

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Burrell

PERSON

**Burrell, Charlie**

**Alternative Names:** Charles Burrell;

**Life Dates:** October 4, 1920-

**Place of Birth:** Toledo, Ohio, USA

**Residence:** Denver, CO

**Occupations:** Classical Bassist

## Biographical Note

Charles Burrell has enjoyed an outstanding career as a bassist for the Denver Symphony Orchestra and is also considered a master jazz bassist; one of the few musicians to have mastered both genres. Born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1920, Burrell was raised in Depression-era Detroit, Michigan. His mother, Denverado, the daughter of an A.M.E. minister from Denver, Colorado, provided inspiration and direction despite the family's poverty.

In grade school, Burrell excelled in music. When he was twelve, he heard the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra under renowned conductor Pierre Monteux on the family's crystal radio. He resolved to play one day for an orchestra under the direction of Monteux, whom he began to idolize. He developed his skills on the bass at Detroit's famous Cass Tech High School, where eighteen of the principal musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra taught. Principal bassist Gaston Brohm agreed to teach Burrell if he would promise not to play the classics for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Burrell considers Oscar Legassy of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra his best teacher and greatest influence. After high school, Burrell landed a job playing jazz in Detroit's Paradise Valley at a club called B.J.'s.

At the start of World War II, Burrell was drafted into the all-black naval unit at Camp Robert Smalls, at Great Lakes Naval base near Chicago. There, he played in the unit's all star band with Clark Terry, Al Grey and O. C. Johnson and took classes at Northwestern University and with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. After the war, Burrell used the G.I. Bill to attend Wayne State University in Detroit. He excelled in his music courses, but was discouraged by the racism of his advisors. In 1949, Burrell joined his mother's relatives in Denver, Colorado, and was soon hired by the Denver Symphony Orchestra. Eventually, he fulfilled his dream of playing for Pierre Monteux by joining the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. In 1965, he returned to the Denver

Symphony Orchestra and met his wife, Melanie, a cellist.

One of the first blacks admitted to the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Burrell has mentored and taught some of the finest musicians in the country. Among his students are bassists Tony Knight of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, Major Holly, and the late great Ray Brown. Other musicians guided by Burrell are jazz pianist George Duke and Burrell's niece, jazz vocalist Diane Reeves.

## Related Entries

**Cass Technical High School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Denver Symphony Orchestra** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1979 to ?]

**Bassist**

**San Francisco Symphony Orchestra** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Bassist**

**San Francisco Conservatory of Music** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1998 to 2000]

**Instructor**

**Denver Symphony Orchestra** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1965 to ?]

**Bassist**