

FINE LIVING IN SARATOGA AND BEYOND

Spirit of
saratoga

SEPTEMBER 2008

**GARLAND
NELSON**
Music from
the soul

**Philly Duke's
Collectible Camels**

**Go Wild with
Western Wear**

**Contemporary
Cottage with
Old-World Charm**

Music from the SOUL

*Garland Nelson
discovers his true self
in front of Saratoga
audiences*

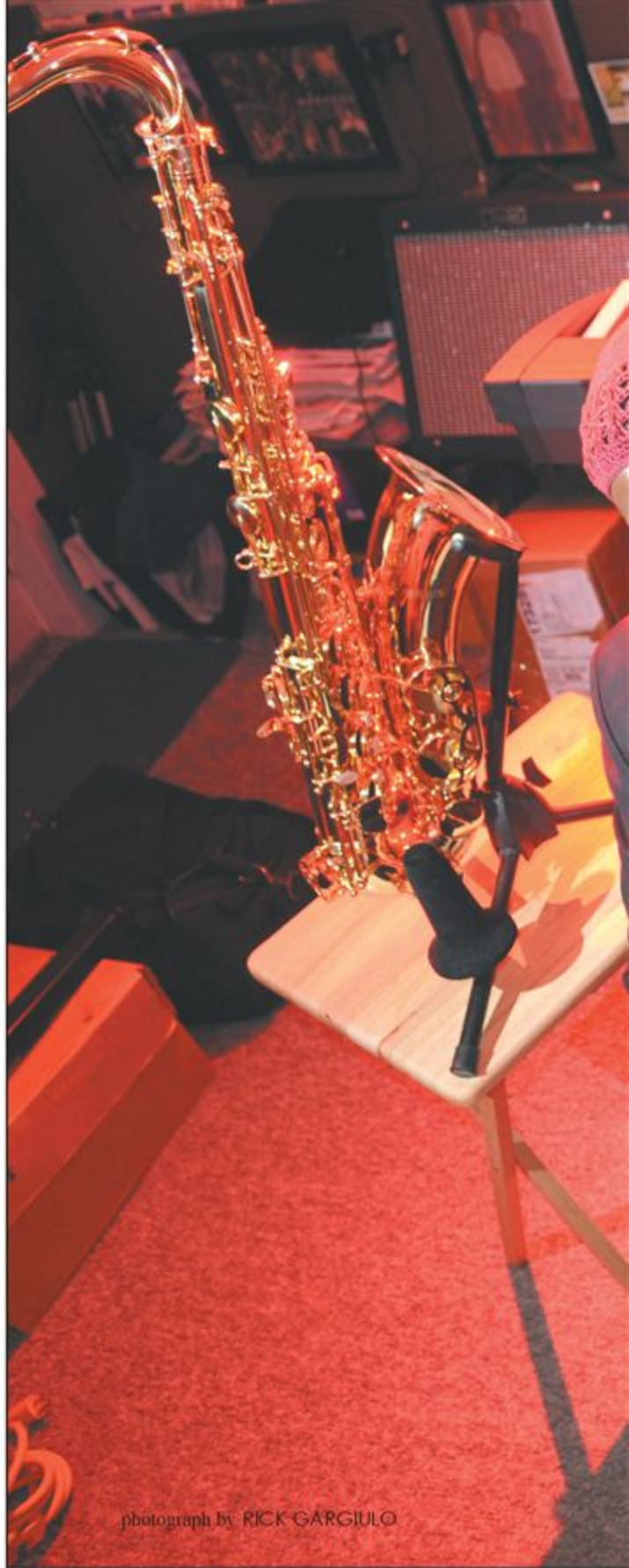
story by IAN PICKUS

The music emanates from all parts of Garland Nelson, one of Saratoga Springs' ubiquitous entertainers of the past decade. He dances. He shouts. He smiles. He sways. He whispers. He belts it out. One second he's clapping, the next he's pounding on bongos. He all but forces the crowd to get involved.

Over the years, it has become impossible to miss the driving rhythms of Nelson's drums carrying into the street or his emotive voice entwined in a call-and-response with the audience.

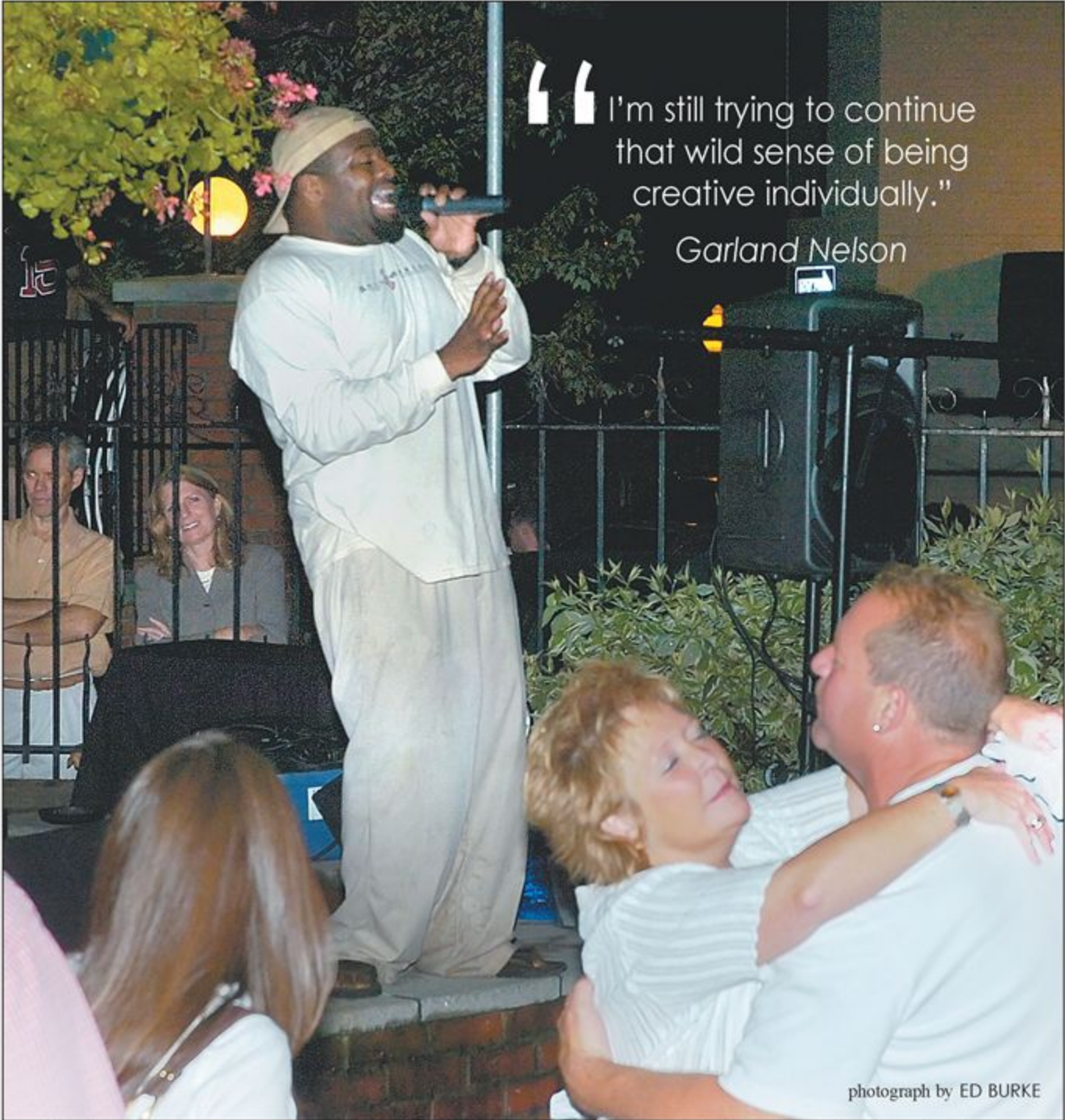
With a different gig at a different club by night, Nelson seems to be everywhere in Saratoga County, and now he's taking his act elsewhere in the Capital Region and beyond.

And to think, this is a man who was once in line for a career in government — what would have been a love but never a passion, Nelson said. Yet music was merely a hobby for years, mostly kept behind closed doors. Nelson, a Brooklyn native, once was afraid to share his voice in his adopted city of Saratoga Springs, which hadn't yet become his true home. ►



photograph by RICK GARGIULO



A photograph of Garland Nelson performing at night. He is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and white pants, and is holding a microphone. He is standing on a small stage or platform. In the foreground, a man and a woman are embracing each other, looking towards the performer. Other people are visible in the background, some sitting at tables. The scene is outdoors at night, with some foliage and a fence visible.

“ I’m still trying to continue that wild sense of being creative individually.”

Garland Nelson

photograph by ED BURKE

Garland Nelson performs with Soul Session this summer at Gaffney’s in downtown Saratoga Springs.

Aside from some open-mic shows, performing stayed mainly on the sideline after college, while Nelson tried to decide where to take his life. It turned out the answer was right in front of him: singing and playing music.

One night, Nelson stared himself down in the mirror, forcing himself to take his love of singing public.

Years later, he’s still working to perfect that art.

“I’m still trying to continue that wild sense of being creative individually,” Nelson said.

It seems unfathomable if you’ve ever had a conversation with Nelson — one no doubt interrupted by hugs from passersby — but he was once a shy kid

who absorbed the singing all around him in church.

Now he is the front man for Soul Session, the 10-piece fusion of jazz, reggae, R&B, blues and whatever other genre the band feels like incorporating into its improvisational concerts.

“This community has given me so much,” said Nelson, who became a



photograph by ERICA MILLER

Nelson performs with Flavor at Saratoga City Tavern in Saratoga Springs earlier this summer.

“born-again Saratogian” when he arrived at Skidmore College in 1992. “I try to respect it and give my all, because it helped me develop into a man who stands for what he believes in.”

Nelson created Soul Session — which also plays corporate gigs — after a stint as the lead singer of the New York Players, a wedding band. But he traces his musical coming-out to a night in 1999, when he got up his courage and, urged on by local singer Rick Bolton, agreed to sing three songs at an open-mic night at Bailey’s.

It was a major step for a man who, because of his color and cultural upbringing in Crown Heights, didn’t immediately feel comfortable in front of an audience of upstate, mostly white, strangers. He took a deep breath and sang three a cappella songs. To his surprise, acceptance was swift, especially from his fellow musicians.

“I was always kind of marching to the beat of my own drum,” said Nelson, who started a gospel group called Quiet Storm while at Skidmore.

“Especially being in this business, I just turned myself inside-out at all times. ... We’re all looking for blessings and trying to find the spirit, and I believe I’ve found that with my band members.”

Also in 1999, Nelson won a series of singing contests across the state and eventually represented New York in the championships, with a record deal on the line in Nashville. He didn’t win, but meeting and jamming with fellow musicians along the way, he was hooked.

“I wasn’t really singing to get praise or for everyone to like me,” he said of that time, when he was first creating an identity as a singer and songwriter. “I just had no choice — I just couldn’t shut up anymore.”

By 2005, Nelson left the New York Players and his job at Kinko’s. It was time to focus on music and music alone — music for its own sake.

Sink or swim.

“Baptism by fire,” he called that first year. “I just truly believed that if I just did it, like that night back at Bailey’s, something would happen. Now it’s 2008, and I think we’re moving in the right direction.”

Nelson also plays acoustically with guitarist Mike Steiner. Since his days with the New York Players, when he realized it was time to become a serious student of music, Nelson has learned to play piano, guitar, drums, percussion and bass. He is now tackling saxophone and trumpet.

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but I never wanted to be just a singer,” Nelson said. “Singers are never in control of their destiny. I wanted to make sure I got my game together.”

Popular locally, Nelson hopes to expand Soul Session’s name around the Northeast, with plans for a CD in the works. Playing mainly reinvented cover songs live, such as crowd favorite “Papa Was a Rolling Stone,” the band has a stock of original work that it breaks out when the timing is right.

The band played before thousands when it opened for “American Idol” winner Ruben Studdard last summer in Albany, which Nelson considers Soul Session’s arrival outside of Saratoga. Recently, the band has been hired to play in California and Pennsylvania.

At the same time, the business side of Soul Session works to promote other artists and book shows.

Nelson also performs with a second band, Flavor, a three-piece jazz and funk group.

No matter the venue, the crowd is always part of the show.

“We want to go out and really tap into the people — what they want, what they feel,” Nelson said. “You have to put it out there. People envy others who can just put it out there.”

“If you feel good about something, just let it out!” **S**