



For decades Al's Bar has been a gathering spot that showcases national and local music. This mural by artist Michael Burrell captures that tradition and was the result of community groups coming together to choose a theme and an artist whose work represented the area.



TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

Colorful murals by local and international artists spruce up once-empty walls throughout Lexington, intriguing residents and visitors alike

By Rena Baer / Photos By Mark Mahan

It's been 50 years since Lexington's original Dunbar High School closed and was integrated with county schools. Yet, its history lives on — not only in the halls and rooms of the community center it's become, but also on an outside wall where several of its former educators are now commemorated in an array of murals. Residents and kids gaze upon their faces every day from a playground underneath or from the sidewalks of North Upper Street.

These eye-catching murals tell the stories of achievement and inspiration at Dunbar, the first all-black high school in Kentucky to be accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.

More and more, murals are brightening Lexington's urban landscape. They depict history, make social statements, and celebrate art for the sake of art. The murals also create an expansive museum where the walls are for expression rather than containment. They invite curiosity, generate conversation, and build community, not to mention provide a

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Murals on the former Dunbar High School tell stories of achievement and inspiration. Local elected officials held a ribbon-cutting ceremony in June.

great backdrop for photographs.

In just the past few months, three murals, including the one on the Dunbar Community Center, have been unveiled.

Downtown, the Village Idiot pub now sports a 30-by-30-foot mural, based on an historic photograph of the legendary Man o' War. Painted by Mexico City native and longtime Lexington resident Agustin Zarate, the mural was sponsored by Mt. Brilliant Farm as part of the Kentucky Horse Park's Man o' War Celebration, a series of events that highlight the 100th anniversary of the legendary racehorse's birth. Joining it is Lexington's latest landmark, a montage of bright color that wraps around the corner of the Phoenix Building, featuring Kentucky's most famous statesman, "The Great Compromiser" Henry Clay, painted by Louisville artist Casey McKinney.

"People enjoy coming to our city and looking at our murals," said Lori Houlihan, Lexington's director of arts and cultural affairs. "Many convention groups have come to us and want to be taken on mural tours. Or people ask if there's a bike tour of the murals. Public art is taking off, and this helps put us on the map with other art destinations and the international mural world. We are such a creative city that it makes sense we'd be part of that circuit."

Most of the city's murals, which number probably in the mid-30s or more, are a mix of private efforts through PRHBTN



Nathan Zamarron, community arts director for LexArts; artist Christine Kuhn; and former councilman Chris Ford celebrate the Dunbar Mural Project. Top, the former school is now a community center.

(short for Prohibition), which has brought in a wide range of artists from all over the world, and public efforts through LexArts, which draws on more regional talent and encourages community involvement.

The Dunbar Mural Project was a public effort started by former Urban County Council member Chris Ford after residents in his district complained about the broken windows at the community center. The windows were replaced, but the interspersed concrete blocks did not add to the building's aesthetic. Ford wanted to change that.

His idea to transform those concrete blocks into public art that celebrated the history of the school quickly found traction, drawing together several community groups to work on the project. These included the Lexington Youth Arts Council and the current Paul Laurence Dunbar High School History Club. The teenagers interviewed members of the original Dunbar High School class of 1966 for an oral history project when they gathered at a 50th reunion last summer. They used



This recent mural, a montage of color surrounding Kentucky's famous statesman Henry Clay, brightens the corner of the Phoenix Building. It was painted by Louisville artist Casey McKinney as part of LexArts' Outdoor Mural Project.



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Dunbar High School alumni and inspirational figures are honored on the exterior of the former school. Those highlighted include all three of the school's principals — William Henry Fouse, P.L. Guthrie, and Clara Wendell Stitt — legendary basketball coach Stanford T. Roach, and the school's namesake, poet Paul Laurence Dunbar.

those memories and the historical knowledge to help choose whose portraits would be featured among the murals and then helped select the artist, muralist Christine Kuhn.

"The most important aspect of this was that it was inclusionary," said Ford. "It's rewarding that it's been a collaboration."

LexArts facilitated the effort as part of the Lexington Outdoor Mural Project, which began in 2008 and includes all three recent mural projects and at least a dozen more.

At the time, only a few random murals illuminated the city's walls, making the Outdoor Mural Project the first use of public art funds actively soliciting murals with a larger vision in mind.

A nonprofit arts funding and advocacy group, LexArts started with a citywide open call for blank walls. They chose three sites: Al's Bar on South Limestone, the corner of Southland and Rosemont, and the Vine Street side of the High Street Y.

Neighborhood groups were approached about how they wanted to identify themselves through the murals. They convened with artists and offered ideas about the scope and composition of the artwork. Following those conversations, artists submitted proposals from which the groups chose what best represented their community.

Nathan Zamarron, community arts director for LexArts,



Artist Agustin Zarate worked from a lift truck to create the mural of Man o' War on the side of the Village Idiot pub downtown.

said the Al's Bar mural by Michael Burrell marked a turning point in the area as three neighborhood associations came together to provide input. It became a catalyst for other art and neighborhood improvement projects.

"The process with public art is often as important as the work itself," he said. "It's about bringing the community together and ownership of the end product."

LexArt's own coffers and an NEA grant originally funded the Outdoor Mural Project, but as the murals have become a welcome part of the cityscape, more private donors and businesses are stepping forward to support the Outdoor Mural Project, said Zamarron.



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PRHBTN's John and Jessica Winters have brought 18 murals to Lexington, including "Buffalo" on Luigart Avenue.

New kids in town

John and Jessica Winters, the husband-and-wife team that make up PRHBTN, arrived on the mural scene in 2011. Inspired by the movie "Exit Through the Gift Shop," they were looking for a way to showcase outdoor art that didn't fit into traditional galleries and that used the available surroundings, said John Winters.

"We just jumped in and started doing it," said Winters. "We figured if others could do it, so could we. It started off as a pipe dream and a passion project, and it still is."

Seventy percent of the money used to support PRHBTN comes from the crowdfunding source Kickstarter, with an average do-



"My Name Is MO" created a stir when it was first unveiled in the Distillery District in 2014.

nation of \$30-\$35. The remainder comes through business and private donations. PRHBTN uses LexArts as its fiscal agent to conduct business to assure that every penny is accounted and goes toward the art, said Winters, who works as a graphic designer and an event coordinator while Jessica is an attorney.

"It makes us nervous every year; we put ourselves out on a limb [financially]," said Winters, who grew up in Connecticut but met Jessica, who is from Virginia, in Lexington after he had moved to the area in 2004.

PRHBTN currently has 18 murals around town, several by internationally known artists, including a controversial one by MTO on the side of the Pepper Distillery Warehouse on Manchester Street. The imposing 75-foot-tall and 270-foot-wide mural caused a stir when it was painted in 2014 because its seemingly dark content of a street artist behind bars signing the letters MTO was viewed by some as having the potential to invite gang activity.

Winters said they choose their locations carefully to assure the artists' chosen subjects are suited to their surroundings. As part of the distillery district in an industrial part of town out toward correctional facilities, Winters said the mural worked. "It fits there; it wouldn't have made sense at the corner of Limestone and Short or on the back of the Phoenix Building," he said.



“We are very aware of the location and the artist being a good fit.”

Every year the Winterses make a list of the muralists they'd like to invite to Lexington. They narrow it down to the ones they find particularly intriguing and send an email invitation. Once the artists commit, the couple sends them a catalog of available walls that businesses have offered or the city has approved. “It's like choosing a canvas,” he said.


Winters said they make sure the artists have everything they need when they come to Lexington. The community has embraced the endeavor, with businesses donating food and drink and residents offering housing so artists aren't looking at the walls of a hotel room when they aren't working, said Winters.

“They eat good food; they drink good beer; and they stay somewhere comfortable,” he said. “And artists talk to each other; word gets around that they are treated well here. Keeping the artists happy is paramount.”

The Winterses have even taken one of the muralists, Phlegm, who has been to Lexington twice from Sheffield, England, to the Red River Gorge to do some rock climbing.

One of PRHBTN's most iconic murals almost didn't happen. First, Winters was amazed that Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra would even agree to come to Lexington. He had emailed Kobra's agent on a whim and was shocked to receive a reply asking when. The artist had a window the following month in which to work it into his schedule.

The Winterses had six short weeks to obtain necessary city permits, lifts,






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Renowned Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra created the Lincoln mural on the back of the Kentucky Theatre.

and paint and to get the back of the Kentucky Theatre primed and ready. They also had to book three tickets to fly the Kobra team from Brazil to Kentucky.

"The night before, the agent called and said, 'we're not coming,'" Winters recalled. It turned out he had booked the tickets with a connector in Canada, unaware that the group would need a transit visa to continue to the United States. Winters said he had to rebook the trio, which at the last minute was quite pricey, not to mention stressful.

Preferring to choose subjects with historical significance to an area, Kobra painted a psychedelic-yet-stately version of a seated Abraham Lincoln utilizing the entire back of the Kentucky Theatre in downtown. The project cost PRHBTN \$18,000, which Winters said they were amazingly able to raise in one month through donations. The average mural costs about \$5,000, but other factors, such as flying someone in from South America or overseas, can greatly vary the cost.

The Winterses also do not broker commissioned work. If a business contacts them about wanting a certain, pre-determined mural, they refer them to local artists looking for those kinds of jobs. "We don't make any money," he said. "We do it because it's fun ... We like the art to speak for itself or for other people to be talking about it."

Zamarron said the appetite for art like this has grown, and in addition to private donations increasing, so are the number of businesses and organizations offering their walls for the city's next great piece of street art.

"People get the power of public art," he said. "Art has the power to change the community and solve problems that have nothing to do with art. It gets people engaged." **KM**