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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 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/flash/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.