

### Movie Review: 'Thunder Soul'

Reverential bio-pic pays tribute to legendary high school bandleader Conrad Johnson



#### MOVIE REVIEWS

by Kam Williams

After graduating from Wiley College (of "The Great Debaters" fame) back in the Thirties, Conrad "Prof" Johnson (1915-2008) briefly embarked on a promising career as a jazz musician, joining big band orchestras led by the likes of Count Basie and Erskine Hawkins. However, he decided to come off the road in 1940, right after meeting the love of his life, Birdie.

The couple soon married and decided to settle down in his native Texas, where for the next 37 years, Prof would teach music at Kashmere High in Houston. There, he formed a stage band to compete in tournaments against other schools, and as conductor taught his students how to achieve a professional quality sound on their instruments.

By the late Sixties, Kashmere had developed an enviable reputation as a world-class powerhouse, courtesy of a funky brand of music dubbed Thunder Soul. But perhaps more important than forging

youngsters into a competitive, top-flight band capable of winning national championships was the fact that Prof simultaneously served as a father figure to so many who were being raised without a male role model.

Although he retired in 1978, Conrad Johnson had made such a lasting impression on his Kashmere kids that numerous band alumni decided to pay tribute to him 30 years later by reuniting to do a show when they learned their hero was in failing health. That Herculean effort is the subject of "Thunder Soul," a reverential bio-pic directed by Mark Landsman.

Produced by fellow Texan Jamie Foxx, the picture features file footage of the group performing in the Seventies when they were mostly sporting big afros and wearing bell bottom pants and platform shoes. That retro reminder is deftly juxtaposed against the same individuals now middle-aged, yet somehow still summoning up the funkified fire of old as they "practice, practice, practice" just to please their former mentor in one glorious, toe-tapping last hurrah.

Mixed in with those preparations are a host of heartfelt reminiscences about how much Prof meant to each of them. And if you aren't moved by those teary-eyed testimonials, then the floodgates will certainly open on reunion



night when their 92 year-old mentor is wheeled up the aisle from a hospital bed to attend the magnificent concert in his honor.

They don't make 'em like Prof anymore!

Excellent (4 stars)  
Rated PG for smoking and mild epithets  
Running time: 83 minutes  
Distributor: Roadside Attractions

## COMMUNITY CALENDAR

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If you have an event you want to share with the community, email it two weeks in advance to *The Skanner* at [info@theskanner.com](mailto:info@theskanner.com)

#### Friday September 30

CAMPFIRE USA AND FIRST AME HOST COMMUNITY S'MORES ROAST AND CAMP FIRE. The evening includes a short program & guest speakers. 7 p.m. - 8:30 p.m. at MLK Fame Community Center, 3201 E. Republican St.

#### Saturday October 1

NORTHWEST GLASS PUMPKIN PATCH: Over 4000 hand blown glass pumpkins crafted by local glass artisans. Come pick the perfect pumpkin for yourself or as a gift. Free admission. 9 a.m. - 4 p.m. Seattle Center Pavilion (room B behind

the Skate Park) 200 Thomas St.

#### Sunday October 2

2011 NORTHWEST BOOKFEST: Meet television and radio personality Manny Pacheco as he signs his award winning book. *Forgotten Hollywood, Forgotten History*. 11 a.m. - 7 p.m. North Kirkland Community Center, 12421 103rd Ave. NE. Kirkland.

#### Thursday October 6

ART IN OCCIDENTAL PARK: Grab a latte and join us for the Art in Occidental Park. The public is invited to discover Seattle's talented community. 11 a.m. - 10 p.m. Occidental Square. Occidental Ave. S. and South Main St.

#### Sunday October 8

THE SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY CELEBRATES THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF LANGSTON HUGHES BLACK NAVITY. Join a discussion about the legacy and impact of Langston Hughes and enjoy readings of Hughes poetry by Youth Speaks poets. This is a free program. 2 - 4 p.m. Douglass-Truth Branch, 2300 E. Yesler Way.

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