

A Brief History of the Original Soul Sanction

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 22, 2024)

James "Jake" Alexander spoke to me after a presentation I made on the history of Oak Ridge and asked if I would be interested in the history of a musical group formed at the Oak Ridge High School some years ago. Of course, I said "Yes" immediately. Jake has since provided the following history of such a musical group known as Soul Sanction.

The Soul Sanction was created early in the Summer of 1967 by organist Rob Culpepper and drummer Steve Davis, both members of the Oak Ridge High School Class of 1968, to exploit the recently discovered vocal talents of three ORHS classmates, Bill Capshaw and Paul Eddy Buckley, both of the Class of 1967, and Lloyd Jones, a '68 classmate of Culpepper and Davis. A bass player, Jake Alexander (ORHS '68), and a guitarist, Daniel R. ("D.R.") Smith (ORHS '66) were spirited away from an established Knoxville-based R&B band, the Plebeians, who were, at the time, under a promotional contract with WNOX DJ Johnny Pirkle's Concepts 90 Productions.

Previously Alexander had played with the Embers, a "blue-eyed" soul band with members from the ORHS and Clinton High School classes of 1967. Smith had played with several Oak Ridge-based bands, including the Deltas, from 1963 to 1967.

It wasn't long before the three singers and the original rhythm section conjured up enough courage to play at one of the "Wildcat Den" parties that the City of Oak Ridge, under the watchful eye of the Recreation Department's Shep Lauter, sponsored at the National Guard Armory.

Sometime in the early 1960s, municipal fire departments were required to set fire safety maximum occupancy limits on rooms in public buildings. Because the original Wildcat Den building had no fire suppression system, the occupancy limit was set at 139. In May of 1964, a band called the Earls, fronted by Jake Alexander's older brother Marty Alexander, is believed to have played the very last Teen Board dance party actually held in the old Den.

There were over 400 people in the room that night, well above the limit specified by the fire department. So, the Teen Board dances were moved to the Armory building, where they continued until the City's new Civic Center building was completed in 1970. (Note: Anyone still worried about fire safety in the Den needs to know that, with the modern sprinkler system now installed in the building, maximum occupancy is set at 400.)

By the time the 1967-68 school year started in September, the Soul Sanction, still unnamed at this point in time, knew they needed to add some horns. No self-respecting R&B band, whether blue-eyed or brown-eyed (the Sanction was both) had the audacity to play out without at least two horns. With the rest of the band's permission, Alexander invited two friends from the ranks of the ORHS marching band to join the Sanction: Doug Kwasnoski on alto sax and Jerry Ferrari on trumpet. Alexander also tracked down Dan Crass, a tenor sax player from Oliver Springs ('68) that had been in Alexander's second band, the Aztecs.

With a membership roster of ten and a rapidly developing repertoire, good-paying gigs started coming the Sanction's way pretty quickly. By mid-Fall of 1967, a decision was made to bring two more ORHS Band horn players permanently onboard: Richard Anderson ('68) on trombone and Bobby Wedemeyer ('69) on trumpet. Also by this time, vocalist Paul Eddy Buckley had left the band, replaced by Aaron Love (ORHS '70), and guitarist D.R. Smith had been drafted. Smith was very quickly, and quite ably, replaced by David McDuffie (ORHS '68).

It was about this time that the Soul Sanction's rhythm section, along with the rest of the band (now numbering 12, an almost unheard-of thing at the time) began to truly "find its groove." Steve Davis was a considerably above-average drummer, but Alexander, Culpepper, and McDuffie, by all appearances, were strictly from the ranks of the mediocre. But when the whole section got in balance, something magical would happen. Years later Alexander was heard to say: "Say what you want about talent, but

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when the four of us found our groove, we generated a sound powerful enough to turn goat piss into gasoline.”

As the Spring of 1968 rolled around, the Sanction was ready to enter the Tennessee Jaycee's second annual Battle of the Bands. They lost their first local competition in Clinton to the Pastels, a band made up of five guys from the Clinton High School Class of 1969. Memories remain foggy, but it is generally accepted that the Pastels, strongly supported by an enthusiastic home-town crowd, simply put on a better show that night.

Not to be denied, this prompted the Sanction to enter into a second local competition in Knoxville where, after three rounds of grueling competition involving more than 20 bands, they came out on top. After that the Sanction never had to look back. The State final competition went down in Oak Ridge on June 8, 1968.

This time the Sanction had the home town advantage and was able to perform its show twice, both times nearly flawlessly. They won the competition, with the Pastels coming in second. From there it was on to Atlantic City for the National BoB. The band drew an early time slot on the first day and played its show to a nearly empty room. The Sanction wasn't even rated in the top ten, but generally felt that its effort had been creditable.

The band's membership experienced some instability in the Fall of 1968 as most members went off to colleges or other pursuits at disparate locations. Bobby Wallace replaced Alexander on bass for a time, but by January of 1969, most of the original members had rejoined the band. The band officially signed with Johnny Pirkle's booking agency and played often at high school and college functions in east Tennessee until the Summer of 1970.

At about that time, the immense popularity of big R&B bands in the southeast began to fade and opportunities to play good gigs began to be more difficult to find. After Concepts 90 inadvertently booked both the Sanction and Johnny Stifle and the Chimes for a prom in Morristown, the band severed its ties with the booking agency, disbanded, and quietly began to pass into the annals of history. Some members went on to join bands that played jazz-rock fusion, e.g., material by Chicago, Blood Sweat and Tears, and the Ides of March, plus any top-40 material that wasn't too bubble gummy.

Fast forward to 1988, when the Sanction regrouped to play for the Class of '68's 20th reunion. Everybody had a blast and a decision was made to restart the band. Steve Davis was living in Houston by this time, so the Ember's drummer, Danny Taylor, ORHS '67, was tapped to play drums.

Alexander was already fully committed to Boys' Night Out by 1988, and bade the new Sanction a fond farewell with best wishes. Culpepper assumed management responsibilities and original members McDuffie, Crass, Kwasnoski, and Capshaw tarried on. Bobby Wedemeyer was a District Criminal Court Judge in Nashville by this time and couldn't spare the time.

Within the first few years of the latter-day Sanction's 15-year run, Kwasnoski and Crass had dropped out and were replaced by some of the best horn players in the Knoxville area. Kerry Hodge, a masterful R&B guitar player from the Plebeians and many other successful Knoxville groups, played with the Sanction for many years.

Culpepper signed with AC Entertainment and the reformed Sanction (referred to as the "Soul Sanction II" by the band's original members) began playing quite frequently, gaining name recognition in the Knoxville area far beyond that ever attained by the original group. After about ten years, Bill Capshaw left the band and, after several more successful years with many other singers and band members, in 2005, Culpepper and McDuffie decided to call it quits.

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The Sanction II, with none of the band's original members, continued on for a time. In 2006 that band officially changed its name to the Soul Connection, which continues to play in the Knoxville area to this day.

In 2012, Jake Alexander and Class President Bill Wilkinson organized the first "Annual Reunion of the Clinton/Oak Ridge 60's Bands" to play for the "Class of 70 Turns 60" party the ORHS Class of 1970 had at the Doubletree Hotel. Bands that participated included the Earls, the Embers, Boys' Night Out, and the Original Soul Sanction.

The second, third, fourth, and fifth annual Clinton/Oak Ridge 60's Band Reunions drew more bands and bigger crowds, with the Original Soul Sanction participating each year. The 6th Annual Clinton/Oak Ridge 60s Band Reunion took place on Friday, October 6th, 2017, at the Historic Grove Theater. Bands featured that year included the Earls ('63 to '65), the Deltas ('62 to '65), the Rogues ('65 to '67), the Knight Riders ('65 to '69), the Original Soul Sanction ('67 to '70), the Impacts ('67 to '68), and the Pastels ('65 to '69).

As of the date of this update, the Original Soul Sanction has lost three of its members. Doug Kwasnoski died January 2nd, 2013; Jerry Ferrari died May 5th, 2017; and Lloyd Jones, died of Covid on November 20th, 2020. The original band's manager, Charlie Johnson, died July 3rd, 2013.

Thank you, Jake, for an excellent review of the history of Soul Sanction. Here is a story Jake told me about the early years of this music and how it was first received by adults.

Jake titled this story as "Mr. Dunigan and Me"

Thomas Dunigan was the Principal at Oak Ridge High School from 1954 until 1971. I went to ORHS for two years, graduating with the Class of 1968. My mother, Marion Alexander, taught English and history at ORHS from 1967 until her retirement in 1986.

During my senior year, I was the leader of a rhythm and blues rock band that called itself the Soul Sanction. The band consisted of nine modestly talented white guys: myself on bass, Rob Culpepper on organ, David McDuffie on guitar, Steve Davis on drums, Dan Crass and Doug Kwasnoski on saxophones, Gerry Ferrari and Bobby Wedemeyer on trumpets, and Richard Anderson on trombone. This relatively large and powerful rock band backed three outstanding Black singers from Oak Ridge: Lloyd Jones, Paul Eddy Buckley, and Bill Capshaw.

The Sanction primarily covered R&B hits that "crossed-over" to the Pop Charts, recorded by artists like Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding, James Brown, and the Temptations. The band was amazingly successful for a collection of high school kids and played all over east Tennessee during its two-year run. Most notably, the Soul Sanction won the Tennessee Battle-of-the Bands in 1968 and represented the state in the National Battle-of-the-Bands in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

In the spring of 1968, the ORHS Student Council decided that they would sponsor a "Soul Show" in the school's auditorium as a means to raise money to help build a school in a remote area of South America. After some negotiations, the Sanction agreed to be the event's headliner and to back several other talented students that would also perform.

Mr. Dunigan attended the second night of the show and definitely did not like what he heard and saw, either on the stage or in the audience. The crowd attending the show that night had admittedly become pretty raucous relative to the standards of behavior expected for a normal school function in those days.

Mr. Dunigan seemed to suspect that some of the students had been drinking, although I wasn't aware of any disciplinary actions taken by faculty overseers of the event related to the illicit use of alcohol. This could have happened, though. There were high school kids that drank beer back in those days, also cherry vodka was a favorite.

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Immediately following the show, Mr. Dunigan, upon being told by someone that I was the band's leader and had been the "primary coordinator" of the entire affair (which was true), was close up in my face delivering a severe tongue-lashing. He credited our band's "immoral, primal music" as the root cause of the unacceptable behavior he was observing, and said that, if he had been made aware of the "coarse nature" of the event in advance, he would never have allowed it to happen. I protested vigorously, stating that there was nothing wrong with what the band was doing and that he couldn't reasonably hold the band responsible for any observed misbehavior among members of the audience.

On the following Monday morning, Mr. Dunigan confronted my mother, and some of the school faculty that had been directly involved in the production of the show, to voice his concerns about the unacceptable behavior he had witnessed. My Mom, and I suspect the other teachers as well, tended to back me on my "we didn't do anything wrong" defense. I think the teachers pretty much took the position that the behavior of the students at the Soul Show, and the music the Sanction played, was pretty typical of the youth of the day and that nothing had happened that needed any corrective action.

Previous to the Soul Show encounter with Mr. Dunigan, I'm sure I was not a student to whom he would have otherwise taken any notice. After that I would receive intense glares from him when we infrequently encountered each other in the hallways. However, I think as time passed, Mr. Dunigan began to come to grips with the changing times, particularly with respect to the music of the day.

I know that Doc Combs, my band director, and Sherman Shepard, my physics teacher, both vouched for my basic character. Towards the end of the 1968 school year, I was designated the "Grand Champion" of the Southern Appalachian Science Fair, which brought academic honor to Oak Ridge High.

After that, Mr. Dunigan and I had several quite cordial conversations about things other than rock and roll music. I have to believe he had found a place in his heart to forgive me for my previous "sinful transgressions" and "rabble rousing."

Now you have the additional insight into the transition of music in the late 1960's. Seems rather bland compared to some of the musical tastes of today, huh. Thanks again Jake for this glance back into a time not so long ago but that many readers may identify with it.

If you enjoyed this local Oak Ridge musical history you might well enjoy learning about the history of Boy's Night Out:

<https://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2024/BNO%20History%20Ed%20Final%20140616.pdf>

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The guys that played in the original Sanction in the 1968 BoB competition were, in the famous 'basketball goal picture, front row left to right: Steve Davis, drums; Dan Crass, tenor; Doug Kwasnoski, alto; Richard Anderson, trombone; Bobby Wedemeyer, trumpet; and Jerry Ferrari, trumpet. Back row, left to right: Jake Alexander, bass; David McDuffie, guitar; Rob Culpepper, organ; Bill Capshaw, vocals; Lloyd Jones, vocals; and Aaron Love, vocals.

Although not in the picture, Charlie Johnson served as the band's manager.

Of these thirteen individuals, Johnson, Kwasnoski, Ferrari, and Jones are now deceased. Alexander and Capshaw still live in Oak Ridge. McDuffie, Culpepper, and Anderson live in Knoxville. Crass lives in Nashville. The Honorable Robert C. Wedemeyer lives near Nashville and, since 1990, sits on the Middle Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals. The whereabouts of Aaron Love are unknown. *Courtesy of James Alexander*