

Bennie Moten

Pianist, Bandleader

1894-1935

by David Conrads

Kansas City jazz, a hard-swinging, blues-based musical style that flourished in the 1920s and '30s, is arguably this city's greatest contribution to the uniquely American art form of jazz. Of the countless musicians and bandleaders who played at nightclubs, ballrooms, social clubs, and all-night jam sessions in the 18th & Vine district during that golden era, none embodied Kansas City jazz more than Bennie Moten.

Moten was born and raised in Kansas City, where he studied piano with two of Scott Joplin's former students. While Moten was considered to be a good, but not exceptional, piano player, he excelled as a bandleader and businessman. Good-natured and generous, and was able to hire the best musicians in the area, many of them lured away from rival bands. He was also a minor politician, friendly with boss Tom Pendergast, and controlled many of the music jobs in Kansas City.

By 1918, Moten was leading his own professional ragtime trio, which he later expanded to a six-piece band. They played regularly at the Panama Club and the Streets Hotel Lounge from 1921 to 1923. Over the next twelve years, Moten's band expanded several more times and its members included some of the great jazz musicians of the day, most notably Count Basie. With Moten as the principle architect, the Bennie Moten Orchestra developed and refined the Kansas City style of big band jazz.

In addition to performing around the country, the Bennie Moten Orchestra made nearly one hundred recordings for the Okey and Victor labels, including "South," "Prince of Wails," and the classic "Moten's Swing," their best-known tune.

In 1935, Moten's band traveled to Denver to begin an engagement at the Rainbow Ballroom while their leader stayed in Kansas City to have his tonsils removed. For reasons not entirely clear, what should have been a routine operation went tragically awry, and Moten died on the operating table at the age of 39.

Sources

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