

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Alvin Bell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Bell, Alvin, 1958-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Alvin Bell,
Dates:	January 5, 2007 and September 13, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005 and 2007
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:58:19).
Abstract:	Fashion designer Alvin Bell (1958 -) designed a women's clothing line called Mosaic that was sold by Sears Roebuck & Company. Bell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 5, 2007 and September 13, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_214
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Award-winning fashion designer Alvin Bernard Bell was born on December 27, 1958, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Catherine and James Bell. Bell grew up in South Philadelphia, where he had a fondness for drawing and fashion, bought fashion magazines like *Harper's Bizarre* and *Vogue*, and realized that he wanted to be a fashion designer at an early age. Bell won a Philadelphia citywide drawing contest at age eight and studied illustration at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art, where he was mentored by Margaret Caravera. Taking an advanced course at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art, Bell met future fashion phenom, Willi Smith who would become his closest friend. When Bell graduated from Edward Bok Vocational High School in 1964, Bell had a portfolio of ad illustrations, but had done no fashion work. Before becoming a fashion designer, Bell worked as an illustrator and photojournalist. In 1964, Bell was referred by a bridal shop to Alfred Angelo Bridal, where he was hired as an illustrator. As a photojournalist, he went to fashion shows and took photos of the designs and made his own sketches; he sold these sketches of designs to other fashion designers. Bell created suits for the P.S.I. fashion label and later went on to work for Roy Halston and Anne Klein. After twenty years of experience, Bell began publishing his own fashion industry trade newsletter called *Designer Report*.

In February of 1997, Sears Roebuck & Company, with a base of twenty percent African American customers, hired Bell to design and launch a casual and career wear clothing line for women called Mosaic. Mosaic featured loose fitting, affordable rayon clothing in abstract African pinstripe and jazz prints.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Alvin Bell was conducted by Shawn Wilson on January 5, 2007 and September 13, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fashion designer Alvin Bell (1958 -) designed a women's clothing line called Mosaic that was sold by Sears Roebuck & Company.

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:

Bell, Alvin, 1958-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Bell, Alvin, 1958- --Interviews

African American fashion designers--Interviews

Fashion illustrators--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Fashion Designer

HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers

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 Alvin Bell, January 5, 2007 and September 13, 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 Alvin Bell, Section A2005_214_001_001, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Alvin Bell was born on December 27, 1958 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His mother, Catherine Bell, was born in Trenton, New Jersey in 1923. Her mother was very strict, and she grew up with eleven siblings in poverty during the Great Depression. Outspoken and independent, she worked as a domestic and at various factories to support her expensive tastes, which were influenced by her idols, Dorothy Dandridge and Lena Horne. Bell's father, James Bell, was born into a family of professors in Macon, Georgia. Bell's parents met in Trenton, New Jersey and married soon after, his father abandoning his college education against his family's objections. Bell's deeply religious mother took him, his two

older brothers and younger sister to churches of various denominations. Despite teasing from his classmates and father, he entered a citywide drawing contest, and his sketch of flowers in a vase placed second. His mother taught him his first lesson in shopping for quality clothing.

African American fashion designers--Interviews.

Fashion illustrators--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Alvin Bell, Section A2005_214_001_002, TRT: 0:29:43 ?

Alvin Bell's childhood revolved around church and family. He grew up in a row house on a narrow street of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he played with a childhood friend who was also artistically inclined. To his father's disappointment, Bell was more interested in fashion and drawing than in academics. Despite his father's disapproval, his mother nurtured his interests by sneaking him Harper's Bazaar and Vogue magazines. Recognizing his extraordinary artistic talent, Bell's high school teacher and mentor introduced him to high-end labels and designers, shaping his fashion tastes. He studied at Philadelphia College of Art and attended Edward Bok Vocational School in Philadelphia. Upon graduating, he looked for work as a commercial artist. A woman impressed with his fashion portfolio introduced him to Edythe Piccione, co-owner of the bridal company Alfred Angelo, who hired him as a commercial illustrator with a starting salary of \$450 a week, which was more than either of his parents made.

Video Oral History Interview with Alvin Bell, Section A2005_214_001_003, TRT: 0:27:50 ?

Alvin Bell met award-winning fashion designer Willi Smith as a teenager while attending advanced classes in art at Philadelphia College of Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They became lifelong best friends. After working for the bridal firm Alfred Angelo, Bell joined Smith in New York City in 1966 to pursue a career in fashion design. Initially, he continued working as an illustrator since his lack of training in fashion design hindered his portfolio. Determined to follow his chosen career path, Bell repeatedly called fashion designer Halston until he finally secured an interview. Admiring Bell's persistence and recognizing his potential and need for training, Halston connected him with renowned designer Anne Klein. Bell worked as her assistant until he was terminated after a confrontation over his job responsibilities. From Klein, he gained the fashion design and clothing knowledge needed to start his designing career.

Video Oral History Interview with Alvin Bell, Section A2005_214_001_004, TRT: 0:30:31 ?

Alvin Bell worked for Jonny Herbert for six years alongside fashion designers Preston Smith and Ted Duckworth. From Herbert, he learned how to make fashion designs into a functional clothing line. However, Bell preferred glamorous clothing designs to the ordinary ones produced by Herbert. During a visit to Paris, France, he snuck in to see his idol Christian Dior's collection, which confirmed his desire to design high-end fashion. Upon the suggestion of Herbert, Gerald McCann and Willi Smith, Bell returned to Paris to hone his artistic talent and discover how he could use it in the fashion industry. At the advice of McCann, he also created the fashion industry trade newsletter Designer Report. Bell reflects upon attitudes towards race in the fashion industry and in Philadelphia during his childhood, as well as his work ethic. He talks about Dior's unique approach to fashion design and his acquaintance with fellow African American fashion designers Scott Barrie, Harvey T. Boyd and Jon Haggins.

Video Oral History Interview with Alvin Bell, Section A2005_214_002_005, TRT: 0:30:06 ?

Alvin Bell spent time in France and Italy learning about fashion design and honing his drawing skills. With sketches from his travels, he created the first issue of the industry newsletter Designer Report and became the only black publisher of a fashion trade publication. The monthly newsletter forecasted trends for the whole fashion market. Bell traveled to Paris, France five times a year for fabric shows and meetings with industry professionals to make style predictions. When asked by a potential client to design suits, Bell at first declined, fearing a conflict of interest as a publisher. With reassurance from other designers, Bell finally agreed to produce twelve suits anonymously. They became a commercial success and led to his own fashion label, Alvin Bell for P.S.I., which sold at Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman. Bell remembers his friend and fellow designer Willi Smith's surprise at the label's sudden renown, and fashion designer Patrick Kelly's experimental and whimsical styles.

Video Oral History Interview with Alvin Bell, Section A2005_214_002_006, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

Alvin Bell saw his close friend, fashion designer Willi Smith, die of AIDS in 1987. In describing Smith's impact on his life, Bell notes his creativity and intelligence. Bell saw the fashion industry lose many prominent figures to the disease at a time when it was still feared and not well understood. Many of his own friends died during the height of the epidemic as well. Bell left P.S.I. in the late 1980s to start his own designing business. During that era, he enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, frequently dining at Le Cirque and 21 Club in New York City, which helped inspire his high-end designs and evening wear. His inspiration for women's dresses came from his female friends and his mother, who nurtured his early interest in fashion and appreciated glamorous clothing. He talks about HistoryMaker Audrey Lavinia Smaltz, the changing fashion trends of the new millennium and the impact of offshore factories on the fashion industry in the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Alvin Bell, Section A2005_214_002_007, TRT: 0:29:59 ?

Alvin Bell left fashion design after working in the industry for over twenty years. He decided to write his autobiography, and in the process of studying how to write, was inspired to create a science fiction thriller about clothing. In explaining his desire to leave the fashion industry, Bell notes his need for a new creative challenge. He believes that his impact on the fashion industry was his revitalization of women's suits. In this part of the interview, he defines black style, which he believes grew out of a creative response to the deprivations of slavery. In describing African American aesthetics, he explains how fashion trends developed in response to musical genres, like jazz and hip hop, and notes how hip hop designs influenced clothing trends across the globe. He talks about other fashion trends, such as the emergence of casual clothing, and shares his opinion on recent African American hip hop clothing designers.

Video Oral History Interview with Alvin Bell, Section A2005_214_002_008, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

Alvin Bell was asked to design a new clothing line for Michael Jackson, whom he met through his friend, fashion coordinator Reggie Morton. Even though Jackson seemed unimpressed with his sketches, Bell was given the job. He ultimately declined since he was busy with his Designer Report newsletter and wanted a more collaborative partnership than Jackson was willing to give. Bell was inducted into the Council of Fashion Designers of America after being voted in by Calvin Klein and Carolina Herrera, which he notes as one of the highlights of his career. Bell reflects upon his decision not to marry or have children, his sense of racial identity and beliefs about racism, and how his parents raised him. In sharing advice for aspiring fashion designers, he encourages them to work hard and not be deterred by challenges. He talks about

the future of the fashion industry, and his recuperation from a serious car accident. He also reflects upon his life and how he would like to be remembered in the fashion industry.