

# Memphis man comes to study Lunceford mystery



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Ron Herd in downtown Seaside near the site of the Bungalow, the dance hall where Lunceford was to play his last concert.

Meet Ron Herd, a Memphis, Tennessee, native and founder of the Jimmie Lunceford Jamboree Festival in 2007. Herd, 37, of course never knew Lunceford — along with Count Basie and Duke Ellington, among the most renowned and bestselling jazz musicians of the 1930s and '40s.

But as a student at Washington University in St. Louis, Herd was turned on to jazz and jazz history.

After reading a journalist's account of the music scene known as the "Chitlin' Circuit" in 2007, Herd wondered why Lunceford wasn't better remembered. "I thought something should be done about honoring this guy."

He did just that. Herd founded the "Official Jimmie Lunceford Jamboree" website with salutes to Lunceford, memorials and events, including a June jam session and wreath-laying, this year in honor of what would have been Lunceford's 115th birthday.

Herd plans on using the information and footage gathered for a feature-length documentary about Lunceford, which will be available 2018. The Jimmie Lunceford Jamboree Festival returns Oct. 23-29.

## Lunceford's legacy

As an athletics instructor at Manassas High School in Memphis, Lunceford organized a student band, the Chickasaw Syncopators, whose name was changed to the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra. Under the new name, the band started its professional career in 1929, and made its first recordings in 1930.

Manassas was the first black public high school in Shelby County, and Lunceford was the first public high school band director in Memphis, Herd said.

In 1934, Lunceford and his orchestra took over the prestigious role as the house band at the Cotton Club in New York City's Harlem, following in the footsteps of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway. While Lunceford was the most popular bandleader among black audiences — selling more records than Ellington and Count Basie — his hits like "Margie," "Rhythm is Our Business" and "My Blue Heaven" crossed all racial barriers.

A commitment to education continued even as his popularity grew.

"No matter how big he got he was always starting education programs," Herd said. "Wherever he went, he used to come back from Memphis, he always gave free concerts to Manassas High School students and gave lessons to young musicians who wanted to learn more about their instruments."

Under the baton of Lunceford protégé Emerson Able Jr., Manassas High School trained countless musicians, including Motown star Isaac Hayes.

## Death in Seaside

Lunceford's death at age 45 was a shock to bandmates and friends. Lunceford collapsed while signing records for fans at Seaside Radio and Record Shop on Broadway.

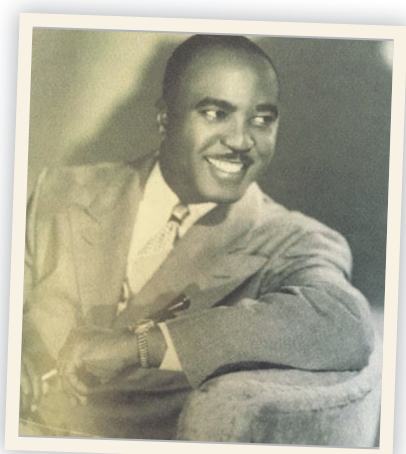
Lunceford, a teetotaler, was "a perfectly healthy man who had boxed, run

SEEN FROM SEASIDE  
R.J. MARX



REBECCA HERREN/SEASIDE SIGNAL

Ron Herd pays a visit to the Signal offices.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Jimmie Lunceford

track and played softball," according to trumpeter Joe Wilder in a 2012 biography of Lunceford. "It was one of the saddest days of my life."

In "Rhythm is My Business," author Eddie Determeyer posits that Lunceford may have been poisoned by tainted meat deliberately served by a racist restaurant owner in Seaside.

The Clatsop County Coroner declared Lunceford died of "coronary occlusion, due to thrombosis of anterior coronary artery due to arteriosclerosis" — in other words, a heart attack caused by a blockage.

Jazz historian Lewis Porter suggests that Joe Wilder — a member of the Lunceford band — remembers the racist restaurant owner as having been in Portland, not in Seaside.

"Further, Wilder was present when Lunceford collapsed and he remembers nothing about bad food beforehand," Porter said.

Botulism is not a poison and cannot be "manufactured" or "planted," Porter said. "It's simply a severe form of food poisoning that can occur in, for example, rotten meat. But he (Lunceford) died from a heart attack — nothing to do with the food! He's not the first guy to die suddenly at a relatively young age from unsuspected heart trouble,

especially in those days."

On the other hand, Porter said, Wilder, who had a very sharp memory, confirmed that the Seaside venue tried to exclude blacks from that evening's concert.

Determeyer, contacted in 2015 at his home in Holland, acknowledged there was little hard evidence of poisoning.

"Let's hope there will be an aftermath, and hopefully some new clues," Determeyer said.

## Seaside connection

Herd was in Seaside this month to expand his research, replete with visits to the Signal, the Seaside Historical Society and interviews with jazz fans and folks who remember the days when the city was a hub of big bands and jazz music.

"Engaging strangers on the 70th anniversary of his tragic death at the key spots that played a pivotal role in his last moments was emotionally and spiritually moving," Herd said.

During his visit, Herd revisited the sites of the landmarks of the past: 10 Downing Street, the restaurant Lunceford ate; the Bungalow, the venue where Lunceford's band played on, even after their leader's death; and Seaside Radio and Record Shop.

Herd met with Tita Montero and other representatives of the Seaside Museum and Historical Society, and talked with Gloria Linkey, author of "A Town Called Seaside."

"I could tell in her voice that she had a lot of respect and admiration for Jimmie Lunceford and his music," Herd said of Linkey. "I always appreciate when I meet someone who is really a fan of Jimmie Lunceford because they can never hide their enthusiasm for this particular unsung music genius. It was very insightful, entertaining and helpful. All were very grateful for the food for thought I provided."

He met jazz lovers from near and far, including fans Kazakhstan and a bar owner who "photo-bombed" the presentation.

Herd played his trumpet near the site of Lunceford's death, and filmed a short commentary about the significance on "why people should never forget the man or his music."

"I thoroughly enjoyed Seaside in particular and Oregon in general," Herd wrote me upon his return to Memphis. "I really did not know what to expect. Being a black man from the American South I am no stranger to racism, both covert and overt."

"The Pacific Northwest has a reputation for being a home and breeding ground for white supremacists," he continued. "Oregon's actual history as a Jim Crow state did not help either. Given that perception, I could easily see a scenario where Jimmie Lunceford might have been killed by a devout white supremacist in Seaside due to the fact he was a proud and confident black man who did not settle for second-class treatment by anyone, regardless of color."

Seventy years after his death, Lunceford's death in Seaside remains clouded.

"To paraphrase William Faulkner, "The past is never past," Herd wrote.



R.J. MARX/SEASIDE SIGNAL

Celia's Gourmet Foods participates in the Seaside Farmers Market.

# Finding friends at the Seaside Farmers Market

I didn't make it to the first two weeks of the Seaside Farmers Market. This was unusual for me, because I find it hard to pass up a farmers market. I go to the one in Astoria. I've been to the one in Cannon Beach. I hear there's a very good one in Manzanita, which makes sense since Manzanita is so much closer to Nehalem which is where the farmers work and live. So I was very excited to learn this season's Seaside Farmer's Market would be located just a 15 minute walk away, right by the Broadway Elementary School. And hey, the parking is easy.

It's still a little early in the season for locally grown fruits and veg, although I picked up a small carton of tasty raspberries and another of strawberries we made short work of. I also got some nice looking snap peas. What I really wanted was fudge. I won't even let myself try a sample because I'm afraid what might happen. A Gearhart friend relayed to me that visiting family members always buy some and then they eat a tiny bit and leave rest at her house and she always eats it. That would be me.

I cruised the aisles, ogling the fine goods on display from Se Me Family Food and Grater Foods and the Naked Winery. I learned the guy from Buddha Kat Winery lives right on my street. How cool is that? He offered to make a home delivery. I waved to Margot Nye from Sea Star Gelato. It's great to see them at the market. My husband bought two bars of soap from the gentleman at Goldenwood. For a couple of years now, he's had a love for a scented soap called pikake, made from the oil of Hawaiian jasmine. It's the same flower they use to make leis. The name "pikake" is derived from the Hawaiian word for "peacock," the favored scent of the Hawaiian princess Ka'iulani, who was fond of both the flowers and the birds, or so the legend goes. The guy who sells the Goldenwood products allowed that he had to change the name of the soap because the name "pikake" didn't go over so well. Maybe nobody knew how to pronounce it, is my guess. In any case, he changed the name of the soap to "Hawaiian Jasmine" and now it sells great.

Since I've developed quite the muffin top, I passed by the kettle corn and the aforementioned fudge, although not without sorrow and regret because I love that stuff. Nuts are a healthier choice. I'll buy them next week.

As we made yet another lap around the market, greeting the friendly Seaside police officers who were keeping watch, we saw our friends, the two Kathleens, neither of whom know each other, but who are both Seaside residents.

Before we left, purchases in hand, we stopped to listen for awhile to the band Pacific Fire. Who doesn't love live music at a farmers market? I remarked to my husband that next week we should hang around longer and partake of the food truck, which offers an easy dinner. (Any excuse not to cook.) We could have some of that affogato from Sea Star afterwards, which is gelato floating in a bath of espresso. Sounds yummy, doesn't it?

## LETTERS

### Gearhart needs to get facts right

In reviewing the June 7, 2017 Gearhart City Council minutes, I found some inaccurate information being given out by City Manager Chad Sweet in regard to voter registration.

In response to a question asked by Gearhart resident, Susan Spring, regarding the procedure for changing one's voter registration, Mr.

Sweet stated "there are some tests done such as how long you have been registered, where the title of your car is mailed and where you receive your taxes."

When attempting to open the Pacific Way Cafe, John Allen was faced with the same issue from the city. Judge Thomas Edison ruled against the city, costing Gearhart a great deal of money. The sooner the flow of foggy and misleading information being fed to the residents of

Gearhart from its city hall is stopped, the better.

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