

INSIDE: Buffalo's thriving African-American community of the 1800s

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Fade to Blues

*Buffalo's East Side
Music Legends*

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Fade to Blues

*On Buffalo's East Side,
music with heart, soul
and style all its own*

Joe Madison was just a Niagara Falls kid, playing his first gigs behind a gutbucket bluesman named Elmo Witherspoon when he first met Count Rabbit. As he tells about it you can almost see the guitarist mirrored in Madison's eyes.

"I was on a big raggedy piano, half the keys didn't work," says Madison, "and we started playing this place called C-4. It was a joint.

"The lady, Mrs. Hunt, could cook. She made great chicken, and we didn't start until midnight and we'd play until 4. People'd come in to dance and slow drag and listen to the blues and have fun all night. Of course Mrs. Hunt, she'd sell whiskey under the table. We got a chicken dinner and \$5 a night.

"I came in one night and Rabbit was by himself. He was kind of a strange-looking dude to me, 'cause

he's so light. I'd never seen a black man that light. He was real thin, real skinny.

"He had a big bass drum, and he just asked, 'Hey, can you play bump-a-boom, bump-a-boom?' I said, 'Yeah, I can do that.' And it was just me and him."

They didn't know that meeting 40 years ago would be the start of a beautiful friendship. Rabbit went on the road soon after and didn't even realize Madison played keyboards until he came back to Buffalo.

Madison played for '60s soul sax legend King Curtis, touring the nation and playing places like the Apollo Theater before returning two decades ago to become Western New York's reigning king of the Hammond B-3 organ.

Madison and Rabbit, who have played together in jam sessions and in

combos over the years, are two of Buffalo's East Side Elders. Through a combination of ability and longevity, they've been the musicians that nearly every black artist, and a good many white, has played with or learned from. With performers like soul singers Jesse Butler and Barbara St. Clair, and the soul-blues combo of Matt Nickson and Johnny Soul, they are living links to Buffalo's rich, and

largely overlooked, tradition in blues, soul and R&B.

The secret to Joe Madison's success may be in his musician-ship, or his ability to bridge blues and jazz. But it is his personality people remember.

"The thing I like best about Joe is the sheer joy Joe's face shows as he plays," says Al Wallack, former jazz programmer for WEBR radio. "You

know he's doing exactly what he's meant to do."

Madison, 55, started out playing everything as a child. His father was a musician, and Joe would play piano in his grandfather's storefront church in Niagara Falls.

"When I was small, he always had music going, especially jazz and standards," Madison says of his father. "He always had musicians coming

over to the house who would jam. He'd sit me on his lap and show me a lot of piano."

Madison loved bebop as a teen-ager in the early 1950s. "When Charlie Parker came out, a lot of guys couldn't understand Charlie. But I heard it and I just loved it . . . I said how come the man can play so many notes and make it sound so right," says Madison.

But many of his first jobs were with bluesman like Witherspoon ("Spoon" to most of his audiences) and Count Rabbit.

"Today, there's places to play jazz, but it's a mixture too," he says. "You gotta play a little funky stuff. A lot of people like the blues. If I have a jazz gig, I always play blues. I can always go back and play some blues and still enjoy it."

Madison caught the golden age of jazz and R&B in the 1940s and '50s.

"At one time, there were always places to play. On William Street, all down the street was nothing but clubs, and all of 'em had bands, four pieces or three pieces," he says. "It was like every day of the weekend was a holiday.



joe madison

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“Everybody could work. You used to see a lot of guys who would come out and spend all their money, but they could go back to work and make more money!”

In the early 1960s, he went to New York with a jazz group, but it was in Buffalo that he connected with King Curtis, the sax player, who had solo hits like “Soul Twist” and was



barbara st. clair

the studio player behind people like the Coasters (“Yakety Yak”) and a host of ‘60s soul stars. Curtis was playing at the Pine Grill at 1447 Jefferson Ave. when he needed a keyboard player. Madison got the job and stayed with Curtis for most of the late ‘60s, performing and doing work at New York studios before returning to Buffalo to stay. Along the way, he sat in with performers like funkfather James Brown and jazzman Sonny Stitt.

He picked up the Hammond B-3 organ in the ‘60s at the Pine Grill, and with it his nickname, Groove, from his similarity to the late Groove Holmes, a B-3 organ player in the Jimmy McGriff-Jack MacDuff-Jimmy Smith mold. The organ was love at first sound for Madison, and he was one of the first area players able to handle the instrument with its distinctive thick bluesy tones.

“Most organ players don’t want to play their own bass lines. I love playing my own bass, I like being in control myself,” Madison says of what has become his trademark instrument.

“We had three pieces and we sounded like four (because the organ played the bass guitar parts). We sounded great, we used to rock the house.”

For most of the past 20 years, Madison has been able to make his living as a musician in Buffalo, a rare feat, and he has built up a legion of admirers.

Ronnie Foster, keyboard player with George Benson and Stevie Wonder, took lessons from Madison as a teen-ager. Saxman Grover Washington Jr. played with Madison as a teen-ager as well. “He could play ‘Honky Tonk’ — on a baritone,” Madison says, laughing. “I don’t know if he was even playing a tenor yet, or all the instruments he plays now.”

Stu Weissman, a guitarist with Madison’s jazz group for the past 1½ years, says one reason local musicians look up to Madison is that “Joe has always been one who’ll show younger players things, why he’s doing things. Joe can play a very complicated John Coltrane composition and make it accessible to the average listener.”

Playing with Madison can be a challenge.

“Joe is always trying to make something sound fresh even though he’s played it a hundred times,” says Weissman. “He may play the same three-chord song you’ve been playing, but he’ll throw an extra chord in where you wouldn’t expect it. It makes you try to become more creative, more aware of your own playing.”

Madison’s health keeps him in Buffalo now, where he plays places ranging from the grungy, smoke-filled confines of the Club 1218 on Jefferson to the more sleek Calumet Arts Cafe downtown.

“It (the music lifestyle) took a toll on my life,” he says. “I’m on dialysis. I’ve got to be careful . . . That’s why I don’t drink anymore.”

“I used to be a heavy drinker, as were all the boys. Through all the years, growing up, everybody used to drink. People buying you drinks, after a while you’re drinking all the time.”

“Not now. I just love the music, that’s what make me high. Playing for people that enjoy it, that’s my biggest kick, the joy of playing good music, good blues or good jazz.”

If there is one musical figure whose name is known throughout the East Side, it is Count Rabbit. He’s

61, and it is possible he has been playing longer than any other artist in Buffalo’s R&B-soul orbit. An Alabama native, Rabbit’s family moved to Buffalo from Pittsburgh when he was a child. He says he got his nickname when a friend heard his name, Robert Robinson, pronounced with an Iron City twang, and started calling him Rabbit.

His late mother, Idella, was a singer in the legendary Butterbean and Susie minstrel troupe that performed throughout the South. In fact, she was still performing with the group when she was expecting Rabbit.

It was a different era when the 14-year-old Rabbit started playing sidewalk guitar with his brother, Skip (who gave him the nickname “Count” when they were children). The two would walk the streets, playing for change.

“You used to go out and have fun anywhere. You could go and get drunk and fall on the sidewalk and would nobody go in your pocket like they do today, man,” says Rabbit. “Today, man, it’s rough.”

“At that time, Buffalo was jam-packed with people. You couldn’t walk the sidewalk without saying ‘Excuse me, pardon me,’ that’s how packed it was.”

“There was money in circulation, and guys like Rabbit and a lot of the others were very active,” says Buffalo Common Council member George Ar-

thur, a very visible force in Buffalo’s black music scene — and a Rabbit fan. “Work was plentiful. Bethlehem Steel was going full blast — they had a 15- or 20-foot sign out on their front lawn saying ‘Help Wanted,’ so you could always get a job. . . . People had a lot of money to go out to nightclubs — and people were welcome regardless of wherever you came from, or color of epidermis.”

It was as a performer on those crowded streets in the late 1940s that Rabbit ran into Harold Turnsley, the manager of the Club Moonglow at William Street and Michigan Avenue. Turnsley heard Rabbit and his brother playing “Boogie at Midnight,” a Roy Brown standard. Impressed, he asked, “Would you like to go in the Moonglow, sonny?” and put the awestruck kids on stage.

“We started playing and they (the audience) started throwing silver dollars, and they were rolling all over the place,” says Rabbit. “My brother stopped playing, he was raking in silver dollars with his feet.”

The next morning Rabbit’s mother took him back to the club — she wanted to make sure that the teen-ager had come by his money honestly.

Rabbit eventually spent years on the road, mostly with partner Gino Washington on keyboard, and became known as much for his sense of humor as his playing.

“I’ve always enjoyed him because



matt nickson

he doesn’t put on any false pretenses, he’s not a dark figure up there enduring the blues,” says WEBR’s Wallack. “He’s enjoying himself.”

The late Donnie Elbert, a Buffalonian who had Top 40 hits with his versions of “Where Did Our Love Go” and “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch),” took Count Rabbit and Gino Washington to Cincinnati’s King Records, where their labelmates included James Brown, Little Willie John and Hank Ballard (originator of “The Twist”).

Rabbit’s own style is down-home blues, although he says he has mellowed since his younger days.

“I was a real wild dude,” he says. “Now I’ve learned to appreciate me and I’ve learned to settle back and get a real understanding of what I’m doing.”

“His repertoire’s far greater than what he plays in clubs now,” says Andy Vitello, who used to book Rabbit for the now-closed Blue Note jazz club. “I’ve heard him play blues ballads like B.B. King. He has that soul.”

Today, Rabbit’s main gig is with the Willie Coleman Group at the Mirage, a jazz oasis on Bailey Avenue with a bit of a brick bar feel, although he’s performed at places ranging from the seedy to the upwardly mobile Kensington Place.

Through the years, Rabbit and Washington recorded seven or eight singles (Washington died a decade ago, a blow from which Rabbit says he has never quite recovered) and a video the guitarist recorded at Nietzsche’s was featured on area cable television. None really hit big, although Rabbit says there were regional hits. Their song “Why Did You Go” was hot in Atlanta.

The guitarist has always come home, though. He has a large family here — 25 children (ages 17 to 42) from his first marriage and with his second wife, Nellie.

Not that returning has always been simple. He recalls that in his early years on the road, he had a method of telling whether it was safe to come back.

“I had this old big leather cap I used to wear all the time, and when I would come by my mother’s house, I would throw it in,” says Rabbit. “And if she would throw it across the street and come back outside, it was not safe to go in.”



count rabbit

His wives have been understanding about him making a living through his music, but it hasn’t always been easy when he’s left them home with a dozen children while he goes on the road.

“Sometimes, when you go on the road and you don’t come home when you’re supposed to, they’ll be looking for you,” he says with a laugh.

Jesse Butler made his first non-church stage appearance with Count Rabbit as a teen, but he is definitely a soul singer, 1960s style. It has only been in the last five years that the man with a voice like Wilson Pickett’s has slowed down, cutting back his performances to mostly opening for performers like the Chilites, Tyrone Davis and Little Milton at the New Golden Nugget on Fillmore Avenue.

Butler says that he would sit with Rabbit and Washington, but he also learned from Donnie Elbert, who helped him make the conversion from gospel to soul music — then fired him.

“He fired me because I couldn’t go ‘wa-ooo’ on some song we were doing, ‘Annie Had a Baby,’” says Butler, laughing. “Some song like that I was out of key on. But he was good.”

Butler, 51, went on to record a pair of albums for independent labels and tour as the front man for Z.Z. & Co. A former band member tells of being chased out of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., because a nightclub manager hired them thinking Butler was Z.Z. Hill, a major soul/blues singer in the

early ‘80s. The manager wanted his money back — after Butler had left the sold-out crowd screaming for more. Butler later became a major draw with black audiences in Buffalo and Rochester.

One of his albums was recorded at the same Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals, Ala., where Percy Sledge cut his 1966 hit “When a Man Loves a Woman,” and he has had an album released in Britain. But major success has proved elusive.

Butler, who has been an Erie County Sheriff’s deputy for the past six years, thinks he knows the reason. He quit gambling more than 10 years



johnny soul

ago, but he figures it cost him in his music career.

“Everyone’s got problem. I never had problems with drugs or alcohol,” he says. “But man, I’d rather shoot dice. That’s what got me. . . . Everything I was trying to get somebody to do, I could have been getting myself if I hadn’t screwed up.”

“Back then it was really easy. Now you’ve got to be 17, handsome, whatever. If you don’t get a connection and get on TV, with videos and all that, you’re out.”

Butler cut back his performing to the opening slots in part because his son, Jesse Jr., had been handling many of the band details and has since moved to Atlanta to start his own band, but also because it’s tougher to draw a crowd.

“Most of the time I work now, I’m on the show with a big name. People would disillusion the hell out of you,” he says. “They love you, they kiss your feet, then you tell them you’ll be back next month, you don’t have to pay that 20 dollars to come in, it’s free . . . and you’ll be there by yourself. The crowd I work to is the older crowd now. You can’t get ‘em out, y’know.”

Barbara St. Clair is Jesse Butler’s female counterpart, the city’s reigning queen of soul. With the title comes a comparison she doesn’t necessarily agree with.

“People have always said I sound like Aretha Franklin, but I don’t think

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jesse butler

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so," says St. Clair, who is in her mid 50s. "I like Aretha and I like Gladys Knight, but that doesn't mean I sound like them."

What it does mean is she has a big voice, the kind that can still fill a hall, seemingly without effort.

"I just love to sing. You have to have the love of the art, y'know," she says. "Some people have the gift and they don't use it, but I just like to sing."

Like Butler, St. Clair has been performing secular material since the early '60s, when she started singing at record hops being worked by some of

the city's bigger DJs, Lucky Pierre and Joey Reynolds.

"Those were just records, no live bands," says St. Clair. "And sometimes — actually all of the times — we sang a capella."

But unlike many of the East Side's soul and blues icons, she has always connected with the area's white audience, too, working in groups like the Pin Cushions with John Mahoney, with guitarist Ernie Corallo or with members of Spyro Gyra. The Pin Cushions scored a local hit with a single called "Share Your Love," a Mahoney song, and recorded several songs for Mercury Records, a national label.

Although she has taken breaks from the music business (she's a licensed practical nurse by trade), St. Clair is almost as hot today, fronting Barbara St. Clair & the Shadows and working the circuit of clubs like the Lafayette Tap Room on Washington Street, Luke's Place in Kenmore and the Browne Baron Lounge in Tonawanda — places that draw older versions of the same University at Buffalo crowd the Pin Cushions drew two decades ago.

Today's club scene can't match the late-'60s, early-'70s scene for St. Clair, though.

"There still aren't as many clubs as

there were years ago," she says. "There were times when you could work seven nights (a week). But since sound systems and DJs came in, there's not as many clubs (for live music)."

None of these musicians would draw borders for their music; that is up to the critics. Perhaps it is one of the reasons the combination of Matt Nickson and Johnny Soul works so well.

Nickson, 69, came to Buffalo from Erie, Pa., in 1953, and has performed here ever since. A tall, stern-looking man, Nickson sits on a stool as he plays soulful guitar, keeping his blues basic as Johnny Soul — the wiry one in the suit and tie — sweats at the Green Ghetto Lounge, the William Street bar where they often play to a middle-aged, working class crowd.

Soul's voice soars through a set of standards ranging from "Down Home Blues" to "Stand by Me." Together they can turn even the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" into a raunchy blues instrumental.

"I prefer just playing. I've gotten up in age and my voice breaks a little bit, so I leave that to the young fellow and play guitar," says Nickson, who learned to play off records of '40s and '50s blues but also cites more recent influences like Albert King and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Johnny Soul began with gospel music. The 43-year-old Florida native grew up in Buffalo and starting singing the blues and soul at age 15, when he sat in with Count Rabbit at a club called Hollis' at the corner of Michigan and Best streets.

And while his repertoire includes pop standards as well as blues and soul, Soul says "I get my kicks from Johnny Taylor.

"It hasn't changed," says Soul. "Blues is gonna be blues." ■

Farewell to the King

When George Alexander died of cancer on Dec. 13, 1993, Buffalo's black music community lost one of its key figures.

Alexander, better known as King George, was an all-purpose musician. He played with everyone, everywhere — with a stage personality that wouldn't quit.

"I played country and western, jazz, blues, ballads, Nat 'King' Cole, Frank Sinatra, I can do 'em all," King George said with typical confidence last fall. "I played with big groups, small groups. I even

played by myself for a few years. Musicians are so temperamental, you know."

King George, who was 55, started playing music with 11-piece bands in the tuxedo era of the late 1950s ("My group was the best — every show we changed tuxes between sets," he said). At times he would play trumpet with one hand, organ with the other.

He sang with trios or quartets at the King George Lounge, the club he owned at 67 Walden Ave. His music tended toward light blues/soul and ballads, and he had clear

ideas of what he wanted out of his musicians.

"Don't try to impress me or the audience. Play something that's down to earth, that people can relate to," he said. "Anybody can run up and down the keyboard, and just about any note you hit's gonna be right, the chords are so extended now. . . . They think they're getting over when they're not."

The singer's death was the latest blow to Buffalo's links to its blues-soul-R&B past.

Whenever musicians start talking that tradition, the list

of names begins: major players like Donnie Elbert, Darrell Banks, Elmo Witherspoon, Eli Hall, Hank Mullins, Gino Washington, Wayne Peterson, Basie and Otis Banks, Arthur Reed, Loretta Reed, legendary boogie woogie pianist Pete Johnson in his later years . . . and so many more.

King George played with a good many of the musicians to come through Buffalo. He was on stage in the now-defunct Blue Note on Main Street when now-convicted funkster Rick James came in.

"Rick James wanted to be the cool dude all the time," said King George. "He

wouldn't come up and sing with us, but me and Johnny Soul and Billy C., we got the whole house rockin'. We'd get in a line, turn off the microphones, go through the place marching and singing. He couldn't stand it any longer, up on the stage he went."

Last year his illness kept him from performing much, but King George wasn't ready to stop entirely. When asked what he liked to play, he pulled a list of songs such as "Tell It Like It Is" and "Tobacco Road" from his wallet, kept in case he was called up to the stage one more time.

— Elmer Ploetz