

Chris Murrell

Byron Christopher Murrell (December 18, 1956 – June 18, 2017)^[1] was an American jazz and gospel singer who has toured as the featured vocalist for the Count Basie Orchestra and has made appearances with the Roger Humphries Big Band.

Biography

Murrell began singing as a young child and continued to study voice and perform through his childhood, singing in church and school functions. As a teenager, he traveled and performed throughout the US with his own seven-piece gospel group, the Christian Disciples.^[2]

Murrell graduated from Wake Forest University in 1979 with a degree in theater, and is a lifelong resident of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In May 1986, Frank Foster was the guest soloist at a concert with the North Carolina School of the Arts Jazz Ensemble in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Chris was invited to be a guest vocal soloist on the same concert, where Foster, who was shortly to take over as leader of the Count Basie Orchestra, heard Chris's rendition of "Lush Life"; when the opportunity presented itself, he hired Chris to be the featured vocalist with the Count Basie Orchestra.^[3] He toured worldwide with the Count Basie Orchestra until 2002.

In 2002, Murrell released a solo album, *Reprise*; in the liner notes, Tony Bennett called him "one of my favorite singers".^[4] In 2004, his vocals were featured on the CD *These Foolish Things* by the Joe Aiello Trio.^[5]

Murrell died on June 18, 2017 at the age of 61 in his native Winston-Salem, North Carolina.^[4]

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Chris Murrell	
Birth name	Byron Christopher Murrell
Born	December 18, 1956 Winston-Salem, North Carolina, U.S.
Died	June 18, 2017 (aged 60) Winston-Salem, North Carolina, U.S.
Genres	Gospel, jazz
Occupation(s)	Singer
Associated acts	Count Basie Orchestra

Certification
OF
DEATH

http://www.journalnow.com/news/local/singer-and-winston-salem-native-chris-murrell-dies-at/article_cad05328-e6f6-515a-92b0-04f3fdf24de7.html

Singer and Winston-Salem native Chris Murrell dies at 61

By Lynn Felder Winston-Salem Journal Jun 20, 2017



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Winston-Salem native Chris Murrell was a frequent performer locally and abroad. He sang on a Grammy winning record with the Count Basie Orchestra in 1997.

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Journal file photo

Chris Murrell, a Winston-Salem native whom Tony Bennett described as “one of my favorite singers,” died on Sunday. He was 61.

Murrell is best known for his work with the Count Basie Orchestra and singers such as Bennett, but he also performed locally for many years, and the music community is mourning his loss.

Murrell's late mother, Bernice Murrell, encouraged his singing.

"She forced me to go to a Saturday children's choir rehearsal at age 10," Murrell wrote in a statement on his website, www.chrismurrell.com. "I was not a happy camper! However, when she returned, I ran to the car and shouted, 'Mom, I want to sing for the rest of my life!'"

He performed in Winston-Salem with the Christian Disciples, choirs at Bishop McGuinness High School, the Wake Forest University Chorale, Twin City Chorus and the N.C. Black Repertory Theater.

He was in the Wake Forest University graduating class of 1979 with Jim Steele, an afternoon jazz music announcer on radio station WSNC.

"The black population on campus was very, very small, so we all knew each other," Steele said. "He was a theater major, and I was a communications major.

"He had that fantastic set of pipes. Around the time we graduated, it was a really rich period, musically, in Winston-Salem. You would have entertainers in town for the Crosby (a charity golf tournament). Chris was right up there with them."

Frank Foster, the director the Count Basie Orchestra from 1986 to 1995, heard Murrell performing with the UNC School of the Arts Jazz Ensemble in the 1980s and recruited him to be the band's featured vocalist.

During his tenure with the Basie orchestra, from 1991 to 2004, Murrell performed on the stage with many of his idols, including Ella Fitzgerald, Nancy Wilson, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and George Benson.

His sister Barbara Payne, who lives in Michigan, heard his first performance with the Basie band.

“The first time he sang with the band was in Michigan,” Payne said. “He got up and sang like he had been singing with them for years.”

Family members also went to see Murrell perform at Interlochen Music Festival in Michigan and at Carnegie Hall in New York.

Another sister, Beulah Newby who lives in Maryland, said, “He and his friends used to do some jam sessions in the basement of our house.”

Murrell’s brother, Benjamin, lives in Winston-Salem. A sister, Beverly, predeceased him.

Their father, Frank William Murrell, owned Forsyth Funeral Home and was a stone and cement contractor. He died in 1978, and their mother died in 2009.

Once, when the Basie band was playing in N.C., Bernice Murrell made dinner for the whole band, the sisters said.

In 1997, a record that Murrell performed on, “Live at Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild,” with the Basie Orchestra, won a Grammy Award for the Best Large Jazz Ensemble Album.

Murrell released at least two albums “Full Circle,” in 1994, with Robert “Baabe” Irving, and “Reprise,” in 2002.

In 2004, he launched a solo career, which included a stint in London’s West End (theater district) in “I Can’t Stop Loving You: the Music of Ray Charles,” and touring throughout Europe and the U.S., including annual appearances in Monte Carlo. He performed twice for the King of Thailand — in 1997 and again in 2013.

Murrell put his international career aside in the mid-2000s when he returned to Winston-Salem to care for his aging mother.

“When he came back to town, I ran into him at the Cloverdale parking lot,” Steele said. “He said, ‘I think I’m going to have to leave Europe and come home.’ ... He was very well paid in Europe. He spent his fortune to be here with her.

“But he was such a joyful person. He did it with love and grace and never regretted a thing.”

Bass player Matt Kendrick, a mainstay of the local jazz scene, said that he started working with Murrell in 1976.

“We played more than 1,000 gigs together,” Kendrick said “I met him when he came down to Stouffer’s (now the Marriott on Cherry Street) and sat in with Damon Carmona and me. He was so good. ... We insisted that the hotel hire Chris.”

Kendrick currently leads a regular jam session on Tuesday nights at Tate’s Craft Cocktails on Fourth Street.

“Chris came to Tate’s on June 6 and sang a few songs,” Kendrick said. “When he left, he said, ‘Matt, I love you, and there’s nothing you can do about it.’ He always said that.”

Murrell performed with the Winston-Salem Symphony in 2003 in a “Saturday Nights, Live!” show and again on New Year’s Eve 2008.

Journal critic Ken Keuffel wrote of his 2003 performance, “His mellifluously mellow tones recalled those of Nat King Cole, but seemed to embrace a greater range of expression. ... warm-and-fuzzy ballads transformed themselves into uninhibited celebrations of joy. The effect honored the singer’s roots in gospel.”

“He was such a great vocalist, just a pleasure to play with,” Kendrick said. “He was major league.”

A home-going service for Murrell will be July 1 in Wait Chapel on the campus of Wake Forest. Clark S. Brown & Sons Funeral Home is handling the arrangements.