

Rock pioneer Gary U.S. Bonds comes home for a show

Fifty-two summers ago, Gary U.S. Bonds, a pretty boy from Norfolk with a fabulously lustrous conk hairdo, was the hottest sensation in pop.

He topped Billboard's Hot 100 in 1961 with "Quarter to Three," a rare feat for a black artist in those days, when radio, like most of the country, was segregated.

Despite the fact that Bonds' records were sold mostly in white record shops, the color of his skin relegated him to the "chitlin circuit," a national chain of clubs and theaters, including the Attucks in Norfolk, where black acts performed.

The Florida native pioneered the so-called "Norfolk Sound," a raucous blend of sanctified gospel and nascent rock, said to have influenced the likes of Bruce Springsteen. In fact, the New Jersey superstar, who befriended Bonds, produced two acclaimed albums for the veteran pop star in the early '80s. The records - "Dedication" and "On the Line" - pulled Bonds out of obscurity.

But after "Quarter to Three," the man born Gary Anderson never crowned the charts again. He scored minor but influential hits such as "School Is Out" and "Dear Lady Twist." But by the time Bonds was 30, he was essentially an oldies act and barely a footnote in rock history.

These days, the 74-year-old singer, still dapper with a diamond stud in each ear and a head full of ink-black hair, lives in New Jersey and tours mostly overseas. But he'll revisit his past hits for a free concert on Granby Street in downtown Norfolk on Friday night.

More than half a century after his brief spell as a teen idol, Bonds also details his life in "That's My Story," a recently published memoir written with Stephen Cooper.

In it, Bonds describes the vibrant music scene of black Norfolk in the late '50s and its most unlikely influence: Bishop Charles Manuel Grace, better known as "Sweet Daddy Grace," the flamboyant celebrity preacher and founder of the United Church of Prayer for All People.

A local branch stood at the corner of Church Street and Princess Anne Road in Norfolk, not far from where Bonds' producer Frank Guida ran a record shop.

"Fresh in Guida's mind must have been the sound of the 'shout bands,' which were an important and festive component of church services," Bonds wrote. "Shout bands featured trombones and horns which could mimic human expression with squeals of joy and hearty laughter.... The double bass and snare drums carried an upbeat, happy rhythm.... At that time, the music of the shout bands was in the streets and our minds."

Guida and Bonds appropriated the sound on "Quarter to Three."

Other historical Norfolk details include Bonds' reflections on The Plaza, the hotel on Church Street run by

Bonnie McEachin, where black acts stayed. After "Quarter to Three" blew up, Bonds suddenly found himself opening for B.B. King and Sam Cooke, artists he used to gawk at in the Plaza's lobby.

"They were making a lot of money and as their opening act I was fearful," Bonds wrote. "But as I tried to learn by watching Sam and B.B. from the wings, I found out quickly that they were watching me. I remember Sam telling me, 'Do something, Bonds, you got a nice voice and the girls love you.' "

Like his friend Ruth Brown, a Portsmouth native and fellow rock-soul pioneer, Bonds didn't sustain success. His reputation rests largely on the bold records he made when he was barely out of his teens, a year after John F. Kennedy became president. Decades later and after countless trends in pop, "That's My Story" offers another take on the development of rock - from an artist and a city pop historians often overlook.

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if you go

Who First Friday Granby Street Party featuring Gary U.S. Bonds [1]

When 6 to 9 p.m. Friday

Where 300 block of Granby St. in downtown Norfolk

Cost Free

Info www.downtownnorfolk.org

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