

During January I attended an Executive Director's Conference in Asheboro, NC. While sitting at the breakfast table the Executive Director of the North Carolina Arts Council, Wayne Martin asked me the question, "Why do you suppose there are so many good singers to come out of Vance County?"

Well, I looked at him and said, "There are a lot of good singers but let me think for a moment why." As I sat there and pondered, I began to name some people that I knew from my childhood. I recalled Edna Gallmon Cooke, and asked if he had heard of her. She was a singer during the Mahalia Jackson era. Ms. Cooke was married to a music promoter Barney Parks. She owned Edna's Diner in the heart of West End. Shirley Owens who performed with the Shirelles was also from West End as it is affectionately called.

Then there was Johnny Fields, one of the original Five Blind Boys of Alabama who once operated a supper club right next door to Edna's. There's Gerald Alston and Dwight Fields, Mr. Field's nephew and son who are currently performing with the Manhattans.

We have Grammy Winner Gary Miles formerly of the Jackson Southernaires and the group Charles Johnson and the Revivers. Quincy King performed for years with Slim and the Supreme Angels.

Wayne interjected, "What was the name of the singer who recently passed?"

"You're talking about Ben E. King!" Some of his family still resides in the county."

As the conversation continued I realized that we have a rich heritage of performers in Vance County. There are many more, I can't talk about music without mentioning Roy Burroughs who was on the circuit as a child. He is still going strong. Oh yeah, Fred Owens is a singer/ actor from the same section of town as Burroughs.

The Holden Brothers is another group from West End who are performing on the local as well as International circuit. Reverend Sidney Williams was one of the original Carolina Kings. He was also from the West End section of Henderson. Sidney was also the first African American mail carrier in Henderson.

I never did answer Wayne's question as to "Why there are so many performers out of Vance County?" But we did come to the conclusion that I should perhaps search and catalogue the information so that our citizens of Vance County will come to appreciate such a rich heritage.

At a party in Durham last month, one of the singers from "Immearurable" yelled out my name as she was coming from the stage. Low and behold it was Ayanna Foster whose parents had their roots on West End.

In various meetings that I have attended over the past few months, there have been discussions on how to clean up the negative image that exist in Henderson. I say lets shine some light on the good qualities that we know are prevalent in this county. The time is right because we have a new Performing Art Center that will draw others to our town.

The Vance County Arts Council would like to hear from the citizens of Vance County. There are many professional, semi-professionals, choirs, soloists, and other local talent that you might know in the area. In the coming months we want to compile and document this information. Please send information to our website [www.vancecountyarts.com](http://www.vancecountyarts.com) or friend us on facebook.com/vancecountyarts.

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