

# Man doesn't miss a beat

81-year-old a  
musical fixture

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For the Cumberland Times-News

FROSTBURG — His repertoire includes musician, businessman and humanitarian. At age 81, Lucius "Pete" Harper is retired, but he still keeps toes tapping in area nursing homes.

"It makes me happy to make someone else happy," said Harper. "I feel compelled to sing and play music. To bring happiness to people confined to wheelchairs and in nursing homes just makes me happy."

Harper plays guitar and sings at the St. Vincent de Paul Nursing Center in Frostburg, Lion's Manor in Cumberland, Moran Manor in Westernport and Egle Nursing Home in Lonaconing. He has been on the nursing home circuit since 1983.

"For an 81-year-old, I think it's wonderful that he comes to do this," said Pam Harris, activities director at St. Vincent de Paul. "He is really faithful about coming, even though he has arthritis."

"Our residents look forward to him," said Barbara Lauder, activities director at Egle. "He plays and we all sing. He does all the old songs, and the residents just love it."



Steve Bittner/Times-News

**Lucius "Pete" Harper entertains the residents at St. Vincent de Paul Nursing Center every Sunday.**

Last year, the city of Frostburg honored Harper with a Community Service Award. He also has received good will commendations from the Maryland State Senate, Sen. John J. Hafer and former Sen. J. Glenn Beall.

For St. Vincent de Paul resident Helen Barry, hearing Harper is just like old times. "We always went to his fried chicken restaurant to listen to him play," Barry said. "I really look forward to hearing him here. It helps the day go along when he comes."

Harper treats his audiences to tunes they remember, adding his own special style. "He does all the oldies, but he likes to put a blues rhythm to all the songs," said St. Vincent de Paul resident Mike Thomas.

Harper enjoys experimenting. "It's boring to play music the way it's written. I don't want to sound like anyone else," he said.

Born and raised in Frostburg, Harper played bass violin with a

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variety of bands in the 1940s and '50s. When he was 18 years old, he went to New York City where he immediately got a job singing on the radio. He later returned to Frostburg, married and had eight children.

Harper was as dedicated to providing for his family as he was to his music. "At one time, I drove a coal truck six days a week and played music seven nights," he said. In 1949, he made local history when he became the first African-American in this area to play in an integrated group.

"We created quite a sensation," Harper remembered. His band, the Modernaires, got its start at Jake's Place in Westernport, then quickly became popular at the "downtown clubs."

"I was the marvel of the age because I didn't read music," he said. "The music is just in my head. It's a gift. I hear a song once and just play it."

In 1956, he started his business, Harper's Park Lane Restaurant in Frostburg. After a performance at Frostburg State University, even the famed Count Basie "came to my place to eat chicken, dance and play music," Harper recalled.

When he was 57, Harper left his business to enroll in the Arlington Technical Institute in Virginia. There he studied air conditioning and refrigeration engineering. He worked in Washington, D.C. for 16 years as a maintenance engineer and performed at area clubs.

In 1981, he got homesick for Western Maryland and came back to Frostburg. That same year he bought his first guitar. "I'm still studying music, and my life is happy, now. I'm 81 years old and playing like I did at 21," he said. "I like playing the nursing homes. I get more satisfaction out of that than when I was playing for money. I get more satisfaction out of giving than getting."