

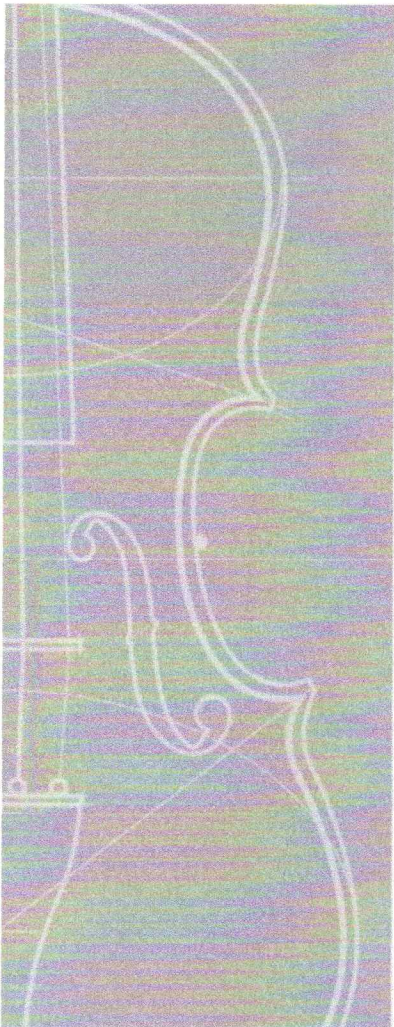


CULTURE CANVAS

## Culture Canvas: Reflections of the Great Migration



by **Micah Walker**  
June 17, 2025 6:30 am

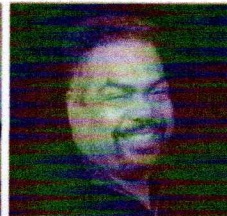


### TASTING NOTES AT 333 MIDLAND: REFLECTIONS OF THE GREAT MIGRATION

Thursday, June 19, 2025 | 7 PM  
333 Midland



GREAT LAKES  
CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL



Credit: Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Hey Detroiters, welcome back to Culture Canvas!



Before becoming a children's and young adult author, Jean Alicia Elster spent several years practicing law. But after she got married and had children, the Detroiter wanted a career that would allow her to work from home. That led her to editing books and, eventually, the Christian publishing house Judson Press approached her about writing a children's book series, she said.

Elster has since written several books, including a trilogy based on her family's history— "Who's Jim Hines?" "The Colored Car," and "How It Happens." The author will share excerpts from the trilogy at an upcoming event for the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival: ["Tasting Notes at 333 Midland: Up South: Reflections of the Great Migration."](#) Taking place at 7 p.m. Thursday at 333 Midland, an art center in Highland Park. The concert will feature performances by Detroit musicians Alvin Waddles, A. Spencer Barefield, Marion Hayden and Tariq Gardner. Elster will serve as narrator.

The event will be a family affair — Hayden and Gardner are Elster's cousins. As guests enjoy a curated tasting of wine and cheese, the concert will feature prose and original music and arrangements for quartet with harmonica, celebrating the spirit of African American migrants through the lens of Hayden's family. General admission is \$61.

***BridgeDetroit: Since the event is about celebrating the Great Migration, what is your family's migration story to Detroit?***

**Elster:** As the narrator, I'm going to be reading from two of my books that I have written, historical fiction based on my family's history. My grandfather came from New Orleans and my grandmother from Clarksville, Tennessee, and they married and came here to Detroit, and it was part of the Black migration. But their story is a little different because my grandfather did not come up here to work in the factories as many of the folks who migrated from the South did. He was a businessman and he started the Douglas Ford Wood Company. He started that in 1922, the year they came up. He (her grandfather) built a house on Halleck Street, and half of the lot is still there. I-75 took the half of the lot where the house was, but the other half, where his wood yard was, is still there. And he had a very successful business up until World War II.

After that, people started transitioning to gas heat and due to the racial realities of the era, he could not get a bank loan to expand his business. He tried and even had references because he delivered all over Detroit and the suburbs, but he could not get a loan to expand his business to become an oil delivery business. The Douglas Ford Wood Company died a natural death because people just were not using wood-burning stoves.

***BridgeDetroit: Did you know a lot about your family history before working on your books?***



**Elster:** Yes. In my first book, I talk about listening to these stories when I was a little girl sitting out in the backyard, where the wood yard used to be. My grandparents planted fruit trees and we'd be sitting under the peach trees or the apple trees, and they would be telling me these stories. So, even as a young child, I heard oral histories about the wood business and about one of their drivers, Jim Hines, and how they came from the south and started this business, and how my grandmother was a partner in the business. She handled the books, she answered the phone. They had the only telephone in the neighborhood and it was for their business. I grew up hearing these stories and then as I got older, I sat down with various relatives and took oral histories from them about our family's history. In my books, "Who's Jim Hines," "The Colored Car," and "How It Happens," it's all historical fiction based on actual events in my family's history.

**BridgeDetroit:** *Why did you decide to do it that way instead of a nonfiction book?*

**Elster:** Well, with fiction, you can expand upon certain events, because if I were to do a memoir, I would be limited to what they told me. With fiction, you can expand more and pique the reader's interest more. Because many people, if it's a history book or even if it's a memoir, it doesn't quite grab them. But when you fictionalize it, you can add things that grab the reader more and make things come alive more in a way that they may not connect with in a memoir or a history book.

**BridgeDetroit:** *What is something that you're looking forward to with the concert?*

**Elster:** I just enjoy connecting with audiences during the performance and afterwards, and so I'm just looking forward to sharing the evening, not only with my cousin and the other musicians, but with all the folks that will be there. The last performance we did was very well attended, and I just look forward to seeing another enthusiastic group there.

As always, have a great week!

Until next time,

Micah