

Movie Review: 'Thunder Soul'

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

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



MOVIE REVIEW

by Kam Williams

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

Gerding Theater at the Armory
128 NW Eleventh Avenue

503.445.3700
pcs.org

PORTLAND CENTER STAGE



OKLAHOMA!

MUSIC BY RICHARD RODGERS BOOK AND LYRICS BY OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II
BASED ON THE PLAY GREEN GROW THE LILACS BY LYNN RIGGS
ORIGINAL DANCES BY AGNES DE MILLE DIRECTED BY CHRIS COLEMAN

SEPTEMBER 20-OCTOBER 30



Bourbon at the Border



When May and Charlie joined hundreds of other Americans on a journey to Mississippi in the summer of 1964 for a massive voter registration drive, they had no idea their lives were about to change forever. PassinArt Presents "Bourbon at the Border," by Pearl Cleage, Oct. 13 - Nov. 5, at Ethos /IFCC,

5340 N. Interstate Ave., Portland. Directed by Ken Dembo, the cast includes: Rozlyn Reynolds and Rick Jones (above), S. Renee Mitchell and Jerry Foster.

General Admission \$20
Online discount available

PassinArt presents
BOURBON at the BORDER

By Pearl Cleage Directed By Ken Dembo
Starring Rick Jones, Rozlyn Reynolds, S. Renee Mitchell and Jerry Foster

October 13 - November 5, 2011
Ethos at IFCC 5340 N. Interstate

Tickets Available at Reflections Coffee and Talking Drums Books, 446 NE Killingsworth Street, (503) 298-4070 or online at www.passinart.org
Online Discount Tickets Now Available