

**“African American Cultural History Relative to Blues Music and Its Origins
in Paxico, KS, 1890-1930”**

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Throughout American history, many towns have left behind rich and elaborate details of their historic backgrounds. Other smaller towns, on the other hand, have left behind little or no clues to understanding the historic roots of a community. The amount of information left behind in communities also varies culturally, yet during the late 19th century, little information might be found pertaining to African-American cultural history. Such is the case in Paxico, Kansas, in which very little has been officially documented concerning African American cultural. In studying the demographics of Paxico, it is evident that this was at one point a predominantly black community. Moreover, it is then significant to note the cultural bonds that might have brought black people together to this particular community and what cultural aspects were essential in maintaining their traditions and their origins. In primarily focusing on the significance of music, jazz and blues specifically, within the African American community history of Paxico and uncovering the historic roots behind the Paxico Blues Festival created by Marvine McKeithen, the lasting historical influences of this community and its transformation into a center for music in Wabaunsee County has united the cultures of the area.

The Paxico Jazz and Blues Festival

The Paxico Blues Festival, a fairly recent annual event, has become a prominent source of distinction for the small town. Established by Marvine McKeithen, a former Paxico resident, the Paxico Jazz and Blues Festival has historic roots that date back for Marvine during the late 1930's growing up in a small town. Marvine recalls her initial interest in blues music with the

introduction of her black father's guitar playing and her white mother's talents in piano playing and "always having music in her life." Growing up Paxico, Marvine and her sister spent their time learning skills on the piano, "playing everything that they learned by ear, playing by listening and making up tunes themselves." Additionally, joining in the Glee Club in high school and having continual influence from her father and mother grew to love music more and more. Waiting until she was retired and having moved to Kansas City in 1953, Marvine put on her first blues festival at 67 years old in Kansas City and in "loving music so much, wanted to give something back to the community and in being biracial, wanted to see the world forget about looking what color of our skin is and be like one big happy family." As Marvine sat in a local club in Kansas City, she "heard a voice inside her head that told her to go home," her home in Paxico.¹ Understanding Marvine's life events is the song by popular blues lyricist Robert Johnson:

"I'm gon' get up in the mornin',
 I believe I'll dust my broom,
 I'm gon' get up in the mornin',
 I believe I'll dust my broom...
 I believe, I believe I'll go back home,
 I believe I'll go back home,
 You can mistreat me here, babe,
 but you can't when I go home."²

Marvine was also inspired to return to her home, and in doing so, share with others her history and connect the community through music. As she arrived home to Paxico, stopping by in a local antique shop owned by long-time Paxico resident Steve Hund to inquire as to whether there were any black families left in the neighborhood, Marvine walked through the shop door declaring,

¹ Telephone Interview with Marvine McKeithen, December 9, 2008.

² Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings

“I’m home!”³ Soon following after discussion with Steve Hund and Mike Hopler, another Paxico shop owner, they asked Marvine to bring the African American traditions home to Paxico through developing a blues festival in Paxico. In returning to her home and starting the blues festival in Paxico, Marvine had reattached her traditional cultural roots and helped establish part of the legacy of the community and had made it permanent, and uniting the community through blues music.

Kansas City: Roots of Jazz and Blues Music

In understanding the impact of blues music in Paxico, it is important to understand the origins of blues music and how the spread of this style of music made a permanent impression on the community. The birth of jazz and blues music in Kansas originated from Kansas City in the 1920’s and continues today with clubs and events held throughout the city. Kansas City is world renowned for its rich jazz and blues history which as result has also left its mark on surrounding towns and cities. The roots of Kansas City jazz are quite varied. Blues singers of the 1920’s and ragtime music greatly influenced the music scene. Settings such as dance halls, cabarets and speakeasies fostered the development of this new musical style. Many great musicians received the opportunity to start musical careers during this time, traveling up to 1,000 miles between jobs.⁴

Kansas City’s 12th Street became nationally known for its jazz clubs, gambling parlors and brothels, earning the city the moniker, “The Paris of the Plains” and at its height, 12th Street was home to more than 50 jazz clubs. Just six blocks to the north, jazz also flourished at 18th & Vine, which became nationally respected as the epicenter of the city’s African-American

³ Personal Interview with Steve “Bud” Hund, December 8, 2008.

⁴ www.visitkc.com/things-to-do/entertainment/jazz-history/ “Kansas City Jazz and Blues History”

community.⁵ Blues music is also known to be derived from religious and old work songs that predated the Civil War and has been described “as an everyday medium through which feelings can be aired freely.”⁶ In the history of Kansas City music, blues formed the basic vocabulary for KC-style jazz. The blues originated as a rural Black vocal music with a style improvised to the rhythms of work. That early rhythm evolved and gave birth to the blues, and eventually to Kansas City jazz.⁷

Ethnic Composition in Paxico

It is evident that blues and jazz music played an essential role in uniting the Paxico residents. The blues tradition continues today with the continued celebration of bringing those who grew up in Paxico back home to honor this particular aspect of African American cultural history. During the late 1800’s in Paxico, there were “no white people within five miles of the place” and “nearly a handful of whites in nearby Newbury community,” strongly emphasizing the African American majority within this area.⁸ The black population in Paxico began to steadily decline by 1930 and in current census data from 2000, the African American population in Paxico today is less than one percent of the total population, with only two black individuals in the community out of a total of 211 community members.⁹ The African American decline in the community was a direct result of the Depression in the 1930’s and many left Paxico for the cities of Topeka and Kansas City.

⁵ www.visitkc.com/things-to-do/entertainment/jazz-history/ “Kansas City Jazz and Blues History”

⁶ Courlander, Harold. “Negro Folk Music, U.S.A. Columbia Press, 1963.

⁷ www.visitkc.com/things-to-do/entertainment/jazz-history/ “Kansas City Jazz and Blues History”

⁸ www.skyways.library.ks “History of Paxico”

⁹ <http://www.localcensus.com/city/Paxico/Kansas>

Unification of Cultures

In Nathan Pearson's, *Goin' to Kansas City*, he explains how jazz music within the Kansas City area created a community that was "extraordinarily supportive, demanding, and artistically uplifting."¹⁰ In comparing his text concerning the environment that was created with the influence of music in Kansas City with interviews that I have conducted with members of the Paxico community and surrounding area, it is evident that music in general played a substantial role in uniting the African American community in both instances. Wabaunsee County Museum curator, Alan Winkler, recalls as a young boy riding his bike in his hometown of McFarland and "having my attention attracted by loud, loud music coming from an old building in the community."¹¹ He distinctly recalls the use of tambourines and drums as the African Americans came from out of town to meet and hold their church services there in McFarland as the rent was cheaper than other surrounding areas. Also notable to Mr. Winkler was remembering a solitary white man coming out of the building and exclaiming "hallelujah" as the church dismissed and the members dispersed¹². This memory provides evidence that the African American church services and music not only brought together the black community but also those of other races and united the community with celebration through music with non-segregated services.

The desegregation of these church services in the smaller communities also seemed to be more readily accepted than would be those held in larger areas such as Kansas City or even Junction City where strong feelings of racism appeared more strongly keeping segregation in tact in social events. Although Mr. Winkler lacked the knowledge of the exact origins of the members of the church, it was clear to him that they gathered in McFarland from various other surrounding communities. In Charles Coulter's work, "Take Up the Black Man's Burden:

¹⁰ Pearson, Nathan W. *Goin' to Kansas City*.

¹¹ Personal Interview with Alan Winkler. Wabaunsee Co. Historical Society. March 2, 2009

¹² Personal Interview with Alan Winkler. Wabaunsee Co. Historical Society. March 2, 2009.

Kansas City's African American Communities," he describes the popular perception of black life in Kansas City with jazz as seen as the essence of African American communities at that time. He additionally explains the impact of music in churches as "an indispensable and fundamental anchor for African American communities throughout the rest of the nineteenth century." Just as Mr. Winkler remembered seeing the church service in his hometown of McFarland in a rented storefront space, Coulter also describes the popular venues for African American church services in Kansas City as congregations of "gatherings of like-minded individuals in rented or borrowed space in former residences or storefronts" until churches could be established explaining how the black churches were supported by unity through the various institutions within the African American community¹³. In comparing the experiences of African Americans in surrounding communities to the African American residents of Paxico it is evident that they differed substantially, as at one point in time, the Paxico population consisted of over half of African American residents.

The ethnic composition of old Paxico was far different from that of the surrounding communities who had few African-Americans living within their neighborhood. The original African American settler in Paxico was a blacksmith named Jack Pride. Pride proved to be the forerunner of a moderately widespread black migration to the new settlement in the town of Paxico, promoting other family members and friends from the south to reside in the newly formed community. Pride, a former slave, had come to Paxico from Nashville, Tennessee in 1873 and those who followed him to the settlement were part of the exodus out of the south. This migration brought "scores of Negroes to the Paxico settlement" the settlers continued to settle in the vicinity of Paxico for the next ten years.¹⁴ Most of the African American settlers worked as

¹³ Personal Interview with Alan Winkler. Wabaunsee Co. Historical Society. March 2, 2009.

¹⁴ <http://www.localcensus.com/city/Paxico/Kansas>

farmers until the Rock Island railroad was set through in 1886 and many then were employed with the railway line.

Origins of Blues

The African American cultural aspects of the Paxico community were carried with those who came to live in Kansas from their places of origin, specifically the former slaves from the south. The time frame that follows this period provides further proof that as the Civil War was brought to a close in 1865 and the 1879 fever exodus began, many freed blacks then made their way into Kansas, bringing with them their strong ties to their cultural heritage with music's substantial influence. The influence of jazz and blues music in Paxico is also strongly derived from the musical movement originating in Kansas City, Kansas. Blues has evolved from an unaccompanied vocal music and oral traditions of African-American ex-slaves and has been dated back between 1870 and 1890.¹⁵ Although the lyrics of many blues songs are soulful and melancholy, the music as a whole is a powerful, emotive and rhythmic music celebrating the life of black Americans.

Blues is a folk music, but a "special one which has been subject to pressures peculiar to the situation of the Negro in the United States, having developed during the period when the status of the Negro was changing and having evolved in the years of migration and conflict¹⁶." During the slave era however, laws were put into effect to prevent the use of music by the slaves as found in a decree that states, "whatsoever master or overseer shall permit his slaves, at anytime hereafter, to beat drums, blow horns, or other loud instruments, shall forfeit 30 shillings for every such offense.¹⁷" Evidence such as this explains the significant part music played in the

¹⁵ Haskins, James. "Black Music in America: A History Through Its People". N.Y., 1987.

¹⁶ Oliver, Paul. "The Blues Tradition." 1968. Pg. 2

¹⁷ Walton, Ortiz. "Music: Black, White, and Blue." 1972. Pg. 20.

lives of African Americans and how it provided a means of spiritual uplift in times of hardships. Laws such as this also account for one of the single most important development in African American music¹⁸. Blues music and its trace to African sources is the field holler which has been described as “a long, loud musical shout, rising and falling and breaking into falsetto¹⁹.” A holler would be answered by a shout from a worker elsewhere in the field and “therefore stands to reason that these shouts and hollers evolved into the collective work song with its chanted and rhymed couplets, and that the work songs evolved into the blues²⁰.”

African American music was additionally forced to undergo a major transformation because of the absence of the drum during these times. The enforcement of anti-drum laws in the United States made it necessary to transfer the function of the drum to the feet, hands and body by way of the Spirituals during the slave era and by way of instrumental music after the Civil War in the new form of black music called jazz²¹. Jazz originally began in the dance halls and the bordellos of turn-of-the century New Orleans and was indeed a thoroughly African American art form. Most of the early jazz and blues players were black and carried their rhythms to Chicago, New York, and most importantly concerning Paxico, to Kansas City. The phonograph machine also dramatically expanded the popularity of jazz and blues which could now be heard at home and styles picked up and played in local taverns.²²

Additionally, the history of blues music in the United States coincides with the development of “juke joints” as places where African Americans went listen to music, dance and often gamble after a hard day's work. The transition from slavery to sharecropping, small-scale agricultural production and the expansion of railroads in the southern United States also gave

¹⁸ Walton, Ortiz. “Music: Black, White, and Blue.” 1972. Pg. 21.

¹⁹ Davis, Francis. “History of the Blues”. 1995. Pg. 33.

²⁰ Davis, Francis. “History of the Blues”. 1995. Pg. 34.

²¹ Walton, Ortiz. “Music: Black, White, and Blue.” 1972. Pg. 22.

²² Henretta, James A. “American History, Vol. 2”, 2008.

inspiration to the form of blues music in black culture.²³ “The blues were nurtured in the farms and settlements of the South, reached maturity in the ghettos of the Northern cities and emerged to become a dominant influence on the popular music of the world as no folk music has ever had so dramatic a history or widespread distribution in the United States²⁴ .

Instruments in Blues Music

Although during the slave era, instruments were not permitted for use in some regions, they serve as a vital part in the creation of jazz and blues music. The tambourine was used for a variety of different reasons including: praise, joy, gladness, rejoicing, triumph, singing, warfare, victory, celebration, processions, and welcoming²⁵ . “Timbrel Praise” is the term used to describe the use of tambourines in church services and worship²⁶ . An example of a tambourine likely to be similar to one used is shown in the photograph below:



Figure 1. Tambourine, circa. 1900. This photograph displays a tambourine that likely resembled ones used in musical celebrations. SOURCE: www.timbrelpraise.com.

²³ Haskins, James. “Black Music in America: A History through Its People”. N.Y., 1987.

²⁴ Oliver, Paul. “The Blues Tradition.” 1968. Pg. 2

²⁵ www.timbrelpraise.com

²⁶ www.timbrelpraise.com

The tambourine is now accepted as an acoustic, un-tuned instrument belonging to the percussion section of the orchestra. It has an indefinite pitch and is used to maintain rhythm and contribute generally²⁷. As previously mentioned, many former residents of Paxico and surrounding communities recall the use of loud drums and tambourines in both holiday and traditional celebrations and also as a significant musical contributor in church services. Other instruments aside from the tambourine that would have been likely used in musical celebrations include the banjo or guitar such as pictured below.



Figure 2. Photograph of banjo and guitars that likely resemble ones used by blues players.

Instruments certainly served a significant role in specifically to the genre of blues music within the African American community. The use of such instruments served as a means of expression for those partaking in the festivities as its use was monumental enough to create a lasting memory in the minds of those who audibly witnessed the church services and celebrations in the surrounding towns.

²⁷ www.timbrepraise.com

Specifically relating to Paxico concerning places of musical refuges for members of the community, both black and white, was a local tavern called “Lu Lu’s” owned by Sam Mongerson as seen in the photograph, below:

Figure 3. Lu Lu’s Bar and Billiard Hall. Circa. 1920. This photograph displays seven local men at the local tavern sharing beverages interracially. SOURCE: Lannan, Vida Wrench. “Our Little Town: Paxico, KS”, 1986.

“Lu Lu’s” was located on the main street on the outer east side of town which served as a bar and billiard hall and one of the only licensed brothels in Kansas from 1887 to 1927.²⁸ With many of the African American men employed at the stock yards with the Rock Island railway line, the tavern served as a relaxing venue for retired railway workers to play their blues music.²⁹ While many of the illegal clubs of Kansas City flourished, virtually mocking the "Prohibition" of

²⁸ Personal Interview with Mike Hopler, owner of shop located in former tavern, December 8, 2008.

²⁹ Personal Interview with Steve “Bud” Hund, December 8, 2008. Ancestor of Joseph Hund, former Paxico Community Member.

alcohol, the booming industry of liquor and gambling turned out to be a monetary opportunity for black musicians also who capitalized in the entertainment business. The effects of events occurring in Kansas City during the booming years of blues and prohibition surely began to trickle down into the smaller communities such as Paxico who also felt the influence of the jazz movement. An additional place of refuge and relaxation for many African Americans living in Paxico was down by the Mill Creek, where they danced, picnicked, and celebrated religious baptisms.³⁰ Celebration and entertainment events were not isolated solely with Paxico residents alone but brought in many residents of towns in surrounding neighborhoods. For entertainment, residents of Paxico would travel to nearby towns such as Alma and McFarland and “get together and go from house to house playing blues music and dancing having to make our own fun.”³¹

Music and the Emancipation Day Celebration

Music within the Paxico community has not only brought together that community exclusively, but through its musical influences, brought many people from the surrounding Wabaunsee County area to share in this experience. Blues music played an essential part in the community’s annual celebration of Emancipation Day. By 1890, there were 250 persons inhabiting the Paxico community and “one of the busiest days each year was on August 1st and the celebration of the Negro community all over eastern Kansas as several hundred people came to Paxico from neighboring towns on the train to partake in the festivities” which thrived around the presence of music.³² A lodge hall free of segregation was constructed for social gatherings where large dances and picnics were held frequently in an interest for social and cultural progress. Celebrations such as the Emancipation Day festival allowed the neighborhood to enjoy

³⁰ Personal Interview with Rex Fiedler, Paxico Resident December 8, 2008.

³¹ Telephone Interview with Marvin McKeithen, December 9, 2008.

³² “St. Mary’s Star” newspaper, 1977. Wabaunsee County Historical Society.

“music, beer, barbeque, and baseball for both men and women and black and white.”³³ Events such as the Emancipation Day Celebration relate to Marvine’s current revitalization of the African American culture in Paxico today as she holds her Paxico Blues Festival that has recently attracted “over 5, 000 people in attendance from all races and from all over.”³⁴ Additionally, excerpts from a 1891 edition of the Eskridge Star explains an instance of a “colored gathering” which describes “blacks coming from all over to take part in the Emancipation Day activities” and “with the all the music being played, if anyone could get people up and dancing, it is them.”³⁵ Newspaper columns such as this explain the impact that music had on the African American community not only in Paxico, but also took part in bringing together blacks from around the surrounding area to celebrate together through the use of song and instruments. Other newspaper columns from the Eskridge Star contain columns that describe African Americans traveling to various celebrations such as “Wesley Page went to Paxico on Friday to meet with others of his race³⁶.”

Another article states a similar instance describing “several spring wagon and buggy loads of young colored people going to Paxico Saturday, to celebrate the emancipation of slaves with their people of that section³⁷.” It is then evident from these articles printed in the Eskridge newspaper that group celebrations brought together the African American community and that the primary meeting place for these celebrations was in Paxico. In an interview conducted former Paxico resident Mabel Wrench, she recalls the Emancipation Day celebration in Paxico as “a picture here in town, they has it in Woodman Hall across from the elevator. Sometimes they had it in Zellar’s Grove and they’d go from early in the morning until late at night. The livery was

³³ Thompson, Louis Carlton. “History of the Paxico Community”. 1953.

³⁴ Telephone Interview Marvine McKeithen, December 9, 2008.

³⁵ Eskridge Star Newspaper, Microfilm, Feb. 26, 1891. Kansas State Historical Society.

³⁶ Eskridge Star Newspaper, Microfilm, circa. 1900. Kansas State Historical Society.

³⁷ Eskridge Star Newspaper, Microfilm, circa 1900. Kansas State Historical Society.

really busy during the picnics and they only wanted to ride in the car and they would have me take them from town out to the grove and around the square. We called it a jittery ride and Negroes from Topeka, Kansas City, and Manhattan came by train and every other way to attend³⁸.” Stories such as this provide further evidence that events held in Paxico brought together the African American community in Paxico from cities as far as Kansas City to join in the musical festivities.

African American culture also played an essential role in church services in the Paxico community. Most of the blacks in the community were Baptist or Methodists and although “little segregation was evidenced in such matters as harvesting and railroad work where labor was shared equally with the whites and all attended the same schools, church services were held separately.”³⁹ The first colored Methodist services were held in what was once an old barn. King Officer, a direct relative of Marvine McKeithen, was one of the original trustees in aiding the building the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church known as the Graves Chapel C.M.E. Church located on the end of the main street in Paxico.⁴⁰ Although these religious services were primarily segregated, “white merchants often attended black church services to gain friendship and learn more about their culture.”⁴¹

Music in the Church

Marvine and her family specifically attended this church as her mother “being as religious as she was, although she was white, attended this church because of us girls.” Unlike larger cities such as Kansas City and Topeka where “if you were white and associated with blacks, they [the community] didn’t accept you anymore, whereas in Paxico, there was no

³⁸ Taped Interview with Mabel Wrench, Paxico Hotel, 1977.

³⁹ Thompson, Louis Carlton. “History of the Paxico Community”. 1953.

⁴⁰ Lannan, Vida Wrench. “Our Little Town”, 1986.

⁴¹ Thompson, Louis Carlton. “History of the Paxico Community”. 1953.

difference, you could go wherever you want.”⁴² Additionally, reports of African American church services were known “to be heard for half a mile on a clear day and were a colorful part of life of the Paxico community.”⁴³ Examples such as this exemplify the cultural emphasis black music had on the community’s social development. Historically, after Emancipation, blacks established separate church facilities and congregations to create their own communities, escape white control, and worship in their own culturally distinct ways.⁴⁴ In Paxico, however, the African American church services were often embraced by the whites in the neighborhood. For some African Americans, the kind of spirituality learned through these churches worked as a protective factor against the corrosive forces of poverty and racism from larger nearby cities. These particular African American religious practices continued in the Paxico community until in the early 1930’s when most of the black population had slowly drifted away to the larger cities of Topeka and Kansas City.⁴⁵ The C.M.E. church has since been replaced by the Paxico Community Senior Center but the historical importance of the church and its members still exists with the preservation of the original church bell from 1909 as seen in the photograph below.



Figure 2. Paxico C.M.E. Church Bell. The remainder of the C.M.E. church is sets on what is now the Paxico Seniors Center located at the end of Main Street.

⁴² Telephone Interview with Marvine McKeithen, December 9, 2008.

⁴³ Thompson, Louis Carlton. “History of the Paxico Community”. 1953.

⁴⁴ Henretta, James. “American History, Vol. 1”, 2008.

⁴⁵ Lannan, Vida Wrench. “Our Little Town”. 1986.

The original bell of the C.M.E. church still stands as a commemorative piece of the churches historic roots of African American culture in Paxico, KS.

As the community celebrates annually the Paxico Blues Festival and “Marvine’s Comin’ Home” celebration, it is clear that music’s historical and cultural impact on the community in the early 1900’s has created a lasting impression on its members. Marvine is now preparing for her sixth annual Paxico Blues Festival and expects a turn out for the event, in a community with a current total population of 199 individuals, of more than 6,000 guests for the next year.⁴⁶ With the efforts of Marvine to permanently solidify African American culture within the Paxico community, she has brought together numerous towns from all over the country. In Marvine’s determination of her purpose in “believing in it so much and wanting it to happen so much,” she has proven herself successful in creating a Blues Festival to help uncover and strengthens the historic roots of the Paxico community.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Personal Interview with Steve “Bud” Hund, December 8, 2008.

⁴⁷ Telephone Interview with Marvine McKeithen, December 9, 2008.

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