

Art Market

How the Record Sale of “The Sugar Shack” Made Ernie Barnes the Comeback Kid

Ayanna Dozier

Feb 27, 2023 12:11PM



Exterior view of UTA Artist Space, Beverly Hills, 2023. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of UTA Artist Space.

The Sugar Shack, [Ernie Barnes](#)'s 1976 mid-size painting of a Black American dance club, took the art world by storm when it auctioned for \$15.2 million at Christie's last May.

The painting was bought by noted hedge fund manager and high-stakes poker player Bill Perkins, who was [rumored to be bidding against](#) Mellody Hobson, the president of Dreamworks animation who, along with her husband George Lucas, is a noted Barnes collector. The bidding set the final price at a whopping 25 times its high estimate of \$200,000. *The Sugar Shack* is most known for its use as the cover to Marvin Gaye's 1976 album *I Want You*, and also appeared in the credits of the Black American sitcom show *Good Times* (1974-79).

Prior to this sale, Barnes's auction record was for *Ballroom Soul* (1978), a large-scale painting that sold for \$550,000 at Christie's in 2021. Barnes's works now consistently command high and mid-six-figure prices across auctions and the primary market, as evident from the summer and fall [auctions](#).



Ernie Barnes, *The Sugar Shack*, 1976. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of UTA Artist Space and the Ernie Barnes Estate.

The revival of Barnes's work can be traced back to the California African American Museum's retrospective of the artist in 2019. From that exhibition, Arthur Lewis, head of UTA Fine Art, staged an exhibition at the space in 2020 with the collaboration of the estate of Ernie Barnes that drew the eyes of gallery director Andrew Kreps (of the eponymous gallery). Following the sale of *The Sugar Shack* later that summer, Andrew Kreps and Ortuzar Projects announced joint representation of Barnes's estate in partnership with UTA Fine Art. Now, in 2023, audiences have yet another opportunity to see *The*

Sugar Shack in his solo show “Where Music and Soul Live” (on view through April 1st) at UTA Artist Space in Los Angeles.

At Frieze Los Angeles earlier this month, Andrew Kreps and Ortuzar Projects presented a much-lauded solo booth of Barnes’s works that was visited by the likes of Tyler the Creator and Lionel Richie. By the end of the opening day, their official sales report confirmed the sale of a painting for over \$1 million, three paintings in the range of \$500,000 each, and several works on paper in the range of \$60,000–\$100,000.



Ernie Barnes, installation view of “Where Music and Soul Live” at UTA Artist Space, Beverly Hills, 2023. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of UTA Artist Space.

And in early February, Barnes was in the press again when Eddie Murphy outed himself as the owner of the first version of *The Sugar*

Shack painting on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. Murphy clarified that he bought his version from Marvin Gaye's estate in the 1980s and that the version Perkins bought at Christie's is a second version made by Barnes. The differences between the version used for Gaye's album *I Want You* from 1976 and the version sold by Christie's can be seen in the different banners used at the ceiling of the juke joint.

Although Barnes actively pursued art as an adolescent, this interest came secondary to his professional football career. Born in 1938 in Dunham, North Carolina, Barnes attended racially segregated schools as a child. Due to segregation, football provided an opportunity for Barnes to evade the racial line of disparity in a way that the art world could not. It is often reported that Barnes was fined by his coaches for sketching during meetings and games.

Barnes's professional football career—which included playing for the Denver Broncos, San Diego Chargers, and Baltimore Colts—lasted until 1965 when successive injuries forced him into retirement. Following this, Barnes pursued his art practice full time and landed key commissions in Black culture across music and television while also receiving institutional solo exhibitions, like 1974's "The Beauty of the Ghetto" at the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C.



Ernie Barnes, *Late Night DJ*, 1980. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of UTA Artist Space and the Ernie Barnes Estate.

Barnes's stylistic choices for Black culture reflect that of his contemporaries like [Barkley L. Hendricks](#), but Barnes sets himself apart with his emphasis on corporeal gestures of his figures that resemble the work of [Thomas Hart Benton](#) and [El Greco](#), which could be inspired by his athletic background. "His scenes have always embraced dynamic movement, with dance and jazz as an urgent and intrinsic part of the human experience," wrote Zuzanna Ciolek,

director of UTA Artist Space. “It’s as if they are meant to be lived in and experienced in the world.”

This dynamic movement is evident in *The Sugar Shack*, where the viewers can almost feel the figures dancing with the groove despite the painting’s stillness. The image’s iconicity across Black American households cannot be understated: It was, for many, the first work that reflected their community on screen. In addition to Gaye’s *I Want You*, Barnes did album covers for Curtis Mayfield, the Crusaders, and Donald Byrd.

Through prints and poster reproductions of these covers, Barnes’s work grew across living rooms, dormitories, and then celebrity homes, including Motown founder Berry Gordy and musician Kasseem Daoud Dean (a.k.a. Swizz Beatz). Dean has cited that his art collection changed after acquiring several of [Barnes’s works in 2005](#). He even flew Barnes to his home to select places for the works to be installed before the artist passed away in 2009.



Portrait of, from left to right, Bridgette Baldo, Luz Rodriguez, and Zuzanna Ciolek at “Ernie Barnes: Where Music and Soul Live,” 2023, at UTA Artist Space, Beverly Hills. Photo by Christian Nguyen. Courtesy of UTA Artist Space.

“Barnes collectors are an eclectic mix of fun, interesting people. Professional athletes, celebrities, ambassadors, musicians, Hollywood producers, sports team owners, educators, business owners, and other ‘non-art-world’ and working-class people have collected his art since the 1960s,” said Luz Rodriguez, trustee of the Estate of Ernie Barnes. “Perkins represented those who grew up seeing Barnes’s art in pop culture and when in the right position, bought an Ernie Barnes.”

With such an iconic style and works, the estate is ensuring that Barnes is remembered in the art world. During Frieze Los Angeles, his surviving family members wore “Team Barnes” T-shirts, evoking the

familiar and personal connection they share with him that exceeds the art world cash flow. Audiences' connection with Barnes was further deepened at the opening night VIP party hosted by UTA Artist Space, where rapper Channel Tres played music to an energetic crowd. One Artsy staff member confirmed the buzzy atmosphere of the evening that included a disco ball and celebrity sightings like sports agent Rich Paul (romantic partner of the musician Adele).



Ernie Barnes, installation view of "Where Music and Soul Live" at UTA Artist Space, Beverly Hills, 2023. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of UTA Artist Space.

Rodriguez stated that it is precisely this soulful connection that attracts collectors to Barnes's work, which is growing in prominence every day due to the artist's ability to connect with collectors outside

of the art world establishment. “We’ll always have the prints and poster buyers. Now that the *Good Times* and Marvin Gaye fans become more prosperous, they want to own an Ernie Barnes original. New music collectors include Ahmir ‘Questlove’ Thompson, Greg Kurstin, and Bruno Mars,” she said.

Bridgette Baldo, director at UTA Artist Space, summarized Barnes’s art world revival best in her statement to Artsy: “Ernie Barnes pioneered what it truly means to be a multihyphenate artist, reaching the world of music, sports, and entertainment, with work that transcends beyond the static canvas. His scenes are meant to be experienced in life, through song and dance, as the work is powerful and joyful, timeless and sensual,” she said. “Ernie Barnes connects with people across countries and generations and those whose lives he touched continue his legacy.”

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