

Black History Month



Etta Moten Barnett

1901 - 2004

An actress and singer closely identified with the role of Bess in the opera *Porgy and Bess*, Etta Moten Barnett was born in Texas and studied music and drama at Western University in Kansas City, Kansas, and at the University of Kansas. Moving to New York City she became a musical inspiration for Kansas City-born composer Virgil Thomson and the great George Gershwin. Though Gershwin wrote the role of Bess with her in mind, Moten Barnett did not sing the role until a revival of the opera in 1942. It became her signature role. In 1933 Moten Barnett became the first African American star to perform at the White House. That year she appeared in two film musicals, *Flying Down to Rio* (singing “The Carioca”) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (singing “My Forgotten Man”). She retired from performing in 1952 and hosted a Chicago-based radio show. She was appointed to represent the United States on cultural missions to 10 African nations. She was also active in the National Council of Negro Women, the Chicago Lyric Opera, and the Field Museum.

Image courtesy: Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries

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William "Count" Basie

1904 - 1984

The musician most closely associated with Kansas City jazz, pianist and bandleader William Basie was born in New Jersey and came to Kansas City in the late 1920s. He joined Walter Page's Blue Devils in 1928 and a year later was lured away to the Bennie Moten Orchestra. As part of that band's rhythm section, Basie was instrumental in the development of the swinging Kansas City style. After Moten's death in 1935, Basie took over the group (renamed the Barons of Rhythm), playing in local clubs and on area radio stations, and winning a recording contract with Decca Records. Renamed the Count Basie Orchestra, the 13-piece ensemble became an international hit with records like "One O'Clock Jump," "Jumpin' at the Woodside," "April in Paris," and "Taxi War Dance." Among the players who came through his band were saxophonists Lester Young and Herschel Evans, guitarist Freddie Green, trumpeters Buck Clayton and Harry "Sweets" Edison, and singers Jimmy Rushing and Joe Williams. Although big bands fell out of fashion after World War II, Basie kept one of the few large touring ensembles, which he led for almost 50 years until his death. He also made recordings with small combos and with popular singers like Frank Sinatra.

Image courtesy: The Black Archives of Mid-America

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Aaron Douglas

1898 - 1979

Known as the “Father of African American Arts,” Aaron Douglas was born in Topeka, Kansas, and developed an interest in drawing and painting at an early age. He studied at the University of Nebraska and in 1925 moved to New York City, settling in the African American neighborhood of Harlem. He soon became involved in the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of the 1920s that emphasized African American artists, writers, and performers. Douglas began creating magazine illustrations and developed a modernist style that incorporated African and Egyptian design elements. Among his most important early work were his murals at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library. In 1939 he moved to Nashville, Tennessee, and founded the Art Department at Fisk University, teaching there for nearly 30 years. In his art Douglas explored and celebrated the lives and history of people of color. In doing so he powerfully depicted an emerging black American individuality.

Image courtesy: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division; Photographer: P. H. Polk

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Langston Hughes

1902 - 1967

A leader of the Harlem Renaissance, James Mercer Langston Hughes was a writer and social activist who developed a new literary art form called jazz poetry. Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. After the breakup of his parents' marriage, young Langston was raised by his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. An unhappy, lonely child, he became obsessed with books, "where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas." He began writing poetry in high school and attended New York City's Columbia University for one year. Though earning good grades, he dropped out because of racial prejudice and his growing interest in the nearby black neighborhood of Harlem. He would live and work there for most of his life. Through his writing Hughes embraced and depicted the real lives of working-class African Americans and their struggles in modern America. He published 16 collections of poetry, a dozen plays, eight books for children, and 11 novels and collections of short stories. His two volumes of autobiography were entitled *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*.

Image courtesy: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection

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Julia Lee

1902 - 1958

Born in Boonville, Missouri, and raised in Kansas City, Julia Lee was a singer and pianist whose work incorporated both blues and jazz. She began her musical career in the early 1920s, playing piano and singing with the band led by her brother, George Lee. She launched a solo career in 1935 and secured a recording contract with Capitol Records in 1944. Lee was famous for her “dirty blues,” double-entendre numbers she described as “songs my mother taught me not to sing.” Among her hits were “Gotta Gimme Watcha Got,” “Snatch and Grab It,” “King Size Papa,” “I Didn’t Like It the First Time,” and “My Man Stands Out.” Most of these records were by “Julia Lee and Her Boy Friends,” an integrated group that often included pianist Jay McShann, saxophonist Benny Carter, vibraphonist Red Norvo, and cornettist Red Nichols. Although her recording career slowed after 1949, she continued to perform regularly in the Kansas City area and on tours. She was married to Frank Duncan, the catcher/manager of the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues.

Image courtesy: The Black Archives of Mid-America

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Charlie Parker

1920 - 1955

Musical giant Charlie Parker was a key creator of bebop, the jazz style marked by improvisation, quick tempos, and virtuosic technique. Born in Kansas City, Kansas, Parker was raised in Kansas City, Missouri, where he attended Lincoln High School. He devoted several years to practicing 15 hours a day on his saxophone and later played in jazz clubs on the Missouri side, eventually landing a job with pianist Jay McShann's band. It was while on the road with McShann that Parker got the nickname "Yardbird" or "Bird" after the band's car ran over a chicken (or yardbird) and Parker retrieved the dead animal lest its meat go to waste. Parker soon moved to New York City and joined the band of Earl "Fatha" Hines, where he met trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, another bebop pioneer. Trumpeter Miles Davis said, "You can tell the history of jazz in four words: Louis Armstrong. Charlie Parker." Though considered too cerebral for the mass audience, Parker's collaborations with Gillespie, Max Roach, Bud Powell, and Davis had a galvanizing effect on the jazz world. Throughout his life Parker struggled with drug addiction. He died in New York City at age 34 and was buried in Kansas City's Lincoln Cemetery.

Image courtesy: The Black Archives of Mid-America

Black History Month



Gordon Parks

1912 - 2006

The son of a farmer in Fort Scott, Kansas, Gordon Parks defied racism and his own impoverished beginnings to become one of the world's great photographers, as well as an internationally recognized writer, composer, and filmmaker. As a photographer Parks moved easily between fashion, portraiture, and gritty studies of African American life. In the 1940s he shot fashion layouts for *Vogue*; in 1948 he became the first black staff member of *Life* magazine, where for 20 years he shot fashion, sports and entertainment celebrities, and studies of poverty and racial segregation. In 1969 he adapted his autobiographical novel *The Learning Tree* into a film, becoming Hollywood's first major black director. Subsequent films included *Shaft* (1971), *The Super Cops* (1974), and *Leadbelly* (1976). He wrote a three-volume memoir, several books of poetry, and composed jazz tunes, a piano concerto, a symphony, and a ballet about Martin Luther King, Jr. The underlying theme of his work, Parks said, was freedom: "Not allowing anyone to set boundaries, cutting loose the imagination, and then making the new horizons."

Image: Untitled, 1940s, Photograph by Gordon Parks, Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation