

Walter “Chikuyu” Chiles Bio

If we judged a career by the places someone has been and the people they have worked with, Walter Chiles’ years in music are about as fabulous as they come.

If we judged a life by the number of people someone touches, and the grace, warmth and guidance they have brought the world, Walter is still at the top of the heap.

From the beginning, music has been the controlling force in Walter’s life, from the time when he was barely old enough to reach all the piano keys. He was a piano prodigy in his father’s church at the age of four, amazing the congregation with his natural gifts on the keyboard. He was so gifted that he would be hired to play in local nightclubs before he was out of middle school, sneaking out his father’s house at night to step into booze and smoke-filled clubs with some of the top acts coming through Baltimore and also playing with some of the top gospel acts of the time.

When he later went into the Air Force, Walter did his part during the Korean War by keeping his fellow soldiers entertained and reducing stress levels all across Europe and Northern Africa. After the war, Walter used the GI Bill to go back to school—perfecting his craft at the prestigious Berklee School of Music in Boston, sitting alongside classmates like Quincy Jones. Boston is also where he met the love of his life, Helen Chiles.

Walter spent the 1950s and 60s playing the music that was dear to his heart: jazz. His jazz trio, Chiles & Pettiford, had a standing gig at a club in New York named Jilly’s, where Walter played with and for such greats as Sarah Vaughan, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday and even Johnny Carson. At one point, Chiles was hired to serve as the private piano player for Frank Sinatra, just the two of them in Sinatra’s spread overlooking Central Park, for days and hours on end, getting Old Blue Eyes ready for a big upcoming concert.

When the ‘70s came around, Walter moved his attention to R&B, funk and disco, leading a band called LTG Exchange that produced quite a few hits that made the charts, including a song he wrote called “Waterbed” that was covered by several top artists, including jazz flutist Herbie Mann. In fact, Walter still occasionally gets royalty checks—tiny little checks—because his music is being played somewhere in the world.

When he left the daily grind of the music business, Walter returned to the church—where it all started for him more than seven decades ago—serving as the Minister of Music at the Shrine of the Black Madonna for the last two decades.

Along the way, Walter and his wife Helen have touched many lives, counseled many needy souls. They also raised three brilliant, successful children, and have been blessed with 8 wonderful grandchildren.

His has been a life well-lived. And best of all, Walter is far from done. Most days you can still find him at the keyboard, creating new songs, tinkering with new arrangements, still keeping his hand in contemporary music.

His mind never stops working. His talent has never diminished.