

Gayelynn

McKinney



Gayelynn is one of America's great drummers. She has performed at the 1996 Olympic Games and at The Kennedy Center. She has received a Grammy Nomination, a Kresge Arts Fellowship, a Motor City Music Award, and a Detroit Black Music Award. And there's much more.

Gayelynn has performed on the CBS, CNN, PBS, and BET television networks. She has also been featured in magazines like Billboard and Elle.

Gayelynn has played for Aretha Franklin, Chaka Khan, Martha Reeves, Freda Payne, Roy Ayers, Marcus Belgrave, Sonny Fortune, Stanley Turrentine, Barbara Morrison, and Benny Golson. And her band has opened for music legends like Ray Charles, Tony Bennett, Nina Simone, and Nancy Wilson.

Whether she's performing at a Jazz festival in Switzerland, playing at a local nightclub or recording in the studio, Gayelynn McKinney is a drummer extraordinaire.



Gayelynn hails from a musical family. Her father was the legendary Jazz pianist and composer, Harold McKinney, who once played with Billie Holliday. Her mother was a noted theatrical singer.

Because of this family connection, Gayelynn was exposed to the best musicians, singers and music venues on the Detroit Jazz scene at an early age. It was where she received much of her musical training before taking formal lessons and later earning a Bachelor's Degree in music.

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Gayelynn showed an early appetite for drumming at age 2 when she would tap out rhythms to music on the dinner table using her knife and fork. By age 8 she began taking formal lessons and had her own drum set by age 9.

Gayelynn took up the clarinet in 5th grade and the saxophone in 6th grade. She became 1st Chair on clarinet in 7th grade. In 10th Grade, she played drums in the Jazz band and saxophone in the Concert band at Highland Park High School.

After high school, Gayelynn moved on to Oakland University where she earned a Bachelor of Music degree. While there, she and bassist, Marion Hayden, formed the "Straight Ahead" Jazz Band and began landing gigs at local nightclubs.

After one year, "Straight Ahead" had the opportunity to perform a regular gig at famed music venue, Bert's Place. Their popularity grew so quickly that every Monday when they played there was a line out the door. They had arrived.

After graduating college, Gayelynn, Marion and "Straight Ahead" took their show in the road. The scored a big gig opening for Nina Simone at the internationally famous Montreaux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. A year later, the group got a call from Atlantic Records and signed with them. For the next 5 years they recorded 3 record albums on the Atlantic label and performed at concerts and nightclubs in 48 states. They also traveled overseas to Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Mexico, and Jamaica. They had become international stars.

For the next 3 years, "Straight Ahead" went independent and continued to play gigs at venues across the country. Then in 1998, Gayelynn left the band and moved to Atlanta to take a 2 year hiatus.

In 2000, Gayelynn was invited to play for "Arrested Development" and toured Japan with them for a year.

Then in 2001, her famed musical father, Harold McKinney, died and the entire Detroit Jazz community mourned the loss of a legend. The following year, Gayelynn moved back to Detroit permanently to be with her mother and family and return to playing locally.

In 2004, Gayelynn had the honor of playing drums for The Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin. Two years later, she recorded her first CD entitled, "It's About Time".



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Gayelynn spent the two few years performing with noted musicians like Dennis Coffey (Motown), Brian O’Neil, Marcus Belgrave, and Martha Reeves. She also resumed playing with “Straight Ahead”.

In 2009, Gayelynn and Marion Hayden performed for Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan at the Tri-City Jazz Festival in Ohio. It was a memorable experience for both of them.

In 2010, Gayelynn headed off to Italy with “Straight Ahead” for the WOMA Jazz Festival and then toured army bases in Germany. While there, one of their performances was sent by satellite to entertain fellow troops who were fighting in Afghanistan.

After returning home, Gayelynn produced and performed The McKinfolk Music Project for the The Detroit Public Library’s Jazz Series. It was a project started by her late father and something that was especially meaningful to her.

That same year, Gayelynn began teaching at the Ann Arbor Music School and became an Artist in Residence for the Plymouth Educational School.

In addition to her teaching, Gayelynn and “Straight Ahead” hit the road and performed shows in New York, Illinois, Missouri, and Oklahoma. She and the ladies closed out the year by serving as ambassadors for The Detroit Jazz Festival on a float in the Detroit Thanksgiving Day Parade which was broadcast live.

In 2011, Gayelynn and the ladies entertained our troops at a US Army base in Alaska. She also performed at Orchestra Hall in Chicago with the likes of Ralph Armstrong, Regina Carter and Amp Fiddler, then with Jason Marsalis and Diane Schnur at The Music Hall and then with Marcus Belgrave for The Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

That year also brought a show about “Music and the Science of Sound” for The Detroit Public Schools that was produced in collaboration with The Cranbrook Institute and The Virgil Carr Center. Working with school kids is an ongoing part of Gayelynn’s overall music philosophy.



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Gayelynn enjoyed a very special moment in 2013 when the City of Detroit honored her late father by dedicating a downtown street in his name. The ceremony was attended by devoted members of the Detroit music community to celebrate the life of this beloved Jazz artist.

That same year, Gayelynn toured Europe with Regina Carter and performed with other noted artists like Benny Golson, Marcus Belgrave, Bill Summer, Kevin Toney, and Freda Payne. She also performed with Larry Coryell and Rick Margitza at The Detroit Jazz Festival.

In 2014, Gayelynn was awarded a prestigious Kresge Music Fellowship for her contributions to music. Her decades-long legacy of performing and teaching has inspired many.

Gayelynn continued to perform The McKinfolk Project and also performed with her own band, The McKinney Zone, at venues in Detroit. She appeared with Marcus Belgrave at famed Dizzy's Coca-Cola Lounge in New York and with the Jimmy Wilkins Big Band at The Detroit Jazz Festival.

In 2015, Gayelynn performed for Aretha Franklin at the Chene Park Amphitheatre along The Detroit River. It was a magical experience for the people of Detroit. She also performed with Barry Harris at The Detroit Jazz Festival as well as at The Dirty Dog Jazz Café with Freda Payne and Marcus Belgrave. In addition to performing, Gayelynn played drums for Ralph Armstrong's Jazz CD.

In 2016, Gayelynn continued to tour with Aretha Franklin in New York, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and Durham. She also performed with the great Barbara Morrison at The Dirty Dog Jazz Café.

In 2017, Gayelynn had the honor of performing with Aretha at Radio City Music Hall for the Tribeca Film Festival to Clive Davis. She later performed with Aretha in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and New York. Gayelynn also did concerts with Benny Golson in Michigan, Ohio and Indiana.

That summer, Gayelynn also performed with Aretha for the inaugural Detroit Music Weekend outdoor music festival on Madison Avenue which was hosted by The Music Hall.



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Like her father before her, Gayelynn McKinney is a Detroit Music Treasure. She has performed with some of the greatest singers and musicians in America. She has performed on national TV and been featured in commercials. She has recorded 5 record albums and appeared on a dozen others. And she has performed at the most prestigious Jazz festivals in the world. In a word, she is exceptional.

Downbeat Magazine describes her this way: *“Gayelynn McKinney is known for going off the grid with her innovative improvisation that uses the entire drum kit with very creative rhythmic ideas.”*

When looking back on her career, Gayelynn has some special impressions. Her greatest moment? Opening for Nina Simone in front of 2,000 people at the Montreaux Jazz Festival in Switzerland with “Straight Ahead” when she was just 22 years old. Her special moment? When a lady took off her necklace and gave it to Gayelynn after a show because her music was so inspiring. Her fondest moment? Seeing the sparkle in the eyes of an 11 year-old kid whom she gave her drumsticks to after a show in Japan.

What motivates Gayelynn? *“I like to play good music and be a part of a group that has the common goal of having a good musical conversation with each other and the audience. And whenever that audience responds, I want to give them more”.*

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Gayelynn McKinney and Special Music Friends



[Gayelynn McKinney and Straight Ahead at The Dirty Dog Jazz Cafe](#)

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"I want to continue being a part of big shows that have Jazz elements, collaborating with top musicians and singers and sharing my musical knowledge with others at music workshops and clinics and at schools. That's my ongoing mission."