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Family reunions remind us how connected we are

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Reunions bring together friends and relatives in unique ways. Here's our story:

My mom's brother, Marshall Allen, leader of the avant-garde jazz group, the Sun Ra Arkestra, came to Oak Park in early January for the first time since the late '90s when he played at Unity Temple. Uncle Marshall and his girlfriend, Swiss-born Cornelia Mueller, promoter of the Uncool Jazz Festival there, stayed with us for three days.

Marshall is an 82-year-old, pony-tailed saxman who plays Egyptian model forms and Indian ragas in clever jazz arrangements. Growing up as a kid, I recall him telling stories about how he and his band played "healing music" in Egypt in the Valley of the Kings. He told us that African-American musicians get more attention abroad than they do here.

His stories inspired me to become a foreign correspondent and report on culture and politics abroad as well as back here. My wife, Earlene Strayhorn-West, also has connections with the tradition of international jazz. Earlene's distant relative, Billy Strayhorn, was the composer of "Take the A Train," made famous by Duke Ellington. Marshall mentioned that he met Billy in Paris. Marshall has played in France every decade since his days in the U.S. Army Band during World War II. He takes pride in the fact that in the late '40s, he and Charlie Parker and other African-American jazz greats introduced bebop to Europeans.

On this visit, he introduced improvisational jazz to our teen twin sons, Amman, who plays drums and piano, and Jordan, who sings at Brooks Middle School. He showed the boys how to compose songs on the piano.

"By humming melodies and harmonies all the time, he taught me new ways of hearing songs," Jordan said.

Aside from our immediate family reunion, Marshall also reconnected with his 61-year-old son, Rodney Sr., and his grandson, Rodney Jr., 38, whom he had never met. It happened at Philander's Restaurant during a jazz concert where Marshall played alto sax with the John Wright Trio.

"I'd like to introduce my old friend Marshall Allen, who leads the Sun Ra Arkestra, who is here with his piano-playing son, Rodney Sr. and grandson, Rodney Jr.," Wright told a crowded room that included Bette Wilson, former director of District 97's multicultural ed department.

"Your Uncle Marshall is a charming man with a rich history," she noted.

Wright added, "To play before your son, grandson and other relatives is a real blessing. Let's give Marshall Allen a hearty Oak Park welcome."

With that, Marshall started to blow an original up-tempo composition he called, "Song Searching for a Name."

Wright played piano, Buggs Cochran played drums, and Nick Tountas played bass. The next song, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," showcased Marshall's whole repertoire of lilting melodies and screeching upper-register harmonics. He received a standing ovation. "We're the last men standing," Wright said, referring to a now-dwindled group of Chicago jazz players who reinvented the art form. Wright mentioned the Sun Ra exhibit at the Hyde Park Art Center. The next day, Marshall, Cornelia and my sons visited it. The three-room exhibit was filled with Sun Ra albums, video projections, and celestial jazz sounds.

The following day, Marshall was honored by the Ernest Dawkins Band at Chicago's Red Velvet Lounge. "I picked up a sax because of how inspired I was by him as a kid. This composition is dedicated to the great Marshall Allen," Dawkins told the packed crowd before launching a 30-minute free jazz romp. Red Velvet Lounge owner Fred Anderson once played with the Sun Ra Arkestra. "We're titans," he said.

Marshall's visit reminded me of our creative similarities. We all use art to help record and express our impressions of the world in which we live. Family reunions are a reminder that all families have a unique place in local and international history.

That's our Black History Month story.

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