

# Community News B1

## 'Too Good To Be Forgotten'

### Chi-Lites sparkle in Night Life skies

By PATRICIA SMITH-DEERING  
Chronicle Staff Writer

"Have You Seen Her?" was the plaintive, musical question asked by a Chicago-based trio whose name and signature sound have been synonymous with the "classic Windy City sound" for almost 30 years. And a capacity crowd jammed into and just plain "jammed" at a two-performance engagement at the Night Life Club on Sunday, Aug. 5, in a response that only proved that the Chi-Lites still have got what took them to stardom in the '60's and kept them on the R&B charts on into the '70's.

As the opening notes sounded for "Oh Girl", the biggest hit of the Chi-Lites' career, time rolled back for many in the audience who recalled the haunting sound that characterized so many of the ballads that they made popular. It is one that has been

described as being "distinguished by its use of keen, falsetto lead vocals, floated on top of three-part harmonies." Simply put, their music is so well-known and recognized internationally that just a few notes let you know, "That's the Chi-Lites!"

Just back from a successful concert tour in England, Marshall Thompson, Robert "Squirrel" Lester, and Anthony Watson crooned and rocked their way through a repertoire of tunes that encompassed old favorites and new tunes featured on their latest album, "Just Say You Love Me".

For their fans, just as there was a story or memory behind every "oldie" that the Chi-Lites sang, for the group, there is also the rest of the story of their meteoric rise and subsequent disappearance from the R&B charts.

When Marshall founded the Chi-Lites, known then in Chicago as the Hi-Lites, in 1960, he had been the

house drummer for groups appearing at the city's Regal Theatre. He teamed up with Creadel Jones, who was with the Desideros at the time, and with "Squirrel", Eugene Record, and Clarence Johnson of the Chantours.

Changes in the group today reflect not only the changes in personnel and circumstance, but those of time and technology, as well.

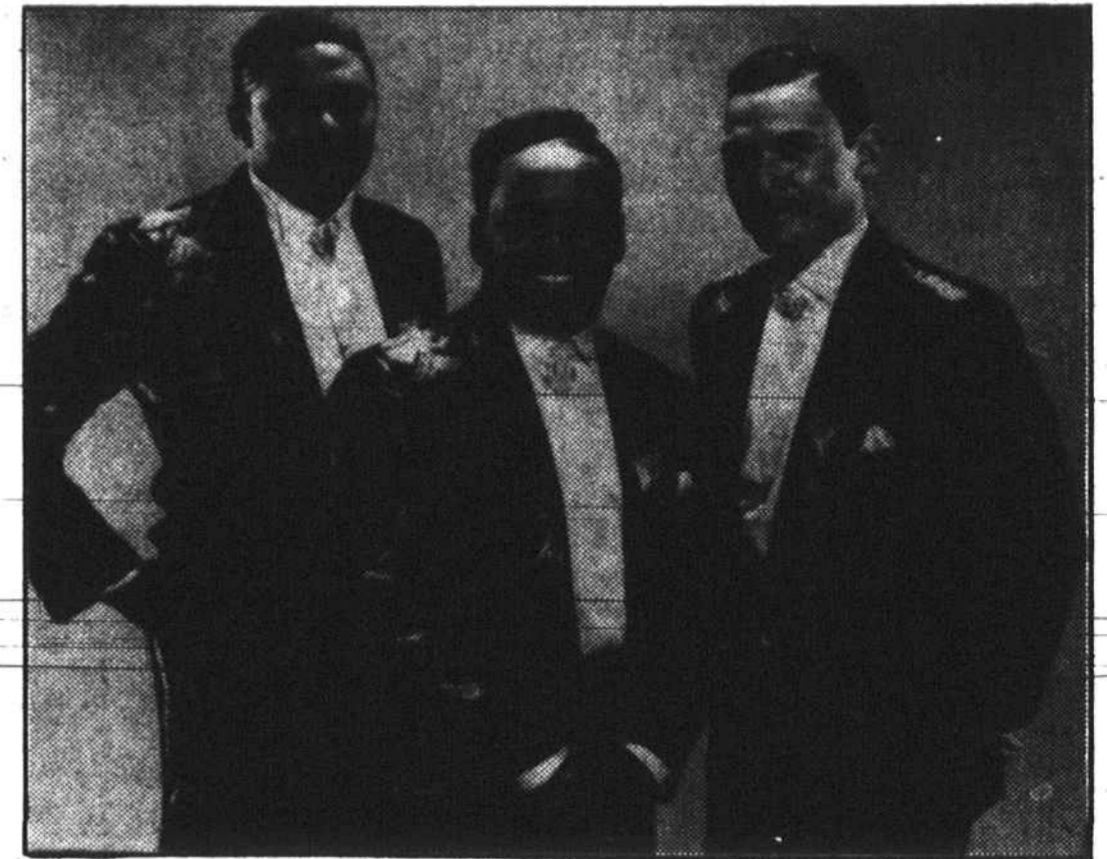
As their music came to be regarded by some as not "in vogue" during the late '70's and early '80's, the Chi-Lites changed personnel and record labels with lackluster results. While they worked on ways to regain position, the group toured in the United States and overseas.

Despite the popularity of new music forms like disco, rap, and funk and the lack of any current albums or records until recently, the Chi-Lites not only retained a faithful contingent of older fans, they have built a follow-

ing of younger people who also sway along with them these days.

Marshall's wife Connie and his 16-year-old daughter Danielle have been traveling with the Chi-Lites as they stage what is, in effect, a "comeback." Connie, along with Marshall, manages the logistics of the group. Commenting on the appearance in Winston-Salem, she expressed appreciation for the support and loyalty shown by the packed audience at the Night Life. As she deftly hustled the group into and out of costume changes during and between the 9 p.m. and 11 p.m. performances, as well as managing pressing fans and the press, her pride in the group, her husband, and her role with the performers was apparent. She said, "It's hectic, and it's tiring, but I enjoy all of it."

Danielle enjoys the music of the Chi-Lites, and the repetitiveness of the concert tours does not phase her. "I



The Chi-Lites: Anthony Watson, left, Marshall Thompson and Robert Lester.

don't get tired of it," she said candidly. "I like the old songs; I don't get tired of watching them because sometimes they make a change that I'm not expecting. It's exciting." But, while

she enjoys the Chi-Lites' style of music, she plans a different entree into the musical field. She said, "I'm going to start rapping," when asked her future plans.

## 'Wind Beneath Our Wings'

### Atkins Classes of '47-'51 remember Carter

By PATRICIA SMITH-DEERING  
Chronicle Staff Writer

"He had devotion to the cause of making the next generation great, and in so doing, (he) was the wind beneath our wings." This acknowledgement summarized the tribute paid to the late principal, J. A. Carter, by Dr. Ada Peoples Burnette, Class of '49, at the third annual combined reunion of Atkins Classes of 1947-51. Held Friday through Sunday, Aug. 3-5, at the Holiday Inn-North, the gathering attracted approximately 250 alumni, family members, teachers, and friends for three days of reminiscing with an old-fashioned sock hop, cook-out, picnic, and banquet.

Dr. Burnette, keynote speaker at Saturday's banquet, recalled the

stern but excellent disciplinarian that Mr. Carter was. She said, "J. A. taught us to be the best that we could be," noting the instructional opportunities and co-curricular activities that Atkins provided as reinforcement of Carter's philosophy of excellence. She continued, "We learned from this role model...the art of being excellent, the skill of demanding the best of our children and ourselves...the aspiration to see the sky as the limit..."

Reminding her classmates that Mr. Carter gave her her first teaching assignment following her graduation from Talladega College in 1953, Dr. Burnette said, "What we are, we are, in part, because of what we learned at Atkins." She contrasted today's youth with those who

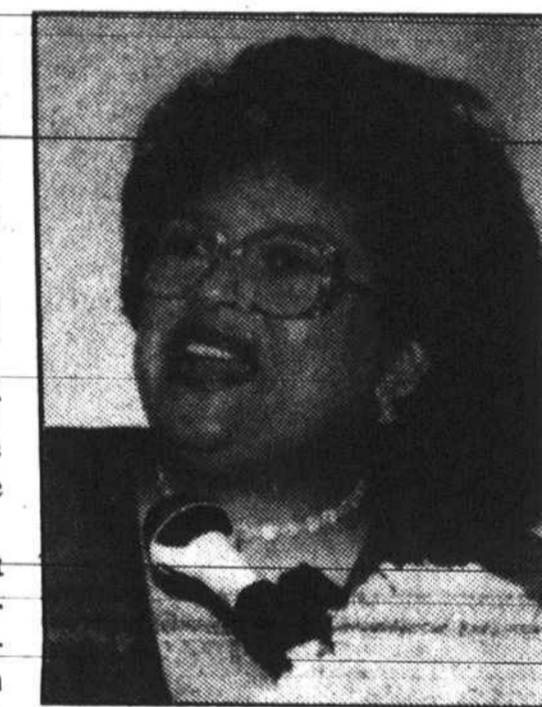


Photo by L. B. Speas Jr.  
Dr. Ada Peoples Burnette pays tribute to Atkins' late principal.

were at Principal Carter's high school, referring to "those days when J. A. required Homer, Virgil, W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Harriet Tubman, Socrates, all those names had to be in our brains and not on our feet or our behinds." She added, "We had the advantage over kids today (with) no names in their brains, but Gucci, Reebok, Calvin Klein on their feet and on their behinds, heading straight for drugs, welfare, and prison."

Dr. Burnette, who taught math at Atkins for a year before moving to Chicago's public schools, is a regular columnist in the Journals of Florida State Reading Council and Florida Association on Children Under Six and hostess on a weekly radio talk show.

## COMMUNITY CALENDAR

THURSDAY, AUG. 9

• The City of Winston-Salem's Black-Phillips-Smith Neighborhood Government Services Center at 2301 Patterson Avenue will feature **Stolen Minds: Memory Loss by the Alzheimer's Association** from 10:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m. For additional information, call 727-2975.

• Summer Wages will perform bluegrass at Walkertown Park, Darrow Road and Highway 158 in Walkertown, as part of the "Evenings in the Neighborhoods" program sponsored by Urban Arts.

FRIDAY, AUG. 10

• The City of Winston-Salem's Black-Phillips-Smith Neighborhood Gov-  
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## 'A Toast to Black Broadway' offered best choice for change

Somebody said that life is like a river, either you go with the flow or you go against the flow.

Choose or someone else will choose for you. Life is about making choices and having to live with the consequences of those choices.

If you chose to attend last weekend's "A Toast to Black Broadway," it was more than an evening of song and dance dedicated to those Black Broadway artists who have paved the way for others to follow.

Saturday night was about choice. It was about the decisions we make as individuals and how they ultimately lead to consequences impacting ourselves, our families, and our community.

In many ways it was a reflection of small-town America reaching out, coming together, networking, fighting back with all that it could muster to strike one blow against forces that would threaten to swallow it whole.

It was also an evening of extraordinary contrasts -- both on stage and off. It was an evening where at various times during the performance, our minds were forced to leave the comfort and safety of the Stevens Center to do some serious reflection on what's happening to our world, to our children, and what we are going to do about it. And after all, that was the purpose for Saturday night's extravaganza -- to help bring about a change in the level of consciousness in our community.

This was more than just raising money to support the Best Choice Center to continue its drug intervention/prevention programs for "at-risk" youth and families. But to be perfectly honest, because the stakes are so high, I almost found it difficult to enjoy Saturday night's performance. I was distracted.

The first real distraction came when I started thinking about the current controversy surrounding the rap group 2 Live Crew. They are the popular group traveling throughout our

communities pedaling, pushing and injecting radioactive trash into the minds, the veins, the very souls and futures of our children.

Those who supported, "A Toast to Black Broadway" were coming together to fight for the survival of their community. They were just like the folk in Iredell County who banded together to keep Gov. Jim Martin and his hazardous incinerator away from them and their children.

In some ways, all of this is a choice for life over death. I couldn't help but wonder that if 2 Live were coming to the Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum, the here-to-fore-unsold out Coliseum would probably sell out in a few hours!

But right here in Winston-Salem, a group of caring folk -- led by Dorothy Graham Wheeler -- armed with a vision, full of the where-with-all to not only conceive, produce and to present a very entertaining, historically rich, at times emotionally riveting, and clearly spiritually uplifting evening of dance, music, singing, and dialogue, all designed to help insure the survival of their community, yet ... when the curtain rose just after 8:00 p.m. there was a noticeable availability of very good seats.

I kept thinking, was this a secret? Is this event closed to the public? Why isn't there standing room only? Oh there was a good crowd at both performances, Saturday and Sunday but.... "Hmmm" as host/director Steven Semien said throughout the night when he would pause to point out a discrepancy between reality and perception.

The historical reality being that the actual contributions, the discovery of many of the trends that made Broadway famous were actually developed by black artists; but when compared to those who actually wound up playing the parts on Broadway, introducing the trends, receiving the royalties, the recognition from Broadway ... well, you get the point. Hmmm... the

contrast was very real.

We have a very talented cast, infused with local color, a good cause, inexpensive... hmmm I said to

myself -- and I know that I wasn't alone. "What in God's name do we want anyway?" What was perception now and what was reality? Who was really on stage? But, I still enjoyed the evening.

And who wouldn't after hearing the very talented director, writer, choreographer Steven Semien and Robin Dixon in Eubie Blake's "Low Down Blues and Cradle of Love." Listening and looking at them sing with so much love and affection, exemplifying real caring between a man and a woman; not the Neanderthal ranting of groups like 2 Live Crew.

This was real feeling with real music performed in the context of America's own music -- the blues! Contrast that with what you normally see, hear, and expect. And for rap lovers, it was wonderful indeed to experience the classical iambic pentameter in Duke Ellington's "Music is A Woman," performed by Sean Haythe, Kathryn Hunter and Leslie Dockery. It was sassy, it was sexy, it was swift, it was swinging, it was sinewy, it was Ellington.

The evening's first act ended with a touching tribute to one of the world's greatest and certainly most recognized entertainers, the late Sammy Davis Jr. Vince Williams, jazz musician and star of soap opera, "The Guiding Light," made the point that it was indeed Sammy Davis Jr. who was in many ways responsible for Williams' own success as a television star.

At one point during the mono-

logue, Williams cried out, "I couldn't be me if you hadn't been you." This rather personal and improvised tribute was followed by Williams joining wife



## ON THE AVANT-GARDE

By TANG NIVRI

Kathryn Hunter and dancer Martron Gales in a rendition of "Mr. Bojangles," concluding with Gales as Bojangles standing alone in a single spotlight.

You would not have wanted to miss the subtle, sweet soprano solo work of Galvin Crisp as he quietly echoed refrains of Mr. Bojangles while Kathryn sang and Gales danced.

The irony, the contrast was all too obvious. Davis, one of this world's greatest entertainers, died essentially of causes related to life-long problems associated with substance abuse. Yet here, the extraordinary power of the Davis legacy was harnessed, being used in perhaps a small way to help lead a new generation of youth to reach beyond their own dreams without the crutch of alcohol and drugs.

The audience knew and felt that they had seen something special. But the best was yet to come and everybody knew it. You could sense that people were waiting for none other than Big John Heath and Carlotta Samuels-Fleming, both of whom "turned out" last summer's production of "Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope." But they would have to wait a while because this show was just beginning to shine.

The second act began with a toast to black pride on Broadway featuring "They Keep Coming," from Micki Grant's "I Can't Cope." This prideful recitation of black history and accomplishment peaked with a glimpse into our very future when the ensemble

was joined by youth from the Best Choice Center.

If only you could have seen the children of all ages and imagine what they might grow up to be. Who among them would be the next Martin Luther King or Malcolm X or Roy Wilkins, or Frederick Douglas, or Booker T. Washington, or W.E.B. DuBois? But, I also wondered who among them would be the next Marion Barry? Would there be? Someone was trying to say no! But they would have to make a choice!

The youths' on-stage presence reminded one of a nation stretching, reaching out for its potential. One couldn't help but feel a great sense of pride and belief in the future hoping that these children would indeed make the best choice.

The show kept on coming with a Toast to Black Opera on Broadway. A lot of people don't understand the words or they think that it's too sophisticated, but when Elizabeth Graham jumped all over Gershwin's "Summertime," you could hear the audience almost breathe a collective sigh of awe. They understood and felt each melodic strand as Graham sang with such silky smooth control.

And when Graham and Bass-Baritone, Sam Stevenson, teamed up in "Bess You Is My Woman Now," a whole lot of minds were changed about opera. These two artists were simply magnificent; they were accessible and they were real! This was truly entertainment. After hearing the duet, I heard a lady remark that "this was the first time she had ever heard opera and understood what it meant." Hmmm-mmm.....

The evening continued to get better when Carlotta Samuels-Fleming just belted out "And I'm Telling You, I'm Not Going" from "Dreamgirls". Samuels-Fleming has the ability to really grab an audience. When she stood out on the front of the stage, looked you in the eye, you knew that "she sho nuff was not going!" She

made a believer out of me!

Finally it was time for Big John Heath to lead the Toast to Gospel on Broadway. This was what everybody was waiting for, and Big John did not disappoint. From Vinnette Carroll's, "Your Arms Are Too Short To Box With God," Big John Heath led the ensemble in "As Long As I Live." Now it was time to have church. You could hear folk all through the audience saying amen and well...well. This was real. And Big John Heath, Elizabeth Graham, Sam Stevenson and Billy Moize weren't playing.

And neither was Carlotta Fleming who just gave you chills as she portrayed Mary in "Something Wrong in Jerusalem." The beauty of it all as Robin LittleJohn-Franklin danced the part of Mary in a beautiful recall of moves from Aileys Revelation.

This was Broadway as it was meant to be.

The evening reached an emotional peak in "Can't No Grave Hold My Body Down," again led by John Heath. Heath had the audience up and kept them up and why not? The Stevens Center had been effectively transformed from a mere theatre to a genuine place of worship. Somebody had to say Amen!

To be sure, the overall production had a loose end here and there and at times it was not very tight, but folks, look at the time they had to do it, and look how it came together. It just proves how very talented this entire ensemble was.

People are saying that the arts scene in Winston-Salem will never be the same after last summer's African American Theater festival. If the production of last Saturday night is any indication of what we can expect, then this community could very well turn to the theatre to solve a great many of its problems.

As far as I am concerned, this was the Best Choice -- the best way to change a community.