It's amazing how many Cleveland musicians who went on to win national and even international fame, started in music at Cleveland's old Central High School. Among the many jazz notables from Central were Noble Sissle, Buster Harding, Andy Anderson, Skippy Williams, Harold Arnold, Harry “Pee Wee” Jackson, Freddie Webster, Tadd Dameron, “Bull Moose” Jackson, Ernie Freeman, Shep Shepherd, Howard Roberts, Chink McKinney, Jimmy Williams, Willie Smith, Fats Heard, Gay Crosse and Johnny Powell.

Central High School began in 1846 in the basement of a church on Prospect Avenue. Ten years later, the school moved to a brick and stone building at Erie Street (later East 9th) and Euclid Avenue. It was not only the first high school in Cleveland, it was also the first free, public high school west of the Alleghenies.

Ironically, when music was first taught at Central, some believed it was an improper use of school funds. In the early years, most of the students were from Cleveland's oldest, most respected families. By 1868, Central High School had grown to 214 students. When enrollment exceeded 300, officials decided to build a new high school, a Victorian Gothic structure that was completed in 1878 at 2201 Willson Avenue (later East 55th Street) at Central Avenue. The new building's ornate clock tower was donated by a graduate, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Sr. It faced the avenue that was arched with trees and boasted some of Cleveland's most imposing homes.

Early Central graduates included street light inventor Charles Brush, U.S. Senator Mark Hanna, and businessman and civic activist Samuel Mather. John D. Rockefeller dropped out a few weeks before he was due to graduate.

When Noble Sissle enrolled at Central in 1906, he was one of only six black students.

There were still very few black students at Central High School in 1914 when future poet, playwright, essayist and novelist Langston Hughes enrolled. He quickly began contributing articles and drawings to the school literary journal. By his senior year, Hughes became the chief editor of the school yearbook. He told the Cleveland Press in 1946, “It was at old Central High School that what literary abilities I had were incubated.” From Central, Hughes went on to become what some have called “the poet laureate of black people.” By 1929, because of the migration of blacks from the South to find jobs in Cleveland and changing housing patterns, about half of Central's 660 students were black. By the early 1930s, Central had become a predominantly black school, and by the late '30s, the great majority of all of Cleveland's black high school students attended Central. School officials decided to switch the educational emphasis away from liberal arts. They revamped the curriculum to train black students as domestics and laborers. But Central High School also had a “vocational music department” designed to prepare students for careers teaching and performing music.

Veteran Cleveland saxophonist Andy Anderson, who was at Central during that period, recalled, “I started taking up music under Dr. Reddig, the music director. We had dances on Thursday nights.” The school's reputation for music was just beginning.

By the late 1930s, James Lee had become the music director.
Willie Smith remembered, “Mr. Lee liked excellence in music and he gave everybody a chance. We had a big band at Central with guys like Woody Holt who played saxophone and Carl Fields, the trumpet player. We had shows going on all the time.”

William “Shep” Shepherd, who later played with Dizzy Gillespie’s big band, remembered Mr. Lee was crazy about big band jazz and took his students to the Palace Theatre to hear Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman. “Mr. Lee got us special passes to go and see Goodman (in 1939). I stood right there and looked over at them when he had Lionel Hampton, Teddy Wilson and all of them.”

Jimmy Williams, who went on to play with the Fletcher Henderson and Jimmie Lunceford bands, recalled, “Mr. Lee was a really nice guy. He let me have a trombone.”

James “Chink” McKinney, a drummer, said Central gave the young jazz musicians “a lot of support even though they taught those other types of music. They knew that’s what we liked, so they gave us plenty of support, especially Mr. Lee. He used to write arrangements himself. He used to be in an orchestra. He told us about how he used to travel around with seven or eight pieces and how they’d work for $5 a night.”

Williams added, “Mr. Lee took me under his wing and started showing me about orchestrations. I really loved the guy. If you were in the band, you had to learn how to read.”

The Central High School marching band became legendary. Willie Smith remembered, “We’d be out in the street marching and guys would be jamming.”

Williams said, “They would come to the games with their horns and you’d hear blasts of riffs. These guys were jamming everything.”

Trumpeter Ted Jones was a member of both the school band and the football team. Mr. Lee wanted to keep him in the marching band to play at football games, but Jones said, “Football season came and the horn had to go because I loved football. So Mr. Lee would shake his fist at me and say, ‘A big fat F for you, Jones!’”

Andy Anderson

After he graduated from Central High School in 1932, Andy Anderson played bass with the Marion Sears Orchestra. Looking back years later, Anderson said with a smile, “We were pretty good.” The band played a number of local gigs – at Oster’s Ballroom twice a week, at the Dreamland Ballroom (near the Cleveland Clinic), and at Cedar Gardens (on Cedar Avenue). Other members of the Sears band included saxophonist Horace Adams, pianist Buster Harding, who later arranged for Count Basie, James Peck, and trumpeter Francis Williams, who later played with Ellington. “All of us doubled on instruments,” said Anderson. “We blew like mad!”

Later members of the Marion Sears Orchestra included Freddie Webster and Earle Warren who later played with Count Basie and, with Harding, composed “9:20 Special.”

After making a name for himself in Cleveland playing bass and saxophone, Anderson in the early 1940s went to Los Angeles where he gigged with Ben Webster and a 21-year-old saxophonist named Paul Gonsalves, who later spent two decades with Ellington. Anderson said, “Gonsalves could really blow then!”

Andy recalled one night when he was jamming with Webster, Lester Young walked in and wanted to sit in with the group. Anderson found himself in an awkward position. “Ben and I were sitting there playing and pretty soon, here comes Lester. Ben says, ‘I can’t play with him!’ I said, ‘Shoot! Now he’s here and I’m in the middle – and here’s Lester. Now what am I supposed to do?!’” Before long Charlie Christian and Jimmy Blanton also arrived and joined the jam session. Anderson said he somehow managed to get through it. He remembered that night as one of the highlights of his long career.

In California, Anderson played with Eddie Barefield’s band, appeared with Louis Armstrong in a film, Going Places which premiered the song “Jeepers Creepers,” and substituted briefly for Webster in the Ellington Orchestra.

Andy performed with Navy bands during World War II. In the early 1950s, he led bands in Alaska. After returning to Cleveland, he became a letter carrier and continued to play with various bands here.

Anderson celebrated his 90th birthday in 2001 by playing with Cleveland pianist George Foley’s group.

Carman Newsome

Another early graduate of Central High School had been a teenage black cowboy in Kansas and later became the leader of Cleveland jazz bands and a movie actor.

Carman Newsome’s unusual story began in 1912 near Dodge City, Kansas, where he was born. He was the grandson of a freed slave, George Washington Walker, who bought a ranch in Kansas the year Carmen was born. By the time he was nine, he was working on his grandfather’s ranch and even breaking horses. Within a
few years, he became known as the first
teenaged black cowboy in Kansas.

In the late 1920s, when Carman was
still in his teens, his family moved to
Ohio and lived for three years in
Bellefontaine. Then, they came to
Cleveland where Carmen enrolled in
Central High School.

The 11th grader found himself
surrounded by music and he was
fascinated by it. Exposed to the music
and entertainment atmosphere at Central,
Newsome went out and bought an old
tenor saxophone and taught himself to
play. Practicing up to ten hours a day,
he also taught himself to read music.

Before long, he was playing saxophone and clarinet
with various school bands. Sometimes they played at
nightclubs. Eventually, Newsome formed his own band
which included other Central students. Among them
were trumpeters Freddie Webster, Harry “Pee Wee”
Jackson, and trombonist George Early.

After he graduated from Central in 1932, Newsome
continued leading his band in Cleveland. It was usually
an 11-piece group. Newsome's band played for five
years at a variety of Cleveland jazz spots including the
Heat Wave at the Majestic Hotel, the Furnace Club,
Cedar Gardens, the Cabin Club, the Hyland Club and the
Suburban Club in Garfield Heights. At various times,
Newsome's band included such other former Central
musicians as William “Shep” Shepherd, Harold Arnold,
Andy Anderson and Bernard Simms.

In 1937, Newsome took his band to the famous Cotton
Club in New York City’s Harlem, where a decade earlier,
Duke Ellington had first gained fame. At the Cotton
Club, Newsome met a man named Oscar Micheaux who
was producing movies with all-black casts designed to be
shown in Negro theatres around the country. Micheaux
had begun producing black films in the 1920s and made
a film called Body and Soul with actor-athlete-activist
Paul Robeson. The 52-year-old producer offered the
young Cleveland musician a job. Newsome broke up his
band and began working for the movie producer in New
York. At first, he handled sales and distribution of
Micheaux' movies to about 250 Negro motion picture
theatres.

Soon, the producer decided to use the former teenaged
cowboy and Cleveland jazz musician as an actor in his
movies. He saw the handsome young Newsome as what
he liked to call “The dark Clark Gable.” Newsome
starred in five movies for the producer—all advertised as
having “all colored casts”—God's Stepchildren in 1937,
Swing in 1938, Birthright and Lying Lips in 1939, and
The Notorious Elinor Lee in 1940.

Lying Lips also featured Robert Earl
Jones, the father of James Earl Jones.
Another performer in the films was the
mother of Sammy Davis, Jr.

After starring in five movies, and
with World War II brewing, Newsome
returned to Cleveland. He went to work
for the Addressograph-Multigraph
Corporation in Euclid and continued
working there until 1970 when he retired
because of health problems.

Newsome, however, continued with
music. He gave free music lessons to
youngsters at the Bell Center on East
81st Street, hoping to engender in them
some of the same musical interest he had
developed when he was a student at Central High School
40 years earlier. According to a Plain Dealer article in
March of 1971, Newsome and his fellow teachers at the
center worked with youngsters between the ages of 8 and
18, teaching them to play horns, reed instruments, guitars,
drums and piano. Newsome said, “At first, we show them
the most simple way to play current hits. This makes
them hungry to learn to read sheet music and to improve
their instrumental technique.” Newsome was proud that
some of his students, who had dropped out of school,
were encouraged by their new interest in music to return
to school.

During those teaching sessions, Newsome also told the
kids stories about his life as a jazz band leader and movie
star in the 1930s.

Carmen Newsome died July 17, 1974, at the age of 62,
at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Cleveland.

Harold Arnold

Harold Arnold’s family had moved to Cleveland from
Asheville, North Carolina in 1932 when he was five years
old. As a child, Harold studied piano, mostly church
music. But he was also listening to the jazz of the late
1920s and early '30s. He was a 13 year old tenth grader
at Central High School (in 1930) when he switched from
the piano to saxophone.

At Central High School, Arnold learned to read music
and became a good sight-reader. He remembered taking
a girlfriend to dances in Cleveland. “They never
danced,” he said. “They just stood in front of the
bandstand cheering the bands.”

After playing for four years for carnivals and on
Mississippi river boats, Arnold decided in 1937 to go to
New York with trumpeter Harry Edison of Columbus
who had been playing in Cleveland. They joined the
Mills Blue Rhythm Band directed by Lucky Millinder.
Arnold remembered the night they opened at the Apollo
Theatre in Harlem. “Duke Ellington came up afterward
and said, "You guys sound great!"

In New York for eight years, Arnold played with such jazz artists as Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller and Wilbur deParis and made a number of records.

Arnold returned to Cleveland in 1945, settled down with his wife and two children, worked for the post office, and played at various local jazz clubs.

He died May 2, 2002 at the age of 90.

**Bull Moose Jackson**

Another Central High School student in the mid-1930s was Benjamin Clarence Jackson who, as "Bull Moose Jackson" became a legend of early honking and risqué-lyrics rhythm-and-blues music.

Born in Cleveland in 1919, Jackson was only three when he began singing in the choir at Cleveland's Avery AME Church. His parents soon sent their musical son off to take violin lessons. But, by the time he got to Central, and over the objections of his parents, young Ben began playing the saxophone. With fellow Central student Freddie Webster, Jackson formed his first band, the Harlem Hotshots. They were soon playing at Cedar Gardens.

After high school, Jackson moved to Buffalo, but returned to Cleveland in 1943. He was playing saxophone with various groups here when he caught the attention of bandleader Lucky Millinder who had a rompin' big band in the early 1940s.

Millinder had been the leader of the Mills Blue Rhythm Band, one of the early black swing bands, until 1938. For a while, Millinder worked with the band of Bill Doggett, who later spent years playing in Cleveland. In 1940, Millinder formed his own orchestra, a band that became one of the most rhythmically exciting bands of the period. Among the musicians in his band were Dizzy Gillespie, who played trumpet on the Millinder band's hit recording of "When the Lights Go On All Over the World," Sam "The Man" Taylor, who later honked his way to fame on the rhythm-and-blues circuit, and Jackson's old boyhood friend from Central High School, Freddie Webster. When Jackson joined the sax section of the Millinder band, some of the other musicians decided "Ben Jackson" wasn't a very colorful name. They began calling him "Bull Moose," and the name stuck.

One of the Millinder band's popular songs was "Hurry, Hurry!" The song was recorded and usually performed by a singer named Wynonie "Mr. Blues" Harris. But, one night in Texas, Harris failed to show up for the gig and Millinder pulled Bull Moose out of the sax section to sing the song. That spur-of-the-moment decision by Millinder launched a whole new career for the saxophonist from Cleveland. He began singing more and more with the band, including a song called "Who Threw the Whiskey in the Well?"

Jackson continued to tour, play sax and sing with the Millinder Orchestra for two years until 1945. That's when Syd Nathan, who had an interest in the Millinder Orchestra and ran a small country and western record company, became intrigued with a then-new form of music called rhythm-and-blues. Millinder urged Jackson to record for Nathan. Bull Moose's first record, ironically, was a tongue-in-cheek response to the song he did with Millinder. Jackson called it "I Know Who Threw the Whiskey in the Well."

Over the next five years, Jackson made a number of records including (in 1947) a song called "I Love You, Yes I Do." It became the first rhythm-and-blues record to sell more than a million copies.

After crooning songs like "I Love You, Yes I Do," the unpredictable Jackson would often turn around and, in almost the next recorded breath, belt out double-entendre risqué songs like "I Want a Bowlegged Woman." He followed his hits with a continuous string of popular records including, "Nosey Joe," and "Big Ten Inch Record." Some were too suggestive to play on the radio.

While recording, Jackson toured throughout the late 1940s and early '50s with his own band, which he called The Buffalo Bearcats.

Many people have forgotten that in 1951, Cleveland composer and arranger Tadd Dameron, another Central graduate, was playing piano with Jackson's band. Dameron was, at the time, trying to decide what to do with his own jazz group. Another member of Jackson's touring rhythm-and-blues group was a young saxophonist who had dropped out of Howard University in Washington, Benny Golson. In fact, that is how Golson first met Dameron, who later became Golson's composing and arranging tutor and mentor. After touring with Bull Moose, Golson joined Dameron's group and in 1956 joined Dizzy Gillespie.

Also with Jackson's band briefly was 22-year-old John Coltrane. Pianist Randy Weston also toured with Jackson early in his career.

But, despite some top-flight musicians in his band and a string of hit recordings, Jackson seemed to run out of gas by the late 1950s. In 1958, at the age of 39, he was semi-retired and running a bar in Philadelphia. By the early 1960s, he took a job with a catering company at Howard University in Washington.

Now, fast forward to 1983. A man named Carl Grefenstette, who was leading a rhythm-and-blues band
Central High School called The Flashcats in Pittsburgh, sought out the all-but-forgotten r-and-b singer and coaxed him into appearing with his Pittsburgh band. The bandleader said, “We thought it would be the thrill of a lifetime to play with him.”

They played a series of sold-out concerts and Bull Moose, the hero of rhythm-and-blues almost 40 years earlier, suddenly became almost a cult hero in Pittsburgh. He made his first record in more than 30 years and said, “I’m elated that I can still perform and I’m very proud that people still remember.” He said, “They’ve resurrected an old man. I had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. They dug me out and here I am.”

Jackson began recording again and made appearances in New York and Hollywood. In 1985, the 66 year old Jackson performed at Carnegie Hall and toured Europe with Johnny Otis.

The Central High School alumnus continued to perform regularly until 1987 when his health began to fail. His last performance was April 23, 1988, a birthday concert with The Flashcats in Pittsburgh. After that concert, Bull Moose came home to Cleveland and moved in with an old girlfriend.


Bull Moose Jackson Albums

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Album Title</th>
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<td>Greatest Hits: My Big Ten Inch (King)</td>
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The Evelyn Freeman Ensemble

“The Freeman Ensemble” was the only notation on the old photograph I found at the Western Reserve Historical Society Library. It was part of the society’s collection of photos by Allen E. Cole, a man who almost single-handedly created a photographic history of Cleveland’s black community in the 1930s and ‘40s. There was no indication on the photo of the historical importance of that young band.

Through a series of interviews, I learned the picture was taken in 1940 at the Phyllis Wheatley auditorium. It shows a group called the Evelyn Freeman Ensemble, a band made up of Central High School teenagers who played at many of the leading dance halls in Cleveland. Several of those teenaged musicians later went on to become extremely important figures in music.

Evelyn Freeman, the teenaged leader of the group, told me (in a February 20, 2001 interview) it began as a family chamber music ensemble organized by her father who had played with dance orchestras in Cleveland in the late teens and early ‘20s. “I learned to play the piano,” she said, “and my brother Ernie came along and they started him out on the violin. Every Sunday morning, before we went to church (at St. James at East 84th and Cedar), we would sight read overtures.”

With their father playing flute, Evelyn the piano and Ernie the violin, “We played at a lot of social functions and we started adding people. Pretty soon, we had about 20 people” (in the ensemble).

One of the members, trombonist Bernard Simms, remembered, “We got musicians from the Central High School Orchestra and Band and did a lot of classical music. We did concerts and played for different affairs, churches, things of that sort.” Simms said the ensemble rehearsed at the Freemans’ home on East 83rd Street between Cedar and Central.

Evelyn recalled a neighbor didn’t like hearing all the music and went to court “and got an injunction against us playing music. That kind of ended the classical music,”
The Evelyn Freeman Dance Band broadcasting from the Circle Ballroom in September of 1941.
(Front row L-to-R): Evelyn Freeman (piano), Van Shepherd (bass), Don Banks (guitar), Robert Morton, Ernie Freeman, Jim Gayle and Charles Mines (saxes). Back row: James “Chink” McKinney (drums), Howard Roberts and Clifford Holt (trumpets), Bernard Simms and William Shepherd (trombones).

she said, “because we didn’t have any place to rehearse.”

She said her brother Ernie “found an old E-flat saxophone in the closet that my father had played years before and he taught himself to play it.” Ernie and the other members of the group quickly became interested in jazz, particularly the big bands of the swing era, and began holding jazz jam sessions after their classical performances.

Evelyn recalled, “When I heard Duke Ellington, it just completely turned me around. I said, ‘That is what I want to do, be a bandleader!’”

One Friday morning, she cut her classes at Central and went to the Palace Theatre to see and hear the Ellington band. “I was so enthralled,” she said, “I had to go backstage to see Duke Ellington.” The teenager managed to get past the security people to meet and talk with Ellington.

Chink McKinney recalled “I found out they were forming a jazz band but didn’t have a drummer. Ernie kept saying, ‘Chink, why don’t you come on down and join us. Just sit in and listen.’ The first time I heard it, I said, ‘Oh yeah! This is what I want to belong to!’ I didn’t know how to play, but I had good rhythm.” McKinney said he quickly learned to play the drums and joined the group.

Evelyn said they got some big band arrangements, including Count Basie’s “One O’Clock Jump,” from the father of trumpeter Millard Jones.

Simms remembered, “We did a two-way concert at the Phyllis Wheatley Center. We called it From Symphony to Swing. We did the symphonic portion first and after the intermission, we switched to our swing instruments.”

Simms’ cousin, Shep Shepherd remembered, “It went so good that Evelyn decided the classical ensemble would become a swing band.”

“I had to get these younger fellows,” said Evelyn, “about three or four years younger than I was and I had to teach them.”

McKinney said the members were all good musicians. He said, “Evelyn taught them everything so they could play all types of music.”

The star of the swing band was saxophonist Ernie Freeman. Jimmy Williams said Ernie “was a heck of a musician. He played violin, French horn and the next thing you know, he was playing saxophone and piano. He turned out to be a heck of an arranger.”

Ernie began his arranging career by writing charts for his sister’s band. Willie Smith remembered, “I’d see Ernie on a bus, writing arrangements for the swing band, right on the bus, while going to school.” Evelyn said, “One of the ways we got gigs was by writing special songs for the groups we were playing for.” After watching Ernie writing on the bus, Smith said he decided he wanted to arrange music.
After the *Symphony to Swing* concert, Simms said, "We began to get jobs at different places. We played at the Circle Ballroom at East 105th and Euclid."

"I don't remember how we got that," said Evelyn, "but since I was the manager and did all the business for the band, I guess I arranged that some kind of way." Shep Shepherd once told Evelyn, "You are the most aggressive female I ever knew!"

At the Circle Ballroom, the Evelyn Freeman Swing Band did radio broadcasts on WHK with Tom Manning, the longtime Cleveland Indians play-by-play voice, as the announcer. "The fellows all got new coats," said Evelyn, "and we got new bandstands and everything for that gig."

Evelyn also recalled, "I talked old man Oster into opening up his ballroom (Oster's Ballroom at East 46th and Euclid) for Sunday nights."

Simms said, "It only cost 35 cents to go to those dances and the people really looked forward to them."

"Yeah," said Evelyn, "and those kids used to dance! It used to scare me sometimes. I thought they'd have a heart attack, they danced so hard!"

At Oster's Ballroom, Evelyn said, "The boys used to sing a little song:

*Dancing every Sunday,*
*Dancing every Sunday,*
*Dancing every Sunday — at Oster's for 35 cents.*
*For 35 cents, for 35 cents.*
*Go ask your mother for 35 cents!*

And everybody in the band would just fall out."

While they were playing professional gigs, the members of the Freeman Ensemble tried to hide the fact that they were local high school students. Shepherd said, "We told everybody we were from Buffalo. But, one night, a fellow from East Tech saw the band and said, 'I know them! They go to Central High School!'"

Evelyn remembered, "We played for dances all around Cleveland and in two years we were blowing everybody out, all the older professional bands."

But, World War II was beginning and many of the members of Evelyn Freeman's Swing Band were facing the prospect of being drafted. A Navy recruiter, who heard the band, approached the members and asked them if they would join the Navy as a group.

Shepherd remembered, "The Navy man came down to Oster's Ballroom and recruited nine of us at the same time." Simms said, "He had heard our band and stood there in the back and liked it. So he recruited most of the band at the time."

McKinney recalled the Navy recruiter asking, "How many of you guys want to join the Navy?" McKinney said he was reluctant at first until the recruiter said, "If you volunteer, they'll jump you up three ratings."

"They asked me about it," said Evelyn, "and I told them, 'Hey, they're going to take you one by one, so you might as well join as a group.'"

McKinney said he finally decided to join the Navy after his buddy, Ernie Freeman, said he would go. "We saw Ernie's picture in the paper (saying he was volunteering)," said Simms. "We knew then that our band was going to break up. So we all volunteered."

The members of the Evelyn Freeman Swing Band signed up together to become members of the first all-black, war-time Navy band called the Gobs of Swing.

**Bernard Simms**

Among them was trombonist Bernard Simms who had studied music theory and vocal instruction and played baritone horn at Central High School. After graduating in 1941 and playing trombone with the Evelyn Freeman band, Simms enrolled at Baldwin-Wallace College.

When they enlisted, Simms and the others, including five or six who were not from Cleveland, shipped out, first to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station near Chicago. "We stayed at Great Lakes for about a month," said Simms. "That's where we met Clark Terry and some other great musicians."

Then, they were sent to Bunker Hill, Indiana, where the Cleveland musicians became members of the Gobs of Swing, the first all-black Navy band in U.S. history.

**The Gobs of Swing Navy band**

"We played for President Roosevelt," said Simms, "when he came through to inspect the base. And we were guaranteed that we would stay in the states during the duration of the war."

McKinney recalled, "We played all types of music — classical, march music, and jazz. We entertained the troops and backed the stars who came to the camp, including Lena Home."

From time to time, Simms remembered that friends from Cleveland, including drummer Fats Heard, a Central graduate, would visit and sit in with their Navy band. They also met old friends from Cleveland when they
could get away from the base. Shepherd said, “Howard Roberts (another former member of the Freeman band) was with Lionel Hampton while we were in the service and we saw him down in Indianapolis.”

The former members of the Freeman band stayed at Bunker Hill, playing together as a Navy band until 1946. Years later, the Gobs of Swing elected Evelyn Freeman as an honorary member of the band. “I felt very proud,” she said. “It means somebody appreciated what I did for them.”

“After the war,” said Simms, “we came back to Cleveland and many of the fellows joined a band led by Johnny Powell, another former Central student. They paid us $3 to rehearse at the YMCA at 77th and Cedar and we had a nice band. In fact, it was more or less a continuation of the Gobs of Swing.”

McKinney recalled, “Some of the guys started branching out, going in different directions. Some wanted to go to the West Coast and some wanted to go to New York. So that band sort of split up.”

Simms decided to stay in Cleveland. “I had an opportunity to go with Louis Armstrong,” said Simms. But he decided to take advantage of the G.I. Bill. “I said, ‘I can always go on the road,’ but I decided to go back to school.”

Simms returned to Baldwin-Wallace College, completed his degree, and began a long career as a music teacher in Cleveland schools.

While teaching, he also continued playing from time to time. He played in bands that backed B.B. King, Lloyd Price, Nancy Wilson and Trini Lopez when they performed in Cleveland. Simms taught music at Central Junior High School from 1961 to 1966 when he was reassigned to East Tech. In 1975, he returned to Central where he continued teaching until he retired in 1982.

Simms said, “I tried to teach them, first of all, to be good people. I said, ‘Some day in life, we will meet again somewhere and I would rather that we could meet on good terms. I tried to teach them character plus musicianship.”

Simms died February 6, 2001 at the age of 78.

**Ernie Freeman**

After playing with the Navy band during World War II, Ernie Freeman returned to Cleveland, studied for two years at the Cleveland Institute of Music and began preparing for a career that eventually made him one of the most sought-after musicians in the recording industry.

After studying at CIM, Freeman decided to go to Los Angeles to try his luck in the studio business there. He struggled at first while working as a free lance musician. He played piano, without public credit, on a number of rhythm-and-blues and rock 'n roll recordings. After a group called B. Bumble and the Stinger had minor hits with their upbeat versions of “Flight of the Bumblebee” and “B. Bumble Boogie,” the record company hired Freeman to improve the musical quality of the group. Before long, the Clevelander was playing lead on the group’s records.

In 1955, Freeman’s recording of “Jivin’ O’ Round” became a rhythm-and-blues hit.

Freeman’s big recording break came when he was hired by Imperial Records. He arranged, conducted and played on many Imperial releases. Some say it was Freeman who was actually playing piano for Fats Domino during the singer-pianist’s period of great popularity. As a leader, Freeman made a number of albums for Imperial including *Ernie Freeman Plays Irving Berlin, Jivin’ O’ Round, Ernie Freeman, Sky High, Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Twistin’ Time* and *The Stripper.*

Freeman’s orchestra backed singer Eddie Fisher on many of his popular recordings.

In 1963, he played on the Jimmy Witherspoon album *Baby, Baby, Baby.* Because the record was made by the rival Prestige Record company, the label identified Freeman as “Ernst Von Funkenstein.” Freeman also recorded under his own name for Imperial and had several hits including “Raunchy.”

He returned to Cleveland in January of 1959 to perform at the Music Hall.

Later, the one-time Cleveland jazz saxophonist was hired by Liberty Records. While handling a variety of musical tasks for the label, he continued to record his own pop instrumentals including such LPs as *Soulful Sounds of Country Classics, Limbo Dance Party* and *Comin’ Home Baby.* He also recorded some jazz, including an album with Buddy Collette, Gerald Wilson, Red Callender and Barney Kessel.

In 1966, Freeman was hired as the musical director of Frank Sinatra’s Reprise record label. He arranged and conducted many of Sinatra’s recordings in the 1960s including “When Somebody Loves You,” “Anytime at All,” “That’s Life,” “What Now My Love,” “The Impossible Dream” and “Try a Little Tenderness.” He won a Grammy for Sinatra’s *Strangers in the Night* album.
Freeman’s former teenaged band mate, Chink McKinney said, “He told me Sinatra put him on the list and told other people, ‘You gotta get this guy!’ He was the top arranger for vocalists and I think the reason for that was that he was so acquainted with the violin and all the instruments. He knew them very well. Most of his arrangements had plush arrangements of violins.”

Also in 1966, Freeman arranged and conducted several Sammy Davis, Jr. recordings and backed singer Dean Martin, boosting the one-time Cleveland singer’s career with a huge hit, “Everybody Loves Somebody.”

In 1967, Ernie Freeman’s studio orchestra accompanied singer Bing Crosby on four recordings including “Step to the Rear.” He also arranged and conducted albums by Dinah Washington, Bobby Darin and even comedian Joey Bishop, singing country and western songs.

In 1970, Freeman won another Grammy Award for arranging Simon and Garfunkel’s Bridge Over Troubled Water LP.

Singer Keely Smith once said, “Ernie Freeman “was one of the best arrangers I ever heard.”

Freeman left Reprise in 1971 when the company became more rock-oriented and worked as a free-lancer for the rest of his life. He also composed and arranged for Stan Kenton.

Ernie Freeman died of a heart attack May 16, 1981 in Beverly Hills, California.

Ernie Freeman’s Biggest Records

1957 - “Jivin’ O Round (a rhythm-and-blues hit)
“Raunchy”
1961 - “Twistin’ Time”
1962 - The Stripper
1966 - Arranged and conducted many Frank Sinatra recordings including the Strangers in the Night
1967 - Backed Bing Crosby on four songs including “Step to the Rear”
Arranged and conducted Dean Martin’s “Everybody Loves Somebody”
1970 - Arranged and conducted Simon and Garfunkel’s Bridge Over Troubled Water LP

Evelyn Freeman

After most of the members of her band had enlisted in the Navy, Evelyn Freeman continued to play in Cleveland. She led a six-piece group that played at Oster’s Ballroom. Among members of that younger group were trumpeter Benny Bailey, tenor saxophonist Ben (“Bull Moose”) Jackson, Benny Miller and bassist Vic MacMillan.

After graduating from Central High School at the age of 17, she enrolled at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

She later joined the nationally popular Wings Over Jordan gospel group that toured the country and broadcast on national radio every week. “The reason I agreed to go with them,” she said, “was because they were going to New York and that was my dream.”

In New York, where Wings Over Jordan performed at Town Hall, Evelyn and her future husband, Tommy Roberts, went to 52nd Street one night to hear Dizzy Gillespie. “I had the temerity,” she said, “to walk up and ask to sit in. I think Dizzy was so shocked that he let me. That was a great thrill playing with Dizzy, Don Byas and Percy Heath.”

After doing some arrangements for a Wings Over Jordan concert that was broadcast by CBS from Carnegie Hall, Evelyn and Tommy left the group and settled in New York City. He was working as a nightclub singer. In 1953, they performed together with the Noble Sissle Orchestra at the Inaugural Ball for newly-elected President Dwight Eisenhower.

In New York, Evelyn and Tommy spent a lot of time at the Turf Club at 49th and Broadway where they frequently bought soup for struggling young artists. “We bought beef broth,” she recalled, “for a whole lot of people including Quincy Jones and Harry Belafonte.”

After buying a house in the Bronx and having four children, including future Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority Director Claire Freeman, Evelyn was getting calls from her brother Ernie in California. “You’ve got to come to California! I need help!” he said.

“He was on the verge of becoming the great arranger,” she recalled, “and it was just overwhelming him I think.”

After he sent them $1,000, she, Tommy and their four kids packed up and drove to California in 1956.

“Ernie was a procrastinator,” said Evelyn. “He would wait until the last minute to do his arranging.” She remembered a number of times, driving to recording sessions, with Tommy at the wheel of the car and she and Ernie sitting in the back seat, rushing to complete the arrangements.

She said she did much of the work on her brother’s arrangements. “I never got any credit for it,” she said, “but the musicians knew. They knew what was going on.” She helped write arrangements for hit recordings by Frank Sinatra, Vic Damone, Dean Martin and many others.
At the same time, her husband Tommy Roberts was entertaining at such Los Angeles nightclubs as the Cresendo, Ciro's and the Moulin Rouge.

"As we worked in the recording industry," she said years later, "we noticed that there weren't any black background singers. So we started training singers."

Eventually, she recalled, "Our background singers were recording with everybody from Pat Boone to T-Bone Walker."

They also formed a young people's singing group called the Young Saints. The group performed with such stars as Danny Kaye and Eddie Albert and appeared on a number of television programs including The Jonathan Winters Show and The Ed Sullivan Show.

In 1970, the Young Saints were invited by President Richard Nixon to perform at the White House. "That was exciting," she said, "because the Duke and Duchess (of Windsor) were the honored guests."

Evelyn and Tommy's group also entertained during the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

After all this, we'd love to ask those neighbors on East 83rd Street, who had complained about all the music at the Freeman's house, how they feel about it today.

Shep Shepherd

Trombonist William "Shep" Shepherd joined the Freeman Ensemble even before he entered Central High School. He was a student at old Rawlings Junior High School. He said, "We started young. Some of the guys were wearing knee pants."

By the time he got to Central, Shepherd was already a good sight reader and was busy playing in Cleveland. In addition to the Freeman Ensemble, he was playing with such Central students and future stars as Fats Heard and Bull Moose Jackson.

After playing with the Navy band during World War II, Shepherd became acquainted with the older Tadd Dameron who was arranging for Dizzy Gillespie. Dameron introduced Shepherd to Gillespie, who hired him (in 1946) for his big band. After listening to Shep sight read, Gillespie asked, "Are there any more at home like you?"

Shepherd toured all over the world with Gillespie for two years. "Dizzy was the most wonderful person you have ever seen," recalled Shepherd. "He was just like a teacher, a brilliant person, a deep person."

Also touring with Gillespie's band was singer Ella Fitzgerald. Shepherd called her "a beautiful person. When we got to a nice hotel, she'd give a nice party for the members of the band." Shepherd said the band members called Ella "Sis."

Shepherd, who played first trombone in Gillespie's band, seldom soloed. But in 1948, Dameron wrote a solo for Shep on an ambitious piece called "Soulyphony" that Shepherd and the Gillespie band performed at New York City's Carnegie Hall.

Shepherd later also played and recorded with James Moody.

Chink McKinney

James "Chink" McKinney, the drummer in the Freeman band when he was at Central High School, also joined the Navy in 1942 with other members of the Freeman group and performed with them in the Navy band.

Discharged in 1946, McKinney went to West Virginia State University and formed his own band before returning to Cleveland, where he played with such touring artists as Dorothy Donegan at the Theatrical Grill, Meade Lux Lewis at the Hickory Grill, and Rose Murphy.

McKinney recorded with the Chickadee Trio and composed such songs as "Creole Nocturne," "Dirty Shirt Blues," and "I'm In a Blue Mood."

McKinney died March 12, 1991 in Cleveland.

Howard Roberts

Howard Roberts, who played trumpet with the Freeman band, later became a well known and highly respected jazz musician, composer, conductor and educator.

Sheppard recalled that Roberts was the first alumnus of the Freeman group who made it on the national scene. During World War II, Roberts did not go into the Navy with other members of the
Freeman band. Instead, he was playing trumpet with the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. He also played with the popular Lucky Millinder Orchestra. Later in the 1940s, Roberts became the musical director of the Cab Calloway Orchestra.

He later became interested in singing and acting. He was the first black tenor in the Robert Shaw Chorale and created the role of Robbins in the international company of *Porgy and Bess*.

Roberts became the musical director of the Tony Award-winning musical *Raisin* and the all-black Broadway production of *Guys and Dolls*.

On television, Roberts served as music director for singer Harry Belafonte. He was twice nominated for television Emmy Awards for a show called *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* and for a gospel-spiritual show, *In Performance at the White House*.

Roberts also created choral arrangements for folk singers Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. In 1987 at Carnegie Hall in New York, he conducted a chamber orchestra and choir, performing his four-movement symphonic suite *The Spiritual Heritage*. It was a musical representation of the evolution of the black experience.

The one-time member of a teenage jazz band in Cleveland became professor of music at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York and served on the faculties at North Carolina Central University and Morgan State University. His choral arrangements of spirituals were published and widely used throughout the country by high school, college and choral organizations. He also wrote for the Boys Choir of Harlem.

Other members of the Evelyn Freeman band became very successful in other fields. Saxophonist Garfield Travis and Clarence Smart became Cleveland police officers. Lemuel Stewart became a doctor. Jimmy Gayle became a photographer for the *Plain Dealer*.

**Fats Heard and “Misty”**

Central High School graduate Fats Heard was the man responsible for one of the most durable songs in jazz.

Eugene Heard got his nickname (he was chubby) from friends at about the same time he got his first set of drums for Christmas when he was eight years old. He began taking lessons when he was at Cleveland’s old Outhwaite Junior High School. By the time he got to Central, Heard played well enough to join the marching band and orchestra. Nehemiah “Chief” Story recalled practicing at Heard’s home at East 38th and Scovil.

While he was still in high school, Heard played a date at Benny Mason’s Farm with saxophonist Coleman Hawkins. Benny Mason’s, also known as “the Cedar Country Club,” was a place on Cochran Road in Solon where black entertainers frequently socialized.

After high school, Heard studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music and served in the World War II Navy.

After the war, he joined Lionel Hampton’s band but didn’t get along with the leader. He said Hampton offered him all sorts of raises but apparently forgot to tell his wife Gladys who handled the money for the band.

![Erroll Garner](image)

Erroll Garner

After playing with various groups in New York, Heard (in 1953) joined Erroll Garner, the little pianist from Pittsburgh who frequently sat on a phone book to reach the keyboard and grunted as he played. Garner was one of the most popular jazz performers of the early 1950s and helped bring jazz to a much wider audience.

Heard first played with Garner in January of 1953 at Storyville in Boston. Heard said they rehearsed for more than three hours, but he quickly learned that Garner seldom played any song the same way twice. Bassist Wyatt Ruther had written down all the keys during rehearsal and was surprised when Garner didn’t play in the same keys when he got on stage. Heard later said Garner, who did not read music, “just played where it sounded good to him.”

Heard was a member of the Erroll Garner Trio from 1953 to 1955 and made a number of records with Garner. The first session was on February 27, 1953, when they recorded 13 songs. They recorded 17 more in March while they were playing every night at Birdland in New York City.

In James Doran’s biography of Garner, *The Most Happy Piano*, Heard is quoted as saying, “I used to kid
Erroll a lot because sometimes he was just sitting at the piano. I would say, ‘What are you thinking about? Looks like you’re dreaming about something.’ Then,” said Heard, “Garnier would play a little melody, only about four bars.” They were the first four bars of what was later to become Garner’s most famous composition, “Misty.”

When the trio was recording an LP called Contrasts for EmArcy Records (on July 27, 1954), they had run out of songs and needed one more to fill the album. “What can we play?” asked Garner.

Heard suggested “that little tune.” The trio began improvising on the four-bar melody. It was the first recording of “Misty,” a song that became a jazz classic.

A short time after the Garner Trio played at the Loop Lounge on Prospect Avenue in Cleveland (June 1955), Heard decided to spend more time at home with his family. He left Garner, played for a while in Cleveland, and went out on the road from time to time with Teddy Wilson, Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae.

Heard settled in the Mount Pleasant area of Cleveland. He operated the very popular Modern Jazz Room near the old Central Market in the 1950s. He also became a real estate salesman, established his own Heard Realty Company in 1974, and moved to Shaker Heights.

Heard died at Lakeside Hospital in Cleveland December 5, 1987 at the age of 64.

Willie Smith

Saxophonist and arranger Willie Smith grew up with trumpeter Benny Bailey. Smith recalled, “I went to Central High School and Benny went to East Tech, so I changed from Central and went to East Tech because we lived a couple doors from each other on East 36th Street. We came up together and Benny was playing trumpet a while before I started playing. We were such good friends, I said, ‘Boy, I gotta learn to play saxophone so Benny and I can play together!’” They played together in marching bands and jam sessions and went out together to hear Jimmie Lunceford, Count Basie, Fletcher Henderson and Benny Carter.

In 1945, when Smith was 19, he and Bailey were playing with the band of Scatman Crothers in Akron. They went to California with Crothers and stayed at the Civic Hotel with such other musicians as Charlie Parker and Miles Davis.

Three years later, Smith and Bailey both joined the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. “That was beautiful,” remembered Smith, “traveling with Hamp! He had a blowing-type band, a band where you had a lot of fun. We’d go in a club or a theatre and just tear it up! Everybody was out in the aisles!” Smith wrote and arranged for the band. He wrote “Cool Train” that was recorded by the Hampton Orchestra.

Willie Smith

In the 1960s, Smith worked for seven years for Motown Records, writing for such artists as Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross, the Tops, the Temptations, the Vandellas and Marvin Gaye. He wrote a medley that Diana Ross and the Supremes performed on the Ed Sullivan television program. He recalled that he looked at the TV “and listened to what I had written. It went over beautifully!”

Beginning in the 1970s, Smith led his Little Big Band in Cleveland, continued writing, and quietly worked with youngsters and performed for the sick and elderly.

In 1999, Smith composed and arranged for Joe Lovano’s 52nd Street Themes compact disc. It included five Smith arrangements of the compositions of Central High School graduate Tadd Dameron plus a Smith original, “Deal.” The album won a Grammy Award and the DownBeat Critics Poll as the best jazz album of the year.

Gay Crosse

Central High School alumnus Gay Crosse, who was born in Mobile, Alabama (August 15, 1916), played saxophone and led a popular jazz band, the Good Humor
Six, for more than 30 years in Cleveland.

In 1945, Crosse directed a music and dance revue in Cleveland entitled Jumping the Blues. Wes Landers, who played drums with Crosse, said (in an interview with researcher Phil Schaap) Crosse would hold the sax while he directed the band but seldom actually played it. Crosse’s chief historical claim to fame is the fact that in 1951 he hired a young saxophonist named John Coltrane to play with his band. Coltrane later said, “Crosse used to be with Louis Jordan and had a little band that was patterned after Louis’ band. He sang and played something like Louis.”

Although there is still some debate among jazz historians, the 24-year-old Coltrane apparently toured with Crosse. Saxophonist James Moody said he remembered hearing Coltrane play with Crosse’s band in Cleveland. Coltrane also made several records with Crosse in early 1951. Included were “Bittersweet,” which was re-issued in a Coltrane boxed set (Last Giant: John Coltrane Anthology) in 1993, and “Fat Sam From Birmingham.” Crosse also recorded such singles as “Gotta Stop Lovin’ You” and “I Got a Feelin’” and a LP entitled Swallow Dollow for RCA.

During his career in Cleveland, Crosse played frequently at the Blue Grass Club at East 55th and Cedar, at the Club 100 at East 100th and Euclid and at Cedar Gardens at East 97th and Cedar.

Barbara Lee remembered that her father, Edward “Chinch” Lee, played alto sax with Crosse’s group. She told me they would practice at Lee’s home at East 74th and Quincy. Lee played with Crosse at the Blue Grass and toured the South. At the time, Lee was working as a guard at the Cleveland House of Correction. He died in 1962.

Crosse also operated the Gay Crosse Hotel at 2117 East 83rd Street and the Musicians and Entertainers Club next door. Longtime Cleveland drummer Lawrence “Jacktown” Jackson remembered many jam sessions in the basement of Crosse’s club. Jacktown told me he recalled Oscar Peterson and Oscar Pettiford jamming at Crosse’s Musicians and Entertainers Club.

The private club with a small one-way window in the front door was raided May 29, 1960 by liquor agents who said Crosse’s club had been selling liquor illegally for four years. An article in the May 30, 1960 Plain Dealer said, “Sledge-swinging liquor raiders smashed into a long-established neon-lit ‘club’ yesterday in another pre-dawn strike aimed at liquor cheat spots.” Crosse maintained it was a misunderstanding. He said he was operating a legitimate private club.

Crosse, the man who had hired the young John Coltrane and was a prominent Cleveland jazz musician for three decades, died at the age of 54 March 9, 1971 at Huron Road Hospital in East Cleveland.

The Johnny Powell Orchestra

One of the most unusual and popular big bands in Cleveland in the late 1940s was led by Central High School graduate Johnny Powell.

Like many others, Powell was completely fascinated by the big jazz bands of the 1930s and ‘40s. “As a child,” he told me, “I used to take a stick and stand in front of the radio and direct the music – Glen Gray and the Casa Lorna Orchestra, Paul Whiteman – all those big bands.”

By the time Powell got to Central, he found other students who were also attracted by the big bands. “Every Friday,” he recalled, “you wouldn’t find many of us in class after 12 o’clock because everybody was at the Palace Theatre (to hear the big bands). We’d sit through two or three shows.”

But, unlike many of his friends at Central, Powell was not a musician. He never learned to play an instrument. “I wasn’t playing anything,” he said, “I just liked to lead the band in front of the radio. I had no musical ability about playing an instrument. I just wanted to lead a band and imitate Cab Calloway and Jimmie Lunceford. Those guys were my idols.”

It wasn’t just the big national bandleaders who attracted young Powell. He was also admiring older Cleveland musicians, including pianist Tadd Dameron. “Tadd was writing ‘If You Could See Me Now’ at the Cedar Gardens basement,” said Powell. “I used to go around in the back and sneak down there where the trash was and look through the window. We used to watch him practicing that tune.”

Powell’s father, who had run a nightclub in New York City during bootleg days, was by 1946 working as a waiter at the Cleveland Athletic Club. John Powell, Sr. had a big plan for his son who dreamed of becoming a bandleader. When Johnny, then in his early 20s, was in New York, his father began putting his plan together.

“While I was gone,” Powell said, his father “sat down with some members of the CAC and told them his plan. He got eight members of the club to buy shares in the ‘Johnny Powell Orchestra, Incorporated.’”

The elder Powell sent his son a telegram, telling him to hurry home to Cleveland for a surprise. When Johnny returned, his father made him wait overnight to learn what the surprise was.

Johnny was smiling as he remembered, “The next day we went to Benny Miller’s studios at 105th and Superior. I went there not knowing what was going to happen. The door opened and here are 18 guys sitting behind music stands. My father said, ‘This is yours!’

“I could have fainted,” said Powell. “And my father said, ‘Now you can really wave that stick!’”

Powell’s father had used the money he persuaded Cleveland Athletic Club members to invest to hire a
group of Cleveland musicians, most of whom had just been discharged from the Navy and had played together in the Navy band at Bunker Hill, Indiana.

“When they came back home, my father recruited them,” said Powell. “He was the first person in Cleveland to pay musicians to rehearse. He wanted to have the best and he wanted them to be on time.”

Twenty-three years old and unable to play a note, Johnny Powell became the leader of his own big jazz band. “All I did,” he said, “was wave a stick. The rhythm moved me and I danced to the music.”

The band included trombonists Shep Shepherd and Bernard Simms, saxophonists Harold Arnold and Willie Smith, trumpeter William Foster; pianist Ernie Banks; and drummer Bobby Smith.

“Our first engagement,” said Powell, “was in Kent. Then, we went to Alton, Illinois, and a series of one-nighters.” With the motto “Giving the Nation Syncopation,” the band played gigs in Cleveland and around the Midwest. Powell’s father had even bigger plans for his son’s band.

“Lionel Hampton and his wife Gladys appeared at the Palace Theatre,” said Powell, “and my father met him and talked to him about my band. Hampton wanted to buy into the organization. They made an agreement where Hampton would get the musicians for my band and, in turn, my band would follow behind Hamp and be known as ‘Lionel Hampton’s Protégés.‘”

Powell said his band traveled with Hampton for a while, but it became difficult for the leader of “Hampton’s Protégés,” who really did little more than stand in front of the band, wave a baton and put on a show by dancing to the music.

“I was embarrassed a couple of times,” admitted Powell, “when I was called to play something. So I decided to do ‘Flyin’ Home.’ I’d pick up a drum and lead the band out of the place to the street, make a circle, and go back in.”

With his 18-piece band traveling with Hampton, Powell was performing regularly and getting paid more than some of the better-known jazz groups. He said, “At one time, I received just as much money as Dizzy Gillespie for a full engagement and he was a highly-touted musician.”

When the band was playing in Chicago, Powell ran into fellow Central graduate Freddie Webster, who had become one of the most respected trumpet soloists in jazz. In 1946, Webster decided to join Powell’s band.

“Freddie was really a character,” said Powell. “He had the most beautiful tone that I ever heard in my life. When he would sound off on his trumpet, it sounded like music from manna. And we all recognized that. It was acknowledged in Cleveland by all the musicians because he was really good.”

Earl Douthitt, another member of Powell’s trumpet section, remembered when he first heard Webster. “I heard that big tone,” said Douthitt, “and I said, ‘Oh, my Lord!’ He sounded like five trumpets.”

With Webster in his trumpet section, Powell’s Orchestra played many gigs in Cleveland, including at a nightclub his entrepreneur father opened at East 55th and Euclid.

“In fact,” said Powell, “we opened the Palladium which had been the Ten-Ten Theatre, right by the Pennsylvania Railroad station there. They brought my band in to play with the big names.”

Powell’s orchestra made one record for the Paramount Record Company of Cleveland. On one side of the 78 rpm disc was “Cedar Avenue Blues” featuring Willie Smith on alto sax and a vocal by Eugene Jordan. The flip side was Duke Ellington’s “Perdido” featuring a trumpet solo by Webster.

A few months after recording with the Johnny Powell Orchestra, Webster recorded “If You Could See Me Now” with Sarah Vaughan and Tadd Dameron.

Powell said one of his band’s biggest fans was Cleveland Don King, who would later become a world-famous boxing promoter. “Anywhere we played in Cleveland,” said Powell, “you could depend on Donald King and his entourage to come and listen.” King had known Powell’s father since the 1930s when they were both working at the Canterbury Country Club.

Powell continued leading his band until 1952 and then, like his father, became a waiter at the Cleveland Athletic Club. He had realized his childhood dream of leading his own big jazz band and later looked back on it as a highlight of his life.

Powell died in 1998.

Old Central High School, which had produced so many outstanding jazz artists, was closed when a new Central High School was constructed in 1940 on East 40th between Central and Cedar. Central was merged with East Tech and the old building was used as a junior high school for several years before being torn down in 1952.

While the old building was gone, the memories of music at old Central High School and the jazz musicians who had started there continued for generations.