

STEVE E. GEORGE, BLUES HALL OF FAME ~ JACKIE WILSON

A low drumbeat and guitar rhythm play in the background at a dimly lit nightclub. While patrons sip cocktails and talk, the music builds in anticipation of the singer. A man wearing a hat and holding a microphone works the crowd, stopping to hug friends. He twirls his finger, cueing the drummer for a faster beat. As the rhythm intensifies, the man in the hat —Steve E. George — turns on his microphone, strolls to the stage and greets the audience with a smile. A bluesy, smooth voice bellows out “Sweet Home Chicago.” As he finishes singing, he welcomes the appreciative crowd with a sing-talk vibrato, the act of a refined showman. Steve E. George appears confident in front of an audience.

That was not always the case. It took years for George to overcome his “shyness” when he first began performing more than 50 years ago. George, 79, has been a singer in Des Moines since the late 1960s, performing blues, funk and soul music. Early in his career, he was known as Stevie, a nod to Stevie Wonder. Later, he changed his stage name to Steve E. George to stand out. Over the years, he has fronted a variety of bands, performed as a solo act and shared the stage with numerous blues musicians throughout the United States. During the winter months, he sings with a band in Fort Myers, Florida. George was inducted into the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame in 2005. Onstage, he appears polished, with a mischievous grin and a sparkle in his eyes.

However, it took years to build that confidence. He recalls listening to his grandmother’s “78” record player, which played tunes by Black musicians such as Count Basie and The Ink Spots. At his Baptist church, he sat in the front row with his grandmother. When the pastor preached, the congregation would shout “Amen.” “The elders of the church then broke out singing in unison, like it was rehearsed,” he recalls. He would listen to Fats Domino records and sing along using a hairbrush as a microphone, yet quickly turn off the music when his family returned home. “I’d hear songs in my head. I was shy about singing,” he explains. Growing up in Marshalltown, the YMCA was a refuge where he and other Black youths gathered outside the classroom. The building housed a piano, and George sang there while also participating in church and school choirs.

An older cousin who played in a band encouraged George to sing in Des Moines. He met the Norman Henderson Trio, a group from Denver. After performing with the band several times, he was pleased to pocket \$20 and a couple of drinks for his efforts. George performed with the trio on the legendary Center Street in Des Moines. “It was full of Black businesses in Des Moines,” he explains. “It was a big deal for Black people and a lively spot.” One of the first times he played in a club, he was underage and drank too many alcoholic beverages. “I was so nervous, I could not do the last set,” George recalls. Later, he played in bands including We The Band, Antelon, The Groove and Steve George and the Other Brothers.

In the 1980s, he took a hiatus from singing to focus on his family and start a business. “There were no other Black-owned paving contractors in Des Moines,” he says. “I stuck my neck out and concentrated on growing my business instead of performing.”

His voice was not silent, however. While traveling to promote his business, he stopped at clubs in Chicago and Memphis, where owners invited him to sing. George once opened for Tower of Power and performed in Chicago blues clubs. He recalls being onstage at Buddy Guy’s Legends when Buddy Guy was

supposed to be out of town. However, the announcer called him up to perform. “I was called up right after Buddy. It is not good to go on, right after a great like him,” he says.

Over the years, George has recorded in studios, sung at private parties and performed at nearly every venue in Des Moines and central Iowa. He sings his heart out whether there are 10 people in the audience or 1,000. “I am blessed. To look out and see smiling faces and acknowledge me, I do not understand it,” he says. “It makes me feel good to know I make others feel good.” Success, George says, is a combination of factors. “I have never had an ego deal. I do not have expectations from an audience.” As he nears 80, he has no desire to stop singing. A pact with his wife, Gail, remains in place. “If she tells me it is ugly, then it is time to quit.” Singing is in his blood. “It is not about the money. It is about the satisfaction and smile on someone’s face. I am thankful for all that,” he reflects. “After every gig, I tell Gail, ‘I think I fooled them again.’”

**George performs at Roosevelt Summer Sundays
in Ames on July 5 and at WesleyLife on July 23.
Check his social media pages for details.**



Steve E. George, far left, sang in bands from the 1970s in nearly every venue in Des Moines.



At age 79, Steve E. George has spent a lifetime of singing blues, funk and soul music. He was inducted in the the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame in 2005.