

BUFFALO

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BUFFALO'S **Soul MEN**

— *Remember Dyke and the Blazers*

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Remembering Dyke

You probably don't remember Arlester "Dyke" Christian. Whenever you see those lists of celebrities from Buffalo who have made it big in the world of entertainment — people like Harold Arlen or James Whitmore or Rick James — his name is never among them.

And you probably don't remember the group with whom Christian, for a short time, achieved some measure of success: Dyke and the Blazers.

And, depending on how well versed you are in '60s soul music, you may or may not remember having ever heard of the one hit song that gave them their brief taste of stardom. It was called "Funky Broadway."

But the men in our cover photo remember. They are, from left, Willie Earl, Maurice Jones, Carl LaRue and Alvester Jacobs. For a short time, a lifetime ago, they were better known as the Blazers of Dyke and the Blazers, and they were hot.

Christian himself died 20 years ago, the victim of a Phoenix gunman. In today's cover story, writer Elmer Ploetz recounts the rise and fall of Dyke and the Blazers, from the song that teased them by making them believe they had a shot at the big time to the forces that drove them apart.

Theirs is the story of so many entertainers, of course. For every celebrity in the entertainment business, there must be dozens like these guys, stars that burn brightly for a while — and then burn out.



Carl LaRue

COVER PHOTO: BILL WIPPERT/BUFFALO NEWS

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BUFFALO'S **Soul MEN**

BILL WIPPERT/BUFFALO NEWS



*In some circles,
he's a legend.
But to most of us
Arlester "Dyke" Christian
is better known
for writing one
very funky song.*

BY ELMER PLOETZ

THE SURVIVORS: From left are Maurice Jones, Carl LaRue, Alvester Jacobs and Willie Earl. The Blazers weren't slick pop, like Motown; they weren't as sanctified as Otis Redding. But they put fear into James Brown's heart.

*Every town I go in, there's a street
Name of the street,
Funky Funky Broadway*



THE CREW: In 1960, Carl LaRue pulled together guitarist Alvester "Pig" Jacobs, drummer Willie Earl and Dyke, frequently bringing in teen phenom "Baby Wayne" Peterson to sing.

The song itself is as sweaty and gritty as a muggy summer night on the East Side, with raw vocal cords croaking over a throbbing bass, the horn section punching through insistently.

It's not polished, it's just powerful. It's not pretty, it's a call to dance.

*Wiggle your legs, shake your head, now ba-bay,
Wiggle your waist, shake it, shake it, shake it*

It's Funky Broadway, dirty filthy Broadway, with its Broadway women, Broadway nightclubs. Sex, drugs and life on the tough side of town.

In fact, it's the place that killed Arlester "Dyke" Christian, the Buffalo soul man who wrote it down in a song.

At 2:05 on a Saturday afternoon in March of '71, Dyke was shot four times with a .22-caliber pistol, the bullets striking him in the right temple, the upper chest and right thigh. He was in front of a tavern in a rough section of Phoenix, Ariz., on a street running parallel to that city's Broadway.

Dyke was declared dead just over an hour later.

Today Dyke and the Blazers are a vague legend in Buffalo's black music community. He is remembered as one of the few singers from this city to break into the big time, scoring seven singles on the Billboard pop and soul charts. He is forgotten because he traveled 2,200 miles to Phoenix to help create funk, black music's next step beyond soul.

Through the years, a mystique has built up around Dyke's life and his death, with his music still conjuring up images of steamy dance floors in clubs like the old Pine Grill on Jefferson Avenue, and other stops on the "chitlin' circuit."

Dyke and the Blazers changed how we hear music today. They weren't slick pop, like Motown; they weren't as sanctified as Otis Redding. But they put fear into James Brown's heart.

When Carl LaRue first met Dyke, LaRue was the Bethlehem Steel worker who put together a bunch of East Side teen-agers as "Carl LaRue and his Crew." In 1960, LaRue pulled together guitarist Alvester "Pig" Jacobs, drummer Willie Earl and Dyke, who was learning the bass from Jacobs.

At first, Dyke wasn't quite proficient enough to perform with the group. He was a lanky street kid whom sources say spent his early years in Niagara Falls before moving to Buffalo.

"There were quite a few gangs. It was really kind of tough, you had to be careful what side of town you went on," says Jacobs. Dyke was well equipped to survive on Buffalo's East Side: easy to get along with but able to handle himself in a street fight.

"Dyke was the type of person once you met him, you'd have to like him. He was easygoing, likable," says one friend.

Dyke's mother, Eva Hales, was relieved at the time that her son was playing in the band, telling LaRue, "I'm so glad you got my son off the street."

Onstage, LaRue, a piano player who says he "stole his style from Ray Charles," shook up crowds in the early '60s with "What'd I Say" at what are now the University at Buffalo and Buffalo State College. And, despite the band's youth, they played bars like the Hotel Markeen on Main Street and the Padlock Social Club on Ferry, as well as the Dellwood Ballroom and Buffalo's Apollo Theater on Jefferson Avenue.

The band made a record ("Please Don't Drive Me Away" backed with "Monkey Hips and Oyster Stew") on KKC Records.

But LaRue, already in his 30s, could see the band wasn't really getting anywhere when he received a card from Eddie O'Jay, a former disc jockey at Buffalo's WUFO-AM. He was working for a Phoenix radio station and told LaRue to bring the Crew out there.

I told the boys," LaRue remembers. "I sat and talked with them: 'When we hit the road, there's two things I'll promise you. I'll see that you have a place to sleep, that you have something to eat, but your other habits you'll have to support yourself.'"

Phoenix's Valley of the Sun had never experienced northern rhythm and blues like LaRue and the boys were putting down by 1964. They started playing shows with O'Jay, but he followed radio's gypsy trail to other cities (along with the O'Jays vocal group that he managed and named). But by that time, LaRue and the Crew were established, playing bars on the city's predominantly black south and west sides. And after closing time, which was 1 a.m. in Phoenix, they played after-hours clubs until dawn.

"The Boys," as LaRue still calls his band, were all getting older, and hungrier, though. Dyke was the hungriest. LaRue remembers Dyke always saying, "Man, look, maybe we might get a hit record," and the older man cautioning him about setting his expectations too high.

"We was definitely thinking of Buffalo, because that was the first Broadway we knew."

— Alvester "Pig" Jacobs

Soul

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By late 1965, the band fell apart under the weight of the expectations and because of group bickering. LaRue came back to Buffalo, but Dyke stayed in Phoenix. James Brown had changed black music that year with the song "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," laying the foundations for modern funk. Dyke knew which musical path he wanted to follow.

The first thing he did was hook up with a Phoenix group called the Three Blazers. "Funky Broadway" first started taking form around that time. Jacobs and Blazers' saxophonist Bernard Williams say they helped write it. It evolved over "10 months or a year. It hadn't even been copyrighted," says Williams. "Nobody thought that record was going to make it."

"That used to be the 'Funny, Funny Broadway,' says Jacobs. "That was a title Dyke and I played with after we got to Phoenix and hanging out on the streets. And we hanged out on Broadway."

"We was definitely thinking of Buffalo, because that was

DYKE: Remembered as one of the few singers from this city to break into the big time, Arlester "Dyke" Christian, scored seven singles on the Billboard pop and soul charts.



the first Broadway we knew. And it came out true. Every town you go in, there's a street..."

At this point manager Art Barrett entered the picture. "They were playing a local club, the Elks Club, and I used to get off work as a juvenile counselor," says Barrett. "I heard him (Dyke) play one night. I was taken aback. They were playing the song 'Funky Broadway.' I thought it was someone else's, and they told me it was an original song."

"I talked to them that night, kind of shot off my mouth. I asked them if they were interested in recording it and gave them my phone number."

That was on a Friday. On Monday, Barrett had his call. The next step was a recording session, and Barrett took the band to Audio Recorders Studio in midsummer of 1966.

"I used my paycheck to do the original recording. It cost \$45," says Barrett. "Funky Broadway" was recorded in less than an hour, and Barrett and a partner pressed 250 copies of the single.

Barrett wasn't able to get in the door at Phoenix radio stations, but sold records at their performances. They started telling people to call an all-request radio station, asking to hear the song.

The calls were enough to get "Funky Broadway" on the air and to No. 2 on the Phoenix radio charts. According to Barrett, it also drew interest from record companies Capital, RCA and Motown, but he and the band decided they would be best served by Original Sound, a small Los Angeles company owned by disc jockey Art LaBoe, where they would be the No. 1 act.

"At that time, nobody signed any contracts, only Dyke," says Williams, the sax player. "He signed the recording contract, which didn't even include the band."

The managers also put together a publishing company, listing Dyke as the songwriter.

The song hit one market at a time and sold beyond what its No. 17 ranking on the Billboard soul charts would seem to have indicated. But the song's impact went beyond any commercial success.

To those hearing it for the first time, it was a burst forward in funk.

Rick James, who would hit it big as a funketeer in his own right in the late '70s and early '80s, remembers seeing Dyke play in Buffalo and hearing the song on the radio.

"The world was stunned. It was revolutionary as far as what the music was saying, revolutionary as far as its sound," says James. "And it showed me somebody from Buffalo could make music that was new and fresh and funky."

Tom Terrell, a former Washington club disc jockey now with Mango Records, recalls the song as part of what was almost a rite of passage.

"We didn't even understand what he was saying. There was something about that record, it was like a call. You had to dance," he says. "It had a bump and grind sound like a strip club. It had a real dirty sound."

"We used to do a dance, I found out later it was very African. It was called the Funky Broadway, and people only dance it to that song."

"At the end of side one, where they fade out with just the drums and voice, people would stand in the middle of the floor and bend over and rotate their heads around and around and around, if they had the necks to do it, almost like your head was on a string. Women and men would do it. It was a very nasty song. People would get up against each other, rub against each other. It was a rite of passage song."

Why a man named Clarence Daniels shot Dyke from the window of his 1963 Falcon has never been made clear. Writer Dave Walker suggests Dyke may have confronted Daniels and accused him of being a "police snitch."



LIVE FROM THE APOLLO: In the summer of '67 the Blazers played the Apollo Theater, the mecca of black music, and crumbled under the weight of a brutal schedule — five shows a day, five days a week.

Terrell recently interviewed James Brown, and says Brown's song, "Cold Sweat," was inspired by Dyke and Wilson Pickett.

"Before I'd let them get ahead of me, I'd make them break out in a cold sweat," he quotes James Brown as saying.

But due to the word "funky," some radio stations wouldn't even play it. At that time, "funky" had various slang connotations, some of them regarded as fairly offensive, and "Funky Broadway" was the first hit song to include the word in its title.

For the band members, just hearing the song on the radio was a revelation.

Jacobs recalls "calling up here to Buffalo. We'd call our moms, our sisters and brothers and all and say, 'Hey, have you heard 'Funky Funky Broadway' yet?' And they would laugh at us. I guess they was laughing at the title of the song."

"Then one day we called up and they said, 'Yes, that's all they could hear!'"

The hit was big enough to put the band on the road. Almost immediately after recording, the Blazers added a saxophonist and bassist to free Dyke to sing.

The band members weren't really seeing any of the money from the record sales. And at first it didn't matter.

"It felt good to know you was on a hit record," says Jacobs. "At that point, we was traveling off the first hit, things was pretty good. Everybody was so excited, things was so up."

The Blazers were a hot live band, too.

"I've never been in a band like Dyke and the Blazers," says Williams. "We could go on stage and make up a song. Dyke or the keyboard player or horn players would make up a riff and we'd go with it. It was a band that could go up there and just do it, without rehearsal."

"I think (Dyke) sold himself more by talking to the audience," says Jacobs. "I did some behind-the-back playing, some playing with my teeth. ... And I had my own little routine where we would take our guitars and start running

and the horn players would twirl their horns like batons."

In the summer of 1967 the Blazers played the Apollo Theater in Harlem, the mecca of black music ... and crumbled under the weight of the Apollo's brutal schedule — five shows a day, five days a week as part of a package program.

"They (Dyke and the managers) wanted to pay us \$90 or \$100 a week," says Williams. "Back then, all the day jobs we had, we wasn't making \$60 or \$70 bucks a week, so they figured that \$100 a week was more than we had ever made in our life."

"I came from the poor end of the projects. I guess I liked the attention of being on stage, and I just liked jamming with the fellows," says Alvin Battle, the new bass player. "But I wasn't getting any money. So I called my mother, and told her to 'send me a ticket and get me out of here.'"

Half the band followed Battle. Dyke returned to Buffalo and called on old connections.

One of the first players Dyke and his manager picked up was drummer Willie Earl of Carl LaRue's original outfit. Then they added "Baby Wayne" Peterson as a second drummer.

"With two limousines — two Cadillacs — he (Dyke) came up Maple Street," says Wardell Peterson, Wayne's brother. "Me and Wayne was upstairs in the house, and little kids was hollering: 'Wayne, Wayne, there's a man up at the hall, he's got two limousines and he wants you to come up right away.'"

"We didn't know who it was, so we go up to the hall and see the limousines and everybody out there, and it was Dyke. They had set up shop and he wanted to hear Wayne play. So Wayne went in there and practiced on the rhythm side, and the next night — the next night — they played at the Memorial Auditorium (which had a dance floor at the time)."

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Among the other musicians Dyke hired were bass player Otis Tolliver, keyboardist Ray Byrd and Maurice "Little Mo" Jones, an 18-year-old All-High trumpeter out of Burgard High School.

Dyke had a knack for bringing a group together, and the band remained a top live act. Wayne Peterson added to the mix with his solos, his drum set sliding to the front of the stage.

Despite the changes in the band, 1967 at first glance appeared to have been Dyke's best year. Wilson Pickett released a version of "Funky Broadway" on Atlantic Records in August. It was a mammoth hit, and Dyke received the publishing royalties.

Dyke appeared on Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" and started recording with the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Section in Los Angeles.

With things looking well, Dyke bought a ranch-style home in north Phoenix, where Wayne Peterson eventually moved in with Dyke and Dyke's wife, Wanda.

Appearances could be deceiving with Dyke, however. He still felt most at home on the streets of south Phoenix, talking, gambling or just hanging out.

"He would do stuff like be in a gambling game. He might have \$500, the rest of the crew would have \$50 between them," says Elmer Scott, a longtime friend. "He said he just liked it. I just felt if he doesn't leave from down there, ain't no good coming out of it."

The hits kept coming through 1968 and '69. His biggest chart songs, "We Got More Soul" and "Let a Woman Be a Woman, Let a Man Be a Man," cracked the pop Top 40. But the second round of Blazers was also cracking up.

Willie Earl was one of the first to go, deciding he was tired of the road and returning to Buffalo in 1968.

In 1969, the band's equipment was stolen from a club. Dyke promised to replace it, but never did. The Blazers, worn down by the travel and low pay, scattered.

Dyke stayed in Phoenix. He performed with a group called the Odd Squad, which included three of the original Blazers, and he recorded in Los Angeles.

One of his songs at that time, "Runaway People," was like a call for help.

Runaway people, let's go home

Wanna see mother, wanna see father

Wanna see sister, wanna see brother

Going home, where I belong
Give me B-U-F-F-A-L-O.

Dyke was strung out on heroin. It's not clear just when he first encountered the drug. Some close to the band have suggested Dyke was shooting even before "Funky Broadway," but by the late '60s he was using. Onstage, it didn't affect him.

"Y'know how heroin is? Once you get hooked, once you get that fix, it holds you for five to six hours," says Williams. "I guess Dyke always had his fix. Every town we went to, he always seemed to be able to go where it was. I don't see how he did it, because it wasn't like it is today where drugs are everywhere."

Some of the younger band members say they weren't even aware of it.

"I was a naive young kid," says one. "I knew he smoked weed. But I never knew Dyke was using any heavy, hard stuff."

For all of his problems, Dyke appeared to be on the rebound by early 1971. He met producer Barry White and they were preparing to record. He was rehearsing with a band, readying for an English tour.

Dyke never made it.

Why a man named Clarence Daniels shot Dyke from the window of his 1963 Falcon has never been made clear. In a report in New Times, a Phoenix alternative weekly, writer Dave Walker suggests Dyke may have confronted Daniels and accused him of being a "police snitch."

According to saxophonist Williams, the story on the street was "the guy was a dealer who Dyke owed \$400. They got in an argument, and Dyke grabbed him in the car. The guy had a gun on the seat and he started shooting."

The coroner's report showed no alcohol or narcotics in his system; his arms bore "linear scars which coursed along the veins in both arms," but they were apparently "old and inactive."

Daniels was arraigned on murder charges but the case was delayed several times and eventually dismissed on Dec. 1, 1971, because of "evidence indicating self-defense."

Several of the original Blazers played at a funeral service for Dyke in Phoenix. His body was then sent to Buffalo, where there were services at St. John's Baptist Church on Michigan Avenue. Dyke was buried at Forest Lawn; Jacobs was among the pall bearers.

Twenty years later, Dyke is a

shadowy figure in black music, although signs of his and the Blazers' legacy still pop up. Rhino Records has put "Funky Broadway" and "We Got More Soul" on a compact disc compilation. But despite the flood of '60s reissues, Original Sound owner Art LaBoe says interest has just started to pick up on re-releasing a Dyke and the Blazers album.

In more human terms, most of the people who worked with Dyke believe they never received their financial due, yet almost every person seems to remember him affectionately.

"I knew the type of characters he was running around with on the street, but Dyke was one of the nicest people you'd want to meet," says Scott. "My mother went to church, and I remember how mannered and nice he was when he came to the house. Whoever his parents were, they did a good job of raising him."

"A lot of people thought he was a street person," says manager Barrett, "but he was a person who had manners. He just liked the street."

Name of the street, Funky, Funky Broadway.

Postscript: What has happened to the rest of Dyke's musical partners and associates? His mother, Eva Hales, and other family members still live in the Buffalo area but declined to talk for this story. ... Carl LaRue recently retired from Houdaille Industries in Buffalo. ... Willie Earl is still drumming with the Chuckie T. Blues Band in Buffalo. ... After battling drugs and alcohol, Al Jacobs is on disability and can't sing, but still plays his guitar at the Restoration Deliverance Tabernacle on Jefferson Avenue in Buffalo. ... Wayne Peterson was the house drummer at Buffalo's Blue Note jazz club until he died in late 1989 of liver disease following his own battles with hard drugs. ... Elmer Scott works at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix. ... Art Barrett worked with an early version of DeBarge and is now employed by a supply company in Tempe, Ariz. ... Alvin Battle has retired from a job working with bank computers and now has his own real estate company, but he still plays bass in a Phoenix church. ... Bernard Williams plays saxophone with the Perez Brothers, a Mexican-American band in Phoenix. ... Maurice Jones leads Draws Down, a Buffalo-area jazz group. ... Otis Tolliver still lives in the Buffalo area. ... Ray Byrd's whereabouts are unknown. ■