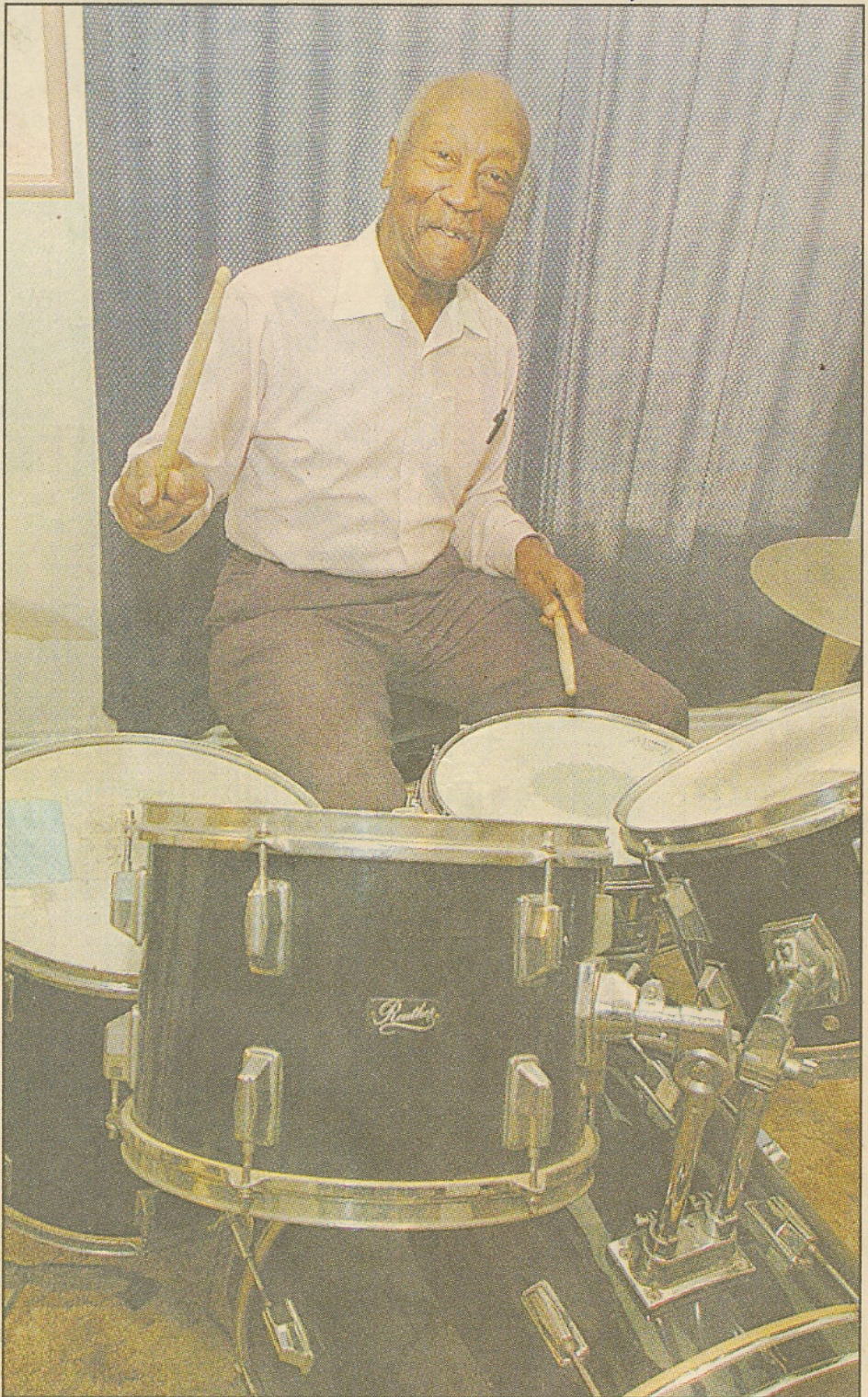


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Tribune Photo/PAUL RAKESTRAW

**Billy "Stix" Nicks plays his beloved drums in his studio last week. Nicks has been drumming since he was in high school.**



# Still drumming after all these years

■ Black musician broke barriers with his drumsticks.

By **MAY LEE JOHNSON**  
Tribune Staff Writer

**SOUTH BEND** — Billy "Stix" Nicks sets up the drums with a roll and a snare crack.

For him, it's a spiritual thing.

For others, the black musician is a living piece of music history.

Nicks, born in Greenwood, Miss., but raised in South Bend, started drumming when he was a junior in high school. He was playing school dances and sock hops around Indiana and Michigan.

But he trained himself.

"I became interested in the drums because my friend Carl's brother played drums," Nicks said. "When I first saw Tommy Shane drum, that's when God revealed to me, 'This is what I want do.'"

Carl borrowed a pair of his brother's sticks, and he showed Nicks how to hold them. "And with those sticks," he said, "I started to hit the chairs and books at home."

He bought his first set of drums from a pawn shop.

## **BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

His first band, "The Blue Notes," played parties around town from 1953 to 1955.

They were known for their showmanship and were called the Whopper Bopping Show Stoppers.

"I remember Billy's band," said Peggy Jones, 63, of South Bend. "He and his group played at our prom. Man, those guys knew how to put on a show, because their music had fingers popping and everybody rocking. They put on a great show."

But in the 1950s, not all public places in South Bend would allow black bands to play.

"I could tell you of places around town that wouldn't allow us inside," Nicks said. For instance, "Shula's on 31 North would rather have a bad white band than a talented black band. But we didn't worry about that; we just played where we were welcome."

Billy "Sticks" Nicks and His Rhythm Rockers, with Junior

Walker and Willy Woods, played a regular Saturday show on WNDU-TV in 1955 in South Bend.

### **Junior Walker signs on**

After he graduated from Central High School, Nick's band had plenty of gigs, but he ended up with an opportunity of a lifetime: hooking up with the late Junior Walker in South Bend.

Word was out that Walker's drummer had left for college, and he needed a drummer.

"But I had a band already, called 'Billy "Stix" Nicks and the Rhythm Rockers,' and we were hot," Nicks said. "I told Junior he would have to join my band because we were popular and his band was playing at mostly taverns."

Walker reluctantly agreed.

Born Autry DeWalt and raised in South Bend, Walker eventually moved to smaller Battle Creek, Mich., as a young musician. A saxophonist, Junior attained worldwide fame both as a musician and as the leader of one of the bigger Motown acts of the late 1960s and early '70s, Junior Walker and the All-Stars.

Nicks played for years with

See **DRUMMING/C3**



# Drumming

Junior Walker and the All-Stars, drumming on many well-known Motown hits such as "Roadrunner," "How Sweet It Is to Be Loved by You" and "Pucker Up Buttercup."

"One thing about Junior, he paid us very well," Nicks said. "When we were on the road, he made sure we had everything we needed from food to clothes. He was very generous."

Junior took over the band when Nicks joined the Army.

"When I was in the Army I played with the Army band," said Nicks. "It's a funny thing, but I couldn't read a word of music. What I would do is play by ear. No one was able to tell I just went with the flow. That was when I realized that I had a natural God-given talent."

After a stint in Europe with the Army, Billy returned in 1962 to play jazz with Jackie Ivory, recording for Atlantic records. He went on to rejoin Junior Walker in 1966 and still has a photo from that first tour in 1966, at the famed Apollo Theater in Harlem.

One of the highlights of his career was playing at Constitu-



Photo provided

**Billy "Stix" Nicks and His Rhythm Rockers, with Junior Walker and Willy Woods, played a regular Saturday show on WNDU-TV in 1955 in South Bend. A couple of guest musicians joined them on stage for one of their shows.**

tion Hall in Washington, D.C., before some celebrities such as the late Sammy Davis Jr., late Louis Armstrong and the late James Cleveland.

"I almost cried as I stood among all these great performers," he said.

## Home again, doing his thang

Nicks has given drum lessons in his family's old home for more than 25 years. His business is going well, and he and his jazz trio is still playing gigs here and on

the road. The 70-year-old has five adult children; he and his wife, Patty, live on the west side of South Bend.

He also teaches two days a week at the University of Notre Dame.

"I thank God every day for all the blessings I have had in my life," he said. "But all I want to do right now is keep on teaching and playing. It's all good."

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