

BLACK HISTORY MONTH 1998

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The Golden Decade of Jazz in Portland

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Vera Katz recently proclaimed Portland as "The Jazz Capital of the West Coast." To be more accurate, it was over fifty years ago when Jazz was played in its highest art form on Williams Avenue. There was no other time in history when so many musical forces came together as they did. Jazz was King.

Between 1944 and 1954, Portland had its own Golden Decade of Jazz. Williams Avenue in Northeast Portland was alive as a "hot bed" of Jazz talent. It was by way of segregation and the heat of racism that touched off an artistic explosion expressed through music.

Williams Avenue reputedly had the "Best music, Best booze, Best broads, Best gambling and Best food." This was the street in a city that never slept. The ongoing sounds of Jazz and the pungent smells of barbecue were obvious. For thrill seekers, Williams Avenue was the place to be.

The Jazz played was made for dancing. Portland was a dance community. The crowds liked to clap, yell and stomp to the music. It stayed intimate until Bebop came onto the scene. Most Black audiences felt lost with it. It was too intellectual, too fast. The musical chords of Bebop would "come at you."

Many Jazz legends came to Portland in droves. This was where musical genius could thrive. The last of the old New Orleans jazz men like Freddie Keppert and "Dink" Johnson were drawn to Portland's Entertainment

Strip. Sammy Davis Jr. had apprenticed here before achieving national stardom. Even Duke Ellington and Thelonius Monk found their musical place here.

Like New Orleans and Chicago, Portland was the Jazz heartbeat of America between 1944 and 1954.

The key elements that made Williams Avenue a Jazz mecca was World War II, segregation and corruption.

Thanks to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, he prompted the building of Bonneville Dam. His vision was to develop the Northwest because he explained, "Cheap energy (through Bonneville) brings in the industry."

An estimated 20,000 to 25,000 Black workers were recruited by the Kaiser company. They were hired to build Liberty ships as part of the war effort. The Kaiser company ran trains daily to the West Coast from the East and the South when the need for workers was greatest.

This town rapidly grew into a bustling port-city. It became an exciting cultural exchange center. Uprooted Blacks from all over the nation arrived with the majority from Texas. Many brought with them a certain flavor of Jazz to the musical culture on Williams Avenue.

Earlier Black residents of Portland resented the massive in-migration of African American workers. Portland had a clearly defined Black caste system. At the top of the rung was the privileged class of Black elites that

pioneered here. Ship workers for Kaiser were second class. The third class were the sharecroppers and domestics who eked out a marginal existence. They were the tough and hardy.

Racism here was "Silent" (institutional). It wasn't out in the open. Many Blacks preferred Southern racism. "At least you know where you stand."

Kaiser company workers stayed in Vanport, the largest war-time housing facility in the country. A lot of Portlanders and Oregonians had negatively associated Vanport with murder, rape, thievery and slums.

After the Vanport flood of 1948, Blacks were forcibly segregated to the Albina section of Portland. Albina was known as the Black workingman's area for being connected with the railroad and ship building industries.

Greed and corruption were a means of survival for many Blacks. A conduit for the Northeast vice districts and the police was Tom Johnson. He controlled Portland's underworld. Tom was both formidable and saintly. No Black-owned night club could open without him. Out of altruism, he generously poured money into Black businesses.

Fortunes were made and lost with gambling and selling liquor in hangouts like the Chicken Coop and McElroys. There was always the Jazz beat as a back drop to a great drama played out long ago.

Next week, the second part of this series will continue with "Pioneers of Portland Jazz."



Employees singing at a picnic in Portland.
Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.



Dixieland jazz was gaining popularity fast. Portland was a dancing community. December, 1949.

Quote from the community:

"Music incorporates a spiritual dimension. It is a freedom that allows for much self-expression: the joy, sorrow, excitement, the challenges. Blues may lament at how sad a tough life was. There is the hope at the end. It makes you feel good. So much of our music is joyous."

(Reverend Alcena Boozer)

Quote from the community:

"Reggae, Salsa, Calypso, Jazz, the Blues. The African beat always gives you the sense of Soul. It is in our blood. Blacks can recognize that beat without thinking. It's easily recognized by any person of African ancestry. It's very difficult to explain."

(Romelio Salas, Tigard resident of Latino African descent)

Quote from the community:

"When I listen to jazz, it puts me in a frame of reference and perspective that everything is right with the world. Things are perfect. Jazz reflects how we live. We live in a structured community and may come back improvising all over the place which may seem chaotic. It is really order adding to the structure."

(Ben Priestley, Executive Director of NE. Neighborhood)

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