

Portland's Jazz Legacies Celebrated

Show honors rich history of black musicians

BY CARI HACHMANN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Black History Month honors Portland's rich history of jazz music with a two-weekend run of "Sherman: A Jazz Opera," a show about the post World War II jazz scene around Broadway and North



Thara Memory

Williams Avenue and the reclaimed talents of jazz musician Sherman Thomas.

Composed by Portland musician Thara Memory and produced by S. Renee Mitchell, an award-winning-

journalist, poet and public speaker, the story is based in the 1940s-1950s and loosely tells the story of Thomas, a Portland saxophone player who died tragically in the 70s, and also highlights the jazz-themed art of the late Portland artist Philemon Reid.

The production, also starring Janice Scroggins, Reggie Houston and Rita Marquez, opens Friday, Feb. 18 at Ethos at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, 5340 N. Interstate Ave., with shows continuing through Feb. 27. The show is a prelude to a larger production scheduled in 2012-2013 by Portland Opera.

"The story of Sherman Thomas is a story of northeast Portland, but it's also a story of many countless musicians throughout the country," said Mitchell, who provides the libretto for the show.

As a gifted star among the milky way of jazz legends, it is said that when Sherman Thomas wrapped his full lips around the mouth of his saxophone, the fierceness of his notes electrified Portland's smoky jazz blues, sending brown-skinned women's hips to swaying and married jazz lovers to make promises they couldn't keep.

Though his natural talent pleased listeners and lovers alike, Sherman sought a high that only harder drugs seemed to satisfy. He soon lost

touch of his jazz music and sweet-heart, Marion, until his life too, faded in history's memory like a sweet and melodic tune.

"No matter whether people knew about Sherman or not, the appeal is really in the story and in the lessons



S. Renee Mitchell

his life can teach us about our own. Like any other art form, this show reflects the energy, creativity, hopes and dreams of all of us and can be a positive force in building community," Mitchell says.

For those who have forgotten about the rich history of inner north and northeast Portland, this show will help people recognize the shoulders they stand on and appreciate the music that was played and birthed from the musical geniuses that lived and died here.

Sixty years ago, before Trail Blazers bound up and down Rose Garden courts, before the tall glass piers of the Memorial Coliseum scraped

city skies, and before the I-5 freeway carved through Portland's eastside over the Willamette River, post-war era's most aspiring jazz legends, Sherman Thomas, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Billy Holiday and many others, jammed in their favorite Portland hideout between Los Angeles and Seattle, two of the most prolific jazz scenes on the west coast.

Smokey jazz clubs lined Portland's North Williams Avenue known then as "Black Broadway," a ballooning hub of black community and backyard entertainment. Home to black-owned grocery stores, black-owned clothing stores, black-owned restaurants, at least 10 clubs bellowed jazz music night and day.

During World War II, black musicians from the East Coast arrived by rail along with tens of thousands of African Americans travelling westward to build war ships in local Kaiser Shipyards.

"More people need to recognize that Jazz unified us, it inspired us, it is truly an American art form, and it's always been a powerful bridge that crosses the boundaries of age, race, sex, ethnic background, and nationality," says Mitchell, who interviewed various people about Sherman after agreeing to write the libretto for Memory, the project's brainchild.

After meeting Sherman Thomas decades ago, Memory was stricken

by the jazz artist's legendary talents.

An accomplished musician who has played music professionally for more 45 years, Memory began working on a score for the project on and off for several decades. Later, he was commissioned by the IFCC to write the score, but financial problems stalled the project for almost a year until the Portland Opera and Ethos helped bear the weight of the production, and Sherman: A Jazz

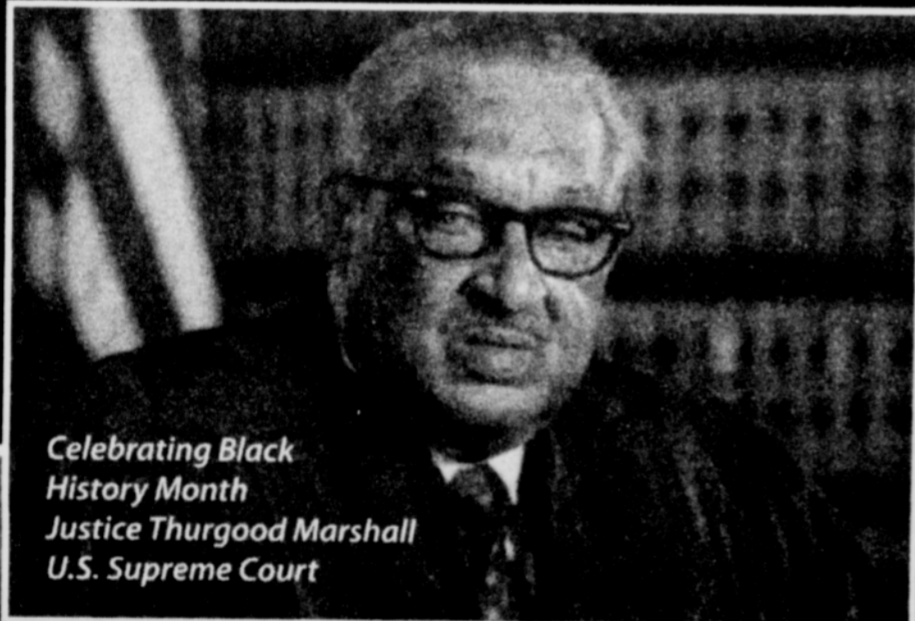


Reggie Houston

Opera was finally born.


As a teaching, the show will remind viewers of important jazz lessons; improvising, group interaction, developing an individual voice,

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