

THE OTHER HIGHWAYMEN

STORY BY
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In 1961, The Highwaymen, a collegiate folk group that originated at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, had a *Billboard* No. 1 hit with *Michael, Row the Boat Ashore*. The song was a variation of the 1863 African-American spiritual of the same name.

Also in 1961, emerging from the small, central Florida town of Fort Pierce, a group of young African-American painters—25 men and one woman—created an improbable art movement, one that would later be called The Florida Highwaymen.

Untouched Florida landscapes like wind-bent palm trees, serene sunsets, bright-red Poinciana trees, and churning oceans were their subjects of choice, and each artist hastily produced as many as 35 paintings per day, eventually amassing a collection of more than 200,000 paintings

By Harold Newton, #2009-9, 24 x 18 inches.



Above: By Johnny Daniels, #2008-64, 24 x 36 inches. All images courtesy of Highwaymen art collector Geoff Cook. Visit his website, floridahighwaymen.com.

CURATOR JIM FITCH'S TIPS TO IDENTIFYING AND DATING AUTHENTIC HIGHWAYMEN PAINTINGS

There are only 26 original Florida Highwaymen artists: Curtis Arnett, Hezekiah Baker, Al "Blood" Black, brothers Ellis Buckner and George Buckner, Robert Butler, Mary Ann Carroll, brothers Johnny Daniels and Willie Daniels, Rodney Demps, James Gibson, Alfred Hair, Issac Knight, Robert Lewis, John Maynor, Roy McLendon, Alfonso "Pancho" Moran, brothers Sam Newton, Lemuel Newton and Harold Newton, Willie Reagan, Livingston "Castro" Roberts, Cornell "Pete" Smith, Charles Walker, Sylvester Wells, and Charles "Chico" Wheeler.

Generally, the earliest and most collectible work is on Upson board and was created between 1955 and 1987. After that period, Upson board was no longer manufactured, and the artists switched to Masonite or stretched canvas. This provides a reliable way to date their work.

The value of Highwayman paintings varies greatly, depending on date of creation, size, condition, artist, color scheme, and subject matter. The paintings have fetched as much as \$25,000. ♦

between them. They used whatever inexpensive materials they could find, including oil paint, tree-trunk easels and Upson board (a compressed-paper material commonly used throughout the 1950s and into the late 1970s), and they fashioned their own frames out of crown-molding painted with gold highlights.

Often, their paintings were referred to as "junk art," and galleries refused to sell their paintings. Undeterred, they took to the road or, rather, the highway, selling their art from the trunks of their cars along Interstate 95 for as little as \$25. Today, though, these paintings have the respected art-world monikers of "Outsider Art" or "Folk Art," terms that refer to art created by artists who aren't traditionally trained or who work outside mainstream society. The works today can fetch as much as \$45,000 at auction, and they now appear in museums and galleries.

Alfred Warner Hair (1941-1970) was the galvanizing force and founding member behind the group, whose original members included Harold Newton, Roy McLendon, James Gibson, Livingston



“Castro” Roberts, Mary Ann Carroll, Sam Newton, Willie Daniels, and Al Black.

Hair was the only member of the original group who had formal training. He learned the academic principles of painting from A.E. “Bean” Backus, the seminal white Florida landscape painter known for his penchant for rum—and his willingness to see beyond race. Backus also was known for eschewing paint brushes, favoring instead a palette knife to apply bold colors to the canvas. He was a teacher, mentor and friend to Hair, charging him 50 cents per lesson and cautioning his pupil not to paint too quickly.

The young Hair, however, shunned his mentor’s counsel and boasted that if he was going to be a millionaire by 30, he had to paint fast. As fate would have it, the intrepid founder of the collective was murdered at the age of 29 in August 1970. The official Florida Sheriff’s Department report states that Hair was sitting in a bar with fellow artist Livingston “Castro” Roberts. A migrant fruit picker, Julius Funderberk, entered the dimly lit bar and started an argument with Castro. Funderberk left and returned with a nickel-plated pistol. A further fracas ensued and Hair was shot twice. Hair was rushed to Fort Pierce Memorial Hospital, where he was pronounced dead on arrival.

From that August night on, the joy and passion that once fueled the group waned, and they disbanded. Most of the artists put down their brushes and took off in different directions, some taking jobs as house painters, factory workers, or whatever work they could find to feed their families. Although a handful continued, by the 1980s, taste had changed, and the once-popular Floridian painting style fell out of favor.

It took a 1995 article in *Antiques & Art Around Florida* by writer Jim Fitch, a curator and art acquisition agent for the investment partnership Florida Masters Collection Limited,

Top left: By Sam Newton, #2001-67, 24 x 18 inches.

Above left: By Livingston Roberts, #2004-9, 24 x 36 inches.

Left: By Hezekiah Baker, #2001-3, 24 x 36 inches.



By Willie Daniels, #79, 24 x 36 inches.

to change the tide. In the magazine, Fitch chronicled a group of unknown artists on the East coast of Florida. He described how, 30 years prior, the group had traveled the highways, “peddling” their paintings from the back of the cars. He called his discovery “The Highwaymen.”

Where Fitch left off, Geoff Cook picked up. In March 1998, Cook, an Orlando-based nursery grower with a passion for landscapes, spied an image of a vibrant Johnny Daniels (1954-2009) sunset painting in *Florida* magazine. Cook took to the road, heading east. He scoured antique shops, thrift stores, and auctions along the coast, eventually nabbing a painting by Harold Newton (1934-1994) for \$85.

He continued his treasure hunt for a decade. Voraciously collecting and gathering information about the artists, consulting with dealers, collectors and the artists themselves, he ultimately became the expert on all things Highwaymen. In 2008, he

produced a PBS documentary on the subject.

Today he generously lends his art to museum exhibitions, and his once massive collection (at one time it exceeded 3,500 paintings) has today settled at now numbers at around 250 pieces and is valued at \$1.5 million.

Cook routinely fields offers for the paintings in his collection, but he sells judiciously. In August 2012, he sold a 1958 Harold Newton painting for \$25,000, but he declined an offer of \$50,000 for another Newton work, 1961 *Self Portrait*, because, as he put it, the “absent landscape is a rare subject matter, making it an unusual painting.”

The 18 surviving Highwaymen are now in their late 60s and 70s, and all except one actively paint. In 2000, 26 artists were identified as Highwaymen, and four years later their legacy was cemented when they were inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. Their determination in the face of adversity remains an

important story of perseverance, inspiration, and creativity. Stars North, a Central Florida based independent film company, is currently producing a film about The Highwaymen. Todd Thompson, the film’s writer and director, has wanted to produce the movie since moving to Florida more than 10 years ago.

James Gibson has achieved high-profile exposure. His paintings can be found in the collections of George W. Bush and Michelle Obama, and two of his works appear in the Steven Spielberg film *Catch Me If You Can*.

The Highwaymen produced a body of work which has endured and is a symbol of determination and entrepreneurial spirit. Best of all, more than 50 years since barnstorming the Florida countryside, their art is finally receiving the praise it deserves. ♦

The Tampa Bay History Center’s exhibit “Against All Odds: The Art of the Highwaymen” runs through August 17. Visit tampabayhistorycenter.org.