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# Celebrity alum gets red-carpet welcome at Mumford High

BY ESTHER ALLWEISS INGBER • FREE PRESS SPECIAL WRITER • JULY 13, 2008

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Noted composer and lyricist Allee Willis first unveiled her musical talent while attending Mumford High in northwest Detroit. The former Detroiter, now of Studio City, Calif., performed her own song, "Oh Vote for Sherry for Secretary," in the gym -- and Sherry (Erman) Stewart of Bloomfield Hills claims her best friend's song helped elect her class secretary.

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"Allee was a lot of fun -- game for anything," said Stewart, recalling Willis (whose given name is Alta) from Mumford's class of 1965. "She always was creative, with a lot of positive energy."

Born to Jewish immigrant parents, the multitalented Willis first made her mark in pop music. Two of her songs -- including "Neutron Dance" recorded by the Pointer Sisters -- are in the 1986 Grammy-winning "Beverly Hills Cop" movie soundtrack. She wrote "Boogie Wonderland" and "September" for the group Earth, Wind and Fire, and the Emmy-nominated "Friends" theme.

## 'Purple' royalty

The acclaimed cocomposer of Broadway's "The Color Purple," Willis was in town recently for the Tony-nominated show's opening at the downtown Fox Theatre on its national tour.

Mumford rolled out the red carpet for her first homecoming. Willis walked in to find a bulletin board decorated with symbols of all her accomplishments.

"Everything was wrapped in purple that could be," she said.

The marching band, choir and dance classes performed a half-hour pageant dedicated to Willis,



The songwriting team for "The Color Purple," from left: Brenda Russell, Stephen Bray and Allee Willis. Willis was in town for the Tony-nominated show's opening at the downtown Fox Theatre on its national tour.

(C Major Marketing)



While on a recent trip back to Detroit, songwriter Allee Willis, a member of Mumford High School's class of 1965, visited Marshall Fredericks' Spirit of Detroit with her honorary plaque from the Detroit City Council.

(Photo from Judy Pearlman)

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who later answered students' questions. Principal Linda Spight presented a basket of Mumford-logo items.

Impressed with Mumford's talent, Willis said she now intends to collaborate online with students for "a visible-to-the-public experiment, like writing a song with the choir, adding lyrics, instruments and vocals -- also doing artwork. All of these active streams going on through music and art have potential."

Also during Willis' visit, the home economics teacher cooked lunch for 50 people, including Willis' friends and family members. Among them: Stewart and another of Willis' old friends, Judy Pearlman of West Bloomfield; her brother and sister-in-law, Kent and Barbara Willis of Bloomfield Hills, and her sister, Marlen Frost from Nebraska.

The Detroit City Council later honored Willis with a plaque.

"To see someone you grew up with, to see all her dreams come true -- it's joyful for all of us who came along for the ride," Stewart said.

### Multimedia maven

After high school, Willis majored in journalism at the University of Wisconsin. She moved to New York in 1969 and was a copywriter at Columbia and Epic Records. Willis wrote liner notes and print ads for Rolling Stone and Billboard.

"I was in charge of the black and female groups," said Willis, who grew up on Detroit's Sorrento Street loving Motown music.

Willis released her first 10 songs in 1974 after buying a piano.

Art is another talent. Willis designs sets and props for videos/short films, sometimes using kitschy items from her home, the site of frequent parties. She displays vintage collections and her own whimsical artwork, sculpture and furniture.

"Allee's house is fantastic," Pearlman said. "You want to look at everything."

Willis enjoys discovering people, such as the Del Rubio Triplets, singing octogenarians in miniskirts and go-go boots. In 1999, Willis announced she'd found Bubbles the Artist (actually Willis herself) and quickly auctioned off about 100 quirky paintings.

"Tracey Ullman went insane for Bubbles," said Willis. Another celebrity collector is Lily Tomlin. Additionally, Bubbles/Willis is a skilled Web designer hired by Tomlin and Jennifer Anniston.

"It's a Woman Thang," from BubblesandCheesecake.com on Willis' clever Web site, won a 2008 Webby Award for video. It was created on home equipment, she said, and "it was the first time I sang, wrote songs, produced records, painted original artwork and cut everything out -- 62 hand-animated characters."

A self-described "freak for documentation," Willis is developing a reality show, "Launching Allee," for TV or Web. Another project, created with animation partner Prudence Fenton, is Willisville, a story-driven, interactive online world.

"Everything I do now is about music, technology, party throwing, collections -- put together as creative expression," Willis said.

*Experience Willis' colorful world at [www.alleewillis.com](http://www.alleewillis.com).*

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