

Guitarist to perform at Mercantile

By TONYA V. SMITH
Chronicle Staff Writer

Strumming the strings of his Mattingly guitar is an art form Russell Denoris Thomas has had 17 years to perfect.

As do many artists who are in search of that perfect sound, this jazz and classical guitarist and

Detroit, Mich. "There was such emotional calamity going on in the school system -- racial riots and conflicts between Afro-Americans and Caucasians. I rebelled against the system and left and went to Detroit."

Thomas' uncle had asked him to move to Detroit and work with him. Thomas had to quit school

Thomas readily identifies his music with his faith.

"...Christ has invited me to take up my cross in the sense that I should appeal to intellectuals so Christ can prick their hearts. A lot of people are in bondage and they need to hear the gospel," says Thomas.

His religious compositions aren't in the form of traditional gospel, the art form common to most Afro-Americans, but in the style of the great masters of yesteryear, says Thomas.

"I play religious music in the sense of the great maestros of the earlier musical period such as (George Frederick) Handel; it's sacred music but not gospel," says Thomas.

One of his original compositions in honor of his fiancée, "Sheila's Morning Prayer", is representative of his religious repertoire. "Land of the Lotus-eaters" and "Return of Polyphemus" are other originals in his collection of about 80 penned jazz and classical pieces.

While Thomas is invited often to display his talent, for now, his music will be a part-time endeavor.

"I plan to work and pursue my music career, but on a part-time basis, because I need to support myself," says Thomas. "I'm applying for music therapist jobs. (A musical therapist) is one who coordinates recreation and musical therapy sessions in helping people to overcome their handicaps through music."

Thomas plans to marry soon and his ultimate goal is to land a recording contract.

"I want to make a living with my instrument," he says.

Thomas will be the featured artist during "Music at Mercantile" Friday from 5:30-8 p.m. The Mercantile Plaza is located at 411 West Fourth Street, next to the Stevens Center. "Music at Mercantile" is sponsored by the plaza's merchants and showcases local talents, giving them exposure and the opportunity to perform before a large audience. All performances are free.

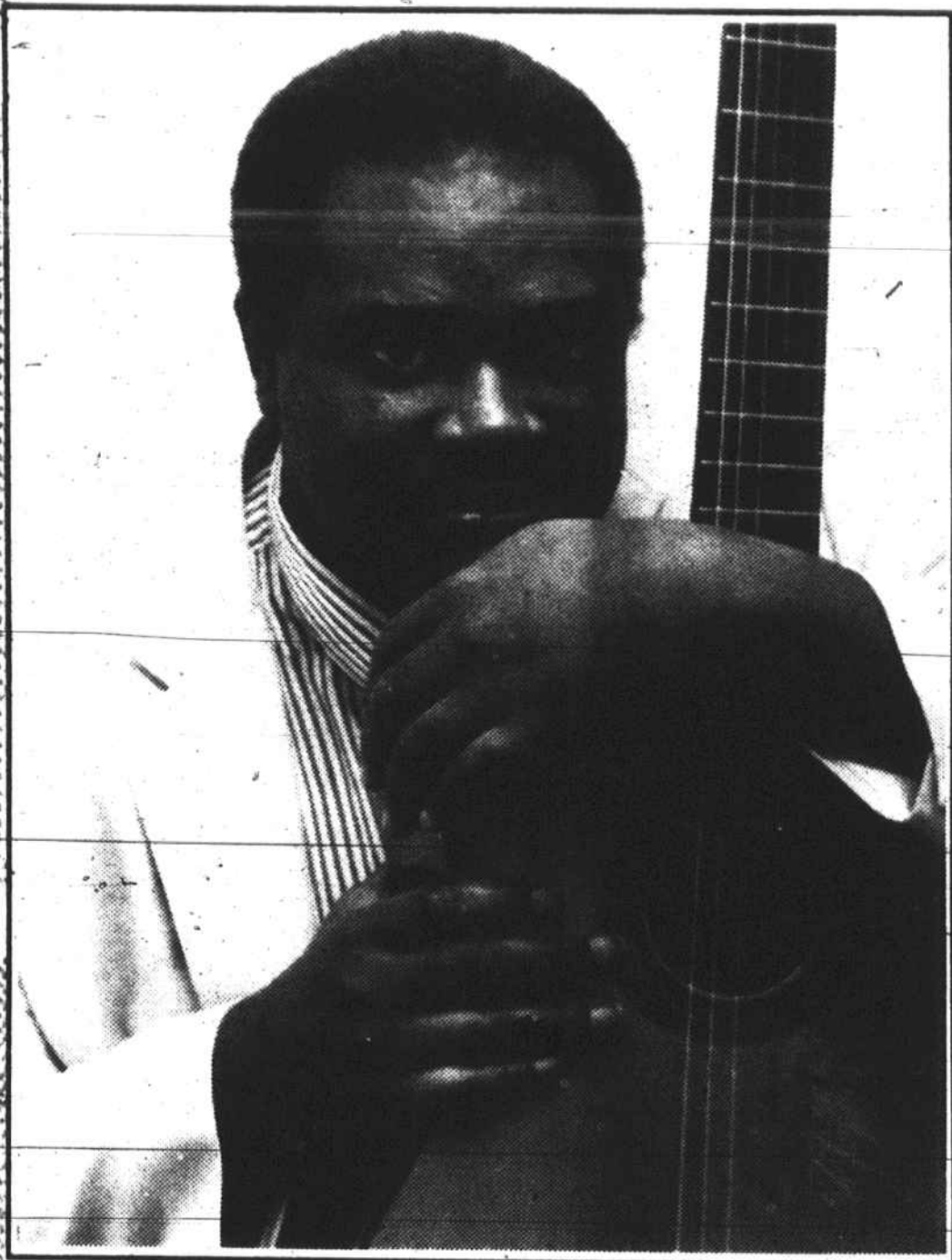


Photo by Charmane Delaverson

"While I was there watching Earl Klugh pick the guitar with his fingers, I was flabbergasted and crushed at the same time. It seemed to be a heavenly calling and I re-identified with what I was doing."

-- Russell Denoris Thomas

composer has a meticulous style unique only to him: He wears clear nail hardener on the fingernails of his right hand.

"It's to keep my nails from breaking," says Thomas, adding that longer nails make it easier for him to pluck the guitar strings.

A 30-year-old recent graduate of Winston-Salem State University, the robust Thomas defines music as "organized sound congregated to create an aesthetic sense of emotion in people."

"I try to create some beauty, a beautiful feeling in people," he says.

Beautiful feelings haven't come easy for the performer who once suffered a nervous breakdown. However, one of the happier times in his childhood came when his mother and uncle bought him his first guitar.

"My dear sweet mother supported my musical efforts," Thomas says. "She and my uncle pooled their resources and purchased me a \$60 guitar when I was 13. I just like to think it was heaven sent."

Soon afterwards, Thomas began taking music lessons at Separk Music Company. Unlike some children, Thomas' musical interests did not waver. He eagerly went to his guitar lessons.

"I practiced literally every day, all day," only making time for school, says Thomas.

The Winston-Salem native attended school in the city-county system, but admits his early education did not have many pleasant experiences.

"I felt relieved (when I left)," says Thomas who dropped out of school during his junior year at West Forsyth High School to go to

and work to help his family make a living.

"Money was scarce back then, but I wasn't aware of it," he says.

While working in Detroit, Thomas received his G.E.D. (graduate equivalency diploma) in night school. He also had the opportunity to see one of his mentors, jazz great Earl Klugh, perform.

"While I was there watching Earl Klugh pick the guitar with his fingers, I was flabbergasted and crushed at the same time," Thomas says, his eyes practically mirroring the memory. "It seemed to be a heavenly calling and I re-identified with what I was doing."

He worked in Detroit for a while then moved back to his home city, and in 1978 Thomas enrolled in the education program at WSSU. During his freshman year he decided to transfer to Mary Grove College, a Catholic institution in Detroit. Into his second year at Mary Grove, Thomas suffered a nervous breakdown.

"My mother came to get me and brought me back here to get my life back together," he says.

Yearning for the pleasure he remembered giving audiences during his early performances at age 15, Thomas re-enrolled in WSSU in 1986 -- this time selecting Commercial Music as his major.

"Commercial music is the study of any style of music or any music written for monetary gain," Thomas explains. "Such as pop, jazz, rhythm and blues . . ."

A born-again Christian and member and music director of New Birth Church of Christ,



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- Nora Nichols

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