

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MUSIC ACTIVITIES IN ASHEVILLE'S BLACK COMMUNITY  
DURING THE PERIOD 1920 TO 1970

In Asheville, as in most small towns, music among Blacks was mainly a church activity. Those persons who were musically literate were anxious to share their knowledge with the church choir of the following established denominations: Presbyterian, Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, ~~and~~ Methodist Episcopal, and Baptist. Choirs were later organized by other denominations. Spirituals, hymns, and anthems were the main types of songs performed.

Pioneers in training these choirs were: Mrs. Ella Burnett (Mt. Zion Baptist), Mrs. Eva Bailey (St. Matthais), Mrs. Carrie Spurgeon, (Hopkins Chapel), Miss Isabelle Jones (Berry Temple), Mr. J.W. Brogden (St. James), Mrs. Willie Bowman (Bethel Adventist), Mr. B.J. Ragsdale (Calvary Presbyterian), and Mrs. Corinne Luck (Nazareth Baptist).

Other outstanding leaders in music were the following singers who enjoyed city-wide popularity: sopranos Lucille Vance Warren, Janie Patton Greenleaf, Willie Sigmon and Lila McJunkins; tenors James W. Brogden and Ernest McKissick and bass Dr. Frank A. Evans.

Prominent piano teachers were: Miss Isabelle R. Jones, Mrs. Willie Bowman, Mrs. Jennie Jones, Mrs. Eleanor Walker, Mrs. Daisy Miller, Mrs. Corinne Luck, and Mrs. George Mays. Several others generously shared their skill with eager-to-learn young Blacks but the afore names listed became the advanced students's teachers. With the exception of Benjamin Ragsdale all the persons named are now deceased.

For several years Ragsdale directed a choir in New York City and appeared on Broadway in the famous production "Green Pastures" with the Hall Johnson Choir. Later he directed a choir in Tampa, Florida. The long illness of his father brought him back to Asheville where he organized an outstanding group of singers under the WPA. His annual presentation of the Christmas and Easter portions of "The Messiah" was a real event for all music lovers of Asheville and Black singers in particular. Today Mr. Ragsdale is a patient at Brentwood Convalescent Home.