

Arzell Nelson Bio

2009 Culan Inc. Flowers Award Ceremony, Humanitarian Award

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3uoli2xPJE&t=23s>

By: Thomas Consolo, WCPO contributor

Posted at 7:00 AM, Feb 27, 2016

Awards are nothing new for Arzell Nelson.

The Cincinnati native and Avondale resident has earned recognition for his work since the early 1970s. He's still surprised, though, when accolades comes his way.

“In the morning, I’m not seeking anything but to satisfy what’s in my heart,” said Nelson, who wears a kufi-style hat as he sits on the couch in his apartment. It’s an oasis of afternoon peace within sight of bustling Reading Road, its walls covered with mostly African and Asian art.

Recent Stories from wcpo.com

Rebound Much of what’s in his heart is music, especially when it overlaps with social justice and civil rights. That’s no surprise: In his family, it would have been stranger if he hadn’t gotten involved with music. His father, Willie, played saxophone, Nelson said, his brother played stride piano, and his mother, Parrie, “sang like [Mahalia Jackson](#).” Among his childhood friends was [Bootsy Collins](#). He can claim [Jimi Hendrix](#) as a relative, too.

As a boy, Nelson’s father encouraged him to start playing violin, drums and piano. Trombone and guitar followed in junior high.

Nelson, now 66, has seen Cincinnati from many perspectives. Born in the West End, his family moved to East Walnut Hills when he was a boy. “We were the first black family on the street,” he said, in an area then dubbed Little Italy because of the cluster of Italian families there. Another move when he was a teenager, to Camp Dennison in Symmes Township, meant that he attended Indian Hill High School. After high school, he attended the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati Bible Seminary and Cincinnati Theological Seminary. Nelson had just started working for the [Cincinnati Human Relations Commission](#) in 1973 when its executive director, [Virginia Coffey](#), tasked him with reducing juvenile delinquency in the West End. “I asked her, ‘What do you want me to do?’” he said, “and she answered, ‘Whatever you can do to keep kids off the street.’”

His answer was music. He started offering a music workshop with a borrowed electric piano. “It caught on,” he said. Soon, he was writing songs for his workshop students to perform.

Nelson’s first show, “Straighten Out Sammy,” was created in reaction to Sammy Davis Jr.’s controversial [support of Richard Nixon](#). Its positive reception led to the creation of Nelson’s second group, the Corporation of Truth, which in 1975 played the city’s first Martin Luther King concert. Footage of that concert was recently rediscovered and last year was posted to YouTube.

Prolific Promoter And Producer

Nelson has since written more than 300 songs and more shows, including “Little Boy Jazz,” which was performed at Playhouse in the Park’s Marx Theater, and “My Time Has Come,” funded in part by Tri-State arts patroness [Irma Lazarus](#). “Little Boy Jazz” earned him the Dino Santangelo Award at the 1981 Kool Jazz Fest (now the [Cincinnati Music Festival](#)).

Nelson also has been a prolific music producer and promoter, including work at Columbia Records and as owner of AVA Studios and L'lezra Entertainment Group. With longtime Bogart's owner Al Porkolab, he helped bring the likes of Prince and Huey Lewis to the Corryville venue.

Today, his status as a local music veteran and mentor to other musicians has earned him the nickname Papazell.

All the while, Nelson remained dedicated to social change and was still at work with the CHRC. When he retired from the commission in 1998 after a quarter-century of service, he was its executive director.

The decades of wide-ranging work have brought Nelson recognition from around the world. He's been given the key to the city by three Cincinnati mayors and by Shreveport, La. Ukraine's Department of State and the AFL-CIO have given him awards.

In 2011, Nelson opened an email telling him he'd been chosen for a prestigious award in India. "I thought it might be a scam, you know?" he said. He had a close friend from India, though, who after a few calls confirmed it was on the up-and-up.

That award was one of the Karmaveer Puraskaar Global Awards for Social Justice and Citizen Action. The awards are given annually in several categories to recognize accomplishments by private citizens in social justice. The award was instituted in 2007 by [iCONGO](#), the Indian Confederation of Non-Governmental Organizations. The public-private partnership's flagship effort is the [Right Every Wrong Movement](#).

| *RELATED: [Watch iCONGO's video on Right Every Wrong.](#)*

Breaking Down Barriers

That November, he flew to New Delhi, India, to receive the Artistes 4 Change Karmaveer Puraskaar in conjunction with the Right Every Wrong conclave. Karmaveer Puraskaar recipients are known as Noble Laureates. The Karmaveer award lines up well with Nelson's driving motivation — whether through music or his social service work — to break down barriers.

Barriers in music can divide genres, he said, resulting in “cliques.” That can lead to a loss of cultural legacy. Much of the proud story of black music in Cincinnati isn't appreciated by those who benefit from it, he offered as an example.

“Billie Walker played with Cannonball Adderley and studied with Art Tatum,” he said. “She was discovered by Pearl Bailey and was friends with Lena Horne. And no one knows about her. She was just playing at the Cincinnati.”

Nelson co-produced recordings of Walker at the Cincinnati in 2006. They're now available [on YouTube](#).

He also cited the Cosmopolitan School of Music, America's first black conservatory. Like the Cotton Club (yes, Cincinnati had one, too), it was a cultural mainstay in the West End that didn't survive the urban renewal of the 1930s and '40s. Today, “no one knows about it,” he said.

Like urban renewal, Nelson said desegregation also had some unintended consequences. Black youngsters in segregated neighborhoods grew up surrounded by black doctors, black lawyers, black educators and black musicians, he said. Today, with those professionals aspiring to live in affluent neighborhoods with their white counterparts, poor children are left with few positive role models in their world.

“Diversity is the best education,” he said. “Diversity is something that is missing now.”

He's under no illusions about segregation, but he said that the people who tried to engineer its elimination usually didn't ask the people who would be most affected what they wanted. The state of the country's poorest, urban neighborhoods is one consequence of that, he said.

He hopes his next project will focus on those children in Cincinnati. "It's a documentary on the effect of stress on kids," he said. The film's thesis: Poor children live under chronic stress which manifests itself in behavior that people outside those communities perceive as aggressive or violent.

He hopes the movie can lead to a deeper understanding of the children's challenges and to solutions. The film's backers are still seeking funding.

Papazell's Music

Two Arzell Nelson albums, "Colors of Composition" and "Jam Culture Club," are available for download at emusic.com.