

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with George W. Faison

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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>	Faison, George, 1945-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 5, 2007 and May 14, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	12 Betacame SP videocassettes (6:06:11).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Choreographer and dancer George W. Faison (1945 - ) founded the George Faison Universal Dance Experience. Faison was the choreographer of the Broadway musicals <i>Via Galactica</i> , <i>Tilt</i> and <i>The Wiz</i> . Faison was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 5, 2007 and May 14, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_073
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Broadway dancer and choreographer George William Faison was born on December 21, 1945, in Washington, D.C. He attended Dunbar High School, where he studied with the Jones-Haywood Capitol Ballet and Carolyn Tate of Howard University; his first performance was with the American Light Opera Company. After graduating from high school, Faison attended Howard University with plans of becoming a dentist; during this time he also worked in theater with the acclaimed African American theater director Owen Dodson.

In 1966, two years after he entered Howard, Faison saw a production of the Alvin Ailey Company; within a week, he had decided to become a professional dancer and left Howard University to move to New York City. There, Faison studied at the School of American Ballet, where he took classes with Arthur Mitchell, June Taylor, Claude Thompson, Dudley Williams, Charles Moore, and James Truitte, among others. Faison began his first professional job with the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, and continued studying dance with Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU) and Harkness House.

In 1967, Faison auditioned with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where he would remain for the next three years. In 1970, Faison left the Alvin Ailey dance company to pursue his own career. After a part in the Broadway musical *Purlie*, Faison created the George Faison Universal Dance Experience with a budget of \$600 dollars. The group's dancers included such notables as Renee Rose, Debbie Allen, Al Perryman and Gary DeLoatch; Faison was the artistic director, choreographer and dancer for the group.

In 1972, Faison made his choreographic debut with *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope* on Broadway, which was the start of a series of successful choreography jobs that included *Via Galactica*, *Tilt* and 1974's all-black retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* entitled *The Wiz*. *The Wiz* was a huge success, and helped to launch the careers of singer Stephanie Mills and actor Geoffrey Holder. That same year, Faison became the first African American to win a Tony award. The George Faison Universal Dance Experience disbanded the following year, and Faison began

focusing on musical theater; subsequently he worked as a choreographer for entertainers like Earth, Wind and Fire, Ashford and Simpson, Dionne Warwick, Patti Labelle and Cameo, among others.

1981 brought the massive critical success of *Apollo, Just Like Magic*, an off-Broadway production that transitioned him from choreographer to director. In 1997, Faison directed and choreographed *King*, a musical performed at President Clinton's inauguration. In 1996 he founded the American Performing Arts Collaborative (A-PAC), after which time, Faison constructed an arts center called the Faison Firehouse Theater, a project of A-PAC which committed its resources to Harlem.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with George W. Faison was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 5, 2007 and May 14, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 12 Betacame SP videocassettes. Choreographer and dancer George W. Faison (1945 - ) founded the George Faison Universal Dance Experience. Faison was the choreographer of the Broadway musicals *Via Galactica*, *Tilt* and *The Wiz*.

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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

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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:

Faison, George, 1945-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Faison, George, 1945- --Interviews

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African American dancers--Interviews

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African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews

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Choreographers--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:

Dancer

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Choreographer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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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 George W. Faison, March 5, 2007 and May 14, 2007. 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:34  
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George W. Faison was born on December 21, 1945 to Agnes Crockett Faison and George Faison. Faison's paternal family was descended from slaves on the Faison plantation in North Carolina. His paternal grandparents purchased small parcels of farmland until they owned over twenty acres in Wallace, North Carolina. Later, Faison's father moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked as a custodian during the Great Depression. Faison's mother was born in South Carolina, and was one of eight children. Her family was fair-skinned, and occasionally passed as white. Faison's mother lived with her older sister in New York City, before moving to Washington, D.C., where his parents met after his father became a widower. They had five children, of whom Faison was the second oldest. He grew up on 10th Street in Washington, D.C., and was exposed to many areas of the city while working with his father, who had a career as an awning builder. Faison attended the neighborhood schools, and Salem Baptist Church.

African American dancers--Interviews.

African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews.

Choreographers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:35  
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George W. Faison was a student at Shaw Junior High School in Washington, D.C., where he read frequently, and was influenced by his history and English teachers. He went on to attend Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, which was very close to his home. In the tenth grade, Faison joined the American Light Opera Company, where he performed in musical productions such as 'Kiss Me, Kate' and 'Show Boat.' At venues in Washington, D.C. like the Howard Theater and Uline Arena, Faison saw musical and dance performances such as the Leonard De Paur Infantry Chorus, opera singer Leontyne Price, vocalist Martha Flowers ballet dancers Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn; as well as numerous musical acts from Motown Records, including The Supremes and The Temptations. Faison was influenced by the black arts community in Washington D.C., and also experienced discrimination in the segregated city. During this time, he worked selling Washington Afro-American newspapers, shining shoes, and as a clerk at a deli and a cleaners.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:37  
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George W. Faison taught himself to dance at an early age, and often performed for his family. At Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington D.C.,

Faison played the French horn and trumpet in the band, where he learned discipline. He also joined the choir, where he was told about an open audition for the American Light Opera Company. Faison auditioned, and was selected to dance in the company's production of 'Kiss Me, Kate.' While a member of the company, Faison enrolled in the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet, where he began his formal dance training. Although Faison was the only African American performer in the American Light Opera Company, they often performed in the Cramton Auditorium at the historically black Howard University. There, Faison began studying dance under Marilyn Tate and Maryrose Reeves Allen while in high school. After graduating, he officially enrolled in the department, and became acquainted with the Howard University Players.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:38  
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George W. Faison studied at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he initially aspired to become a dentist, because he did not see dancing as a viable career. However, with the encouragement of fine arts professors Ted Shine and Owen Dodson, Faison obtained a scholarship to study dance. During his coursework, he improved his dance technique, and saw a performance of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. After two years, Faison left school to pursue his dance career in New York City. There, he joined the Arthur Mitchell Company, and became acquainted with African American dancers like Donald McKayle and Eleo Pomare. Faison was hired to perform on the integrated 'ABC's Stage 67' program, where he danced alongside actress Lauren Bacall. During this time, Alvin Ailey's company was touring Europe. Faison began working for Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited outreach program under dancer Thelma Hill, who trained him in the Lester Horton technique. Soon, Faison secured an audition for Ailey's company.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:38  
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George W. Faison was trained by dancer Thelma Hill in preparation for his audition with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which was influenced by choreographers Lester Horton, Jack Cole and Katherine Dunham. Faison joined Alvin Ailey's company in 1967, and departed with a group of dancers on a tour of Europe and Africa. In Italy, he heard news of the Civil Rights Movement, and the violence in the South and cities like Detroit, Michigan. During this time, Faison was mentored by Ailey, and learned to express emotions in Ailey's choreographic pieces, such as 'Revelations' and 'Blues Suite.' Faison also befriended the members of the company, including Judith Jamison. Faison remembers Ailey's commitment, and the sacrifices that he made to establish the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He also reflects upon the differences between his generation of dancers and that of Ailey, who was born a decade before Faison.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_001\_006, TRT: 0:31:10  
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George W. Faison and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater finished their European tour with only nine company members, after dancer Lester Wilson was fired for faking an injury. During Faison's three years with company, he completed three tours of each the United States and Europe, and visited Africa, where he was inspired to choreograph his first ballet, 'Gazelle.' Alvin Ailey refused to perform Faison's choreography, so he left the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1970. Through musician Louis Johnson, Faison was hired as a

featured dancer in the Broadway production of 'Purlie,' where he met actor Ossie Davis and dancers Sherman Hemsley, Ted Ross and Al Perryman. Faison recruited the show's dancers to join the George Faison Dance Ensemble, and they performed his ballets, 'Gazelle' and 'Slaves,' for which Faison began to gain notoriety as a choreographer. In the early 1970s, Faison met musician Miles Davis, who was a client of Faison's hairdresser, James Finney.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_001\_007, TRT: 0:31:01 ?

George W. Faison transitioned from dancer to choreographer, and developed the George Faison Universal Dance Experience company. He befriended jazz musician Miles Davis, and choreographed 'Poppy,' a ballet about drug addiction set to Davis' music, which aired on the 'Soul!' television program. Faison also choreographed 'Suite Otis,' which combined classical and modern dance pieces set to the music of Otis Redding. 'Suite Otis' premiered in 1971 at the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, and featured Gary DeLoatch, a member of Faison's company. The ballet went on to enter the repertory of many national dance companies. Also in 1971, Faison was hired to choreograph Micki Grant's Broadway production of 'Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope,' after the departure of the original choreographer, Talley Beatty. In 1972, he worked on the avant-garde rock musical 'Via Galactica.' Then, during a performance of 'Suite Otis,' Faison was approached by musical producer Kenneth Harper to choreograph 'The Wiz.'

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_001\_008, TRT: 0:30:41 ?

George W. Faison was hired by producer Kenneth Harper to choreograph 'The Wiz,' an African American musical retelling of 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.' Faison chose Timothy Graphenreed as his musical dance arranger, and together they created the number 'Emerald City Ballet (Psst)' with the encouragement of stage manager Jose Vega. The production premiered in 1974 in Baltimore, Maryland with a cast that included Stephanie Mills, Andre De Shields, Mabel King, Clarice Taylor, Tiger Haynes, Ted Ross and Dee Dee Bridgewater. The show transitioned to Broadway in 1975. Although panned by critics, 'The Wiz' was massively popular among audiences, and was adapted into a movie by Motown Productions in 1979. Faison went on to stage and choreograph R and B acts like Ashford and Simpson and Earth, Wind and Fire, and later wrote the musical 'If This Hat Could Talk' about civil rights activist Dorothy Height. Faison also reflects upon the impact of HIV/AIDS on the African American theater community.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_002\_009, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

George W. Faison agreed to choreograph 'The Wiz' during a performance of his ballet, 'Otis Suite,' at the Delacorte Theater in New York City. He developed the choreography for 'The Wiz' based on his early dance career at the American Light Opera Company. During the rehearsals, Geoffrey Holder's costume designs interfered with the dance numbers, so Faison altered the dresses to make them shorter. He also recalls his surprise at the behavior of some members of the production, including music writer Charlie Smalls and director Gilbert Moses, who fought over the affections of actress Dee Dee Bridgewater; as well as Stu Gilliam, who took the day off when the musical's investors were visiting, and was replaced in his role as the Scarecrow by dancer Hinton Battle. Although 'The Wiz' received mixed reviews from critics, it was popular among audiences, partly because it was one of the few African American musicals not in a revue

format at the time.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_002\_010, TRT: 0:29:58  
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George W. Faison and the other creators of ‘The Wiz’ made changes throughout the show’s rehearsals, frustrating the dancers and musicians. Faison admired Stephanie Mills, who played the role of Dorothy, because she had performed on Broadway from an early age, and did not require extensive training. He also appreciated the other cast members’ interpretations of their characters, including Mabel King’s soulful styling of the Wicked Witch, and Andre De Shields’ performance as the Wiz, which was inspired by singer James Brown. Because the musical was slow to gain popularity, Faison was asked to give up his royalties, but negotiated so that he got more royalty points later in the show’s run. Despite critics’ reluctance to accept a new interpretation of ‘The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,’ ‘The Wiz’ won seven Tony Awards, including the Tony Award for Best Choreography. Faison cites choreographers of various styles and races, including Jerome Robbins and Jack Cole, as influences on his work.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_002\_011, TRT: 0:31:13  
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George W. Faison was influenced by choreographers Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse during his early choreography career. Later, after Faison’s success as the choreographer of the ‘The Wiz,’ he began working on commercials, and staged concerts for ‘The Wiz’ star Stephanie Mills. Then, Faison was approached on the street in New York City by songwriters Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson, and agreed to stage their first duet performance as Ashford and Simpson. Faison went on to stage and choreograph musicians like Dionne Warwick, Natalie Cole and Stevie Wonder. He also worked with Earth, Wind and Fire, whose theatrical style particularly suited him. In 1975, Faison staged singer Josephine Baker’s return concert in New York City, and was later hired to work on the HBO movie ‘The Josephine Baker Story’ with actor Louis Cameron Gossett, Jr. Faison also wrote and directed the musical ‘Sing, Mahalia, Sing;’ and, in 2000, opened Faison Firehouse Theater in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with George W. Faison, Section A2007\_073\_002\_012, TRT: 0:30:26  
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George W. Faison wrote ‘If This Hat Could Talk,’ a musical about civil rights activist Dorothy Height, whom he admired for her diplomatic power and grace in the face of tensions between her male collaborators. Faison reflects upon his mentors, including choreographer Alvin Ailey and musician Miles Davis; as well as those who inspired him, but whom he never met, like civil rights leaders John Lewis and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He also describes the influence of his parents, Agnes Crockett Faison and George Faison, on his career. Faison talks about the lessons imparted by Toni Morrison’s novel ‘Beloved,’ and the future of black dance. He also reflects upon his legacy, and his hopes and concerns for the African American community.