



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Bennie Moten (1894-1935)

Although Bennie Moten's life and career were cut short, his contributions to Kansas City's jazz music in the early 20th century would live on long after his death. Moten paved the way for Count Basie and other bandleaders that would continue Moten's legacy and pioneering ways.

Benjamin "Bennie" Moten was born and raised in Kansas City. Growing up, he studied piano with two of Scott Joplin's former students. Although Moten played the piano well, he was an even stronger businessman and bandleader. Moten initially played the baritone horn in Dan Blackburn's Band, but by 1918, Moten started his own professional ragtime trio, the B.B. & D. Trio.

The group soon became a six-piece band and played regularly at the Panama Club and the Streets Hotel Lounge. In September 1923, the group accompanied singer Ada Brown on the track considered the first Kansas City Jazz recording, "Evil Mama Blues" on the Okeh label. As time went on, Moten continued expanding his band and recording along the way.

In 1926, Moten's group of 11, now known as Bennie Moten's Kansas City Orchestra, began recording for the Victor label and produced hits such as "South" and "Kansas City Shuffle." The group personified Kansas City's big band jazz and was touring all over the country, making a name for Kansas City and its music.

Moten's business sense led him to begin recruiting members from other groups, most notably the Blue Devils. In 1929, Count Basie joined Moten's band, along with Walter Page, Jimmy Rushing, Oran "Hot Lips" Page and Eddie Durham. In 1932, after acquiring Ben Webster and Eddie Barefield, the group recorded their most popular hit, "Moten's Swing."

Moten and his group frequented El Torreon Ballroom in Kansas City, and the group merged with George E. Lee in 1933 to form a 15-piece orchestra. In 1935, the band left to play an engagement in Denver, while Moten stayed behind to have his tonsils removed. Although a routine surgery, complications arose and Moten died on the operating table at the young age of 39. Count Basie took over the band after Moten's death and led the group to a great deal of continued success.

Although Moten's career suffered a tragic ending, his contributions will never be forgotten. The Bennie Moten Orchestra recorded more than 100 songs under Moten's leadership, and the group is arguably one of the most influential in American jazz history.

