Presentation: The ‘Land of Funk’ Mural

By Morris T. Howard, Lead Artist

These are my notes from my presentation on September 13, 2018, at the University Of Dayton. The presentation is based on the completion of “The Land of Funk” mural on Stone Street in downtown Dayton. The mural honors bands of the funk era that are from Dayton, e.g., the Ohio Players, Heatwave, Lakeside, Slave, Faze-O, Sun, and Zapp featuring Roger Troutman. I realized the need for recognition of these groups after relocating back to Dayton in April 2015. My mother had taken ill, and this was the reason I initially came back. I was driving one day and stopped at the light at the intersection of Salem and Catalpa, when I noticed a mural on the side of the old Troutman studios building. It appeared to be unfinished. I became curious as to whether there were any other murals around Dayton that honored or recognized the other funk groups from the area, and I found none. As a visual artist and lover of the music, this did not sit well with me, and ideas for a mural started taking shape.

With ideas now forming in my head, I went back to my youth and the times when funk music was all over the airwaves. The 1970s were “the best of times” musically here in Dayton, and I was so proud of my city. I first heard of the Ohio Players when I was about eleven or twelve years old. A classmate of mine, Ralph Middlebrook, is the son of the late Ohio Players trumpet player Ralph “Pee Wee” Middlebrook. The first song that I really liked by them was “Pain,” a jazzy, soulful, up-tempo funk ballad that I still enjoy listening to this very day. Later the other groups would come, and “the rest as we say, is history.”

When I served in the Navy and met people from other parts of the country, there always was confusion about exactly where these groups were from. Hardly anyone knew that these groups were from Dayton. So it was a surprise most of the time when I informed them that they were from my hometown of Dayton, Ohio. I got more than my share of glee from all of this. I had no idea at the time, however, that these instances would be a factor in creating and producing a mural in those musicians’ honor all these years later.

In 2017, I started putting my ideas on paper with drawings. I applied for an Individual Artists Grant from Culture Works and was selected as a grantee for 2017-18. This was of course a great honor; however, it was only the beginning of what seemed like a monumental task. I reached out in November 2017 to Brittini Long, Community Engagement Coordinator for Montgomery County Juvenile Court. She agreed to partner with me through her HAALO program (Helping Adolescents Achieve Long-term Objectives), and together with the help of 28 young people from that program, a few artists, and volunteers, we completed what is now known as the “Land Of Funk” mural. Faze-O founding member Keith Harrison was also instrumental as a consultant and liaison to the funk groups. Keith also proposed at the mural dedication on September 10, 2018, that Stone Street be renamed “Land Of Funk Way.” Hopefully this will become a reality in the near future.