

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Guillaume

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Guillaume, Robert
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume,
Dates:	April 29, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:11:42).
Abstract:	Actor Robert Guillaume (1927 - 2017) was a two time Emmy Award winner, and the star of the first television show to feature an interracial couple, entitled The Robert Guillaume Show. Guillaume was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 29, 2005, in Burbank, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_114
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actor Robert Guillaume was born Robert P. Williams on November 30, 1927, in St. Louis, Missouri. Raised by his grandmother, Jeanette Williams, Guillaume attended St. Nicholas School where, as a promising singer, he idolized Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, and William Warfield. Expelled by St. Joseph's High School, Guillaume joined the United States Army in 1945, where he served until 1947. Guillaume eventually returned to St. Joseph's High School, from which he graduated; from there he went on to work as a postal clerk and a streetcar driver while attending St. Louis University and Washington University, where he majored in music. In 1957, Guillaume won a nine week classical music summer scholarship to Aspen, Colorado; there he met Russell and Rowena Jelliffe who invited him to join Karamu House Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio.

At Karamu Guillaume changed his name from Williams to Guillaume (French for Williams), received his first acting lessons, and befriended Ron O'Neal, who would later cast him in *Superfly TNT* in 1973. In 1959, Guillaume toured Europe with Quincy Jones, Clark Terry, and Harold Nicholas in the musical *Free and Easy*. Spending most of the 1960s and 1970s in musical theatre and drama, Guillaume appeared in *Kwamina* in 1961; *Fly Blackbird* in 1962; *Tambourines to Glory* in 1963; *Golden Boy* in 1965; *Porgy and Bess* from 1965 through 1972; *Purlie* in 1971; *Othello* in 1973; and *Guys and Dolls* in 1976. In 1968 Guillaume made his first television appearance on Diahann Carroll's *Julia*; many programs followed, but Guillaume achieved stardom when he won an Emmy Award playing the acerbic butler, Benson, on ABC's hit sitcom, *Soap* in 1979. Guillaume reprised the role of Benson DuBois in his own sitcom, *Benson*, which ran from 1979 through 1986. Nominated five times for best actor in a comedy series, Guillaume won another Emmy in 1985, and appeared in *The Robert Guillaume Show*, the first comedy about an interracial family, in 1989. In 1994, Guillaume became the voice of Rafiki, the mandrill sage in Walt Disney's *The Lion King*, and its sequels. That same year, Guillaume played Gleason Golightly in Derrick Bell's *Space Traders*.

Producer and director of *John Grin's Christmas* in 1988, Guillaume also produced *The Kid with the 2000 I.Q* in

1983. After suffering a stroke in his dressing room while working on the sitcom *Sports Night*, Guillaume made history by returning to the show; he went on to appear in more films, including *Big Fish* in 2003, *Tough Like Wearing Dreadlocks* in 2005, and *Jack Satin*, also in 2005.

Guillaume passed away on October 24, 2017 at age 89.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Guillaume was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 29, 2005, in Burbank, California, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actor Robert Guillaume (1927 - 2017) was a two time Emmy Award winner, and the star of the first television show to feature an interracial couple, entitled The Robert Guillaume Show.

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:

Guillaume, Robert

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Guillaume, Robert--Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

African American television personalities--Interviews

African American motion picture actors and actresses--Interviews

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Actor

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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 Robert Guillaume, April 29, 2005. 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 Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_001, TRT: 0:29:42 ?

Robert Guillaume was born on November 30, 1927 in St. Louis, Missouri to Zoe Edwards. His mother was also born in St. Louis, and had three children, including Guillaume, before she was twenty years old. Guillaume never knew his biological father, and was treated badly by his mother's lovers, one of whom hit him in the head with an iron poker. Around the age of five, Guillaume was adopted by his maternal grandmother, Jeannette Williams, who later adopted his three siblings also. His grandmother did not pass along much family history, which he believes was due to her not feeling pride in her racial heritage. Guillaume recalls how his grandmother doted on him despite being stern, and how she kept flowers on the windowsill of her two-story home on Franklin Avenue in St. Louis. He sold newspapers downtown, and usually spent his earnings on hot dogs and drinks on his way home from that job. Guillaume recounts receiving an icon of Jesus as a school prize and accidentally setting his grandmother's front room on fire.

African American actors--Interviews.

African American television personalities--Interviews.

African American motion picture actors and actresses--Interviews.

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_002, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Robert Guillaume grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where segregation existed in many theaters and restaurants but not on public transportation. He was an altar boy at St. Nicholas Catholic Church. His grandmother, Jeannette Williams, worked as a laundress for the church's rectory to pay for him and his three siblings to attend St. Nicholas Grade School, a Catholic school. His grandmother also worked as a housekeeper for multiple white families in the area. One of her employers, a designer at the International Shoe Company, was kind to Guillaume, although he hurt Guillaume's feelings by giving a fake excuse when Guillaume asked if they could spend time together during the Christmas holidays. Guillaume recounts an incident where he and his brother, James Edwards, worked as shoeshine boys and were disrespected by white patrons. Every year during the city's Veiled Prophet Parade, Guillaume and his friends hid behind a billboard and used pea shooters to fire darts at the ceremony.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_003, TRT: 0:29:25 ?

Robert Guillaume attended St. Nicholas Grade School in St. Louis, Missouri, where he was liked by teachers and praised as a talented singer. However, he disliked singing in public and did not focus on his studies. Guillaume recalls the preferential treatment given to lighter skinned African Americans in his school community. His grandmother, Jeannette Williams, out of fear for his safety if he were to get into trouble with the police, pressured him to be non-confrontational. Guillaume found it hard to accept racial injustice, but largely obeyed his

grandmother's wishes. He joined a local street gang, the Nineteenth Street Aces, but was not heavily involved. When Guillaume reached high school, he was expelled from St. Nicholas, and enrolled at St. Joseph's School for the Colored, where he learned music from Sister Claire Joseph. However, St. Joseph's also expelled him in the tenth grade. Guillaume recalls the nightlife in St. Louis and in East St. Louis, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_004, TRT: 0:29:59
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Robert Guillaume answered a want ad for the Missouri Pacific Railroad in Kansas City, Missouri, but after he and his friends saw the harsh conditions of the work site, they turned down the job. They spent almost a week hitchhiking from Kansas City back to St. Louis. After Guillaume was expelled from St. Joseph's School for the Colored in St. Louis, he enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1945. He was shipped to Fort McClellan, Alabama for his training, and he was stationed in the Ryukyu Islands, south of Japan, and assigned to be a mail clerk. Guillaume's defiant streak put him in conflict with his Army superiors. His captain, who was from Georgia, chose to give Guillaume an honorable discharge from the military before his three-year term was complete. By that point, Guillaume was glad to leave the Army, and the discharge had no consequence for his career. Guillaume recounts how his brother, James Edwards, was accused of theft and dishonorably discharged from the U.S. Navy.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_005, TRT: 0:29:28
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Robert Guillaume left the U.S. Army in 1946. The headmaster of St. Joseph's School for the Colored, Sister Anna Adelaide, allowed Guillaume to reenroll despite his earlier expulsion. He took part in the first integrated graduation ceremony for local Catholic schools in 1947 at the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis. After passing the U.S. Postal Service exam, Guillaume was hired as a mail clerk. In 1951, his grandmother, Jeannette Williams, died, and he and his siblings could not afford a burial. Ashamed and upset by this, Guillaume began aspiring to a lucrative career. He partnered with Jack LaZard and John Hightower to open the Geraldine Clothing Shoppe and also sold a hair product known as Sassy Curl. When neither business prospered, he became one of the first black streetcar operators in St. Louis in 1953. Guillaume married Marlene Scott in 1955, and they had two sons, Kevin and Jacques Guillaume. Guillaume recalls his interest in classical music and his doubts about pursuing a singing career.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_006, TRT: 0:29:44
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Robert Guillaume took courses at St. Louis University. He then enrolled at Washington University in St. Louis from 1955 to 1957, where he studied music with Laszlo Chabay in hopes of becoming a concert singer. However, his stubbornness interfered with training. Guillaume received a scholarship to attend the Aspen Music Festival and School in Colorado for a summer. While there, he met Rowena Jelliffe and Russell Jelliffe, the founders of Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio. The Jelliffes invited him to Karamu, where he starred in an opera by Mozart and the musical 'Carousel,' changed his surname from Williams to Guillaume, and met fellow actors Ron O'Neal and Clayton Corbin. Guillaume was cast in the 1959 musical 'Free and Easy,' an update of 'St. Louis Woman.' The show's musical director was HistoryMaker Quincy Jones, and it performed in New York City before touring in Europe. When that tour folded after two weeks, Guillaume returned to New York in 1960, and spent years

struggling to establish his acting career.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_007, TRT: 0:29:14
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Robert Guillaume appeared in a touring production of 'Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris' from 1968 to 1971. This led to his first role in a TV show in 1969 on 'Julia.' He first appeared as the character Benson DuBois, a wisecracking butler, on the TV show 'Soap' in 1977. Guillaume had qualms about playing a black servant, but grew to like Benson because he often overawed and outsmarted his employers, which reminded him of his grandmother, Jeannette Williams. He describes how his brother, James Edwards, who was comedic while keeping a straight face, influenced his portrayal of Benson. In 1979, Guillaume began starring in the spinoff 'Benson.' His family watched the show, although his sister, Cleo Edwards Ruffin, was skeptical of his career in entertainment. Guillaume recalls how Benson's rebelliousness endeared him to the audience and how his antics were toned down once he became the main character. Guillaume also reflects upon how his acting career made him feel more comfortable with himself.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_008, TRT: 0:29:06
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Robert Guillaume starred as Benson DuBois in the TV series 'Benson' from 1979 to 1986. The character was based on a real person, the stern African American butler of a famous Hollywood star. Guillaume recalls the public response to 'Benson,' including a boy who saved his friend's life with the Heimlich maneuver after seeing it used on the show, and a Southern man who thanked Guillaume for the touching episode about the death of Benson's mother. Guillaume appeared opposite Beah Richards, Rosalind Cash, and Beverly Todd over the course of the show. He played the title character in a movie version of the musical 'Purlie,' which takes place in Georgia during the Jim Crow era. In 1989, he played Edward Sawyer on 'The Robert Guillaume Show,' but the series was cancelled after only thirteen episodes. Guillaume was also the lead in 'Space Traders,' a science fiction TV movie adapted from a story by HistoryMaker Derrick A. Bell, Jr. Guillaume also describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Guillaume, Section A2005_114_001_009, TRT: 0:15:25
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Robert Guillaume performed as the title character in the musical 'The Phantom of the Opera' at the Ahmanson Theater in Los Angeles, California during the 1990s. He had five children: Kevin Guillaume, who works in the music industry; Jacques Guillaume, who died in 1990 from AIDS; Patricia Carpenter, a retired social worker in Springfield, Illinois; Melissa Guillaume; and Rachel Guillaume, the youngest child. Guillaume closes the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy, and describing how he would like to be remembered.