

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

A SHARED HERITAGE

James Justice: Erie's Forgotten Singer, Actor, Composer

By Dr. Chris Magoc, Johnny Johnson,
and Melinda Meyer
May 2022

Following is the second of a 12-part series on African American history in the Erie region. The series will continue monthly in Jefferson Educational Society publications over the next year.

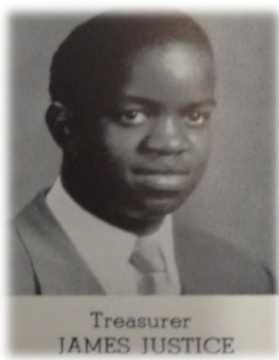
Members of Erie's Shared Heritage Project have worked diligently for several years to make the project an instrument for documenting the history of African Americans and their contributions to the fabric of the Erie, Pennsylvania community.

Erie is known for its many outstanding artists and performers and their achievements are heralded and frequently discussed. However, the stories of many of Erie's African American performers have not been widely told to a hometown audience. It is never easy to research and find hidden treasures but often in our quest we do discover sparkling and previously hidden gems.

James Marcellus "Jim" Justice is one of them. Justice was born in Erie on December 31, 1931, the son of the late Dotty Belle Justice Mount, who was born in West Virginia, and the late Sylvester Mount. James Justice died at 75 on January 31, 2007, in Barcelona, Spain, fatally stricken while performing on stage.

It was at Academy High School in Erie that the community first saw a glimpse of who he would become in his drive toward musical and artistic success.

The High School Years



Treasurer
JAMES JUSTICE



JAMES JUSTICE
"Jim"

Everybody's friend . . . love that voice! . . . tickles the ivories . . . active around school . . . musician deluxe . . . "Well, school me!"

During his years at Academy, James Justice's greatest interests were geared toward music and theatrical performance. He was a member of Academy's A Capella Choir, the National Honor Society, and was the class treasurer for his February 1950 graduating class. He was highly acknowledged and appreciated by his classmates for his musical talent, often entertaining his classmates on the piano during their free time, according to his obituary published in the Erie Times-News in 2007. It is appropriate to note that Justice was one of only three African American males and five total African Americans in his senior class, which had more than 300 graduates.



Row 1: E. Gustafson, M. A. Sawdey, S. Wilson, J. Mosser, E. Albrecht, L. Tarno, C. Lauterbach, M. Evans, M. Hart, A. Smith, J. Gowans, D. Deckard. Row 2: G. Roth, D. Bruce, F. Brown, M. Pappas, D. Chrostka, E. Trumble, D. Nease, M. Kurtz, M. Warren, C. Leppas, J. Vasilevich, W. Willett. Row 3: E. Fischer, M. Wilson, P. Ulrich, C. Parker, M. Smith, J. Schmitt, J. Owens, B. Fritz, J. Yapple, J. McMichael, J. Cooper, A. Hannah, J. Hagmann. Row 4: E. Shain, J. Struss, R. Eason, K. Davis, J. Walczak, J. Justice, B. Brown, G. A. Baker, D. Main, T. Collins, B. Esserhof, G. Schuler, R. Gernack.



Row 1: A. DiTullo, J. Renner, C. Dietrich, G. Martin, M. Hug, B. Caldwell, J. Hotchkiss, S. Achille, N. Zimmerman. Row 2: J. Szporak, M. Furber, E. Webb, A. Shackelford, A. L. Bowman, J. Behrke, L. Stein, S. Fuhrman, Y. Miller, L. Naughton. Row 3: J. Lauterbach, A. Downing, D. Kuligowski, A. Thomas, P. Fetichin, J. Hagmann, M. Fiese, C. Adell, C. Clark, O. Kriensauer, J. Bell. Row 4: J. Culp, J. Kennedy, D. Gifford, P. Thompson, J. Metzler, J. Schuster, C. Miller, B. Harrington, C. Reese, P. Lenz. Row 5: W. Weber, E. Lombardi, K. Nicol, D. Robertson, H. Anderson, J. Justice, J. Smith, A. Fuhrman, J. Fracast, J. Salvia, M. Wepe.

Community Involvement

James Justice's talent was not merely noticeable in high school but also highly visible in the Erie community. He was involved with the Shiloh Baptist Church Choir and other singing groups that enjoyed gospel and classical music. A 1952 article in the Erie Dispatch-Herald illustrates the point.



Article by Charlie Cantania of the Erie Dispatch-Herald, February 17, 1952:

Local Negro Trio are Fine Singers

I was engrossed in a good book last Tuesday night, lounging in my favorite living room chair, when I caught the pleasant refrains of a Negro spiritual emanating from our video set. The music was fine, very professional, leading me to believe that the group was from a big city, or nationally prominent. However, my wife enlightened me on the fact that the program was local and the group was known as The Three Notes. The more I listened, the more I liked the vocal trio. As a result, I buzzed WICU and asked The Three Notes to stick around long enough for an interview. This is what I learned.

The trio consists of James Justice, Irma Terry, and Sara Thompson. They got their start at the Shiloh Baptist Church, 502 Perry Street, some six years ago. Their work originally consisted of classical and spiritual renditions. Some two years later, The Three Notes wound up second in Major Bowes amateur contest at the Warner Theatre. Then followed a 15-minute show, which ran for over a year, over radio station WIKK. Incidentally all the while they were known as the Shiloh Trio.

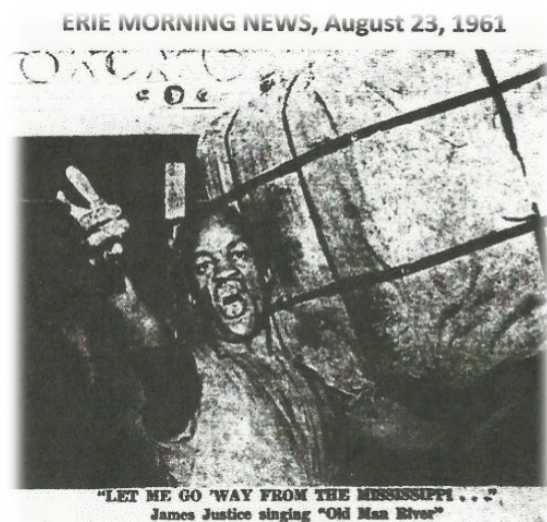
College careers on the part of Terry and Justice interrupted the trio's current climb up the ladder to success.

James Justice is a '50 mid-year grad of Academy with 2 years at the Erie Conservatory and one semester at the Philadelphia Musical Academy. Jimmy is just 20 years old.

Later, young Justice got his early start in Erie theater at the Erie Peninsula Playhouse in 1961 and 1962, in roles such as Joe in "Showboat" and a Sailor in "Anything Goes." An article in the Erie Morning News praised his singing voice.

Article by Tom McCormack of the Erie Morning News, August 23, 1961 :

'Showboat' Wins Playhouse Applause



James Justice of Erie, as Joe the boat laborer, exhibits a stirring set of vocal cords.

From Erie's Playhouse to a Larger Stage

As Justice sought to sharpen his talents, he pursued a serious musical career with the Erie Philharmonic under renowned conductor Fritz Mahler, and, as a singer, he appeared on various national television shows ("The Ted Mack Show," "King TV, Seattle," "KTNT TV, Tacoma") and numerous radio shows.

After high school and completing work at the Philadelphia Music Academy, he served in the United States Army, played in the military band, and traveled

extensively throughout Europe with the band. He was a vocal soloist with the Seventh Infantry Division Band in 1954 and was the National Winner of the All-Army Singing Contest. Once a veteran, he moved to New York City, where he took voice lessons and was discovered during a musical contest and won a scholarship to Juilliard School of Music. There he earned degrees in opera and theater in 1964.

While attending Juilliard, Justice performed in the New York-New Jersey area and toured as a singer with the Robert De Cormier Singers. He appeared in many Juilliard productions and with other groups as a singer and performer. His resume at Juilliard is extensive and shows how determination, perseverance, and the quest to showcase his talents led him to become an integral member and contributor to America's artistic community.

He went on to roles on Broadway as Rudolph the head waiter in "Hello Dolly" starring Pearl Bailey; the Pearl Merchant in "Timbuktu" starring Eartha Kitt; and Jackie the piano man in "Sweet Bird of Youth" starring Lauren Bacall. Off-Broadway he was the featured singer Godsong, Uncle Jimmy in "Makin It" and also the composer, musical director, pianist, and arranger for "The Liberation of Mother Goose." He also played Leon in "Bingo Long and the Traveling All-Stars" and played the horror film lead role of Deke Brown in "Memorial Day Massacre," as well as a featured role in "Beverly Hills Brats."

His music writing credits include compositions such as "Isabell Rising," "Evita Del Barrio," "Overnight Sensation," and many others.

Justice last performed in "Looking for Josephine Baker" in Paris, France, and Barcelona, Spain, where he suffered a fatal heart attack.

During the years when African Americans were making their mark in theatrical performances, Erie's James Marcellus Justice can be counted as a legendary contributor.



James Justice, center, played the leading role of Deke Brown in the 1989 campy horror movie "Memorial Day Massacre."

Acknowledgment: The Heritage Project would like to acknowledge the contributions of Debbi Lyon, curator of the Erie Blasco Library Heritage Room, and Juilliard Archives at The Juilliard School, 60 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York, N.Y. for granting access to archival documents about the academic and

performance career of James Justice. Without the access granted and cooperation in this research by both parties, the life and contributions of James Justice would be forever hidden. – Johnny Johnson, Researcher, A Shared Heritage

Subscribe to JES Publications Emails!

Subscribe to Book Notes Emails!

About the Authors:

A Shared Heritage is co-led by Johnny Johnson (Burleigh Legacy Alliance), Dr. Chris Magoc (Mercyhurst University), and Melinda Meyer (Erie Yesterday).

Johnny Johnson, M.Ed., is a native of Covington, Georgia and has been a resident of Erie for 50 years. Mr. Johnson taught health and physical education at various middle and high schools in Erie’s Public Schools for more than 30 years before retiring. He is one of the founding members of the Harry T. Burleigh Society. The current president of the Burleigh Legacy Alliance has participated in numerous historical programs and is the author of “Erie African Americans in the 1880s.”

Dr. Chris Magoc is a professor of History at Mercyhurst University whose most recent book is “A Progressive History of American Democracy Since 1945: American Dreams, Hard Realities” (Routledge Press, January 2022). He is a 2012 recipient of the Mercyhurst Teaching Excellence Award.

Melinda Meyer is an experienced public historian, educator, project consultant, grant writer, and nonprofit administrator. As a public historian, she pursues avenues to share local history with all audiences. Ms. Meyer has also taught museum studies and historic preservation undergraduate courses at Mercyhurst University.

About A Shared Heritage:

Launched in 2020, A Shared Heritage is a local community history project long in the making that shines a light on the rich heritage of African Americans in Erie County, Pennsylvania. The centerpiece of A Shared Heritage is a walking and driving tour of 29 significant sites of African American history encompassing the entire county.

Visitors to the project website, available [here](#), will find an illustrated tour guide, along with other features: a concise narrative history and timeline of African American history in Erie, brief profiles of dozens of African American “pioneers, community builders, and freedom fighters” who have contributed to the greater Erie region, and interviews with five history-making figures of Erie’s recent past: Celestine Davis, Johnny Johnson, Gary Horton, Rubye Jenkins-Husband, and Marcus Atkinson. The project is a partnership of the Mercyhurst University Public History Program, Burleigh Legacy Alliance, and Erie Yesterday with support provided by WQLN, the Jefferson Educational Society, VisitErie, Erie Arts and Culture, and Erie County Public Library.

In Case You Missed It

[Ghosts of Hotels, Excursion Ships, Dance Halls](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

[Book Notes #99: Great Poems About Spring \(Part Two\)](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[Culture Wars Key to Elections: Part Three](#) written by Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education **Rev. Charles Brock**

[Truth in Love: Whiteness Must be at Center of Discussions on Critical Race Theory \(Part One\)](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[True Americans: An Abridged Introduction to the Epic Story of African Americans in Erie County](#) written by **Johnny Johnson (Burleigh Legacy Alliance)**, **Dr. Chris Magoc (Mercyhurst University)**, and **Melinda Meyer (Erie Yesterday)**

