

# Cy McLean and the Trailblazers of Black Jazz in Prewar Central and Eastern Canada

Wade Pfaff

Volume 51, Number 2, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099594ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Pfaff, W. (2022). Cy McLean and the Trailblazers of Black Jazz in Prewar Central and Eastern Canada. *Acadiensis*, 51(2), 121–151.

## **Cy McLean and the Trailblazers of Black Jazz in Prewar Central and Eastern Canada**

THE STUDY OF JAZZ IN CANADA'S BLACK COMMUNITIES must begin with the fascinating stories of the lives of the first generation of big band leaders in the 1920s and 1930s, who overcame grave personal and professional obstacles due to their skin color in a turbulent time. Although these African Canadian musicians struggled to make lives for themselves as professionals, the fast-paced changes taking place in the music industry after the Second World War and the Canadian media's lack of attention combined to make them invisible to all but a few historians. This research note examines the career and family history of Cyril (Cy) McLean and compares his accomplishments with those of two other important band leaders who gained large audiences in Canada during the interwar period (1918-1939) – Ollie Wagner and Myron (Mynie) Sutton – in order to discuss the fact that there were racialized barriers in Canadian entertainment. Each of these men left their homes in small Black communities across the country and went on to create some of the first all-Black Canadian swing bands in Canada. The "Great Migration" of southern American Black people to the industrial urban cities of the northern United States during the first half of the 20th century occurred in an east-west fashion in Canada, with Black Canadians gravitating towards the centre of the country for community, opportunity, and a more equitable business climate.

This research note also draws attention to the ways in which African diasporic music has helped shape Black Canadians' resilience and political will, which in turn has helped unite Canada's diverse African diasporic population. Each of the three musicians mentioned above – Cy McLean, Ollie Wagner, and Mynie Sutton – were important influencers in the fledgling jazz industry of Canada, but when the public's taste changed in later years all three men returned to physical labour jobs to support their families. These trailblazers of Central and Eastern Black Canadian jazz, sadly, are almost completely forgotten today, except by Canadian music historians. Their life stories are inspirational studies of perseverance, dedication to art, and the maintenance



**Figure 1 – Cy McLean, *Toronto Star*, 24 June 1969 (photographer Doug Griffin).**

Source: *Toronto Star* Photograph Archive, Object Number TSPA\_0067429F.

of personal dignity in a society that was full of admiration for Black people's artistry yet lacked empathy for their lack of civil rights or poor quality of life.

During the Great Depression in Canada, there were no federal laws dictating racial segregation. But right up to the end of the Second World War, local customs and regional business practices ensured that there were very

few premier performance venues in Central and Eastern Canada that allowed Black Canadian artists much less Black customers. The best jobs were always reserved for union members only, and Black people were not welcome in most Canadian union locals until Cy McLean and his band broke through these racial barriers in 1944. Prior to that landmark year, Black Canadian musicians had to play under an American union card or perhaps under the Coloured Clef Club of Montreal union card (an all-Black organization). Big stars from the United States, such as Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, could play in the top venues, but they had to enter from the rear and arrange for dwellings themselves with the local Black community because reputable hotels in Central and Eastern Canada did not allow Black patrons. Cy McLean and the Rhythm Rompers were very active in Toronto during the Second World War, but by the 1960s, as swing music continued to lose popularity, McLean ended up playing his brand of “sweet” jazz in some of the less-desirable venues around Toronto with just one or two accompanists while maintaining a second job to support his family. Cy McLean’s story is representative of many unknown artists’ struggles, which were (and are) not unique in Black Canada even today.

Cy McLean’s family came to Canada as part of a modest migration from the West Indies that started in 1901. Black West Indians and Americans from the southern states came to fill jobs at the new state-of-the-art Dominion Iron and Steel Company (DISCO) plant in Sydney, Cape Breton Island. McLean’s uncle Reginald came to Canada in 1907 from St. Lucia, and was working at the steel plant as a labourer for four years before his father, George McLean, arrived in 1911.<sup>1</sup> McLean’s mother Geraldine immigrated the following year, accompanied by their son Reginald, 2 years old, and their newborn daughter Dorothy. Reginald and Dorothy were born in Brazil, so George must have been working in Brazil prior to arriving in Canada, but he and his brothers were from Barbados. The whole George McLean family could read and write English by the 1921 census, so they were granted full citizenship and listed their race as “British.” Cy McLean was born in Sydney, in 1916, during the Great War.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the century, Sydney was a busy international seaport. Steel production, coal mining, international telegraph wires, and the war overseas kept the city bustling. The area where Black people lived in Sydney was a crowded, multi-ethnic neighbourhood called Whitney Pier. “The Pier,”

1 Reginald McLean (1923), # 79, British Empire Steel Corporation employment records (unprocessed), acc. 78-141-611, Beaton Institute (BI), Cape Breton University.

2 “George McLean,” in 1921 Census of Canada, ancestry.ca.





**Figures 2 and 3– Backyards on Tupper Street in Cokeville, c. 1950.**

Source – Item # CA BI 91-689-22650 and Item # CA BI 91-691-22652, 1972 (Raytel Photography), Beaton Digital Archives, BI.

as it is still known today, was a melting pot of European and African diasporic ethnicities, located on the dirty side of the steel plant opposite the city of Sydney. In addition to the African Canadians who had settled there in previous centuries, such as the descendants of formerly enslaved Americans, Jamaican Maroons, and Black Loyalists, Whitney Pier was home to Southern and Eastern Europeans, Asians, and Jews. The center of the Black community was named “Cokeville” by the locals as it was closest to the foul-smelling coke ovens and the railway tracks. The neighbourhood was in a perpetual state of disrepair and neglect.<sup>3</sup> This is where George McLean bought a house at 34 Hankard Street. Reginald, George’s older brother, had been living in a rooming house just up the street with other West Indian labourers prior to George’s purchase, but he soon moved in with the family.<sup>4</sup>

Cokeville was a busy retail district at the beginning of the century, with Black-owned grocery stores, bakeries, and shoemakers as well as Turkish baths and Chinese laundries. During the 1920s and 1930s, blues and jazz music were still a novelty and dances such as the Charleston and the Lindy Hop were becoming very popular among Black and white youths alike. The Black community in The Pier had a diverse transatlantic ethnic mix during the 1930s, mainly British subjects from Barbados, Guyana, Grenada, and Black Americans from Alabama, Louisiana, and the Carolinas.<sup>5</sup> All of these ex-slave cultures contributed to the musical melting pot in Whitney Pier, now a national historic site due to the ethnic diversity that existed there a century ago.<sup>6</sup>

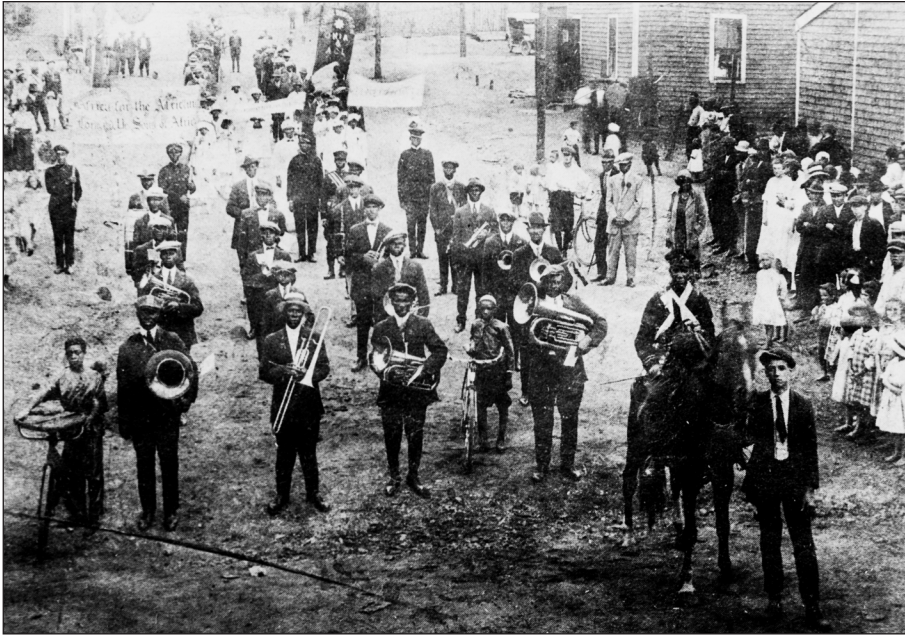
Churches and benevolent societies in The Pier represented dozens of cultures and ethnicities from Europe and the British Empire. Many had bands, which contributed new music styles, chord patterns, and playing techniques to the emerging jazz idiom. This “melodious racket” was first played in Whitney Pier after the First World War by musicians from the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in festivals, celebrations, and street parades.

3 Map of Cokeville, 1902, in Elizabeth Beaton, “An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904,” *Acadiensis* XXIV, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 83.

4 “George McLean” 1921 Census of Canada, ancestry.ca. Reginald McLean’s British Empire Steel Corporation Employee Record (1923), acc. 78-141-611, B1, indicates that he lived on Tupper St. in 1911 and at 34 Hankard St. in 1922; he was injured that year and sent home.

5 Beryl Braithwaite, “Perspectives from The Pier: A Woman’s View,” in *From The Pier, Dear!: Images of a Multicultural Community*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Keating and Elizabeth Beaton with Whitney Pier Historical Society (Sydney, NS: Whitney Pier Historical Society, 1993), 83-5.

6 Parks Canada, Directory of Federal Heritage Designations, “The Development of Whitney Pier National Historic Event,” from [https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page\\_nhs\\_eng.aspx?id=14276](https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=14276).



**Figure 4 – Black nationalist parade on Laurier St., Whitney Pier, 1921. The banners in the back affirm “Africa for the Africans.”**

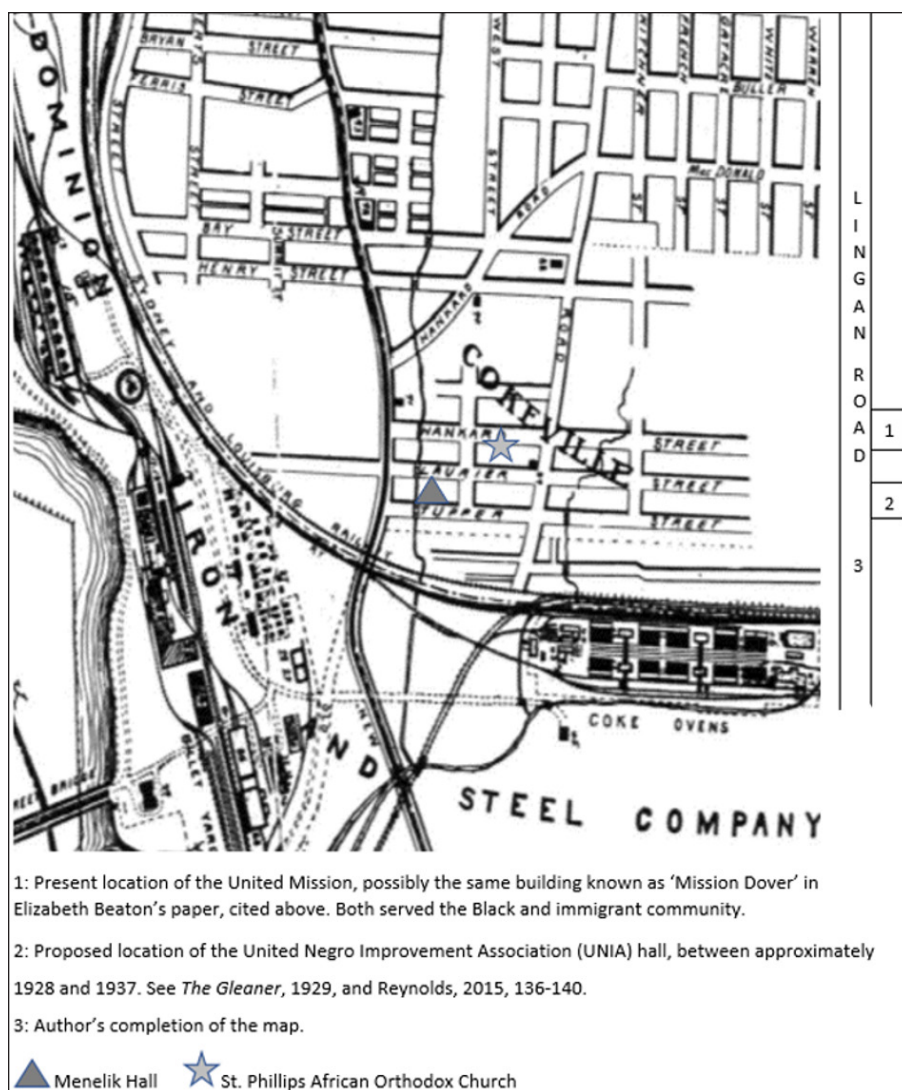
Source: Ref. # 78-112-1862, 1921, Beaton Digital Archives, Beaton Institute, NS.

The UNIA Hall started life on Lingan Road around 1920 but was moved to Laurier Street and renamed the Menelik Hall in 1936. The community also had the Colored Young People’s Society on Hankard Street, and the Oddfellows Hall nearby.<sup>7</sup> Black people, regardless of their education or country of origin, had very few job opportunities in Canada during the interwar period, but many were very enterprising. A few multi-skilled Black men in Eastern Canada worked in music, competed in sports professionally, and worked a day job in the coal mines, steel plant, or as a sleeping car porter in order to make ends meet. Working conditions such as these required mobility, creativity, and self-confidence. But the Black-owned business district that began to flourish in Cokeville around 1900, and that had provided such a fertile musical and political nursery for Reggie and Cy McLean, started to lose its population during the 1940s. The “Great Migration” of Black Canadians to central Canada had begun (and continues to this day).

Education was an important ethic for Black people from the Caribbean, Canada, and the United States at the turn of the century, but it was strictly

<sup>7</sup> Beaton, “African-American Community in Cape Breton,” 83.





**Figure 5 – Street map of Cokeville, Sydney Nova Scotia, 1902.**

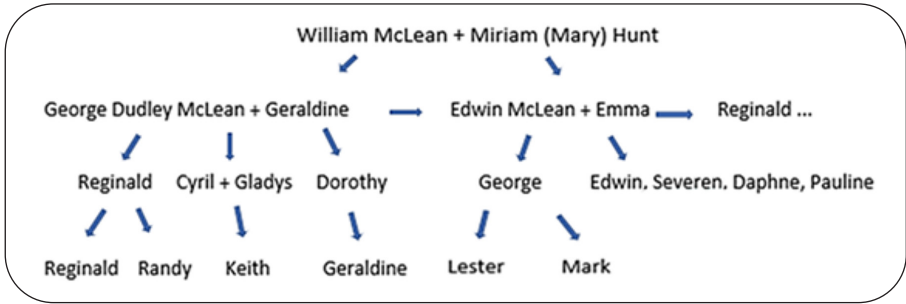
Source – Elizabeth Beaton, "An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904," *Acadiensis*, XXIV, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 93. Author inserted symbols to indicated Menelik Hall and St. Phillips African Orthodox Church.

segregated in Nova Scotia. During the interwar period in Eastern Canada, if the local Black population was high enough, separate schools for Black and white children were maintained, and the Black schools in Nova Scotia had trouble finding teachers. Children often left school at a young age to work to support the family. Guysborough County was the last district in Nova Scotia,



in 1936, to build a school for its Black children.<sup>8</sup> During the 1920s in Sydney, the school for Black children shifted around frequently: sometimes it was on Henry Street, further away from the plant, and other times it was provided by benevolent societies or one of the various Christian churches from other ethnic groups in the neighbourhood.<sup>9</sup>

Below is a family tree drawn by George McLean, cousin of Cy McLean and father of Lester and Mark McLean:



**Figure 6 – This family tree by Edwin McLean (the younger) was based on an earlier handwritten note by George McLean. Other names were taken from George McLean's death certificate, Dominion Iron and Steel Company Employee Records (1923), and the author's personal communication with Mark McLean, 2 May 2017.**

Source: Graphic done by the author.

George Dudley Mclean, Cy's father, was the youngest of five siblings, born to William and Miriam McLean in Barbados.<sup>10</sup> Only two of George's five siblings are known. George's elder brother Reginald came to Sydney as a labourer in 1907 and returned to Barbados in 1922 after falling sick at the steel plant.<sup>11</sup> Another brother, Edwin, moved to Guyana in 1908, then settled in England. Edwin had a son he named "George" (referred to as "George the younger" in this research note), who eventually moved to Toronto in 1965<sup>12</sup> and joined his cousins Reggie, the pianist, and Cyril, the famous bandleader, in Toronto. George the younger continued the family music legacy through

8 Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, vol. 2 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 380.

9 Beaton, "African-American Community in Cape Breton," 92.

10 George McLean Obituary, *Cape Breton Post* (Sydney, NS), 28 October 1950.

11 Reginald McLean, British Empire Steel Corporation Employee Record (1923), acc. 78-141-611, B1.

12 McLean Family Tree, 2016, on page [?] of this research note. The year of their arrival in Canada was provided by Mark McLean in an undocumented post-interview communication on 2 May 2017.

his sons – Mark and Lester. Both are accomplished musicians to this day, and will be discussed later in this research note. William and Miriam, the parents of George, Edwin, and Reginald, must have provided their children with a superior education in Barbados in the late 19th century because Canadian census records show that members of the McLean family were widely travelled by 1910. And George McLean was a very socially active and well-respected member of the Black community in Sydney according to his obituary in the *Cape Breton Post* on 28 October 1950.<sup>13</sup> The Black empowerment message of Marcus Garvey resonated with Black people around the globe and, like Garvey himself, the first generation of Canadian McLeans did not let racist obstacles impede their progress.

George was an educated and religious man, actively involved with the African Orthodox Church based in Barbados to which he donated part of his property in Whitney Pier. In 1925, the steel company donated a building to the West Indian community to be used as a church. George was assuredly instrumental in pressuring the steel company and the African Orthodox Church to establish this branch of the church in this remote corner of Canada for the growing West Indian community. He provided a part of his lot at 34 Hankard St. for this purpose, and there the church still stands today – bearing the same address as George's former home, even though they once shared a property.<sup>14</sup> In 1928, after three years of renovations, the church was ordained as St. Philips African Orthodox Church, and it remains the only branch of this church ever founded in Canada.<sup>15</sup> George was a fireman at the steel plant and was also a member of the Independent Order of Foresters in Whitney Pier and the Oddfellows in Barbados.<sup>16</sup> Being a member of a club or social organization carried a lot of weight if you were part of the underprivileged classes in Canada, and his obituary makes it clear that George was well-loved by his multi-ethnic coworkers and neighbours alike.

When Marcus Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1919 in Jamaica, it was not long before he founded three branches in Cape Breton to serve the growing Black population who were working in the steel and coal industries. George and many Black Canadians

---

13 McLean Obituary, *Cape Breton Post*, 28 October 1950.

14 *McAlpine's City Directory for Sydney and Cape Breton County, 1918-19*, compiled and published by the Maritime Directory Company, Halifax, FC 2349.S9.M3, B1.

15 See Keating and Beaton, *From the Pier, Dear!: Images of a Multicultural Community*, 41.

16 "George McLean Obituary," *Cape Breton Post*, 28 October 1950.

got involved because the UNIA movement was widespread in Canada, with 32 chapters across the country in the 1920s and three in Cape Breton: Sydney, New Waterford, and Glace Bay.<sup>17</sup> Garvey's message of Black empowerment and unification is memorialized in his speech, given at the Menelik Hall in Whitney Pier in 1937, which was printed in the *Black Man*, 3, Number 10, July 1938, as "The Work That Has Been Done." Lines from this speech have been used in popular music by Bob Marley of Jamaica to help enlighten and strengthen discriminated peoples worldwide, such as "Emancipate yourself from human slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds."<sup>18</sup> Of the three chapters that were founded in Cape Breton, only the Glace Bay location remains.

George, like his parents in Barbados, saw to it that his children were well-educated. Public schools in The Pier date back to the 1890s, according to tradition, but from 1902 to 1905 the City of Sydney operated a school for "coloured" children, called the Cokovia School, which served the immigrant and Black community.<sup>19</sup> It is not known where Reggie and Cy McLean attended school, but the United Mission on Lingan Road was attended by Black children during the 1920s, and the building still stands today although it has been boarded up for many years. Another significant centre for African Canadian education was just a couple of lots down the street. The UNIA Hall taught both children and adults and hosted community gatherings and musical performances.<sup>20</sup> It has long been demolished, and the lot remains vacant today. In fact, currently, there are no businesses at all in the area formerly known as Cokeville – not on Curry's Lane, Tupper Street, nor Hankard Street. The only remaining institutions in the area are the Menelik Hall on Hankard Street and the St. Philips African Orthodox Church on Laurier Street (see map above). Both still serve the Black community of Sydney as they always have, but they are the last remnants of a once thriving Black neighbourhood, with its own Black-owned businesses, athletic and social clubs, and entertainment. The former Cokeville, or "Sin City" as the local whites called it during the Great Depression, is now a quiet enclave of retirees.

17 Graham Reynolds, *Viola Desmond's Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2016), 134.

18 Marcus Garvey, "The Work That Has Been Done," *Black Man* 2, no. 8 (December 1937): 10-12, cited in Reynolds, *Viola Desmond's Canada*, 136-40. The Bob Marley and the Wailers song using this phrase is "Redemption Song" from the band's 12th album *Uprising* (Island Records, 1980).

19 Beaton, "African-American Community in Cape Breton," 92.

20 *Nova Scotia Gleaner*, 5 October 1929 and see as well Keating and Beaton, *From the Pier, Dear!: Images of a Multicultural Community*, 51.

Many of Whitney Pier's Black men played musical instruments, presumably having learned to play them in their home countries.<sup>21</sup> Besides the new vinyl records and radio broadcasts, the sound of horns, fiddles, pianos, and guitars filled the air in The Pier and George McLean and his sons honed their skills within the developing music of the multiethnic neighbourhood. Reggie and Cy McLean also had exposure to white audiences as youngsters, who would sometimes brave the non-segregated dancehalls in Whitney Pier to hear jazz during the early 1920s. These music fans surely encouraged the two ambitious youngsters to seek out more profitable venues for their talents in Central Canada. Music halls such as Curry's Dancehall thrived in Cokeville before the first war, and the Cabana Club and the West Indian Cricket Club were still active after the Second World War.<sup>22</sup>

Most Black people in The Pier were new to Canada and they were loyal British subjects, and when the First World War broke out in 1914, many proved to be very patriotic. In 1916, the year Cy McLean was born, 180 Black Nova Scotians joined the No. 2 Construction Battalion, the only all-Black regiment in Canadian military history. With three small children to raise, George McLean did not enlist but he became a community leader. On 15 September 1929, George McLean was voted in as the president of the Sydney branch of the Universal Negro Improvement Association on Lingan Road. The article in the *Nova Scotia Gleaner* on the meeting that night recorded 31 financial members, but each UNIA hall also had its own contingent of Black Cross nurses, singers and musicians, educators, and young people.<sup>23</sup> In his acceptance speech, George called for unity within the Black community.<sup>24</sup> That same issue also reported on events at the New Waterford UNIA, which had reached a membership of 36 financial members and had held its opening celebrations that same month

21 Reynold, *Viola Desmond's Canada*, cover. There is a 1921 photograph on p. [?] of this research note of an African Canadian parade on Laurier St. on the cover, which is full of musicians.

22 Keating and Beaton, *From The Pier, Dear!: Images of a Multicultural Community*, 33.

23 The *Gleaner* reported on the Sydney UNIA's financial members only, but UNIA halls were famous not only for their Black Cross nurses and musicians (including singers and marching bands) but also for their educational programs for children and illiterate adults. During the Great Depression, one can assume that not everyone had enough money to contribute financially to the hall, so the actual number of members is probably closer to the entire Black population of The Pier, if not higher, if you include those Black people that lived in outlying regions without their own hall. Even Black people that disagreed with Garvey's concepts would have participated in parades, performances, and attended speeches.

24 "New Hall Opened" *Nova Scotia Gleaner*, 5 October 1929, Beaton Institute Digital Archives, <http://beaton.cbu.ca/atom/newspapers/nsgleaner/NovaScotiaGleaner-1929-10-05.pdf>.



and at which there were many musicians from Whitney Pier and Glace Bay (including horn players and singers). Although the evening's program does not mention the style of music being played, it was most likely spiritual music and early jazz because jazz represented modernity and freedom then as now.

That which we now recognize as jazz and rhythm and blues music began as a blending of imported scales, harmonies, and polyrhythms. These were founded in church spirituals, American blues, marching band music, classical, calypso, and popular American and European folk songs. These elements of transatlantic songwriting were as present in Sydney at the turn of the century as they were in New Orleans, the south side Chicago, or Harlem. Jazz was as popular in Cape Breton as in Paris or London during the late 1920s due to American movies and radio broadcasts, which had popularized jazz around the world. Like many other colonial nations that had previously practiced slavery and had experienced multiple waves of African diasporic immigration, Canada had no shortage of musical talent in its Black communities. UNIA halls across the country were instrumental in spreading the new music to Black audiences and musicians. The halls provided eastern Black Canadian communities with a sense of pride and fellowship, which was sorely needed at the time.

One of the first notable Black Canadian jazz bandleaders was Millard Thomas and his Famous Chicago Dance Band, based in Montreal, who played at the UNIA hall in St. Antoine as early as 1924.<sup>25</sup> The St. Antoine neighbourhood of Montreal had a large Black population, which was comprised mainly of Americans from the northern states, and it had a thriving jazz scene. During Prohibition, Quebec was quick to loosen its drinking laws and entice many American Black jazz musicians to settle there during the 1920s. Incidents of racist violence against Black people were not as common in Canada during the interwar period as they were in the United States, especially after the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith's racially inflammatory film, *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>26</sup> As a result, several American Black musicians moved to Canada during this time and started Canada's first jazz bands. Millard Thomas's band was the best of these, dating from the 1920s, but another notable Black jazz band from Montreal in that period was (Charles) Prevoa's Colored Jazz Band.<sup>27</sup>

25 Mark Miller, *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada, 1914-1949* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997), 22.

26 *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. D.W. Griffith (Epoch Producing, 1915).

27 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 76-83.

The Black communities of Montreal (St. Antoine) and Halifax (Africville) both had active jazz scenes during the 1930s and were close enough to visit by train for aspiring young musicians like Cy and Reggie McLean. And travelling to and from Ontario was not a problem if you had the money. A return ticket was affordable (\$16), and you could always sell the other half of your ticket at a profit if you wanted to linger on in any of the other Black communities in between where one had family or friends.<sup>28</sup> It is likely that Reggie, six years older than his brother, started playing piano in the dancehalls of Sydney, then migrated to Halifax, Montreal, and, finally, Toronto by the early 1930s, and was frequently travelling back and forth for work. Cy McLean grew up in this lively atmosphere of music, nationwide racial discrimination, and the mass dispersion of people during the Golden Age of Jazz and the Harlem Renaissance.

For his tenth birthday, George gave his son, Cy, a violin. Presumably he taught him how to play it, but Cy never liked it. In a 1962 interview, he stated, "I never did care for that violin."<sup>29</sup> Reggie had excelled at piano as a youth, and was playing with Canada's earliest Black jazz bands by the early 1930s.<sup>30</sup> He taught young Cyril how to play piano at 14 years old, and he became very good at it. In a 1962 interview, Cy McLean stated: "I figured if somebody hired me when I could only play a few chords, then maybe I could play piano."<sup>31</sup> When a travelling jazz band passed through Sydney in 1933 or 1934, Reggie introduced Cy to the band and he was offered a job. This band's name never got recorded, but perhaps it was Mynie Sutton's Canadian Ambassadors or Jimmy Jones's Harlem Dukes of Rhythm. Both bands toured Central Canada during the summer of 1934.<sup>32</sup> Soon, Cy McLean would become one their bandleader rivals and establish himself as one of the first Black jazz legends in Toronto.

Both Mynie Sutton's and Millard Thomas's bands had superior reading skills in 1935.<sup>33</sup> There were plenty of jobs available for qualified musicians during the silent film era. Orchestra musicians were constantly needed in theatres, ballrooms, and in every town for vaudeville acts, silent movies, burlesque shows, and dance music in nightclubs, private functions, and the

28 Helen McNamara, "McNamara's Bandwagon," *Telegram* (Toronto), 12 August 1950.

29 Ralph Thomas, "For Him Day Starts at Night," *Toronto Star*, 20 October 1962.

30 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 173.

31 Thomas, "For Him Day Starts at Night," *Toronto Star*, 20 October 1962.

32 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 162.

33 "Canadian Negro is Jazz Pioneer," *Brandon Sun*, 14 November 1962.

many speakeasies during Prohibition. Skilled Black musicians who could read music notation found work during the Great Depression, but most did not read music. So, the compositions of those many unnamed, Black musicians who did not record on vinyl and did not write their arrangements down on sheet music during the Great Depression will never be heard. Even the written music of regional Black bandleaders like Cy McLean, whose memorabilia and personal audio recordings have not yet been located, remain lost to historians.<sup>34</sup>

The lives of travelling musicians are often romanticized in music lore, but Black Canadian musicians' experiences were often lonely and unrewarding during the interwar period. Despite the diversity of the big city during the 1930s, the conditions for Black people in Toronto were much the same as they were in Sydney: segregated. In Toronto, for instance, Chinese people, Black people, and Jewish people lived side-by-side in one small, cramped neighbourhood close to College Street and Spadina Avenue, just as they did in Africville, St. Antoine, and Whitney Pier. As mentioned previously, the many diverse international cultures that lived in the Black neighbourhoods in the 1920s influenced the development of jazz's melodies, its rhythms, and its variety of phrasings. It is difficult to get a sense of what these early Canadian players sounded like because, from the 1920s to the 1940s, Black players were seldom recorded on vinyl or tape; some, though, played on the local radio, like Mynie Sutton and Oscar Peterson, who each had a radio show in Montreal.<sup>35</sup> Peterson had played with Sutton as a youth, but he was the protege of another Black Canadian pianist of note, Lou Hooper, and his own older sister, Daisy, the well-respected Montreal piano teacher. The whole family had been encouraged by Oscar's father, Daniel, and inspired by his talented older brother, Fred, who passed away when Oscar was young. Oscar gained world-wide notoriety in the late 1940s and remained Canada's foremost ambassador of jazz until his death in 2007.<sup>36</sup>

The difficulties experienced by most Black musicians were, of course, compounded by racism. At the beginning of the 20th century, for example, racist business and cultural practices were prevalent in every province. These

---

34 A few audio recordings of Black Canadian jazz musicians were compiled in 1986 by Harlequin Records in England featuring recordings made by the Compo Record Company in Lachine, Quebec, from the 1910s to the 1940s under the Apex label; see *Jazz and Hot Dance in Canada 1916-1949*, Harlequin Records, England, 1986, <http://citizenfreak.com/titles/315233-compilation-jazz-and-hot-dance-in-canada-1916-1949>.

35 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 19, 148.

36 "Oscar Peterson," *Canadian Encyclopedia Online*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/oscar-peterson>.

unwritten policies and racist practices were especially noticeable in the field of entertainment. Segregated dancehalls, theatres, and ballrooms were common in Canada, which prevented Black and white people from developing a greater appreciation for each other and which also served to marginalize many of Canada's great Black jazz musicians. In addition, minstrel characters in Blackface, portrayed by both Black and white performers, used vocal affectations from the southern states, extreme clownish behaviour, and old plantation songs to stereotype and parody Black people. These performances appeared regularly throughout the first half of the century in small towns across Canada and the United States. Travelling circuses, minstrel shows, and vaudeville acts were instrumental in bringing American jazz to Canada, even as it was being invented; but these self-deprecating minstrel performances were merely a means to an end for Black performers and musicians. The cross-border mobility of entertainers' lives in the 1930s helped inform and inspire the Canadian jazz community and increased the opportunities available for both Canadian and American Black musicians.

America and Canada had a lot in common during the 20th century. A casual glance at any media source during and between the two wars will show that denigrating images of Black people proliferated in every form of media. Racist sentiments were prevalent in advertising, print news, in silent films, sound recordings, and in cartoons, not to mention the many local minstrel shows. All these forms of media and entertainment parodied Black people and labelled them as no good and untrustworthy, and even though white Canadians had been living with Black people in Canada for almost four centuries, either as their owners or their neighbours, these racially stereotypical entertainments remained popular throughout the 1940s. Minstrel shows themselves had lost popularity in most of Canada by the 1940s, but in Nova Scotia there were still white minstrel troupes performing during the 1950s.<sup>37</sup>

During the first half of the century, and especially during the Great Depression, both Ontario and Nova Scotia had controversies concerning equal rights for Black people – controversies that occasionally erupted into violence. Institutionalized racism existed in law enforcement, education, the judicial system, labour rights, immigration policies, and social inclusivity, and people were dissatisfied on both sides of the issue. Many white people felt their jobs were being taken over by cheap immigrant labour, and that

---

37 City of Sydney, Annual Report, 1944, BI, and Reynolds, *Viola Desmond's Canada*, 158.



their neighbourhoods were being infiltrated by undesirables. In Toronto in 1933, for example, a group of Nazi sympathizers started a fight with a Jewish baseball team, which instigated an all-out riot.<sup>38</sup> In Trenton, Nova Scotia, in 1937, a Black homeowner barely escaped with his life when an angry mob of 100 white people stoned him for moving into the neighbourhood. The next evening a mob of 400 rioters proceeded to burn down his and two other Black homeowners' houses, forcing the Black homeowners to abandon their property. In the ensuing days the RCMP and the mayor of the town proved to be unwilling to pursue the case because of popular unrest.<sup>39</sup> Infringements on Black people's civil and legal rights in Canada were common in the first half of the century, and infringements continue to create an uneven playing field for Black people in Canada to this day. When Cy McLean began his career, racial inequality was the rule and not the exception.

In 1934 Cy McLean followed his brother Reggie to Toronto and would occasionally sit in for Reggie on the piano with the Harlem Aces, led by Harry Lucas. Both also played with Sam Morgan's Harlem Knights in the early years.<sup>40</sup> Morgan was a Toronto bandleader and entertainer who was reportedly more entertainer than musician, but he was very popular with white audiences. During these years, there was a small community of Black jazz musicians who travelled from Cape Breton to Ontario repeatedly and helped to spread jazz. Reggie and Cy McLean were two such Nova Scotian dreamers who ran away with the circus, so to speak, and began new lives in the big city as jazz musicians. Other Black Cape Breton jazz artists who gained attention were Warren Chiasson, the vibraphonist, who moved to New York in 1958, Alf Coward, the pianist with the Emilio Pace Band, and Alex Jones, the trumpeter.<sup>41</sup>

During the 1930s and 1940s only white people could travel in the full luxury of sleeping berths, with Black porters, dining cars, observation decks, and smoking rooms, although middle class Black people also travelled by rail because it was the most affordable way to go long distances. Black porters had virtually no job stability prior to the First World War, but at least the work conditions were somewhat less dangerous than the other jobs available to

---

38 Irving Abella and Harold Martin Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*, 3rd ed. with a new epilogue (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1991).

39 Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 419.

40 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 171-3.

41 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 210.

Black people; railway work also allowed them to explore new employment opportunities available to them elsewhere in Canada.<sup>42</sup> The earliest Black jazz musicians took advantage of this nation-wide mobility, and often worked as porters on the side. Their jobs were always contingent on white unemployment conditions, of course, and (racist) policies in the railway companies. Black porters earned much less than white railway workers and were not permitted to take on more skilled work for many years in any Canadian railway. By the end of the Second World War, the Order of Sleeping Car Porters had gained some bargaining strength, and they had also gained the respect of the Black community because “they were the chief political advocates of their communities.”<sup>43</sup>

Despite this increased mobility for Black people, by the end of the 1940s the best music venues in Canada were still restricted to all-white union musicians only. This is not to say, however, that no Black bands ever played in all-white venues before this time in Canada. Non-union dances, cruises, waterfront pavilions, and resorts featured Black bands on a regular basis during the 1920s and 1930s. During the war years, there were plenty of non-union venues that allowed Black musicians but not a whole contingent of Black musicians (at least in Canada). In most cases, in order to be accepted, the bandleader had to be a white musician. Cy McLean and the Rhythm Rompers are remembered as being the first all-Black, unionized, and Canadian-born jazz orchestra to play in a unionized establishment in Toronto – at the Colonial Tavern on Yonge St. in 1948.<sup>44</sup> But his was not the first unionized Black jazz orchestra in Canada. Reggie McLean had been playing in the Harlem Aces and other all-Black jazz groups in Toronto by 1933. Mynie Sutton performed with the all-Black Canadian Ambassadors in Montreal in 1933.<sup>45</sup> Millard Thomas and Charles Prevoa did it in Montreal before Mynie. In those days of speakeasies and gangsters, most Black performances would not have been advertised and so any records of the earliest all-Black Canadian jazz bands are incomplete and inadequate.

---

42 Helen McNamara, “McNamara’s Bandwagon,” *Telegram*, 12 August 1950; article provided by author Mark Miller in 2015 from his own records.

43 Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 11, 40.

44 “Jazz Pianist Cy McLean, 70, led Toronto’s First Black Band,” *Toronto Star*, 1 November 1986.

45 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 146.



**Figure 7 – Mynie Sutton.**

Source: Mynie Sutton, P019-02-10, Special Collections from Concordia University, Montreal/Quebec.

During the mid-1930s and the 1940s Cy McLean's various bands, alternately called the Rhythm Rompers, the Jumping Jacks, the Debonnaires, the Cy McLean Quartet, and other names, played on both sides of Lake Ontario's waterfront, from Port Dalhousie to Oshawa and further north into the Muskoka Lakes and Peterborough. The Rhythm Rompers played in the best non-union

venues around Toronto during the 1940s,<sup>46</sup> and, by the end of the decade, Cy McLean became the most popular bandleader in Toronto – playing at the Colonial Tavern, Canada's top jazz venue on Yonge St. in Toronto.

The UNIA halls were very important venues for the Black listening public. They were free shows, and they were close to the Black communities. During the 1930s, Black people were not permitted in any of the prime venues in Toronto, whether as players or as customers, so Black musicians and dancers often gathered at the UNIA Hall. Cy McLean is known to have played at the UNIA Hall in Toronto at 355 College St.,<sup>47</sup> and surely must have played at the Menelik Hall in Whitney Pier before he left home and/or at the original Sydney UNIA Hall (where his father had been president when he was 13 years old). Jam sessions with local white and Black musicians were still happening at the Menelik Hall during the 1960s at the same place where Marcus Garvey had spoken in 1937 while on his second Canadian tour.<sup>48</sup> Cy and Reggie McLean probably saw Garvey speak at the hall on 355 College St., Toronto's UNIA headquarters.

In 1937 Cy McLean was offered the leadership of the Rhythm Rompers, an all-Black Swing band, while their leader, Roy Worrell, was away on vacation. McLean accepted the job and remained the band's leader for almost 20 years. Worrell was a former member of both the Harlem Aces and the Harlem Knights from Toronto, known for his powerful trumpet solos and scatting vocals. When Worrell returned from his vacation, he decided to accept McLean's leadership and continued to play with his groups until 1947. Cy McLean and the Rhythm Rompers was merely a temporary name, but they became the first all-Black Canadian band in Toronto that year. They are also remembered as being the last all-Black band still playing in Toronto during the latter days of Swing Jazz.<sup>49</sup>

46 In 2015 author Mark Miller generously shared with me a collage of newspaper advertisements for Cy McLean's various bands that he found in the Canadian National Library in the Helen McNamara Fonds, in Ottawa. The file number is unknown to this author.

47 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 171.

48 "Red" Mike McDonald Interview transcript, McConnell Library, Sydney, 3 February 2017, in possession of the author. "Red" Mike discusses his jam sessions with the Coward brothers and Bucky Adams from the 1950s to the 1980s.

49 Thomas, "For Him Day Starts at Night," *Toronto Star*, 20 October 1962. This was written when he was presumed the only Black bandleader left in Toronto. The Rompers name lasted until approximately 1948, then they changed names quite a lot. Ollie Wagner was back in Edmonton by 1950. Presumably other Toronto bandmembers continued to play with Cy McLean throughout the 1950s; the venues they played during those years are not known. The Rhythm Rompers name can be confirmed from 1934–1948, the year they



Alfred “Tiny” Marsen was a saxophonist, the largest guy in the Rhythm Rompers, and known for being quite capable of singing all the crooning techniques of the day. Vivian Roberts was his bassist and arranger, and Sammy Richardson, a former track star who had run against Jessie Owens at the Berlin Olympics in 1936, was one of his drummers.<sup>50</sup> Ollie Wagner, a pioneering bandleader from Edmonton, also joined Cy McLean’s band, recognizing his musical talent and management skills.

Ollie Wagner was a notable character in his own right. He was known to be an ultra-perfectionist, a multi-talented natural leader, and a hot head. He started playing saxophone and singing in 1927 with the Moonlight Syncopators, a mixed-race jazz band from Edmonton, then founded his own all-Black band, the Knights of Harlem by 1934. He left Alberta’s Dust Bowl crisis in the mid-1930s, travelling both east and west, with the idea that he could make more money if he moved to the big city. He worked several types of jobs to survive, including shovelling coal, working in a meat plant, and picking up work in several white bands.<sup>51</sup> Like Mynie Sutton, Wagner had worked in many cities and played in many all-Black bands before the Rhythm Rompers ever existed. Determining who was the first Black Canadian musician to break the color barrier in Canada is a little difficult, as noted by author Mark Miller in *Such Melodious Racket*. A player like Wagner may have spent his life in Canada, but he was born in the United States. So too was the popular 1920s Montreal bandleader Millard Thomas, who left Montreal in 1928 to go to New York City. The pioneering Ontario-born pianist, Lou Hooper, who had been raised in Harlem and had played with Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, and Ethel Waters in the 1920s, went the other direction – returning to Canada and moving to Montreal in 1930. Many other American Black musicians returned home when performing became more difficult in Montreal during the Great Depression in the late 1930s.<sup>52</sup>

---

played the Colonial. By 1962, Cy McLean was playing alone at the Warwick Hotel. What he did and where he played during the 14 intervening years is unknown; see Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 171–6.

- 50 From 1934, the Rompers employed many drummers, including Willie Wright, Phil Williams, Don Carrington, Archie Alleyne, and Sammy Richardson (former Olympian); see Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 172–4.
- 51 See chapter on Ollie Wagner in Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 158–80. The difficulty in determining who the first Black Canadian musician to break the colour barrier in Central and Eastern Canada was discussed at length in the author’s personal telephone communication with Mark Miller on 3 January 2017.
- 52 John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1988), 33, 53; Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 103, 140–1.

In 1946, Wagner joined McLean and Worrell and left on the Lifebuoy Debonnaires tour. The promotional tour played small ballrooms and dance halls in small towns across southern Ontario at the end of the war when war rationing was still in effect. The admission price to see the band was merely a box of soap.<sup>53</sup> McLean's band members remarked that white people just gawked at them during this tour. It seems unlikely that these white people had never seen a Black person before because some of the earliest American Black settlements in Canada were in place by the 1880s in southern Ontario. Nevertheless, reports from McLean's musicians during this tour confirm this fact.<sup>54</sup> After taking over the Rhythm Rompers, McLean's bands played all the main venues on Toronto's lakeshore – the Top Hat, the Fallingbrook and Sunnyside pavilions, the Corsair, and the Strand Theatre – although not always under the same name. Other names used were the Cy McLean Trio, the Dixieland Rascals, and the Jumping Jack Quartet.<sup>55</sup>

In 1944, after pressure from the Top Hat's owners and scores of fans, Cy McLean and female vocalist Phyllis Marshall were the first Black musicians to be admitted into the Toronto Musicians Protective Association, Local 149 of the American Federation of Musicians. Marshall had worked with Percy Faith and Jack Arthur on CBC Radio as a teenager during the mid-1930s, and debuted with Mynie Sutton's Canadian Ambassadors at the Silver Slipper in Toronto in 1938.<sup>56</sup> After acquiring her union card in 1944, Marshall spent eight months touring in the United States with Cab Calloway's revue in 1946-1947. During the 1940s there were union locals in every major city in Canada and each with their own rules. Black people in Montreal, for instance, had their own Black musician's union called the "Canadian Coloured Clef Club," which was founded in 1928 and revived in 1935 under the new Canadian Federation of Musicians as the Canadian Clef Club Local 11. Mynie Sutton had been a member of the American Federation of Musicians in Buffalo from 1924-1931 when he joined Ottawa Local 180 for a year.<sup>57</sup> During the year 1932 he moved

53 Ralph Thomas, "For Him Day Starts at Night," *Toronto Star*, 20 October 1962.

54 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 175-6.

55 Advertisements for Cy McLean's different bands' names during the 1940s and 1950s are in the Helen McNamara Fonds, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and were generously shared with this author by Mark Miller in 2016 (reference number not provided). The band members continually used different names at different venues concurrently for almost two decades. There is no way to determine how many names were used when, and for how long.

56 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 150-1, 154-5.

57 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 151, 149.

to Montreal and was non-unionized, but he and the Canadian Ambassadors eventually joined the Canadian Clef Club of Montreal from 1935-1941 before he returned home after his father's passing; there he served on the executive board of the Niagara Region Musicians' Association, an integrated union, for more than 30 years.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Ollie Wagner had already joined Local 190 of the American Federation of Musicians in Winnipeg by the late 1930s when he was still working for white bandleaders.<sup>59</sup> Even worse, visiting Black musicians who were union members in America had been playing in Canada since the 1910s but Black Canadian musicians had few Canadian unions that would accept them; so most Black Canadian jazz musicians were relegated to the non-union venues on the fringes of the jazz world. One could still attain popularity on the fringe, as evidenced by Cy McLean and Phyllis Marshall in Toronto and Eleanor Collins in Vancouver, who are remembered as the race-line-breakers in their provinces.<sup>60</sup> Their popularity and acceptance influenced other Canadian cities' musician's unions across the nation to desegregate. Even more than Cy McLean, Phyllis Marshall, and Eleanor Collins, Reggie McLean, Sammy Richardson, Roy Worrell, and Ollie Wagner have been forgotten by music historians along with countless other Black musician since the advent of Black popular music in the 1880s but who are no less deserving of recognition. Due to the hostile climate of lessened opportunities and outright racism in Canadian society at the time, the lack of knowledge of such performers is not surprising; but it is undoubtably a disappointment to Black Canadians who want to know more about their own history.

Black performers needed to get paying gigs at the non-union white establishments during the Great Depression because the UNIA performances were put on for free. During his decade and-a-half of wild popularity as "Canada's Count Basie" in Toronto during the 1930s and 1940s, Cy McLean broke new ground. Archie Alleyne, Order of Canada (recently deceased) was his drummer for a short while at the Colonial Tavern and was one of McLean's great friends and admirers. In a 2015 interview, Archie remembers "the chap that actually broke that barrier was a talented Nova Scotian piano player named

---

58 "Myron 'Mynie' Sutton – Arts and Culture Wall of Fame," <https://niagarafalls.ca/living/arts-and-culture/wall-of-fame/2007-myron-mynie-sutton.acwof>.

59 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 269.

60 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 1545-5 and <https://bcblackhistory.ca/eleanor-collins/>.



**Figure 8 – The Colonial Tavern, 1973.**

Source: Toronto Library Archives, Series 377, Item 782.

Cy McLean. Both me and Cy pushed through a lot of the discrimination in music.”<sup>61</sup>

In 1947, the Lichtenberg brothers, Harvey and Goodwin, opened the doors of the Colonial Tavern on Yonge St. in Toronto, specializing in the best jazz music. On the 6th of March 1948 the club broke the unwritten custom of barring Black performers on Yonge St. and featured the band Cy McLean and the Rhythm Rompers, which had shrunk to a quartet by then. Prior to that day, Black people had not been allowed to perform on Yonge St. or attend performances; but after that performance, world-class jazz venues across Canada began to desegregate their stages and dancefloors.<sup>62</sup> Cy McLean was not a civil rights activist, per se, but he did challenge the prevailing system of unspoken racism in Canada and opened the way for other Black artists in the Canadian music industry. And he was certainly not the only Black Canadian fighting the system during the mid-1940s.

Aside from just the entertainment industry, unofficial racialized business practices existed in every type of business in every region of Canada during

61 Jabbari Weekes, “The Life and Times of Archie Alleyne, Toronto’s Greatest Jazz Drummer,” *Noisey* [online magazine], 2015, p. 6, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/6wq5ex/the-life-and-times-of-archie-alleyne-torontos-greatest-jazz-drummer>.

62 Jack Batten, “The Jazz Pianist Toronto Ignored,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 28 June 1969.

the 1940s. By the end of the Second World War, Black people in Canada started to fight the system in earnest through court actions and by utilizing the influence of the Black Press. There were very few Black newspapers in Canada in which to advertise during the 1940s, but reports on important Black Canadian court battles and announcements for significant entertainers, such as Cy McLean's performances, do appear in the *Chicago Defender*,<sup>63</sup> which had a Canadian section and maintained a strong presence in Canada and helped to promote Black advancement and success wherever it had distribution. One Black Canadian newspaper that made an impact on public opinion during the 1940s was the *Clarion*, an independent newspaper from New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. Published by political activist Carrie Best, the *Clarion* is remembered mainly for its reports in December of 1946 on the case of Viola Desmond, a businesswoman from Halifax who tried to overturn a conviction of an outdated seating regulation in a Nova Scotia theatre in New Glasgow.<sup>64</sup> Sadly, Viola lost her case and her Supreme Court of Nova Scotia appeal, but her story was a great inspiration to many Nova Scotian Black people. She has since been given a free pardon by the Canadian government for her offence and has been officially recognized for her role in attaining equal rights for Black people in Canada.<sup>65</sup> Cy McLean is only now, 75 years later, beginning to be recognized by music historians for his role in the fight for Black musicians' rights in Canada.<sup>66</sup>

During the Second World War Black Canadian musicians were gaining popularity on stages, but due to war rationing of vital materials very few vinyl recordings of jazz were taking place until the late 1940s. As a result, many skilled Black Canadian jazz musicians were not recorded during the heyday of big band swing jazz. Prior to the founding of the CBC in 1936, the few radio broadcasts that featured jazz were local to the city from which they were broadcast. Only the top Canadian jazz artists, such as Bert Niosi, Guy Lombardo, and Oscar Peterson, had national airplay during the mid-1940s.<sup>67</sup> Throughout their three-year stint at the Sunnyside Pavilion the Rhythm Rompers were broadcast on CKEY radio, but they were not recorded. Similarly, the Lifebuoy Debonnaires tour of 1946 may have been broadcast locally, and

63 Advertisement for Cy McLean, *Chicago Defender*, 6 January 1960.

64 *The Clarion* (New Glasgow, NS), December 1946, <https://archives.novascotia.ca/newspapers/results/?nTitle=The+Clarion>.

65 See <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/culture/designation/personnage-person/viola-desmond>.

66 See <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/toronto-feature-colonial-tavern>.

67 Miller, Mark, *Such Melodious Racket*, 19-20.



possibly even recorded by some radio enthusiast somewhere, but no recordings of his music have yet been found.<sup>68</sup>

Cy McLean continued to play his “light, polite jump” throughout the 1940s and 1950s, long after many other Black players had given up. In addition to playing nightly, he worked as a courier for Bell telephone and spent many years as a mail clerk with Imperial Oil while Gladys worked at the post office. Their only child, Keith, was born in 1943, and was known to be very likeable, musical, and industrious. In those days, McLean was playing five nights a week as a bandleader at the Top Hat on Toronto’s lakeshore and continued to play there from 1944 to 1947.<sup>69</sup> This was the hey-day of swing jazz, and Cy McLean was the man of the hour.

Cy McLean was known as a mentor to many young, budding jazz musicians in the Black community in Toronto during the war years. According to contemporary sources and his own admission, Cy’s style was reminiscent of Earl Hines, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington – musicians who were his heroes.<sup>70</sup> One night McLean was asked to fill in for Earl Hines at the Colonial, Toronto’s premier jazz venue in the 1940s, while Earl was playing the *Tonight Show* in Hollywood. Although he was nervous to be replacing his idol, he was familiar with the establishment and he brought the house down and impressed the critics as usual. He was also a great friend of Art Tatum, the virtuoso pianist, who always looked him up when he was in town.<sup>71</sup> Helen McNamara, writing for the *Toronto Telegram*, wrote extensively on Cy McLean from at least 1950, and she was the first to coin a phrase for his style: “light, polite jump.”<sup>72</sup>

As the swing bands continued to down-size during the 1950s, Cy McLean created a quartet from his favorite players. He was not a bebopper; he preferred the style of “sweet” jazz – a romantic, precisely arranged brand of big band jazz that emphasized romantic melodies and smooth solo performances.<sup>73</sup> The erratic and speedy runs required from bebop players may have been beyond his skill level, but McLean had a particular style of his own that he never

---

68 Two recordings of interviews with Cy McLean were commissioned by Imperial Oil. See Nancy Wood, interview with Cyril (Cy) McLean, Toronto, 1972, Imperial Oil Collection #IR-3b-9 as well as Barry Broadfoot, interview with Cy McLean, Toronto, 1979, Imperial Oil Collection IR-6-40, both in Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB.

69 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 174–5.

70 McNamara, “McNamara’s Bandwagon,” *Telegram*, 12 August 1950.

71 Batten, “Jazz Pianist Toronto Ignored.”

72 McNamara, “McNamara’s Bandwagon,” *Telegram*, 12 August 1950.

73 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 175.

abandoned, and which always provided him with many admirers and a good income. By the 1960s, many of McLean's bandmates and other pioneering Black musicians from across Canada had left the big cities and returned to their hometowns to do menial jobs or teach music; but Cy McLean was lucky to have a good job at Imperial Oil as an order clerk.<sup>74</sup>

Ollie Wagner continued to play with Cy McLean around Toronto until the end of the 1940s, but by 1950 he was back in Winnipeg working as a roofer and music teacher. He was offered a teaching job in Vancouver briefly, but when it fell through he ended up running a shoeshine stand to support his family.<sup>75</sup> This was a sad ending for an iconic musician who should be honoured for his contribution to Canadian culture and music history, even though he was born in the United States. Many Black Canadian jazz musicians ended up settling in the United States eventually, but not McLean. Throughout his career he stayed in Canada, believing that racism was far worse in America than in Canada: "I've never wanted to go down there for that reason."<sup>76</sup> Mynie Sutton, from Niagara Falls, also chose to stay in Canada for the same reason, stating in 1934 "We knew we were missing out on more fame and money, but we were having fun. . . . I never wanted to go back to the States, really. I knew I couldn't stand that pace. I would have been dead by now if I had gone [in 1927] to New York."<sup>77</sup>

Sutton, a skilled saxophonist and arranger, dropped out of high school to play with a jazz band from Cleveland, Ohio, in 1924.<sup>78</sup> After founding the Canadian Ambassadors in 1933, Sutton moved to Montreal and began a very successful stint for the Ambassadors in Montreal that continued until the late 1930s. Frustrated with the new union regulations in Montreal, Sutton returned to Niagara Falls in 1941 when his father passed away. He got a job as a welder at APEX Industries, which lasted for 29 years, and in 1943 he formed a new band there called The Casuals. He raised his family in Niagara Falls and continued to play as a local celebrity until his death in 1982.<sup>79</sup>

---

74 "Cyril G. "Cy" McLean Mount Pleasant Group, 2021 <https://www.mountpleasantgroup.com/en-CA/General-Information/Our-Monthly-Story/story-archives/york-cemetery/Cy-McLean.aspx>.

75 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 179–80.

76 "Moonlight Bandleader Prefers Canada to the U.S," *Jet Magazine* (Los Angeles), 27 December 1962.

77 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 153 (parentheses added by author Mark Miller).

78 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 153.

79 Myron "Mynie" Sutton – Arts and Culture Wall of Fame, <https://niagarafalls.ca/living/arts-and-culture/wall-of-fame/2007-myron-mynie-sutton.acwof>.

During the 1970s, when rock bands were taking over the best clubs, you could go see a jazz legend like Cy McLean for free at a strip club or restaurant. But McLean's "light, polite jump" style was a predecessor of Toronto's rock, folk, and pop music years later. Elements of swing jazz can still be heard in the rock music of bands such as the Guess Who, Jeff Healey, and the Barenaked Ladies (all from Central Canada). Cy McLean and his bands were ubiquitous in the Toronto scene under various names for more than 40 years and he surely had an influence on later jazz musicians from Toronto such as Lenny Breau, Moe Kauffman, and his great-nephew, Mark McLean.

When their father died in 1950, both Reggie and Cy McLean returned home for the funeral. Their mother had died several years earlier, and there was no one left to manage the property so it was turned into apartments for a few years before being torn down in the late 1960s.<sup>80</sup> As McLean got older he developed a pronounced hunched back, but he continued to play his music in Toronto and, in his later years, he enjoyed working in the garden at his cottage in Port McNicholl.<sup>81</sup> Residents in The Pier remember Cy McLean, his wife Gladys, and his German shepherd dog visiting Sydney for various occasions.<sup>82</sup> Although there is no evidence that Cy or Reggie McLean ever played in Sydney's jazz scene while visiting home, they may have jammed with local Black musicians at the Menelik Hall, or with members of several of the white swing bands that were popular at the time. Charlie Hillcoat's, Gib Whitney's, and Emilio Pace's orchestras were all active during the 1940s and 1950s in Cape Breton. Alf Coward, a Black pianist from Whitney Pier, formerly with Emilio Pace, was still playing jazz at Menelik Hall with "Red" Mike MacDonald<sup>83</sup> and Rudy Pace (Emilio's brother) well into the 1960s.<sup>84</sup>

Cy McLean's career began to falter by the 1960s and 1970s. In 1974, his son Keith was tragically killed in a car accident. Keith was a guitarist and

---

80 Author's personal communication with Whitney Pier resident Wayne Nichol, at his home at 83 Bentinck St., Sydney, NS, 6 April 2016.

81 McNamara, "McNamara's Bandwagon." *Telegram*, 12 August 1950.

82 Gladys Moe worked at the Willowdale Post Office as per author's personal undocumented communication with Glenville Moe, Whitney Pier resident, who attended his presentation on Cy McLean on 2 February 2017, at the McConnell Library in Sydney, NS. The Moe family connection was confirmed by George McLean in his family tree.

83 "Red" Mike MacDonald interview held on 3 February 2017, at the McConnell Library, Sydney, NS, in Wade Pfaff, "Transculturation in Black Jazz Scenes from Ontario and Nova Scotia During the Interwar Period: and Its After-Effects" (MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 2020), 206.

84 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 210.

a graduate of Ryerson Technical Institute's business program.<sup>85</sup> Being the couple's only child, his sudden death was undoubtedly a traumatic, life-changing event for the family. Despite the tragedy, Cy McLean managed to carry on. Throughout the 1970s, McLean maintained his job as an order clerk for Imperial Oil, and he continued to play at company functions. He played venues such as the Lobster Restaurant, and he accompanied exotic dancers at the Warwick Hotel Tavern in later years.<sup>86</sup> Writers from the *Star*, *Jet Magazine*, and the *Telegram* have written about his virtuosity and skill and have pondered why his career never blossomed into a national success story.<sup>87</sup> And none of Cy McLean's own personal recordings or memorabilia have been located yet, although it is possible there may be something in the personal memorabilia of Vivian Roberts (his arranger for many years) or one of his brother Reggie's descendants. More time is needed to locate the whereabouts of McLean's friends and relatives. McLean also hired a white arranger named Art Snider,<sup>88</sup> but he always tried to have Black musicians exclusively as band members and this is one of the reasons for which he is remembered. Finding recordings of his music are going to be crucial in any further research on Cy McLean. This author has, as a start, located two unpublished recordings of his voice made by Imperial Oil.<sup>89</sup>

Cy McLean's great nephew, Mark, has not forgotten him, although he never knew him. The son of George (Cy's cousin from England mentioned near the beginning of this research note), Mark McLean is a world-renowned jazz drummer living in New York. As a high school graduate, Mark won scholarships to the University of Toronto and York University for business and music performance. He chose music performance at the University of Toronto, and while attending that university Mark was invited to play for Oscar

---

85 "Keith McLean," Northview Heights Collegiate Institute, Class of 1964 & Friends blog, [https://www.classcreator.com/North-York-Ontario-Northview-Heights-Secondary-1964/class\\_profile.cfm?member\\_id=6741696](https://www.classcreator.com/North-York-Ontario-Northview-Heights-Secondary-1964/class_profile.cfm?member_id=6741696).

86 Thomas, "For Him Day Starts at Night," *Toronto Star*, 20 October 1962.

87 "Moonlight Bandleader Prefers Canada to U.S.," *Jet Magazine*, 27 December 1962.

88 Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*, 174. In the 1950s Art Snider (originally Sniderman) went on to manage artists like Gordon Lightfoot and start the United Music School in Toronto, direct the chorus on *The Tommy Hunter Show*, and start Chateau Records and the record label Sound Canada; see <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/art-snider-emc>.

89 These two recordings document Cy Mclean's relationship with the Imperial Oil Company, and his interests in 1972 and 1979. In the first one, the interviewer asks Cy about his musical career and leisure activities. In the second, the interviewer has a very rushed, disinterested tone, and only refers briefly to Cy's music; see transcripts on pp. 186-92 of author's "Transculturation in Black Jazz Scenes from Ontario and Nova Scotia."

Peterson – who would become one of his teachers and musical mentors. His first instrument was the piano, but as he became more interested in jazz, he gravitated towards drums. Like many a Torontonians, Mark was influenced and mentored by his great-uncle's friend and drummer Archie Alleyne. Since then, Mark has played with all of Canada's biggest jazz stars, such as Oscar Peterson, Holly Cole, Jane Bunnett, and Diana Krall as well as with international jazz artists such as Quincy Jones and Wynton Marsalis.<sup>90</sup>

Unlike Mark, Cy McLean never got the chance to be heard internationally. He played mainly around the Toronto area during his entire professional career. Indeed, by staying in Canada, he and his Canadian contemporaries effectively crippled their international careers because in their day there were very few opportunities to be heard outside of one's own region in Canada. Mark's older brother Lester, a saxophonist and guitarist who records independently and plays live in Toronto regularly, has this problem today: "You'll get no exposure if you stay in Canada."<sup>91</sup>

By the late 1960s George McLean's former home on Hankard Street in Cokeville had fallen into disrepair and was torn down as part of the city of Sydney's effort to rejuvenate the neighbourhood. Whitney Pier, though, fared better than other Black communities across Canada during the 1960s. From 1964 to 1970, for instance, Black-owned homes in Africville were taken from their owners, many of whom who had family members who had lived there as far back as the 19th century. These houses were demolished by city officials in order to help develop an upscale waterfront district, which has still not been built due to the legal battles taking place between the City of Halifax and Africville's former residents and their descendants.<sup>92</sup>

Black-owned homes in the Strathcona neighbourhood of Vancouver were also demolished during the 1960s to make way for new roads under the premise that the houses in Hogan's Alley were "dens of squalor, immorality, and crime."<sup>93</sup> Prior to his death in 1950, George willed his property to the St. Phillips African Orthodox Church. If he were alive today, George would be happy that the lot where the family house once stood was never built over; it

90 Mark Miller, "The Sound of a Truly Different Drummer," *Globe and Mail*, 6 January 2005.

91 Wade Pfaff and Sobaz Benjamin with Lester and Mark McLean, "Youth Now" radio program, CKDU Radio – Halifax, 27 November 2018.

92 See <https://humanrights.ca/story/story-africville>) as well as Tina Loo, "Africville and the Dynamics of State Power in Postwar Canada," *Acadiensis* 39, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2010): 23–47.

93 See <http://blackstrathcona.com/about/>.



has been turned into a churchyard, which hosts the annual Caribbean Sydney-Toronto Reunion that was founded in 1985.<sup>94</sup> It is unknown whether Reggie or Cy McLean ever attended any unofficial reunions prior to its official start. Cy McLean died at his cottage near Collingwood, Ontario – a picturesque community north of Toronto – on 29 October 1986.<sup>95</sup> He was buried at York Cemetery next to his son, Keith,<sup>96</sup> and was survived by his wife, Gladys, who lived until 2003.<sup>97</sup>

Heroes come in many forms. Cy McLean may have only attained regional success as a bandleader for a short while, but he made his mark on the fledgling jazz industry despite unfair social conditions and racist business practices. Most of McLean's bandmates eventually sank into obscurity as well, but he never gave up. He continued to play until his health would no longer permit it.<sup>98</sup> And even though he developed a pronounced hunched back as he aged, he never let his physical deformity impede him in his goals. He was a natural leader in his field, and an unwitting and underappreciated pioneer of Black civil rights in Canada for his role as leader of Toronto's first and last all-Black jazz orchestra. Cy McLean and the other Black bandleaders mentioned in this research note remain strong examples of Black Canadians' resilience, strength of will, and creative power. This research note, by compiling what is known of Cy McLean and his family for posterity, and by documenting some of the achievements of his African Canadian contemporaries in Central and Eastern Canada during the interwar period, will hopefully encourage more research on early Black Canadian musicians across Canada.<sup>99</sup>

WADE PFAFF

---

94 "Sydney-Toronto Reunion Celebrations Planned," *Cape Breton Post*, 31 July 2015.

95 Cy McLean Obituary, *Toronto Star*, 1 November 1986.

96 "Cy McLean," Mount Pleasant Group, 2017, <https://www.mountpleasantgroup.com/en-CA/General-Information/Our-Monthly-Story/story-archives/york-cemetery/Cy-McLean.aspx>.

97 In the hand-written family tree drawn by George McLean (the younger) in 2016, he tells us that Gladys McLean (nee Gladys Moe) survived Cyril by almost 20 years, dying in 2003. Very little is known about her life.

98 His last verified performances were at the Warwick Hotel in 1970; see Alex Barris, "NIGHT IN – NIGHT OUT," *Globe and Mail* (4 October 1950).

99 For more information on prewar Central and Eastern Black Canadian jazz scenes, see Wade Pfaff, *Transculturation in Black Jazz Scenes from Ontario and Nova Scotia During the Interwar Period: and Its After-Effects*.

**WADE PFAFF** est présentement inscrit au programme en culture et en communications offert conjointement par l'Université York et la TMU (Toronto Metropolitan University – anciennement Ryerson) et collabore avec son ancienne directrice de mémoire de maîtrise, Afua Cooper, à titre de chercheur, intervieweur, créateur de contenu et agent de liaison avec les organismes dans le cadre du projet d'élaboration d'un programme d'études en histoire des Noirs du Canada, intitulé *Une histoire des Noirs au Canada*. Dans le prolongement de son mémoire de maîtrise, qui portait sur l'histoire et la culture du jazz chez les Canadiens noirs de 1918 à 1939, sa thèse de doctorat couvrira les événements survenus des années 1890 aux années 1950, tout en examinant les questions de la formation de l'identité noire au Canada, de la tolérance et de la résistance, et de la transculturation dans les communautés noires. Il est également un artiste multimédia et un guitariste de blues et de jazz dont l'héritage vient d'Afrique du Sud. Il réalise des entrevues ethnographiques auprès d'universitaires et d'artistes, des enregistrements vidéo en direct, crée du contenu et des messages sur l'histoire de la musique pour les médias sociaux et fait du réseautage avec des groupes universitaires qui tentent d'utiliser les médias et la technologie pour faire connaître l'histoire des Canadiens noirs au public.

**WADE PFAFF** is currently enrolled in the Communication and Culture program at both York University and TMU (Toronto Metropolitan University – formerly Ryerson) and is continuing to work with his former MA thesis advisor, Dr. Afua Cooper, as a researcher, interviewer, content creator, and organizational liaison, in *A Black People's History of Canada* – the Black Canadian history curriculum development project. His doctoral dissertation will expand on his master's thesis's focus on Black Canadian jazz history and culture from 1918-1939 by covering events from the years between 1890 and 1950 while also discussing matters of Black Canadian identity formation, tolerance and resistance, and transculturation in Black communities. He is also a multimedia artist and blues and jazz guitarist whose heritage comes from South Africa, and he conducts ethnographic interviews with scholars and artists, videotapes live events, creates social media content and music history posts, and networks with university groups who are trying to use media and technology to bring awareness of Black Canadian history to the public.