

Music legend Nicks honored by city

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SOUTH BEND

Music has always been a part of Billy Nicks.

It was as normal in his life as sitting down to dinner each evening. He grew up in the 1930s and 1940s listening to everything from country and classical to blues and jazz.

"My mother always loved music," said Nicks, 72, who was recently honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the city of South Bend

"I remember when Ella Fitzgerald came out with her song 'A-Tisket, A-Tasket,'" he said from his studio in South Bend. "We had an old crank Victrola."

His mother, Alma Nicks, played it so much that "we wore that record out," Nicks said, his voice rising an octave with each word.

But just because music is in someone's life, doesn't mean the

music is in them.

In Nicks' case, the music is in his soul, and when it's in your soul, it's gotta find a way out somehow.

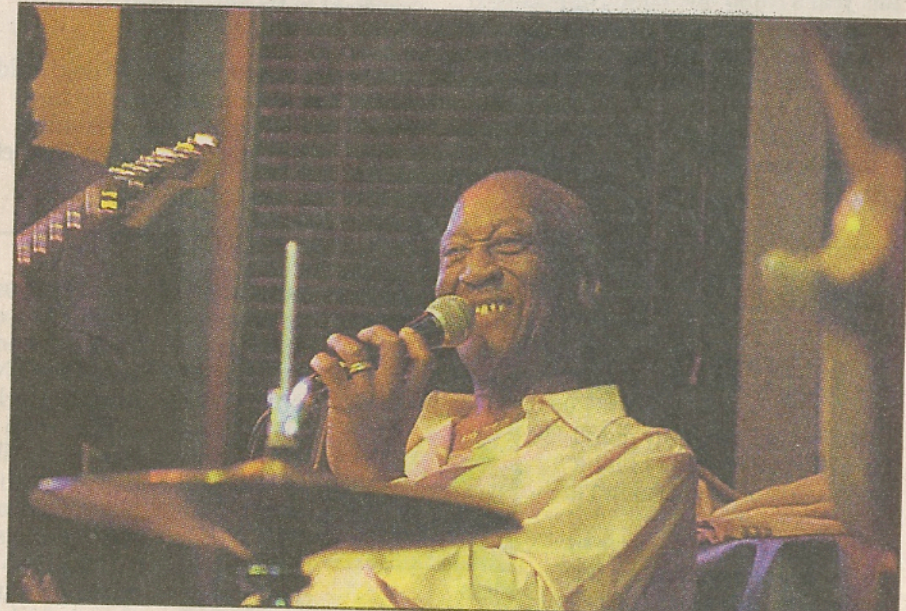
"I always believed that people inherit their strong feelings about music," Nicks said, like they inherit their eye color or their temperament.

His watery brown eyes were wide as he sat on the edge of his chair in the parlor of his studio, where he still plays and teaches young drummers what he knows about "beatin' the skins."

"I always wondered why I felt so strongly about music."

One day his mother told him.

"My grandfather played in a blues and hillbilly band," Nicks said, noting "hillbilly music" is what country music was called back in the day. "He played the guitar. She'd ride on the back of a mule to go watch his gigs," he said with a hearty laugh, falling backward into his chair and clapping his knee for



Tribune Photo/SHAYANA BRESLIN

Billy "Stix" Nicks charms the crowd at Club LaSalle in South Bend one recent Saturday night.

good measure.

And ever since he could remember, the music that was in his grandfather, Ben O'Bannon, and in his mother and then in him wanted to bust out, though he didn't quite know how early on.

And it finally did when he watched a Sunday school classmate of his playing the drums in a parade in South Bend.

Nicks wasn't in high school yet, but his chum was a member of the Central High School marching band.

It was the way he played those drums, Nicks remembered, that made him say to himself, "I want to do that."

He had a slight problem, though.

See LEGEND/E2

Legend

Nicks and his family didn't have the money to buy him a drum set, and they couldn't afford lessons either.

But, Nicks said, the urge to play got so strong that he borrowed a pair of drum sticks and began beating furniture and books around the house.

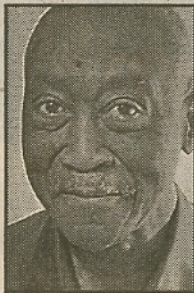
"Mom didn't object," said Nicks.

He was teaching himself to play drums.

In 1951, Nicks saved up enough money to buy a second-hand set of drums from a pawn shop in South Bend for \$15. Nicks, whose father Wyze Nicks was a share cropper in Greenwood, Miss., before moving his family to South Bend in the winter of 1944, refinished the drums.

He admitted he couldn't read music.

"But I could hear and feel



Nicks

school, because Nicks went everywhere with his drum sticks.

"I could hear and feel what was going on," he repeated.

It wasn't long after, he bought his first drum set that he organized a band, The Blue Notes.

During the fall of 1954, the band was playing sock hops and Polish weddings, and he was paying his bandmates between \$25 and \$30 per gig, while Junior Walker, a saxophone player with whom Nicks would eventually hook up with, and his band were playing three to four-hour

what was going on, and I listened to the other musicians," said Nicks, who got his nickname Billy "Stix" Nicks from a fellow musician in high

sets at taverns for \$15.

The two were eventually introduced, and Nicks formed Billy "Stix" Nicks and the Rhythm Rockers.

The group signed a contract with the WNDU television station in South Bend and began playing live on Club 46, a teen dance party show.

But in 1957, Nicks was drafted into the Army and shipped to Germany, playing drums in the general's band. When he finished his tour of duty in 1959, he joined up with the Oscar Baby Jones Jazz Quartet, and in 1962 began touring with the Jackie Ivory and the Gents of Soul.

But when his old bandmate Junior Walker came calling and asked Nicks to join his band, Junior Walker and The All Stars, Nicks jumped on board. By January 1966, the band was playing the famous Apollo Theater in New York with such legends as the Spinners, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Dee Dee Warwick, The

Temptations, Marvin Gaye, Sammy Davis Jr. and more.

"We were all there together," said Nicks, reminiscing. "They were all beautiful people."

Then he began to laugh again.

"And people would ask me if I got The Temptations' autographs," Nicks said. "Or they asked me if I got Marvin Gaye's autograph. No! I didn't think about that!"

That was their hey-day.

During the fall of 1966, the band also played the Regal Theater in Chicago, Howard Theater and Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., and Uptown Theater and Freedom Hall in Philadelphia.

They recorded such hits in 1965 as "Shotgun," "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)," "Pucker Up Buttercup" and "Roadrunner" from the LP release of "Roadrunner," recorded by the Motown/Soul record label.

Nicks said when he heard the recordings of those songs back then, he didn't like them.

"I use to hate to hear myself play," Nicks lamented. "I always thought I could do better. Now when I hear it, I appreciate it, and I don't think I sounded as bad as I thought I did."

Today, he still plays. You just can't help it when the music is in you.

He tours the area with The Rhythm Rockers and the Billy Nicks Jazz Trio, and he teaches private lessons at the studio he owns in South Bend. He also teaches percussion at the University of Notre Dame.

Billy "Stix" Nicks has come a long way from the 8-year-old in Mississippi who watched his father crawl from chair to bed in their home because hand-plowing a cotton plantation on foot had broken down the arches in his feet so that he could barely walk. The plantation, owned by a man who had no sympathy for Wyze Nicks, threatened to whip him if he didn't get out and plow the fields.

But his father, who was not

known for keeping bullets in the shotgun above the family's fireplace, suddenly began putting bullets in that shotgun, Nicks said.

Billy Nicks said his father told him that no man was ever going to whip him, which is why he moved the family north, where racism continued to be as plentiful as cotton bobbles on that plantation owner's field.

Despite that, Nicks said his father taught him a valuable lesson after Nicks and a friend sued a South Bend burger joint for throwing them out for sitting at the counter to eat their food.

"A skunk is a skunk no matter if he's black, white or peppermint," Nicks said. "You don't assess a whole group of people based on one person."

And there's one other bit of wisdom Nicks will reveal about himself and his drumming.

"It wasn't my talent," Nicks said. "It was my heavenly Father's talent that he loaned to me."