

154th Emancipation Festival

16th Annual Emancipation Festival Speaker's Forum
July 29, 2016 – Grey Roots Museum and Archives

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Teach, communicate, and appreciate Black history. That is part of the mandate for the Owen Sound Emancipation Festival, which held its 16th Annual Speaker's Forum on July 29th at Grey Roots Museum and Archives. As part of the longest continuous running Emancipation Festival in North America (154 years!), this year's Speaker's Forum did just that: it clearly taught, communicated, and appreciated Black history. In addition to two formal presentations, the evening also included the *Archie Alleyne* Photo Exhibit featuring Canadian Jazz and Blues musicians, announcers, and booking agents; a social hour with the Coffin Ridge Wine Bar; the Grey Roots Exhibit *Black Roots in Grey*; and words of welcome from Al Barfoot, Grey County Warden and Mayor of the Township of Georgian Bluffs, Ian Boddy, Mayor of Owen Sound, Petal Furness, Manager of Grey Roots Museum and Archives, and Blaine Courtney, Emancipation Festival Chairman.¹



The *Archie Alleyne* Photo Exhibit featuring Canadian Jazz and Blues musicians, announcers, and booking agents.

While the Emancipation Festival successfully informs, educates, recognizes and celebrates the history of African-Canadians, especially the journey from slavery to freedom via the Underground Railroad, it also effectively and importantly identifies that injustices towards Blacks did not stop after the abolition of slavery in 1834 (British Commonwealth Emancipation Act) and 1863 (United States Emancipation Proclamation). Inequality and racism were still evident in Canadian society for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and furthermore, as a society we are charged with broadening measures for equality and

¹ (Photos taken by Susan Martin, Heritage Interpretation Supervisor, Grey Roots)

(*Unless otherwise cited, information came from the presentations at the Speaker's Forum)

eradicating persisting racism and prejudice in the twenty-first century. Both speakers for the evening clearly illustrated this.

The first presenter at this year's Speaker's Forum was multiple award-winning filmmaker, composer, poet, and singer-songwriter Cyrus Sundar Singh, who wrote, produced and performed "Africville in Black and White: How a National Historic Site and the Destruction of a Church have Reignited Racial Hatred in the Canadian City of Halifax." Dubbed "a brown man with a yellow guitar and a black camera," Sundar Singh had developed and directed numerous productions for CTV, CBC, VisionTV, Discovery Channel, MuchMusic, and Bravo, including his well-known *Crazy for Love*.² This 'site-specific ephemeral documentary performance' encompassed video clips, photographs, live music, and poetry. Accompanying him was Shelley Hamilton, a professional singer, actor, teacher and host, who sang and led songs while Sundar Singh played guitar. Songs included a number of Negro spirituals such as "Wade in the Water" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," as well as gospel songs like "Woke Up This Morning" and "Do Lord, Oh Do Lord." The interaction and participation between the presenters and the audience, especially in song and spoken word, was particularly effective because it engaged the audience and made the story come alive. By singing and speaking from the viewpoint of someone living in the past, the audience connected with the story in a deeper way. The interactive documentary told the story of Africville, a small community in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which Sundar Singh visited in July, 2014.

Africville was settled in the 1830s and 1840s, primarily by Black Canadians seeking employment in Halifax. These settlers, many of whom were Black United Empire Loyalists and Maroons from Jamaica, formed a tight-knit community and established a church in 1849, the Seaview African United Baptist Church, which was the heart and soul of Africville. Although the residents were free, law-abiding citizens who paid taxes, they were unfailingly denied municipal services such as proper roads, health services, police, fire, ambulance, water and sewage systems, garbage removal, street lamps or electricity. Throughout the entire history of the community, Halifax moved many of the city's undesirable facilities to Africville, including a prison (1853), an infectious disease hospital (1870), a slaughterhouse, a city sewage depository, and in 1958, the city garbage dump.

Through all the deplorable conditions, the spirit of Africville lived on and the community stayed together. Africville was their home, and their neighbours were like family. In the face of adversity, they did not grow weary and they did not divide. Instead, they used every negative circumstance to their advantage. When the city moved the dump into their community, the citizens would find things to reuse. And through their poverty and trials, they still had their church. They still had their faith, which held them together.

² Salaam Shalom Productions Inc., "Producers," salaamshalom.org, <http://www.salaamshalom.org/producers.html> (accessed August 15, 2016).

Shelley led the audience, speaking about the community's church:

Here we played, communed and prayed
Eulogized, christened, rallied, and hoped
Baptized, celebrated and sang together

By the 1960s, given the lack of municipal aid and being the home of the city dump, Africville was unsurprisingly designated a slum and condemned. Between 1964 and 1967, under the guise of the urban renewal movement of the 1960s and with a promise of redevelopment, better employment, education, and healthcare, the citizens of Afriville, many of whom legally owned their property, were forcefully evicted and relocated. Though neglecting to do so for decades, the city finally sent garbage trucks to Africville – but instead of removing trash, the trucks transported the residents and their possessions elsewhere before the community was bulldozed to the ground, the church included.



Cyrus Sundar Singh (right) and Shelley Hamilton (left) at the Speaker's Forum

Shelley led the community (and was particularly passionate, given that her relatives were some of those who were forcefully evicted):

They tore down our homes, our lives, our community
And sent in the garbage trucks to carry us out

Their homes, their church, and their community were bulldozed to the ground and they had no choice but to leave. And if being unjustly evicted was not enough, many relocated Africville residents faced just as many hardships in their new homes as before. For many the cost of living and unemployment increased, creating family strains and debt, and many were forced to rely on social assistance. As public housing development for these internally displaced people began in various Halifax neighbourhoods, white residents protested: "We don't want Africville people here."³ Africvilleans did not feel welcome in Halifax; their sense of community, and their ownership and pride of that community, was literally bulldozed to the ground.

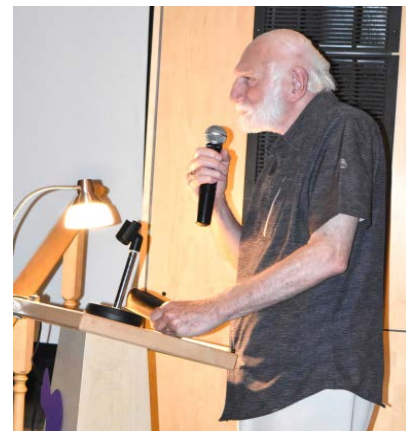
Predictably, the promised redevelopment of Africville never came to fruition. Instead, the community was turned into a city dog park. In 2002, Africville was officially designated a National Historic Site, and in 2010, Halifax Mayor Peter Kelly formally apologized to the former

³ Donald Clairmont, "Moving People: Relocation and Urban Renewal," in *The Spirit of Africville*, edited by The Africville Genealogical Society (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1992), 71.

residents of the community for the heartache caused by forced eviction and for the destruction of their church in the middle of the night. As an apology, the City offered to rebuild the Seaview African United Baptist Church. It is worth pointing out, however, as Sundar Singh did in his talk, that “the church was not a church but a museum.”⁴ It was “a politically motivated gift along with the apology,” he argues; “There were no pews nor pulpit, people nor preacher... this was not even a “church” but a façade of the original, now deconsecrated and decommissioned.”⁵

Even though these events happened in Nova Scotia, Sundar Singh and Hamilton made it clear that this story is still relevant in Grey County by showing a short video featuring the present day descendants of those Africvilleans who were evicted. During their annual picnic in Africville, they offered words of thanks, encouragement, and congratulations to the Emancipation Festival attendees in Owen Sound. Shelley remarked after the presentation that we are all connected in our journey from slavery to freedom. The story and community of Africville is important because it is a representation of Black settlement in Nova Scotia specifically and North America generally – a settlement that literally and figuratively was on the periphery of white society. It illustrates the resilience and determination of this Black community even to this day, which illustrates that the spirit of Africville indeed lives on. This story is important because it makes clear that only a few decades ago, Canadians were active in racial discrimination against other Canadians, a number of whom had ancestors that had settled in Canada almost 200 years before the eviction and destruction of Africville. Many of those who settled Africville were free and fleeing slaves escaping oppression, and over a century later, their descendants were still trying to escape the bondage of discrimination. While the buildings may have been destroyed, the spirit of Africville continues to live on in the hearts of the descendants and in everyone else who hears the story.

The second presentation of the evening, and the 2nd Annual Les MacKinnon Memorial Presentation, featured a documentary produced by former CBC broadcaster, esteemed journalist and publisher Barry Penhale entitled “All That Jazz: A Personal Musical Journey.” Barry Penhale, or Mr. Ontario as he is also known, has written multiple books including *A Stringerful of Memories* (1976) and *Grassroots Artisans* (1982), founded the national magazine *The Outdoorsman*, and for decades worked for the CBC and TVOntario broadcasting and journaling the stories of many Canadians. In 1983, Penhale founded a



Barry Penhale at the Speaker's Forum

⁴ Cyrus Sundar Singh, *Africville in Black and White: How a National Historic Site and the Destruction of a Church have Reignited Racial Hatred in the Canadian City of Halifax* (Toronto: Salaam Shalom Productions Inc, 2015), 10.

⁵ Sundar Singh, 10.

publishing company in Toronto called Natural Heritage Books.⁶ In 2016, Penhale and his wife, Jane Gibson, were awarded the Ontario Black History Society Harriet Tubman Award for Commitment to a Purpose. For many decades, Penhale and Gibson have been advocates for racial equality, race relations, human rights, and social justice issues. Penhale participated in the official commission concerning the hiring practices for Black performers on Canadian television.⁷ Both actively support the Owen Sound Emancipation Day Festival.

Throughout his lifelong work showcasing Canadian history, culture, and the environment by way of conducting interviews, creating documentaries, and publishing books, Penhale has always tried to highlight the “forgotten chapters” of Canadian history and give voice to the “lesser heard” Canadians including new authors, First Nations peoples, African-Canadians, and new citizens. His documentary, which premiered at this year’s Speaker’s Forum, was no different. “All That Jazz” featured music, pictures, and commentary and it passionately told the story of many Black jazz and blues musicians, including their successes in the face of discrimination in the music industry, as well as the story of white musicians, agents, and friends who supported them along the way. Combining his life experiences as a friend and fan of many of Canada’s noted jazz and blues greats with his talents and expertise as a broadcaster and publisher, Penhale highlighted the stories of some of the greatest musicians North America and the world has ever had the pleasure of listening to. This presentation was a perfect fit with the Archie Alleyne Photo Exhibit.

While one cannot produce a jazz and blues history documentary without talking about the likes of Duke Ellington (1899-1974) and Louis Armstrong (1901-1971), Penhale spent most of his time focusing on the lesser-known but equally-honourable jazz and blues greats from Canadian and American history. There is no doubt that greats like Ellington and Armstrong were influential, but they enjoyed unusual access to the upper echelons of North American society, a place in which most Black musicians never saw. In his presentation, Penhale recounted personal memories, life stories, and the great accomplishment of dozens of Black and white musicians, agents, and friends in North American jazz and blues history. His focus was on the ways in which these musicians were influential in breaking down the barriers of discrimination in their industry. A number of the Black musicians he discussed, in order of appearance, include:

⁶ Terry Poulton, “Publisher finding home-grown success: Toronto company preserves Canadian print heritage,” *Business Edge News Magazine*, May 24, 2005. <http://www.businessedge.ca/archives/article.cfm/publisher-finding-home-grown-success-9589>.

⁷ The Ontario Historical Society, “The Ontario Black History Society’s (OBHS) Annual Black History Month Kick-off Brunch was a Huge Success,” [ontariohistoricalsociety.ca](https://www.ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/index.php/2014-03-04-21-07-46/news-archives/430-jane-gibson-barry-penhale-receive-prestigious-harriet-tubman-award), 2016. <https://www.ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/index.php/2014-03-04-21-07-46/news-archives/430-jane-gibson-barry-penhale-receive-prestigious-harriet-tubman-award>.

- Owen Souder Bobby Dean Blackburn, the descendant of a slave, who sang R&B (rhythm and blues) and rock and roll in Toronto and across Ontario, and who still plays today.
- American jazz pianist, organist, bandleader, and composer, and one of Penhale's favourite musicians, Count Basie (1904-1984). Count Basie and the Count Basie Orchestra (1935) travelled extensively and was responsible for making famous dozens of musicians. Count Basie worked with Duke Ellington, Frank Sinatra, Quincy Jones, Tony Bennett, Bing Crosby, and Oscar Peterson to name but a few.
- American jazz pianist, composer, and vocalist Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981) who sang professionally by age 7. She worked with Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman.
- American swing and bebop trumpeter, a pioneer of the flugelhorn in jazz, composer, and educator Clark Terry (1920-2015) is perhaps best known for breaking the 'colour bar' on TV by being the first African-American to become a regular in a band (Johnny Carson's Tonight Show Band) on a major US television network. Playing with Charlie Barnet, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Quincy Jones, and Oscar Peterson, Terry's jazz career spanned more than 70 years where he recorded over 900 songs and composed more than 200.
- One of the best jazz singers of her day, American Grammy-Award Winner Sarah Vaughan (1924-1990), known as "The Divine One," worked with Ella Fitzgerald, Earl Hines, Billy Eckstine, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, and Count Basie. She is known for her 1946 performance of Tadd Dameron's jazz standard "If You Could See Me Now," which he wrote especially for her.
- The "Queen of the Blues, Jukebox, and Jam Sessions," American jazz, blues, R&B, traditional pop, and gospel singer and pianist Dinah Washington (1924-1963) was known as "the most popular black female recording artist of the '50s." Friend and colleague of Tony Bennett, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie, Washington's unique voice is known for singing, "What a difference a day makes."
- American baritone vocalist Al Hibbler (1915-2001), who was blind from birth, began singing at age 7. Most famous for his role in Duke Ellington's Orchestra and his solo "Unchained Melody," Hibbler was also a civil rights activist in the 1950s and 1960s. While participating in marches, Hibbler was arrested multiple times, which discouraged major record labels from carrying his work. Despite this, Frank Sinatra supported him and signed him a contract. Hibbler also worked with Johnny Hodges, Count Basie, and sang at Louis Armstrong's funeral.⁸
- One of the CBC's earliest performers, Canadian TV and radio star, jazz singer, and actor Phyllis Marshall (1921-1996) was a pioneer among black Canadian performers. She worked with Jack Arthur, Percy Faith, Oscar Peterson, Bert Niosi, Buck Clayton,

⁸ Ben Ratliff, "Al Hibbler, a Singer With Ellington's Band, Dies at 85," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2001. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/27/arts/al-hibbler-a-singer-with-ellington-s-band-dies-at-85.html>.

Buddy Tate, and Cab Calloway. She also starred in the 1950s television shows “The Big Revue” and the “Cross-Canada Hit Parade.”

- American Grammy-Award Winner jazz, blues, swing, and traditional pop singer Joe Williams (1918-1999). Rising to national prominence with the Count Basie Orchestra, Williams also worked as an actor, appearing on The Cosby Show and Sesame Street.
- American blues shouter, balladeer, and swing jazz singer Jimmy Rushing (1901-1972) was known as one of the “greatest blues singers” who, according to Count Basie, “never had an equal.” After being the vocalist for Count Basie’s Orchestra from 1925-1948, Rushing worked with Duke Ellington and Dave Brubeck. He is said to have had a great influence in the development of post-1945 popular Black music.
- Beginning her career in music busking on the streets of Chattanooga to raise money to support herself and her other orphaned siblings, Bessie Smith (1894-1937), the “Empress of the Blues,” became the most popular female blues singer of the 1920s and 1930s. Recording with the likes of Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, James P. Johnson, Joe Smith, and Charlie Green, Smith headed her own shows and became the highest-paid entertainer of her day. Despite her popularity, performing was a dangerous occupation in certain American cities because of the colour of her skin.
- American pioneer jazz drummer and band leader Jo Jones (1911-1985), who constituted the rhythm section of Count Basie’s Orchestra from 1934 to 1948. Jones was influential in the use of brushes and of keeping time on the bass drum instead of the hi-hat cymbal.
- American blues and jazz singer, guitarist, violinist, and songwriter, Lonnie Johnston (1899-1970) was a pioneer of jazz guitar and jazz violin, being the first musician to play an electrically amplified violin and an early advocate of the single-string solo guitar style. Johnston, like many other Black musicians, was forced to pick up menial jobs on the side to make ends meet. When he had to take up work as a janitor, Johnston remarked, “That’s life – shot down in April, riding high in May.” He recorded with Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, and Eddie Lang to name but a few.
- Canadian jazz pianist, composer, and teacher, Lou Hooper (1894-1977) was a pioneer in recorded jazz. A young Oscar Peterson was his pupil for a time, and during the Second World War, Hooper was the musical director for the Royal Canadian Artillery in Europe.
- Canadian pianist and band leader Cy McLean (1916-1986), known as “Canada’s Count Basie,” is best known for leading Canada’s only black orchestra in the 1940s and for revolutionizing the Toronto music scene by becoming the first Black member of the Toronto Musical Protective Association (Musicians Union). Early in his career, McLean, like so many other Black musicians, had to take up menial jobs because he was unable to join the local musicians union and was barred from playing in certain restaurants and clubs. In 1947, McLean and his band were the first Black band to perform on Yonge Street in the Colonial Tavern. Before this, clubs on Toronto’s Yonge Street were exclusive to white musicians. McLean was a great influence on many Black musicians, including Canadian drummer Archie Alleyne.

In his expository documentary, Penhale stated that jazz and blues were declared dead countless times in the twentieth century. Yet, the music lived on and even thrived. Just as the jazz and blues 'fought back' against society's labels, so did many Black musicians, including many of those listed above. All they wanted to do was play or sing the music that they genuinely loved. In many places, however, the colour of their skin determined whether or not they played. Penhale also highlighted a few white musicians, agents, and owners who were influential in helping and supporting Black musicians. These friends and colleagues did not care about the skin colour of the musicians – they too, simply and genuinely loved the music. Although he did not mention his own contributions, Penhale himself was also a great friend and advocate for many Black musicians, promoting them and giving many of them opportunities to showcase their talent. A few of the white friends and supporters of Black musicians showcased in the documentary include:

- Jazz trumpeter and guitarist Bobbie Hackett (1915-1976), friend of Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Vic Dickenson, Bill Kenny, Ruth Brown, and Mary Lou Williams
- Jazz standard singer, composer, drummer, and actor Mel Tormé (1925-1999), also known as "Velvet Fog" is known for composing and co-writing "The Christmas Song" ("Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire"). He worked with Nat King Cole and Teddy Wilson.
- The black sheep of the royal family and a granddaughter of Queen Victoria, Lady Iris Mountbatten (1920-1982) was a great supporter of jazz and blues musicians. Having lived in North America for over thirty years, Lady Mountbatten was highly acquainted with jazz royals Duke Ellington and Count Basie, and was a strong supporter of jazz and blues musicians in North America.
- Canadian music critic, biographer, lyricist, and journalist Gene Lees (1928-2010) was an avid supporter and defender of jazz music and musicians in his many columns. He wrote about racism in jazz music and, more specifically, the effect racism had on the careers of Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry, Milt Jackson and Nat King Cole.
- Duke Ellington's tailor, jazz promoter, jazz radio host and booking agent Dave Caplan (1925-2000), known as the "Salesman for Jazz," promoted and financially supported Black musicians. He worked with Dinah Washington, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Sonny Stitt to name a few.

Sundar Singh and Penhale, the speakers at this year's Speaker's Forum, passionately discussed the hardships Black North Americans have suffered long after slavery was abolished. More importantly and inspiringly, however, they also shared the stories of how those who faced these hardships overcame them and how their legacy lives on to this day. Regardless of one's heritage, background, or history, Owen Sound's Emancipation Festival, held in the most northern terminus of the Underground Railroad, is a great way to celebrate the historic and current journey from slavery to freedom. The Festival is a great opportunity to reminisce, enjoy a time of fellowship, honour those who paved the way to freedom, and to celebrate the history

of Black Canadians and Americans locally, nationally, and internationally. Ian Boddy, the Mayor of Owen Sound, said it best at the opening of the Speaker's Forum: "The Emancipation Festival is a great event where we can come together, rub shoulders, and change the world."