

Larry Vann shares some highlights of his music career...

My earliest performances started with the NAACP Talent Shows in the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Area where I lived. Through these shows, I was able to get my "chops" together by playing behind so many acts – there was a lot of time to prove ourselves, a lot of recognition and exposure to the up and coming Bay Area young talent.

Next, we played the Oakland clubs. We were able to get our feet wet with great R&B acts such as The Whispers, The Ballards, Marvin Holmes and the Uptights. We gained a lot of ground. It was a great time to learn and be on the scene – getting our feet wet with great R&B acts, the great talent in the area.

We played the big rooms in the area. One was the Continental Club in Oakland - they brought James Brown, Bobby Bland, Charles Brown; another was The Sportsman Club – one of the premier Black clubs in Oakland. Some of the artists they brought were Jerry Butler, The Impressions, and Major Lance. And history tells us that Billy Holiday also played there, but that was before my time, but still very interesting information. Another premier club in Oakland was the Showcase. Some of the artists they brought were Johnny Talbot and Johnny Hartsman. These were all premier "cats" in the area we had to gauge ourselves from and learn from. It was an important time in my musical growth.

In 1966 or '67 I went on my first tour – it was with The Whispers. We were part of a "review". I didn't know it at the time, but I was able to be on the "Chitlin' Circuit" right before it ended. Many of the clubs in the circuit unfortunately closed. At that time it was an incredible circuit – you could see some of the biggest names. While out on that tour, I met: Buddy Miles in Omaha, Nebraska at the Paul B. Allen Showcase; Sam and Dave – we opened for them in Buffalo, New York at the Dellwood Dance Hall. We almost starved a week before they came because something went wrong with the booking and we were there one week before they arrived, in the dead of winter. I also met Dike of Dike and the Blazers who did "Funky Broadway" down in Phoenix where he lived. He used to always come see us all the time when I was with The Whispers. This was an incredible tour for me – a big, big journey for me in my career. I learned and grew a lot – I learned a lot about life.

My work with Motown started in the late 60's, working in the backup band for The Marvalettes. We got picked up to play in their backup band while they were in our area.

Also in the late 60's, I was a part of the Temptations Review. We didn't back them up, just in the same review. That was really a treat - they were really hot at that time.

I had the pleasure of working with Curtis Mayfield and The Impressions – their drummer spent a lot of time with me. He saw I was just a young brother, new to the scene. He was the first one to show me about rudiments, taking me aside to give me some training. I learned a lot just hanging out with him and watching

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him play – he was a master drummer. He came to an unfortunate end. While touring down south, driving over an icy bridge, they lost control of the car. They were also pulling a trailer. The car fell over into an icy river and everyone perished. It was a really sad, sad note for me to find out about that. I always looked forward to them coming to the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Area. We would usually get together and kick it, so this was really a big loss for the music community and me.

Another highlight in my career was in the '70s, while working with Marvin Holmes and Justice. We worked with Rufus Thomas – Mr. "Do the Dog", the father of the great Carla Thomas. Rufus Thomas taught me how to end songs. I used to just do "a feel", then do a lot of rolls/movements, playing off the cymbals. He stopped me at a rehearsal – he said, "drummer, don't ever end like that. End like this...". He then showed me how to do a flam and then roll on the cymbals, making a big swell with the ending chord. I never forgot that – he showed me how to end a song. That was an incredible highlight to perform behind Rufus Thomas.

Also in the 70's, I was back with The Whispers. I went to Europe for the first time, Geneva, Switzerland. We performed there for about a month. After that, I became a staff musician for the Soul Train Records, developed by Don Cornelius and the great Black promoter, Dick Griffey. We recorded the first Soul Train Gang LP, down on Sunset Boulevard at the RCA studio. During that time, we also did the "Midnight Special" television show. Working as a staff musician for Soul Train Records was a big moment for me. It was also great working with Don Cornelius and Dick Griffey.

Really, I started out playing blues in blues and R&R clubs. I actually always looked to jazz. If it wasn't for the area I grew up in and the guys I was around, I probably would have been a hard-core jazz musician. Jazz was really pulling me, but I'm glad I came up the way I did and was able to start out the way I did. It gave me the foundation I needed for where I've been headed. There's nothing like having a strong backbeat. Don't never go outside without a strong backbeat, drummers. I thank God for the backbeat – being able to understand it and develop it and have it as part of my arsenal.

To sum up how I am, I'm a groove merchant, always searching for a groove. That's my mission – to find the grooves, me grabbing it and locking it in. Every time I play, I want to be able to capture it. When a band locks down on a groove, it's powerful. It can become hypnotic. It gets people dancing, excited. Once you've experienced that, you're always in search of it. There's power in it – it's joyous. You're giving it and the crowd is giving it back to you. It makes you want to play all night long – you just don't want to stop.