

Plainville's African American Musicians and Bands

by Gail Johnson Williams

Celebrating June as African American Music Appreciation Month

The Early 1900's

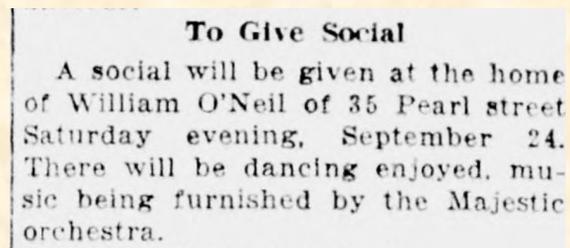
Music was an important element in the early part of the 1900's as it is today. There were concerts, parties, dances, and church. If you were having a house party, you moved all the furniture to make room for dancing. A piano player would show up and the party was on. There would be a cup on the piano for tips for playing a special tune.

A couple of the house party piano players were Clint Naaman and his cousin Jim Strong. These two were playing from around 1910 into the 1920's and beyond.

The 1920's brought more talent. There was the Majestic Orchestra born on Pearl Street. The members were Myrtle, aka Mert or Mimi, Halsted and her sons Bertrand (Bert) and George (Buck). Mert played the piano, Bert the violin and trombone, and Buck the trumpet. The other members were Charlie Peters who played violin and his brother George Peters who played the drums. George was the leader of this band. All the members of this band lived on Pearl Street.

Dances and parties were held at the Halsted home and folks danced around the chimney. It is said that Mert had spells and would faint. They would lay her out on the floor and keep on playing and when the spell passed, Mert would get up and resume where she left off.

On the Fourth of July, Pearl Street was blocked off. The band would play and the whole neighborhood would join in the festivities.



The above news clip is from the New Britain Herald September 20, 1927.

*Accessed online at Chronicling America Historic American Newspapers / Library of Congress.**

George Peters and His Bands

George Peters led The Majestic Orchestra and The Cotton Pickers. The Cotton Pickers played summer resorts around Connecticut.

George was a drummer and vocalist. He would pay the band during intermission. If they weren't paid during intermission, they would not play. Although he was blind, he could count money. He had his nephew stack his money in numerical order from twenty to one dollar bills. He could count it out fast and without error. Side men got \$12.50 and the leader got \$25.00. That was good money for the times.

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George's wife Lillian DeMorty was a graduate of the Conservatory of Music. She arranged all his music and taught him the songs to sing. Her brother Raymond played saxophone in the orchestra.



**Photo is of George Peters and the Cotton Pickers.
George is on the right.**

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George had a third band made up of musicians he hired from New York. George belonged to the Black Musician's Union of Hartford and the Black Musician's Union of New Haven. He also had a permit to carry a gun and he did. George Peters later moved to Hartford and continued to lead bands. He was still playing in the Albany Bar and Grill on Albany Avenue in Hartford in the 1940's.

Amateur Night at the Plainville Strand

In the 1930's the Plainville Strand (movie theater in the center of town) would have an Amateur Night each week. Walt Naaman and his brother Irving played in the house band. Walt played sax and piano and his brother played banjo. Clarence Washington was the drummer.

They also played for dances at the Colonial Hall on West Main Street in town and in Norfolk, Connecticut.



This is a photo of the Plainville Strand on West Main Street. It was next to the railroad tracks where the White Oak offices were later located.

Music and Redeemer's A.M.E. Zion Church

During the twenties and early thirties on the church scene at Redeemer's A.M.E. Zion Church on Whiting Street was Charlie Hubbard. He played the pump organ with great gusto according to my Dad, Lutt Johnson. On occasion, my aunt Ethel Johnson Hobson would be the musician. In 1936, my Dad, Lutt Johnson married a concert pianist, Val Gonzalez, my Mom. He said the church needed a musician, so he married one and she was the Minister of Music at Redeemer's from 1936 until her death in 1992.

My mother Val Johnson was the accompanist for the Farmington Valley Choral Society. She also taught piano and music theory to many Plainville children.



1944: Val Johnson's first piano class

Bob Beverly and His Bands

Another Plainville native Bob Beverly led three bands. His first band was in the forties and consisted of guys from Plainville High School. The members of the band were Gino Pizzola, Sonny Mastrianni, Bill Beverly playing trumpet, Leroy Corlette playing trumpet and piano, and Bob playing drums. They played in Torrington and Plainville.

Members of Bob's next band were Willie Hunter on sax and Charles Moody on trumpet. These two guys were from Middletown. Bob's brother Bill who previously played trumpet switched to tenor sax when Willie Hunter left the group. His other brother Joe even tried playing sax for a while. There was Ernie Wilson playing bass and piano and Junie Naaman playing washtub bass. He played so well they gave him solos.

He later got a real bass. This was the first incarnation of the Royalaires. Buck Halsted passed through this band too. They played a lot in upstate New York, Hills Dale to be exact. Later in the sixties this band consisted of Bunny Jackson on guitar, Skip Garrett on bass, his brother Buzzy on saxophone, and Bob on drums. Louie O'Neil sang in one of Bob's bands.



Bob Beverly's Royalaires. Bob, his brother Bill and Louie O'Neil are in the picture.



Junie Naaman who played washtub bass.

The 1950's: Part One

In the 1950's I remember Wednesday Night Jam Sessions at the Grange Hall on Pierce Street. My cousin Norene Johnson Robinson and I would go to band practice at the high school with Grace Jersey. We were both in the Plainville High School band.

As a matter of fact, there were four Johnsons in the band at the same time with my brother Rodney and Norene's sister Anita. We were each in a different grade. One still in grammar school, one in Junior High, and Norene and I in High School.



Anita, Norene, Gail, and Rodney Johnson

Anyway, after band practice, Norene and I would go to the Jam Session. I don't know the name of the band but Sam Kimble was playing the guitar, Buck Halsted was on trumpet, and Leroy Corlette was on vibes. One of their tunes was Meet Me in the Alley Behind the Barn. Leon Stinson sang Lawdy Miss Clawdy. We would dance until 11:00pm and then run home.

The 1950's: Part Two

The fifties brought Sam Kimble to the forefront. He was from New Britain but moved to Plainville in the mid-fifties. He was already known here and many of the musicians previously mentioned played with him. He was a preacher's kid and had to sneak out of the window to go play music. He tried changing his name to Sam Karton so his father would not hear that he was sneaking out to play the devil's music, but it did not work. He waited too late to change his name and everyone knew he was Sam Kimble. Some of his musicians were Stanley Woodson, Willie Hunter, Pete Lee, and Ace Harris. In 1954 he made a recording that was popular in this area called Stop & Go. Leroy Corlette, Stanley Woodson, Ace Harris and Roger Green along with Sam were on that recording.

About 1958 or 1959, Bill Beverley started a band called the Velvetones. He played tenor sax and his side men were Bob Snell on bass, Bill Grieko on drums and I don't remember who played the piano. They played in Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven, and Plainville.

From the Late Fifties Through the Seventies

In the late fifties Sam Kimble's band started to change its face. Sam introduced Taffie Ann Walker as his new keyboard player. No more pianos and now there's a girl in the band. She was still in high school and her mother had to sign a paper giving Sam permission to take her around to the places to play. She was a minor and not allowed in places that served alcoholic beverages. Next he brought in Rose Pena. She played electric bass and guitar. In 1960 Rose left to go to college and I showed up and became Sam's bass player.

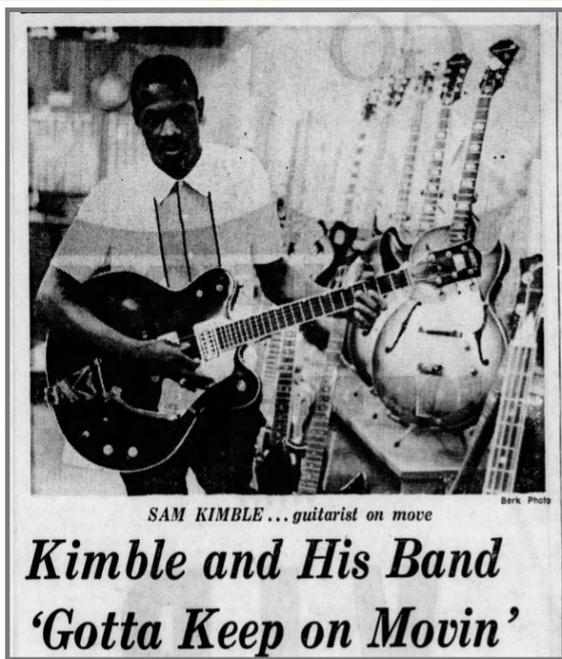
Another newcomer to the band was Hank Bentley. He had just recently arrived in the area from Georgia fresh out of high school and he played saxophone. Harold Lumpkin played the drums and Al Ayers was the vocalist. Leon Stinson played tambourine and sang songs like "Walking the Dog" and "The Jerk". Both were popular dances of the sixties.



Sam Kimble's Band: Al Ayers, Sam Kimble, Gail Johnson, Leon Stinson, Taffie Ann Walker, Henry Bentley

Later Charlene Andrews joined as a vocalist. She was another one from Pearl Street. A young kid of fourteen showed up with his mother. His Mom said he could play the guitar and asked Sam if he could play with the band. Sam said yes so Alan Chavis became part of the band. He too lived on Pearl Street. Sam actually had a whole new band. Sam's wife Virginia learned to play organ and could also play vibraphone so when Sam was double booked, he'd split the band up and cover both gigs.

Some of the places we played were union halls and you were required to have a certain number of members in your band or the union could shut you down or add members to fill the requirement. Sam's band fit whatever the criteria was. The core of Sam's band stayed the same 1960-1970 except that Harold Lumpkin, the drummer, went into the service. Al Ayers, the vocalist, became drummer and vocalist.



From an article about the band in the Hartford Courant. February 26, 1967.

Used with permission of the Courant.

The Sam Kimble Band was a Rhythm & Blues Band and was very popular on the East Coast. The core band played Monday nights at the Institute of Living and Thursday nights at the Black Elks. Both places were in Hartford. If we did not have traveling gigs on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, we played at the Hartford Avenue Restaurant in New Britain. When the gigs were out of town, we played in Maine, Upstate New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey doing one-nighters. We were a dance band. The only bars we played in were the Hartford Avenue Restaurant and the Elks Club.

We played colleges too. We backed up Patty LaBelle and the Blue Bells at UCONN and the Orlons at Yale. The band made some recordings. One was with the Harptones, a popular R&B vocal group out of New York City and an instrumental called "Henry's In". Then Henry went into the service.

In the 1970's the personnel of Sam Kimble's band started to change. I left the band to play with Al Pitts and the Bitter Seeds and then Doris Allen and the Motivations. Both were R&B bands and played one-nighters, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.

After ten years away I rejoined Sam. By that time, Sam had a female drummer/singer named Thomasina Loveless. Henry and Taffy Ann had married each other. He was still there but Taffy was home raising two boys.

I stayed with Sam for another ten years traveling all over the place.

Nzinga's Daughters

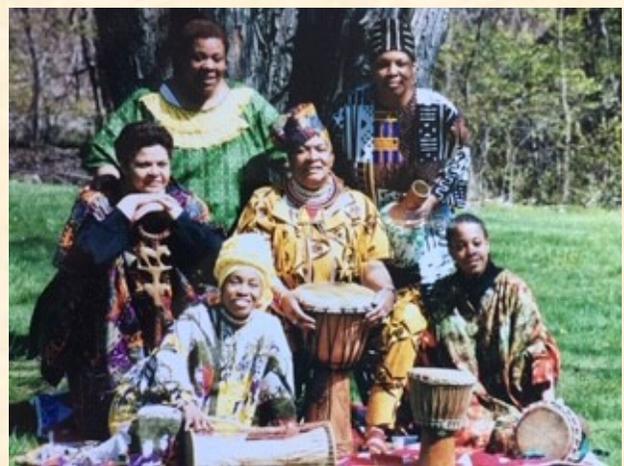
After my years with Sam, I started my own band, Nzinga Daughters which still performs today. This band at first included:

Gail Williams— bass and vocals
Dayna Snell, my daughter - flute and vocals
Alison Johnson, my sister - keyboard and vocals
Taffie Bentley – keyboard, vocals and storyteller
Shanta Williams, my daughter - spoken word and vocals
Donna Crockett – vocals
Mary Vasquez – vocals
Debbie Piccolo - drums and vocals
Dawn Lofseski – guitar
Celestia Simmons – vocals and storyteller
Joann James - African percussion instruments and vocals
Irma Walton—vocals
Rose Minton—vocals
(and several others)

This is an all-female group. We have sung African songs, spirituals, R&B, and rap, but more on a social consciousness theme. We have been out there with a message. Eventually we eased into just singing a capella spirituals and began our Tales of the Underground Railroad, revealing secret messages in the songs and everyday objects that would lead enslaved African Americans to freedom.



**Dayna Snell, Shanta Williams, Alison Johnson,
Donyne Cowan**



Another photo of Nzinga's Daughters

We have performed in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York City, Upstate New York, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania. We have been on the roster for the Commission on the Arts for the State of Connecticut (Heritage Arts Division) and the New England Federation of Artists Traveling Musicians and Urban Artists Initiative.

Later, I incorporated more musicians into the band, Angie Brown Follins on keyboard, Henry Bentley, Mustafah (Alan) Chavis, Bill Beverly, and Willis Moore.

We played every summer in Norton Park for many years. We also produced a free concert “Nzinga’s Daughters Present Music from the African Diaspora” at the Bushnell Memorial in Hartford every summer for ten years. We have included local musicians and brought in others from Boston, Providence, and Plainfield, New Jersey.

The Connection from Redeemer’s A.M.E. Zion Church

During Rev. Elvin Clayton’s tenure (1997-2015) at Redeemer’s A.M.E. Zion Church, a church band was organized and it was called The Connection. This band consisted of Rev. Clayton on guitar, Alison Johnson on keyboard, Carla Simmons on violin, Mustafah Chavis on guitar, Angie Brown-Folins on keyboard, and Alvin Carter and Jerome Grant on drums. Henry Bentley and Bill Beverly played tenor saxophone.



Queen Nzinga’s R&B Band with Queen Ann Nzinga Center Youth at Norton Park summer concert series



The Connection. Redeemer’s A.M.E. Zion Church band.

The band was directed by Dayna Snell and included musicians from the Plainville church and others from the A.M.E. Zion connection. They played church services, concerts, conventions, and Christmas parties in Farmington at the home of the Bishop.

Other Plainville African American Musicians

Others who have helped build our rich legacy of Plainville African Americans in music include:

Sherman Matthews, violin

Estella Lewis, drums

Edgar Wynkoop, saxophone with Inter City Exchange (ICE)

Jeffry Kimble, organ and guitar

Kimmy Kimble, electric bass

Julia Kimble, drums/vocals

Bob Snell, electric bass

Clarence Wilmore, vocalist (Pearl Street)

Donyne Cowan, my daughter, electric bass with Liberty Standing, Boys Say Go, Alpha Bettys, Sisters of the Yam, Electric Sky (all out of Boston) and Delish (local)

Rev. William Paris, vocalist, presented himself in concert during his tenure to raise money for Redeemer's A.M.E. Zion Church and also sang and recorded with the Carrington Men's Chorus

Wayne Green, guitar

David Mays, vocals

Tinary Barton, vocals