

James “Jimmie” Lunceford: The Father of Jazz Education

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James “Jimmie” Lunceford (1902-47) was a multi-talented man who made enormous contributions to the world of music: In the late 1920s he put together a band of high school music students that evolved into a first-rate internationally-known swing orchestra, and developed what is very likely the first academic jazz curriculum in the world at Manassas High School in Memphis, Tennessee. Preston Lauterbach writes, “Until that time, formal musical training was unheard of in Memphis’s black public schools. Without a budget or directive other than his own motives, Lunceford initiated music education in black Memphis schools, a program that flourished over time and produced dozens of professional musicians.”¹ Lunceford was a true pioneer in music education and performance, producing an orchestra that to this day is considered one of the greatest swing orchestras.

Jimmie Lunceford’s achievements are extraordinary and impressive, but they have not been fully appreciated. In music he was a saxophonist, music director, and band leader, but he was also a gifted athlete and accomplished aviator. Moreover, he as an African American excelled in many areas and attained genuine stardom at a time when it was difficult for African Americans to obtain a high-quality education and advance in their chosen fields. How Lunceford accomplished what he did in such difficult times is

¹ Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin Circuit and the Road to Rock and Roll* (NY: Norton, 2011), 44.

most worthy of examination, and this is the focus of my research project: It analyzes the talents and skills that the “Father of Jazz Education” cultivated in order to distinguish himself and his famous swing orchestra.

So many famous jazz musicians graduated from Manassas High School that it makes a person wonder how the school created such a strong musical tradition, one that had international dimensions. In fact, Lunceford’s band was so highly appreciated by other bandleaders of that time that “Glenn Miller is reported as saying that Jimmie Lunceford had ‘the best of all bands.’ He went on to say, ‘Duke is great, Basie is remarkable, but Lunceford tops them both.’”² It seems a commonly accepted fact in jazz history that Lunceford at the height of his fame was esteemed as the equal of Duke Ellington, Earl “Fatha” Hines, and Count Basie. In this research project I plan to include some features of the early history of Manassas High School in order to describe the time when Jimmie Lunceford educated talented young musicians and molded their student band into a history-making swing orchestra.

By digging into the details of Manassas High School and the musical activities of its first band leader, I will draw some conclusions about the academic environment of this high school and its clear influence on Lunceford’s success. Many people have wondered why Manassas produced such exceptional musicians in jazz. One famous musician who expressed his feelings about this is no less than Miles Davis, who wrote in his autobiography:

Before I left New York I had had tryouts for the band and that’s where I got all those Memphis musicians—Coleman, Strozier, and Mabern. (They had gone to

² George Hulme, liner notes, “Jimmie Lunceford—It’s the Way That You Swing It,” in *It’s the Way That You Swing It*, Jimmie Lunceford & His Orchestra, Jimmie Lunceford, conductor (Jasmine Records, 2002), 5, compact disc.

school with the great young trumpet player Booker Little . . . and the pianist Phineas Newborn. I wonder what they were doing down there when all them guys came through that one school?)³

Lunceford's career was enhanced by his teaching at Manassas High School and vice versa; the high quality of the orchestra he produced was a result of his extraordinary ability to train talented students. Nine of the musicians in Lunceford's band were graduates of Manassas. The student band that he transformed into a professional group in 1927 was named the "Chickasaw Syncopators." They made their first recording on December 13 of that year. "The lineup of this primeval Lunceford orchestra was Charlie Douglas and Henry Clay (trumpets), H.B. Hall (trombone), Lunceford, George Clarke, Christopher Johnson, and Allen Williams (reeds), [Bobbie] Brown (piano) [a female], Alfred Kahn (banjo), [Moses] Allen (tuba), and [Jimmy] Crawford (drums)."⁴ Some of these musicians, such as Moses Allen and Jimmy Crawford, stayed with Lunceford until the mid-1930's, while others were replaced by new band members. The mature band, which was formed in 1929 and would evolve into the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, would tour and perform until Lunceford's death in 1947.

Lunceford's musical growth and success were not achieved easily: They took place against the backdrop of a difficult era, which included the complex aftermath of the Civil War, the Great Depression in the U.S. of the late 1920s and 1930s, and the emerging Civil Rights movement. The Civil War, with its liberation of African American slaves and disturbing resurgence of racism in the ensuing Reconstruction Era, created new problems and challenges for African Americans. These problems and racist

³ Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 262.

⁴ Eddy Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2006), 31.

attitudes would still be in the air during the years of Lunceford's childhood and education. When the Depression came upon the U.S. unexpectedly, its economic hardships affected Lunceford's ability to make records: "The Lunceford band recorded a couple of sides for Victor in June 1930, but the Depression prevented further records."⁵ Concerning the Civil Rights movement, it affected all African-Americans, but hampered black musicians in particular ways. Along with his musical triumphs, Lunceford encountered discrimination and hostility. He was courageous and made professional decisions that were based in part on issues of fairness to the African American people, and especially to African American musicians. He stood up for his principles, not booking his band at places that would not allow both blacks and whites to perform. "From 1933 on . . . [Jimmie Lunceford's] orchestra's drawing power enabled musicians and management to be fastidious about the venues they played: as a rule, the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra did not perform in segregated dance-halls."⁶ He hired talented white jazz musicians, breaking the race barrier in reverse--he judged others by their qualifications, rather than by the color of their skin. Determeyer continues, "Not only was Jimmie Lunceford one of the first black leaders to hire white arrangers, a white singer, and white musicians . . . [but his] appearances at white colleges and other venues that up till then had featured white artists exclusively [also] opened the door for other black acts."⁷ Thus in a real way, Lunceford made his mark on social as well as musical issues, and, at least morally, triumphed over the racism around him.

⁵ Hulme, "Jimmie Lunceford—It's the Way That You Swing It," 9.

⁶ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 86.

⁷ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, viii.

My paper will have four parts: In the first part, titled “Connections,” I discuss the issues of the legacy of slavery in the South, the Civil War, liberation of African Americans, and their struggles for Civil Rights, which serve as a historical framework for my examination of Manassas High School and the accomplishments of Jimmie Lunceford. Since Lunceford was a teacher as well as a musician, and got his professional start in the fertile soil of a school for African Americans, the questions of education and its evolution before and during Lunceford’s life are critical ones: The struggles and achievements of several African American educators paved the way for Lunceford to be able to do what he did at Manassas High School. This background information leads into the second part of my paper: the origins and early history of Manassas High School. The third part of the paper presents Jimmie Lunceford and his brilliant career, and the fourth and final part briefly reflects on what Manassas High School and Jimmie Lunceford contributed to the culture of the Memphis music community, as well as what Lunceford’s legacy is for the world of jazz in general.

Connections

In order to understand the struggles and successes of Manassas High School and Jimmie Lunceford, we need to consider the events of late-nineteenth-century U.S. history: The tragedy of slavery and huge losses of life during the Civil War motivated fair-thinking and heroic white and black citizens to improve the abilities of all people to advance and be fulfilled. These phenomena created the background against which educational (including music) opportunities would come about in Memphis.

In the period after the Civil War, known as Reconstruction, African Americans were learning about freedom, while many white people in the South wanted to find ways to maintain the old social order. Although the slaves had been freed, peoples' prejudices remained and they sought to find new ways to keep African Americans in a state of oppression. In 1876-77 the Republican congressman Rutherford B. Hayes was elected President of the U.S., and he withdrew the northern troops from the South, which had been sent there to keep order between the whites and African Americans. The result of this troop withdrawal was that laws protecting the African American citizens were not obeyed by many Southerners and there were no real consequences for discriminating against the recently-freed slaves. Only four years before Jimmie Lunceford's birth, in 1889, new violence erupted against the African Americans—this started a long series of race riots that ended with the deaths of many African Americans.⁸ Southern states tried to keep black people in their place by segregating them and keeping them from using their new freedoms. One of the ways they did this was by enacting laws known as “Jim Crow” laws that dictated what blacks could do, where they could go, and whether or not they could vote.⁹

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court decision “Plessy v. Ferguson” ruled that blacks were “separate but equal” to whites. The decision was based on a suit that was brought against a Louisiana railroad company. A black man wanted to buy a seat in the whites-only car and was refused. With help from concerned people from the state of Louisiana,

⁸ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 5. Also see Robert A. Divine, T. H. Breen, George M. Fredrickson, R. Hal Williams, Ariela J. Gross, and H. W. Brands. *The American Story*. 3d ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 430-31.

⁹ Divine et al., *The American Story*, 416-21, 431-33.

the man sued and his case went all the way to the Supreme Court, where the decision established the legal principle known as “separate but equal.” This decision justified the laws that were made before 1896, and set a foundation for future segregationist laws. Housing, schools, stores, hospitals, restrooms, and even drinking fountains were all designed to keep blacks and whites separate.¹⁰ This policy of separating the races would have a major effect on the choices Jimmie Lunceford would have of high schools to which he could apply for a teaching position. It would affect his rise as a musician and his career choices at every step of the way.

Jimmie Lunceford was born six years after this famous court decision, but by then the principle of “separate but equal” was deeply planted in many parts of the country, not just the South. One of the ways that the decision affected the social life of blacks was in public education. There had to be separate schools for blacks and whites, but black communities were generally poor and often could supply little or no support to their schools, if they had schools at all. Even though they were disadvantaged, however, African Americans still tried to improve their lives by building schools.¹¹ Lunceford inherited the challenges of these times.

At first, all teachers of the schools, both for whites and blacks, were white—since at that time only the whites had enough education to be teachers. But in time, when African Americans were graduating from high school and college, they were committed to coming back to their people and teaching them. Of course, their decision to seek teaching positions was also related to the fact that teaching in high school represented one

¹⁰ Divine et al., *The American Story*, 502-03, 587.

¹¹ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 77.

of the few job opportunities available to educated African Americans at this time. An interesting and positive development in the “separate but equal” school systems was that African Americans wanted to have teachers of their own race to teach their children. On July 5, 1873 the *Memphis Daily Appeal* in an article titled “Our Colored Schools” reported on a meeting of “the colored citizens of Memphis, Tennessee” at Zion Hall on Beale Street, at which they voiced their request for better schools and better teachers (specifically, black teachers). These are some quotes from the resolutions that the black citizens proposed and passed unanimously:

We feel truly grateful for what has been done by our board of education for the purpose of ameliorating the condition of our public schools.

Resolved, That in view of the fact that white teachers in our schools have failed so utterly for the last two years, and as we believe that their educational training is calculated to render them unfit for positions in our schools, therefore we would most respectfully ask that the services of those teachers be dispensed with. Resolved, that in view of the fact that we are proscribed by law to separate schools for our children, upon the presumption of “inferiority,” we respectfully ask that we may have the benefit in full, and that every teacher from principal down, be elected from the proscribed class.¹²

These resolutions took real courage and commitment to a better education on the part of those African American citizens who wrote and passed them. It is ironic that the “separate but equal” laws wanted by the whites extended to their being asked to stop teaching in the black schools. The African American citizens took this law and turned it to the advantage of their own children: the children would have genuine role models to look up to. In the case of Manassas School, which received this legacy, Jimmie

¹² “Our Colored Schools” (*Memphis Daily Appeal*, 5 July 1873, accessed 2 July 2012). This letter, along with several others, appears on the website: <http://www.memphistechhigh.com/blackeducation.html>.

Lunceford would provide such a role model for his music students. This may be part of the key to understanding his success with his students.

Another eloquent expression of the need to be a member of the race that was being taught or written about came from Green Polonius Hamilton (1867-1934):

No people can be sure of impartial history [or education] if the narrators of their history are members of a different race, with views and traditions that are diametrically opposite and often inimical to the interests and welfare of those whose history they are to write. Impartial history can be written only by unprejudiced minds, for even the scales of justice tremble in the presence of bias and unnecessary hatred.¹³

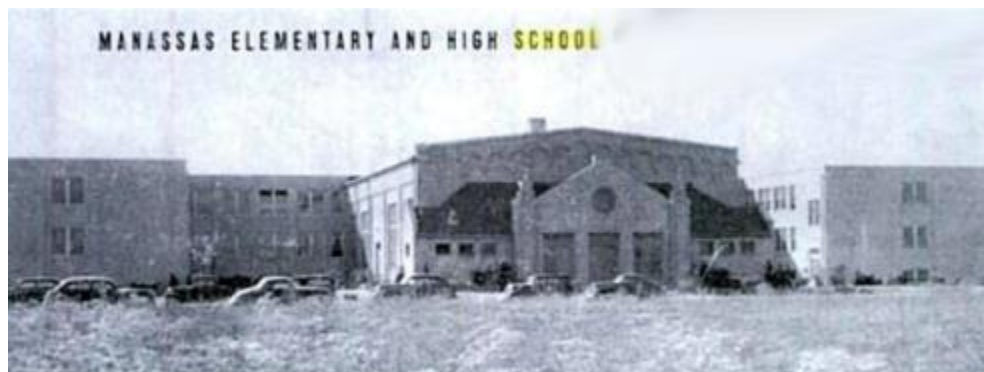
Green is important for a story about black education, Manassas, and Jimmie Lunceford, because, like Lunceford, he was multi-talented and helped students to study music: he was an educator, administrator, poet, and musician. He can also be rightly viewed as Lunceford's forerunner: "In 1892 he became principal of Kotrecht High School, the first African American high school in the city [Memphis]. By the early 20th century, he had organized the first Black high school band at Kotrecht."¹⁴ Clearly Green was interested not only in giving African Americans a good education in practical and academic subjects, but he also wanted to teach them some major ways of expressing themselves and their identities in music. Without the efforts of Green and others like him, Lunceford's ability to teach his students at Manassas about music would have been much harder.

¹³ Green P. Hamilton, *Beacon Lights of the Race* (1911), accessed 3 July 2012; available from: <http://blackoncampus.com/2008/10/09/the-quotable-black-scholar-green-polonius-hamilton/>.

¹⁴ Ajuan Mance, "The Quotable Black Scholar: Green Polonius Hamilton" (9 October 2008; accessed 3 July 2012; available from: <http://blackoncampus.com/2008/10/09/the-quotable-black-scholar-green-polonius-hamilton/>).

Origins and Early History of Manassas High School

Manassas High School, which started as a small, two-room building circa 1899 and grew into a large and progressive educational institution, is remarkable for providing the kind of supportive environment that allowed African American students of music to become well-known professional musicians. The online article “The History of Manassas,” which attempts to reconstruct the facts of the founding of Manassas School, states, “Manassas School, unlike any other school in the Memphis City School System, was the dream, the concerted labor, and the result of the consistent planning of black men in the Manassas area.”¹⁵ The origins of this high school as a dream of hard-working people may provide a partial explanation for its success and enduring presence in Memphis. But it did not evolve in a vacuum: Manassas was one of several schools, both elementary and secondary, that were organized in the era of the Jim Crow “separate but equal” laws.



Original building of Manassas Elementary and High School¹⁶
(note the cars parked along the street, which help to date this photograph)

¹⁵ Mrs. Addie Jones, Mr. E.A. Teague, and Mrs. Willa McWilliams, “The History of Manassas” (2007; accessed 1 July 2012); available from: <http://www.mcsk12.net/SCHOOLS/manassas.hs/site/documents/TheHistoryofManassas.pdf>. Much of my discussion in this section comes from this link, in which the early history of Manassas is described.

¹⁶ Photograph of Manassas Elementary and High School (photographer unknown, no date; accessed 3 July 2012); available from: <http://www.memphistechhigh.com/blackeducation.html>.

During the last two years of the Civil War (which lasted from 1861-65) there was a movement in the South to create public schools for “colored children” as part of the Memphis school system.¹⁷ The following description gives us a clear picture of what these early steps to achieve education for blacks were like:

The first free school for black students opened in 1863. By 1865 there were more than 4,000 blacks in school. And not all of them were children. The earliest free schools were established mostly by missionaries from the North and most of the early teachers were white. Eventually the black leaders began to demand black teachers for their schools. In 1872, five black women and six white women were employed as teachers in the black schools. By 1884, the same schools employed 11 women and 9 men, all black. Most of the women were young when they began teaching, and became part of the emerging black professional elite. Among them was Virginia Broughton, the first black woman in the South to receive a college degree. By the 1880s, graduates of the black Memphis Schools, such as Fannie Thompson and Green P. Hamilton, were returning as teachers.¹⁸

¹⁷ Anonymous, “Early Black Education in Memphis” (accessed 1 July 2012); available from: <http://www.memphistechhigh.com/blackeducation.html>. My discussion in this section is supported by this link on the early years of black education in the South and in Memphis.

¹⁸ Website on “Early Black Education in Memphis.” Available from: <http://www.memphistechhigh.com/blackeducation.html>. This website is filled with historical information and rare photographs. Accessed 3 July 2012.



Photograph of a Freedmen's School, circa 1864-66¹⁹

The process of creating educational opportunities for blacks was not smooth; in fact, it got off to a rocky start: The Race Riot of 1866 in Memphis was a huge setback to the early steps that had been taken to form black schools and teach black children and adults what they needed to know in order to function as citizens of the U.S. *Harper's Weekly* provides some details of the violence, in which all of the black schools in Memphis were destroyed in various ways:

On May 1-2, 1866 Memphis suffered its worst race riot in history. Some forty-six African Americans and two whites died during the riot. Reports are that seventy-five persons were injured, one hundred persons robbed, five women

¹⁹ Website on "Early Black Education in Memphis." Photographer unknown. Available from: <http://www.memphistechhigh.com/blackeducation.html>. Accessed 2 July 2012.

raped, ninety-one homes burned, four churches and eight schools burned and destroyed, and thousands of dollars of federal property destroyed.²⁰

It took Memphis many years to recover from these riots, but the city kept moving forward in its goal to provide education for everyone—even if there were two parallel “separate but equal” school organizations. Progress was slow, and for almost one hundred years (from the 1860s to the 1950s) this policy of separating whites and blacks in the educational system was in place.

The project of creating Manassas School was realized through the efforts of a dedicated group of men.²¹ Who were these men? They were African Americans (as the writers of the article make clear) who lived in the Manassas area, and whose “dream,” “labor,” and “planning” made the building of the school possible. Very likely they were leaders of the Memphis black community in the 1890s, since Manassas School was established circa 1899. It is curious that the historical account of Jones, Teague, and McWilliams does not mention music, especially because it names Green P. Hamilton (who brought music to Kotrecht High School) and because Jimmie Lunceford became so famous. It may be that the authors were focused instead on the growth of the physical structure of the school and the accomplishments of its top administrators. But still, it is curious and also unfortunate, since an opportunity to present the greatness of Manassas High School through its huge contributions to jazz was lost.

²⁰ Article in *Harper's Weekly*, 1866. Quoted in the link “Early Black Education in Memphis.” Accessed 5 July 2012.

²¹ Jones, Teague, McWilliams, “The History of Manassas,” accessed 3 July 2012, available from: <http://www.mcsk12.net/SCHOOLS/manassas.hs/site/documents/TheHistoryofManassas.pdf>.

The first years of Manassas' growth were dramatic and must have been exciting to the black community in Memphis. In the following quotation we can get an idea of the early progress of the school and some glimpses into how its curriculum developed:

The original Manassas building was a two-room frame structure erected on the west side of Manassas Street, north of the Beltline.²² The late William H. Foote was appointed as its first principal. In 1902, two more rooms were added to the structure.

On [a] tract of land [probably the east side of Manassas Street] in 1918, a 16-room stucco building was erected. In 1921, a two-story frame building was added . . .

. . . A high school grade was added every year until Manassas graduated its first senior class in 1924. There were 14 members in the class. . . .

By the 1924-25 school year, competitive sports had been established at Manassas. The school had the first Negro football team in the city, and soon basketball and baseball were added. . . .

In 1924, the auditorium was completed allowing Manassas to move its commencement exercises from the outgrowth Gospel Temple Church to the new auditorium that seated twelve hundred.

The year 1935-36 saw the old stucco building razed and a new 50-room modern structure added to the auditorium . . . in 1938. . . .²³

We have to use our imagination to understand how exciting and important all of these developments might have been, both for African Americans in Memphis and for the success of Jimmie Lunceford and his students as jazz musicians. Between the years of 1899 and 1938 a “two-room frame structure” rapidly was transformed into a “new 50-room modern structure” that was added to an auditorium seating 1,200 people.²⁴ Lunceford started teaching at Manassas in the fall of 1927, and this was under the principalship of Mrs. Cora Taylor. Since he was hired to teach several subjects (including sports and music), the way had been paved for him to be a kind of pioneer:

²² Jacob's Ladder Community Development Corporation. Available from: www.jacobsladdercdc.org/whoweare.htm (accessed 24 July 2012). The Beltline is near the campus of the University of Memphis and Chickasaw Gardens. It is a historic and diverse community; many of the residents of this neighborhood live in poverty.

²³ Jones, Teague, McWilliams. Accessed 8 July 2012.

²⁴ Jones, Teague, McWilliams. Accessed 8 July 2012.

Manassas' first senior class had graduated three years earlier, and a "16-room stucco building" had been built nine years before, with a two-story frame building" built just six years before he started. The school had become the first full-accredited black school in Shelby County three years before Lunceford started, and this would certainly have given it prestige in Lunceford's eyes and made it an attractive school to apply to for a teaching position. In addition, competitive sports had been introduced as well only three years before Lunceford started, but a music program did not yet exist.

Judging by the quoted sections above from the history of Manassas School, it is clear that the school had capable and committed principals, even if it did not have much money. One of Lunceford's major challenges was a lack of money for musical instruments and students who came from families that could not afford to buy them. However, despite the facts that the black schools had limited resources and money, and also had to deal with the "separate but equal" racist policies and attitudes, they did have perhaps the most important resource of all: well-educated and talented African American teachers who were motivated and from the same racial and cultural background as their students. They themselves had graduated from high schools for African Americans and continued their education at colleges and universities all over the U.S. (for example, Lunceford graduated from Fisk University in 1926²⁵). With their college degrees in hand, they wanted to return to the cities they knew well (such as Memphis) and train the generations that would come after them. An overriding factor for them would also be to relocate to cities where they could find work—and Memphis was one of the cities where some opportunities for African Americans existed.

²⁵ Barry Kernfeld, Ed., *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (Oxford University Press; accessed 25 July 2012), available from: http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_lunceford_jimmie.htm.

With this difficult, yet victorious past, Manassas can be proud of its history and the ways in which it was “first.” It was one of the three first black schools in Memphis.²⁶ It became the first four-year accredited “colored” high school in Shelby County (this probably took place in 1924, according to Jones, Teague, and McWilliams²⁷). The first sports program at a black school was created at Manassas in 1924. Its first senior class graduated in 1924, which would have been near the time when Lunceford began teaching there. After he had graduated from Fisk University in the spring of 1926, he went to New York to spend one year doing postgraduate work at New York City College. In 1927 he traveled to Memphis and applied for a teaching job at Manassas.²⁸

The members of the Memphis board of education who interviewed Lunceford “soon discovered that the interviewee was a fast and eloquent talker, and that his knowledge and views surpassed their own.”²⁹ They must have been impressed with Lunceford’s credentials and how he presented himself; he clearly lived up to what they were seeking. Thus Lunceford was hired at this school that had so much potential: At the time its student population numbered between eight hundred and a thousand, and this number would increase over the years to three thousand.³⁰

²⁶ Melrose High School was established in 1890 in the Orange Mound neighborhood of Memphis, Kotrecht High School (with Green P. Hamilton as its first principal) was created in 1891, and Manassas School was founded in 1899. Accessed 8 July 2012; available from: www.memphistechhigh.com/blackeducation.html.

²⁷ Jones, Teague, and McWilliams. Accessed 12 July 2012.

²⁸ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 26.

²⁹ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 27.

³⁰ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 27.

Jimmie Lunceford and His Career



Jimmie Lunceford (Redferns/Getty Images)³¹

Jimmie Lunceford was an extraordinary man by any kind of measure. His personality was formed by the combination of industrious parents and a stable family, the challenges of racism, undeniable musical talent, the bitter disappointment of an unfulfilled love, and constant hard work and success. He rose above the difficulties he encountered through the strength of his character and desire to live a big, successful life as a musician.

Lunceford was born on June 6, 1902 on his family's farm near Fulton, Mississippi. The horrors of slavery were a part of his family's history: his paternal grandparents were slaves, and even the family name of Lunceford came from his grandmother's last owner David Lunceford. However, Lunceford's father, who worked as a field hand, saved enough money over the course of fifteen years to buy 320 acres of land near Mobile,

³¹ Redferns/Getty Images, accessed 31 July 2012, available from:
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304070104576399633446787082.html>.

Alabama.³² The family prospered, and thus the young Jimmie grew up with real hope for his future. Some months after he was born, his family moved to Oklahoma--in part to escape the dangers of being black in the South, and in part because Oklahoma was becoming a kind of mecca for African Americans seeking to improve their lives.³³ Oklahoma was also the place to which several Native American tribes were forced to relocate, traveling along the "Trail of Tears." Lunceford's early years were spent in a diverse cultural and musical environment, for Oklahoma also attracted people of many ethnic groups. Determeyer writes:

Jimmie Lunceford was always reticent about his past and his personal life . . . [maybe, since his family's past was spent in slavery, the memories would have been difficult ones and not those that a family would want to remember] Even musicians who worked under the man for many years had to admit they did not really know him. Accordingly, we do not have much information about his early years. We do know that his main interests were sports, aviation, and music.³⁴

In 1915 Lunceford's family moved to Denver, where he spent his teen-age years. In high school he studied under Wilberforce J. Whiteman (father of the prominent jazz band conductor Paul Whiteman), who conducted the Denver Symphony and, starting in 1894, also was the director of music education in the Denver public schools.³⁵ Little did the young Lunceford know that he, too, would become a music director in a public school and even a famous musician. "It was Whiteman who introduced Jimmie Lunceford to the fundamentals of music, including harmony and counterpoint, and during his high school years the young musician mastered an incredible array of instruments: trombone, clarinet,

³² Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 2.

³³ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 2-3.

³⁴ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 4.

³⁵ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 7.

the complete saxophone family, violin, and piano, in addition to guitar and banjo.”³⁶ Both the melting pot of musical culture that formed in Oklahoma (African American, white, Native American, and European immigrant musical styles) and the formal education gained from Whiteman influenced Lunceford’s style, which matured into one that was difficult to describe. Gunther Schuller noted, “One of the real problems in trying to analyze the so-called Lunceford style is that there wasn’t a single style but several. There may have been, especially in later years, a ‘Lunceford beat’ or a ‘Lunceford tempo,’ but the band’s very versatility would almost by definition preclude a single stylistic approach.”³⁷ But it was jazz in the swing style, and it was original, even unique to the Lunceford band.

Education was always highly valued in the Lunceford family, and Jimmie would carry this tradition with him all his life: Everything that he had attained, he had achieved because of his education and his musical gifts. He also knew, because of the racially-divided times in which he had grown up, that racial matters determined much in life. This may be why he worked so hard to develop an image of himself as a positive and capable African-American man.³⁸ After high school he spent four years at Fisk University in Nashville, where he graduated with a major in Sociology and much experience in music in 1926 (music and Spanish were minor subjects for him). Lunceford’s study of social issues and patterns of change, how groups function, how the members of societies and groups can be categorized by race, class, and gender, and how

³⁶ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 8.

³⁷ Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945* (NY: Oxford, 1989), 201-202.

³⁸ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 6.

social change can be taken forward by political means—all these areas being a part of the Sociology curriculum—surely gave him a high level of knowledge and understanding of how he as a young, smart, and talented black man was perceived in the society of his day. He knew what prejudices he was up against, but his energetic, honorable, and capable personality enabled him to view his future in both a realistic and optimistic way.

At Fisk Lunceford was an excellent student and active participant in sports and campus life. In December of 1925 he was elected president of Fisk University's Athletic Association, and on this occasion Charles S. Lewis portrayed him as a:

. . . member of the Extempo Club, Mozart Society, Glee Club, captain-elect of the varsity football squad, baseball team, track man, president of the class of 1925, coauthor of the *King of Uganda* revue, headwaiter, and leader of the Fisk Orchestra . . . His energy and fire, his honesty and loyalty, manliness and strength all guarantee an honest administration.³⁹

But there was a compassionate aspect of Lunceford's personality that does not come through in the previous quotation. Lunceford's band member Truck Parham experienced this compassion firsthand. When Parham's infant daughter developed a serious problem in one of her eyes and needed an expensive operation that Parham could not afford, he recalled Lunceford as a "humanitarian." When he told Lunceford about his need for money for the operation, Lunceford said, "Call your wife, tell her to go ahead [with the operation]. Don't you worry.' He paid. He went to a trunk to get the money. . . . So he was my man. Jimmie Lunceford was the greatest person that I've ever worked for. All he want you to do is play his music, and combine each other like brothers—brothers. . . . He was a man like that."⁴⁰

³⁹ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 19.

⁴⁰ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 113-114.

While teaching at Manassas High School in Memphis Lunceford met Edwin Wilcox (a pianist and arranger of music) and Willie Smith (an alto saxophonist and arranger). They began playing music together, and, according to Schuller, “when they went on to Fisk for further study, Lunceford followed them, and became an assistant professor of music at Fisk.”⁴¹ Lunceford believed in the value of education and encouraged his band members to become educated. “By the time Wilcox and Smith graduated, the band, conceived in Memphis, developed further at Fisk, and having added in the meantime two outstanding rhythm men—Moses Allen (bass) and Jimmy Crawford (drums)—had already acquired a considerable reputation throughout the South.”⁴²

Anecdotes of Lunceford’s fellow band members show him to be compassionate, highly-disciplined, and well-educated; more is known about his professional life than about his personal life. However, even though not very much is known about Lunceford’s inner world, it is known that he experienced a bitter disappointment at not being able to marry the love of his life, Nina Yolande DuBois, daughter of the early Civil Rights activist and political writer-intellectual Dr. W.E.B. DuBois. Jimmie and Nina were in love when they were both students at Fisk, but her father disapproved of their union because he felt that Lunceford’s commitment to music was not worthy enough for him to be a match for his daughter.⁴³ Lunceford married another woman, Rose Crystal Tulli, seven years later, and maybe had a happy enough marriage, but he and his wife never had children. Jimmie and Nina carried powerful memories of each other and their

⁴¹ Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 203.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 20-21.

love throughout their lives.⁴⁴ He was to devote the rest of his life to bettering himself as a musician and orchestra conductor, to improving opportunities for his orchestra to perform in higher profile clubs, and to helping African American young people. “The leader [Lunceford] used to finance several amateur baseball and basketball teams, in addition to youth orchestras, in order to fight juvenile delinquency.”⁴⁵

Jimmie Lunceford was hired at Manassas High School specifically to teach four subjects: English, Spanish, sports, and music. His most far-reaching innovations at Manassas, however, came in the area of music, and jazz in particular. He could allow his creative springs to flow liberally, since the teaching job at Manassas, his first after graduating from Fisk University, provided him with real opportunities to build a curriculum where none had existed before him. During his first years at Manassas he had to show real initiative, since between 1924-26 the principal who hired him, Mrs. Cora Taylor, “became very ill and had to direct the school from her bed for the next two years. She died in 1932 after seeing Manassas annexed into the City School System.”⁴⁶ With an ailing head administrator, Lunceford may have had more freedom to be creative, make his own decisions, and tackle new initiatives more quickly than might have been possible if he were supervised closely at the beginning of his teaching career at Manassas. On the negative side, it is possible that financial resources were not available because of the illness of Mrs. Taylor. Lunceford would have had no choice but to use his initiative to

⁴⁴ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 21-22.

⁴⁵ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 108.

⁴⁶ Jones, Teague, and McWilliams. Accessed 10 July 2012.

find ways to obtain such items as musical instruments, teaching materials, and sports equipment.

A Mr. J. Ashton Hayes became the principal of Manassas in 1929 after Mrs. Taylor could not continue in that role because of her health. This background, with the Manassas principal in poor health and directing the school from her bed, can lead us to conclude that Lunceford must have had to make use of all the resources that his enterprising and creative personality could muster in order to keep his classes, especially his music program, afloat. There is no reason to believe that Lunceford did not teach all of his required subjects well, but it was jazz music that was his passion and he made smart decisions about how to teach this subject to his students:

He starts the first music education program in Memphis City Schools with no start up money from the system. . . With limited resources he finds a way to equip young Black boys with music instruments . . . He uses a Victrola and records of jazz greats such as Jelly Roll Morton & Louis Armstrong to instruct his protégés on how to play the popular music of the day, jazz. . . He arguably singlehandedly creates the first jazz education program in U.S. public schools history. . .⁴⁷

This “first jazz education program in U.S. public schools history” may even be an international first:

In 1927 Lunceford was one of the world’s first, if not *the* first to teach jazz at a school. He beat cellist, conductor, and teacher Mátyás Seiber, who is generally credited with developing the very first jazz course, at the Hoch’schen Konservatorium, in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, by one year. While working in ocean liners’ orchestras, Seiber in the mid-1920s had heard American jazz, and subsequently incorporated what he had experienced in his *Jazz-Klasse*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ R2C2H2 Tha Artist/Artstorian & The Jimmie Lunceford Jamboree Festival Committee, “Wreath Laying Ceremony & Birthday Tribute Swings Forgotten Jazz Great’s Contributions Back Into The Spotlight” (Memphis, TN: 22 August 2009, accessed 1 July 2012); available from <http://jimmieluncefordjam.blogspot.it/2009/08/wreath-laying-ceremony-birthday-tribute.html>.

⁴⁸ Mátyás Seiber’s Jazz Class: www.dra.de/dok_1204.htm, in Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 30.

The jazz curriculum that Lunceford developed included the basic and essential elements that any person, teacher or performer, would need to know in order to understand this new music genre: “Jimmie Lunceford taught his students jazz history, dance band harmony, dynamics and blending, the use of mutes, how to build a solo, and rhythm . . . In all probability, the teacher also had Arthur Lange’s new book *Arranging for the Modern Dance Orchestra* at his disposal. It had been published in 1926 . . .”⁴⁹ In addition, from his years at Fisk University he read three books by noted music pedagogue Karl Wilson Gehrkens, who believed that teaching was an art and that the successful teacher should be mindful of this idea when in the classroom.⁵⁰

Many people shared Lunceford’s excitement and commitment to this newly-emerging genre, but in some ways he had to fight an uphill battle. Only a few years before, in 1921, Anne Shaw Faulkner, who was considered “an authority on both classical and folk music” and who had published an academic book on music history, published an article in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* about the “merits and dangers of the new dance music called jazz”:

Jazz originally was the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest deeds. The weird chant, accompanied by the syncopated rhythm of the voodoo invokers, has also been employed by other barbarian people to stimulate brutality and sensuality. That it has a demoralizing effect upon the human brain has been demonstrated by many scientists.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 30.

⁵⁰ Music curriculum: Fisk University News, 1922, 63-65, library.indstate.edu/levelII.dir/cml/rbsc/walker/walter-f.html, and www.assumption.edu/ahc/1920s/Eugenics/DoesJazzPuttheSin.html, in Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 17 and note 6, 261.

⁵¹ Anne Shaw Faulkner, “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, 1921, in Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 17.

These words will sound shocking to the modern reader, but they probably reflected the views of many white people of the early 1920s. They express an attitude of racism, narrow-mindedness about music (implying the superiority of white music), and a certainty about the moral dangers of listening to jazz—“sinful” activities may result.

Some years later, in a variety-show-type of performance in 1936 titled “Rhythm Coming to Life Again,” the showmanship of Lunceford and his orchestra were spotlighted in a musical routine that, whether or not he realized the connection, in effect parodied the racist and unfounded connection that Anne Shaw Faulkner had made in the *Ladies Home Journal* between jazz music and sin. In this performance, a man in a devil’s costume (including horns on his head) rises upon a darkened stage lit only by what are supposed to be the fires of Hell. The man, clearly one of the musicians in Lunceford’s orchestra, climbs high onto the center of the burning fires, puts his hand up to his mouth and shouts, “Rhythm! Hot rhythm! Where are you?” He looks around and moves to the center of the stage, while in the background the Lunceford Orchestra crescendos “Jazznocracy” to a moderately loud level. The man says, “Rhythm’s beginning. The devil’s grinning. Flames are shooting. Trumpets tooting. I am sailing [word unclear], syncopating. [Here the man starts singing.] It’s all a gigantic transformation, swept by the spirit of syncopation. . . . [A primitive-sounding rapid drumbeat starts.]”⁵² Lunceford’s success, popularity with the public, and the respect he enjoyed of his peers in music all challenged in an entertaining way the statement by Faulkner about the connection between “sin” and “syncopation.”

⁵² “Vitaphone Presents Jimmie Lunceford and his Dance Orchestra,” Dir. Joseph Henabery, available from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cz6_9bz--00. Accessed 12 July 2012.

Another example of how Lunceford's band played on the fears of some people that jazz was "sinful" comes from a band member's ad-libbing in their shows of the early 1930s:

Bass player Moses Allen ad-libbed this preacher bit that made the people fall out, laughing. He cued the trumpet solo: "Oh, Gabriel, I want you to go down this mornin', I want you to place one foot on the land and the other foot on the sea; I want you to blow that silver trumpet calm and easy. . . . Oh, I imagine I can see him bust the bell of that trumpet wide open."⁵³

In the 1930s jazz had become more accepted and was being performed from coast to coast in the U.S., but ten years earlier, in the late 1920s, if Lunceford had been teaching in an all-white school or an integrated school (blacks and whites together), he might not have been allowed to introduce jazz into the music curriculum. The fact that he brought his dedication to jazz to students in an all-black high school may have enabled jazz to survive and develop in this Memphis school. Jazz was well known and understood among the members of the black community, and it was not viewed with fear or suspicion. It was appreciated as an art form and musical expression of the hopes, dreams, and experiences (both positive and negative) of African Americans (and also whites who were finding their way into the jazz scene).

In a real sense Lunceford was embodying the ideal teacher for Manassas's students: he was well educated, talented in a variety of ways that would benefit the high school, and of the same race as the students he was teaching. Furthermore, the areas in which he was educated before coming to Manassas served him very well, both at the high school and in his future years as performing musician, orchestra leader, and organizational mastermind of the professional development and engagements for his orchestra. His superb musical education was essential in obvious ways, his

⁵³ Lauterbach, *The Chitlin Circuit and the Road to Rock and Roll*, 46.

undergraduate training in Sociology gave him an understanding and some historical background in how societies work, and the year he spent studying business at New York City College taught him about the financial and organizational aspects of running a band as a business. In many ways, Lunceford could not have been better prepared for the roles he would occupy during his lifetime.

How did Lunceford spend his time when he was not at work at Manassas? It is very likely that in his spare time he played in clubs on Beale Street, such as the old Palace Theatre, in order to keep developing his musical skills, make professional connections, and also to recruit talented jazz players for his future orchestra. Maybe he took his students from Manassas there, too, so that they could listen to examples of excellently-played jazz pieces. One of Lunceford's jazz students at Manassas, drummer Jimmy Crawford (who stayed with Lunceford into the 1930s), recalled how Beale Street had inspired him:

“When I was a kid in Memphis, my aunt used to carry me to the old Palace Theatre . . . It would be around 1924, I guess, and there I saw Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Baby Cox and Butterbeans and Susie. That was the time of the T.O.B.A. [Theatre Owners Booking Association] Circuit and there was a pit band led by Charlie Williams . . . My interest in drumming began right there.”⁵⁴

The “separate but equal” racial laws were felt everywhere, even on Beale Street:

Around the time of Crawford's Beale indoctrination [which must have involved Lunceford, too, after he arrived in Memphis], white Memphis was getting a look at the Beale Street talent during the popular Midnight Rambles, the whites-only shows held at 11:30 p.m. Thursday nights . . . The Beale evenings provided some relief from the [WMC] station's staple diet of . . . white pop music. Provided by

⁵⁴ Stanley Dance, *The World of Swing: An Oral History of Big Band Jazz* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1974), in Larry Nager, *Memphis Beat: The Lives and Times of America's Musical Crossroads* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 95. The Theatre Owners Booking Association was a vaudeville organization for African American musicians and performers in the 1920s and 1930s. “The Blues, Black Vaudeville, and the Silver Screen, 1912-1930s: Selections from the Records of Macon's Douglass Theatre Information,” no author (accessed on 14 July 2012); available from: dlg.galileo.usg.edu/CollectionsA-Z/dtrm_information.html?Welcome.

so-called jazz bands, all of them lily-white in personnel and musical style, the music was often a mix of incompatible styles ranging from light classics to attempts at the blues. No matter how feeble the attempts, it seemed everybody wanted to be part of the Jazz Age. “We didn’t call it jazz back then,” recalls Rufus Thomas. “We called it ‘syncopation.’”⁵⁵

Lunceford’s band would change its name twice: from its original name of the Chickasaw Syncopators, it would become the Harlem Express in 1933, and soon after that the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra. Lunceford chose the name of the Chickasaw Syncopators very likely to honor the Native Americans whose original territory was in the area of his birthplace in north Mississippi—the Chickasaw were resilient and perseverent. Determeyer notes, “The independent, aggressive spirit that characterized the [Chickasaw] tribe probably appealed to Lunceford and his pupils. The Chickasaws’ inclination to provide shelter for black fugitive slaves might also have been part of the reason for this tribute.”⁵⁶ The name of the Harlem Express was arrived at jointly by Lunceford and his newly-hired manager, the prominent Harold Oxley (who was white); it evoked Lunceford’s experience and popularity in Harlem’s Cotton Club. As the band became more famous and performed in more prestigious clubs, Lunceford changed its name to one that seemed more generic and respectable—since he was deeply concerned about the image of the black man and black musician. The band became the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, and this name stayed with it until the end of Lunceford’s life in 1947.

Lunceford would retain his formal connection with Manassas High School between the years of 1927-34. Even though his band was becoming more and more successful each year, he still was nervous about breaking away from a steady salary and

⁵⁵ Dance, *The World of Swing*, in Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 95-96.

⁵⁶ Determeyer, 30.

reliable employment. The year 1934 was the year of his big break at the Cotton Club, and it also represents the year when Lunceford officially left Manassas. However, he kept his ties with the high school and made some efforts to continue to influence its students in music:

. . . after [Lunceford] had become famous, he used to bring his orchestra over to Manassas every time it played the Beale Street Auditorium. That way the students at Manassas could meet the band members, and ask them questions. And the bandleader would lecture, and exchange pieces of news and gossip with his former fellow teachers and his successor in the music department, Eddie Love.⁵⁷

Lunceford's decision to hire a well-known white man, Harold Oxley, as his band's manager proved a smart one in both professional and personal terms. The two men, one black and the other white, developed a close and warm friendship that served them well for many years. Lunceford's decision was an intelligent one, but it also was ahead of its time for musical circles of the 1930s. It provides more evidence of the fact that Lunceford hired people according to their qualifications, not their race. He was to break new racial ground in this way many more times:

In December [1944], Lunceford made a bold decision when he hired Bill Darnell, a white singer, for a recording session . . . even though [Darnell] had sung with Edgar Hayes as early as in 1937, seven years later it was still a rarity to find a white vocalist with a black band. The other way around was more accepted socially . . . Likewise, Lunceford's earlier decision to add white men to his roster of arrangers had been considered unusual in the music trade.⁵⁸

Why was it "more accepted socially" for a blacks to be invited to work in a white band than the other way around? There is no clear explanation, but it is likely that the "separate but equal" law interfered with the natural mingling between musicians that

⁵⁷ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 42.

⁵⁸ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 219.

otherwise would take place regardless of their race. But it is clear that talented artists of both races were beginning to interact and perform together for the purpose of making music, of being musicians, and making a decent living.

Lunceford's musical efforts were noticed by many of his peers and critics, who considered his orchestra one of the finest, if not the finest, of the era, and his innovations well ahead of their time: "Leonard Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz* calls the Lunceford band 'the best-disciplined and most showmanly Negro jazz orchestra [were white bands identified by their race as well?]. . . . The Lunceford band ranked with those of Ellington, Basie and Goodman among the few lastingly important big jazz orchestras of the 1930s.'"⁵⁹ The charisma and talents of Lunceford the man emerge in the following description:

The athletic Lunceford stood around six feet tall, weighed two hundred pounds, and was dark and handsome to boot. A nondrinker, he dressed immaculately, and his band glinted as sharply as a military review line. He could play a number of instruments, but his true gifts were for organization and leadership. He fined his men for wearing the wrong socks and conducted his orchestra on stage with a long baton. The group blended acrobatics and physical discipline, learned under Coach Lunceford, with musical acumen to create one of the most thrilling spectacles in the business: mesmerizing choreography, spit-polish appearance, unsurpassed musicianship, and boundless swing.⁶⁰

Clearly Lunceford was a driven, focused, and inspiring musician who believed in himself and his fellow orchestra members. Nager noted, "Lunceford definitely had the 'Memphis thing,' that combination of versatility and showmanship that he shared with Handy, Buster Bailey, Elvis, B.B. King, Otis Redding, and the other Memphis music

⁵⁹ Leonard Feather, *Encyclopedia of Jazz* (NY: Oxford, 2007), in Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 96.

⁶⁰ Lauterdale, *Chitlin Circuit*, 44-45.

stars. . . .”⁶¹ Lunceford’s education in Music and Sociology, as well as his graduate work in Business, would continue to serve him well: he was disciplined, polished and polite, and, for the most part, made good promotional decisions for his orchestra. In fact, “former Manassas music teacher and saxophonist Emerson Able said Lunceford should be as honored as W.C. Handy for his contributions to Memphis music history. . . . ‘Lunceford did as much, if not more, for Memphis music as Mr. Handy,’ Able said.”⁶²

Both musicians and musicologists, those who were contemporaries of Lunceford as well as those who wrote about his music after his death, agree on the major qualities of Lunceford’s orchestra that set his collaboration with his band members apart from any other orchestra of the time. They include a superior level of musicianship, a genuine knowledge of jazz as a musical genre, an unparalleled gift of showmanship, discipline and professionalism, and loyalty to each other and their band leader Lunceford. Floyd Levin affirms the Lunceford sound as one of the distinct and unique sounds of the swing era: “From a sax section’s ensemble sound, I could recognize the orchestras of Jimmy [sic] Lunceford, Count Basie, or Duke Ellington.”⁶³

The Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra continued to perform many tunes throughout the 1930s and the 1940s that became well known to the orchestra’s audiences and fans. Lunceford even became associated with a particular two-beat tempo, which was known as the “Lunceford bounce.” A detailed description of how this tempo functioned within a tune played by the Lunceford orchestra breaks down the musical elements this way:

⁶¹ Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 97.

⁶² Pamela Perkins, “Belated admirers salute musician: Swing era arranger taught at Manassas High in 1920s,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 21 October 2007.

⁶³ Floyd Levin, *Classic Jaz: A Personal View of the Music and the Musicians* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 5.

It was slower than a regular medium swing tempo, and faster than the average ballad. This kind of tempo is hard to play, and even harder to hold. The interaction of the instruments in the rhythm section is crucial. The pianist plays stride, alternating between bass notes on the downbeats and off-beat chords . . . The bass player amplifies the bass notes played by the pianist. The guitarist strums his chords in four-four, which . . . lends a steady flow to the rhythm. Using various parts of his kit, the drummer supports his colleagues. The sum total is a deep, warm pulse that never overpowers the horns.⁶⁴

This description gives us an idea of the complexity, precision, and fascinating innovations at the basis of Lunceford's and his fellow musicians' work.

The Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra performed actively and widely in the U.S. The ways in which he kept his band disciplined, held long and productive rehearsals, and built an ensemble of musicians who were highly-skilled performers and could produce a smooth and impressive sound, accounted in large part for the band's almost meteoric rise from Manassas in Memphis to all over the U.S. "By late 1933, Lunceford's band challenged Cab Calloway's and Duke Ellington's for supremacy, then in early 1934 it pushed Cab's to the curb as the new house attraction at Harlem's Cotton Club, like Cab had succeeded Duke in 1931."⁶⁵ The orchestra also completed a successful tour of the Scandinavian countries in Europe from February to March of 1937.

Such a demanding schedule took its toll of several aspects of the orchestra's musicianship, what Schuller describes as the "fading energies and creativity of the band."⁶⁶ Schuller focuses on three types of pressures that he feels affected the creative springs of Lunceford's band: commercial pressure to perform what was popular (rather than be innovative), the stability of orchestral jazz leading to a stagnation of development,

⁶⁴ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 50.

⁶⁵ Lauterbach, *Chitlin Circuit*, 45.

⁶⁶ Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 218.

and the “limitations of the three-and-a-half minute form to which jazz was limited by the record industry.”⁶⁷ Lunceford, in making smart commercial and economic decisions, had to sacrifice some aesthetic aspects of the band’s musical development. As the “swing and big-band movement eventually ground to a halt in the mid-forties . . . the Lunceford band . . . had become entrapped in its own popular success.”⁶⁸ However, what Lunceford achieved is still amazing and significant: “the music of Lunceford’s mid-thirties glory days was, for a moment in time, the very best that jazz had to offer.”⁶⁹

Lunceford’s sudden death on July 12, 1947 has remained a source of controversy to this day. Some people speculate that he was poisoned by a racist restaurant owner in Seaside, Oregon: he died of a heart attack at the relatively young age of forty-five. The cause of his death has not been determined: An obituary in the *Commercial Appeal* stated that Lunceford “collapsed in a music store late Saturday after complaining of severe headaches during the day. Coroner William Thompson said the death was due to natural causes.”⁷⁰

The collapse of a healthy and relatively young man after having severe headaches does not sound like a death from “natural causes.” Determeyer speculates, “It was hard to understand. Here was a perfectly healthy man, who had boxed, run track, and played softball, who flew his own airplanes, who last year [1946] had gotten his commercial

⁶⁷ Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 220.

⁶⁸ Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 221.

⁶⁹ Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 222.

⁷⁰ “Death of Jimmy [sic] Lunceford Recalls His First Band Here,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 14 July 1947.

license . . . Furthermore, Lunceford was a teetotaler with no demons haunting him.”⁷¹

The restaurant had unwillingly served the black musicians beef sandwiches, and those who were present during the crisis wondered if the beef was contaminated. Lunceford’s convulsions, which were witnessed by Omer Simeon (a band member), “are consistent with the neurological effects of toxic botulism (produced by *Clostridium botulinum*, a microbe).”⁷² Truck Parham, another band member, refused to eat the beef sandwiches. He had learned from bitter experiences in the past that when white restaurant owners did not want to serve blacks, the food they were given often made the blacks violently ill: “We go about five miles down the road, everybody had to stop the car and get out and shit all over the road, man. Vomited. That taught me: never eat in a place where they refuse to serve you. Never insist that they serve you.”⁷³

Determeyer concludes, sadly, “it is not too far-fetched to maintain that Jimmie Lunceford was poisoned for being the proud black man that he was.”⁷⁴ Lunceford’s life and musical activities may have been stopped, but his achievements as one of the best orchestra leaders of the Swing Era, his innovations in jazz style, and his groundbreaking work in developing possibly the first jazz curriculum in the world at Manassas High School in Memphis, Tennessee will remain a permanent part of music history.

⁷¹ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 240.

⁷² Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 241.

⁷³ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 236.

⁷⁴ Determeyer, *Rhythm is Our Business*, 242.

Reflections on Jimmie Lunceford's Legacy

It is incredible and puzzling that Jimmie Lunceford's contributions to the world of jazz have not been fully researched, but it seems certain that his stature in jazz and music history will continue to grow. There almost is something mystical about the elements that produced his success, and they all had to be present at this same moment in history: Manassas High School had to be ready to hire a teacher of several subjects, including music; Lunceford had to be seeking a job as a teacher; he had to possess the determination, creativity, and musical skills to be able to put together a completely unknown curriculum of a new musical genre; and he had to connect in an inspiring way with students who had enough talent and belief in him to follow his lead. Lunceford helped to make Manassas High School great, but he could not have done this without the spirit and achievements that others at the high school and in the Memphis school system had had before him—both he and the high school infused energy and success into each other.

It is worth remembering that Jimmie Lunceford's orchestra was considered either better or as good as the other top orchestras of the 1930s—those of Duke Ellington, Bennie Goodman, and Count Basie—but not a single one of the other great band leaders was also a high school teacher with a university degree who developed the first academic jazz curriculum in the world. That distinction is reserved only for Jimmie Lunceford. Performer, conductor, composer, teacher, manager, athlete, airline pilot—he was truly a Renaissance man, someone who did many things brilliantly.

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