



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

James Columbus “Jay” McShann (1916-2006)

Although Jay McShann is oft remembered for serving as bandleader to the legendary Charlie Parker, McShann was a gifted musician himself, both as a pianist and vocalist. Born in Muskogee, Okla., McShann’s musical gifts were cultivated through self-teaching. He attended Tuskegee Institute and worked with Don Byas in 1931 before setting out to perform on his own.



McShann began playing in Oklahoma and Arkansas before moving to Kansas City in 1936. In Kansas City, he joined Oliver Todd and Elmer Hopkins in a local trio before forming his own sextet the following year. By 1939, McShann had formed his own big band, which would play gigs at the Century Room and Fairyland Park over the course of the next year. He also earned the nickname Hootie.

In 1940 at a radio station in Wichita, Kan., McShann recorded eight songs with his octet. These early tracks weren’t released until the 1970s as some of Charlie Parker’s earliest works. McShann’s full orchestra recorded for Decca twice during 1941 and 1942. McShann’s legendary group featured Gene Ramey, Gus Johnson, Bernard Anderson and Walter Brown, in addition to Charlie Parker.



McShann took his group to New York in 1942, but with World War II at hand, it was difficult to promote and popularize their music. Although the group performed both blues and swing music, they mainly recorded blues songs, most notably “Confessin’ the Blues.” McShann was drafted into the war in 1944, and the group never returned to its previous glory after he returned to the states.

From New York McShann moved to Los Angeles where he led several small groups. His most notable included singer Jimmy Witherspoon. McShann then fell out of the music spotlight for more than two decades, playing occasionally in Kansas City and recording even less. In 1969, McShann was rediscovered and rose to fame a second time, on this occasion as a pianist and vocalist. He played with violinist Claude Williams and toured heavily.



Throughout his years in music, McShann recorded with more than 15 different record labels. He is the subject of the 1978 film “Hootie’s Blues,” and his performances are featured in the 1979 film “The Last of the Blue Devils.” He also served as a character in the 2005 novel “The Hot Kid.” A bandleader, lively pianist with blues and boogie-woogie flavor, and strong blues vocalist, McShann’s classic style withstood the test of time and is still remembered today.

A live album “Hootie Blues” was recorded in Toronto in 2001 and released in 2006 just before McShann’s death. Even at age 85, McShann’s performances were legendary. McShann died at age 90 in Kansas City at the end of 2006.

