

HARLEM 1958 → LEXINGTON 2026

Be Part of Our Historic Moment!

A GREAT DAY *in* LEXINGTON!

A GATHERING OF LEXINGTON'S
MUSICIANS, ARTISTS, CULTURAL WORKERS & DREAMERS
JAZZ • HISTORY • HOMEGOING • COMMUNITY

**MICHAEL
CRUSE**

Comes Home

LEXINGTON NATIVE • INTERNATIONAL JAZZ ARTIST
TRUMPETER • VOCALIST • COMPOSER • EDUCATOR

ONE COMMUNITY. MANY GENERATIONS. ONE HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH.

Join us for a once-in-a-lifetime community portrait
with artists, musicians, cultural leaders, elders,
students, friends, and our Mayor!

SATURDAY, AUGUST 29, 2026

5:30 PM ARRIVAL & GATHERING
6:00 PM "A GREAT DAY IN LEXINGTON"
COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPH
& HOMECOMING CEREMONY
6:05 PM MAYOR LINDA GORTON
PROCLAMATION
6:15 PM SPECIAL RECOGNITIONS
6:30 PM MICHAEL CRUSE HOMECOMING CONCERT
THROUGH APPROXIMATELY 8:30 PM

Honoring
ISAAC & LUCY MURPHY
AND GENERATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
HORSEMEN, WOMEN AND COMMUNITIES

COME BE PART OF THE PICTURE.
COME BE PART OF OUR HISTORY.



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A Great Day in Lexington: Louis Armstrong, Michael Cruse, and the Appalachian Journey of Black Music

By Jim Embry



Figure 1 Louis Armstrong in Lexington.

On December 4, 1961, Louis Armstrong sat in the doorway of his tour bus parked outside Lexington's Phoenix Hotel.¹

He was one of the most recognizable human beings on Earth. He had transformed American music, playing before kings, presidents, and vast international audiences. Just the year before, more than 6,000 people had crowded into the University of Kentucky's Memorial Coliseum to hear Satchmo and his All-Stars.²

But outside the Phoenix Hotel that crisp December evening, Armstrong confronted another America.

Members of Lexington's chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were picketing the segregated hotel. Documenting the demonstration was a young Black Lexington photographer named Calvert McCann.

e and initially refused to cross it.

He knew this contradiction intimately. Armstrong once recalled traveling with thousands of dollars in his pocket yet being unable to find a restaurant that would serve him or a hotel that would give him a room. His money wasn't good enough. His Black body could not enter the spaces his trumpet could.³

¹ David T. Miller, "Armstrong," *UnderMain*, accessed August 14, 2026, undermainarts.org. His article provides an account of Louis Armstrong's 1960 and 1961 Lexington appearances and the December 4, 1961 CORE protest at the Phoenix Hotel.

² Ibid. Miller reports that more than 6,000 people attended Armstrong and the All-Stars' February 1960 performance at the University of Kentucky's Memorial Coliseum.

³ Ibid. Louis Armstrong, quoted in Miller, "Armstrong": "\$2000 in my pocket and nowhere to eat.... Lots of times we couldn't get a place to sleep.... We couldn't get into hotels. Our money wasn't even good."

That image—Louis Armstrong sitting in a bus doorway in Lexington while Black citizens challenged Jim Crow—has stayed with me as we prepare for another Black trumpeter to arrive on another Lexington stage.

His name is Michael Cruse. And Louis Armstrong travels with him. From New Orleans into the Appalachian Movement

Louis Armstrong was born in New Orleans in 1901, but his music belongs to the broader geography of Black freedom and movement. Jazz moved because Black people moved. It traveled aboard passenger trains and tour buses, through migration corridors and industrial river towns, into theaters, dance halls, churches, auditoriums, campus centers, and community spaces.

And crucially, it traveled through Appalachia.

Armstrong's touring schedule was legendary and exhausting. Like so many Black artists of his era, he moved through a region where audiences might wildly applaud him inside a venue at night, while the racial order outside denied him a meal, a hotel room, or basic human dignity.

That contradiction was not unique to the Deep South; it existed throughout the borderlands and the Appalachian South.



In February 1957, Armstrong performed at Chilhowee Park in Knoxville, Tennessee, when a stick of dynamite exploded outside the venue.⁴ Accounts from that night describe Armstrong calmly continuing his set amid the disruption, telling the crowd it was just the acoustics. He frequently traveled through the Ohio River and Appalachian corridors, making stops in mountain towns like Huntington, West Virginia, as well as the regional cultural anchor of Pittsburgh.⁵ Early in his career, Armstrong spent lots of time playing on the riverboats on the Mississippi to the Ohio... from New Orleans to Pittsburgh and all in between.

These itineraries remind us of something essential: Appalachia has never been culturally isolated.

Black musicians moved through these mountains. Black railroad workers laid these tracks. Black miners, factory workers, farmers, teachers, preachers, and families built lives within these valleys. Black music moved along these exact same pathways.

The story of jazz is, therefore, inextricably part of the story of Appalachia.

Snowstorms, Segregation, and the Camera Lens

On February 19, 1960, a year before the Phoenix Hotel protest, Armstrong and his All-Stars were scheduled to play Memorial Coliseum. A severe snowstorm had paralyzed the region. Armstrong's bus, traveling west from Washington, D.C., became trapped behind a wreck in the West Virginia mountains, struggling through the snow until state police escorted the musicians toward Lexington.

⁴ "Chilhowee Park, Dynamite and Louis Armstrong," *Knox TN Today*, October 10, 2023, <https://www.knoxtnoday.com/chilhowee-park-dynamite-and-louis-armstrong/>.

⁵ Documentation of Armstrong's extensive touring itinerary and appearances throughout the Appalachian/Ohio Valley region. William Howland Kenney, "Groovin' on the River: Louis Armstrong and Riverboat Culture," excerpt from *Jazz on the River* (University of Chicago Press), accessed August 14, 2026.

More than 6,000 people waited patiently inside the arena. Armstrong arrived 90 minutes late. Without changing, the musicians walked straight onto the stage in their street clothes and played their hearts out for two hours.

Imagine that journey: The bus. The blinding snow. The winding mountain roads of West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky. The sheer exhaustion. The constant shadow of segregation. And then, stepping onto the stage to give the audience everything he had.

Yet, that audience was overwhelmingly white—another peculiar American contradiction. Black music was central to American culture, while Black human beings remained excluded from basic public life.

When Armstrong returned to Lexington in December 1961 and encountered the CORE picket line outside the Phoenix Hotel, history was waiting.⁶



Armstrong initially refused to cross. He had already publicly condemned President Dwight Eisenhower and Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus during the 1957 Little Rock integration crisis. He had spent decades navigating Jim Crow. He knew what was at stake.

Eventually, after receiving assurances from the organizers and reaching an

Figure 2 CORE members protesting at the Phoenix Hotel

understanding with the protesters, Armstrong entered and performed. But he made it clear: he would not return while the hotel's discriminatory policies remained.⁷

Standing on the sidewalk that night was Calvert McCann, capturing the movement through his lens. McCann documented Lexington's civil rights movement when the city's major white newspapers turned a blind eye.

⁶ Miller, "Armstrong"; see also historical documentation of the Lexington chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality.

⁷ Miller, "Armstrong," drawing in part upon contemporary accounts and Calvert McCann's photographic documentation of Armstrong's arrival at the Phoenix Hotel during the CORE protest

That matters immensely. Who holds the camera determines what future generations can see. Who keeps the records determines what future generations can remember.

And Calvert McCann's brother happened to be Les McCann. Suddenly, another cultural circle begins to close.

For Calvert McCann:

Calvert McCann had his camera.

McCann documented Lexington's civil rights struggle when the city's major white newspapers frequently did not. His photographs became an important visual record of a movement that Lexington's daily newspapers had largely failed to document.



Figure 3 Calvert McCann

Calvert McCann's photographs of Lexington's civil rights movement are preserved as an important visual record of local demonstrations and have been exhibited and discussed by Lexington historians.

Then the extraordinary *Herald-Leader* connection:

More than four decades later, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* formally apologized for its predecessors' failure to adequately cover Lexington's civil rights movement, acknowledging that the omission had damaged the historical record.⁸

Lineage and the Great Remembering

⁸ *Lexington Herald-Leader*, July 4, 2004, formal apology concerning its predecessors' failure to adequately cover Lexington's civil rights movement. The newspaper acknowledged that the lack of coverage "hurt the civil rights movement at the time, irreparably damaged the historical record and caused the newspapers' readers to miss out on one of the most important stories of the 20th century." https://www.democracynow.org/2004/7/7/whiteout_me_a_culpa_kentucky_paper_apologizes. <https://www.historynewsnetwork.org/article/a-newspaper-that-missed-the-civil-rights-movement>.

Les McCann was born in Lexington and grew into one of America's most influential soul-jazz pianists and vocalists. Though his career carried him around the globe, Lexington remained in his musical DNA. Decades after Calvert photographed Armstrong confronting segregation, another young Lexington musician would enter the McCann orbit: Michael Cruse.

We have a photograph of a young Michael standing outside Lexington's historic Lyric Theatre before performing alongside Les McCann.



Figure 4 Michael Cruse in front of the Lyric Theatre

Think about that lineage:

Calvert McCann
photographs Louis
Armstrong.

Les McCann becomes an
international jazz icon.

Michael Cruse performs
with Les.

Michael develops his own
powerful interpretations of
Armstrong.

These are not straight, clinical lines on a family tree—culture rarely works that neatly. They are living relationships, intersections, and encounters. What I call the Great Remembering.

Michael Cruse did not simply appear one morning holding a trumpet. A village helped create the conditions for his growth.

His great-uncle, Charles “Mr. Q” Quillings, was a beloved Lexington music educator who shaped generations of young talent, including Les McCann. Then there was my dear friend Chester Grundy, whose extraordinary cultural work at the University of Kentucky brought world-class Black artists to town, opening doors for local youth.

There is another photograph of Michael at around twelve years old, standing beside Wynton Marsalis. Someone brought Wynton to Lexington. Someone created the program. Someone made sure a young Black child was in the room to catch that spark. Years later, Michael would carry his trumpet into the global jazz scene and become an educator himself, including work with Jazz at Lincoln Center.

The child who encountered greatness became the adult capable of inspiring the next generation. That is how culture regenerates.

Deep Roots: From Scott County Horses to the Art Garden

When Michael returns to Lexington on August 29, his homecoming extends beyond jazz.

On his mother's side, he descends from the Raglin family of Scott County—a Black family deeply woven into Central Kentucky's equine history. Members of the Raglin family were highly respected farriers and horsemen. In 2022, our organization, Phoenix Rising Lexington, honored the Raglin family during a program celebrating the legacy of Black farriers.



Figure 5 Duane Raglin with his plaque carved by Lavon Williams

Michael's grandfather, the late Rev. Floyd Bradley Raglin, carried another vital tradition: he was a minister who sang gospel alongside his brothers as the Raglin Brothers.

Listen to those interconnected threads: Horses. Church. Gospel. Jazz.

Michael is not coming home to a single isolated history; he is coming home to a tapestry of traditions that were never truly separate.

That is why the setting for his August 29 concert is so profound. The Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden sits in Lexington's historic East End—a space whose name, concept, and vision I helped conceive starting in 2006. We deliberately named it an Art Garden, not just a park.⁹

Isaac Burns Murphy was one of the greatest jockeys in international racing history. But Murphy did not create Kentucky's Black equine legacy alone. Around him stood grooms, trainers, farriers, stable workers, artisans, and families whose collective brilliance built the Thoroughbred industry. Beside Isaac stood his wife, Lucy Murphy. Their home was a vibrant social hub where community gathered for meals, celebrations, and music.¹⁰

⁹ Jim Embry, "Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden Concept Paper," Sustainable Communities Network, October 9, 2006, <http://sustainlex.org/IMMAGConceptpaper.pdf>.

¹⁰ "Keeneland Magazine Summer 2021 Issue," *Keeneland Magazine*, May 29, 2021, 108-116, https://issuu.com/keeneland/docs/keeneland_magazine_summer/108?e=115&o=1.

So when Michael Cruse raises his trumpet on this ground, he is not introducing music to a quiet landscape. He is adding another layer of sound to a space already vibrating with ancestral memory.

Harlem 1958, Lexington 2026

To kick off Michael's homecoming on August 29, we are framing the gathering around a powerful act of collective memory.

In 1958, photographer Art Kane assembled 57 legendary jazz musicians on a doorstep



in Harlem for what became one of the most iconic images in American history: "A Great Day in Harlem."¹¹

We are borrowing that spirit to capture A Great Day in Lexington.

At 6:00 p.m., musicians, artists, cultural workers, horsemen and women, neighborhood elders, children, elected officials, and community builders will gather at the Isaac Murphy Memorial

Figure 6 Jazz artists assembled for Art Kane's photo.

Civic recognitions will follow—including an official proclamation from Lexington Mayor Linda Gorton, legislative honors from State Senator Reginald Thomas and Representative George Brown, and historic displays from the Keeneland Library's Heart of the Turf: Racing's Black Pioneers exhibition.

Then the official speeches will end, the crowd will settle into their seats, and Michael will raise his trumpet.

The Categories Came Later

¹¹ Art Kane's 1958 photograph, commonly known as *A Great Day in Harlem*, assembled 57 jazz musicians on East 126th Street in Harlem and subsequently became one of the iconic group portraits in American jazz history. "A Great Day in Harlem: behind Art Kane's classic 1958 jazz photograph," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2018, The Guardian Gallery.

[1, 2] <https://www.theguardian.com/music/gallery/2018/dec/17/a-great-day-in-harlem-behind-art-kane's-classic-1958-jazz-photograph>

¹² Michael Phillips, "The Legacy of Black Horsemen Races Towards the Future in East Lexington," [Kentucky to the World](#), April 28, 2021

We have a habit in modern society of siloing history into neat boxes: Black history, Appalachian history, Horse history, Jazz history, Civil Rights history.

But our ancestors did not live in silos.

The same neighborhoods produced horsemen and horn players, preachers and painters, farmers and educators, activists and entrepreneurs. People worked, worshipped, protested, made art, raised children, and buried their elders together.

The categories came later. The lives came first.

That is what Michael's homecoming helps us remember:

Louis Armstrong's tour bus plowing through West Virginia snow toward Lexington.

CORE members standing resolute outside the Phoenix Hotel.

Calvert McCann raising his camera.

Les McCann carrying Lexington's sound to the world.

Chester Grundy opening doors for local youth.

A young Michael Cruse standing beside Wynton Marsalis.

The Raglin family shoeing horses and singing gospel.

Isaac and Lucy Murphy hosting neighbors on East Third Street.

And Michael Cruse returning home with his horn.



Figure 7 Michael Cruse

These are not isolated fragments. They are part of a unified cultural ecology.

Somewhere in the crowd on August 29—whether from Lexington, Knoxville, Huntington, Charleston, Louisville, Pittsburgh, or Berea—there will be a child who has not yet discovered their gift. Perhaps it is a trumpet, a

camera, a pen, a farrier's hammer, or a paintbrush.

It is our collective responsibility to create the spaces where those gifts can ignite. Michael stood beside Wynton because adults built that bridge. On August 29, another young child will stand beside Michael.

Someone make sure to take that photograph. Fifty years from now, someone will look at it and say: Look who was standing there before the world knew their name.

That is the work of remembering. That is the work of community. That is how culture travels—from New Orleans through Appalachia, from Armstrong to McCann, from elders to children, from memory toward possibility, and from home back out into the world.

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Jim Embry is a Kentucky-based agrarian intellectual activist, cultural organizer, storyteller, and co-founder of the Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden. He serves as master of ceremonies for Michael Cruse's homecoming celebration in Lexington.
