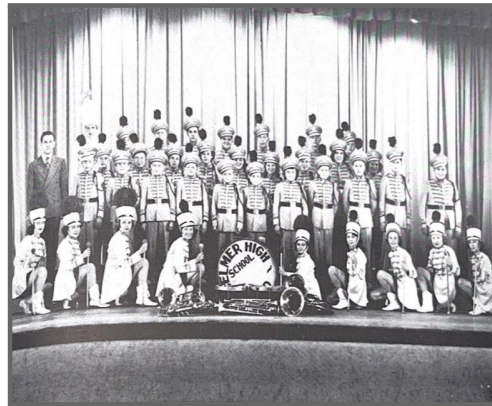


Cornet Bands, Music Education, and Instrumental Music in McNairy County

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Introduction

The significance that music, and the arts as a whole, have in McNairy County is common knowledge within the community and across West Tennessee. Countless tourists from around the state, country, and globe have declared McNairy County a must-see stop during their adventures; whether for the three murals reflecting the rockabilly roots in the county's history, or stopping by Pat's Cafe for a slug burger.



Rockabilly Highway Mural Three, commissioned by Arts in McNairy, painted by Brian Tull in 2023

The music history in McNairy County is vast and expansive, impacting countless generations of its citizens. The County's most significant claim to fame is rockabilly. McNairy County sits comfortably on the Tennessee-Mississippi State Line and is the key intersection on Rockabilly Highway; connecting Nashville, Jackson, Memphis, and Tupelo. McNairy was ground zero for the cultural rift that brought about rock 'n' roll music.

Countless rockabilly giants honed their skills and performed in and around the county. Carl Perkins frequented community jams at the Latta building in downtown Selmer. Perkins first met Elvis Presley during a performance at Bethel Springs High School in the fall of 1954, this being the King's earliest performance outside of Memphis. Perkins even made his first known recordings in Eastview with Stanton Littlejohn. The man who gave

Presley, Perkins, Cash, Lewis, and others their start, Dewey Phillips, hailed from Adamsville. The history isn't in doubt, McNairy County has had a significant impact on music history.

However, the musical impact within the county doesn't stop at rock 'n' roll. Countless genres, instruments, and voices are represented within the folds of music history in the county. A less-talked-about, but assumed common fact, is the significance of wind bands, brass bands, and other instrumental ensembles woven throughout the county's history; and the educators surrounding it.

Wind and brass ensembles have been performing in and around McNairy County for over one hundred and fifty years. While these ensembles have been standard fixtures of events, gatherings, and community efforts, it is important that the history is preserved for future citizens, instrumentalists, and educators.

Early History

Following its founding in 1823, McNairy County began to expand. The original seat, Purdy, was a hotbed of culture and knowledge in the early days of the county's history. The town boasted a college, numerous shops, hotels, a jail, churches, and a courthouse. The city also had a brass band as early as 1871. This is the earliest known wind ensemble located in McNairy County. Following the Civil War, citizens of the county began rapidly mentioning relocating the county seat, and in 1896, citizens voted and relocated to Selmer, the current seat. During this time period, communities around the county began forming numerous ensembles, performing, and even traveling together.

By 1920, almost every community within the county's borders was home to some sort of wind ensemble. These ensembles were mostly brass bands, better known then as cornet bands. Adamsville had a brass band as early as 1891 and frequently performed across the river in Savannah. Savannah, a part of Hardin County, even had its own ensemble by 1871, but was defunct by 1889.

The Montezuma community in northern McNairy boasted its own cornet band as early as 1871 and performed at fairs and community gatherings well into the 1910s. One notable gathering where musical entertainment was a staple, was the annual Barbeque Festival in Finger. This festival was, and is, a staple among McNairy Countians and has been for over one hundred and fifty years.

The county seat, Selmer, also featured many ensembles and events for performances. The McNairy County Fair gave a stage to numerous ensembles in the county. Selmer was home to the Town of Selmer Band as early as 1920 and featured various ages among its performers. In the African American communities of Selmer and Falcon, numerous performances were given by brass bands. In Selmer, John Erwin led an all-black wind ensemble that frequently performed at prominent community gatherings throughout the 1910s and 1920s. In 1918, Selmer was a stop on a tour by the Great Lakes Naval Station Band, led by John Phillip Sousa. Selmer's location as a key intersection between Memphis, Nashville, and Tupelo made it prime for touring acts and ensembles.



The Town of Selmer Band, pictured in 1926



The Queen Crescent Band circa. 1915

A little south of Selmer in Ramer, Professor Mac Hollis was leading two very successful ensembles.

Professor Hollis, a prominent educator in the area, led the Ramer Concert Band, an

all-male group; and the Queen Crescent

Band, an all-female group. Known members of the female group were Ila McAlpin Hamm and Mattie Robinson Lawson, both baritone players.



Queen Crescent Band, Front Row, second and third from left: Ila McAlpin Hamm and Mattie Robinson Lawson

Both groups frequently performed at festivals, parades, and gatherings in McNairy County, Bolivar, and Corinth, Mississippi. The boy's band once performed for a campaign stop of Senator Kenneth McKellar, who would eventually become President Pro Tempore in the Senate. Both ensembles were prominent throughout the early twentieth century.

These independent ensembles were not alone. Throughout the county, schools formed their own bands and performed as well.

Music in Schools

Schools in Bethel Springs, Stantonville, and Ramer sponsored band programs in the early twentieth century, but the most prominent school band was in the county seat.

Selmer High School opened its doors following the relocation of the county seat in 1893. The high school went through various changes in location and staff during its time in use. The building was destroyed by fire for the first time in 1898, then again during the 1939 school year. Throughout the history of the school, several music teachers garnered respectable reputations for their leadership. Miss Rebecca Branch and Miss Joethel Powers taught music at the school throughout the 1910s.

By the 1930s, Selmer High School had a good reputation as a Science and Arts school in West Tennessee. The band frequently marched in parades in Selmer, Savannah, and Jackson.

As early as 1930, Selmer High School sponsored a Kiddie Band in the county. This band of children would march alongside the big kids and was a staple in the community.

Following the closing of Selmer High School in 1969, two other high schools within the county began developing wildly successful programs. Led by wildly successful educators.



Selmer Kiddie Band circa 1930, photographed by McCords Studio out of Corinth, MS

After Selmer High School closed its doors in 1969, a new high school emerged in the county. McNairy Central High School opened as a revolutionary and groundbreaking learning center. The school boasted a planetarium, library, nature trails, two lakes, one-hundred-forty-acre campus, and the building was air-conditioned. Many teachers from the previous high school were moved to the new one. The band director at Selmer High School, Frank Congiardo, was one of these teachers.

Mr. Congiardo was born into a musical household in Illinois. Everybody within the Congiardo family played something and Frank played the mandolin by the age of five with the family band. Frank's father worked for Brown Shoe Company and the family relocated to McNairy County when the company opened a new factory in Ramer. Mr. Congiardo finished school at Selmer High and continued his education at Union University: studying clarinet and earning a Bachelor's in Music Education.



Frank Congiardo Jr.

Following his work at Union, Mr. Congiardo took the band director job at Selmer High School, his alma mater. His tenure there began in the fall of 1965. While working at Selmer High, Mr. Congiardo was also working as a full-time parent. Frank raised his children surrounded by music, playing songs from every genre, background, and culture. In an interview with his son, Frank "Frankie" III, he recalled the musical influence throughout his childhood: "I can remember blues bands, I can remember classical music country music, ya know we were surrounded by every style of music."

Once at McNairy Central, Mr. Congiardo helped the band program immediately to flourish. Ken Goforth, another prominent educator directed the choir and assisted in the band. Under their leadership, the program grew in size and quickly made an impact on the band world in and around West Tennessee.

Frank Congiardo worked at McNairy Central until leaving in 1979, following his son, Frankie's graduation. Beginning in the fall of 1979, Frank would begin a new chapter in his career and revive the band program at Adamsville.

When Mr. Congiardo arrived at Adamsville, the band program consisted of four members in total. During his tenure at Adamsville, he significantly altered the trajectory of the band's future. He regularly sent countless instrumentalists to division and state-level band conferences and led the band in countless parades and festivals across the midsouth.

Following his retirement, his son, Frankie, accepted the band director position at Adamsville in 1985. Frankie led the band to numerous state championships and sent countless students to band conferences across the country. Frank's second son, Mike, also entered the band world and would become a prominent educator and leader in the midsouth; teaching in Jackson and Dyer, in Tennessee, and Kentucky.

The Congiardo name is synonymous with musical excellence in and around McNairy County and their impacts will forever be felt by many.



Mr. Congiardo and Mr. Goforth

Following Frank Congiardo's departure from McNairy Central, new leadership emerged over the years in the band program there.

In the years following Congiardo's exit, a few directors held short stints in the program at McNairy Central. Throughout the eighties, Greg Stover,



Ronnie Brooks in the late 1980s

David Hurst, and Ronnie Books would all have successful tenures leading the band. The band frequently competed in marching contests and festivals across the midsouth and in 1983, hosted the McNairy County Marching Invitational.

During this period, many county middle and elementary schools began to flourish. Programs at Selmer Middle, Bethel Springs Elementary, and Ramer Elementary all saw significant growth.

In 1998, a new director took the role at McNairy Central. Ryan Foret, a Louisiana native, met his wife, Gina, at Louisiana State University. Gina has significant musical roots in McNairy County. Her parents, Dwight and Freda Locke are prominent pickers in the county and are members of the McNairy County Music Hall of Fame, Class of 2016.

Gina, a saxophonist, attended McNairy Central and was taught by Ronnie Brooks. She consistently placed in regional festivals and conferences and continued her music education into college. Ryan was a standout trumpeter in his small bayou town in Louisiana. He decided to leave the family shrimping company after high school and pursue music education.



Ryan and Gina Foret in the late 1990s

The two met and after marrying in 1997, found job openings in Gina's home county. Both since have developed standout reputations in the county and beyond as magnificent educators. Ryan has led the Bobcat Band to countless victories in numerous competitions across the midsouth, but what most remember him for is his impact on students.

Mr. Foret has been known to create a sense of community among his students. When asked about his experience under him, former student Mario Puentes said: "He is a really

understanding person, and you can tell every decision he makes is for the betterment [of the group]"

The Foret's impact on music education in McNairy County has defined an era of band kids and they are continuing to change lives daily.

Several other music educators have passed through McNairy County and taught music in some way since the 1910s; this list is being updated and altered as more educators are discovered:

Rebecca Branch
Florence Ross
Jennie Freeling
Joethel Powers
Frank Congiardo
Frankie Congiardo
Ryan Foret
Gina Foret
Rebecca Kerr
Norma Humphries

David Stevens
Tammye Hight
Tommy Thompson
Carol Gemeinhardt
Helen Redding
Professor Mac Hollis
Trice Mayhall
Isaac Spitler
Micaiah Radcliffe
Kerry Radcliffe