

“Bus” Brown: Durham’s Swing Senior Citizen

Woodrow “Bus” Brown remembers the good old, old days. At 75, he’s probably one of the oldest jazz vocalists in this area, and certainly, he’s one of the oldest still singing.

But though he’s lived through times that most people today know about only through history books, such as “the 20s”, the Great Depression and both World Wars, Brown still dreams of the future.

“I don’t intend to ever stop singing,” he said. “I guess the Man Upstairs will just have to stop me.”

Brown has been singing a long time.

A Baltimore native, Brown recalled that during his early teenage years, he wasn’t that interested in music.

“I took courses in shoe repair and cabinet making in high school,” he said, “but I soon dropped out of school and started running with street gangs.”

Brown says he hung with the gangs until one of his best friends was killed in a gang war.

“I decided after that,” he said, “that it would be in my better interest to adopt a less violent lifestyle.”

Music was his choice.

Brown and his friends would hang out on Baltimore street corners until all hours at night, flirting with the women by singing as they walked by. Finally, he and several other fellows started a singing group.

“In the late 20s, Ida Cox, who was a very popular singer at that time, appeared at the Baltimore Royal Theater,”

Brown said, “and a friend persuaded her to come and hear our group. She liked us. We went on the road with her when she left Baltimore.”

Traveling with Ms. Cox took Brown and his fellow vocalists along what was known as the “Lynch Theater” circuit. This included the Howard Theater in Washington, the Lincoln Theater in Philadelphia, and the Apollo Theater in New York.

“We stayed with her show for about three years,” Brown said, “and then we went out on our own. We were living in New York at this time, and we called our group the Harlem Highlanders. My younger brother, Baby Lawrence, who was a tap dancer, joined up with us, and we were off and running.”

Off and running took Brown and the Highlanders throughout the United States and over to Europe where they played, according to Brown, to smash reviews.

But when the group returned to the states, the pressures of drugs, the fast life and internal confusion took their toll. The group broke up.

“I went back to Baltimore and was there for two years when I received a call from Joe Glaser, a top jazz booking agent,” Brown recalled. “He was putting together a package of all of the most famous big bands of the era. We were supposed to be the opening act for such bands as Chick Webb, Duke Ellington and Count Basie, just to name a few.”

Brown took the gig, and as he remembers, everything



“Bus” Brown

went well until their opening act got too good.

“We were supposed to be the act that introduced the featured artist,” Brown said. “But audiences liked us so much that the featured acts sometimes had trouble following us.”

Chick Webb brought the issue to a head one night following a show, according to Brown. Webb said either the opening act had to go, or he and his band would quit.

Webb’s featured vocalist, Ella Fitzgerald, came to the young group’s defense, but to no avail.

Once again, Brown was out in the cold. But the cold didn’t last long because Brown and his group had gathered quite a following around New York.

“We worked the Apollo,” Brown said, “and we played other popular nightspots such as Dickie Welles, and Kelly’s Stables. During those years, a lot of big name stars, such as Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire, George Raft and others would come up to Harlem after hours. They called it ‘slumming’.”

Brown worked around New York until the early 40’s, and then returned to Baltimore to

care for his invalid mother. He stayed home for 30 years.

Then during the early 70’s, Yusuf Salim, another Baltimore native, called Brown from Durham and invited him to be on a television music special. Brown came down, got hooked on North Carolina, and never left.

“This is a real good place to live,” he said. “It beats the big cities ‘cause the life style’s slower and people are a whole lot more friendly down here.”

And with that, Durham’s swinging senior citizen swings off for another jazz set.

Bathtub Treatment Can Refurbish Lampshades

“Don’t junk it — dunk it” could be the motto of the homemaker who finds her lampshades need refurbishing.

“Many lampshades are washable,” reminds Charlotte Womble, extension housing specialist, North Carolina State University, “especially those made of fabric that is sewn, not glued.”

Remove any colored trim or trim that is pasted on before you try to wash a lampshade by the following methods, she cautions.

Then fill the bathtub or sink with enough warm water to cover the shade. Add detergent and swish to dissolve.

Vacuum the shade inside and out to remove surface dirt.

Then dunk the shade in the water and move it from side to side and up and down.

If soil is stubborn, you may need to rub with a well-lathered, soft-bristled brush. Rinse shade in several changes of clean water. Dip up and down.

Dry the shade by tying a string to the middle of the frame. Then hang up over the bathtub or from a clothesline outdoors to drip dry. Or pat dry with a bath towel.

Plastic, plastic-coating, laminated or parchment shades may be cleaned with a sponging of thick suds. To rinse, wipe with a damp cloth and dry with a clean cloth.

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