

The Music They Played on 7th Street OAKLAND WALK OF FAME

By **Ronnie K. Stewart, Executive Director, West Coast Blues Society**

The Music They Played on 7th Street Oakland Walk of Fame pays tribute to the great musicians, club owners, record companies and related independent businesses that put 7th Street in Oakland, CA, on the map as a top entertainment destination.

Over the years, a plethora of top performers – some already established and some just starting their careers – graced the famed entertainment district. Such performers included Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, Sugar Pie DeSanto, B.B. King, Nat King Cole, Louis Jordan, Etta James, Ike and Tina Turner, Sammy Davis, Jr., Big Mama Thornton, Lowell Fulson and many more.

The Flynn Saloon opened in 1886 and was the first social place on 7th Street (then called Railroad Ave.). However, it wasn't until 1918, with the opening of Sid Deering's Creole Café – a famous venue of New Orleans-style jazz and big band dance – that 7th Street began to gain notoriety.



Lenny Williams, soul crooner and Oakland native, was one of 85 artists honored with a plaque Photo by Bob White/ CRWV Photography



Gathered for the Walk of Fame's unveiling in March 2015, (l to r) "Terrible" Tom Bowden, vocalist and unofficial Mayor of West Oakland; Pastor Gregory Brown, of Oakland's Miracles of Faith Community Church; Ronnie K. Stewart, Executive Director of the West Coast Blues Society; City Councilwoman Lynette Gibson McElhaney; Mayor Libby Schaaf; and Henry Delton Williams, celebrity clothing designer and community activist. Photo by Bob White/ CRWV Photography

Special recognition must also be given to club owners Harold "Slim" Jenkins and Esther Mabry. Jenkins opened Slim Jenkins Supper Club on the day Prohibition ended in 1933, and the club quickly became the place to "see and be seen." Operated by Esther and William Mabry, the landmark Esther's Orbit Room operated for over 40 years, the longest running club on 7th Street. Esther, the grand dame of 7th Street, was able to continue the club's operation by evolving her soul food breakfast club into a popular cocktail bar and restaurant showcasing live music. 7th Street was the entertainment and social center for the local African American community, and these two remarkable venues were the heart and soul of it.

7th Street shined into the 1970s, affectionately referred to as "The Harlem of the West Coast," where world-class entertainers performed nightly in its lively clubs, bars and dance halls that lined the thoroughfare. Established and upcoming artists flocked to 7th Street because its clubs and businesses offered good pay and steady work. The style of music varied from blues, R&B, gospel and jazz to supper club music.

Time passed and urban renewal destroyed the entire 7th Street corridor. As a testament to the history of one of the most important entertainment districts in the U.S., The Music They Played on 7th Street Oakland Walk of Fame unveiled its first installation in 2015. It currently consists of 88 bronze plaques dedicated to 7th Street legends and the organizations that were fundamental in implementing this project. Funding has already been secured for another 120 plaques that will be installed at the site of the Slim Jenkins Supper Club. Come visit the Walk of Fame and pay homage to those who created, produced, presented and played America's indigenous musical art forms. 🎵

Oakland, CA, native Ronnie K. Stewart – guitarist turned historian, music teacher and blues community activist – founded the Bay Area Blues Society and the West Coast Blues Society, the latter of which he serves as the executive director. Stewart produces three major festivals that have been held annually for 17 years, as well as the West Coast Blues Hall of Fame & Award Show.