

Written by Richard Reid special to the Times and Democrat
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In the early 1960s, the Exotics Band was formed while they were students at Wilkinson High School. Their musical talents expanded greatly under the tutelage of former Wilkinson High School band director and South Carolina Band Directors Association Hall of Fame member, James “JB” Hunt.

The original members of the group included Dwight “Sleepy” McMillan, Walter “Wally” Bowers, Francis “Egghead” Thompson, Levi “Rock” McDonald, Johnny Sabb, Stewart “Bogumma” Thompson, Harry Palmer and Rogers “Spod” Jarvis.

After the group began to perform more and more, the name of the Exotics Band became a household name in the black community. They would eventually become known all over the state for their entertaining performances.

In the late 1960s, the band recorded the hit song, “Boogaloo Investigator,” that was played on all of the black radio stations throughout the state.

In no time, the band was performing and entertaining audiences at such venues like the Green Door in Columbia, the Robin Hood in Spartanburg, County Hall Auditorium in Charleston, the Ghana Motel in Greenville, the Ponderosa in Neeses and the Club 400 here in Orangeburg.

Then in 1969, the band seized an opportunity to move into a business venture when they started leasing the Ghana Motel in Greenville. Each Thursday night, the band would perform on the stage of the Ghana in front of a packed house of party-goers who would come out for a night of musical entertainment and dancing.

During this time, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, unrest on college campuses and other social transitions were going on in America.

As they grew in popularity in the black community, the group decided to expand and perform in other venues. The band then joined the Ted Hall Booking Agency in Charlotte, North Carolina. Hall was one of the leading white promoters in the Southeast.

Through the Ted Hall Agency, the Exotics Band began to perform on many white college campuses in the South. Hall would book the band to perform for fraternity organizations. During that time, they gave performances on such campuses as the University of Mississippi, Georgia Tech, University of the South and many other white schools.

For an all-black band to give performances throughout the South on white college campuses in the late 1960’s is another piece of documented evidence that proves the musicians from Orangeburg have always displayed a high degree of excellence. They purely demonstrated that their musical performances could entertain both black and white audiences anywhere they went.

Fifty years ago, the Exotics Band experienced a life-changing event that will forever be remembered. On Oct. 5, the community of Orangeburg was awakened to read the shocking and unbelievable front page article in The Times and Democrat stating that the Exotics Band and Show was involved in an accident, killing two of their members. This news of the accident spread all over Orangeburg very fast. The death of the two members was very hard on the many fans of this popular and well-known band.

Early on Friday, Oct. 3, 1969, the band was making plans to travel to a gig in Cullowhee, North Carolina, to perform on the campus of Western Carolina University. Levi McDonald, along with other members, was working to repair some mechanical problems they were having with the bus. The bus was scheduled to leave from the campus of South Carolina State College. McDonald was the bus driver for the band. After the bus departed for Western Carolina University, little did they know that traveling to this gig would be a life-changing event that would impact them for the remainder of their lives in different ways.

The names of guitar player Lemuel Austin and singer John Riley will forever be remembered for the great talents they displayed as musicians from Orangeburg County, South Carolina.

On Oct. 9, 1969, the Sylva Herald Newspaper in Sylva, North Carolina, reported: "Two Die in Accident On NC 107; Eight Injured -- Two Orangeburg, S. C., men died Friday night in a bus accident on NC 107. Eight others were injured. The accident occurred about 8:30 p.m. on Glenville Mountain north of Lake Thorpe. "The victims were members of a musical group, The Exotics, en-route to play for a fraternity dances at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee Friday and Saturday night. The accident occurred around 10 miles south of Cullowhee.

"State Highway Patrolman S. W. Sanford said the driver apparently lost control after his brakes failed and the bus left the road on the left, ran down an embankment and struck three trees.

"The two who died in the accident were identified by the Highway Patrol as John Riley, 24, and Lemuel Austin, 17. Acting Jackson County Coroner Dr. R. David Daniel said Riley died of head and abdominal injuries and Austin died of head injuries.

"The other eight occupants of the vehicle received varying degrees of injuries. The most seriously injured were at C.J. Harris Hospital in Sylva. They include: Harry Palmer, 25, loss of both legs and fractured thigh. (Dr. Nagui R. El-Bayadi, surgeon in charge, said Wednesday morning Palmer remains in critical condition.) "Levi McDonald, 26, driver of the bus, loss of one leg, fractured thigh. "Francis Thompson, 24, fractured thigh and forearm. "Coleman Sistrunk, 20, fractured thigh. "Dr. El-Bayadi said Wednesday morning that McDonald, Thompson and Sistrunk are all in satisfactory condition. "The other four men were listed in satisfactory condition at Haywood County Hospital in Waynesville. They are: Clayton Fogle, 18, laceration of the left arm. Russell Kennedy, 20, laceration of right arm. Dwight McMillan, 23 back and neck pains. James A. Stroman, 20, abdominal injuries. "All the injured were from Orangeburg except Kennedy, whose address was listed as Columbia, SC. "A special shipment of blood was brought from Asheville to the hospital for use during the emergency.

"Trooper Sanford was assisted in his investigation by Patrolman Z. V. Hawes and Sgt. J. W. Wilson, both of Bryson City, and the Jackson County Sheriff's Department. "Sanford commended the Sylva, Cashiers-Glenville and Cherokee Rescue Squads for their organized efforts at the wreck scene. "Also standing by were the Sylva Fire Department and Nantahala Power and Light Company crews. Ambulances were provided by Moody Funeral Home, the Town of Highlands and Cashiers-Glenville Rescue Squad. "The Investigation is continuing, Sanford reported." On Oct. 5, 1969, The T&D published an article for the community: "2 Orangeburg Musicians Killed -- Glenville, N. C. -- A bus carrying an Orangeburg, S. C. dance band, the "Exotics," wrecked on a steep, winding road Friday night, killing two persons and injuring eight others."

"The news of the accident was passed on to the disappointed fraternity on the campus of Western Carolina University. The report of the Exotics Band's accident apparently affected the entire student body so greatly that the student newspaper carried a front page article describing this mishap." On Tuesday, Oct. 7, 1969, the Western Carolinian Voice of the Students newspaper printed the following: "Accident Yields Two Dead, Four in Critical Condition -- "In the aftermath of an accident Friday night, October 2, involving the 'Exotics,' of Orangeburg, SC two members of the ten-man group were killed.

"The 'Exotics' were scheduled to appear at a Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity party. Dwight McMillan, 23-year old manager of the "Exotics," described the nighttime ride which ended when the musicians' highway bus plummeted 90 feet down a ravine.

"Four others were in critical condition at C.J. Harris Hospital in Sylva. The remaining four members of the group, which included McMillan, were in Haywood County Hospital. John Riley, 24, and Lemuel Austin, 17, a relative newcomer was killed.

“In critical condition at C. J. Harris Hospital were Harry Palmer, 25, Francis Thompson, 24, Levi McDonald, 26, and Coleman Sistrunk, 20, all of Orangeburg, SC. “With McMillan, who suffered a back injury, were James Stroman, 20, of Orangeburg, SC. and Clayton Fogle, 18, of Orangeburg, and Russell Kennedy, 20, of Columbia, SC.

“‘The driver couldn’t gear the bus down.’ McMillan said. ‘Guess the engine was turning too fast. Then, suddenly he said, ‘O-oh, hold on.’

“‘When it stopped, and I got up, I was standing on the roof,’ he continued, ‘I got out through a hole in the roof. “Descending a steep, winding grade on N.C. 107, the brakes gave out and the bus gathered speed until it finally crashed through guardrails, knocked over several trees and plunged into the ravine.

“‘I think the guys that got killed wouldn’t want us to give up,’ McMillan said ‘We’ll go on. It’ll take about six to eight months to rebuild the group. But it’s sure gonna be hard to make it without the boys.’”

The prediction that McMillan spoke of happened just the way he said. After most of the members had completed a miraculous recovery, the group was restructured and the Exotics Band started rehearsing to design a new show for their audiences without the presence of John “Pogo” Riley and Lemuel Austin.

The departed members, Lemuel Austin, the guitar player and John “Pogo” Riley, the singer, died when the bus brakes failed and plummeted 90 feet into a deep ravine coming to a stop after uprooting three trees. They perished after the bus stopped. Since that unforgettable night, two of the members who survived the accident have gone on and departed this life. Francis “Egghead” Thompson and Russell “Pepe Lapue” Kennedy have played their last gig.

Lemuel Austin - guitar:

Lemuel Austin played guitar and performed with the group from around 1968 up until his death in 1969 while traveling to a gig on the campus of Western Carolina University. Austin was the son of the late Isaac Austin and Mrs. Fannie Brown Austin. He had three sisters and four brothers. Lem, as he was called, attended Wilkinson High School. He started out playing bass guitar but converted over to playing the lead guitar. Lem was hired by John Wright’s band, the Invincibles. Wright molded Lem into a very talented guitar player. Austin became a member of the Exotics when his big brother Ben had to leave the group and go into the military during the Vietnam War. Ben asked Lem, “Would you consider taking my place in the group?” He agreed and immediately blended in with the band. In a conversation with Ben, he said, “Lem taught David Stephens how to play the bass guitar. Stephens turned out to be one of the top bass players in South Carolina. Ben also remembers the night of the accident that took his little brother: “Mom was hurt, but she always kept the loss of Lem to herself.” He also said, “Over the last 50 years, all of the family had to learn to live with the events and loss of Lem in that tragic accident. Today, I am the last member living from my family. “He lives with me each and every day. He is always with me. I even included his name in my e-mail address. I still miss him.” Lem’s funeral took place at Warren Chapel Baptist Church and was laid to rest in the Warren Chapel Cemetery.

Russell S. Kennedy – tenor saxophone:

Russell S. Kennedy played tenor saxophone with the band from 1968 up until the time of the accident on the night of Oct. 3, 1969. He was born to the late Edward S. Kennedy and Leslie Lamb Kennedy in Columbia on July 22, 1949. Russell graduated from C.A. Johnson High School in 1967. He then enrolled at South Carolina State College, majoring in music education. Not long after he started at State, he was hired by the Exotics as a tenor saxophone player. Kennedy was a towering musician who looked like he could have been a football player for the Bulldogs. He was an outstanding musician who could blow the gold finishing off the saxophone. Russell was the type of musician who would always push the band whenever the music would start. He just loved being on the stage and performing to the highest of his musicianship to entertain any audience. And he would really honk his horn when he took a solo. Russell was known to the band as “PePe Lapue.” As it did with all of the surviving members of the Exotics, that tragic night left an unforgettable impact on his life. Not long

after the accident and his recovery, Kennedy started his own band in Columbia. While performing with his group, he also became a long-distance truck driver. Russell departed this world on Jan. 6, 2019. This writer remembers his eagerness when performing with him on a gig. He would always say, "Come on, let's play, let's play."

John Lee Riley - singer:

John Riley became a singer with the Exotics in the early 1960s. He was known by the group as "Pogo." Riley was the fun - loving person who would keep the band laughing. Sometimes he would be a jokester who kept a smile on his face. Clayton Fogle recalls how Pogo would tease him about being the only black mechanic working for D.D. Salley, the Dodge automobile dealership in Orangeburg. Harry Palmer said, "Almost every time we would pick up Pogo from his house, his mom would always fix some food for the band to eat when they had gigs out of town. She made sure that we all had something to eat. "Pogo was a talented singer who would bring the house down. When he would sing the slow song, everybody would call him a crooner. He was a great entertainer." Riley was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Riley of Orangeburg. He graduated from Wilkinson High School in 1964. At the time of his death, he was survived by his widow, Mrs. Joyce Riley; a son, Marvin; three brothers, Louis, Harold and Michael; and two sisters, Mrs. Patricia Tyler and Miss Carolyn Riley.

Francis Arthur Thompson - alto saxophone:

Francis "Egghead" Thompson, started performing on the alto saxophone with the Exotics during the mid-1960s. To the group, he was known as "Egghead." Egghead was a talented musician who majored in music education at South Carolina State College. During his time at State, he played alto sax in the famed Marching 101 Band. Thompson was always an exciting musician who loved to play music. He loved playing jazz, especially while being around former jazzman Thales "Skip" Pearson. Francis was born in Orangeburg and was the son of Matilda Franklin Thompson and the late Francis A. Thompson Sr. He was a graduate of Wilkinson High School and learned to play music under band director James B. Hunt. After the band's accident, Egghead for some reason did not rejoin the Exotics. With a different musical desire to continue playing music, he played with several bands in Orangeburg. During that time, Orangeburg had a good many bands throughout the county. After bouncing around from band to band playing his alto sax and flute, he changed his life and discontinued playing music that he so loved. It is not clear why he lost his interest. Some of his friends believed that the accident with the Exotics had taken some effects in his life after that traumatizing event took place. For some unknown reason, Egghead never regained the level of confidence in performing music as he did before the accident. Just like Russell Kennedy, Egghead was a pusher of music when it came to performing before an audience of party-goers. Francis "Egghead" Thompson departed this earthly life in May of 2001. He was survived by his wife, Mrs. Clara Ann Cleckley Thompson of the home, and a son, Andre' Thompson of Waco, Texas.

The surviving members of the Exotics Band's accident include Harry Palmer, Dwight McMillan, Clayton Fogle, Coleman Sistrunk, James Stroman and bus driver Levi McDonald.

After 50 years, we will never forget these talented musicians that represented Orangeburg County by sharing their outstanding musical abilities all in effort to bring great joy to the audiences that they performed in front of. May these departed members of the Exotics Band continue to rest in peace.

Richard Reid is president of the Orangeburg Historical and Genealogical Society. His mission is researching Orangeburg history, with a particular emphasis on the role of African-Americans in that history.