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Recommended Citation

Wynn, Linda T., "Tennessee State University's Aristocrat of Bands" (2012). *Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture*. 24.

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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Tennessee State University's Aristocrat of Bands

As early as 1928, Professor Clearance Hayden Wilson, the author of the music (lyrics by Laura M. Averitte) of the Tennessee State Alma Mater, laid the groundwork for a music program at Tennessee A. & I. State College. It was not until 1946, when President Walter Strother Davis inaugurated an instrumental music and band program, that a formal music program made available the opportunity for formal training, structured educational courses in music, and planned curricular experience and application to high school graduates who qualified for scholarships. With the scholarship students as a nucleus, students whose primary academic disciplines were in other areas augmented the band program. The instrumental program developed and expanded qualitatively and quantitatively.

In 1946 President Davis selected Jordan Douglas (Chick) Chavis as band director. A native of Greensboro, North Carolina, he attended Tennessee State and was graduated from Fisk University. Bandmaster at Washington Junior High School and Pearl Senior High School, he served in the United States Navy as assistant leader of the Black Naval Band at the Great Lakes Naval Station and later at the Seattle, Washington Navy Base.

Chavis began the organization with 100 pieces. After more than a few weeks of practice the band marched onto the field. In addition to the 100-piece marching band, Chavis also directed a 60-piece concert band, and a 17-piece orchestra. However, the marching band captured the heart and soul of the football team's fans and spectators. Originally known as the Marching 100, the Aristocrat of Bands has had four band directors. In addition to Chavis, Jr., who served from 1946 to 1951, other directors include Frank Terry Greer (1951 to 1972); Clifford Watkins (1972 to 1979); and Edward L. Graves (1979 to the present).

Under Chavis' leadership, the marching band grew and developed into a premier university band that gave extraordinary performances in parades and half-time shows at football games. In 1947 and 1948, the marching band performed in the Washington Classic in Washington, D.C., where top historically black colleges and universities competed for national championship or as stated by Chavis, "the black Super Bowl of that era." The band participated in a large parade and furnished the half-time show each year. Three years after the Marching 100 appeared in Washington, D.C., Chavis' term as band director ended in 1951. Again, President Davis was interested in further developing the band into a show band and again he tapped one of the university's former students, Frank T. Greer. Greer attended the university for two years; however, because of the diminished financial resources he left the school. A music major, Greer later completed his education at West Virginia State College (B.A. 1948; he later earned a M.A. from Marshall State University in 1954) and became a band director at of a West Virginia high school band. Davis read about Greer's West Virginia band and asked him to join the faculty and become director of bands in 1951, where he remained until his retirement in 1979.

Soon after taking the baton as director of bands, Greer brought in Anceo Francisco as his assistant band director. Under Greer's leadership the band made extraordinary advances, both in numbers and musical excellence. He transformed the marching pattern, taking on the Michigan influence of quick steps, high bent knees, and pointed toe. Colleges and high schools across the nation emulated this marching form for more than two decades. Four years after Greer began his tenure as director, the band was invited to perform during the half-time show of the Chicago Bears and Los Angeles

Rams professional football game. The performance was the first of a series of nationally televised half-time shows for the band. It was also the first time that a historically black university band appeared on national television.

The "Aristocrat of Bands," the appellation given to the school's "Marching 100," brought national recognition and distinction to the university when it performed on National Television in 1960 at half time during the Baltimore Colts—Green Bay Packers professional football game in Baltimore, Maryland. Reportedly, TV announcer Lenny Nelson declared that he had never seen stadium spectators remain in their seats amazed and electrified at the performance of the "Aristocrat of Bands," as they went through their 32 intricate steps and drills on the field. Greer's Aristocrats had the unique distinction of combining high quality musicianship with high quality showmanship, never sacrificing their booming symphonic sound regardless of the movements and intricate dance steps. Between 1955 and 1978 the TSU band performed half-time shows at nine professional football games. TSU's Aristocrat of Bands also appeared in the Orange Blossom Classic in Miami, the Blues Bowl in Memphis, and the Grantland Rice Bowl in Wichita Falls, Texas.

In 1961 the band again made history and added another first to its record when it became the only historically black college or university to march in President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Parade. One of the students who marched in that parade was Edward L. Graves, who later became the band's director. In addition to marching in Kennedy's Inaugural Parade, Greer's band also played for President and Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson on their visit to Nashville. "The Aristocrat's Aristocrat," a designation given him by Robert Churchwell, Greer passed the baton to Dr. Charles Watkins in 1972, when he resigned as director of the Aristocrat of Bands to become the university's chief recruiter of students. Watkins continued the high quality musicianship and excellent performances of both the Marching and Concert bands. After serving as the band's director for seven years, Watkins was succeeded by Edward L. Graves.

Since taking over as Director of Bands and Associate Professor of Music in 1979, Graves has developed a band program that has been acclaimed both within the country's borders and abroad for its amazing musical performance, innovative arrangements and meticulous marching. Under his direction, the band traveled to Japan to perform at halftime in the Mirage Bowl, and the Jazz Ensemble has traveled to Switzerland as part of the Montreaux Jazz Festival and toured Nigeria. In 1993 and 1997 the band performed in the Inaugural Parades of President Bill Clinton. In addition the band

has been featured during numerous television halftime shows and specials.

From 2000 to the present, TSU's famed marching band has added numerous appearances to its credit, including but not limited to: the CBS All American Happy Thanksgiving Day Parade; the American Celebration of Music in China; the Inaugural Honda Battle of the Bands Invitational Showcase in Atlanta, Georgia; the CMT Music Awards, with country music stars Big and Rich; *Porgy and Bess* with the Nashville Symphony; and as a featured performer at the Second HBCU National Band Directors Consortium Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. In 2003, the Aristocrat of Bands was named the official spirit band of the National Football League's Tennessee Titans. On August 6, 2011, in Canton, Ohio, when Richard Dent became the first football player from TSU enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the Aristocrat of Bands served as his escort during the Timken Grand Parade.

For over sixty years, audiences have been thoroughly entertained by the band's unique marching style and musical versatility. Recognized by their appellation as the Aristocrat of Bands, TSU's marching band has performed in parades, half-time shows, music videos, movies, and television commercials. The band's majorettes enhance its dynamic style and sound. From 1956 to 1974, the majorettes were under the direction of Carrie Gentry. Later, under the direction of Judy Fenton Gentry, the majorettes were given the appellation Sophisticated Ladies.

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