

African Nova Scotians' Contributions to Canadian Music

BY WADE PFAFF

Since **Matthieu DaCosta** played 'sea shanties' on fiddles and flutes in the 17th century, people-of-colour have been coming to this land, spreading their love of music and community spirit. We can never know the lost history of the countless creative musical immigrants who came or were brought to this province over the four centuries that Black music has been developing in the colonies, but a few Black Nova Scotians have gone down in Canadian music history and some are valued local legends today in their own communities.

Regardless of the music or performance genre, African Nova Scotians can command a stage. From Canada's earliest known jazz bandleader, **George Paris** from Truro, to the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church's own **Portia White** who silenced opera critics in the 1940s, to today's rising stars of Hip Hop and Blues, such as **JRDN** from Halifax and the **Carson Downey Band** from North Preston (a small town near Halifax), African Scotians will not be silenced.

Certain Nova Scotian neighborhoods are legendary now for their importance to Canadian music development. Black communities such as **Africville**, **Whitney Pier**, **East Preston**, **UBT** (Upper Big Tracadie), and **Annapolis Valley** are but a few examples of the important nurseries of great Nova Scotian talent. **Cornwallis Street Baptist Church** has had more than a few accomplished vocalists and organists over the years, and various churches across the province continue to produce award-winning ensembles in every category from orchestral music to Hip Hop.

Informal Black-owned venues from the past and present, such as the **Menelik Hall**, **The Club Unusual**, **Gerrish Street Hall**, and **The West Indian Cricket Club** in Whitney Pier, were also important to our music history. They represented the other side of the coin and the tracks, from commercial music. This was community music for the people and by the people, made by local Black Nova Scotians in every Black community. Through the hard work and guidance of mentors, youth clubs, and not-for-profit resource centres, it has always been the people in the community who have made the greatest difference in every budding young musician's life, whether their interest is in jazz saxophone, operatic singing, rapping, or the Blues. Nova Scotians can be proud of the positive reception their artists and organizations have received from the public, the press, the government, the parents, but especially for the approval and success of the kids.

The hard-working, talented individuals and organizers working in Nova Scotian Black music circles have succeeded in increasing the visibility and appreciation for African arts province-wide over the years. Even though historically, the out-migration of Black workers has taken its toll on the number of Black performers staying in the province, many new Canadian and foreign Black artists, academics, and performers continue to arrive in Nova Scotia and have been made to feel welcome.

The Nova Scotian government has truly helped in financing and encouraging African diasporic arts studies with grants and awards, scholarships, advisory committees, festivals, and directly or indirectly providing funds for community groups, not-for-profit resource centres, privately and university-owned facilities, and public libraries, which give poorer musicians access to technology that they could not otherwise afford. The Government of Nova Scotia has also encouraged greater ethnic diversity in small and large communities across the province and almost anywhere local groups of African diasporic music and dance enthusiasts have not already started their own club. ➡️2

WADE PFAFF • 'BALA' CONTENT RESEARCHER & CONTRIBUTOR



Wade Pfaff has interests ranging from Canadian Black history research, to studying and playing music from the trans-Atlantic diaspora, to developing arts and culture programs for marginalized youth. After completing a Bachelor of Community Studies degree and a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from Cape Breton University, where he was greatly influenced by Dr. Graham Reynolds, he went to Halifax to obtain a Master of Arts in Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University under the supervision of Dr. Afua Cooper.

A dynamic lecturer and lifelong learner, Wade continues to study the relationship between the music of trans-Atlantic Black cultures (especially Jazz and Blues) during the early 20th century, and improvements in the civil rights of Blacks and people-of-colour that came later in the century in Canada.

African Nova Scotians' Contributions to Canadian Music

African drummers, dancers, and musicians are visiting every part of the province today, playing and teaching trans-Atlantic Black melodies and rhythms on their traditional instruments and making friends.

French-speaking Acadians (known as Cajuns in the southern U.S.) are from the northern part of the province, where two hundred years ago Scottish fiddlers must surely have encountered French and American Black violinists. Musically, Cape Breton fiddle music, Cajun music, Bluegrass, and Country music are related. They all use similar instruments, employ related rhythms and playing techniques, and these can all be traced to early happenings in upper Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The earliest accomplished players of this genre, prior to the Great Depression, and original creators of the new playing techniques were Black Nova Scotians. Then, as now, and always at the vanguard of new music, Cape Breton and Nova Scotian Black musicians make themselves heard.

Acadians

The Acadians are scattered in small groups throughout Atlantic Canada, often very remote and isolated before the modern advent of roads; Acadian music has therefore evolved in many different directions. Scottish influences are very apparent in areas such as Cape Breton, and as you move up the Cabot Trail from Mabou's Scottish fiddling to Chéticamp's Acadian kitchen parties, you will be struck by how similar the sounds are. Generally, Acadian music is a little more soulful than Scottish music, with more percussion from tricky handclapping, foot-tapping, and the spoons. The lyrics are in French. In southwestern Nova Scotia, the local music is far more influenced by rock, bluegrass, and country, as well as Cajun styles introduced by descendants of those caught up in the Great Expulsion. The most popular Acadian band today, **Blou**, is from this region, and they call their sound 'Acadico' – a mix of Acadian, Cajun, and zydeco (American Creole folk music). The group's accordion-based rock tunes regularly win the East Coast Music Award title for Best Francophone recording of the year. Meanwhile, from the same region, **Jacobus et Maleco**, which eventually became **Radio Radio**, was the first Acadian rap group, and internationally renowned **Grand Dérangement** sings movingly of Acadian reality through its traditional tunes. Many Acadian groups head to Montréal where there is a much stronger Francophone music scene, and it is easier to get recognized. New Brunswick Acadian groups are often influenced by the traditional Québécois poetic style.

African Influences

Many Black Canadians arrived as freed slaves and Loyalists to the British Crown during the American War of Independence. Social inequalities and marginalization (Nova Scotia's racism earned it the moniker 'Mississippi of the North') stopped the black community from making a huge mark in the Maritime music scene in the past, but nowadays it is adding a lot of spice to the region's music scene. The influence had been largely gospel music, but today hip-hop, jazz, blues, R&B, pop, and classical music are all holding some cultural sway. Nova Scotian R&B musician **Gary Beals** placed second in the first season of Canadian Idol, and **Faith Nolan**, a mixed-heritage African, Mik'maw, and Irish jazz singer, songwriter, and guitarist, has made music with powerful political statements. Recent breakthrough artists include **Reeny Smith** and **Keonté Beals**.

SEE LISTING OF **Nova Scotian Musicians & Artists** ON FOLLOWING PAGES

Nova Scotian Musicians & Artists



BUCKY ADAMS

(1937-2012)

- Saxophonist

- International Gabriel Award by the United Nations, the highest honour in broadcasting production & content

Learn more ~

<http://www.buckyadams.com/biography.html>



AFUA COOPER

- Poet, performance artist
- Scholar, historian
- Social & cultural commentator

- Ph.D. in Black Canadian Studies and the African Diaspora
- Multidisciplinary award-winner

Website ~ <https://afuacooper.com/>



LINDA CARVEY

- Gospel singer
- Activist & organizer

- President of The Mass Choir at New Horizons (formerly Cornwallis St.) Baptist Church
- Honourary Doctor of Letters

Learn more ~

<https://www.smu.ca/academics/archives/linda-carvey.html>

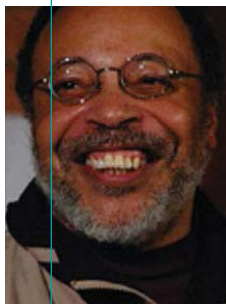


JRDN

/ RALPH JORDAN CROUCHER

- Juno Award-winning Rapper

- Songwriter
- Producer



GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

- Poet
- Novelist
- Playwright
- Critic

- Professor, scholar

Website ~ <https://www.georgeelliottclarke.net/>

Learn more ~ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/black-artists-with-n-s-roots-want-their-m%C3%A9tis-ancestry-recognized-1.4537936>



CARSON DOWNEY BAND

- Blues band (previously funk & dance music)

- Carson Downey - guitarist, lead vocalist
- Murray Downey - drummer
- Marlowe Smith - bassist

Facebook page ~ <https://www.facebook.com/Carson-Downey-Band-480527165314459/>



SHELLEY HAMILTON

- Singer
- Actor
- Host

- Producer
- Writer

Website ~

<https://www.shelleyhamilton.ca/>



OLIVER JONES

- Jazz pianist, composer & arranger

- Order of Canada, Order of Québec
- Martin Luther King Jr. Award
- Governor-General's Award

Facebook Page ~

<https://www.facebook.com/oliverjonespiano/>



SYLVIA HAMILTON

- Award-winning Film-maker
- Writer
- Journalist

- Public speaker
- Poet
- Activist

Learn more ~ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sylvia-hamilton>



FAITH NOLAN

- Folk & jazz singer/songwriter

- Guitarist of mixed African, Mi'kmaw & Irish heritage

Website ~

<https://www.shelleyhamilton.ca/>



EL JONES

- Poet
- Educator
- Community activist

- Fifth Poet Laureate of Halifax
- Burnley 'Rocky' Jones Human Rights Award

Facebook page ~ <https://www.facebook.com/>

Learn more ~ <https://ukings.ca/people/el-jones/>



CYRIL (CY) McLEAN

(1916-1986)

- Pianist
- Bandleader

- First African-Canadian to join the Toronto Musician's Union (1944) and to play in an all-white unionized venue in Toronto (1948)

Learn more ~ <https://www.mountpleasantgroup.com/en-CA/General-Information/Our%20Monthly%20Story/story-archives/york-cemetery/Cy%20McLean.aspx>

Nova Scotian Musicians & Artists



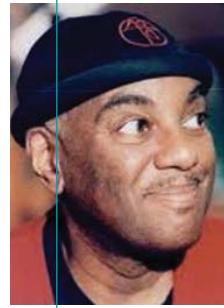
JACKIE RICHARDSON

- Singer
- Actor

- Award-winning performer

Learn more~

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/jackie-richardson>



JOE SEALY

- Pianist
- Composer
- Music arranger & director

- Actor
- Radio DJ on Toronto's 91.1 Jazz FM

Website ~ <http://www.joesealy.com/>



GEORGE PARIS

(1869-?)

- Jazz drummer

- Thought to have formed Canada's first jazz band in Vancouver in 1917
- Heavyweight boxing champion

Learn more ~ <https://pasttensevancouver.tumblr.com/post/69729155814/george-paris-george-paris-was-a-black-man-who>



ANTHONY SHERWOOD

- Actor
- Producer

- Director
- Writer

Learn more~ <https://anthonysherwood.com/portfolio-item/anthony-sherwood/>



EDDIE PARRIS

(1942-2018)

- Blues guitarist
- Politician

- Led the Inspirational Singers, including a performance for Queen Elizabeth II

Learn more ~ <https://www.capebretonpost.com/lifestyles/whitney-pier-singer-politician-and-family-man-dead-at-age-75-198522/>



NELSON SYMONDS

(1933-2008)

- Jazz guitarist with the Nelson Symonds Quartet

- Played at Montréal's top jazz venues from the 1950s to the 1990s

Learn more ~ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/nelson-symonds-emc>

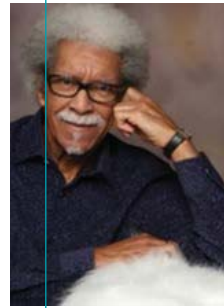
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CED UPSHAW & MARTY WILLIAMS

- Guitarist & harmonica player with the Blues trio Ced, Marty & Dave

2021 Concert ~ http://www.marigoldcentre.ca/calendar/2021/2/26/ced-upshaw-amp-marty-williams?fbclid=IwAR2gLUvi4RZU_rSRenhMICxhykK4BIXRNLaZwKUuFWYcCT1dyAjlUr9rSD4



BRENT WILLIAMS

- Bluegrass musician
- Violinist, guitarist & pianist

- Nova Scotia Country Music Hall of Fame Inductee (2013)
- Member of The Birch Mountain Boys

Learn more ~ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/bluegrass-music-hassett-nova-scotia-brent-williams-birch-mountain-boys-1.5372663>

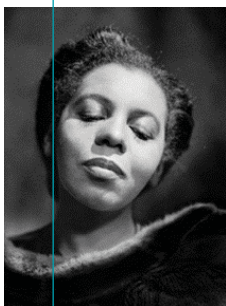


CHRIS WHITE

- Singer
- Guitarist
- Songwriter
- Performer
- Nephew of Portia White

- Son of musician/choral director Bill White
- Nephew of Lorne White, veteran musician on 'Singalong Jubilee'

Learn more ~ <https://afrometis.ca/chris-white-a-musical-bio/>



PORTIA MAY WHITE

(1911-1968)

- Classical contralto
- Schoolteacher
- Named a 'person of national historic significance' by the Government of Canada, 1995

- First Black Canadian concert singer to win international acclaim

Learn more ~ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/portia-white-emc>

Are you an African Nova Scotian musician/artist whose name is missing from this list?

...OR...

Do you know of an African Nova Scotian musician/artist who should be celebrated here?

PLEASE CONTACT:

The Centre for Sound Communities

E-mail: sound_communities@cbu.ca