

# The sound of a generation

*Durham's rich history of African-American music has a legacy worldwide*

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The world knows American popular music well, and Billy Stevens knows why.

Stevens, a musician and historian, traveled the world for the State Department for a decade starting in 1986. As he shared American music with about 60 countries, he found that international audiences already knew the United States' songs, largely because of their innovation.

Stevens traced that innovation to the contributions of black musicians and presented his findings in "Sincere Forms of Flattery: Blacks, Whites, and American Popular Music," which combined scholarship, music clips and live performance. He spoke to an audience of 50 on March 20 at the Durham County Library.

Studying bands like the Beatles and the Beach Boys, Stevens found one major similarity.

"What's the common thread here? It's pretty obvious: white folks playing black music," he said. "This tradition goes back 150 years before Elvis Presley — this is actually the roots of all American popular music."

African-Americans naturally led innovation because their traditional music was outlawed in America, Stevens said.

With Irish fiddles and an instrument — a precursor to the banjo — that they brought to the country, slaves learned to earn tips by entertaining bored, isolated plantation owners. They played European songs but retained two key elements of African music, layered rhythms and blue notes, that gave rise to the first truly American music.

"Every time you gave an African-American musician a new instrument, they would pick it up, they'd start playing it and, bam — something new would happen," he said. Then entrepreneurial white musicians, from 19th-century minstrels to 1960s rock bands, would adapt these songs for profit.



Staff photo by John Hamlin

**Billy Stevens performs "Oh! Susanna," the first popular song to sell 1 million copies. His banjo, which is entirely handmade except for the strings and head, replicates that of a minstrel performer.**

Stevens also detailed Durham's rich and unparalleled history of African-American music.

"Durham in the '30s and the '40s and into the '50s was unique in terms of what kind of a black culture was here," he said.

This was because Durham was a hub of working black people, thanks to the tobacco and hosiery industries, who had the money to consume music. Interested in selling record players to black people, white entrepreneurs recorded the blues musicians who played in Durham's streets, Stevens said.

Doletha Blake, who was born in Durham in 1931, said Stevens' account of the city was spot-on.

"It was excellent. You see, Durham's my home — I could acknowledge everything he said about it," she said.

Blake recalled the segregation at black musicians' concerts at what is now the Civic Center in Durham.

"When they would bring the entertainers in, which was a big thing for black people then, the white people could come," she said. "They had a certain section in the balcony where they could sit, but they could not come down on the floor and dance like we could."

## Music with roots

Fulton "Blind Boy Fuller" Allen and "Reverend" Gary Davis were two prominent artists in Piedmont blues, a primarily African-American musical genre of the '20s and '30s. Piedmont blues thrived in cities like Durham, near railroad lines, where many African-Americans settled.

Allen and Davis were discovered by J.B. Long, manager of the United Dollar Store in Durham, in the mid-1930s. He eventually took them to New York City to record their music.

Police patrolled to keep white people off the dance floor, she said.

"They'd walk up and tap them on the shoulder and send them back upstairs."

Stevens said no major genre of African-American music has emerged since hip-hop developed around 1978.

"In the history of African-American music, there has not been a significant new form of music created in two generations," he said. "And that is a complete break in the historical continuity. Before that, you could pretty much say every generation had a personality, had a sound."