

George E. Lee

Singer and Bandleader
1896-1958

by David Conrads

During the 1920s and early 1930s, George E. Lee fronted one of the most popular and successful bands in Kansas City. Though more akin to a vaudeville troupe, George E. Lee's Novelty Singing Orchestra was the chief rival of the Benny Moten Orchestra for supremacy among the city's many outstanding black bands.

George Ewing Lee was born in Booneville, Missouri, in 1896 and grew up in Kansas City. As children, he and his younger sister, Julia Lee, performed with their father's string trio at neighborhood house parties and church socials. In 1920, they teamed up with a drummer and performed at Lyric Hall, at Eighteenth and Lydia streets. By 1927 George Lee had formed a larger band, and later hired an arranger to modernize the group's sound so it could compete on equal musical footing with Moten's orchestra.

Lee played many instruments, but singing was his forte. Sometimes billed as the "Cab Calloway of the Middle West," George had a powerful voice and a penchant for ballads and novelty songs. His sister was also a strong singer, and through the 1920s no group in Kansas City could compete vocally with the Lee Orchestra.

Lee's organizational skills, however, were weak. Turnover in his band was high, and he was not always able to attract top musicians. But the infectious beat of its songs, combined with the one-two punch of the brother-sister vocal team, made the Lee Orchestra tough competition in local battles of the bands, where the winner was judged by popular applause and well-sung songs were perennial crowd-pleasers.

By 1935 Lee's orchestra had disbanded, but he continued to perform with smaller ensembles through the decade. In 1937, at a resort in the Ozarks, Lee fronted a small group that included 17-year-old saxophonist Charlie Parker.

George E. Lee retired from music in 1941 and moved to Detroit, where he operated a tavern. He died in San Diego in 1958.

Sources

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