

SMITH COLLEGE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM (FALL 2023)
2023 Internship Project Description

(Send to Alex Capobianco [REDACTED])

Name of Smithsonian Staff Mentor(s): Vanessa Broussard-Simmons

Title of Smithsonian Staff Mentor(s): Archivist

Phone Number(s): [REDACTED]

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Museum/Institute/Office: National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Department/Division/Office (if applicable): Archives Center

Project Title (must be ONSITE): Processing the Byron and Sylvia Lewis Collection

Project Description – *Please provide as much detail as possible. What will the intern learn? How will this internship benefit the intern and your unit? Please also include any relevant background information on the function of your unit, department, or office:*

The intern will learn how to evaluate, arrange, and process and archival collection according to current archival standards. The internship will benefit the intern by honing their critical thinking skills, teaching basic archival processing skills that will help them to better understand researching in an archive, and enhance their writing skills. The internship will benefit the unit in that after processing of this collection it will be available to researchers in a much more accessible format. Items in the collection will be housed properly for long term preservation.

About the Collection

Byron E. Lewis, Sr. made his mark when he started UniWorld Group, Incorporated in 1969 in New York. His company was among a handful of African American agencies that emerged in the 1960s to market to demographics that mainstream advertising agencies ignored or misunderstood. Lewis' entry into the advertising world was groundbreaking because his was the first African American owned multicultural agency.

Lewis was quite unusual because he had not worked for large historically white advertising agencies before starting his own. Other African Americans who founded agencies in this era such as Frank Mingo, Caroline Jones, Tom Burrell and Emmet McBain had all worked for big time agencies and then –seizing the cultural moment breaking open in the late 1960s due to the modern Civil Rights Movement, started their own agencies. Lewis did not do that. He came from the world of art and theater, having originally wanted to be a singer and then a journalist, based on his college training. After graduating from college, he was unable to find a job in mainstream journalism due to being Black. He tried various options such as selling ads for Black newspapers and other publications which were largely unsuccessful. He founded The Urbanite, a magazine of arts and culture capitalized by Irwin Burgie, the composer/lyricist for Harry Belafonte’s hit: Day-O. This was a singular endeavor and included the work of several generations of Black artists and writers, including James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Louis Lomax, James Earle Jones, Romare Beardon and others.

Starting with a Latino business partner, Lewis focused on African American and Latinx consumer markets, which was atypical when he started out. Interestingly, he did not name his agency after himself as did Mingo, Jones, Gilmano or Burrell Communications. Rather Lewis named his agency “UniWorld” – a signature name evocative of the spirit of ethnic and racial communality that characterized an optimistic outlook on American culture in the middle of the 20th century.

While African American owned ad agencies that had integrated staffs were common, most of these firms, especially smaller, local firms, found it difficult to win contracts that would allow them to expand beyond African American markets. By the early 1970s, with the country experiencing an economic downturn, Lewis managed to keep UniWorld afloat (by writing and producing a radio soap opera!), making it the only surviving African American owned agency in New York by 1976, although others would open after this period. Over the next 40 years, Lewis’ clients included Eastman Kodak, Ford Motors, ATT, Kraft Foods, and Avon. Lewis’ educational background in journalism; prior professional experience as a social worker, advertising sales representative, and Army veteran; as well as his broad artistic interests allowed him to expand his company into territory not typical for advertising agencies. His marketing of African American movies, including *Shaft*; his creation of a radio soap opera; and his publicity of a political convention illustrates his professional and entrepreneurial flexibility, which has resulted in a company that is still operation today, although he retired in 2012, becoming UniWorld Group’s chairman emeritus.¹

Byron Lewis’ contributions to the advertising industry represent one aspect of the significance of the proposed collection he will donate. Another reason why Lewis’ collection, including potential oral histories, is significant is because they can illuminate broader themes in African American life, culture, and history from the mid-20th century until the early 21st century. Lewis lived through several important moments in African American history and because of the nature of his work also played a part in documenting those moments. For example, during the early 1960s, Lewis started a magazine, *Urbanite*, that highlighted African American writers including Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, and Charlyne Hunter, to name

¹ A brief biography of Byron Lewis is included in Jason Chambers’ history of African Americans in the advertising industry, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) pp237-240.

a few. In the 1970s, Lewis wrote and produced a made-for-radio soap opera, *Sounds of the City*, which kept the company afloat and was eventually sponsored by Quaker Oats. He started America's Black Forum television show, with civil rights activist Julian Bond (and later politician and professor) as the original host. Also, in the 1970s, Lewis' agency did the publicity and media relations for the Black Political Convention held in Gary, Indiana in 1972. According to historian Steven Lawson, this convention "was the most ambitious attempt to unite Black political leaders" in the immediate post 1965 moment when the impact of the Voting Rights Act resulted in a dramatic increase in African American politicians.² Civil right activists and minister Jesse Jackson announced his national political intentions at this well documented convention and Lewis worked on Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign. Additional items in the UniWorld Group company records highlight African American Anti-Apartheid efforts in the 1990s and Lewis' founding of the Acapulco Black Film Festival, which became the American Black Film Festival.

Also, of note, are materials that document Lewis' personal life including material related to his fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, an African American fraternity organized in 1911 at Howard University. Lewis became a member of the fraternity when he attended Long Island University in the 1950s. Historically African American fraternities and sororities are important among college educated African American professionals, particularly as they provide networking, community service, and philanthropic opportunities.

For his contributions, Lewis has been recognized with a number of important honors and indeed The History Makers, the nation's largest online repository of oral history interviews featuring African American change makers, lists many of them including the Lifetime Achievement Award from *Black Enterprise* magazine as well as being named an Alumni of Distinction from Long Island University. Additionally, Lewis has been inducted into several halls of fame such as the American Advertising Federation's Advertising Hall of Fame, Omega Psi Phi's Hall of Fame, and Ad Color Hall of Fame.

Mission

In support of the Museum's mission, the Archives Center identifies, acquires, and preserves significant archival records in many media and formats to document America's history and its diverse cultures. The Center's staff members arrange, describe, preserve, and make collections accessible in support of scholarship, exhibitions, publications, and education.

We offer these services in a professionally managed reference center and through on-line databases, finding aids, and other forms of publication. We provide expert advice on archival practices and standards and, through educational outreach activities we strive to clarify the role that organized archives play in American life. The Center actively pursues alliances inside and outside the Institution, in recognition of the need for cooperation and financial support.

Reference Services and Collections

We have 1586 collections. In FY 2019 we had 530 researchers, 210 of whom were graduate

² For more on the 1972 Black Political Convention see, Steven Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in American Since 1941* 4th edition, (New York: Wiley, 2014), 146.

students working on their dissertations, while 191 were doing research for books and articles, and 71 were working on exhibitions. Subject strengths include the history of radio, television, telegraphy, computing, and other aspects of the history of technology with a special interest in the history of invention; advertising, marketing, and entrepreneurship; commercial visual ephemera (post cards, greeting cards); American music (sheet music, jazz) and musical instruments. These, and a wide range of other subjects, are documented in business records, personal papers, and extensive holdings of motion picture film, video and sound recordings, historical photographs, and oral histories.

Learning Objectives:

- Assessing archival material and drafting a processing plan.
- Processing and archival collection according to DACS guidelines.
- Arrangement and description of an archival collection.
- Drafting and writing a finding aid.