

Taking Them Home

By Benjamin Pomerance



Photos courtesy of
Plattsburgh State
Gospel Choir

SEE THAT faraway look? That's the thousand-mile stare of a man back in Mississippi again, somewhere between the hours of 10 p.m. and 2 a.m.

Dexter Criss was a graduate school student in those days, up to his eyebrows in chemistry rather than music, yet determined that musicianship would never leave his soul. During those placid hours when everyone else slept, he played the well-worn piano that he had acquired from a

church, teaching himself the lessons of what made Gospel music tick.

One night, he offered up a request to the Almighty. "Please, God," he prayed. "I'm not asking you to make me the best musician in the world. But I am asking you to make me the most committed musician in the world."

Maybe that's where he is now, the chemistry kid back on that makeshift piano bench again, unveiling the

mysteries. It's a process that repeats itself every time the leader of the Plattsburgh State Gospel Choir (PSGC) sits down at his piano one more time, just as he will do in Elizabethtown on Feb. 11 and 12 for two Piano By Nature series performances — openness and discovery. His fingers know the Gospel standards with the force of muscle memory now, but his heart refuses to let them play those familiar tunes the same way twice.

www.chauvinagency.com



– Discounts available upon qualifications –
**Home • Auto • Farm
Contractors and more!**

6064 Route 22, Suite 6
Plattsburgh, NY 12901

(518) 562-9336

"Insurance Service Is Our Product"

*Call in today and request
to speak to Rosa or Grace
for all your Home and Auto
insurance needs!*



Rosa Asselin
rosaa@westelcom.com
LICENSED, CSR



Grace Bechard
graceb@westelcom.com
LICENSED, CSR

NEW LOOK — SAME GREAT SERVICE!



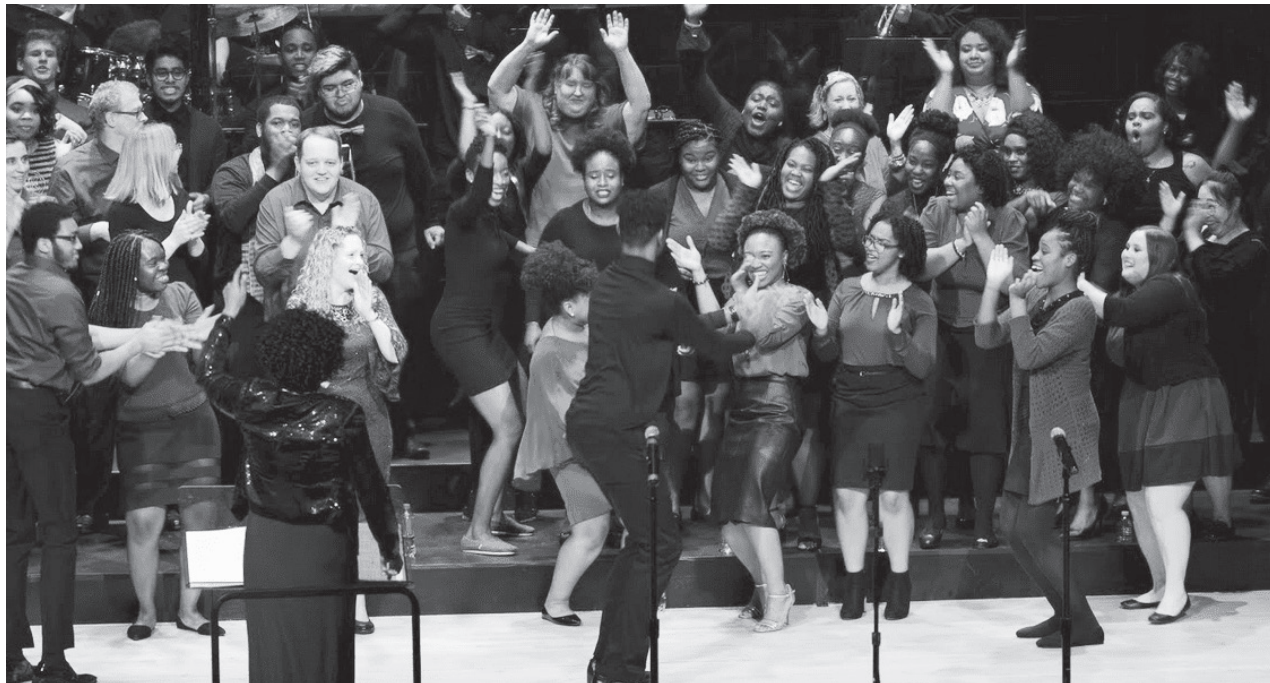
Ashley: (518) 569-3533

Denise: (518) 572-0437

CleanTeamPeruNY@gmail.com

-  **Residential And Commercial Cleaning**
-  **FREE Estimates**
-  **Reasonable Rates**
-  **Fully Insured**
-  **One Time, Weekly, Biweekly & Monthly Cleaning**

**Serving The North Country
Since 2001**



Keep learning, his parents had told him. Stay in school. If you just stay in school, you'll be okay. He would sit on the side of the loading dock and gawk as his father — a man who hadn't gone to high school, much less college — declared with uncanny precision how many bags of rice to pack into a truck, figuring out the proper volume almost perfectly without the crutch of a calculator. He would watch his mother devour her books, traveling through each to places far beyond Stuttgart, Ark., the self-anointed duck and rice capital of the world.

Then he would listen to their words, even when they didn't entirely make sense at the time. "My parents didn't expect for their four boys to take the easiest pathway in life," he declares. "Your job was to learn as much as you could." In school, he heard the same speech from Ms. Wilson, a math teacher who took no prisoners. "If you ever saw the television show Maude," Criss states of the sitcom that starred Bea Arthur in the title role, "then you saw Ms. Wilson. She was Maude." He laughs. "I think they were reincarnated together."

It was enough to leave him entranced by a subject that many kids often avoid. He became a bona fide math geek and then a science wiz, too — enough so that the other kids in the classroom started calling him "Professor Hastings" as a half-joking, half-awestruck nickname. Math and science, he decided, were the last bastions of proven truths. There was nothing he enjoyed more than plunging into a debate, even with the grown-ups, and coming out of the pile with some mathematical or scientific recitation that ended in his favorite victory cry: "It's just a fact."

But then there was faith. All the hard sciences in the universe couldn't explain the way that he felt in that church. It wasn't just the spoken messages raining down from the pulpit, either. The house of worship to which his family belonged boasted several choirs, keeping each group flourishing even when the congregation dwindled as families moved northward in the Great Migration. The Angelic Choir was the finest of them all, the all-star team for which the other singers aspired. Criss, an All-State player in both choir and band, was among their number.

Then, suddenly, he was their leader. The Great Migration swept away enough of the musicians that one day the Angelic Choir's old guard was gone, leaving behind an adolescent who couldn't read a master score, couldn't tell you how to beat a proper conducting pattern with his hands and couldn't explain to you why he wanted to conduct the choir but knew that he wanted to try. Sometimes, victory starts with showing up. Criss showed up on Sunday after Sunday, leading that choir in service after service, making up with panache what he lacked in technique.

Learn as much as you could, his parents had told him. Every Sunday spent leading the Angelic Choir was his time to learn, with that sanctuary serving as his laboratory. He

honed his performance methods; his melodic and harmonic preferences; his personal style for urging the proper dynamic out of his group of choristers; and all the other fundamental skills that comprise a conductor's bedrock education. Still, he knew that he wanted — and needed — to learn more.

That was the thing that kept him up at night, the thing that powered him through the midnight hours at the piano after a mentally fatiguing day of studying organic chemistry: the thirst to find out how all the layers fit together, just as his father could grasp exactly how all of those bags of rice could fit into the truck. To do that meant taking a step back, learning the rudiments of the piano with unsparing attention to detail. It was a humbling process — hence, the late-night prayer: *I am asking you to make me the most committed musician in the world.*

The prayer's first answer came from his wife, Barbara. They had married on a Saturday in 1989, just two days before Criss took his first graduate school class at Mississippi State. One night, watching her husband slog over the keyboard after completing his chemistry assignments, she walked over and showed him how to play chords. Then a friend taught him how to unpack a Gospel recording like a suitcase, learning one line and then another rather than trying to wrap his arms around everything in the music at the same time.

And onward it went, the lessons coming bit-by-bit as he played — first on his own and then accompanying the choir and congregation at a church in Sturgis, Miss. "They were perfect with me," he remembers. "They were so encouraging." As his graduate school education in organic chemistry advanced, his musical palette expanded simultaneously. By the time he completed his Ph.D. program, he had played for several churches, his musical instincts becoming more supple and more intuitive with each experience.

He had come too far to turn back. That was the drumbeat resonating in his brain as he dispatched his resume out into the academic realm, hoping for a chemistry professorship on a university faculty. Life was about to change, he knew, the inevitable transition from student to professional. In most ways, he welcomed that moment. Yet one worry kept tugging on his sleeves, a fear based on the fact that chemistry professors rarely are called upon to lead a choir or play the piano: *Would this be where my music stops?*

Five colleges called for his services in that 1998-99 academic year. One of them, he believed, was the University of Pittsburgh. Then he called the chair of the university's chemistry department and, mid-conversation, realized that the offer letter had come from a different school entirely, a college in northern New York town called Plattsburgh. As their dialogue unfolded, Criss pulled out a map of the United States to find exactly where Plattsburgh was located. "And I said, 'What? This place is north of

LIVATIONS

— WINE & SPIRITS —

Hours: Mon-Thurs 10am-6pm
Fri & Sat 10am-8pm • Sun 12pm-5pm

10% OFF Any Wine* exp. 03/01/23
*In Store Only

2 Gorman Way • Peru, NY | 518-643-2323
Livationswineandspirits.com
Order Online for Same Day Delivery





American Legion Post 1619

Queen of Hearts \$7,600...

Wednesday, Feb. 1st - Loaded Nachos | Shrimp Chowder
Thursday, Feb. 2nd - Hot Pork Sandwich
and French Fries | Cheeseburger Soup
Friday, Feb. 3rd - Gateway Sandwich with Chips
Dinner (until sold) Meatloaf, Mashed Potato
and Gravy, Veggie, Roll & Dessert

219 Rand Hill Rd | Morrisville, NY | 518-561-8706

125 Stuart Road
Burke, NY 12917

Custom Designed By
Certified Engineer

"Put Our Trusses... Under Your Roof"

TRIPLE M TRUSS, LLC

"Quality Built Trusses At A Fair Price"

Phone 518-497-3339 Fax 518-497-6220



**"Agency's price was good,
that's why I switched!"**

I've been with Agency Insurance for three years.
I have my homeowners and auto insurance with Agency.
Having them in my hometown is extremely convenient for me.

If someone were to ask me about the Agency,
I would definitely recommend them.

— Tammy Seguin - Rouses Point

**AGENCY
INSURANCE**
1-800-562-0228
www.agencyins.net

In person, on the phone
and now online 24/7!

**AGENCY
24/7**

Plattsburgh • Saranac Lake • Ticonderoga • Rouses Point

Toronto?” he laughs. “It was quite a shock to see that.”

The geography alone might have kept him away. Yet at his home church in Arkansas, Criss related the story of mistaking Plattsburgh for Pittsburgh and found that one of the church’s deacons had been stationed during his military service at Plattsburgh Air Force Base. When Criss asked about his memories of living in a place that really did stand farther north than Toronto, the older man sang the community’s praises. “There aren’t going to be a lot of people up there who look like you,” he told Criss. “But it’s going to be a beautiful experience.”

On the strength of that recommendation, Criss came to Plattsburgh to meet with the chemistry faculty. At the end of their conversation, the professors asked Criss if he had any questions for them. “Do you have a Gospel choir?” Criss asked. The room fell silent.

“I remember the looks on the faces of the scientists when I asked about a Gospel choir,” Criss says, laughing vigorously. “They were all looking at me like, ‘What did he just say?’”

Yet the biggest surprise to Criss came in their reply. To his astonishment, the college in the town where a lot of people admittedly did not look like him did have a Gospel choir after all. Six years earlier, SUNY Plattsburgh pupil Zadine Richardson had formed a student Gospel choir to sing at the college’s memorial to all who lost their lives in the 1970 shootings at Kent State and Jackson State. Rather than disbanding after that performance, the choir had stayed together, soon becoming a fully recognized collegiate club.

It was enough for Criss to sign on the dotted line. “Of all the places that had offered me a job,” he states, “Plattsburgh seemed to be the only one that would recognize not only the science part of me but the musical part, as well.” Before long, the newest professor on campus was also the Gospel Choir’s newest member, singing under the direction of Marlene Fields, the director of SUNY Plattsburgh’s Equal Opportunity Program.

From that choir, he found both pride and motivation. The pride came from the fact that the choir had sustained this long, the proverbial rose pushing through the crack on the sidewalk to thrive in an unlikely place. The motivation came from his feelings that the group could rise higher. “Marlene had this deep passion for the music,” he recalls. “But the students didn’t have that level of commitment yet. And they also didn’t have a consistent piano player.”

His arrival in town solved the group’s lack of a consistent piano player. Then, in 2001, when Fields stepped down as the choir’s leader, and Criss agreed to serve as her successor,

another breakthrough occurred. “That year, there was this tremendous crop of people who walked through the door,” he remembers. “The choir doubled in size and tripled in their level of commitment to making music, thanks to them. To this day, I still call them ‘the A-team.’”

With “the A-team” reconstituting the choir’s heart, he opened a new vein to the group’s soul. A look at SUNY Albany’s gospel choir — complete with praise dancers, step team, poetry and spoken word — inspired him to try something similar up north. In the spring of 2002, he staged Plattsburgh’s first-ever Gospel Fest. At the back of the hall, the choir gathered, clad in their traditional performance robes, as the house lights dimmed.

Then the chords of the urban Gospel rafter-rattler *Praise Party* thundered from Criss’ piano. The amplified band picked up the tune, and the voices of the choir members flooded the room as they danced down the aisle — shedding their old robes to reveal far flashier outfits. “It was a signal,” Criss declares. “It was a sign that this was going to be a new kind of experience.”

It felt as if an unstoppable force had been unleashed on Plattsburgh and beyond. When the college welcomed to their student body the daughter of Ron Rucker, the best-known ambassador of Gospel music in Japan, Criss asked Rucker if he could bring the PSGC on tour across the Pacific. He was prepared for Rucker to give all of the reasons why such a venture would not work. Instead, Rucker gave a two-word response: “It’s doable.”

Six months later, a church in Japan — packed to the rafters even though the clock said that it was after 10 p.m. — roared with the sounds of welcome for this Gospel choir from more than 6,000 miles away. For 10 days, the 23 musicians toured the nation on a total budget of just \$23,000. At houses of worship throughout the land, they sang and clapped and danced with crowds who spoke a different language but for whom reverence and elation needed no translation. Inside one temple, even a contingent of sumo wrestlers wept with joy.

And by the time the choir returned to Plattsburgh again, their eyes had been lifted to new things. In the years that followed, Criss — with the collaborative leadership of Andrea D. Ogle, who joined him as choir director in 2005 — brought the ensemble on the road to venues from Canada to the Caribbean. A trip to Chicago offered the chance to make music in the city that formalized Gospel music as a performance genre. In 2019, Criss even showed off the choir in the footsteps of his home, escorting them throughout Arkansas and Mississippi.

In some places, slack-jawed stares greeted their entrance. “When we walked in with this diverse choir,” Criss recalls

of one particular Apostolic church in Clarksdale, Miss., the town that lays credit to birthing the Delta blues, “people were like, ‘Oh, my. There’s Asians in this choir. There’s Indians in this choir. There’s even White folks in this choir. Oh, and some Black folks, too.’ And they think that we’re going to sing like some European concert choir.”

He pauses, thinking back to the choir’s formative years. “In the first year of this choir, before I got here,” he notes, “I believe there was one white person in the group.” In the recent seasons prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, the choir’s ranks swelled for some performances to nearly 70 singers, arriving from both the campus and the community, forming a veritable patchwork quilt of racial and ethnic heritages. From the crowds would come the inevitable query after hearing the choir at the pinnacle of its sound: *How do you get white people to sing like that?*

Each time, Criss offers the same response. “‘Close your eyes and listen,’” he advises. “Because when you close your eyes, we’re no longer White; we’re no longer Black; we’re no longer Asian. We are singers.”

Perhaps it is too much, this hope that what is happening here represents a key to unity in a world filled with division. Yet it is indisputable that in this small northern community, a choir whose music can resonate in Japanese temples or Southern Apostolic sanctuaries or the annual Gospel Christmas programs that the group performs on the SUNY Plattsburgh campus has struck a chord worth hearing. Criss himself grasps the impact. “I never had a white person in any of the choirs I had worked with in the South,” he states, “not ever. Plattsburgh has changed me, too.”

And when that mid-performance faraway look comes into his eyes, it is a testament to the extent of that change. “Gospel music,” Criss proclaims, “has a way of taking you home.” Now, on a campus that indeed stands farther north than Toronto, a group of college kids and local residents, mixed in race and background, can cast that magic. From them, the carpet of sound flows, a trail back to the warmth of another place and time whose essence still lingers here, the roots of lessons and love still soaring on the harmonies of the finest homecoming of all.

The Plattsburgh State Gospel Choir, under the artistic leadership of Dexter Criss and Andrea D. Ogle, will present ‘The Key’d Up Gospel Experience: An Intimate Concert of Piano, Rhythms, Ballads & Spirituals’ on Feb. 11 at 7 p.m. and Feb. 12 at 3 p.m. in the parlor of the historic Hand House in Elizabethtown. For tickets and more information, call 518-962-8899, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.

HALEY LUMBER AND BUILDING SUPPLY

Millwork & Hardware

**FULL LINE OF BUILDING
MATERIALS & PRODUCTS**

*We have everything you need
to build or remodel your home!*

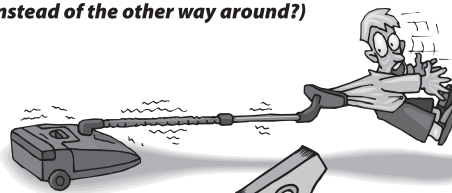
Locally Owned & Operated • Over 25 Years Experience

1472 Military Turnpike
Plattsburgh, NY
518-825-0248

Monday - Friday
7am - 4pm

**Is your business
running you...**

(instead of the other way around?)



**Advertise with us
and clean up
on the competition!**

518-563-1414 • 1-866-563-1414
advertsing@studleyprinting.com

LAKE CHAMPLAIN
WEEKLY

**Studley Printing delivers label
solutions that build brands**

- ☑ Any Size, Color, Shape & Quantity
- ☑ Printer Labels & Laser Sheets
- ☑ Stock & Custom Thermal Labels
- ☑ QR & Bar Code Labels
- ☑ Extended Content
- ☑ Peel & Reveal
- ☑ Reversible
- ☑ Removable

Custom orders welcome.
Call for a quote today!
PROFESSIONAL GRAPHIC
DESIGN SERVICES AVAILABLE



Shop local
Mon-Fri 8am to 5pm
Weekends & Evenings
By Appointment

4701 State Route 9
Plattsburgh, NY
518.563.1414 • 866-563-1414
studleyprinting.com

SL
Studley Labels
A DIVISION OF STUDLEY PRINTING