

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Howard Simmons

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Simmons, Howard, 1943-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Howard Simmons,
Dates:	May 25, 2010
Bulk Dates:	2010
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:06:53).
Abstract:	Photographer Howard Simmons (1943 -) was a news photographer for the Chicago Sun-Times and Ebony magazine, who captured legends like Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Brown. Simmons was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 25, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2010_038
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Commercial photographer and photojournalist Howard Simmons was born on June 11, 1943 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His mother, Lillian, was a day worker from South Carolina while his father, Luther, was a contractor from Pennsylvania. Simmons and his older sister Margaret were often moving around as children. In 1961, Simmons graduated from Westinghouse High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Immediately after graduation, Simmons enlisted in the U.S. Air Force where he played French horn with Air Force service bands until 1966. While serving, he became interested in photography and began photographing arrangements he would make with various materials from the barracks.

In 1966, Simmons began working for Gateway Studios as a photo lab technician with the desire to become a commercial photographer. The following year, he compiled a portfolio and presented it to *Ebony* magazine where John Johnson hired him as a staff photographer. With *Ebony*, Simmons covered Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral in Atlanta and Coretta Scott King's subsequent rally in Washington D.C. In 1968, friend Bob Black told Simmons the *Chicago Sun-Times* was hiring so Simmons joined the staff doing photojournalism until 1976. In 1973, Simmons, John White, Ovie Carter, and Bob Black created the exhibit "Through The Eyes of Blackness" which displayed the everyday life of blacks.

In 1976, Simmons left the paper to become a self-employed commercial photographer. He did advertisements for Coca Cola, McDonalds, Sears, Folgers, Amoco, Kelloggs and others traveling as far as Zimbabwe and Paris. In 1980, Simmons shot the first cover for *Black Family* magazine and in 1983, he bought a building in Chicago and turned it into what became his favorite commercial photography studio. Simmons work is showcased on his website, HowardSimmonsPhotography.com, opened in 2009.

Simmons is married to Marva E. Simmons and together they have three children: Robbin L. Mugnaini, Tracey L. Mcghee, and Christie R. Edwards.

Howard Simmons was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 25, 2010.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Howard Simmons was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 25, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Photographer Howard Simmons (1943 -) was a news photographer for the Chicago Sun-Times and Ebony magazine, who captured legends like Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Brown.

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:

Simmons, Howard, 1943-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Simmons, Howard, 1943- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Chicago sun-times

Occupations:

Photographer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Howard Simmons, May 25, 2010. 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 Howard Simmons, Section A2010_038_001_001, TRT: 0:29:03
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Howard Simmons was born on June 11, 1943 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to

Lillian Drayton Simmons and Luther Simmons. His father was born in 1896 in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania. Four years later, Simmons' mother was born in Sumter, South Carolina. She eventually moved with her sisters to Pittsburgh, where she worked as a domestic, while her sister Tessie Drayton Butler opened a hair salon in the Hill District, and her sister Beatrice Drayton Price became a seamstress. Simmons' parents met while employed at a resort in Pittsburgh, and married in 1923. His father worked as a faith healer, led a band called Bud Simmons and the Dixie Brownies and also founded contract cleaning business. His father was sued after an employees used a defective product to steam clean a building, and lost all of his property, as the business was uninsured. From that time, Simmons and his family stayed in Pittsburgh's dilapidated Bailey Hotel, until Simmons' maternal aunt, Ada Drayton, found them a place to live.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Simmons, Section A2010_038_001_002, TRT: 0:29:24
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Howard Simmons spent his early childhood in a home on Milwaukee Street in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When he was seven years old, his father, Luther Simmons, lost the property in a lawsuit. Simmons began his education at Pittsburgh's Madison Elementary School, where he was accosted with racial slurs by a white classmate. He transferred to a Seventh-day Adventist school, and then to Crescent Elementary School. After class, Simmons enjoyed building model planes and trains with his father, who once fashioned a matchstick village for him. At this point in the interview, Simmons remembers the impact of his father's death, which occurred when Simmons was sixteen years old. Simmons played the French horn in the band at Pittsburgh's Westinghouse High School, and joined the all-city orchestra under conductor Arthur Fiedler. During that time, he also took photographs with his family's Kodak Brownie Hawkeye camera. Years later, Simmons renewed his interest in photography while on leave from the U.S. Air Force.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Simmons, Section A2010_038_001_003, TRT: 0:28:39
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Howard Simmons played the French horn while a student at Westinghouse High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At this point in the interview, Simmons talks about French hornists like Dennis Brain, Julius Watkins and Dale Clevenger; and Pittsburgh natives like photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris, pianist Ahmad Jamal and bandleader Lionel Hampton. In 1961, Simmons graduated from high school, and joined the U.S. Air Force. He completed basic training at the Chanute Air Force Base in Champaign County, Illinois, where he developed acute sinusitis that left him bedridden for one month. After his training was complete, Simmons joined a field band, with whom he travelled to the U.S. Naval Base Subic Bay in the Philippines. The band performed throughout the country, and spent one night in Vietnam, where they were sent to strengthen morale among the troops. Then, Simmons decided to extend his U.S. military service, and was stationed for nine months in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Simmons, Section A2010_038_001_004, TRT: 0:30:36
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Howard Simmons became interested in photography in 1962, while on leave from the U.S. Air Force. Upon returning to duty, he borrowed an Asahi Pentax camera from the base exchange, and learned to develop and print photographs. After his discharge in 1966, Simmons returned to his hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There, he lived with his maternal aunts, and became an apprentice at the Judge Studio under industrial photographer Jack M. Judge. He began searching for a position as a photographer, and was hired instead as a lab

technician at Pittsburgh's Gateway Studio. Unsatisfied with this role, Simmons travelled to Chicago, Illinois to seek employment at Ebony magazine; where, despite his limited work experience, he was hired as a staff photographer by founder John H. Johnson. During his time at Ebony, Simmons shot a photograph of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that appeared on the magazine's cover. In 1967, Simmons married his wife, Marva Simmons, and joined the staff of the Chicago Sun-Times.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Simmons, Section A2010_038_001_005, TRT: 0:30:00
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Howard Simmons worked as a photographer at Ebony magazine for nine months, during which he captured images of black celebrities like actor Jim Brown on the set of 'The Riot' and Harry Belafonte at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada. Then, he was recruited by photographer Bob Black to join the staff of the Chicago Sun-Times under managing editor Emmett Dedmon. At this point in the interview, Simmons remembers his transition from magazine photography, where he covered stories independently, to newspaper photography, where staff photographers often competed to capture the best image of an event. Simmons worked at the Chicago Sun-Times from 1968 to 1976, and was one of the few African American news photographers in the city. He was frequently harassed by the Chicago police while working in predominantly white neighborhoods. Simmons also talks about documenting events like the Ebony Fashion Fair at Chicago's McCormick Place, and the "L" train crash of 1977.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Simmons, Section A2010_038_001_006, TRT: 0:28:59
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Howard Simmons served as a photographer for the Chicago Sun-Times from 1968 to 1976. During this period, he captured historic images of Minister Louis Farrakhan, Elijah Muhammad and investigative reporter John Drummond in Chicago, Illinois. He also participated in 'Through Eyes of Blackness,' an exhibit at Chicago's South Side Community Art Center, where his photographs were featured alongside the works of Bob Black, Ovie Carter and John H. White. After leaving the Chicago Sun-Times, Simmons shifted to the commercial photography industry at Vince Cullers Advertising, Inc., whose clients included the Kellogg Company; Sears, Roebuck and Co.; and the Standard Oil Company. As his career progressed, he joined other general market agencies like the Burrell Advertising Agency, owned by black entrepreneur Thomas J. Burrell. Simmons remembers his transition to digital photography, and reflects upon his life and career, as well as his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Howard Simmons, Section A2010_038_001_007, TRT: 0:10:12
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Howard Simmons and his wife, Marva Simmons, were married for over forty years at the time of the interview. Together, they had three daughters: Robbin Simmons Mugnaini, a broadcast journalist; Tracey Simmons McGhee, a pharmaceutical sales representative for Pfizer Inc.; and Christie Simmons Edwards, who worked in the medical field. He describes his gratitude to his parents, Lillian Drayton Simmons and Luther Simmons, both of whom passed away before he became successful as a photographer. Simmons also talks about his concerns for the photography industry, which relied increasingly on digital technology. He concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.