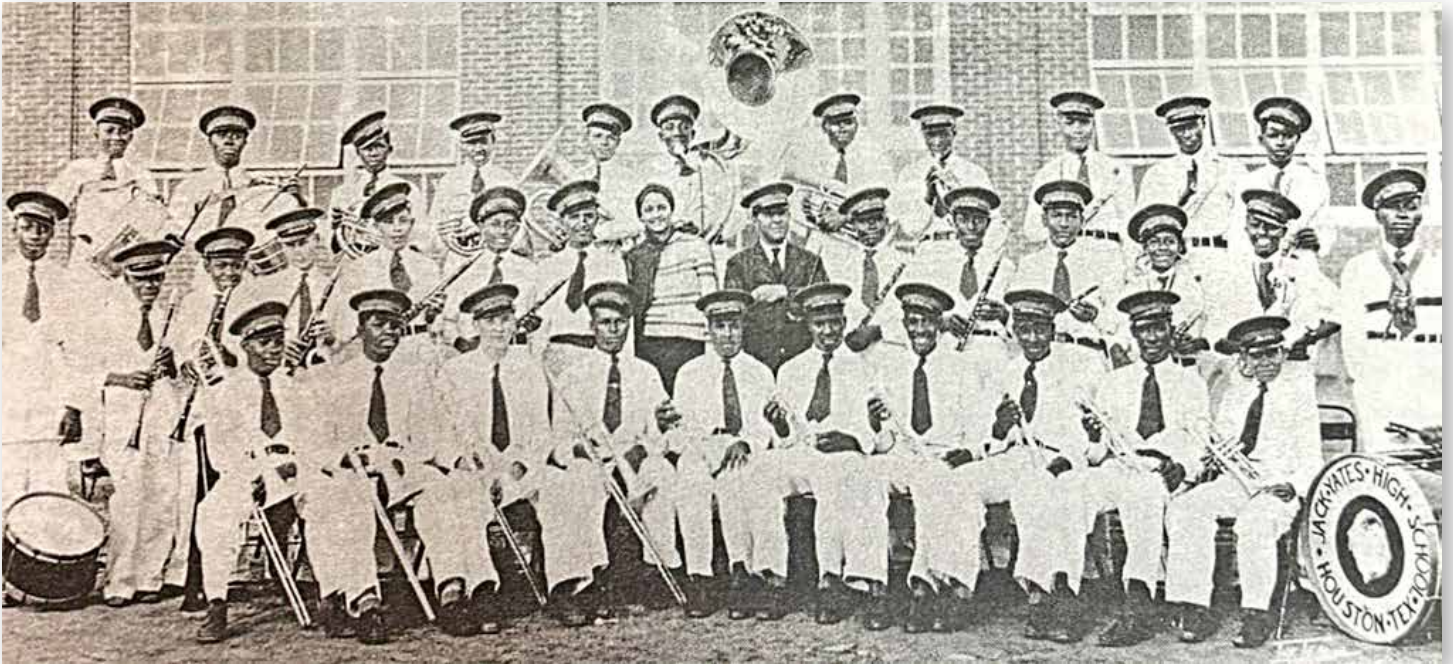


Hitting a High Note:

The Musical Legacy of Jack Yates High School

By Adithi Nythruva



The first Jack Yates band was formed five years after the school's opening, led by Charles B. Johnson, who, besides being a practicing dentist, was an accomplished trumpet player who instilled a love of jazz in the young players.

Photo courtesy of Conrad O. Johnson Collection, African American Research Center, Houston Public Library.

The year 2026 marks the centennial of Jack Yates Senior High School. Initially named Yates Colored High School, it opened with seventeen teachers and 600 students and has ushered in significant progress over the past century, from providing academic opportunities to fostering acceptance among those affiliated with it. The school's progression paralleled the priorities of its namesake, Reverend Jack Yates, a prominent civic leader and Baptist minister, who "emphasized education directed toward the youth as the future."¹ Among the many areas of instruction Yates High School offered in keeping with this ideal was a robust music program that recognized the value of arts to a well-rounded education.

Since the early twentieth century, music has transformed Houston's culture and woven together a tight-knit community amongst the growing African American population. During the early 1920s, blues and jazz music became increasingly popular. For several musicians, Houston acted as a hub where they could congregate and perform for paying audiences. As more musicians performed publicly, a viable music scene coalesced within the city.²

Like other U.S. cities, Houston witnessed the emerging Jazz Age, and local African American musicians leveraged this to express their vulnerable perspectives through music. Historian Tiwana Steptoe explained, that they tackled "black sadness and sorrow, black agony and anguish, black heartache and heartbreak without fully succumbing to the numbing effects of such misery—to never allow such misery to have the last word." By expressing their authenticity, these musicians connected with and amplified their community, exercising Black autonomy in a highly polarized society that often diminished their perspectives.³

Local high schools and their initiatives became notable contributors to the flourishing Houston Jazz Age. Jack Yates, Phillis Wheatley, and Booker T. Washington High Schools provided aspiring African American musicians with a formal musical education, tailored to their needs and interests. Through a proper structure, young musicians could, noted historian Bernadette Pruitt, "study music, form bands, invest in instruments and achieve success in their careers." These musicians were so well trained, that during the 1930s, venues, such as local ballrooms and theaters, hired them



Beginning with Charles B. Johnson, the Johnson family has become intertwined with Yates High School history across three generations teaching at Yates and in HISD.

Photo courtesy of Conrad O. Johnson Collection, African American Research Center, Houston Public Library.

to perform for the same audiences entertained by professional musicians.⁴

Yates High School's music programs demonstrated their capacity to support emerging talent and produced a significant number of the young performers in those spaces. As a cornerstone of Houston music education for African American students, these programs brought out the best in students, faculty, and alumni. Assessing the school's band, choir, and orchestra programs offers a nuanced understanding of Yates's history and the continuity of music education in Houston.

Dr. Charles B. Johnson: The Beginning of Jack Yates Band

In 1931, five years after Yates High School proudly opened its doors, the school established its band program led by Charles B. Johnson. In its first year, the band program included thirty-six players, a relatively large number for a new program. A practicing dentist by profession, Dr. Johnson was also an accomplished trumpet player, flutist, and vocalist who wrote the song, "Houston Is A Grand Old Town." Dr. Johnson's teachings were directly attributed to his personal morals and the dynamic of his family, who "always had a big heart, so there was always room for one more plate at the table." During his time at Yates, Dr. Johnson "instilled in young people a love of jazz, and the determination to become good musicians, good students, and good human beings," a sentiment carried forward by several of his students, including his own son, Conrad O. "Prof" Johnson.⁵

The Johnson family and their legacy were critical to Yates High School's success. Dr. Johnson was the first of three generations of family members who taught at Yates and in the Houston Independent School District (HISD), and two generations who graduated from the school. Not only did Johnson's son follow in his footsteps as a band director at Yates, but Dr. Johnson's daughter, Sue Tankersley,

taught in HISD for over thirty years. And his grandson, Dr. Ronald Johnson, became the school's principal in 1990. By 1991, the Johnson family had amassed over 100 years of service to HISD and more than 150 years of service to the Houston community.⁶

From his earliest days at Yates, Dr. Johnson and his teachings fostered a sense of community and motivation that subsequent band teachers naturally embraced, carrying the Yates musical spirit forward in their instruction. In 1941, the Yates Band, led by director Abner Jones, received several compliments from *The Lion* yearbook staff for their programs and two concerts. *The Lion* also commended Jones for his "untiring and faithful efforts in working with the members."⁷

In 1941, Prof Johnson left his professional career as a renowned jazz saxophonist and composer to become a music educator. In 1945, he led Jack Yates Band and served as director until 1947. Prof consistently credited his success to his father and the way his father had trained him. Dr. Johnson inspired his son, "playing the flute at home" after work and leading Prof to realize that "he wanted to become a musician."⁸

A 1933 graduate of Yates High School, Prof Johnson developed a unique versatility as a band leader and a band member during his secondary schooling, and, as band director, he used his talents to mentor his students. Paralleling his father's efforts, Johnson helped his own students become successful jazz musicians. Even though much of Johnson's success has been centered around his work at Kashmere High School and its renowned jazz band, Johnson's core foundation in teaching and leading music began during his time as a student at Yates.

This transition from secondary student to influential musician was not exclusive to Johnson. For example, Yates alumnus and saxophonist Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson developed his musical talents as a Yates student and traveled with Chester Boone's Territory Bands in the summer, before making his first professional recordings in the early 1940s.⁹ The successes demonstrate that Yates musicians were dedicated to making their musicianship known and, ultimately, fostering a strong community amongst the future generations of musicians.



Yates music offerings represented the community's heritage. The Yates Glee Club rapidly expanded to include three groups that performed at school and area events.

Photo courtesy of *The Lion*, 1949.

The Development of the Choir and Orchestra Programs

As the Yates band gained notoriety, other music programs grew along with it. Even though Glee Clubs are often overlooked, Yates High School's Glee Club became a critical element of the music program's structure. Initially founded in the 1930s, the Yates Glee Club became more formalized in the 1940s. In 1941, director Hazel Lewis helped foster a community among African American students interested in the vocal arts. These students sang at school assemblies and were known for their "beautiful operettas."¹⁰

By 1949, the Glee Club had split into three groups: Junior Glee Club, A Capella Choir, and Senior Glee Club.¹¹ As interest in the vocal arts increased, several students used the Glee Club to artistically express themselves, connect with their Third Ward community, and showcase their pride in their roots despite living in a segregated society. Glee Club students built school spirit by singing short, yet patriotic songs, and preserved their cultural heritage through engaging in spiritual and jazz music styles. Like Jack Yates Band, the vocal program was a testament to the ongoing resilience and endurance of the Black community.

The talent and capacity of Yates High School's amateur singers led them to succeed beyond the classroom. In 1953, the choir program significantly expanded. Three groups operated under Hazel Lewis's direction: Chorus II, the Glee Club, and the A Capella Choir.¹² Now senior choral groups, they performed in the annual operetta, which the neighborhood and the city of Houston had enjoyed since 1944.

Mrs. G. O'Neal Duke directed another musical group, the Treble Clef Choral Club during the 1950s. Much like the senior choral groups, the Treble Clef Choral Club heavily emphasized performance. The group performed for junior school assemblies and participated in dance compositions, including one named "Jubilation."¹³ By having two choir directors, Yates High School could accommodate the growing school population and, as a result, garner a high degree of interest.

Like Dr. Charles Johnson and Prof Johnson, Lewis left a significant impact on



Under choir directors Hazel Lewis, left, and Mrs. G. O'Neal Duke, the Yates choir program significantly expanded, prioritizing greatness. The A Capella Choir often saw alumni return to sing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" during the holidays.

Photo courtesy of *The Lion*, 1953.

dedication and "devotion to duty and untiring efforts toward the development of musical talent." This, in turn, boosted her former and current students' esteem and confidence when navigating the real world.¹⁴

Yates High School moved to a new building at 3703 Sampson Street in September of 1958 to relieve overcrowding, and Lewis's legacy continued at the new location.¹⁵ Yates's choir programs performed at several assemblies and events, strengthening Yates's music programs.

During the Jim-Crow Era, these programs heavily focused on asserting Black autonomy in a predominantly white society. However, with school desegregation beginning in

the 1960s, music programs emphasized the expansion of individual's world views as part of their education, as opposed to amplifying Black voices. In the midst of this process, Yates wanted its students to acclimate to the surrounding society. The Fine Arts Department offered subjects that larger curricula often overlooked, which led to growth of the Yates band and choir programs. The 1977 yearbook pages for the Fine Arts Department that housed the Yates music programs stated that individuals at the time were "just not art or music oriented." It indicated, however, "We here at Yates try to cultivate our students for them to have a well rounded education when they leave us to go on to bigger and better things."¹⁶

The Fine Arts Department continued its expansion during the 1980s. In 1983, the school renamed the band, the Yates Marching Motion Band. From the early 1980s to the late 1990s, Yates High School



One of Yates's notable music alumni, Johnny Nash, had numerous hit records before scoring a number one hit on Billboard with "I Can See Clearly Now," which sold over a million records. Also appearing in films, he became known as America's "first Black teen idol."

Photo courtesy of Joda Records and Wikimedia Commons.



Will Henry Bennett, right, led the music programs at Yates for twenty-seven years, bringing notoriety to its numerous music ensembles and the school.

Photo courtesy of
the Houston History
Research Center,
RGD0013-73-5-164-32.

expanded its impact by participating in several competitions. One of two Houston high school bands to participate in the first annual Mobile Bowl in Mobile, Alabama, the band won three consecutive first place awards in the Mobile Mardi Gras Parade within the area. The band's successes were a direct reflection of the hard work that earlier directors had put into the program when playing at events.¹⁷ The band's performances during the 1990s were a direct reflection of their earlier legacy. From once playing at events, such as the Turkey Day Classic Games against Wheatley High School from 1942 to 1966, to now competing at festivals, the marching band added another layer of diversity in the band program and within Yates's full music program.

The Lion acknowledged the orchestra program during the early 1940s, but it received much more recognition from a broader audience during the late 1950s to early 1970s. First named Yates Orchestra in 1941, it became the Yates Concert Orchestra by the late 1950s. Led by William Henry Bennett during the late 1950s, the Yates Concert Orchestra collaborated with other groups, such as the Texas Southern University Faculty Trio.¹⁸

Given that they were performing with upper-level faculty and received recognition in the local newspapers, the Yates Concert Orchestra contributed significantly to the reputation of Yates's music programs. By the late 1970s, it became Yates Symphony Orchestra.¹⁹ The orchestra's sixty-year legacy, like that of the band and choir, provided participating students unique opportunities to build on their musicianship and perform with others within the Third Ward community until the orchestra was dismantled in the early 2000s.

In 2018, Yates High School moved to a new state-of-the-art facility at 3650 Alabama that included a new fine arts performance wing and auditorium. Even though the orchestra has yet to be revived, Jack Yates Marching Motion Band took advantage of these developments to make some powerful strides. Recently, two Jack Yates Marching Motion

Band members participated in the 2025 Honda Battle of the Bands. An annual HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) band showcase, the event spotlights talented players, who represent the best of "HBCU tradition and culture."²⁰ Given that this showcase is typically for collegiate level bands, the idea of two Yates students being selected to perform, demonstrates the power of the music cultivated within the high school's walls. This parallels the many Yates band students who performed at jazz clubs during the 1930s, almost a century before.

Overall, since 1926, the music programs at Yates High School have undergone significant development. Although much of the attention has been on the band program, understanding the history of the choir and orchestra program shows the diversity of music education. Without the efforts of dedicated mentors, the resilience of Houston's African American community, and the hard work and dedication that student musicians put into their craft, these music programs would not have succeeded, and Houston's jazz and blues musical culture would not be as rich as it is today.

The music programs have stood the test of time and demonstrate this rich legacy of cultural preservation, artistic resilience, and educational opportunity for the African American community in the Third Ward. Despite the obstacles of the Jim Crow Era and the isolating effects of segregation, the band, choral, and orchestra programs contributed to the musical culture that defined, and continue to define, Houston. At the centennial, they stand as, and will remain, a true musical legacy. 🇺🇸

Adithi Nythruva is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Houston's Honors College, majoring in psychology and minoring in Creative Work and Leadership Studies. Upon graduation, Adithi plans to pursue graduate degrees in immigration law and American History.



The Yates Marching Motion Band performs at homecoming in 2018, the same year the school opened a new state-of-the-art facility. Students in the program strive for excellence, with two students recently participating in collegiate level marching events.

Photo courtesy of 2C2K Photography and Flickr.