



10 BLACK ARKANSANS IN MUSIC

Whether you're a born and raised Arkansan, lived here for 30 plus years, or recently arrived to the Natural State, this place we call home has a rich, diverse, and unique history.

Since the website was launched in the mid-2000s, the staff of the Encyclopedia of Arkansas has tried to make sure that the story of this place is documented in an accessible digital format.

This free resource has almost everything you might want to know about the 25th state. And the EOA staff are in the habit of finding the most fascinating of those stories to tell.



The CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas launched in 2006 with 700 entries and 900 pieces of media.

In 2019 we switched platforms from the original proprietary website to a newly designed WordPress site.

In August 2022 we undertook a further redesign of the home page, search function, and user experience features.

You can stop by the EOA for tidbits like THIS DAY IN ARKANSAS HISTORY and PHOTO OF THE DAY...

As well as trending entries and what's been newly updated. (And here's a hint, we are updating all the time!)

7,000+
entries

ALL ENTRIES FLOOD OF 1927

Flood of 1927

AKA: Great Flood of 1927
AKA: Mississippi River Flood of 1927
AKA: 1927 Flood

The Flood of 1927 was the most destructive and costly flood in Arkansas history and one of the worst in the history of the nation. It afflicted Arkansas with a greater amount of devastation, both human and monetary, than the other affected states in the **Mississippi River** Valley. It had social and political ramifications which changed the way Arkansas, as well as the nation, viewed relief from natural disasters and the responsibility of government in aiding the victims, echoing the **Hurricane Katrina** disaster in the present day.

In largely agrarian Arkansas, the Flood of 1927 covered about 6,600 square miles, with thirty-six out of seventy-five Arkansas counties under water up to thirty feet deep in places. In Arkansas, more people were affected by the floodwaters (over 350,000), more farmland inundated (over two million acres), more Red Cross camps were needed (eighty of the 154 total), and more families received relief than any other state (41,243). In Arkansas, almost 100 people died, more than any state except Mississippi. In monetary terms, the losses in Arkansas (totaling over \$1 million in 1927 dollars for relief and recovery) surpassed any other affected state.

The Flood of 1927 had its origins both in nature and in man. In the late 1920s, technological advances kept pace with the growing economy. Heavy machinery enabled the construction of a vast system of **levees** to hold back rivers that tended to overrun their banks. Drainage projects opened up new, low-lying lands that had once been forests but had been left bare by the **timber industry**.

ENTRY Flood of 1927

TIME PERIOD

Early Twentieth Century (1901 - 1940)

CATEGORY

Environment / Land and Resources / Natural Disasters

TYPE

Event

LESSON PLANS

1927 Flood (Grades 5-8)

Arkansas's Top Ten Events (Grades 6-12)

Hard Times (Grades 7-12)

Mucket Mania (Grades 6-12)

Rollin' on the River (Grades 5-12)

Southern Flood Blues (Grades 9-12)

We have over 7,000 entries.

We are often compared to Wikipedia but the difference is that our entries are peer reviewed and professionally edited.

Anyone can write for the EOA but all entries are reviewed by other scholars, fact checked, and edited for grammar and spelling.

- **EVERY** incorporated community
- **Government officials**
- **Civil rights organizations from NAACP to CLOB**
- **EVERY** military action including the smallest skirmishes
- **Wildlife, flowers, plants**

WE HAVE ENTRIES ON ...

Every incorporated community, hundreds of unincorporated ones, and we're always seeking more.

ENTRIES ON

Government officials from those who served in Congress, to Arkansas constitutional officers, to individual state legislators, even significant sheriffs, mayors, and county judges

Civil rights organizations from the national level, such as the NAACP, to the local level, such as CLOB (Council for Liberation of Blacks)

Military events from the Civil War, ranging from major battles (Pea Ridge) down to small local skirmishes; if someone in blue and someone in gray met in the woods between 1861 and 1865 we probably have an entry documenting it.

AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT - birds, fish, mammals but also fungi, lichens, ferns, jellyfishes

AND WE ARE ALWAYS DEVELOPING MORE...

Developing entries on every film set or filmed in Arkansas, as well as every book, television show, and even individual episodes set in the state (Search: X-Files)



Produced by a public library

230 countries

EVERY continent

Used by government agencies and officials, students, media, genealogists, historians (local and national)

Users have come from every continent (including Antarctica) and more than 230 countries.

Over 175,000 users per month

Search results for **flood of 1927**

Search for...

17,000+ media

ENTRIES 264 MEDIA

Tupelo Flood

Pine Bluff Flood

Lake Village: 1927 Flood

MEDIA TYPE

- Photo 5
- Document 1

CATEGORY

- Natural Disasters 7
- Chicot 2
- Desha 1
- Monroe 1

AND DO WE HAVE MEDIA...

We have worked with archives, libraries, museums, and universities around the state and the country to make sure that the EOA has visual images to illustrate our entries.

BUT THERE IS ALWAYS MORE TO FIND...

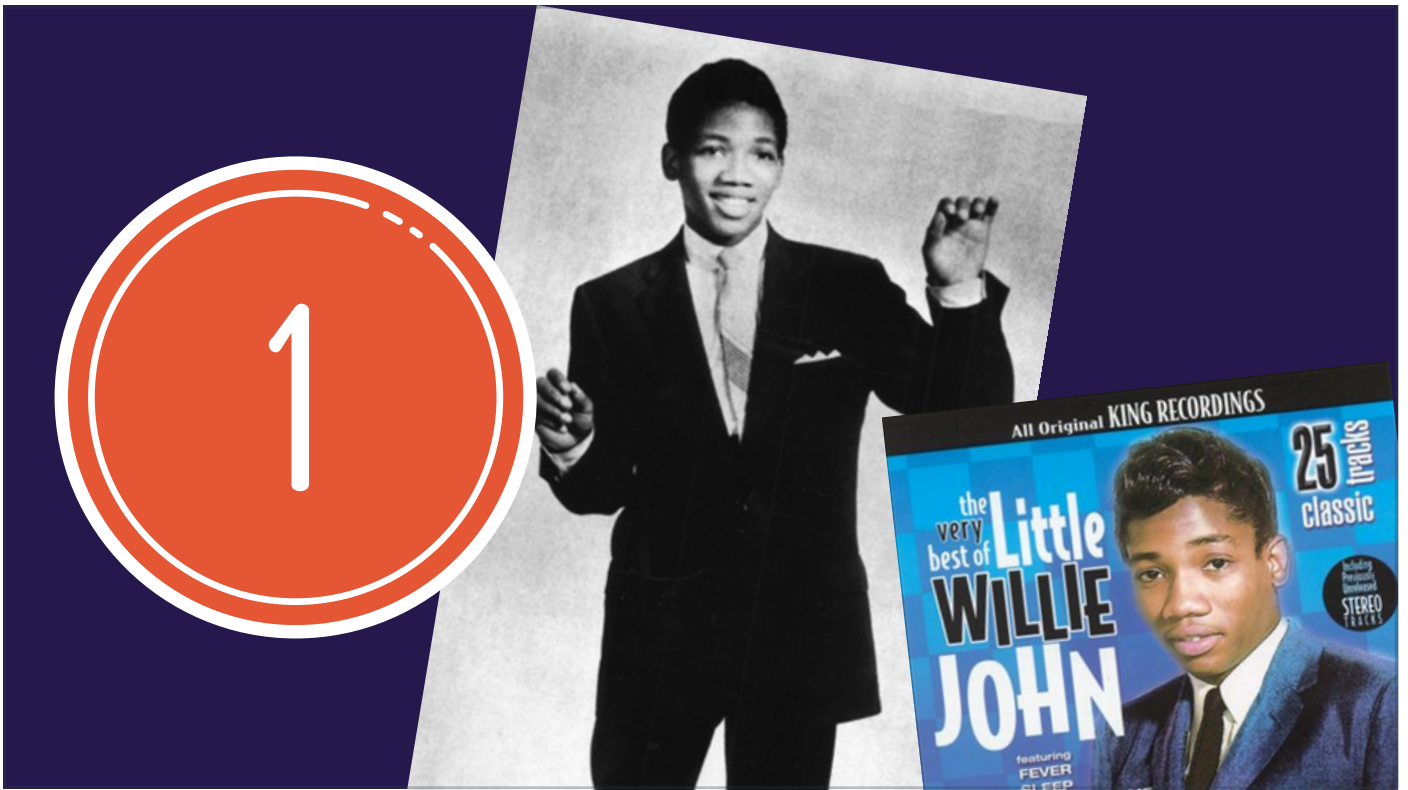
We rely on everyday citizens to help us locate photos.

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THE
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10 BLACK
ARKANSANS
IN MUSIC



William Edgar “Little Willie” John (1937–1968) was a powerful rhythm and blues vocalist and songwriter who recorded several hit songs, including the original version of “Fever” at age eighteen.

Little Willie John was born in Cullendale (Ouachita County). He started singing in the 1940s. Producer, musician, and arranger Henry Glover of Hot Springs (Garland County) signed John to King Records in 1955. Nicknamed “Little Willie” because he was short, John also had a short temper and a problem with alcohol.

Through the late 1950s and early 1960s, John kept charting songs—1959’s “Let Them Talk,” 1960’s “Sleep,” 1961’s “Take My Love.” But increasing alcoholism and weakening sales caused King Records to drop him by 1963.

The Beatles recorded a version of “Leave My Kitten Alone,” a 1959 charter for John, but the song was ultimately cut from the album.

In 1964, John killed a man at a party. He posted bond and continued touring, returning for trial in 1965. Convicted of manslaughter, he was sent to Walla Walla State Penitentiary in 1966. He died there two years later, and rumors of foul play have always surrounded his death.

After John’s death, James Brown recorded a tribute album. Johnnie Taylor of Crawfordsville (Crittenden County) was among the many R&B singers who later performed John’s songs. In rock and roll, Phillips County native Levon Helm and Robbie Robertson of the Band are among those

who have acknowledged John's influence. When Robertson coordinated The Color of Money film soundtrack, he asked British rocker Robert Palmer for a version of John's overlooked 1963 rumba, "My Baby's in Love with Another Guy." Retro-rockers the Blasters covered another obscure John single, 1960's "I'm Shakin'," and the Allman Brothers recorded a version of "Need Your Love So Bad." From Peggy Lee to Madonna, the song "Fever" lives on through countless versions, but John's haunting, tortured vocals have yet to be replicated. He left a brief but profound musical legacy.



Hazel Shanks Hynson (1903–2005) was a classically trained pianist who served as the choir director at Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock (Pulaski County) and taught many musicians in her studio who went on to be well known.

Hazel Shanks was born in 1903 and attended private schools, studying music; she received her bachelor's degree in music, with a major in piano. She later traveled to pursue further musical studies. Among other well known music schools, she studied at the renowned Juilliard School in New York.

In 1940, she married William Edward Hynson, and the couple moved to Little Rock. There Hynson joined Mount Zion Baptist Church and served as pianist there for more than a quarter century. She also founded the Hazel Shanks Hynson Music Studio and trained many accomplished musicians, including jazz and classical musician Art Porter Sr. She served as the pianist for the Arkansas State Baptist Convention for twenty-six years, as pianist for the National Baptist Convention for twenty-seven years, and as director of the Arkansas Baptist College Choir. The college's multipurpose center was later named in her honor.

In 1990, she received an honorary doctorate from Arkansas Baptist College in recognition of her service. She was inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame in 2004; the program for that year's induction described Hynson as “a grand lady of grace and elegance, a superb teacher and pianist, arranger, composer, and musician's musician.”

Hynson remained active into her later years, maintaining a driver's license until 1999. In the

spring of 2005, she broke her hip for the second time in four years and never recovered. She died on May 22, 2005, and is buried at Miller Cemetery in Pine Bluff (Jefferson County).



Chester Arthur Burnett (1910–1976) was known as Howlin' Wolf and was one of the most influential musicians of the post-World War II era. His electric blues guitar, backing his powerful, howling voice, helped shape rock and roll.

Charlie Patton, the most popular musician in the Delta, first showed Burnett a few chords on the guitar. Burnett's father bought him a guitar and he eventually teamed up with Patton.

Preferring the life of a blues musician to the harsh life of sharecropping, Burnett began wandering the Delta. He was a large man, standing six feet three inches and weighing 275 pounds. He became well known as a blues performer not only for his showmanship but also for his size and loud, howling voice.

In 1933, the Burnett family moved to a large Arkansas plantation in Wilson (Mississippi County). In early 1934, they moved to the Nat Phillips Plantation on the St. Francis River fifteen miles north of Parkin (Cross County). Despite his commitment to music, Burnett faithfully returned each spring to plow his father's land.

Burnett traveled to Oklahoma and all over the south, but Arkansas remained his stomping ground. He learned to play harmonica from blues legend Sonny Boy Williamson.

In 1948, Burnett moved to West Memphis (Crittenden County) which was at the forefront of the newly amplified blues music scene. Burnett assembled a blues band called the House Rockers. Burnett was performing on local radio station KWEM when he was noticed by record producer

Sam Phillips. In 1951, Burnett signed with the Chess label and moved to Chicago.

In 1971, Burnett released the album *Message to the Young*, which was considered his “psychedelic” record, as well as the nadir of his recording career. In 1972, Burnett cut the live album *Live and Cookin’ at Alice’s Revisited*. He received an honorary doctorate from Chicago’s Columbia College. In 1973, he recorded his final studio album. In 1975, he was nominated twice for a Grammy Award. Burnett died in 1976. He was elected to the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 1980 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991. In 1994, he was honored on a U.S. postage stamp.



Arkansas native "Sister Rosetta" Nubin Tharpe (1915–1973) was one of gospel music's first superstars and an early crossover from gospel to secular music. Tharpe has been cited as an influence by numerous musicians, including Bob Dylan, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and Arkansan Johnny Cash.

Rosetta Nubin was born in Cotton Plant (Woodruff County) and began performing at age four. In 1934 Nubin married Thomas A. Tharpe. Later, she divorced and married a second time. Tharpe was signed to Decca Records in 1938 and was successful immediately. The popularity of her singles led to Tharpe's inclusion in a performance at Carnegie Hall in 1938. After this well-publicized event, Tharpe went on a concert tour. She recorded with Cab Calloway and Lucius "Lucky" Millinder. From 1944 to 1951, her main accompanist was Samuel "Sammy" Blythe Price, a boogie-woogie pianist from Texas.

Such was Tharpe's popularity that in 1951, 25,000 people paid to witness Tharpe's third wedding. While her marriages to men were public record, it is widely accepted that Tharpe also had relationships with women.

Tharpe unsuccessfully tried to enter the blues and pop music markets, and her popularity waned. She lost her contract with Decca. But Tharpe kept working and signed with Mercury Records, touring Europe many times. Although she never realized her comeback, Tharpe continued to perform until her death in 1973.

In 1998, the U.S. Postal Service issued a Rosetta Tharpe postage stamp. In 2003, a tribute album

was released. She was inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame in 2012. In 2013, the PBS series American Masters featured an episode on Tharpe, and she was inducted into the Arkansas Entertainers Hall of Fame. Highway 17 was designated the Sister Rosetta Tharpe Memorial Highway. In 2018, Tharpe was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In 2022, Tharpe was portrayed in the movie Elvis and a mural honoring her was dedicated in Little Rock (Pulaski County). In 2023, Tharpe was listed as number six on Rolling Stone magazine's list of the 250 greatest guitarists of all time.



Scott Joplin (1868?–1917), known as the “King of Ragtime,” composed more than forty ragtime piano pieces, including “Maple Leaf Rag” and “The Entertainer.” He spent his formative years in Texarkana (Miller County).

Scott Joplin was born in 1867 or 1868 and showed an early interest in the piano. A teacher exposed him to the European opera music that influenced his later compositions.

Joplin joined the all-night ragtime piano competitions at Tom Turpin’s Silver Dollar Saloon. Later he played in the Williams Brothers Maple Leaf Club; his famous “Maple Leaf Rag” took on the name of that club. His moniker, “The Entertainer,” printed on the club business card, also became the name of one of his famous works. He took a music theory course at George R. Smith College and learned to notate the complicated rhythms of piano ragtime. This skill enabled his music to reach a wider audience through publication.

In 1899, John Stark, an agent for the Mason and Hamlin piano company, contracted with Joplin to publish “Maple Leaf Rag” for fifty dollars, plus royalties. Through nationwide sales at F. W. Woolworth stores, the song sold more than a million copies. This single publication freed Joplin from performing in honky-tonk saloons and enabled him to teach and compose.

Alfred Ernst, a European-trained conductor of the St. Louis Choral Symphonic Society, encouraged Joplin to compose an opera and ballet. But his efforts resulted in little financial support from Ernst or from general audiences. Joplin’s opera *Treemonisha* is set in the Red River region near Rondo and tells the story of a plantation girl who fights conjurors and voodoo magic to

lead her people to freedom through education. He died in 1917.

Joplin's fame returned in the 1970s when "The Entertainer" was used in the film *The Sting*. "Treemonisha" has been performed at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC and at the Houston Grand Opera in Texas. In 1976, he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his contributions to American music. Joplin is a central figure in Tyehimba Jess's 2016 poetry collection, *Olio*, which also received the Pulitzer Prize.



Florence Beatrice Smith Price was the first African American female composer to have a symphonic composition performed by a major American symphony orchestra.

Florence Smith was born in Little Rock (Pulaski County) in 1887. She enrolled at the New England Conservatory of Music and received degrees as an organist and piano teacher. Smith taught music at the Cotton Plant Academy and at Shorter College in North Little Rock (Pulaski County), and was then head of the music department at Clark University.

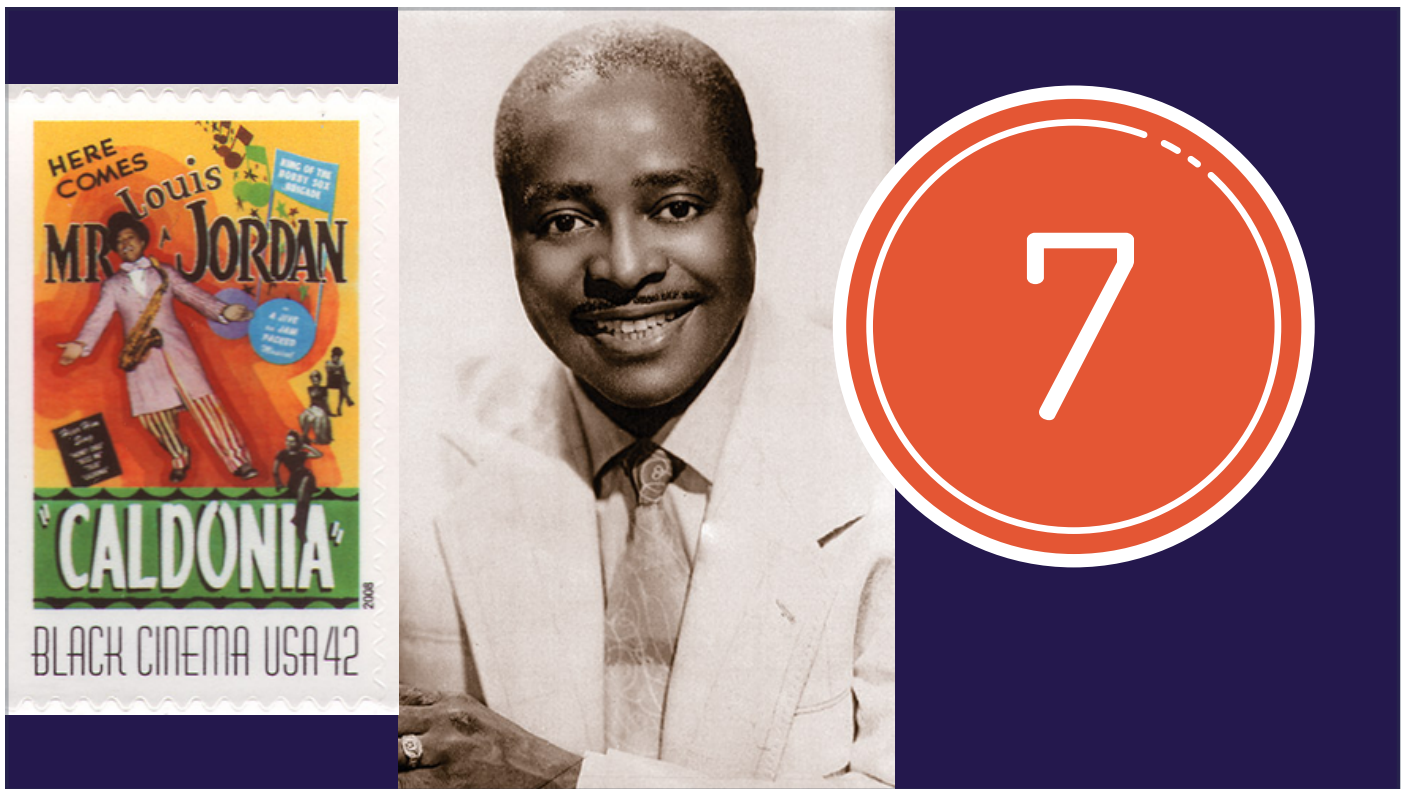
Smith returned to Little Rock to marry Thomas Jewell Price. Despite her credentials, she was denied membership into the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association because of her race.

The Prices moved to Illinois where Price had more opportunity. She pursued further musical studies at the American Conservatory of Music and Chicago Musical College and established herself in the Chicago area as a teacher, pianist, and organist. In 1928 a major publishing firm accepted Price's *At the Cotton Gin*. In 1932, Price won multiple awards in competitions sponsored by the Rodman Wanamaker Foundation for her Piano Sonata in E Minor and her more important work, *Symphony in E Minor*.

The latter work premiered with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933 (and was later performed at the Chicago World's Fair), and the orchestras of Detroit, Michigan; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Brooklyn, New York, also performed subsequent symphonic works by Price, as did European orchestras. National and international recognition made her more popular back home, and in 1935, the Alumni Association of Philander Smith College sponsored Price's return to

Arkansas.

In her lifetime, Price composed more than 300 works. She died in 1953. In 1964, a Chicago elementary school took her name. In 2018, she was inducted into both the Arkansas Women's and Arkansas Black Halls of Fame and was honored by the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association. In 2009, during renovations, new home owners discovered piles of musical manuscripts belonging to Price including many scores that had been presumed lost. In 2022, the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra released a recording of Price's Concerto in One Movement.



Louis Thomas Jordan (1908–1975) was a vocalist, bandleader, and saxophonist who ruled the charts, stage, screen, and airwaves of the 1940s and profoundly influenced the creators of rhythm and blues (R&B), rock and roll, and post-World War II blues.

Louis Jordan was born in 1908, in Brinkley (Monroe County). His father led the Brinkley Brass Band and Jordan toured with them. He briefly attended Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock (Pulaski County) in the late 1920s and was later a benefactor to the school. Jordan was married five times. In the 1930s, Jordan found work in the Charlie Gaines band, which recorded and toured with Louis Armstrong. The two would later play duets when Jordan became a solo star. In 1936, he joined nationally popular drummer Chick Webb's Savoy Ballroom Band. Ella Fitzgerald was the band's featured singer.

Jordan started his own band which changed American popular music. It was always called the Tympany Five, regardless of the number of pieces. The small size made it innovative structurally and musically in the Big Band era. Among the first to join electric guitar and bass with horns, Jordan set the framework for decades of future R&B and rock combos. Endless rehearsals, matching suits, and dance moves made the band. Jordan had a raucous persona but was quiet and aloof offstage. Jordan charted dozens of hits from the early 1940s to the early 1950s including the ballad "Is You Is Or Is You Ain't (My Baby)." Jordan also helped introduce calypso music to America.

His more than fifteen years on Decca—not counting his time there with Webb—ended in 1954; he sold millions of records and performed duets with Armstrong, Bing Crosby, and Fitzgerald. In the

1950s and 1960s, Jordan continued to perform but his popularity declined. He toured Europe and Asia. He returned to Brinkley in 1957 for Louis Jordan Day. In 1973, Jordan issued a final LP. He died in 1975.

A host of prominent musicians claim his influence, including Ray Charles, James Brown, Bo Diddley, and Chuck Berry. Tribute albums include B. B. King's *Let the Good Times Roll*. Jordan was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and named an American Music Master. A musical revue of his songs played on Broadway. A tribute concert funded a Jordan bust in Brinkley. He was inducted into the Arkansas Entertainers and Arkansas Black Halls of Fame. The U.S.P.S. put him on a stamp. A portion of Highway 49 was named for him. Jordan was honored with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.



Kristin Allison Lewis (1975–), an opera singer from Little Rock (Pulaski County), is recognized for her richly hued voice capable of subtle emotional inflection. Based in Vienna, Austria, since 2005, Lewis has established herself in the opera houses of Europe as a lirico-spinto soprano specializing in Verdi's heroines. She was inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame in 2019.

Kristin Lewis was born in Little Rock in 1975. Lewis attended the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) in Conway (Faulkner County) and studied voice with Dr. Martha Antolik. Lewis sang in Bolivia by invitation, toured with UCA's Concert Choir, performed in UCA's Opera Workshop, and placed in three years of National Association of Teachers of Singing regional competitions. She was featured as a solo singer with the choir of Second Presbyterian Church of Little Rock, and toured with the choir in Eastern Europe. She won the Mid-South Region Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions and then competed in the National Semi-Finals on the Metropolitan Opera stage in New York City. In 1999, Lewis received a BA in vocal performance. Lewis returned to UCA in 2004 to perform a recital, as well as in 2009 as an artist-in-residence.

At the University of Tennessee in Knoxville Lewis received a master's in vocal performance. Lewis performed with the Knoxville Opera Studio and met Carol Byers, who became her voice coach.

In 2005, Lewis made her European operatic debut. Lewis sang her first Aida at the Cairo Opera House in 2006. She has become recognized for her interpretation of this role in many international opera houses, including those in Vienna, Munich, Berlin; Israel, Italy, and Finland. She has performed in St. Petersburg, Russia; at the Opéra Bastille in Paris, France; and the

Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Lewis's peers and the opera community have recognized her talent with numerous awards. The Red Cross of Vienna named Lewis an Ambassador for Humanity. Lewis founded a non-profit corporation to foster the development of young singers through competition and scholarships. She has continued to expand her stage debuts with performances at Carnegie Hall and the Royal Opera House, London.



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Shaffer Chimere Smith Jr., better known as Ne-Yo, is one of the most prominent and active Arkansas-born recording artists and songwriters performing in the early twenty-first century. Initially known for songs he wrote for other artists, Ne-Yo began releasing solo rhythm and blues (R&B) albums of his own in 2006.

Smith was born in 1982 in Camden (Ouachita County) and wrote his first song at age five. While still in high school, Smith began performing with local R&B group Envy and later moved with the group to L.A. Work as a staff writer led to a record deal with Columbia Records in 2000.

Smith recorded a full-length album for Columbia Records but it was never released. Soured by the experience, he focused on songwriting instead. The nickname Ne-Yo was given to him by producer Deon “Big D” Evans due to his songwriting prowess: Big D felt that Smith saw music the same way that the character Neo saw the intricacies of the matrix in the movie *The Matrix*. Smith quickly adapted it, with a change of spelling due to copyright reasons, as his stage name.

Ne-Yo garnered attention after the song “That Girl” was re-recorded in 2003. Ne-Yo’s acclaim as a songwriter grew after he co-wrote Mario’s 2004 single “Let Me Love You,” which reached number one on the Billboard pop and R&B singles charts.

Ne-Yo’s first released solo album, *In My Own Words*, came out in 2006 on the Def Jam label and debuted at number one on the Billboard albums chart. The album also featured three singles that reached the top ten on the singles chart, including “So Sick” which reached number one. His second album, *Because of You*, 2007, also debuted at number one and won the 2008 Grammy

Award for Best Contemporary R&B Album. His two subsequent albums, *Year of the Gentleman*, 2008, and *Libra Scale*, 2010, have also been top sellers, and Ne-Yo received two additional Grammy Awards in 2009 for the song “Miss Independent.”

Ne-Yo has continued to stay active as a songwriter. He has written songs for Beyoncé (“Irreplaceable”) and Rihanna (“Take a Bow”) that have reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. He has also written songs for Chris Brown, Mary J. Blige, Whitney Houston, and Celine Dion, among others.

In addition to his career in music, Ne-Yo has acted in movies and television. He has appeared in several dance movies and guest-starred on the television shows *CSI* and *The Mindy Project*. Ne-Yo joined NBC’s dance competition series *World of Dance* as a judge. In 2023, Ne-Yo was the winner of season 10 of *The Masked Singer*, performing wearing a cow mask.



Rose Marie McCoy (1922–2015) broke into the white, male-dominated music business in the early 1950s to become a highly sought-after songwriter whose career lasted over six decades. More than 360 artists have recorded her tunes, including Nat King Cole, Elvis Presley, and Sarah Vaughan. She was inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame in 2008 and the Arkansas Jazz Hall of Fame in 2018.

Marie Hinton was born in Oneida (Phillips County) in 1922. In nearby Helena, Hinton became acquainted with the blues, often standing outside a club to hear top bluesmen perform.

At age eighteen, she legally added Rose to her name, and in 1942 moved to New York and began singing in small clubs in Harlem. On a trip back to Arkansas in 1943, she married James McCoy.

In 1952, ten years after moving to New York, McCoy recorded two of her songs for Wheeler Records, a new company formed to capitalize on the growing popularity of Black music. As soon as her record was released, music publishers began seeking her out, not as a singer as she had hoped, but as a songwriter. One of the first songs she was asked to write reached No. 3 on Billboard's Rhythm & Blues chart in 1953. "Gabbin' Blues" gave the singer Big Maybelle her first hit record and McCoy the first of her seven BMI Awards. That same year, Big Maybelle scored another top-ten hit with McCoy's "Way Back Home."

At first, McCoy worked on her own, writing both words and music. In 1953, she teamed up with her first writing partner, Charles Singleton. From 1954 to 1956, they wrote seven top-ten hits, including "Letter from My Darling" (Little Willie John, 1956). Their song "Trying to Get to You" was

included on Elvis Presley's first album. That song has since been recorded by more than thirty other artists.

Some of McCoy's other songwriting partnerships created hits for stars like Ike and Tina Turner ("It's Gonna Work Out Fine," 1961). McCoy also produced many recordings, including the five songs she wrote for Sarah Vaughan's 1974 album *Send in the Clowns*. She also wrote jingles for artists such as Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles and formed her own publishing firm.

McCoy kept promoting her tunes from her office in Manhattan and later from her home in New Jersey. Her last songs were written with Billy Joe Connor and appear on his 2013 self-titled country album. McCoy died in 2015.

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QUESTIONS



This is just the tip of the iceberg. The CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas is a rabbit hole I encourage you to jump down. No matter what you are interested in, Arkansas has it--and the EOA is where you can start looking.