

Listen to Charles “Chuck” Austin (1927–2012), trumpeter and cofounder of the African American Jazz Preservation Society of Pittsburgh, talk about his passion for music, performing at local clubs, and being involved in musicians' unions. This interview was conducted and recorded by Charlene Foggie-Barnett and Kerin Shellenbarger on April 27, 2011.

Excerpt 1: How he started playing music

Well, my mother played a little bit of piano. My father played a little bit of violin. I don't know, my aunt played piano. So music, it was there for me, and I remember, I was in 6th grade ...

I was living in my grandparent's home. I had a foster brother, and my grandparents asked us what do we want, for instruments, for Christmas. I went down to Volkwein's, it was downtown at that point, on [inaudible] avenue, and I looked at this shiny saxophone. Well first I wanted the drums, and they said, "No we can't have that."

So I went down, and I looked at this saxophone. I didn't know anything about pawn shops. I didn't know anything about "used." All I know is I saw this shiny saxophone, and I went home, and I told them, and I think it was \$125, \$150. Which was a thousand dollars to them, at that point in time. They went to the pawn shop and bought two trumpets for \$25 and gave one to my foster brother, and one to me. I went out in the yard and I made some noise, I didn't know what the hell I was doing.

My mother was a waitress in the Hill District in most of the clubs and so forth. She's my link to the entertainment community. A trumpet player that was playing at the Roosevelt Theater, at that time, was dating my mother. When I went in, I had the trumpet, I took that with me because I spent the Christmas holiday with my mother. The guy took a piece of paper and do the lines and the notes and the fingering. He didn't name the notes, but the scale up just one way. And I played it up, and I played it down, played up, played down. When I went back to school, I got my first elementary book from music, and I learned the notes.

In May, I went on the band. I was the first grade school person to go... We just had one band it was, a junior and senior high school, but I was in sixth grade and I went in for May Day. I remember the May Day exit signs. I went on the band and then from sixth grade til I graduated I was in the band. I was in the orchestra, probably from seventh grade til I graduated. And in the 9th grade, a guy Nick Lomakin came to our school as a teacher, and he started a little dance band, and being the only Black musician, trumpet player—it was Charlie's Band. Everybody called me Charlie when I was in school. I was kinda in charge—the band leader of this little dance band. We played for school functions and we did a couple of miscellaneous dates outside of school.

Excerpt 2: His passion for music

There was just something about music that, I don't know, and then through this big band, I got involved in Big Band playing and to this very day, my preference is Big Band playing, because when

you hear a trumpet section—I mean, particularly a trumpet player playing in a section—when you hear it and it's on, there's no greater feeling, and if the band is a good band, it's a good feeling to be part of this package that's happening.

We tried to get the reaction from the public, even... my playing is to the public. I try to make you smile. I try to make you pat your foot. If you wanna dance, I mean, feel free. That my approach. I'm an entertainer. Basically, that's what we are. We're entertainers. But, some guys don't wanna look at it that way, because they want to play for one another, they want to show how great their facility. I'm not about that. I would rather play a standard tune that you can identify with, or that you know. And it touches you in some way like that.

Without music, I don't know what I would do, because music, what is it, it soothes the savage beast, or however they say it, because I've had some terrible things, through a course of time. And through it all, music has been there to help me through it. And I'm so disappointed in how the school systems are doing today, where they want to cut out music, or they have cut it out.

Music, it helps you in math because that's all it is. It's mathematics. It teaches you division. It teaches you a lot of things that—they're correlated to other subjects in school. But it's not so much the fact that you're playing notes and you're reading. It's a discipline that you get, it's the idea, it teaches you independence because you play what's in front of you. This guy, I mean he's playing the same instrument, but he has a little different part, so, I mean, you hear that, but you're responsible for what's in front of you. The discipline... Although, my kids aren't involved, they played a little bit. My granddaughters did. They played. It skipped a generation.

Excerpt 3: Playing at the Hurricane in the Hill District

KS: What was it like playing the Hurricane?

Chuck: It was very exciting because Birdie Dunlap was the proprietor of the club, and she was very business-like. Every usable space she would have someone, you know, sitting. She would scrunch you up to make room for other couples or other people, people that were spending money, she knew how to make money. That was the whole thing about it. She had good waitresses there that didn't allow you to have so much in a bottle. Then you'd make another order, you know, rather than just sit there and sip off of one drink all night long. She was very business-like.

The prominent Black people of the city came—because it was a new club, it was a nice, small intimate club. Plus we had a lot of white clientele that came because this was before Martin Luther, so people felt safe coming to the Hill. And entertainment, that was our thing. They'd come to The Hill for entertainment. And there was a number of clubs, Crawford Grill, they weren't in competition with one another because they had a different kind of entertainment, different kind of bands. They were the mainstays of the Hill. Plus, Stanley's which at the corner of Fullerton and Wylie, Stanley's was there, Good's Drug Store, and going up towards Bedford Avenue there's a place called The Blue Note, which was a little jazz club.

Excerpt 4: Playing at the Bamboola and Little Paris (and working as a truck driver during the day)

And then the Bamboola was, there was a theater The Rhumba Theater and then, downstairs was The Bamboola, and that was like an after hours club. You know, about 11 o'clock, 12 o'clock you would go there. Plus there was another place called Little Paris at Clark and—I can't even tell you the name of those streets—but it was a way from the main drive from Center Avenue and Crawford Street, but they were also after hours clubs. Where you'd go to the other club and drink, and then go there and you'd stay until maybe, 6 or 7 o'clock in the morning.

I played at Little Paris, and I drove a truck. I worked for Argolight Studio, but I drove a truck six days a week, and I'd play five, six nights a week, and come out of the joint, you know playing music and change clothes and get on a truck. I'd be bloody eyed, but I'd make... You had to do it like that. You had to have a job. There's a lot of musicians, believe the idea that they could make a living playing music, but it was hard to do in Pittsburgh.

Band leaders couldn't make a living because they would charge X amount of dollars but the musicians would only get so much money, I mean, we were restricted on the amount of money we would make. You had to have a job to really support your family and to have a decent kind of a life. But there were a few guys that held out, that they wanted to be musicians, and that's all they did. They'd play music and they did a lot of other things, and they're not with us today.

Excerpt 5: The musicians' union and hiring practices

Well, to being with, the musicians' union was a good thing. I can speak to the Black local because, a lot of the club owners and proprietors didn't want to give us a fair amount of money, but the union protected the members by seeing to it that we got a decent wage, we got a fair amount of money.

They protected us—in the old days, in the earlier days, you couldn't play with a non-union musician. We would get fined as union members, we would get fined or the business agent or the collector for the Union would shut the job down, there would be no entertainment, if non-union people wanted to play. We didn't have the same kind of arrangement that we have today.

The union has kind of lost some of its clout, so to speak, so they allow ... And then the Right to Work law has changed all of that, so now we have mixed bands where you might have half union members and half, or there's a certain amount of, non-union members. But they're allowed to play with the hope, and expectation that they would join the union, but some of them don't.

The union is to a point now where, in your jazz clubs, the majority of musicians are not union members, because the union has just lost its. They've kind of given up on protecting and looking out for the jazz players, and then the merge happened in '66 and that was... It didn't materialize as it was proposed, and it just became a thing of eliminating Black musicians.

It's terrible. You go to the theaters now, you can go down to The Benedum, and you look at the makeup of the band, they might have two Black guys in a band, maybe. It's not integrated as it should be. We had a number of Black musicians that could have been involved in the mainstream, but the contractors and band leaders didn't hire them. I was lucky, Jack Purcell hired me, and I had

a very good musical life. I did a lot of things locally, played a lot of shows, a lot of country clubs and a lot of things. I was one of the few, one of the lucky ones that was hired to do their thing.