

Shelby, North Carolina is a town in Cleveland County North Carolina, with a little over 20,000 residents. Don't be fooled by its size though; Shelby, a designated Main Street Town, is a vibrant and bustling place with much to offer. It's perhaps most famous as being the hometown of Earl Scruggs, originator of the three-fingered banjo picking style that many say defined bluegrass and influenced pickers across the board, including Bela Fleck, Tony Trischka, and Steve Martin.

As if Scruggs wasn't enough, Shelby is also home to Don Gibson, country music giant. The Gibson theatre in Uptown Shelby is named after him and he wrote such country standards as "I Can't Stop Loving You," and "Oh, Lonesome Me."

Shelby is home to other trailblazers as well, whose names may not be as well known. David Lee, a black songwriter, performer, producer, and manager worked behind the scenes and on stages throughout the state and country, and his career spanned nearly three decades. The sounds coming from his Washington Sound Record Store and Recording Studio were driven by a genre-busting appetite for a wide array of artists and their products. Lee's broad taste for music wasn't reflected by societal restrictions of his early career. He was inspired by country music and singers like Charley Pride but for a black person in the mid-sixties, that was difficult territory to enter. Despite this, he produced a body of work whose greatest strength, some might argue, is its broad appeal, born of its mission of inclusion. His work is highlighted by the Paradise of Souls record label.

Aftan: Hello

Karl: Hi, Aftan how are you doing?

Aftan: Hi, I'm well, thank you.

Karl: Today I'm speaking with Aftan Smith, also know as AftanCi. She was born and bred in Cleveland county and began singing at three, and performing at 9. Her musical mission comes from her family, and she has continued in her own right, pushing the musical envelope in shelby and building community along the way.

Aftan: My name is Aftan Smith, I am a singer, a artist, I'm also a band leader, ACE Party band out of Shelby, North Carolina. I own, operate ACM Music Studios, which is also located in Shelby North Carolina. I also sing with various other bands and a gospel group entitled the Keys of Harmony Gospel Singers.

Karl: Well, thank you, we're excited to have you. I want to talk about your musical pursuits and I want to also talk a little more broadly about Cleveland County, and Shelby. Do you have any memories growing up that you'd like to share with us?

Aftan: Um, well first and foremost I began singing with my family's gospel group, the Keys of Harmony Gospel singers. I started singing when I was three and actually joined the group when I was nine so my most fond memories are when the Keys of Harmony would sing at the fairgrounds, at the Christmas parade walking down Lafayette street. And just local places around the community that we would do. The Keys of Harmony is a gospel group and our motto is singing in the key of God so just going around and being able to share the good news of god through song has been one of my most memorable moments as a child. Like I said, the fair, all the people, relay for life, that was great. And so those types of things have been an amazing opportunity for me.

Karl: That's wonderful. So you said that's a family-based group, correct?

Aftan: It is. So the group is comprised of my mom Patty, she is the leader of the group. And also her sister Dolores, they founded the group together. And also my other aunt, she's also their sister. Her name is Sharon. And myself. So my mom, her two sisters and me. So we're all family.

Karl: That's amazing. And that's the kind of music that really got you inspired in your own pursuits, correct? Are there any other influences for you, local or otherwise, that were formative for you in your music career?

Aftan: In addition to that my father is a pastor, Reverend Gary Smith, at the AME Church all of my life so um, he's always pastored in South Carolina. And like I said I started singing when I

was 3, so he and my mom made me sing in church, psalms and things like that. So I was 9 when I joined the group. And that really is what gave me the foundation. I would not be where I am today without my parents pushing me and urging me to sing as unto the lord. And then I learned what the radio was, right? And started listening to 97.9 as a student at Shelby middle school. So then I heard Pop and R&B, and Soul and all of those elements shaped my vocal styling of today.

Karl: And how would you describe your vocal styling?

Aftan: My voice is a fusion of so many different genres. There's always gonna be that christian and that gospel piece, that little gospel twang. But also the jazzy sort of riffs and whines. But you got the soul singer in there too. You got a little bit of country because we're from Cleveland County and we're naturally country. And so you also have the pop and the modern as well. I'm a fusion of so many different pieces. It's really amazing when I think about it.

Karl: It is amazing, I've been listening to some of your music and really enjoying it so I have to thank you for that.

Aftan: Well thank you.

Karl: Can you talk a little bit about how your sound fits into the Shelby music scene today and maybe a little bit about the importance of small-town music scenes and how to support them and how we can make them bigger and broader?

Aftan: Well, Shelby is know for Earl Scruggs and some of the singers of that caliber, but there is a segment of us who are a little bit different. We've taken some of his music and sound and created our own. And so that has created a little sub-category if you will, for those of us who are a little bit more creative and modern in terms of pop and jazz and soul. And so I am the owner and operator of Ace Party Band and we are a top 40s variety band. And so because of what earl and all the others did before me I'm able to work in a different arena that doesn't really step on too many toes and it allows me to do things that other people aren't doing and so when it comes time for the younger crowd to come in and the more modern crowd to come in and appreciate the

sound of a new era if you will, me and my band are able to fill that space. And so that's a beautiful thing and I'm very grateful for that.

Karl: What are some of the creative projects that you are working on at the moment or that are exciting for you? And as you build that community where do you see Cleveland county and Shelby going in the future, where would you like to see it go?

Aftan: I would like to see it become more broad and open to other styles and genres of music. It would be great to have a jazz scene at alive after 5 and just different sorts of music. And the guys at uptown have been doing a wonderful job. You know, covid kind of shut us down this year but unfortunately, you know for us working musicians, we haven't been able to do too much this year. Ace, we've been able to do a couple virtual festivals, we did the Cheerwine festival virtually and things of that nature but as far as traveling things have been a little challenging for us, however, things have been starting to pick back up so we're excited about that. And, to your previous question, I have a few christian artists, a few gospel, some neo-soul type artists. I'm also working with some guys who do Christian rap as well as regular rap. And I'm also working with someone who is working on a folk style album and I'm excited about that. So I'm just working with different artists around the community and abroad, who want to come to a place, you know Shelby is the city of pleasant living, so artists want to come to a place that is pleasant, where they can kind of clear their head and be as calm as possible. And I don't want to give out too much information but I'm very excited about those projects as well as what I'm doing with the band and what I'm doing as an independent artist.

Karl: Of course, yeah it seems like Shelby offers an experience that is more pleasant and laid-back and approachable. Would you say that's the case and how does that yield different results than a larger music recording situation?

Aftan: So energy is really, really important. And I can say that as an artist I've always found it more comforting to be able to go and record in a studio that is more calm. You know not all the hustle and bustle and busy, busy, busy, but just calm place to be able to get all the ideas that are

in my head out. And I find there are artists that come from Charlotte and beyond to record here in Shelby and there are thousands of recording studios in Charlotte. So it's just amazing that I'm able to offer this service to others.

Karl: No I think that's really incredible and I think it speaks to the strength of the music community in Shelby. You were talking a little bit about what you'd like to see change? Or how you would like to see it expand in terms of a main street community energy? Where do you see Shelby today and what are you enjoying about it?

Aftan: I think I'm enjoying the fact that the guys at the uptown association are reaching out to the community and asking them what they would like to see. So I really appreciate that and like I was saying before if we could have more top 40 bands, more jazz bands, more than just country music. Because there are several of us who do more than just country. And I'm not taking anything away from country because I love it. But we have more to offer than Earl Scruggs. Down to gospel and christian music. If we could do more things, main stage center stage, things like that, I think that would be amazing. I'm excited about it all, I'm grateful to God of the universe, the city for supporting me, my band, for supporting everything I do, to you for allowing me to speak on your platform, I'm just grateful to see where we're all going, in all of these small little towns across North Carolina.

Aftan: Welcome to Shelby, the city of pleasant living, if you're coming through Shelby, that you'll please stop at all the places uptown, all the shops and local music, we have dragonfly indigo, we have the wine shop that offers live music, please please be on the lookout for the shelly alive calendar and my band is Ace party band and it's just gonna be a wonderful wonderful time. We'd love to see your face, take a picture, take a selfie, and post it on social media. But welcome to the city, I hope to see you all, one day.

Karl: Thanks for stopping by. Join us down the road to learn where your path might cross, with North Carolina's Main Streets.