situations of poor blacks. Finally, LeGon reflects on her life, family, and career and considers her legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeni LeGon, Section A2004\_113\_001\_007, TRT: 0:30:07 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Jeni LeGon, Section A2004\_113\_001\_008, TRT: 0:07:30 ?