

THE SPOONMAN

Lucius Talley Jr. has played spoons for nearly 70 years, long enough to earn the nickname “Spoonman.” The Nashville, TN Branch 4 member first picked up and played the spoons way back in high school in the 1950s.

Talley played clarinet in the marching band while his friend and high school marching bandmate, Bobby Hebb, played trumpet. During their time together in the high school band, Hebb taught Talley how to play the spoons.

Hebb ended up being an influence on not only Talley, but also on musical history. Hebb was an R&B and soul singer, musician, songwriter and performer who is best known for his song “Sunny.” The single, released in 1966, is one of the most performed and recorded songs and was listed as No. 25 on Broadcast Music, Inc.’s “Top 100 songs of the century.” The chord progressions used in the song influenced many later compositions.

The spoons are a makeshift percussion instrument that has been played in several ways in folk music in various countries across the world. In the United States, the spoons are associated with folk music along with jug and spasm bands. Talley plays the spoons by placing two spoons in one of his hands with their backs facing each other and by hitting the spoons on various parts of his body.

Once Talley completed his service in the Air Force, which he had joined after high school, he went back to Nashville and performed with Hebb. While he was there, Hebb was discovered and was offered a position playing in a nightclub in New York City. A few months went by, and Hebb sent for Talley to come join him to play

the spoons and the drums, both percussion instruments.

In 1962, Talley decided to apply to the Post Office after a letter carrier he knew advised him to try his hand there for steady work. He carried mail for three or four years in New York, marking the beginning of his 29-year career as a letter carrier. He joined NALC while working in New York and has been a member ever since.

“My biggest influence was my daddy, who was the only mailman who didn’t know how to drive in Nashville [during a time when driving became required of letter carriers],” Talley, a second-generation NALC member, said.

Despite the end of his stint in the New York band, Talley said, “I would take my spoons everywhere.” For customers on his route, he would play the spoons while singing the song “Please Mr. Postman,” which was released in 1961 by the Marvelettes and became the first Motown song to reach the No. 1 position on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart.

“A lot of people got a lot of joy out of that,” he said. “You’d be surprised what the spoons can do.”

Talley, who retired in 1992, loved being a letter carrier. “When the clock rang for me to go to work, I was happy to go to the post office,” he said. “It didn’t even feel like a job.”

After all these years, Talley enjoys connecting with letter carriers no matter where he is. “Whenever I see a mailman, I stop and talk to him—even today,” he said.

Professionally, he never stopped playing the spoons. As a side gig he played at nightclubs in New York and in Nashville after he returned in 1965. In Nashville, his popularity grew and “my telephone was ringing all the time. I just picked where I wanted,” Talley said.



Although his focus is on drums and spoons, percussion isn't the only group of instruments Talley has experience in; he also learned to play clarinet and saxophone in high school. At the very beginning of his career, he used to tap dance, too, which he did in coordination with playing the spoons.

In the '90s he started taking his grandson with him to gigs at nightclubs. His grandson danced while Spoonman played, and they became known as "Spoonman and grandson."

Since his retirement from USPS in 1992, Talley has had more time to perform. He has had gigs across the United States, on cruise ships, and even at the Apollo Theater, which has been a significant cultural institution for Black musicians since 1914 and is located in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. Additionally, he likes to teach the spoons to young people at schools and museums.

In June, Talley was featured in a video created by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum on playing the spoons. Talley and Blanco Brown—an American country rapper, singer, songwriter and record producer who wrote the song "The Git Up"—explain to viewers how to play the spoons.

On the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's website, the organization refers to Talley as "legendary Nashville musician Lucius 'Spoonman' Talley."

Before playing any show, Talley makes sure to "tune" his spoons, meaning that he hits the spoons on different parts of his body to get himself familiar with the sound.

"The cheapest spoon that you can get is the best sound that you can get," he said. He prefers to buy "two for a dollar" metal spoons. However, Talley says

that each spoon's shape and material offers a unique sound.

"The key to the sound is on your body, on your clothes, on your feet, on your legs, going all the way down," he said. "Like if I'm sitting down, playing spoons, I hit my shoe on the back of the heel and come all the way up."

When he teaches, he gives the kids plastic spoons so that they don't hurt themselves.

"I hit my knee one time," he said. "You gotta stay away from that knee."

Teaching is important to him to ensure that future generations can have as much fun as he has.

"What I was trying to do was to let the world know that this was a dying art," he said. "Whole generations that come along [have] never heard or never seen [it], and I was just trying to bring it back."

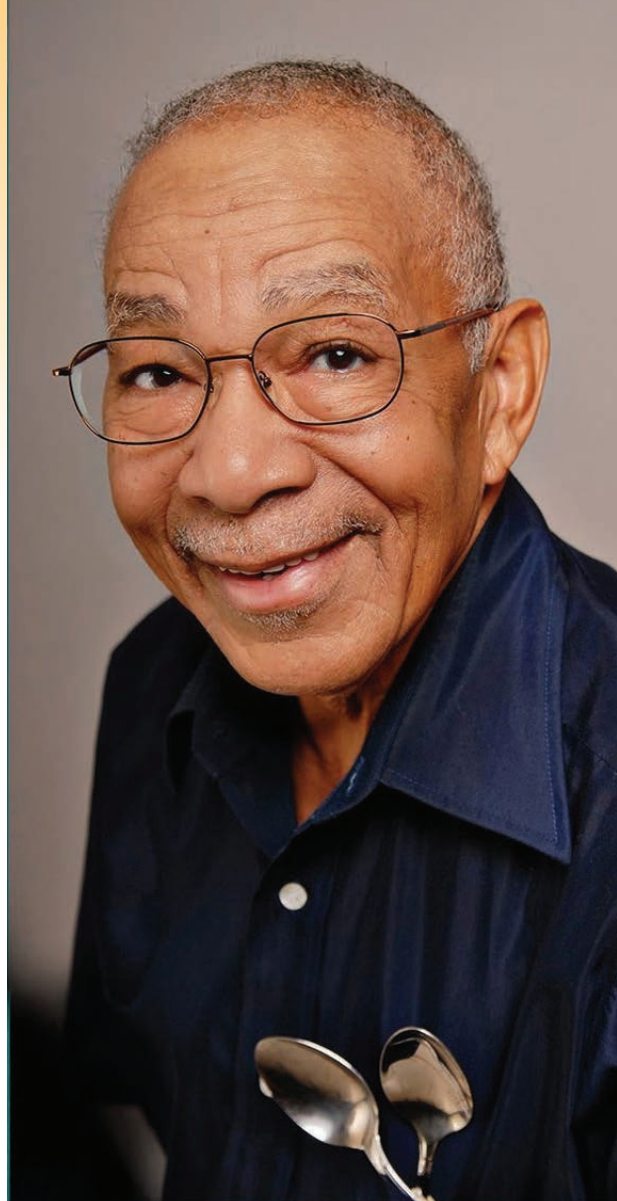
Talley likes to tell the youngsters, "There's a lot of fun, a lot of show, a lot of magic, a lot of techniques, but put it all together, it's a harmony that you can make some money with."

Expanding his talents, Talley has taken some small acting roles in the last decade. Among them is his role as a janitor in Charles Kelley's music video for the song "The Driver" in 2015 and as a background character in a 2015 Smirnoff commercial with Instagram influencer Baddie Winkle.

With a laugh, he said he "certainly enjoyed it."

He continues to bring spoons everywhere he goes and plays them every Sunday at his church.

"Anywhere you go, you can have fun with it," Talley said. **PR**



Lucius Talley Jr.