

Conrad O. “Prof” Johnson (1915-2008)

A Tribute by Don Haynes, TBA Treasurer

Don Haynes salutes “Prof” Johnson, a great music educator of our times, by sharing the story of his life.

Born in Victoria, Texas in 1915 and moving to Houston with his family during his formative years, Conrad Oberon Johnson started exhibiting his aptitude for music at a very early age. His father, Dr. Charles Johnson (a dentist by profession) was himself a gifted musician and also the band director at Jack Yates High School. Conrad attended Yates and excelled academically and artistically, learning to play saxophone. After graduation, he first attended Houston College for Negroes and later went on to Wiley College on a music scholarship. He graduated from Wiley with two bachelors degrees - in music and english. Conrad undertook graduate-level study at Texas Southern University, Prairie View A&M University, and the University of Southern California (receiving a MME).

Conrad was ever the “consummate performer” but was equally a devoted family man. He kept his feet firmly planted in Houston because he thought being a good husband and father to his four children was just as important as being a musician. Through the years, Conrad had the opportunity to play alongside many music icons such as Jimmie Lunceford, Lou Rawls, Jackie Wilson, Dizzy

Gillespie, Grover Washington Jr., Arnett Cobb, Johnny Hartman, Roy Hamilton and Johnny Nash.

Although Conrad began his teaching career in Dennison, in the mid-1940s he moved back to Houston to be the band director at Jack Yates High School where his father had earlier been the director. He subsequently transferred to Booker T. Washington High School and then Kashmere High School in 1957. His 37 years of classroom service were highlighted by a distinguished tenure of 20 years as director of the Kashmere High School Stage Band. Under his direction the band won 42 out of the 46 contests entered between 1969 and 1977, recorded eight albums featuring more than 20 original compositions of his own, traveled throughout Europe, Japan and the U.S., and launched dozens of professional musicians’ careers. It should be noted that all his students benefited from his training, the discipline he demanded, and the standard of excellence that success requires.

After retiring from public education in 1977, Conrad continued being involved with the education of young musicians. Along with his former student Bubbha Thomas, Conrad established Houston’s Summer Jazz Workshop, which provides invaluable tutelage.



In the late 1990s, he established the Conrad Johnson Music and Fine Arts Foundation. This foundation provides scholarships to deserving students, workshops with renowned professional artists and opportunities for youth to perform in front of audiences are provided. Conrad’s most recent vision was for the foundation to build an Interactive Center to house the supplemental instruction and resources for youth who are interested in the arts. The foundation is continuing to work toward this endeavor in his name.

Added to his impressive resume, Conrad authored three books on music education and jazz improvisation. He also is the inventor of a uniquely designed and patented saxophone ligature, designed to better hold the reed to the saxophone’s mouthpiece yet provide maximum tonal quality.

Conrad Johnson’s legacy as a teacher, family man, performer, artist, author, and inventor has inspired a multitude of students, friends and family to dream higher and aspire to become better.

The world has witnessed true excellence and perfection in a man that sacrificed so much, and whose harvests continue to flourish through his foundation and his former students who are now motivating and mentoring young musicians using Conrad’s methods.