

# African-American Artists in February!

Welcome to *HighNotes*, a publication of the Evanston Symphony for the senior members of our community who are helping with the fight against COVID-19 by staying home and, quite often, staying home alone. The pandemic has also affected all of us here at the ESO, and we understand full well the frustration of not being able to celebrate birthdays with family, or have lunch once a week with the Seniors Club or other friends, or take an exercise class at an Evanston's community center. We hope that *HighNotes* will help you pass a bit of the time until we can all be out and about again.

*HighNotes* always has articles on a specific musical theme plus a variety of puzzles and some *really* bad jokes and puns. For this issue we're highlighting African-American contributors to classical music and other art forms. Note that we won't try to bring you anything about jazz or blues because writing about that wonderful music is better left to experts in those fields – which we're not! Instead, we'll bring you information on some great African-American classical composers, musicians and ballerinas, plus the extraordinary artists known as the Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, Alabama. In addition to the articles here – necessarily short because of space limitations - we put together a list of YouTube and other Internet links where you can listen to some of the featured music and find more information about the other artists. We hope you enjoy *HighNotes*!



Annie E. Pettway (1904-1972)

# HighNotes!

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Editor .....		Kelly Brest van Kempen
Technical Advisor.....		David Ellis
Puzzle & Maze Checkers .....		Connor, Addison, Ryan, Calli, Ciara & Gus
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# George T. Walker (1922-2018)

George Theophilus Walker is among the most prominent of African-American composers of classical music and the first to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music (1996). Walker was born in 1922 in Washington, DC. His father came to the USA from Jamaica and became a physician; his mother was involved in music, supervising George's first piano lessons when he was five.



Before graduating from high school at age 14, Walker gave his first public recital at Howard University. He was admitted to Oberlin College as a scholarship student in 1937 where he studied piano and organ, graduating at 18 with the highest honors in his Conservatory class. He was then admitted to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia to study piano, chamber music, and composition. He graduated from Curtis with Artist Diplomas in piano and composition in 1945, becoming the first black graduate of this renowned music school.

George Walker died in Montclair, NJ, on August 23, 2018, at age 96. During his long, distinguished career as a pianist, composer and educator, he had an impressive number of African-American "firsts," all the more notable because of the strict legal and social segregation of Blacks during much of his creative life. He was the first black instrumentalist to perform at New York's Town Hall and later with the Philadelphia Orchestra, both in 1945, the first black recipient of a doctoral degree from the Eastman School of Music, and the first black tenured faculty member at Smith College – and the list goes on. He was a remarkable man with many extraordinary talents.

The ESO performed Walker's *Lyric for Strings* on February 2, 2020, our last pre-pandemic concert. This piece is the most frequently played second movement of his longer work, *String Quartet No. 1*, and during his lifetime was the most frequently performed work by a living American composer. We'll give a link to the ESO's performance on our Internet Links page.

# William Grant Still (1895-1978)

William Grant Still, Jr. was born on May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi, the son of two teachers. His father was also a partner in a grocery store and performed as a local bandleader, but died in 1895 when his son was just three months old.



Still's mother, Carrie Lena Fambro, moved with him to Little Rock, Arkansas, where she taught high school English. In 1904 she married Charles B. Shepperson, who nurtured his stepson William's musical interests by taking him to operettas and buying Red Seal recordings of classical music, which the boy very much enjoyed. The two attended a number of performances by musicians on tour.

Still attended Wilberforce University and Oberlin Conservatory of Music, which set him on the path to a prolific career as a composer. Still composed nearly 200 works, including four ballets, five symphonies, nine operas, over thirty choral works, plus art songs, chamber music, and works for solo instruments.

Often referred to as the "Dean of Afro-American Composers", Still was the first American composer to have an opera produced by the New York City Opera. Still is known primarily for his first symphony, *Afro-American Symphony* (1930), which was for 20 years the most widely performed symphony composed by an American.

Like George Walker, Still has a number of firsts in the classical music world: he was the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra, the first to have a symphony (his 1st Symphony) performed by a leading orchestra, the first to have an opera performed by a major opera company, and the first to have an opera performed on national television. Due to his close association and collaboration with prominent African-American literary and cultural figures, Still is considered to be part of the Harlem Renaissance movement. The ESO hopes to perform works by Still when we can return to giving concerts. In the meantime, see our Internet Links page for examples of Still's work.

# Meet Tage Larsen!



Tage Larsen says he was drawn to the trumpet by its clarion quality – or maybe, he added with a grin, because it was a way of making himself heard at home! Not at all surprising in a house-hold with ten siblings, six of whom, like Tage, were adopted and all of whom have

Scandinavian names because of their father's Norwegian heritage. (It's pronounced "TAH-geh.")

After his father completed an MBA at Harvard, Tage's parents decided that they wanted to stay in the Boston area and, because they had always wanted a large family, they bought a 13-bedroom house, which they proceeded to fill. His parents first adopted Tage, who heads up a parade that includes a Native American brother, a Vietnamese sister, an El Salvadoran brother, a Cambodian sister, and a Vietnamese-African American brother, all interspersed with four of his parents' biological children – a lovely microcosm of the USA.

Tage has a strong memory of the first piece of music that "grabbed" him, a CD of the Sibelius Second Symphony. He fell in love with its melodies and big brass fanfares. He was nine years old, had just started trumpet lessons, and found himself drawn more and more toward music, inspired in part by the popularity and musicianship of famous trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. At the end of his first year of group lessons at school, Tage's parents decided he needed a private teacher. And so it began...

Tage says that he liked the discipline of an instrument and enjoyed practicing. (His mother reported that he spent hours in his room with his trumpet!) He also enjoyed the experience of playing in a group and during high school did it all: orchestra, band, jazz band, chorus – even one of two trumpets in a saxophone choir!



Tage earned a bachelor's degree in music from Michigan State and a master's from Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY. He

spent the year after Eastman with the Dallas Brass, a group that toured the country by bus giving concerts in various venues. Toward the end of his time with the Dallas Brass, he tried out for a position he knew would be a career boost. His audition a success, he thus morphed into Staff Sergeant Tage Larsen, United States Marine Band, one of "The President's Own."



During his four years with the USMB, Tage was cornet soloist and performed at many official functions, including the second Clinton inauguration, state banquets at the White House, concert tours, military funerals, and the band's regular Wednesday night concerts.

With four years of solid experience under his belt, Tage left the Marine Band at age 29 with the goal of landing an orchestra position by age 30. Success! He won the second trumpet spot with the St. Louis Symphony and played with them for two years.

In 2002, he successfully auditioned for the Chicago Symphony, where he is the first and, to date, only African-American permanent orchestra member. His position is "fourth/utility trumpet," the "utility" title meaning that he does all of the extras such as doubling a part or filling in for someone who's absent. He enjoys the variety of musical experiences the position gives him and loves being part of a good, solid team. He's also volunteered for the CSO's new diversity task force, but notes that the emphasis in an orchestra must always be on the quality of the music.

With live concerts out of the question during this pandemic, the CSO has some online musical offerings, mostly with strings. While all sections could sit socially distanced, string and percussion can wear masks while playing; brass and woodwinds obviously cannot, which limits any group performances for Tage for the time being.

Tage lives in Evanston and has two sons, both in college. He loves Asian food (especially spicy Thai), and enjoys Soul-Cycle, a cycling exercise class set, of course, to music. In addition to his position with the CSO, he teaches private classes (now via Zoom) and like all of us is trying to keep busy in these strange times!





danceinforma.com: Complexions Contemporary Ballet

## Gasp-Worthy Moments

Every once in a while you come across a photo that threatens to jump off the page or screen and makes you gasp at its artistry, strength and beauty. This is such a photo. The ballerina is Ashley Mayeux, who was born in Houston, Texas, and got hooked on dance when she was a mere six. She began her focused dance training at the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, then graduated cum laude with a BFA from SUNY Purchase. Mayeux continued her studies at the Dance Theatre of Harlem and went on to perform in the tour of the Broadway musical *Aida*. She danced with Complexions Contemporary Ballet in New York from 2012 to 2016, before becoming a company member of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre from 2016 to 2018. She joined Alonzo King's LINES Ballet in San Francisco in 2018.



Sometimes it's words rather than a photo that make you gasp. Inauguration Day brought us a number of powerful firsts, foremost among them the fabulous trifecta of Kamala Harris, our first woman/African-American/So. Asian-American Vice-President. It also gave us another wonderful gasp-worthy moment as the first National Youth Poet Laureate became the youngest

poet ever to recite a work at a presidential inauguration. The extraordinary Amanda Gorman lit up the stage with her bright yellow coat, a red band around her braids, and, most of all, her powerful words, which were spoken from her heart to the hearts of so many of us. You can read her complete poem on the next page.

In her work, Gorman describes herself as "a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother [who] can dream of becoming president only to find herself reciting for one." She was born in Los Angeles in 1998, has a twin sister, overcame a speech impediment, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard. And she's thinking about running for President in 2036. "My hope is that my poem will represent a moment of unity for our country" and "with my words, I'll be able to speak to a new chapter and era for our nation." For many, that hope came true on January 20.

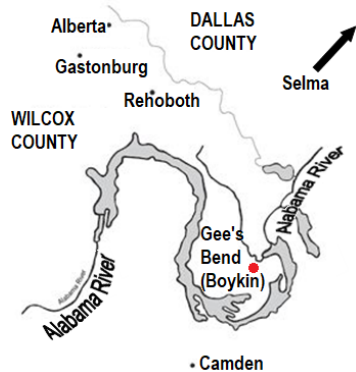
# Amanda Gorman: "The Hill We Climb"

When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light  
in this never ending shade?  
The loss we carry, a sea.  
We must wade.  
We've braved the belly of the beast.  
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace.  
And the norms and notions of what just is, isn't always justice.  
And yet the dawn is ours before we knew it.  
Somehow we do it.  
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken,  
but simply unfinished.  
We, the successors of a country and the time where a skinny Black girl  
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of  
becoming president only to find herself reciting for one.  
And yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine,  
but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect.  
We are striving to forge our union with purpose.  
To compose a country, committed to all cultures, colors,  
characters, and conditions of man.  
And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us,  
but what stands before us  
We close the divide because we know to put our future first,  
we must first put our differences aside.  
We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.  
Let the globe, if nothing else say, this is true.  
That even as we grieved, we grew.  
That even as we hurt, we hoped.  
That even as we tired, we tried.  
That we'll forever be tied together victorious.  
Not because we will never again know defeat,  
but because we will never again sow division.  
Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine  
and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid  
If we're to live up to our own time, then victory won't lie in the blade,  
but in all the bridges we've made.  
That is the promise to glade the hill we climb.

If only we dare it's because being American is more than a pride we inherit.  
It's the past we step into and how we repair it.  
We've seen a force that would shatter our nation, rather than share it.  
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.  
And this effort very nearly succeeded, but while democracy can be periodically  
delayed, it can never be permanently defeated in this truth.  
In this faith we trust for while we have our eyes on the future,  
history has its eyes on us.  
This is the era of just redemption.  
We feared it in its inception.  
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs of of such a terrifying hour,  
but within it, we found the power to author a new chapter.  
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves.  
So while once we asked, how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?  
Now we assert how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?  
We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be  
a country that is bruised.  
But whole benevolence, but bold, fierce, and free.  
We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation because we know  
our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation.  
Our blunders become their burdens, but one thing is certain.  
If we merged mercy with might, and might with right, then love  
becomes our legacy, and change our children's birthright.  
So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left.  
With every breath, my bronze pounded chest.  
We will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.  
We will rise from the gold limbed hills of the West.  
We will rise from the wind swept to Northeast  
where our forefathers first realized the revolution.  
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the middle Western States.  
We will arise from the sun baked South.  
We will rebuild, reconciled and recover and every known nook over our nation.  
And every corner called our country.  
Our people diverse and beautiful will emerge, battered and beautiful.  
When day comes, we step out of the shade of flame and unafraid,  
the new dawn balloons, as we free it.  
For there was always light.  
If only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it.

# The Glorious Quilts of Gee's Bend

About an hour southwest of Selma, the Alabama River doubles back on itself, carving out a large teardrop of land where, in 1816, a man named Joseph Gee established a cotton plantation that was worked by 17 African-American slaves. The area became known as "Gee's Bend," and the descendants of some of those enslaved people still live on that land.



After the Civil War and Emancipation, the community thrived for a while, but dwindled and fell into great poverty and isolation during the Great Depression. A U.S. Post Office was established in 1949 – officially the town of Boykin – but both poverty and isolation grew even more after 1962, when the ferry service that connected the community to the closest main roads was discontinued, thus making contact with other

communities much more difficult – and greatly hindering the residents' ability to register to vote. Out of this poverty and isolation, however, grew one of the most vibrant folk arts this country has ever seen: the quilts of Gee's Bend.

Nights can be cold even in Alabama - and necessity is indeed the mother of invention. The poverty in the community forced the reuse of everything at hand. "When I was growing up," said Bettie Bendolph Seltzer (1939-2017), "Mama made quilts to keep us warm. The ladies then piece their quilts at home and go to each other house to help quilt. At the start, all they was making them out of was old clothes, pants, fertilizer sacks, dress tails, and meal and flour sacks, too."



**Bettie Bendolph Seltzer**

The re-use of old fabrics gradually died out after 1966, when a group of women from Gee's Bend and several communities just to the northwest formed the Freedom Quilting Bee in Alberta. Through this cooperative venture, many of the women were for the first time able to use new fabrics instead of used materials of various thicknesses, which were difficult to work with. And, their work attracted the attention of the art world. Folk art collector, historian, curator William Arnett brought further attention to these extraordinary artists with his Souls Grown Deep Foundation in Atlanta, Georgia, as he helped organize many exhibitions which featured their work. The Foundation website describes the quilts:

*Most Gee's Bend quilts can be called improvisational or "my way" quilts. Uninhibited by the norms of fine or folk art, the Bend quiltmakers have been guided by a faith in personal vision; most of them start with basic forms and head off "their way" with unexpected patterns, unusual colors, and surprising rhythms. The quiltmakers of Gee's Bend and Rehoboth tell similar stories when describing their separate styles; taken together, the women's insistence on developing a unique artistic voice becomes a statement about their community's tradition. The people of the Bend like to do things in certain ways and have stuck to them. Theirs are handsome, if unorthodox, works of art, yet the shared unorthodoxy attests to the stabilizing power of a tradition that, for many decades, has fostered individualism and even eccentricity. By making what they want to make, these women reveal innovative ways of looking at fabric, design, and format and have produced work that is utterly original and ranks with the finest abstract art in any tradition.*



**Sue Willie Seltzer (1921-2010)**

"Unique,...handsome, if unorthodox,...individualism and even eccentricity,...innovative." All of these words resonate in the quilts of Gee's Bend, which are first and foremost works of art by these talented "my way" quiltmakers. Each quilt is a riot of colors in unexpected combinations, often with a design that seems





Minnie Sue Coleman (1926-2012)

to start off in one direction then veer off in another without rhyme or reason, but a direction that is absolutely perfect for that particular quilt.

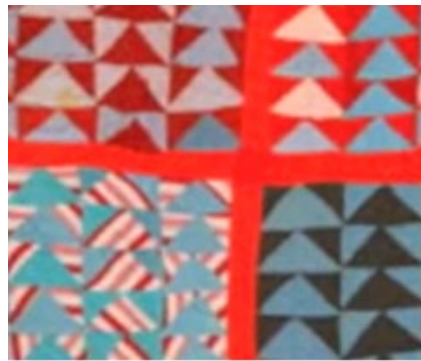
However, the Souls Grown Deep Foundation has issued a caution about using certain words when describing these quiltmakers and their art; among them is “self-taught,” a term that SGDF says belittles the long, rich, historical tradition of the Gee’s Bend quiltmakers.

This tradition is indeed long, handed down from generation to generation.

Girls learned to quilt from their mothers and grandmothers; Bettie Bendolph Seltzer began quilting at ten under the watchful eye of her mother, and passed the tradition on to her daughters.

The Freedom Quilting Been in Alberta ended with the death of the last member in 2012. However, many of the Gee’s Bend quiltmakers had been members of both groups, and the women in the latter continue to produce their works of art. These quilts have become very sought after and many now hang in major museums around the country.

Editor’s note: I’m going to go out on a limb here, or maybe it would be more accurate to say that I’m wading into waters where I perhaps have no business going; I am not an historian or a woman of color and my quilting skills are rudimentary at best. However, I lived in North Africa for over six years and gained a deep appreciation of the designs found in the original art of a culture, but can claim no expertise. With those caveats, I was struck by the juxtaposition of two separate stories: the first is the history of the quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend and the second is the creation of the painted houses of Tiébélé, Burkina Faso, in West Africa.



Annie E. Pettway (1904-1972). Detail.

The first: Arlonzia Pettway (1923-2008) another well-known quiltmaker, could recall her grandmother’s stories of her ancestors, specifically Dinah Miller, who was brought to the United States by slave ship in 1859. All of the quiltmakers are descendents of enslaved people.

The second: Tiébélé is the town that is the seat of the chief of the Kassena people and is famous for its painted houses, the work of a group of ordained artists, all women.

(Photos at right. We don’t have enough space to describe their work here, but have put some references on our Links pages.)

Tiébélé is just over the northern border of Ghana and is at the edge of the area trafficked by slavers.

The patterns of the Gee’s Bend quilts are based on geometric shapes, a common occurrence in many cultures. For example, the nose-to-base string of triangles is called “flying geese.” This is a common pattern; it’s easy to see how it got its name. Or does it have a different, parallel origin, one perhaps based on ancestral memory?

With their glorious quilts, the Gee’s Bend artists have given American culture a sacred gift, one to be celebrated and cherished, and one for which we are most thankful.

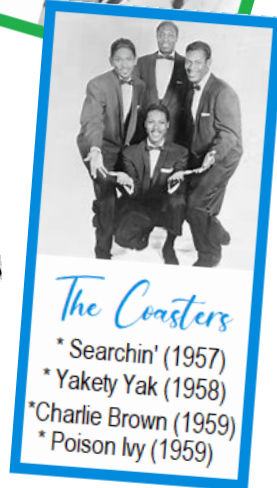
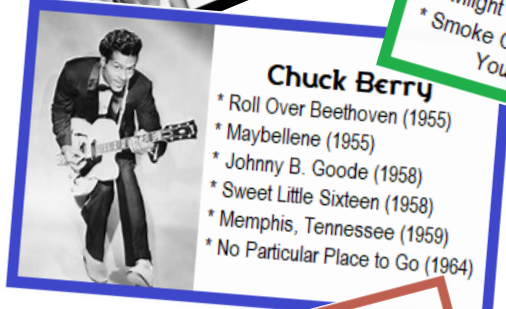
By the way ferry service was finally restored in 2006 - 44 years later...



# Bygones

How many of us can remember the after-school social life of a teenager in the 1950s and early 1960s?! Sock hops, poodle skirts and saddle shoes, juke boxes, drive-ins (food and movies), Dick Clark and "American Bandstand", and all the fabulous African-American singers of the Rock & Roll Era. Note: We love Ray Charles, Nat

King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles and the other great Black singers, too – but this is *sock hop* music! We're just going to put some of our favorites out here. What are yours?



# Valentine's Day!

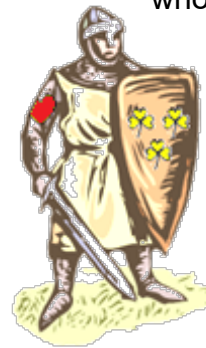
Ah, yes! Valentine's Day is on its way! Here are some fun facts about this popular, love-crazy, chocolate-filled holiday.

Valentine's Day started with the Romans! Apparently the Roman Emperor Claudius II was trying to bolster his army, so he forbade young men to marry. (He thought single men made better soldiers then!) In the spirit of love, St. Valentine defied the ban and performed secret marriages. For his disobedience, Valentine was executed on February 14. Poor guy...



The red rose is the favorite flower of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. So, it's no surprise roses are the most popular of the many bouquets of flowers sold on Valentine's Day. AND, Cupid, that other ancient symbol of love, is Venus's son.

"Wearing your heart on your sleeve" is more than just a phrase. In the Middle Ages, young men and women drew names to see who their Valentine would be. They would wear the name pinned to their sleeve for one week so that everyone would know their supposed true feelings.



Every Valentine's Day, the Italian city of Verona, where Shakespeare's lovers Romeo and Juliet lived in 1695, receives about 1,000 love letters addressed to Juliet. After 425+ years!

The chocolate box has been around for more than 150 years. The first Valentine's Day box of chocolates was introduced by Richard Cadbury in 1868. It's estimated that more than 35 million heart-shaped boxes of chocolate will be sold for the holiday. And Cadbury's is still making chocolates!





# Word Search Clues!

1. George T. \_\_\_\_\_ was the first African-American to win the \_\_\_\_\_ Prize in Music.

2. William Grant \_\_\_\_\_ composed a \_\_\_\_\_ that was once the most performed work by an American composer.



3. \_\_\_\_\_ is the first - and only - African-American member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

4. The photo of \_\_\_\_\_ Ashley Mayeux made us gasp!

5. \_\_\_\_\_ is the National Youth Poet Laureate. What a talent!

6. The women artists of \_\_\_\_\_ Alabama, make extraordinary \_\_\_\_\_.

The women artists of \_\_\_\_\_ in Burkina Faso paint geometric designs on many of the houses.

One common design is called "flying \_\_\_\_\_."

7. February 14<sup>th</sup> is \_\_\_\_\_'s Day, when many people get roses, the favorite flower of \_\_\_\_\_, the Goddess of Love

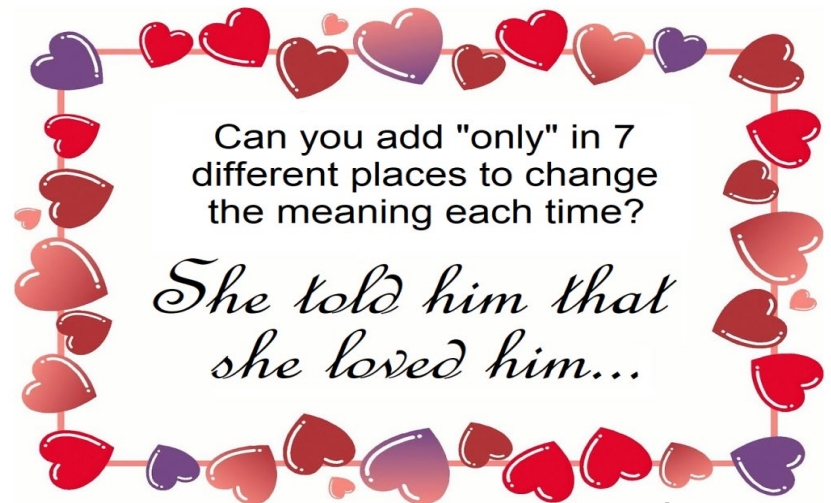
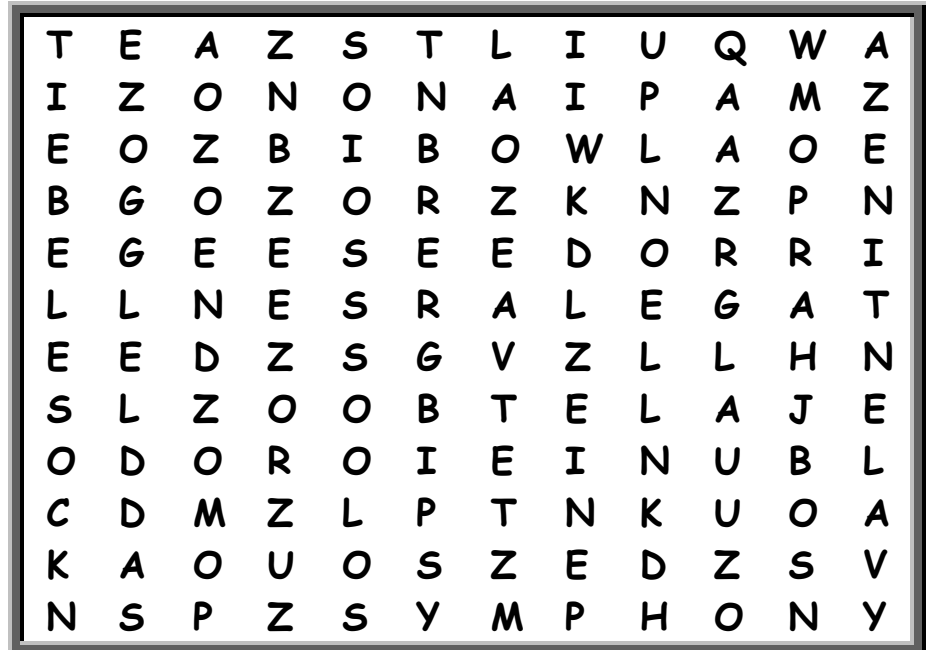


8. \_\_\_\_\_ hops, \_\_\_\_\_ boxes \_\_\_\_\_ shoes & \_\_\_\_\_ skirts! Ah! The life of a teen in the 1950s!

9. Find these hidden instruments: Piano Bow Oboe Harp

# Word Search Puzzle!

Some important HighNotes are hidden in this puzzle! can you find them? Remember: Words can go up, down, across, OR diagonally, AND backwards or forwards - 8 directions in all! And, can you find "OZ" at least 23 times?

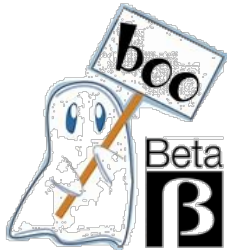


# Upbeat: WaPo's Word Contest!

The Washington Post, "WaPo" for short, is famous for its annual "neologisms" contest where people make up new words following some simple rules: (A) Take an existing word and give it a new meaning OR (B) Take an existing word and add, subtract or change a single letter and give it a new meaning. Here are some of the winners over the years. Most of these follow rule (B):

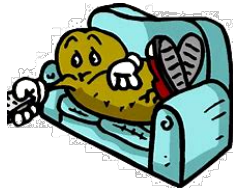
**Antifun gal** (n.): a prude.

**Doltergeist** (n.): a spirit that decides to haunt someplace really stupid, such as your obsolete Betamax or your septic tank...



**Intaxication** (n.): euphoria at getting a refund from the IRS, which lasts until you realize it was your money to start with.

**Hindprint** (n.): indentation made by a couch potato.



**Decafalon** (n.): the grueling event of getting through the day eating only healthy food

**Q:** If someone from the 1950s suddenly appeared to you, what would be the most difficult thing to explain about life today?

**A:** I possess a device in my pocket that can give me access to the entirety of information known to mankind. I use it to watch cat videos and get into arguments with strangers.

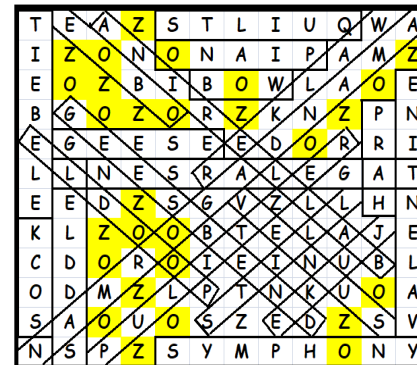
©Brightside

# Hail to the Chief!



When the president is about to enter a room at official events, the orchestra or band plays a fanfare called "Ruffles and Flourishes" - "ruffles" with drums and "flourishes" with bugles or trumpets. (Dum dah-dah dah dah DAH! – which is as close as we can come to putting it in rhythm words!) This is played four times as a signal that he's on his way so that people can get

ready to stand up as a gesture of respect to the office of the president. After Ruffles and Flourishes, the band plays an old Scottish tune now called *Hail to the Chief*, which has been played for American presidents ever since the 1820's, and is now played for our 46<sup>th</sup> president, Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr. – or just plain "Joe."



## Puzzle Answers!

**CLUES:** Walker, Pulitzer, Still, Symphony, Tage Larsen, Ballerina, Amanda Gorman, Gee's Bend, Quilts, Tiebele, Geese, Valentine, Venus, Sock, Juke, Saddle, Poodle



1. Only she told him that she loved him - no other woman has told him this.
2. She only told him that she loved him - but she did not mean it.
3. She told only him that she loved him - she has told no one else.
4. She told him only that she loved him - not that she'd do anything else for him.
5. She told him that only she loved him - trying to convince him no one else does.
6. She told him that she only loved him - but maybe not respected him etc.
7. She told him that she loved only him - she is not in love with anyone else.