

## MUSIC IN FERNDALE: A SIGN OF THE TIMES, 1917-2019+

Jeff Milo

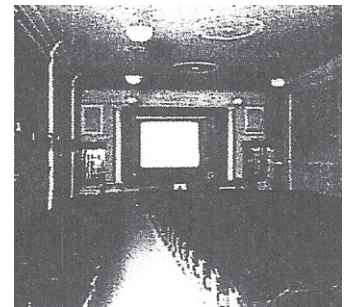
**M**usic, long defined as “the instinctive expression of man’s love of rhythm and tonal harmony,” provides a revealing measurement of Ferndale’s development as a community. Originally a wooded boggy area traversed by Indians on their trail between Detroit and Saginaw, it was only in the mid-1800s when explorers saw the site as a possible location for lucrative farms and businesses. And the first settlers, some with small families, soon began to arrive in the area. Singing, any basic musical instruments they may have brought, and the sounds of surrounding nature were the only music sources available. But soon a small community, where music became a focus of the gatherings of neighbors, was established, beginning the Ferndale known today.

In 1917 the area’s first church, the Tabernacle, was erected (present Bermuda/Nine Mile corner). Besides church services, the building was made available to all organizations, including the Red Cross, War Bond drives, and sewing groups. The same year, the Baptist Church (then located at Woodward/Withington), welcomed the local women’s club and many area activities. In 1918 the Tabernacle church hosted Ferndale’s first theatrical production, a minstrel show featuring comic dialogue, song, and dance, so successful that it was repeated the next evening. By 1919 St. James Church had been established and, once a new structure had been erected, it accommodated a number of community group activities. The years 1919 and 1920 saw the opening of many more churches in the village, most serving as centers for the support of World War I veterans—and accompanying band music.

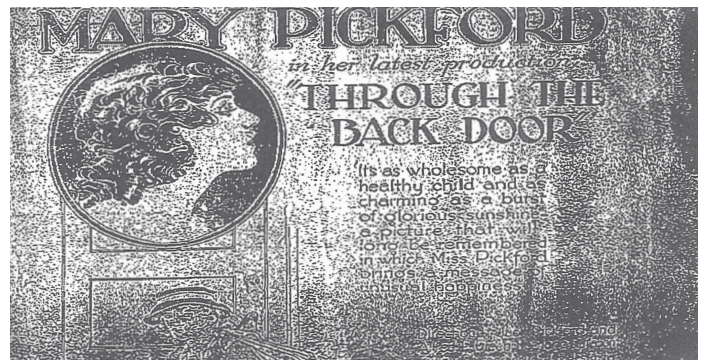
The year 1920 was special in local history: Lincoln High School opened. Many youth organizations became centered there, and many innovations were made. Especially noteworthy was I.B. Stevens, the school’s Chemistry/Physics instructor, who, in celebration of the LHS football team, composed the school’s legendary theme song, which he



*Ferndale Theater, 22930 Woodward, opened in 1921. Fred Rawley was the owner.*  
Photo: Museum Resource Collection



*The Ferndale became Studio North in the 1960s; now the Magic Bag.*  
Photo: Museum Resource Collection



*Advertisement in the Ferndale Star, September 1921, for the first movie shown at the Ferndale Theater*  
Photo: Museum Resource Collection

based on the already famous “On Wisconsin” theme—and played it on the violin at the LHS football team’s first-ever celebration banquet.

In 1921 the Ferndale Theater opened, showing only silent films. The wife of the theater’s owner played background music on the organ for “Through the Back Door,” starring Mary Pickford, the first movie shown in Ferndale. By the early 1920s street dances soon became common; the largest

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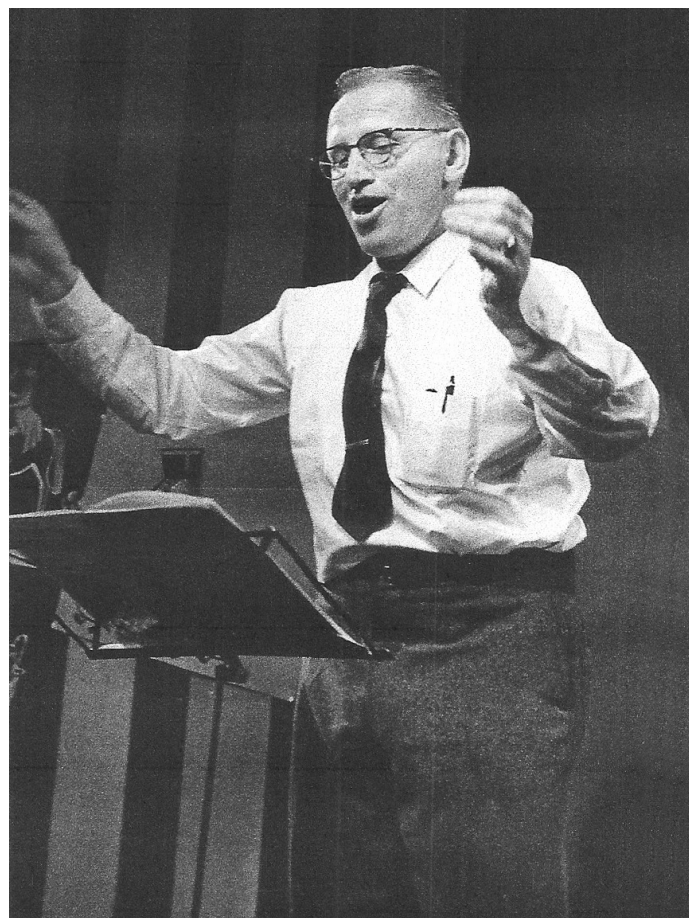
open air dance floor was on Woodward between Academy and Ardmore (across from the Methodist Church). By 1924 the Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Memorial Association had organized a special band for celebrations and parades honoring war veterans. By 1924, the local phone directory listed four piano teachers (all women); soon after, a man who taught violin was added to the list. By 1928 Leonard Music and Radio Store had opened—the same year that Rodgers Dutch Mill, a unique meeting place restaurant (with no music at the time), led the way to the popularity of local restaurants of all descriptions as centers for music activities in the coming years.



*Castle on the Nine, 434 W. Nine Mile, just west of Planavon  
(now parking lot of Ferndale Foods)*

Photo: Museum Archives

The 1930s marked the real beginning of Ferndale as a music city. During the Depression, Youth Inc., a local volunteer group, was granted permission to establish the Castle on the Nine, a recreation/learning place for high school students and adult groups, in a donated building (just west of Planavon) near the high school. The Castle became a center for entertainment, with a focus on various kinds of music for students and adults alike. By 1937, as listed in the city's directory, the Detroit Civic Conservatory of Music (236 W. Withington) had opened. The Radio City Theater was in operation, offering music contests that became a draw for musicians and followers alike: One of the first winners of an honorary mention was a harmonica group dressed as mountaineers who wowed the whole theater, but it was Leonard Stanley well-known jazz pianist who won the highest honor. Classical and other types of music were now appreciated by audiences. These contests at the Radio City continued for years and ultimately introduced several local rock-and-roll bands to nationwide popularity.



*Otto Brown, Lincoln High School and Ferndale High School  
Music Director, 1936–66.*

Photo: Continental Studios, Museum Archives

But the most influential event of the 1930's local music scene was the hiring of Otto Brown as the Music Director of Ferndale Public Schools, a position he held until 1966. He had been a staff counselor at the famous Interlochen National Music Camp in Traverse City, served as choir director of the Drayton Avenue Presbyterian Church in Ferndale, and was a member of the nationally-known Fred Waring Chorale. The Daily Tribune noted in his obituary, October 12, 1966, that he would forever be remembered for his baritone voice, skills on piano, trumpet, and saxophone—and his profound effect on the role of music in Ferndale history by his developing school bands, school orchestras, and choirs, and inspiring generations of Ferndale youth.

Thanks to the Castle on the Nine and the positive community programs created to deal with the hardships of the Depression, the 1940s and the 1950s ushered in a whole new music era. Ferndale fostered numerous talented singers, songwriters, performers and artists in various mediums, each born and raised in Ferndale, who would go on to massive or sometimes marginal moments of fame. Included was jazz pianist Leonard Stanley, who performed with his instrumental trio on the 1949 TV show "Songs for Your

Supper” (and played sets at the Bali Club in Detroit). Henri Nosco, Concertmaster of the NBC Symphony Orchestra, moved from New York to live on Drayton in Ferndale in 1953 and assist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. French horn prodigy Don Roth Jr. went on to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.



*The members of the Ferndale-based '50s singing quartet The Dappers—from left, Ken Fraser, Austin Coleman, Bill Sheridan and Earl Swanson—perform on “American Bandstand.”*

*Photo: Museum Archives*

During the burgeoning days of rock ‘n’ roll and R&B music in the 1950s and 1960s, spurred by the Cruiser culture craze, the Dappers, a Ferndale-based doo-wop-style pop group (all LHS graduates), toured the country. Earl Swanson sang lead, Ken Fraser was the baritone, Austin Kollman sang tenor, and Bill Sheeran was their bass. They eventually appeared on Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand.”

Their most popular song was “We’re in Love,” which sold some 700,000 records in the Chicago area alone. They performed from 1956 to the end of 1960.

The Spinners, a group of Lincoln High students, began singing at local dances and talent shows. They surged to notoriety during the peak of Motown’s hit parade, in the 1960s and 1970s. They found success with hit songs like “Making My Way Back to You” and “I’ll Be Around.” The quintet (Henry Fambrough, Billy Henderson, Bobby Smith, Pervis Jackson, and G.C. Cameron) were often in the shadow of the Temptations and the Four Tops and eventually left Motown for Atlantic Records—but not before their good friend Stevie Wonder wrote a hit song for them “It’s a Shame” in the summer 1970. More than 30 years later after forming, they would headline the Michigan Tastefest in 1992. In 2017 the group was inducted into Michigan’s Rock and Roll Legends Hall of Fame.

Other Ferndale-based artists include the esteemed journeyman jazz bassist Ron Carter, born in Ferndale, who went

on to study double bass performance at the Manhattan School of Music, and in 1963 joined the Miles Davis Quintet, served as a member of the New York Jazz Quartet throughout the 1970s, and then collaborated with Bill Joel and “A Tribe Called Quest.” By 1988 many local churches, with the help of local business and service organizations, sponsored a series of concerts featuring prominent musicians, both classical and jazz. Also, during the 1990s, aspiring rapper Violent (aka Joseph Bruce, moved to Ferndale from Berkley and formed the rowdy duo known as The Inner City Posse (later known as Insane Clown Posse), attaining cult-like status with its legion of fans.

Ferndale had its fair share of rock & roll groups throughout the 1980s and 1990s, along with some notable folk singers and poets enlivening an open-microphone scene at venues like Gotham City Café (241 W. Nine). Woodshed Studio, a stone’s throw from downtown Ferndale on Woodward, recorded dozens of albums from a large batch of punk and ska-revival groups. Drum Dancer Records, specialized in recording and releasing works by several folk, country, and rock bands from around the state. Tempermill, one of Ferndale’s longest operating studios, a favorite among Metro Detroit area artists remains open today. Located in northwest Ferndale in a 3,000 square-foot building, this studio is designed for ideal acoustics and plenty of isolation booths for tracking large ensembles. Owned and operated by Dave Feeny, a Livonia-raised musician/producer, Tempermill has recorded hundreds of artists, (including Goober and the Peas), produced dozens of albums over the years and, as well, won a Grammy for Feeny’s pedal-steel contribution to a 2004 Loretta Lynn album (produced by Jack White).

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*The Spinners in 1965*

*From left: Billy Henderson, Edgar Edwards, Bobby Smith, Henry Fambrough, and Pervis Jackson*

*Photo: Motown*



*Great Lakes Myth Society at DIY Street Fair, 2009*  
Photo: Kelly Bennett

As for venues for live music, the present Magic Bag Theater (on Woodward)—originally known as the Ferndale Theater through the 1950s, went through a number of changes, including a name change to Studio North until 1988 when it became the Déjà Vu, an exotic dance club—before emerging as a respectable rock and pop music concert and movie theater—reliably showcasing local talent. Into the mid-1990s, the Magic Bag’s owner, Jeremy Haberman, began changing the identity of the theater by regularly hosting live concerts.

The Metro Times in May 1999 noted that Ferndale had begun “a rapid revival...establishing itself as one of metro Detroit’s hip, open-minded, and growing cities.” This change had a lot to do with the community’s going from a mostly quiet, not-so-glamorous town after the closing of the Radio City Theater in 1979, into a city that was filled with modest restaurants and bars to a lively “hip” place attractive to artists, poets, writers and musicians. Hang-out friendly spaces like the Gotham City Café, cool clothing stores like Cinderella’s Attic, and alternative diners like Xhedos (which eventually became AJ’s Café (240 W. Nine), and currently home to Bobcat Bonnie’s, another venue with enthusiasm for live music performances. Supporting local artists and musicians became the prevailing base for Ferndale’s devotion to supporting local businesses. And promoting local artists such as Jill Jack, Stewart Francke, Susan Calloway, and the Luddites meant an increasing buzz in local magazines and other publications. Along with folk and rock, the blues became prominent in the mid-1990s with the local founding of the annual Blues Fest (originally the ‘Deep Freeze Blues Fest’).

In 1998 the Johnston family opened the Woodward Avenue Brewers (Troy & Woodward), a spacious two-floor establishment that specialized in microbrewing. Along with



*Dutch Pink at DIY Street Fair, 2012*  
Photo: Kelly Bennett

two sister bars, the Emory, opening in 2006, and the Loving Touch (a former pool hall) in 2008, the WAB soon became an epicenter featuring both local and national top-tier musical talents. (A revolving parade of local artists and musicians at the bar were often found there serving drinks.)

The southeastern Michigan music community experienced somewhat of a renaissance at the turn of the 21st century. The national and international press took an interest in a burgeoning batch of “garage-rock” groups that started causing quite a scene in Detroit (namely, The White Stripes) during the late 1990’s. This inspiring, albeit fleeting moment in the spotlight fed an increasing influx of artist and musicians who were moving to Ferndale throughout the 1990s and 2000s, partly to be closer to the activity uptick inside Detroit venues, but also because it was becoming a more accommodating community for artists.

Throughout the 2000s more bands were starting up around Ferndale, many feeling empowered with a voice and reach of their own, thanks to the self-promotional opportunities available to them by streaming their self-produced songs through their own sites on the internet. With more musicians catching this new DIY (Do-It-Yourself) spirit, Ferndale bars and restaurants soon began converting a corner of their spaces into a stage designed for musical performances. Along with the city’s boost in artistic residents, and the congealing expectation among its residents, many music fans in outlying suburbs, like Royal Oak and even Detroit, made Ferndale a destination for live entertainment.



*Beggars at DIY Street Fair, 2012*  
Photo: Kelly Bennett

It has become commonplace for talented, creative people to relocate to Ferndale to set up their studios. An uptick in the musically-inclined populace has fed into an increase in city-spanning festivals fueled by this spectacular local talent, starting with the Blues Fest, and expanding with the D.I.Y. Street Fair (starting in 2007), the Pig & Whiskey Festival (starting in 2010), and in 2013 the Metro Times Blowout coming to Ferndale (previously hosted exclusively in Hamtramck). Dino's and the New Way Bar began to stoke their own devoted following by open microphone nights, which originally had begun at Club Bart in the early 1990s, that featured local jazz and blues talents and, eventually, rock bands like Duende. It was members of Duende that eventually revived the tradition of an artist's residency inside Club Bart by headlining monthly shows and inviting two or three local bands to join them, a practice that in 2011-2014 they moved to the Loving Touch. Bands support of each other became an inspiration for large-scale celebrations in Fern-

dale like street fairs but also smaller music events—like the countless scroll of local album releases hosted at the New Way and the Loving Touch.

Ferndale musicians, whether born and raised or having transplanted here to get closer to the action, would embrace, and then embody, a city-spanning spark that celebrated the independent spirit, sustained by a shared appreciation for the vitality of camaraderie and mutual support. The tacit implication seems to be that if the dream of being a Rolling Stone-like rock star is unrealistic, then artists should cheer each other on and make every local concert the best it could be. So, it became, for local artists, less about moving to Ferndale to be closer to Detroit, than it was moving to Ferndale to be closer to “Ferndale”.

Now, every year, the D.I.Y. Street Fair and Pig & Whiskey summertime street festivals are drawing hundreds of people from around the region, each attending music lover assured that the lineups will feature exceptional local bands. In the last five years, a new venue, Otus Supply, a restaurant that features performances in its Parliament Room, has been added to the Ferndale music scene. Local musician Jesse Shepherd Bates coordinated the Ferndale Spring Fever festival in April 2019, which featured three consecutive nights of live music hosted at four main Ferndale venues: The Loving Touch, the New Way Bar, the Magic Bag, and Otus Supply. Ferndale's enthusiasm has even led its local library to monthly concerts on the first Friday of every month.

As its history of music indicates, Ferndale, with its focus on providing a welcoming community, has indeed focused on the time-honored definition of “music as an instinctive expression of man's (and woman's) love of rhythm and tonal harmony” as a basis for the successful development of the city and the happiness of its residents. From its earliest days as a haven for new settlers, to its fledgling churches' emphasis on the importance of music, its schools stressing music education, and its promotion of programs and businesses supporting music events, music has been, and will remain, a focal point for this successful community.

*Sources consulted: Cole, Maurice, Ferndale of Yesteryear (Ferndale Historical Society/Harlow Printing, 1971): passim. Crow's Nest (newsletter), Summer 2006 (role of music in Ferndale). Ferndale Historical Society (Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, Gerry Kulick, Editor, Old Timers Tell It Like It Was), 1987, passim. Ferndale Historical Museum Archives (Dappers, Spinners, music groups, churches). Fuller, George N. (Editor), Michigan Centennial History of the State and Its People (Chicago: Lewis Publishing, 1939): Vol. II, 532 (definition of music). Wikipedia (Spinners).*

## A STORE OF RECORD



*Sam's Jams, 1994*

Photo: Craig Gaffield, Daily Tribune

Sam's Jams, at 279 W. Nine Mile in Ferndale, 1972-1994, was deemed by the R.O Tribune as the "undisputed king of Detroit area music venues in 1989." Opening as a used record shop in the 1970s, Sam's soon became a center for popular and alternative records, tapes and CDs in reasonably priced new and used sections of its store. A private room featured jazz and classical offerings. A makeshift stage was available for free concerts and book- and record-signing promotions events. It was the only place in town where the kind of music

featured on alternative music stations such as WDET and CJAM was available.

*Sources summarized for this article: Daily Tribune, Anonymous ranking of local record shops, Feb. 9, 1989. Daily Tribune, Two articles by K. Michelle Moran on local record stores, March 20, 1994. [Ferndale Historical Museum Archives]*

## HOW TIMES CHANGE: A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT

I wonder if anyone remembers the open air dance floors about 1926 that were between Academy and Ardmore Drive on Woodward, about across from the Methodist Church. There was nothing else to do, so these dances were family affairs. I remember I was about 10 years old and somehow Mr. (Alfred) Wiitanen, superintendent of the church, heard I was dancing, and chastised me because dancing wasn't too popular with Methodists then. But years later when he was

principal of Taft School he approached me about buying a ticket for a PTA dance. How times change!

*Source: Elsie (Melville) Schade, as quoted in Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick (Editor), Old Timers Tell It Like It Was. (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 54.*

### We Want to Hear From You

Do you have an interesting story about Ferndale history or growing up in Ferndale you would like to share? Is there something in Ferndale that you want to know more about? Contact us with story ideas or questions.

[info@FerndaleHistoricalSociety.org](mailto:info@FerndaleHistoricalSociety.org) • 248-545-7606 (call during museum hours)

## NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

*Summer has come and gone all too quickly and fall is upon us.*

*Working on this issue of the newsletter was done with a very heavy heart. One of our long-time volunteers and board member, Gay Tarvis recently passed away. She always had a smile on her face and we are truly going to miss her. I would like to take this opportunity to dedicate this issue of The Crow's Nest to her memory.*

*This summer has seen a lot of changes in our research archives. Due to a large donation of reference materials/ photographs from the Police Department we have had to add another file cabinet and reconfigure our backroom. Thank you, Baron Brown, for this very valuable addition to our ever growing collection.*

*I also need to say a big thank you to Karin Vigliarolo, our Membership Chair and Board Member, for her outstanding efforts with the house plaque sales. Schleppling that house plaque to those Chamber of Commerce coffees has worked! Thanks to her, our house plaque sales have been at an all time high. Good job, Karin!*

Jan Froggatt  
President/Director  
Ferndale Historical Society and Museum

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## On the Inside

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## Calendar of Events

- Meeting dates for The Ferndale Historical Society Board of Directors for 2019.  
Thursday, October 24 . . . . . 6:30 pm at the Ferndale Historical Museum. Public Welcome  
Thursday, December 5 . . . . . 6:30 pm at the Ferndale Historical Museum. Public Welcome

## Visit the Museum

Hours of operation: Mon.-Wed., 10 am-1 pm. Sat., 1-4 pm.  
*Hours are subject to the availability of volunteers to be on hand. Call 248-545-7606 to confirm.*

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### The Crow's Nest, Fall 2019

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