

The Mutual Musicians Foundation Celebrates 75 Years



Members of Local 627 strike a pose for posterity on the dedication day of their new union hall on May 4, 1930.

On May 4, 1930, over 100 musicians proudly lined the street at 1823 Highland. There was much merriment and celebration as members of Musicians' Union Local 627 officially opened the doors to its own building. It was a grand event.

Seventy-five years later, the building is the only black musicians' union hall left standing in the United States. It is also the only building in Kansas City to be designated a National Historic Landmark.

On April 30 the Mutual Musicians Foundation will celebrate Local 627's move into the building. A party with music, food, films, and a 60-page web site showcasing 180 photos will mark the occasion.

Kansas City Here I Come

At the time the musicians opened their headquarters in 1930, the Roaring '20s had ended with a crash. Jazz musicians who were drunk with fame and suc-

cess were now hard pressed to find work. But not in Kansas City. While money and booze had pretty much dried up elsewhere during the '30s, Kansas City's night scene was flourishing thanks to Boss Tom Pendergast and his henchmen. Black musicians especially flocked to 18th & Vine. It became a vibrant community that never slept.

"18th & Vine was very alive," says pianist and vocalist Luqman Hamza who grew up in the neighborhood. "It was a community of entrepreneurs." "Every joint, no matter how big or small, had at least a three-piece in there," recalls saxophonist Arthur Jackson who joined the union in 1938.

After hours, musicians would head home to 18th & Vine and jam all night. Some clubs never closed their doors.



The Union Hall in 1940.

Traveling musicians quickly joined the union, which was very successful at finding decent-paying jobs.

"The Union had the town covered," says saxophonist Ahmad Alaadeen. "Some of the guys from the Union would come around and try to intimidate if you were a scab."

As a result, Local 627 grew from 25 members at its inception in 1917 to 347 in 1930.

Along Came Shaw

Local 627 quickly outgrew the small office it rented in the Rialto Building at 18th & Highland. When musician and local barber William Shaw

was elected president in 1928, he established discipline within the ranks and fined members for infractions. He also began to make plans to purchase the two-story apartment building at 1823 Highland. Bands held fundraisers in the form of dances and battles of the bands. Frequently participating in these fundraisers were the wildly popular Bennie Moten Orchestra, George E. Lee's Novelty Singing Band, Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy, and Paul Bank's Rhythm Aces to name a few. When the building was purchased and converted into a headquarters, band members celebrated the grand opening with a parade, a pose for posterity and a staged battle of the bands that continued until daybreak.

Shaw would reign as president for the next 20 years.

A Look Inside the Building

Inside the building, members sat around a large black pot-belly stove playing chess or dominoes. The room was filled with smoke, stories and unrehearsed music. Shaw's small office was at the front and his hunting dogs presided in the back. (They sometimes roamed freely, reportedly leaving "souvenirs" throughout the building.) There was no bar on the premises like there is today. But that didn't stop anybody.

"Guys might come in off the street and bring a little taste," laughs Jay McShann who joined in 1937. "Everyone would be sitting around and watching to see if they were going to get some!"

Without question there was a strong sense of brotherhood. After all, black musicians in Kansas City were going through the best of times and the worst of times. While experiencing immeasurable success and adoration, they were also confined to



William Shaw, President Local 627 1928 - 1948.

PHOTO COURTESY KANSAS CITY MUSEUM

humiliating Jim Crow laws. "Hard times brought about the good music," says Hamza. Stepping into the building at 1823 Highland was like coming home to family.

A Who's Who of Musicians

Upstairs, members held meetings every other Sunday. Sometimes there was the occasional Union party. But mostly bands rehearsed there during the day and musicians jammed at night.

A long list of Kansas City musicians honed their skills here before moving up the national circuit: the Count Basie Band, Andy Kirk and his 12 Clouds of Joy, Bennie Moten's Orchestra, Harlan Leonard's band, and musicians such as Big Joe Turner, Ben Webster, Lester Young, Pete Johnson, Buster Smith, Eddie Durham, Hot Lips Paige, Charlie Parker, Jay McShann, Mary Lou Williams, Myra Taylor, and more.



Group shot of George E. Lee Novelty Singing Orchestra circa 1926.



Installation of union officials upstairs at 627. L-R: 2nd Carroll Jenkins, 3rd Herman Walder, 4th Richard Smith, 5th Franz Bruce, 6th John Church, 7th R.H. Coleman 1948.

Over the years, visiting musicians made their trek: Billy Eckstine, Sonny Stitt, Jimmy Smith, Miles Davis, John Coltrane. In fact, it was here

where Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker met and jammed for the first time.

There was no end to the talent that graced these halls and belonged to the Union.

"I would visit on a daily basis to learn, hear, and see," recalls Alaadeen, who joined the Union in 1950.

School of Hard Knocks

Many musicians learned to play Kansas City jazz from jamming with the more experienced veterans at the union hall. It was the "School of Hard Knocks" as Lonnie McFadden explains. McFadden would often go down to the Foundation with his father, tap dancer Jimmy McFadden, in the late '60s. "When I picked up my horn I was no longer Jimmy's son," he

laughs. "I was either good or I wasn't. And they'd knock me off the stage if I wasn't! Guys would start playing in the middle of your solo if they didn't like what you were playing or if you were boring them. Believe me, the verbal interpretations were very freely given!"



Harlan Leonard band on stage. Leonard second from left, Myra Taylor in back and Ernie Williams is conducting.

It was a Local 627 tradition that began with jam sessions. Such a scene was depicted in the movie *Bird* in which a musician threw down

"Hi, May I Help You?"

KANSAS CITY'S OWN
GATES
BAR-B-Q SAUCE

GATES
FAMILY OF SAUCES
Available at
your Local Grocery Store

JAZZ up your
next event...
let Gates give you
a helping hand
816.923.0900

Gates offers you SIX restaurant locations
in the Greater Kansas City Area!

1325 Emanuel Cleaver II Blvd. - 816.531.7522
103rd & State Line - 913.383.1752
1026 State Ave - 913.621.1134
1221 Brooklyn - 913.483.3880
10440 E. 40 Highway - 816.353.5880
Linwood & Main - 816.753.0828



Mutual Musicians Foundation, *continued*



Bennie Moten Band on stage probably as Paseo Hall circa 1925. L-R Willie McWashington drums; LaForest Dent banjo, Vernon Page tuba; Thamon Hayes trombone; Lamar Wright cornet; Moten piano; Harlan Leonard alto sax; Woodie Walter tenor sax.

recalls Hamza, who joined under the name Larry Cummings in 1949. (Hamza along with his band The Five Aces would eventually win a record deal with Decca.) The mentoring tradition also continues.

a cymbal during Charlie Parker's solo. The tradition continues to this day, which often shocks aspiring musicians.

Beyond the jam sessions, there was also a strong mentoring program.

"There were a lot of musicians who were very knowledgeable who took us under their wings,"

Changes

As the musicians who performed here in the '30s left for record contracts and national exposure, younger ones came up through the ranks. Bands like The Scamps, the Five Aces, the Four Tons of Rhythm, the Deans of Swing, the Jimmy Keith band, and more.

In 1948, bandleader Elmer Payne was elected president and replaced Shaw. But it was the secretary treasurer Richard Smith who became the defacto president and made sweeping changes at the Union headquarters. He tidied up the place

Only a week after the 75th Anniversary Celebration at the Mutual Musicians Foundation, another Kansas City legend will be honored. On May 7, Jay McShann will be the recipient of the American Jazz Museum Award in an all-out gala with tributes from guest pianists from around the country.

It was almost 70 years ago that McShann began playing professionally. McShann remembers when he first joined Local 627 in 1937.

"After I came to Kansas City, William Shaw said to me, 'You're gonna have to join the union.' I said 'But I don't have any money.' At the time it cost about \$20 or \$35.

So he said 'But you can pay \$1 this week. \$1 next week. And when you get a gig, another \$1. And before you know it you're all paid up.'

So anytime I would see him on the street I would say 'You have a pencil and paper? Give me a receipt and I'll pay you.'

He'd do it!"

It wasn't long before McShann had put together his own band which included a young Charlie Parker. (It was McShann's band that nicknamed Parker "Yardbird.") In 1941, McShann's big band signed with Decca Records and from there he received national status



Andy Kirk and His Twelve Clouds of Joy on stage 2/16/34. Ben Webster is second from the left in the reed section.

as a blues and jazz musician. McShann always retained his membership with Local 627. Sometimes he even tried to jam there.

"The piano was so bad, they didn't do too much jamming on it," he chuckles. "I never seen it fail. Someone would sit down and play two or three notes and jump up and run away from the piano! I'd be ashamed to send someone over there."

"Every once in a while a Good Samaritan would come and tune it, but it didn't stay tuned for long."

Since then, a piano was donated to the Foundation in McShann's honor. Over the years, McShann has been the recipient of many awards and honors, including a documentary about him called *Hootie Blues* and a part in the documentary *Last of the Blue Devils* filmed at the Mutual Musicians Foundation.

For more information about the gala, contact the American Jazz Museum at 816-474-8463.

—Kathy Feist Vescovi

McShann Honored



Jay McShann Orchestra circa 1940.

Battle of the Saxes

A Benefit for the Musicians Emergency Assistance Fund

Ahmad Alaadeen

Dan Thomas

Rick Rieger

With

Bram Wijnands • Lucky Wesley • Tommy Ruskin

August 18

7:30 – 11:30 p.m.

12th Street Rag Room (in the Downtown Marriott)

Tickets \$15 (\$12 KCJA Members; \$10 Students)



KANSAS CITY
JAZZ
AMBASSADORS

Mutual Musicians Foundation, continued

and ran a tight ship with union members. After Smith was elected president in 1957, the building was updated to include a lounge and bar on

hang with us. We knew we couldn't go home to 34 and do that." The members devised a way to save the building and keep it as a social club. With the



These two photos illustrate the before and after process of cleaning up spills, tears, folds and even cigarette burns found on photos. This particular photo, circa 1917-1920, is of Dave Lewis' Jazz Boys, one of the earliest jazz bands in Kansas City.

the first floor. Eventually, the brick exterior was replaced with stucco.

Mostly, Smith had to deal with integration. During the '60s, while most African-Americans were fighting for integration, Local 627 was resisting. Members were afraid they would lose jobs, or more importantly lose their social club. "Local 34 was all business and no pleasure," recalls Jackson. "Some of their musicians would come down and

ing.

When the local unions merged in 1970, members still had a building to call home.

The Spirit Lives

Musicians from far and wide still like to jam at the Foundation's midnight jam sessions on weekends. Local musicians still rehearse during the day. They all continue the legacy.

"Even now, after all these years, when you go into that building you can feel the energy of all those guys," says musician and MMF President Al Pearson. He and the board would like to preserve that energy, if not somehow renew it.

Betty Crow, secretary of the board, figured out one way to capture the spirit of bygone days. Her dream was to preserve the hundreds of photos that have hung on the wall of the Foundation. She contributed her own money to get the project started. "I really believe in the Foundation and I believe it should be saved and preserved for the future," she says. "All the great musicians were there."

With the help of Chuck Haddix, historian at the Marr Sound Archives, Rob Ray, librarian in the Special Collections Department of the Miller Nichols Library at UMKC, and a grant from the

help of experts from New York, Chicago, and St. Louis, the administration pooled money from local businessmen and formed a corporation that bought the building from Union 627. Members then formed the Mutual Musicians Foundation which still occupies the build-



Group portrait of the Scamps. L-R Willie Rice piano, Sam Alexander guitar, Art Jackson sax, Earl Robinson drum, James Whitcomb bass.



Five Aces. L-R: Jeep Gridiron guitar, Lucky Wesley bass, Luqman Hamza vocals, Eddie Saunders saxophone, Rico Kemp guitar.

William T. Kemper Foundation, her dream has become a reality. Over 700 items have been cleaned up, digitized, and stored at UMKC.

On April 30, about 180 photos and items can be seen online along with an accompanying his-

tory of Local 627. "The web site fills in the visual details of the history," says Haddix.

Duplicated photos now fill the walls at the Foundation. But the music and spirit that spills from its halls are 100 percent genuine.

Everette DeVan, Lester "Duck" Warner, and Sharon Thompson will start out the festivities on April 30 from 7-10 p.m. at the Foundation. The new web site and its address will be revealed after the program. In the meantime, a portion of the collection can be found at www.umkc.edu/lib/spec-col/627mmf.htm.



PLAZA III

The Steakhouse

4749 Pennsylvania
Kansas City, Mo
816.753.0000



"The Gold Standard of Kansas City Steakhouses"

— Zagat Survey