

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Billy Taylor

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Taylor, Billy
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Billy Taylor,
Dates:	August 29, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:51:25).
Abstract:	Music professor, jazz pianist, and music composer Billy Taylor (1921 - 2010) has enjoyed a long and prolific career as an educator, recording artist, and touring musician. Taylor played with such musicians as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis, in addition to becoming a national and international name for his performances, television musical directing, and television and radio hosting activities. Taylor was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 29, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_210
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Pianist, composer, and recording artist Billy Taylor was born in Greenville, North Carolina, on July 24, 1921, to a dentist father and schoolteacher mother. As a youth, Taylor and his family moved to Washington, D.C.; it was there that he began to study music. During his teenaged years, Taylor was heavily influenced by the sounds of the Big Bands that were popular. Young Taylor experimenting with many instruments, including drums, guitar and the saxophone, before he found his niche with the study of classical piano. Aside from actively pursuing his musical education through independent means, Taylor also remained active in academia, graduating from Virginia State College in 1942 with his B.A. degree in Music.

Taylor moved to New York City in 1944, where he began his professional music career playing piano with Ben Webster's Quartet on 52nd Street. Taylor eventually became the house pianist at the legendary Birdland jazz club, where played alongside musical greats such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis. Taylor continued on in the New York circuits, until the 1950s, when he began to lead and record with his own trio.

Taylor entered the realm of television in the 1970s, when he took on the role of musical director for The David Frost Show, which broadcast on the U.S. Westinghouse Corporation television stations. In addition to his activities with The David Frost Show, Taylor also acted as the musical director for Tony Brown's Black Journal Tonight, a weekly show on PBS. Later in his television career, Taylor hosted his own jazz piano show on the Bravo network called Jazz Counterpoint. Despite his forays into visual media, Taylor remained closely tied to the world of audio by hosting a variety of radio both locally in New York, and syndicated nationally by National Public Radio. Perhaps his widest radio audience was reached when Taylor became the arts correspondent for CBS Sunday Morning in the early 1980s.

In addition to becoming a well respected musician of international fame, Taylor also went on to become a successful music educator. Taylor received his Masters and Doctorate degrees in Music Education from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and went on to serve as the Duke Ellington Fellow at Yale University. Subsequent to these academic achievements, Taylor received several honorary doctoral degrees over the course of his career.

Recipient of numerous awards and appointments throughout his career, Taylor became one of only three jazz musicians at the time to be appointed to the National Council of the Arts. In addition to serving on the National Council of the Arts, Taylor was also appointed the artistic advisor on jazz for the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where he developed a run of widely acclaimed series, including the Louis Armstrong Legacy series, and the annual Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival.

For his performances and professional activities, Taylor received two Peabody Awards; an Emmy; a Grammy; and a place in the Hall of Fame for the International Association of Jazz Educators. At the time of his interview in 2005, Taylor was still professionally active; touring and recording with his Trio, playing concert dates, appearing in television and radio engagements, writing music, and lecturing.

Taylor passed away on December 28, 2010.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Billy Taylor was conducted by Shawn Wilson on August 29, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Music professor, jazz pianist, and music composer Billy Taylor (1921 - 2010) has enjoyed a long and prolific career as an educator, recording artist, and touring musician. Taylor played with such musicians as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis, in addition to becoming a national and international name for his performances, television musical directing, and television and radio hosting activities.

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:

- Taylor, Billy
- Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)
- Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
- Taylor, Billy--Interviews

African American jazz musicians--Interviews

African American television personalities--Interviews

African American radio broadcasters--Interviews

Pianists--Interviews

Organizations:

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
- The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

- Jazz Pianist

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 Billy Taylor, August 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 Billy Taylor, Section A2005_210_001_001, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Billy Taylor was born on July 24, 1921 in Greenville, North Carolina. Although blind, Taylor's maternal grandfather was an avid storyteller; he told tales inspired by westerns and his love of dancing. Taylor's mother, Antoinette Bacon Taylor, was born in Washington, D.C. where she grew up with three siblings in an intellectually stimulating, black community. His paternal grandfather graduated from Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Soft spoken and community-oriented, he was a school principal in North Carolina. Then, in Washington, D.C.'s U Street Corridor, he pastored Florida Avenue Baptist Church, which Taylor attended as a youth. Taylor's father, William Taylor, Sr., studied dentistry at Howard University in D.C., where he met Taylor's mother, a teacher. On Sundays, Taylor monitored his mischievous younger brother, who often got them into trouble. In 1995, his paternal cousin, HistoryMaker Shirlee Haizlip, authored 'The Sweeter the Juice,' which includes information about their shared ancestry.

African American jazz musicians--Interviews.

African American television personalities--Interviews.

African American radio broadcasters--Interviews.

Pianists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Taylor, Section A2005_210_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Billy Taylor was introduced to music at a young age; his father sang and played the piano, and his grandfather's choir rehearsed at their home. In 1926, his family moved from Greenville, a rural, tobacco town in North Carolina, to Washington, D.C., where he encountered a strong community of African American professionals. He took piano lessons from Elmira Street, who taught him discipline and how to read music. He also attended Lucretia Mott School, Shaw Junior High School and Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. At Dunbar, Taylor discovered his passion for jazz; he was taught music by Henry Grant, the founder of the National Association of Negro Musicians, and attended concerts by Dorothy Maynor and Marian Anderson. At thirteen, he played gigs in D.C.

nightclubs. His father, an athlete and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity member, often took him to visit Virginia State College, where Taylor later enrolled. When Taylor changed his major from sociology to music, his father stopped paying his tuition.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Taylor, Section A2005_210_001_003, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Billy Taylor observed white and black audiences react differently to his piano playing in the 1930s. In 1936, Taylor saw Mary Lou Williams perform at Washington, D.C.'s Howard Theatre. From 1938 to 1942, he attended Virginia State College. He remembers traveling on segregated trains to the campus in Petersburg, Virginia. At his father's behest, he majored in sociology, but he continued studying music as an elective. While in college, Taylor played in multiple bands, including the Virginia Statesmen, Benny Layton and the Rhythm Kings and Johnson's Happy Pals. At a gig in Petersburg, Taylor briefly joined Count Basie and Jo Jones on stage. After graduating, he worked at a government job in New York City for a year to earn money while establishing himself as a musician. Taylor and Ben Webster opened for Art Tatum at the Three Deuces. Jones discouraged Taylor from drinking, and introduced him to Coleman Hawkins at the White Rose Bar in 1944. That same year, Taylor also met Dizzy Gillespie.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Taylor, Section A2005_210_001_004, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Billy Taylor often played piano for Dizzy Gillespie in New York City. As a result, Taylor was invited to tour with well-known jazz musicians, such as Slam Stewart, Eddie South, Roy Eldridge and Stuff Smith, when they traveled the Northeast and mid-Atlantic region. In the mid-1940s, Taylor and Stewart performed with Billie Holiday in Baltimore, Maryland. During this time, Taylor also played with Cozy Cole in the orchestra pit for the Broadway production of 'Seven Lively Arts,' featuring Mary Lou Williams and Ethel Waters. Through Cole, Taylor met the Latin jazz musician Machito and band leader Mario Bowser, who introduced him to Afro-Cuban music. After opening for Charlie Parker at Birdland in 1949, Taylor performed as the venue's house pianist for two years. Taylor talks about black musicians being paid less than their white counterparts and the transition from big band to bebop following World War II. He cites the influence of big band musicians, including Chick Webb, in the development of bebop.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Taylor, Section A2005_210_001_005, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

Billy Taylor first composed music as a college student. In 1949, he published his first book, 'Billy Taylor's Basic Bebop Instruction for Piano.' During his two-year stint as Birdland's house pianist, many of his performances, with musicians like J.J. Johnson, Miles Davis and Dinah Washington, were broadcast on Symphony Sid's nightly radio show. He also played on Duke Ellington's opening night. Taylor became the first African American to lead an orchestra on TV when he was hired as the bandleader for 'The David Frost Show.' His first major composition, "Suite for Jazz Piano and Orchestra," premiered at the Mormon Tabernacle in 1973. In the 1980s, Taylor received an Emmy for his CBS segment with HistoryMaker Quincy Jones. After Charles Kuralt interviewed him on 'CBS Sunday Morning,' Taylor became the show's regular jazz correspondent. Taylor toured with his friend, Ramsey Lewis. Taylor also describes his NEA Jazz Master Award and Grammy Award, and the accomplishments of his piano student, Eldar Djangirov.

Video Oral History Interview with Billy Taylor, Section A2005_210_001_006, TRT: 0:24:12 ?

Billy Taylor served as Jackie Robinson's musical director during a planning phase for the March on Washington. After hearing Reverend Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr. speak about heroes at an organizing event at Robinson's house, Taylor was inspired to write 'It's a Matter of Pride.' In 1964, Taylor co-founded Jazzmobile, Inc., a jazz outreach organization focused on community building. Taylor also reflects upon changes to jazz music and jazz instruction; in particular, he compares white and black instructors' approaches to jazz education. He describes how media representations of jazz musicians often fail to capture African American perspectives that shaped the jazz genre, citing Ken Burns' 'Jazz' documentary series as an example. Additionally, he recalls lessons he learned about freedom during his international travels, describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and talks about opportunities for young black musicians. Taylor concludes the interview by sharing an anecdote about Art Tatum.