

Music Talk:

Remembering Charles Stepney

with Duane Powell and
the Stepney Sisters

July 27, 2025

2-3:30 pm

Edlis Neeson Theater

Museum of

Contemporary Art

Chicago



ABOUT THE WORK

MCA Music Talks pair powerhouse musicians with artists, activists, writers, and historians to take on big ideas in art and culture live at the MCA. These intimate encounters featuring performance and conversation reveal the anecdotes, shared ideas, and creative inspirations behind the music.

For this afternoon of music and remembrance, DJ and music historian Duane Powell joins the Stepney Sisters to share stories and songs in honor of the legendary composer and producer Charles Stepney. A Chicago native with Mississippi roots, Stepney was a prolific musician who wrote effortlessly across genres including blues, soul, pop, jazz, gospel, and rock. His musical genius is a part of the fabric of American culture. The event will conclude with a performance by Rotary Connection 222, the official Charles Stepney tribute ensemble.

This music talk was organized by Laura Paige Kyber, Assistant Curator.



Learn more about Stepney's music and its continuing influence on culture today in an accompanying blog post and playlist by MCA Performance Producer Carissa Pinckney.



Duane Powell. Courtesy of the artist.

BILLING

Speakers	Chant�, Charlene, and Eibur Stepney
Moderator	Duane Powell
Band leader, bass	Junius Paul

ROTARY CONNECTION 222

Band leader, bass	Junius Paul
Drums	Makaya McCraven
Lead guitarist	Jackson Shepard
Keyboards	Miguel de la Cerna
Horns	De'Sean Jones
Percussion	Chris Paquette
Vocals	Brandice Stepney-Manuel, Candice Hoyes, Tiaybe Bledsoe
Violin	Caitlin Edwards
Viola	Dominic Johnson



Junius Paul. Courtesy of the artist.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Known as the “architect of the Chicago Sound,” CHARLES STEPNEY (1931–76) was a groundbreaking producer, arranger, composer, and multi-instrumentalist whose innovations helped shape the sound of modern music—from soul and funk to psychedelic rock and orchestral jazz.

Born and raised in Chicago, Stepney began his career as a jazz vibraphonist before becoming a transformative figure at Chess Records, where he arranged and produced iconic works for artists such as Minnie Riperton, Ramsey Lewis, the Dells, Marlena Shaw, and Rotary Connection. Renowned for his orchestral vision and early use of synthesizers, Stepney pushed the limits of a genre that would later be known as *baroque soul*. His intricate, cinematic arrangements brought depth and imagination to the Black musical canon and laid the foundation for some of Earth, Wind & Fire’s most celebrated albums including *Open Our Eyes* (1976), *That’s the Way of the World* (1975), and *Spirit* (1976). Stepney’s influence extended far beyond his lifetime. Though he died at just 45, his sonic legacy continues to echo through generations of artists. His work has been sampled by A Tribe Called Quest, Jay-Z, the Fugees, Gorillaz, and many more. In 2022, his daughters—known as the Stepney Sisters—released *Step on Step*, a collection of his unreleased home recordings that reveal not only his genius but also his relentless, behind-the-scenes creativity. Whether orchestrating a soul ballad, building a symphonic groove, or sketching melodies in his South Side basement studio, Stepney changed the way we hear music. His sound lives on—as bold, beautiful, and visionary as ever.



The Stepney Sisters. Photo: Eddy “Precise” Lamarre.

Stepney’s legacy is carried forward by his daughters, THE STEPNEY SISTERS: CHANTÉ, CHARLENE, AND EIBUR STEPNEY, who have spent over four decades preserving and amplifying their father’s work. With deep expertise in music publishing, estate consulting, and intellectual property rights, they have also guided numerous artists and families in reclaiming their own creative and financial legacies. The sisters are sought-after speakers at universities and industry events, where they share vital knowledge about legacy preservation and the business of music. Their ongoing work includes developing new projects that extend their father’s musical reach, like the ensemble Rotary Connection 222, which debuted in 2022 with a live tribute concert at Chicago’s Millennium Park, and the 2023 release of the [track](#) “You Make Me High,” produced in collaboration with Chicago house music legend Terry Hunter. Through these efforts, the Stepney Sisters continue to introduce their father’s timeless artistry to new audiences and generations. His music doesn’t just endure—it evolves.

Raised in the thick of Chicago’s music culture of the 1970s, DUANE POWELL is one of the city’s premiere DJs and music historians. In 2017, Powell launched his interactive lecture series, *Rear View Mirror Sessions*, which dives deep into the rich histories of music legends and unsung heroes. He has been invited to share his wealth of knowledge on music and business at conventions including the I Got Soul Conference in Dallas and the International Soul Summit in Atlanta. His lecture series has been a part of programming for institutions including University of Chicago, Stanford University, Detroit Institute of Art, Goethe Institute, and Chicago Public Library.



Duane Powell. Courtesy of the artist.

Composer, bandleader, and acoustic and electric bassist JUNIUS PAUL was born and raised in Chicago and is a graduate of Saint Xavier University. As an internationally established bassist, some of Paul’s performance and recording credits include the Art Ensemble Of Chicago, Roscoe Mitchell, Famoudou Don Moye’s Sun Percussion, Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians’ Small Ensemble & Big Band, Kahil El’Zabar, Brandee Younger, Makaya McCraven, Fred Anderson, Georgia Anne Muldrow, Vincent Davis & Percussion Plus, Ernest Dawkins, Dee Alexander, Curtis Fuller, Shabaka Hutchings, Oliver Lake, Donald Harrison, Willie Pickens, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Billy Harper, Marquis Hill, KRS-One, and Donald Byrd, among others. Paul is passionate about music education and currently serves on faculty for the Saint Xavier University music department, in addition to working with youth musicians throughout Chicago. His debut album, *Ism*, was released in November 2019 via International Anthem Recording Company to four-star acclaim in *Downbeat Magazine*. Paul was acknowledged in the magazine’s 2022 Readers’ Poll “Rising Stars” category for both double bass and electric bass. He also serves as the musical director and bassist for Rotary Connection 222, the official Charles Stepney legacy ensemble. Along with touring internationally and fulfilling his professorial duties, Paul is currently at work on his second full-length album.



For complete bios, scan here.

SUPPORT FOR THIS PROJECT

Lead support for the 2025–26 season of MCA Talks is made possible by The Richard and Mary L. Gray Lecture Series through a generous gift to the Chicago Contemporary Campaign.

Generous support is provided by The Antje B. and John J. Jelinek Endowed Lecture and Symposium on Contemporary Art; the Kristina Barr Lectures, which were established through a generous gift by The Barr Fund to the Chicago Contemporary Campaign; The Gloria Brackstone Solow and Eugene A. Solow, MD, Memorial Lecture Series; and the Allen M. Turner Tribute Fund, honoring his past leadership as Chair of the Board of Trustees.

RELATED PROGRAMS

TUESDAYS ON THE TERRACE: ROTARY CONNECTION 222

July 22, 2025
5:30–8 pm, Anne & John Kern Terrace Garden

Summer Tuesdays come alive on the MCA Terrace with free concerts highlighting artists from Chicago’s internationally renowned music community. Audiences enjoy free live music with delicious food and beverages offered for sale by Marisol.

On Tuesday, July 22, Rotary Connection 222 played two musical sets to honor the legacy of Charles Stepney. Tuesdays on the Terrace takes place every Tuesday from June 24 through August 26, 2025.



To learn more and see the rest of this season’s lineup, scan here.



Rotary Connection 222. Courtesy of Brian Ashby.

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Cover: Charles Stepney. Courtesy of the
Stepney Family.