

## Parker, Maceo: These Kids are Fantastic <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Maceo Parker: These Kids are Fantastic

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 6/13/2004. Copyrighted.  
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Saxophonist Maceo Parker was 21 years old when soul singer James Brown discovered him in 1964. Straight out of Kinston, a small town in Eastern North Carolina, Parker was a trailblazing figure in the birth of funk, the riveting dance music created out of jazz, blues and soul in the 1960s and '70s. He went on to become funk music's most celebrated saxophonist with Brown and then with George Clinton and Parliament/Funkadelic. Since 1990, he's traveled the world with his own, highly acclaimed funk orchestra and performed with singers ranging from Ani DiFranco to Prince. I caught up with him at his home in Kinston in between dates on Prince's "Musicology" tour.



Maceo Parker. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. To request permission for Maceo Parker to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I was born here in Kinston in 1943. I was named after my father. He had his own cleaners on South Queen Street. My mother's name is Novella, and I know she could have been Ella Fitzgerald singing. She could have done all that! I know that my father couldn't play a lick, but he was part of a gospel quartet and they would have rehearsals at our house because the piano was there. My eyes could barely get up to the keys. I'd sit and watch and watch. They'd get up, and I'd sit there. As we got a little bit older, my father lost the cleaners somehow. My mother was working as a seamstress at one of the clothing stores downtown, and she took on a second job doing janitorial stuff. We had moved from the old neighborhood. They had ways of making it work somehow, and music had a big part to do with that. In other words, if my mother is fixing oatmeal and singing or whistling a tune, then we're happy because she's happy. The fact that we're having oatmeal is that's the way it was growing up in my family. It seemed like every day, every night, was fun. It was because we had each other. There were four boys, and we were tight. We did everything together. And the music end of it kept us lifted up. I still remember my first parade. I was 6, 7 probably. When I heard all this noise, I mean, it was one of the most exciting things I ever heard in my life. You know, it's like, you've got this many people playing all these instruments, and all these. I remember asking ma, where's the piano? No piano. Piano isn't a marching band instrument, she told me. So if I can't do piano, maybe I can play one of those things like that. What's that? And she said, that's a saxophone. Cool. And that's how my mother's brother had a band and often we'd go to their rehearsals. It was dance music: rock and roll, jazz, blues, boogie woogie -- a mixture of all that stuff. So I got a brother that plays trombone, a brother that plays drums, a cousin who played. My uncle's band was called the Blue Notes -- Bobby Butler Mighty Blue Notes. We called ourselves the Junior Blue Notes. They would do: bop bop, bop ba doo, ba bop bop ba doo. We'd try to imitate them. I mean, all the time. Just practice. When we got to the point where my uncle would take us to the nightclubs. I was in fifth grade so that had to be '53, '54. He'd put us in the dressing room. They'd start playing around 9 o'clock, take that break around 10:30, then he'd take us out of there. We also did small gigs, school dances and little programs on Sunday like for the PTA. Then, before we graduated from high school, we were old enough to play some of these nightclubs where my uncle used to play. Melvin and I also got this. We used to play a lot of segregated places. Different clubs and frats used to hire us, and for the money we'd go. I'm talking '59, '60, '61, and nothing is integrated then. There was a place like that we played every Saturday night in Faison. The reason because it was three of us, three brothers, it was almost like getting paid three times, even if it was \$20 and \$20 and \$20. If you did a Friday gig, a Saturday gig and a Sunday gig, it starts not to be bad for one household. We'd take that money. In high school my band director happened to be a saxophone player. His name was James Banks, and he was a professional. I spent all my lunch periods with him. I'd run down and get my food and right to the band room. He would sit down. You could hear people play on tape or record, but somehow that wasn't close enough. You know what I'm saying? But now I got this guy, at a professional level, this close? And he was just like, man, these kids are fantastic. He could have just. We played things we heard on the radio or the jukebox, or black music like the Temptations. We were interested in whatever made the people dance. I like to see the people being part of it and having fun. If you're doing something like -- Oon

Maceo Parker, Official Web Site: <http://maceoparker.com/> <sup>[4]</sup> (Accessed 3/2/2016).

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