

"Indian" Gospel Music Every Friday Night at the N.C. Indian Cultural Center

By Bruce Barton

Red Banks-Indians love gospel music, and they sing it Robeson County "Indian" style. If you don't believe the writer, come out any Friday night to the community building on the grounds of the North Carolina Indian Cultural Center in the Red Banks Community. On any given Friday night, you'll find, among others, Charles Bell, The Chavis Brothers, the Brayboy Brothers and, usually, if his health is up to it, the legendary Buddy Locklear on the harmonica. They call themselves The Glory Bound Express in honor of their signature song that is usually the highlight of the evening—"The Glory Bound Train!"

If you're a regular on Friday nights, you'll eventually see the Who's Who of Indian Gospel Music. Recently, for instance, Harvey Dial, the leader of the popular D & L Gospel Singers from White Hill Free Will Baptist Church, has been sitting in on the Friday night sessions playing his rhythm guitar and singing melody. His brother, Monford Dial, one of the purest voices around, drops in often to vocalize with his buddy, Danny Hue Chavis, and sing lead in his own inimitable style. Monford Dial acknowledges that he cannot read "a lick" but he knows hundreds of gospel songs by heart and sings them flawlessly, never skipping a word, beat or nuance. His rich baritone is a beautiful instrument graced from on high.

You never know who might show up from a Willie Lowery to the popular Oxendines. And, often, singers will appear from the audience to sing and testify as the Lord directs them. The sessions are free wheeling, and usually run from about 7:30 p.m. until 11 and beyond, "just according to the way the spirit leads us" as Charles Bell eloquently puts it. The only house rules are that you can only sing Gospel Music and you should act the way the Lord would have you act, including appropriate dress, if you decide to get up and sing in front of the enthusiastic and discerning audience.

MEET THE REGULAR HOUSE BAND—THE GLORY BOUND EXPRESS!

The regular house band, or the Glory Bound Express, is made up of Charles Bell; the three surviving members of the famous Chavis Brothers (Ernest, Danny Hue and Earl); Hank Chavis (Danny Hue's son); three of the musically talented Brayboys from the Antioch Baptist Church and White Hill area (Orland, Sanford & Clonnie); Harvey Dial, one of the founding members of the well known D & L Gospel Singers; and Buddy Locklear, the legendary harmonica player who has played with many musicians locally.

FRIDAY NIGHT SINGING ORIGINALLY BEGAN AT THE SUGAR SHACK

Charles Bell, a member of Liberty Holiness Church in the Saddletree area, hosts a popular gospel program on WSTS on Saturday nights and is a Concrete Contractor by trade. He is a well known gospel singer in his own right and plays the piano and often fronts for the group. He was one of the first musicians to begin to appear at the Sugar Shack on Friday nights along with Ernest (one of the surviving Chavis Brothers).

The original Sugar Shack is located on Highway 710 (in front of New Prospect Holiness Methodist Church). Actually, Ms. Vietta Chavis was the first to drop in at the Sugar Shack and suggest that they sing Gospel Music on Friday nights. She is credited, along with Ernest & Betty Chavis, and later Charles Bell, and others like Elsie and Elvington Hunt with what came to be known as "The Sugar Shack Friday Night Singing." The Sugar Shack was a sandwich shop run by Ernest and his wife Betty. Bell and Ernest Chavis struck up a fast friendship when they met and began to reminisce about their respective backgrounds in music.

Bell and Chavis eventually began to sing and play with other singers and musicians in the neighborhood on Friday nights in a very informal way. Later folk in the community and beyond began to drop by on Friday nights as gospel music fans began to hear about what was happening at the Sugar Shack on Friday Nights. Later on other musicians and singers joined, including Danny Hue and, later, Earl, the surviving Chavis Brothers.

ON TO THE N.C. INDIAN CULTURAL CENTER

In 1997 Ernest and Betty Chavis decided to retire again from the regular grind of running a business and closed the Sugar Shack. The Friday night crowd didn't want to give up the Sugar Shack Experience and, later on, Charles Bell met and encouraged Ms. Ernestine "Ernie" Chavis Bulifant, the Operations Director of the N.C. Indian Cultural Center, to allow the group to begin to play and sing at the Indian Cultural Center building. Friday nights are now reserved for "Indian" Gospel Music and the crowds continue to grow, most times averaging upwards of three hundred or more. Bell credits Ms. Bulifant for having the foresight to see that Indians love Gospel Music and have their own way of singing praises to God-- it's Robeson County "Indian" gospel Music at its best! Bell, and his friends, in turn, have drawn people to the N.C. Indian Cultural center in droves, and have also helped clean

up the grounds and take care of the facility. Bell sings Ms. Bulifant's praises: "She is a kind and considerate person, and has been very helpful in making us feel welcome. She understands that being Indian is more than beads and feathers, and that 'Indian' gospel music has its place too." Ms. Bulifant, in turn, is thankful that people are beginning to use the facilities and find out more about the positive things going on at the N.C. Indian Cultural Center. It has been a good and rewarding experience for both sides.

A LOOK AT SOME MEMBERS OF THE GLORY BOUND EXPRESS

Three of the surviving Chavis Brothers--Danny Hue, Earl and Ernest--are now all in their 60s and retired. Along with Charles Bell, they are integral cogs in the Friday night gospel music extravaganza at the North Carolina Indian cultural Center. All three Chavis Brothers play a lot of golf these days. Danny plays a mean Mandolin and sings lead; Earl plays lead guitar. Ernest, who has a good sense of humor, plays rhythm guitar (He also was the original drummer and later played the upright keyboard for the Chavis Brothers for many years on the road) and has a good old-fashioned, blue grass sound besides. Brothers James and Frank, both deceased, along with the surviving Danny Hue, Earl and Ernest, made up the famous Chavis Brothers who left Robeson County in the early fifties and flirted with stardom before succumbing to the travails and vagaries of the road and dropping out of the music business in the early eighties. All three have since returned home to live near their mother, Mrs. Reecie Chavis, 91, who is now ailing. All three have settled in the New Prospect area. Amazingly, all three, along with their families, have become exuberant Christians. Danny and his new wife, Becky, have joined his childhood friends at White Hill. Earl and his family have joined the ranks at Antioch Free Baptist Church in the Evans Crossing Area. Ernest and his wife attend New Prospect Holiness Methodist Church. Danny's son, Hank, a drummer and vibrant member of the group until it left the road, lives in Lumberton and works at Lumberton Motors as a car salesman. He and his family attend Hyde Park Baptist Church.

Earl said it best when he said recently, "I never expected to ever play again. I had not picked up my guitar since we came off the road. Music had become a job and there was no joy in it for me. Since I became a Christian, playing to the glory of the Lord has returned the joy to the music. I look forward to playing now. I can hardly wait for

Friday nights to roll around." Earl and his wife Nancy live with his mother in the New Prospect area.

Danny sang lead for many years, playing his Mandolin and Fiddle up and down the East Coast and beyond, with his brothers and Hank. They performed at many first class halls, including the Copacabanna in New York and Las Vegas venues as well. Danny had not played his instruments or sung since he quit performing, and was surprised when his brother Ernest and Charles Bell approached him about playing again. Admitting that "I don't play as well as I used to but the Lord surprises me where he leads me now in music and in life."

Ernest and his wife Betty are trying to enjoy their most recent retirement. He is excited about being saved and looks forward to each "blessed" day with joy and anticipation. "I am glad Vietta Chavis, Charles Bell and the rest of the Sugar Shack crowd stopped by. It is amazing where the Lord has led us, and continues to lead and guide us."

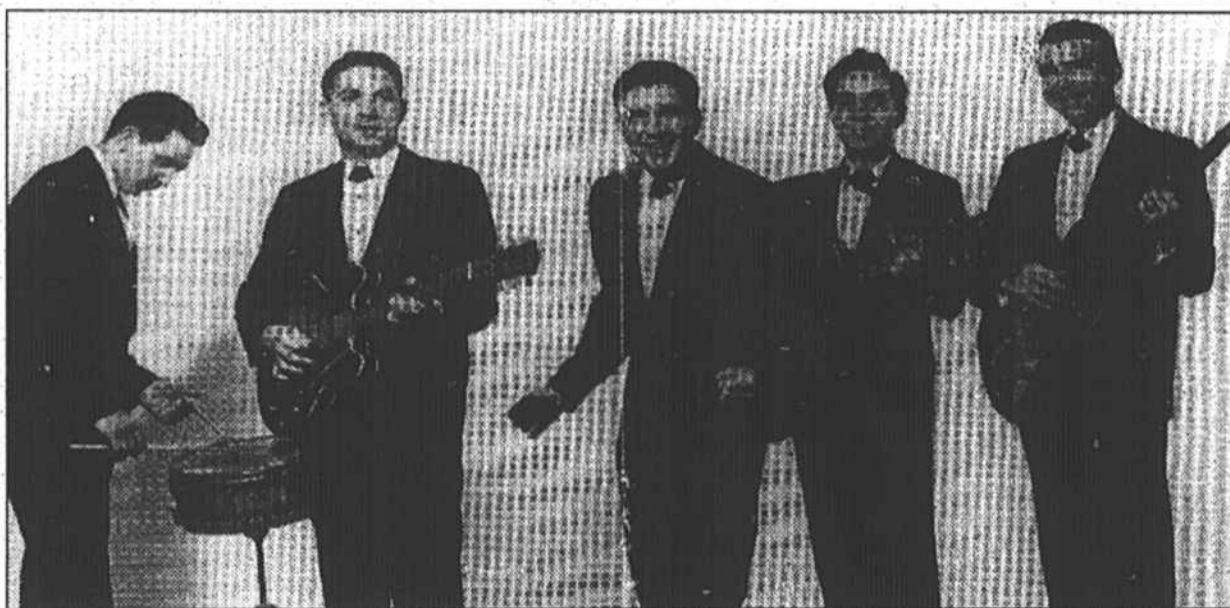
The amazing Brayboys are mostly centered in and around Antioch and the White Hill area. Orland, the lead guitarist, who is still recovering from a heart attack in the late 1980s, is on disability and admits that "music doesn't come as naturally as it used to." He is Chairman of the Board of Deacons at Antioch Free Baptist Church and devotes the majority of his time to his family, his church and now "Friday night at the Indian Cultural Center."

Other members of the talented Brayboys include Sanford who was once tempted to go on the road and play professionally. He is known locally as a great bass player and singer. Clonnie, another of the talented Brayboys, plays rhythm guitar. He works at LOF, and looks forward to the opportunities to play with the Friday night crowd.

Buddy Locklear, who is known far and wide for his harmonica playing, might be the most famous musician of them all. He has played with many local groups, and is a

sideman who is welcome wherever good music is being played. Now in his 70s, and ailing with heart problems, Buddy Locklear is thankful for every opportunity he has to play with "great musicians." His speciality every Friday night is "THE GLORY BOUND TRAIN." The audience looks forward to his rendition every Friday night.

Charles Bell's sister, Elsie Bell Hunt, helps keep up with the finances and business of the group and plays her tamborine and sings harmony whenever she gets a chance. Brother Britten Brayboy provides harmony and spiritual guidance to the group, and offers up prayer to "Our Heavenly Father" when called upon by the group. It seems that everyone has a role to play. Many others just consider themselves "regulars", including this writer. All it costs to be a "regular" is to show up and sing praises to the Lord and, as Charles Bell says at the end of each performance, to "come again and bring a friend!"



The Chavis Brothers left Robeson County in the 1950s to seek stardom and sing Rock and Roll Music. They are (left to right) Ernest Chavis, Earl Chavis, Danny Hue Chavis, Frank Chavis and James Chavis. James and Frank are now deceased; Ernest, Earl and Danny have returned home and sing gospel music every Friday night at the North Carolina Indian Cultural Center.



Charles Bell played music for many years with the Scott Sisters and his brother, Travis Bell. He is shown (fourth from the left) in the rear.



Shown (left to right) are Hank Chavis, Harvey Dial, Orland Brayboy, Ernest Chavis, Danny Chavis, Earl Chavis, Buddy Locklear, Sanford Brayboy and Charles Bell.



The original D & L Gospel Singers were one of the first Indian groups to sing gospel music in the area. Orland Brayboy (back row, far right) and Harvey Dial (front, far right) were members of the group when this album was made in the 1970s.

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