

WTSBOA 2019 HONOREE

HALL *of* FAME



James Melvin "Jimmie" Lunceford

(JUNE 6, 1902 – JULY 12, 1947)

Jimmie Lunceford was born on a farm near Fulton, Mississippi. Seven months after James Melvin was born, the family moved to Oklahoma City and then to Denver where Lunceford went to high school and studied music under Wilberforce J. Whiteman, father of Paul Whiteman, whose band was soon to acquire a national reputation. There Lunceford learned several instruments in the band and continued his studies at Fisk University in Nashville. At the age of 20 he was playing alto saxophone in local bands throughout Tennessee.

In 1927, Lunceford was hired to teach English and Spanish and coach the Manassas football and baseball teams. The school had no budget for music, no instruments, no music curriculum, and no idea what music education could do for a community. Jimmie Lunceford found many capable student musicians and brought together a group of young men, motivated them, and equipped them with the help of community donors. One of his students recalled that "he was a good

disciplinarian, a good teacher, and the students just had a fit over him. Lunceford played sophisticated jazz."

The group developed into a Jazz Orchestra style band, and Lunceford named it the Chickasaw Syncopators. Some would claim the group to be the "First Memphis City School Orchestra." Lunceford's eleven-piece high school jazz band included musicians who sang and doubled on different instruments. The Lunceford sound distinguished itself in a crowded field of talented swing bands with its two-beat syncopation, a sonic ancestor of what came to be known as "The Memphis Sound" heard in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1929, the Manassas High School Band began its professional career, and the band changed its name to the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra. Those students who graduated that year went with him when Lunceford left Manassas in 1930 to make their first recordings and begin touring. In 1934 the band accepted a booking at the famed Harlem nightclub The Cotton Club. With their tight musicianship and the often-outrageous humor in their music and lyrics, Lunceford's orchestra made an ideal band for the club, and Lunceford's reputation began to steadily grow. By the mid-1930s, Jimmie Lunceford was considered the equal of Duke Ellington and Count Basie.

Lunceford died young at the age of 45 after he collapsed during an autograph session at a record store in Seaside, Oregon from a heart attack and was buried at Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis. Lunceford has the distinction of being the first jazz educator in the public-school system. Lunceford's success helped begin the tradition of Manassas as Memphis' jazz high school. Most of the top Memphis jazz musicians for the next 50 years came out of that school, including trumpeter Booker Little, pianist Harold Mabern, saxophonist Frank Stozier and Black Moses himself, Isaac Hayes.