

ENTERTAINMENT

The Heart & Soul of Calvin Walker

by Nyewusi Askari

When one really takes the time to talk and listen to Calvin Walker, he or she discovers a man who is sensitive, deeply religious, warm, courageous, directed, college educated, delightful and determined to leave a positive musical legacy for those who will follow in his footsteps. He or she will also discover a man who has suffered, like many African-Americans, racism and discrimination.



Photos by Richard J. Brown

Born in St. Louis, Calvin and his family moved to Portland when he was twelve years old. He remembers those times fondly. "I grew up in the Woodlawn area of Portland which was multi-racial. It had Mexican-American farmworkers, there was a large Asian-American population and Black and whites, as well. I think it was one of the neighborhoods where many Blacks came to live after the Vanport flood. We all got to know each other well and we had some good times together."

The opportunity to live in a multiracial neighborhood helped shape Calvin's racial attitude toward others from different cultures. "Man, it was a very positive experience for me," he remembers. "People deal with each other as neighbors and friends and relatives. We got to know each other's cultural ways, so race very seldom came into the picture whenever we had to deal with problems."

Inspired and encouraged by his family to get a high school education, Calvin found himself enrolled at Portland's Jefferson High School.



"A real influential time was during my last year-and-a-half at Jefferson. It was because of some of the teachers there and the people who I associated with when I was there. Ron Herndon, Calvin Freeman, Darrell Milner... Ron Herndon influenced me to go to Reed College. Calvin Freeman went on to become one of the financial spokesmen for the Nation of Islam, and, as you know, Dr. Milner is now at Portland State University," Calvin recalled.

"But of all the influences, it was my family who provided the strength and the courage for me to move forward as a young man.

My mom and my grandmother, they were the best. I also have three sisters. We had and still have this die-hard association with family and appreciate it. Much of my young life was spent trying to please them which was a natural thing. I was the first grandchild, the only boy, and in a Black family that's like being a prince. The best position to be in," he said with a laugh.

Like many young African-Americans of his time, Calvin was experiencing the rhythms, sounds and grooves of African-American music. In St. Louis, it was the sounds and rhythms of the Blues, Gospel, Spirituals, Jazz and R&B. In Portland, it was the music of people like Thara Memory and Mel Brown and others who made up the Portland, Seattle, California circuit. To quench his musical thirst, Calvin learned how to play the trumpet. After the trumpet came the drums and a stint in a Drum and Bugle Corp.

He recalls that during his freshman and sophomore year, he was heavily influenced by athletes. "Most of the cats I was into was athletes like I was. It was a funny story, though. You know how you can be influenced by myths. I remember spending time eating beans. No kidding! I had been told that if I eat a lot of beans I would grow to be six feet five. I ate so many beans, came back to school only to find that everybody had grown up five or six inches and here I was at the same size! When I was younger, I had come up real fast. When I was in the second or third grade, I was the biggest male in the class. And, after I decided that sports wouldn't be the thing, I decided to get into something I could do."

By the age of 13, Calvin found himself playing with some of Portland's well-known African-American musical giants. At the center of his experience was Mr. Paul Knowls, owner and operator of Portland's famed "Cotton Club".

"When you talk about who gave Portland's Black musicians a chance to sharpen their skills at that time, you must talk about Mr. Paul Knowls. He had this talent for bringing Black musicians together regardless of their ages. He owned the Cotton Club, and

he would let us play. We were young and had to abide by strict rules once we were inside the club. We couldn't drink or anything, but we could play our music. Myself and Jimmy Saunders and Dennis Bradford... I mean it's like Dennis started playing around here when he was eight or nine years old! Mr. Knowls took care of us. He let us be the house band for awhile, made sure we got home. He was just a nice man who cared.



"The Cotton Club was the best. It put us right in the middle of the chitlin circuit. You got to see and hear people like Jesse James, Etta James, Cliff Noble and a whole lot more. There was a circuit between Portland, Seattle, California and Vancouver, B.C. Portland was a stop on the way and there was the Cotton Club, wall-to-wall soul."

Calvin remembers that Portland's African-American community was alive with a deeper sense of church, community spirit and community organization. "You had people who would visit each other, bringing pies, fried fish and other foods to eat. People would also share their music, visions and dreams with each other."

The highlight of Calvin's life came when he graduated from Reed College. He recalls: "It was a real highlight because I was the first in my family to graduate from college. The whole family was there. You see, I really wanted to go to school and go to a good school. My family dug it. It was good for everybody. In addition to my degree, I also obtained a Certificate in Black Studies."

As a musician determined to share his music across racial and cultural lines, Calvin has experienced many ups and downs; some because of negative racial attitudes and others because of the cultural and racial divisions in the white and Black community.

"Unfortunately, unless you are in a community where people can really appreciate what you are doing, nobody is going to know what you are or who you are. That's what happened to me. Whites were saying, 'Man, you're too Black,' and Black people were saying, 'He plays too much rock.' I was disappointed that there weren't enough people in Portland to groove on what I was trying to do — just for the sake of difference. I wanted to be appreciated for taking the chance," Calvin revealed with a half smile.

For Calvin, time has not erased the barriers racism created for African-American musicians and singers. "Racism has a subtle way of hurting the Black musician's chances of making a living and sharing his or her music with the broader population," he noted. "There are some club owners who feel that if you hire certain Black musicians you are going to draw a large Black crowd which is going to upset the personality of the club. It's not enough to say I'm going to make a living doing my thing and ignore the broader problem which continues to keep good people separated and confused about each other."

Calvin says he is determined to set a positive example for other African-American musicians when it comes to fighting racism and sharing his music with the larger population. "We must not allow racism or hate to destroy our ability to communicate, and music is a very spiritual and special form of communication. As Black musicians we must become conscious of where we stand and who we impact. The larger African-American and white community must find the courage to fight the forms of discrimination we find entrenched in our society. One way to do that is to make sure we are not spending our money with people who are promoting discrimination through their practices and policies."

Concluding the interview, Calvin said he is looking forward to hitting the Portland scene with his new band and their funky, soulful music. "I encourage the general public to come out and hear us play. You won't be disappointed. Also, I want the African-American community to support and stand by us. We want to get totally involved in shaping the musical heritage of our community and our City. We can no longer just stand on the sideline. It's about building a better world."



Band members are (L-R) Pat Corrigan, Ron Regan, Walker, Rusty Cox and Stevie Mays.

In an effort to reorganize his resources and talents, Calvin has formed a new band. This time he is very specific about the type of music the band will share with its audiences. "I'm going to play what I really want. And, I'm hav-

ing a whole lot more fun. We've narrowed everything down, just play funk music, soul music, that's what it is. It says it loud and clear that it's not jazz, it's not anything else, it's us..."

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