

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Russell Williams, II

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Williams, Russell, 1952-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II,
Dates:	September 26, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:39:16).
Abstract:	Film producer Russell Williams, II (1952 -) was the first African American to win multiple Academy Awards, two, in the history of motion pictures. He also won Emmy Awards all for his sound mixing work for films and television movies. Williams' film and television credits include, "Dances With Wolves," "Glory," "Jungle Fever," and, "12 Angry Men." Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 26, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_273
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Russell Williams, II was the first African American to win more than one Academy Award in any category. Two-time Academy Award and prime-time Emmy Award winner Russell Williams, II was born on October 14, 1952 in Washington, D.C. His mother, Lillie Mae Williams, worked in retail, while his father, Russell Williams, Sr., was an employee at Union Station. Williams' mother passed away one day after childbirth. Williams grew up an avid movie-goer, raised in Washington, D.C. by his aunt and uncle, James and Ruth Harshaw.

In 1970, Williams attended the American University where he earned his B.A. in film production and literature in 1974. While pursuing his B.A., in 1973, Williams began working as an audio engineer for WRC/NBC-TV. He then moved to WMAL-TV (now WJLA-TV) and worked there from 1975 to 1976. Williams returned to work at WRC-TV from 1977 to 1978. In 1978, Williams formed his company, Sound Is Ready. He then transferred to work at WMAL/ABC Radio as an engineer and editor. Williams moved to Los Angeles in July of 1979, where he attended the University of Sound Arts, studying sound mixing and earned a certificate in electronics.

After moving to Los Angeles in 1979, Williams began working as the sound mixer for various films including *Making the Grade* (1984); *In the Mood* (1987); *Billionaire Boys Club* (1987) and *The In Crowd* (1987). In 1988, Williams won a prime-time Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Sound for *Terrorist on Trial* (1987). In 1990, he won an Academy Award for Best Achievement in Sound for *Glory*. In 1991, Williams made history when he won another Academy Award for his contribution as a sound mixer for *Dances With Wolves*, making him the first African American multi-Academy Award winner.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Williams did the sound recording for several films and made for television movies including *Field of Dreams* (1989); *The Distinguished Gentleman* (1992); *Boomerang* (1992); *Waiting to Exhale*

(1995); *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995); *Run for the Dream: The Gail Devers Story* (1996); *12 Angry Men* (1997), which he won another prime-time Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Sound; *The Negotiator* (1998); *The Temptations* (1999), which he earned a prime-time Emmy Award nomination for Part One of this miniseries for Best Sound; *Rules of Engagement* (2000); *Life* (1999); *Training Day* (2001); and *The Sum of All Fears* (2002). Williams also received accolades as a sound recordist for the civil rights documentaries, *Eyes On The Prize: Bridge to Freedom* and *Eyes On The Prize: Fighting Back* in 2006.

In 2002, Williams was hired as Artist in Residence at his alma mater, The American University. He has also taught at Howard University, University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Southern California.

Williams is married to Rosalind Williams and has two children from a previous marriage: Myles Candace Williams and Khemet Ellison Williams.

Williams was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 26, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Russell Williams, II was conducted by Cheryl Butler on September 26, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Film producer Russell Williams, II (1952 -) was the first African American to win multiple Academy Awards, two, in the history of motion pictures. He also won Emmy Awards all for his sound mixing work for films and television movies. Williams' film and television credits include, "Dances With Wolves," "Glory," "Jungle Fever," and, "12 Angry Men."

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:

Williams, Russell, 1952-

Butler, Cheryl (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Williams, Russell, 1952- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Film Producer

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 Russell Williams, II, September 26, 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.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II, Section A2007_273_001_001, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Russell Williams, II was born on October 14, 1952 in Washington, D.C. to Lillie Robinson Williams and Russell Williams, Sr. His maternal great-grandmother was half Cherokee. His maternal grandfather, Joseph Robinson, was a schoolteacher, farmer and moonshiner in Camden, South Carolina, and eventually moved his family to Washington, D.C. Williams' mother passed away the day after Williams was born, so he was raised by his maternal aunt and uncle, Ruth Robinson Harshaw and James Harshaw, whom he considered his parents. Williams' biological paternal grandmother, Eva Williams, had a farm in Aiken, South Carolina, where Williams' birth father was born. His birth father lived in Northeast Washington, D.C., and only visited Williams occasionally. Williams grew up in the Benning Heights neighborhood of Southeast Washington, D.C., and attended the inaugural parade of President Dwight David "Ike" Eisenhower in 1956. Williams recalls celebrating the holidays with his maternal family, and his relatives' southern cooking.

Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II, Section A2007_273_001_002, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Russell Williams, II's mother, Lillie Robinson Williams, died the day after he was born. Williams assumed his delivery caused her death, until he investigated the records with his friend's father, pediatrician Robert Crawford, and found that she had died due to her doctor's neglect. Williams was raised by his maternal aunt, Ruth Robinson Harshaw, in the all-black Benning Heights community of Washington, D.C. There, he and his friends played baseball, and climbed the maple trees behind his house. He also frequently saw movies with his maternal relatives at venues like the Lincoln Theatre. In Washington, D.C., Williams was exposed to segregation from an early age, while riding with his maternal uncle, James Harshaw, in his taxicab. Williams began his education at Davis Elementary School, where he was influenced by his teacher, Miss Keys. After the third grade, he transferred to Randle Highlands Elementary School, which had been desegregated following the decision of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka.

Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II, Section A2007_273_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Russell Williams, II's first experience in a majority white school took place at the recently integrated Randle Highlands Elementary School Washington, D.C. While a student there, he began taking private piano lessons, as he had become interested in music through television shows and his church. Williams went on to attend Kramer Junior High School. During that period, racial tensions escalated in Washington, D.C. Williams witnessed police brutality for the first time, and heard about the March on Washington, which his mother did not allow him to attend. While Williams was a student at Woodrow Wilson High School, uprisings broke out across the city in response to the assassination of Reverend

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. From his school bus, Williams saw rioters with guns, and smoke from the fires set across the city. In high school, Williams played the tuba in the school orchestra. He decided against pursuing his education at a music conservatory, and enrolled at American University in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II, Section A2007_273_001_004, TRT: 0:29:22 ?

Russell Williams, II attended American University in Washington, D.C. The school's African American community was close-knit, and often gathered at the Amen Corner, an area of the student center where upperclassmen offered tutoring and mentorship. The anti-war movement was prominent at the time, and Williams participated in several protests held on campus. During his college years, Williams was chosen by the Selective Service System, but was denied entrance to the U.S. Army after being misdiagnosed with syphilis. At American University, Williams created an African American centered radio show, 'Spirits Known and Unknown,' with his friend, Gerald Bruce Lee. The program consisted of jazz music and news segments, including Williams' interview with city councilman Julius Hobson at the District Building in Washington, D.C., just hours before it was besieged by the Hanafi terrorists in 1977. After graduating, Williams worked at the Library of Congress, and then obtained a position at WRC-TV in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II, Section A2007_273_001_005, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Russell Williams, II worked at WRC-TV in Washington, D.C. during the Watergate hearings in 1973. Although Williams' main role at the station was projection, he also gained experience with camerawork and on-air audio. After a short time, Williams left WRC-TV to join the sound department at WJLA-TV, a network television station in Washington, D.C. While there, he aspired to work on feature films. After taking an electronics course in Los Angeles, California, Williams decided to move, where the film industry was more welcoming to freelance workers. Williams' early career in Los Angeles focused on television shows and specials, including Michael Nesmith's 'Television Parts' and the 'ABC Movie of the Week.' His first position on a feature film crew was as a sound mixer for 'Penitentiary II.' While working on these productions, Williams cultivated a network of industry contacts, and was soon offered work on larger films, including Kevin Costner's 'Field of Dreams.'

Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II, Section A2007_273_001_006, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Russell Williams, II was hired to do sound work on several Academy Award-winning films through the connections he made early in his career. One of Williams' first jobs was on the television show 'Just an Overnight Guest,' where he met crew manager Pieter Jan Brugge. Through Brugge, Williams was hired for the film 'Glory,' which earned him his first Academy Award for sound mixing in 1989. Telling the story of the Civil War's 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, 'Glory' was a challenge for Williams, who had to remove all modern sounds from the audio. On that film, Williams worked directly with the lead actors, including Denzel Washington and Matthew Broderick. One year prior to winning his first Academy Award, Williams won a Primetime Emmy Award for his work on 'Terrorist on Trial.' At the award show, Williams was initially ignored by his white peers, until he rose to accept his trophy. Following his wins in 1988 and 1989, Williams won another Academy Award for 'Dances with Wolves' in 1990.

Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II, Section A2007_273_001_007, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

Russell Williams, II was the recipient of two Academy Awards and one Primetime Emmy Award for his work in sound mixing by 1990. These accolades led Williams to more opportunities on feature film productions, including the remake of '12 Angry Men,' and 'Rules of Engagement,' both of which were directed by William Friedkin. The cast of '12 Angry Men' was comprised of numerous well-known actors, the most notable being George C. Scott, who worked directly with Williams. Williams also worked on Kevin Costner's film, 'Dances with Wolves.' From a sound perspective, the filming locations in South Dakota were ideal due to their emptiness, but there was little to do socially after filming ended for the day. Williams was also a sound mixer for 'The Temptations' miniseries, and Spike Lee's 'Jungle Fever.' Williams describes his approach to sound mixing, which was influenced by radio personality Ed Walker, who was blind, and used sound as a second sight. Williams also talks about the influence of sound on emotions.

Video Oral History Interview with Russell Williams, II, Section A2007_273_001_008, TRT: 0:13:12 ?

Russell Williams, II and his first wife, Renee Leggett Williams, had two children while living in Los Angeles, California. They separated, and Williams married his second wife, Rosalind Brown Williams. After working as a sound mixer in Los Angeles' film industry for over twenty-three years, Williams decided to transition to a career in academia in the early 1990s. He returned to Washington, D.C. to become a professor at his alma mater, American University. Williams concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy.