

Jay McShann

Pianist and Bandleader
1916-2006

by Jeremy Drouin

Pianist, band leader, composer, and vocalist Jay “Hootie” McShann is recognized as one of the most influential blues and jazz artists of the twentieth century, with a career that spanned over 60 years. A bluesman at heart, McShann helped shape the Kansas City sound which was heavily influenced by blues and swing.

Born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, on January 12, 1916, McShann was the youngest of four children in a conservative Christian family. As a young man, he was first introduced to the blues while rummaging through damaged records he found in his father’s furniture store. He taught himself to play on the family piano, inspired by likes of James P. Johnson and other pianists.

McShann’s early music career consisted of short stints performing with “territory” bands in Oklahoma and Kansas before finding his way to Kansas City, Missouri, in 1936. According to McShann, during a bus layover on his way to Omaha, Nebraska, he ran into an old Tulsa acquaintance—bassist Bill Hadnot—who advised: “Man, this is where you want to stay. This is where the music is. You don’t want to be going to Omaha.” Jay stayed in Kansas City and within days was playing regular gigs at the Monroe Hotel on Independence Avenue.

McShann quickly earned the reputation as a talented musician and in 1937 formed his own sextet. In 1939 he assembled a big band and performed at the Pla-Mor Ballroom, Century Room, and Fairyland Park in Kansas City.

Over the next several years, the Jay McShann Orchestra, which featured a young Charlie Parker, toured extensively throughout the United States. In 1941, with Walter Brown as vocalist, the band recorded its most popular hit, ‘Confessin’ the Blues,’ for Decca



Records. However, the group disbanded two years later when McShann was drafted into Army.

Jay returned to Kansas City in 1950 and continued to play in local clubs and tour regionally with small combos. After studying music at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, he was back on the road by the late-1960s and continued to record and tour through the 1990s, garnering international fame. He passed away in Kansas City on December 7, 2006 after a brief illness.

Sources

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