

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bertha McNeal

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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>	McNeal, Bertha, 1940-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 26, 2014 and June 27, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:03:17).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Singer Bertha McNeal (1940 - 2022) was a member of the classic Motown group the Velvelettes. McNeal was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 26, 2014 and June 27, 2014, in Kalamazoo, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_135
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Singer and performer Bertha McNeal was born in Shannon, Mississippi and raised in Flint, Michigan. McNeal and her cousin, Norma Fairhurst, first sang in a group with their uncle called The Barbees, where they recorded “The Wind” and “Que Pasa” for the Stepp label in 1957. Following high school and the breakup of The Barbees, McNeal enrolled as a student at Western Michigan University as an accomplished classical pianist.

In 1961, McNeal and her friend, Mildred Arbor, formed a singing group called the Velvelettes at Western Michigan University. McNeal then recruited her cousin to join the group and Arbor enlisted her younger sister, Carolyn Street, and Street’s best friend, Betty Kelley. After the quintet won an Alpha Phi Alpha talent contest at the University, fellow student and nephew of Berry Gordy, Robert Bullock, suggested they audition for Gordy’s Motown Records. The Velvelettes signed to Motown in late 1962 and started recording in January of 1963. They recorded two singles in 1963: “There He Goes” and “That’s The Reason Why.” In 1964, the Velvelettes recorded and released the single “Needle In A Haystack” on Motown’s VIP Records, which peaked at #45 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. The group then recorded “He Was Really Sayin’ Somethin’,” which peaked at #64 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and at #21 on the Billboard R&B Singles chart.

In September of 1964, Betty Kelley left the Velvelettes to join Martha and the Vandellas. The remaining four Velvelettes continued to perform and released the singles “Lonely Lonely Girl Am I” and “A Bird in the Hand (Is Worth Two in the Bush)” in 1965, and “These Things Will Keep Me Loving You,” in 1966, which later became a hit in the United Kingdom peaking at #34 on the UK Singles Chart. In the late 1960s, McNeal, Fairhurst and Arbor left the group and were replaced by Sandra Tilley and Annette Rogers-McMillan. Then, in 1969, Carolyn Street married and disbanded the Velvelettes. McNeal went on to receive her M.A. degree in music and became a middle school teacher and choir director.

In 1984, four of the original Velvelettes, Arbor, Fairhurst, McNeal and Street, reunited. In 1990, the group re-recorded their original hits and new songs for the album *One Door Closes* for Motorcity Records. Motown Records

then released *The Very Best of the Velvelettes* in 1999, *The Velvelettes: The Best Of* in 2001, and *The Velvelettes: The Motown Anthology* in 2004. The Velvelettes were the only Motown group of the classic era that still performed with the “original” line-up.

Bertha McNeal was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 26, 2014.

Bertha McNeal passed away on December 15, 2022 at the age of 82.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bertha McNeal was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 26, 2014 and June 27, 2014, in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Singer Bertha McNeal (1940 - 2022) was a member of the classic Motown group the Velvelettes.

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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

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®.

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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:

McNeal, Bertha, 1940-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

McNeal, Bertha, 1940---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:

Singer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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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 Bertha McNeal, June 26, 2014 and June 27, 2014. 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).

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## 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 Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:07 ?

Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_002, TRT: 2:27:40 ?  
Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:04 ?  
Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:37 ?  
Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:43 ?  
Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_006, TRT: 6:32:05 ?  
Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_007, TRT: 7:28:12 ?  
Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_008, TRT: 8:27:43 ?  
Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_001\_009, TRT: 9:22:29 ?  
Video Oral History Interview with Bertha McNeal, Section A2014\_135\_002\_010, TRT: 10:48:37 ?