

# Pianist Jay McShann, last of Kansas City's jazz giants, dies at 90

John Andrews  
12 December 2006

Pianist, singer and bandleader Jay McShann died Thursday, one month before his 91st birthday. Fittingly, he passed away in Kansas City, Missouri, his adopted hometown and one of the most significant incubators of modern jazz.

During the early twentieth century, jazz developed largely within communities where steady work for musicians was concentrated in brothels, speakeasies and night clubs. While the pre-World War I red-light Storyville district of New Orleans and gangster-dominated Chicago and the Harlem renaissance of the late 1920s and early 1930s have passed into popular consciousness, the outstanding contribution to jazz music emanating from Kansas City in the 1930s is less widely appreciated.

Jazz flourished in Kansas City because of a unique confluence of factors, including its role as a commercial center for livestock and other commodities produced in the great American Midwest, an established and relatively affluent black community—home to two daily newspapers and the most successful baseball team in the Negro Leagues, the Kansas City Monarchs—and the thoroughly corrupted administration of the Democratic political machine, led by “Boss” Tom Pendergast.

The best musicians in the territorial bands roaming what was then known as the American Southwest invariably landed in Kansas City to work in its clubs, dance halls and assorted hangouts. By the mid-1930s Kansas City was home to, among many others, boogie-woogie piano master Pete Johnson, blues shouter Big Joe Turner—who would become a founding icon of rock and roll two decades later—and the original Count Basie Orchestra featuring tenor saxophonist Lester Young, the first player to suggest the modern jazz style of the 1940s and 1950s.

Born in Oklahoma, where he taught himself piano, McShann moved to Kansas City in late 1936, the year before the Basie band was “discovered” there by jazz impresario John Hammond, who arranged for the band to leave Kansas City's Reno Club for national tours and recording sessions. By the end of 1938, the Kansas City jazz style—extremely hard swinging and bluesy, emphasizing instrumental solos backed by patterns called “riffs”—were essential to the exploding popularity of “swing” music. On December 23, Hammond, a supporter of the Communist Party, made the Basie band the centerpiece of his first “Spirituals to Swing” concert, which sold out Carnegie Hall in New York City as a benefit for the Republican forces fighting Franco in the Spanish Civil War.

Eventually, McShann would fill the void Basie left in Kansas City with a swing orchestra assembled from local musicians, including, most notably, a teenaged Kansas City native and budding alto saxophonist named Charles Parker, Jr. In the opinion of many jazz aficionados—including this writer—Parker would become the greatest improviser in jazz history and the largest single influence on its subsequent development, despite his struggle with substance abuse and premature demise at the age of 34.

In later interviews, McShann relished telling his version of how Parker got his famous nickname “Yardbird”—later shortened to “Bird.” “Supposedly, a car in which they were both riding to an engagement killed a chicken, and Parker insisted they pull over, so he could retrieve the “yardbird” and have it cooked for his dinner.

By 1939, work began drying up in Kansas City as a result of state and federal crackdowns on the political machine, with Pendergast himself convicted of income tax evasion and sentenced to a federal penitentiary.

Parker left for New York City, where he worked as a dishwasher, while honing his skills in Harlem jam sessions. McShann kept his band together by touring throughout the Midwest, with occasional stops in Kansas City dancehalls still operating.

The Jay McShann Orchestra made its first recordings—without Parker—in late 1939. Parker rejoined McShann the next year and stayed until he became a member of pianist Earl Hines' band in 1943, a group that included Dizzy Gillespie and several other jazz modernists. In 1945, Parker and Gillespie made the seminal early recordings of bebop-style jazz, which overwhelmed the conventions of the large swing orchestras and transformed jazz into its modern form.

The five 78 rpm records of the McShann band featuring Charlie Parker solos—made for Decca Records' "Sepia" series, aimed specifically at black audiences—are among the most important in jazz history because of Parker's tremendous impact on his peers. They make great listening today. "Hootie Blues" (the title refers to McShann's nickname), for example, includes all the best elements of the Kansas City style, McShann's skillful piano introduction, a chorus of riffs from the band, Parker's passionate blues solo, an excellent vocal by bluesman Walter Brown ("Well, hello little girl, don't you remember me?") and a final riff chorus.

Unfortunately, although the Jay McShann Orchestra excelled at popular songs, the success of Brown's vocal on "Confessin' the Blues" led Decca management to pigeon-hole the band as "The Band that Plays the Blues." Live recordings, unearthed decades later by collectors Frank Driggs and Norman Saks, reveal a much broader repertoire than those on the commercial recordings, exemplified by an astounding Savoy Ballroom performance of "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," a hoary 1919 popular song featuring an extended, and extremely modern, Parker solo.

McShann was drafted in 1943, bringing his classic swing band to an end. He unsuccessfully attempted to establish a viable jazz orchestra after his discharge, but times had changed. While bebop took leadership of the jazz world, McShann became a more commercially oriented rhythm-and-blues performer. He scored a huge hit backing vocalist Jimmy Witherspoon on a cover recording of "Ain't Nobody's Business."

McShann returned to Kansas City in 1950, where he

raised his three daughters and performed regularly in local establishments. He toured sporadically, including a highly rewarding 1969 European trip, made occasional recordings and settled comfortably into the role of an elder statesman. He was prominently featured in the excellent 1980 homage to the Kansas City golden age, "Last of the Blue Devils," was interviewed in Ken Burns' uneven 2001 documentary "Jazz," and performed during the piano segment of Clint Eastwood's 2003 PBS mini-series "The Blues."

On recordings, McShann displayed a high degree of piano skill, with elements of boogie-woogie underlying his always imaginative melodic improvisations. He never developed the more modern sound of his Kansas City contemporary, Mary Lou Williams, however, and sounded increasingly dated as the years rolled on. Eventually, he began singing as well, sounding remarkably like Walter Brown.

McShann was a tireless advocate of his musical tradition. "You'd just have some people sitting around, and you'd hear some cat play, and somebody would say, 'This cat, he sounds like he's from Kansas City,'" the Associated Press quoted McShann as saying in a 2003 interview promoting his CD "Goin' to Kansas City," which received a Grammy nomination in the traditional blues category. "It was the Kansas City style. They knew it on the East Coast. They knew it on the West Coast. They knew it up north, and they knew it down south."

McShann performed live until last year, when deteriorating health made it impossible for him to continue. It was only a few days before his death, however, when he entered St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City complaining of a respiratory infection.

For those interested in learning more about this fascinating chapter in the history of jazz, I strongly recommend *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop—a History*, by Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix (Oxford University Press, 2005).



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**