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Al Sears' Saxophone at York Library

by John A. Drobnicki

On August 1, 2011, a question came in to Prof. Anamika Dasgupta through the Library's email reference service. It was sent by Sally Adams, a reporter with the *McDonough County Voice* (Macomb, Illinois), who requested a photograph of Al Sears' tenor saxophone.

Al Sears, who played with the likes of Fats Waller, Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, and Johnny Hodges, was born in Macomb on Feb. 21, 1910, and in doing research for the city's annual Al Sears Jazz Festival, Ms. Adams came across the page on the Library's website about the York College-Black American Heritage Foundation Music History Archive (<http://www.york.cuny.edu/library/about-the-library/music-history-archive>), which mentions that the College has a tenor saxophone that belonged to Al Sears.

Although the web page had a photo of the saxophone in a glass case, Prof. Di Su took some digital photographs to send to Ms. Adams, and Prof. John Drobnicki



Al Sears

YORK COLLEGE CUNY

6 A piece of Sears history sits at York College

By Sally Adams

The Black American Heritage Foundation was founded by Clarence L. Irving, Sr. in 1984. Its purpose is to document, preserve and disseminate information about the accomplishments of African Americans, help young people, and infuse good citizenship and awareness of the African American cultural heritage.

Irving was born in Virginia and moved to Brooklyn in the late 1950s, where he played baseball for the Brooklyn Black Sox. Now in his 80s, Irving is not only responsible for the creation of the BAHF but was also instrumental in convincing the United States Postal Service to issue the Black Heritage Series of stamps in 1978.

He also helped to establish the Black American Heritage Trail, which honors the achievements of African Americans in southeast Queens.

Irving describes the archives as "a hobby that turned into research and devotion. I started collecting memorabilia reflecting the creativity of the Jazz Age and southeast Queens



musicians, and before I knew it, the collection was enormous." He has played with such jazz greats as Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald.

On May 2, 1994, the BAHF opened the first exhibit for its Music History Archive. Its purpose is to collect documents, music manuscripts, memorabilia, recordings, and artifacts pertaining to African American musicians and composers who lived in southwest Queens.

Creation of the Archives was announced by York President Milton G. Bassin on Oct. 18, 1989.

Housed in the York College Archive, the archive is home to scores to five of trumpeter and composer Wilbur "Buck" Clayton's compositions, his trumpet case and mutes, a flute that belonged to inventor Lewis Latimer and the tenor saxophone of Macomb's own Al Sears. Sears' saxophone was added to the collection of the Archives in the late 1990s. It was presented to York College's then-President Josephine D. Davis by Sears' wife, Ruth.

York College is located in Jamaica, N.Y.

gave Ms. Adams contact information for the Music History Archive's founder, Mr. Clarence Irving, Sr.

Drobnicki also recalled seeing a photo of Al Sears' widow presenting the saxophone to York College, and after some unsuccessful searching in the Library's archive was able to obtain a copy of it from Prof. Robert Parmet.

The photo was one of many that had been scanned a few years ago by Mr. Eric Tyrer of the Information Technology Department as part of a digitization project, and Dr. Parmet had copies of them in order to select some for his forthcoming book.

That photo of Mrs. Ruth Sears with York's

then-President Josephine Davis was added to the Library website along with Prof. Su's photos, and reporter Sally Adams used both the archival photo and information from the Library website (as well as her interview with Mr. Irving) for her article, "A Piece of Sears History Sits at York College," which appeared in the 2011 Al Sears Jazz Festival's book (also available online at http://www.pbiprinting.com/flaash/view_flipbook.php?quote_id=3431).

The 10th Annual Al Sears Jazz Festival was scheduled to be held in Macomb, Illinois from September 23-25, 2011.