

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ellis Marsalis, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Marsalis, Ellis
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ellis Marsalis, Jr.,
Dates:	June 10, 2010
Bulk Dates:	2010
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:00:00).
Abstract:	Jazz pianist Ellis Marsalis, Jr. (1934 - 2020) directed Jazz Studies at the University of New Orleans from 1989 to 2001. He was inducted into the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame on December 7, 2008. Marsalis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 10, 2010, in New Orleans, Louisiana. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2010_048
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Jazz pianist and music professor Ellis Louis Marsalis, Jr., was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on November 14, 1934. As a youth, Marsalis played clarinet. From the age of eleven, he studied the clarinet at Xavier University's Junior School of Music (New Orleans), a preparatory course for the university. He would later ask his mother to get him a tenor saxophone so he could begin playing Rhythm "n Blues, the popular music of the day. He added piano to his studies while still in high school.

Marsalis entered Dillard University (New Orleans) in 1951 as a Freshman music major. In 1955, Marsalis earned his B.A. degree in music education. For the next year he worked as an assistant manager in his father's motel business while continuing to freelance with the American Jazz Quintet which consisted of Alvin Batiste, tenor saxophonist Harold Battiste, Ed Blackwell on drums and Richard Payne on bass. The group found little work in New Orleans, but they persevered.

In 1956, Ornette Coleman sent for Edward Blackwell to hoin him in Los Angeles and after a conversation with Harold Battiste, he and Marsalis decided to go with Blackwell to Los Angeles. While there, Marsalis and Blackwell played with Ornette Coleman for a short time. But by the end of the summer, Marsalis received a draft notice so he had to return home for a physical. In January of 1957, he joined the U.S. Marine Corps for a two-year stint. Marsalis spent all of his military service stationed in southern California, where he played piano for a weekly CBS television show, the Marine-sponsored "Dress Blues," and a radio show called "Leather Songbook," also sponsored by the Marince Corps. After his military service, Marsalis returned to New Orleans and married Delores Ferdinand. Eventually, the two would have six sons: Brandford, Wynton, Ellis III, Delfeayo, Miboya and Jason.

In 1964, Marsalis moved his wife and family to the small town of Breaux Bridge, Louisiana where he served as the band and choral director of Carver High School. In 1966, Marsalis returned to New Orleans and led the house trio at the Playboy Club. After leaving the Playboy Club, Marsalis was asked to join the Al Hirt band from 1967 to

1970, he had the piano chair in Al Hirt's Dixieland group.

In 1974, Marsalis joined the staff at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts High School (NOCCA), where he worked for the next twelve years. There, he would influence the careers of countless musicians, including trumpeter Terence Blanchard, pianist Harry Connick Jr., saxophonist Donlad Harrison, and his four musician sons, Wynton, Branford, Delfeayo and Jason. In 1986, Marsalis earned his M.M. degree from Loyola University New Orleans.

From 1986 to 1989, he taught at the Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, where he spent two years as coordinator of Jazz Studies. In 1989, Marsalis received an Honorary Doctorate degree from his alma mater, Dillard University, and that same year, he joined the faculty of the University of New Orleans. Marsalis served as Director of Jazz Studies until his retirement in 2001. He would be the recipient of honorary degrees from Tulane University (2007), The Juilliard School, Ball State and Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010. Marsalis has served as panelist, grant evaluator and board member for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Southern Arts Federation. On December 7, 2008, Marsalis was inducted into the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame.

Ellis Marsalis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 10, 2010.

Marsalis passed away on April 1, 2020.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ellis Marsalis, Jr. was conducted by Denise Gines on June 10, 2010, in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Jazz pianist Ellis Marsalis, Jr. (1934 - 2020) directed Jazz Studies at the University of New Orleans from 1989 to 2001. He was inducted into the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame on December 7, 2008.

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:

Marsalis, Ellis

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Marsalis, Ellis--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 Ellis Marsalis, Jr., June 10, 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 Ellis Marsalis, Jr., Section A2010_048_001_001, TRT: 0:28:49
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Ellis Marsalis, Jr. was born on November 14, 1934 in New Orleans, Louisiana to Florence Robertson Marsalis and Ellis Marsalis, Sr. Marsalis' paternal great-grandmother, Mary Gayden, was born into slavery, and raised his paternal grandmother, Rosa Gayden Marsalis, who was a strict disciplinarian. His paternal grandfather, Simeon "Simmie" Marsalis, was adopted by the Marsalis family at two years old, and assumed their name. Marsalis' father was born in 1908 in Summit, Mississippi, where he was educated through the third grade; and moved to New Orleans during his teenage years. Marsalis' maternal grandparents, Emma Robertson Trahan and Charles Robertson, raised ten children, including Marsalis' mother, in New Roads, Louisiana. After his maternal grandmother was institutionalized, his mother and aunt were left in the care of his great aunt, Rosalee Manuel. Marsalis also talks about his mother's Creole heritage and the Louisiana Creole language, which was his maternal family's native tongue.

Video Oral History Interview with Ellis Marsalis, Jr., Section A2010_048_001_002, TRT: 0:28:38
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Ellis Marsalis, Jr.'s father, Ellis Marsalis, Sr., moved as a teenager from Summit, Mississippi to New Orleans, Louisiana. There, he worked for an electrician, and managed a Standard Oil Company filling station at the corner of South Claiborne Avenue and Toledano Street. He also purchased property in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana; and, following World War II, obtained a loan from New Orleans' First National Bank of Commerce to develop a thirty-five room motel on the land. In addition to his entrepreneurship, Marsalis, Sr. was active in the Republican Party, and encouraged his African Americans neighbors to vote. Marsalis, Jr. began his education in New Orleans at the Danneel Public School, where he enjoyed his art and English classes. During his sixth grade year in 1944, he moved with his family to the town of Shrewsbury in Jefferson Parish. At this point in the interview, Marsalis, Jr. also describes his parents and paternal grandparents' courtships.

Video Oral History Interview with Ellis Marsalis, Jr., Section A2010_048_001_003, TRT: 0:28:34
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Ellis Marsalis, Jr. was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, where his family lived in Gert Town. In 1944, he moved with his family to Shrewsbury, a rural town in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, where he attended an all-black school with few resources. Marsalis returned to New Orleans to enroll at the F.P. Ricard School, where he sang spirituals like 'Lift Every Voice and Sing,' and read the works of African American authors like Claude McKay and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Around this time, Marsalis began his musical instruction at the Xavier University Junior School of Music, where he studied the clarinet under Bernice

Wyatt. After he was expelled for misconduct, he took piano lessons from Geneva Handy Southall and Jean Coston Maloney. Marsalis continued his education at New Orleans' Gilbert Academy, where he played the tenor saxophone with the Groovy Boys, a band led by his friend, Roger Dickerson. Marsalis went on to graduate from New Orleans' Gaudet High School in 1951.

Video Oral History Interview with Ellis Marsalis, Jr., Section A2010_048_001_004, TRT: 0:30:34
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Ellis Marsalis, Jr. played the tenor saxophone with the Groovy Boys band, which was formed by his friend, Roger Dickerson, in 1947. The group performed at venues in New Orleans, Louisiana, including both schools and nightclubs like Don's Million Dollar Room in the Uptown neighborhood. During this period, Marsalis met his mentor, jazz saxophonist Harold Battiste, who went on to found the first African American owned record label, AFO Records. Upon graduating from New Orleans' Gaudet High School in 1951, Marsalis matriculated at New Orleans' Dillard University. While there, he learned to play bebop, and composed his own music. Marsalis formed the American Jazz Quintet with Harold Battiste and drummer Ed Blackwell; and, after graduating in 1955, moved with the band to Los Angeles, California. Shortly afterwards, Marsalis returned to New Orleans, where he taught music at the Xavier University Preparatory School. He enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1957.

Video Oral History Interview with Ellis Marsalis, Jr., Section A2010_048_001_005, TRT: 0:30:07
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Ellis Marsalis, Jr. began his service with the U.S. Marine Corps at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, California in 1957, and was then assigned to the Marine Corps Air Station El Toro. He joined the Corps Four band, with whom he performed on 'Dress Blues,' a program on KNXT-TV in Los Angeles, California. After delisting, Marsalis returned to his hometown of New Orleans, Louisiana, where he became the pianist and leader of the Ellis Marsalis Quartet, which included saxophonist Nathaniel Perrilliat and drummer James Black. He recorded 'Monkey Puzzle: Ellis Marsalis Quartet at the Music Haven' on AFO Records, which was founded by his mentor, Harold Battiste. In 1963, Marsalis played on Nat Adderley and Cannonball Adderley's album, 'In the Bag.' At this point in the interview, Marsalis talks about the history of jazz, and describes his personal style of jazz composition, which focused on melodic development.

Video Oral History Interview with Ellis Marsalis, Jr., Section A2010_048_001_006, TRT: 0:29:37
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Ellis Marsalis, Jr. continued his career as a jazz musician in New Orleans, Louisiana during the 1960s. After the Music Haven closed, he worked briefly as a school music director in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana. He then returned to New Orleans, where he worked for his father, and as an accompanist at the Southern Rep Theatre. Then, Marsalis joined Al Hirt's band, which performed both traditional jazz and Dixieland music; and the Storyville Jazz Band, which was formed by drummer Bob French. At the request of Lu and Charlie's club owners Charles Bering and Lula Lowe Lewis, Marsalis formed a band called the ELM Music Company. He went on to enroll in a graduate program at Loyola University New Orleans, and joined the faculty of the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. Upon obtaining his degree in 1986, Marsalis became the director of the jazz studies program at Virginia Commonwealth University, and later at the University of New Orleans. He also recorded six albums with Columbia Records.

Video Oral History Interview with Ellis Marsalis, Jr., Section A2010_048_001_007, TRT: 0:03:41

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Ellis Marsalis, Jr. raised six sons with his wife, Dolores Ferdinand Marsalis. Of these six children, four went on to become notable musicians: saxophonist Branford Marsalis, trombonist Delfeayo Marsalis, percussionist Jason Marsalis and trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. The eldest, Branford Marsalis, first learned to play music on the clarinet, while Jason Marsalis initially trained as a violinist before switching to the drums. At this point in the interview, Marsalis, Jr. remembers buying Wynton Marsalis' first trumpet. He was advised by renowned trumpeter Miles Davis that the instrument was too challenging, but nevertheless secured a trumpet for his son, who waited six years before learning to play.