

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jim Alexander

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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>	Alexander, Jim, 1935-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 12, 2006 and October 12, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:50:57).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Photographer Jim Alexander (1935 - ) is known for his 1993 exhibition of photographs of Duke Ellington. He teaches photography and operates a studio in Atlanta. Alexander was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 12, 2006 and October 12, 2006, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_114
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Photographer Jim Alexander was born to contractor David Alexander and Frances James Alexander on August 7, 1935 in Waldwick, New Jersey. He attended Waldwick Public School and Ramsey High School. Joining the U.S. Navy in 1952, Alexander developed an interest in photography, apprenticing with the base photographer and selling photo portraits of other sailors for fifty cents each. Leaving the Navy in 1956, Alexander detailed cars, ran a pool hall and was route manager for a newspaper.

In 1964, Alexander moved to Ridgewood, New Jersey and started a career as a

freelance photographer. He earned a certificate in business management from Rutgers University in 1967 and a degree in commercial photography from the New York Institute of Photography in 1968. That same year, Alexander began to document the local and national response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Earning a reputation as a documentary photographer, Alexander was hired by Bruner Productions to shoot film strips from 1968 to 1970. In 1970, he was hired by Yale University's School of Art and Architecture as a consultant for the Black Environmental Study Team. Alexander completed courses in communications psychology at the New School for Social Research in 1974. Accepting a position with the Atlanta Office of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in 1976, Alexander went on to the Atlanta Neighborhood Arts Center in 1977 as photographer in residence. In 1982, he established the Photo/Media Photography Collective studio gallery complex in downtown Atlanta. He was appointed photographer in residence at Clark College in 1985. In 1988, his cultural interest led to the establishment of the First World Bookstores. In 1993, several of Alexander's photographs were selected for "Beyond Category: The Musical Genius of Duke Ellington" exhibit that continues to tour. Alexander was also included in the city of Atlanta's Masters Series in 1995 and in 2000; his jazz photos were featured in a solo exhibit with the National Black Arts Festival.

The recipient of a myriad awards, Alexander operates his own gallery/studio near the King Complex and is still a photographer, curator, lecturer and teacher. Having taught and mentored youth and adults at the Carlos Museum, Emory University, the Fulton County Arts Council, TRIO and Upward Bound Programs at Clark, Morris Brown and Atlanta Metropolitan Colleges, Alexander also maintains membership with Photomedia Associates, Inc., Media Arts for Youth, the International Association for Jazz Education, the African American Jazz Caucus and the Tupac Amaru Shakur Foundation.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jim Alexander was conducted by Denise Gines and Larry Crowe on December 12, 2006 and October 12, 2006, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Photographer Jim Alexander (1935 - ) is known for his 1993 exhibition of photographs of Duke Ellington. He teaches photography and operates a studio in Atlanta.

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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:

Alexander, Jim, 1935-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

(Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Alexander, Jim, 1935---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:**

Photographer

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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 Jim Alexander, December 12, 2006 and October 12, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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 Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:22 2006/10/12

Jim Alexander describes his family background and childhood. His mother, Frances James-Alexander, was born in Camden, South Carolina in 1911 to parents who were farmers. She attended school in Camden before moving to Ridgewood, New Jersey as a teenager to work as a maid. Her father and extended family members later followed her to New Jersey. Alexander's father, David Alexander, was born in 1901 in Camden, to a minister and farmer and his wife. He moved to Waldwick, New Jersey in his early twenties to work in construction before becoming a Packard automotive mechanic. He met Frances at church in Ridgewood, and they had ten children, in addition to his three children from a previous relationship. Jim Alexander was born on August 7, 1935 in Hackensack, New Jersey. He describes growing up in Waldwick where most of his neighbors were Italian, his earliest childhood memory and his parents' personalities. He also recounts a childhood adventure floating down Waldwick's Ho-Ho-Kus Brook in a cement-mixing tub.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:30 2006/10/12

Jim Alexander recalls his education and childhood in Waldwick, New Jersey. As a boy, he and a friend rode a

cement mixing tub down Waldwick's Ho-Ho-Kus Brook. The two were stranded on a sandbar and rescued by the volunteer fire department. Alexander attended Waldwick Public School where he was a poor student. A fast learner, he read his older siblings' textbooks. However, Alexander was bored in class and became disruptive, later skipping school altogether. He was held back until his fourth-grade teacher recognized his intelligence and created a gifted program for him. Alexander attended Ramsey High School in Ramsey, New Jersey for a semester and completed a season on the junior varsity football team before dropping out. He describes his passion for horseback riding and his weekend and summer work at a pony track and riding academy in Allendale, New Jersey. After dropping out of high school at age sixteen, Alexander began working at a coat factory in Paterson, New Jersey.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:20 2006/10/12

Jim Alexander talks about serving in the U.S. Navy and how he became a photographer. During his childhood years in Waldwick, New Jersey, Alexander visited his extended family in nearby Paterson, New Jersey. In Paterson, which had a larger African American community, Alexander met black business owners and musicians. In 1952, upon turning seventeen, he enlisted in the Navy and was stationed at the U.S. Naval Training Center, Bainbridge in Maryland. There, he won a camera in a dice game and began taking fifty-cent portraits of the sailors. Scoring 100 percent on the Navy's mechanical aptitude test, Alexander achieved the rank and billet of fireman and attended on-the-job training in Charleston, South Carolina. Alexander recounts his first experiences of racism and segregation in Maryland and South Carolina. While in Charleston, he became an apprentice to a photographer. In 1974, Alexander attended celebrations for the one hundredth birthday of blues artist W.C. Handy where he met Emme Kemp and Maxine Sullivan.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_001\_004, TRT: 0:27:30 2006/10/12

Jim Alexander recounts his U.S. Navy service from 1952

to 1956. Stationed in Charleston, South Carolina, Alexander explored the city, frequenting Mosquito Beach and enjoying the jazz scene. He describes segregation on and off the naval base and racial discrimination in the Navy post-integration. Alexander secured a transfer to New Orleans, Louisiana through his friendship with one of the base's commanding officers, the son of one of his father's employers. In New Orleans, he worked on a newly commissioned tank landing ship (LST). He then sailed to the Naval Amphibious Base in Little Creek, Virginia in 1954, encountering Hurricane Hazel on the way. In Virginia, he maintained the ship's evaporators, converting salt water to fresh water before transferring to Long Beach, California. In Long Beach, he continued to pursue photography as a hobby and met jazz artist Johnny Otis. He also entered a serious relationship that ended upon his discharge in 1956. Alexander left his photo portfolio with his girlfriend.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:51 2006/10/12

Jim Alexander describes his life after his discharge from the U.S. Navy in 1956. He moved back to Waldwick, New Jersey and worked at a furniture factory in Paterson, New Jersey before becoming the night manager at a pool room. There, he ran an illegal after-hours gambling operation for nearly eight years. Alexander recalls waking up one morning in February 1964 and deciding to turn his life around. He stopped drinking, got married in 1965, and began detailing Cadillac cars in Ridgewood, New Jersey. He also worked part-time delivering newspapers, and was promoted to route manager. In 1966, he divorced his first wife, and the newspaper delivery service made him general manager. Alexander recalls returning to his neglected photography hobby at this time and documenting the ongoing Civil Rights Movement. He met Amiri Baraka and became involved in the Black Panther Party in 1969, leaving the newspaper business to focus on photography and activism. He also met his future wife, Louise, in New Haven, Connecticut.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_002\_006, TRT: 0:31:09 2006/12/12

Jim Alexander recounts his early professional photography career. He recalls President John F. Kennedy's 1963 assassination. He also talks about the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and his experiences in Harlem, New York. He describes black community organizations like The Black Coalition and black elected officials in New Haven, Connecticut. He remembers the election of Kenneth Gibson, Newark, New Jersey's first black mayor in 1970. Alexander attended the New York Institute of Photography and met HistoryMaker Gordon Parks in the offices of Essence magazine. After the 1969 Newark riots, he did photography for the federal Model Cities Program and lectured at the Yale School of Art and Architecture in New Haven. There, he worked with the Q House community center and the Freedom Arts Communications Team to create cultural programs like the Dixwell Community Festival. He also promoted black television programming through Black Efforts for Soul in Television and the National Black Media Coalition.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_002\_007, TRT: 0:29:10 2006/12/12

Jim Alexander talks about his career after leaving New Haven, Connecticut in 1976. Offered a job as the photo editor for the magazine of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), disagreements with CORE led him to distance himself from the organization. He decided to move to Atlanta, Georgia with his wife after meeting Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson while photographing a meeting of black elected officials in Washington, D.C. Alexander describes working for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, documenting community programs throughout the South, and becoming the photographer-in-residence at Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center in 1977. He also talks about helping the National Black Media Coalition negotiate a settlement with Turner Broadcasting. Alexander talks about his love of music. He is the official photographer for the African American Jazz Caucus and has photographed jazz artists like Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake, and Count Basie. He describes the Duke Ellington Fellowship at Yale University in New Haven.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section

A2006\_114\_002\_008, TRT: 0:29:20 2006/12/12

Jim Alexander recounts his photography career in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1972, he met Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake, and Noble Sissle at Yale University's Duke Ellington Convocation in New Haven, Connecticut. He describes his method for capturing a great photograph, and relates advice from his mentor, HistoryMaker Gordon Parks. Alexander recounts how he smuggled a camera into a 1981 concert featuring Sammy Davis, Jr. and Frank Sinatra in Atlanta, Georgia. He also explains how he has retained the trust of groups like the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam, which allowed him to photograph their events. His portrait subjects have included John Henrik Clarke, HistoryMaker Oscar Brown, Jr., and Amiri Baraka. Alexander talks about jazz artist Dizzy Gillespie, who also had an affinity for photography. Alexander describes photographing writers like HistoryMakers Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Pearl Cleage at African American literature conferences at Emory University and Spelman College in Atlanta.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_002\_009, TRT: 0:29:00 2006/12/12

Jim Alexander reflects upon his photography career. He documented civil rights events and icons, including Rosa Parks and the family of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He also talks about challenges posed by documentary photography. Alexander taught photojournalism at Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia and documented the college's merger with Atlanta University. During that period, he began his bookstore chain, First World Bookstores, where he invited scholars like HistoryMakers Asa Hilliard III and Haki Madhubuti to deliver public talks. After closing the stores in 1994, he worked with Very Special Arts in Atlanta. Alexander describes Roy Innis' leadership of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). He describes obtaining permission for his photographs and his desire to photograph Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee and HistoryMakers Barack Obama, Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, and Reverend Al Sharpton. Alexander talks about the need to archive his work and serving as president of African Americans for the Arts.

Video Oral History Interview with Jim Alexander, Section  
A2006\_114\_002\_010, TRT: 0:27:45 2006/12/12

Jim Alexander reflects upon his life and legacy. He talks about exhibiting his work at the National Black Arts Festival as well as document the festival itself. One of his exhibits was attended by HistoryMakers Ossie Davis and Gordon Parks. Alexander also exhibits his work in the Jim Alexander Collection at Auburn Avenue Research Library in Atlanta, Georgia. Photographers he admires include James Van Der Zee, P.H. Polk, and HistoryMaker Roy Lewis. He explains how digital photography has affected the professional photography field by reducing the necessary skills for taking a quality picture. Alexander expresses his hopes and concerns for the African American community and gives advice to younger generations. He talks about how he would like to be remembered and reflects upon his legacy. Alexander also talks about the Studioplex, his workspace in Atlanta; and about his family. He has a wife, Louise, nine children, and fifteen grandchildren at the time of interview.