



IN HISTORY: IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC HERITAGE

Community

Meet William Hill

From Memphis to Northern Indiana, Mr. Hill is a counselor with a community-based organization, the Neighborhood Agency in Gary, Indiana. He was also an acclaimed jazz musician and is a local historian, documenting biographies of African-American jazz musicians in Gary. His identity as an African-American is strongly shaped by his experience as a musician. The music he plays—blues and jazz—is clearly rooted in Indiana traditions. But like much of the cultural experience in the Calumet region, that tradition is based on the immigrant experience, tracing its roots in the southern and eastern United States, in Europe and in Africa.

From a conversation with the Traditional Arts Indiana program (Indiana University, Bloomington):

My mother is a pianist originally from Memphis, where she played with silent movies and bands there. That's where I'm from. My father died in '36 and we moved to Gary; my mother got involved with music and singing here. She still plays, she's 92 years old. So I automatically got into it! I started vocalizing with her and then took up the tenor saxophone. Most of us got started with her band while we were still in high school.



Photo: Traditional Arts Indiana

My brother was a trumpeter; but the saxophone, that's my only instrument. My son is a musician too, he's carrying on the genes. He's a drummer. I gave him my saxophone, he pawned it and has been playing drums ever since!

I spent approximately ten and a half years in Milwaukee in the entertainment business, but lived the rest of my life here in Gary. They used to call me "Wild Bill"—at the time I was playing!

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During that era—in the 1940s and 1950s—Chicago musicians used to come over to Gary to learn what we played. A lot of recording artists came to Gary to sit in with us, because we had such a reputation. They'd come and sit in; we called it "woodshedding" at that time. We'd also jam all night long with Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young—
—I could go on and on about this.

You know that much of the Afro-American music comes from gospel music—the church background, the 'call and response' type of playing, that kind of dialogue, it's where it all comes from.

I retired as a musician in 1965. I'd started a family and was taking care of them, so I stopped traveling. Because traveling is tough, it's rough on you, it's not all the glamour that you see. A lot of the time we were playing, we almost starved to death—we didn't make very much money. It was a great experience though, I really enjoyed myself.

I'm 73. I'm not involved with playing any more. I still go to hear some concerts though; there are some good musicians coming up. There are a lot of school kids in this area that are starting to play jazz. I think it's going to come alive again. I don't think jazz will ever die.

Why is it still here? It's an original African American art form. That music is still there, that beat is there, we walk to that beat, we sing to that beat. So it will never die.