

LARGER THAN LIFE

Letter carrier remembered as jazz legend



Buck Hill posed for this photo in 1987 for a *Postal Record* story on his music.

Executive Vice President Brian Renfro explained at the mural unveiling that Hill was well known to NALC members as being a jazz virtuoso.



Buck Hill had the musical talent—and the offers—to make records and tour the world playing his tenor saxophone. But he had another calling as well: delivering the mail in his home town.

Fittingly, when Washington, DC, recently celebrated Hill’s legacy with the unveiling of his portrait mural, it included both endeavors—as a mainstay of the local jazz scene and as a dedicated letter carrier.

The tallest portrait mural in the nation’s capital—more than 70 feet high and visible from blocks away—depicts Buck Hill in his Postal Service uniform, playing his sax.

An enthusiastic crowd of musicians, city officials and residents, along with print, television and radio reporters, gathered for the outdoor event, diagonally across the street from the dramatic mural on the side of an apartment complex. They were treated to music from a jazz quartet followed by remarks from several speakers, including NALC Executive Vice President **Brian Renfro**.

Renfro told the crowd that, among a talented NALC membership, “I don’t know that we’ve ever had a member more talented all around. We highlighted him in our monthly magazine [in October 1987], and he’s been a legend ever since in our union.”

In the 1987 *Postal Record* article, written after he had achieved fame in the music world, Hill said that when jazz fans first learn that he is a letter carrier, “some don’t believe it.”

Among Hill’s many fans who arrived early for the festivities was Maryam Balbed, a fervent fan of Washington’s jazz scene for decades, who summed up Hill’s career path for *The Postal Record*.

“There are levels of jazz,” she said. “Some can play their faces off; can play with anyone in the world. Buck Hill was

one of them. But he never was willing to leave and go to New York and live like famous musicians live, do a lot of touring. He just continued delivering the mail.”

Mayor Muriel Bowser proclaimed Aug. 27 “Buck Hill Day” in Washington. The midday event, featuring the mural and celebration, was coordinated by the city’s Department of Public Works.

Roger Wendell “Buck” Hill, who left behind his wife of 68 years when he died at age 90 in 2017, was known as the “Wailin’ Mailman.” He joined Capitol Branch 142, in Washington, DC, when he began carrying the mail in 1960, and was a member for 57 years. He delivered the mail for three decades.

DPW Director Chris Geldart, who spoke at the event’s close, noted that along with Hill’s musical contributions, he was a dedicated fellow public employee. “My grandfather was a 35-year letter carrier,” Geldart said, “so I have a little bit of pride.”

The ceremony was held at the intersection of U and 14th streets, NW, which one speaker called “hallowed ground.” DPW spokeswoman Nancee Lyons explained later that the area was known as the “entertainment stretch for African-American musicians and residents.”

Indeed, Hill began playing music in the 1940s, at a time when the clubs and theaters along the city’s U Street corridor were dubbed the “Black Broadway,” according to the carrier’s obituary in *The Washington Post*. He often arrived at the post office at 4 a.m. to practice the sax before sorting and delivering the mail. He played the clubs on nights and weekends.

Hill also composed music, played the clarinet and the soprano sax, and recorded several albums.

“I like swing, because I’m from the old school,” he said in the 1987 *Postal Record* story. Hill’s music, the article

The mural is located at the intersection of U and 14th streets, NW, in Washington, DC.

noted, is filled with his own chord changes rather than improvisation over standard melodies. “The harmonies are different,” he explained.

When internationally known jazz musicians played with Hill in Washington, they often said afterward that—contrary to the usual pattern among “local legends”—Hill was actually better than his reputation.

Though Hill turned down opportunities to play around the world, the world’s best—the likes of Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis—sought him out when they played in Washington.

A drummer who played with Stan Getz said in 1980 that when he returned to his native Washington with Getz, he went to see Hill, who was “greater than I even remembered, and I was playing with one of the greatest saxophonists. Buck is a true creative genius.”

A reviewer for Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* wrote in 1981, “He is a Washington mailman by day, so it’s tempting to suggest that Hill really delivers the goods, that he puts his stamp on everything he plays...What’s better, it’s all true. He’s a terrific player.”

Those who knew him say that Hill never wanted to leave his family for long periods to tour, that he wanted to provide them with a reliable income, and that he enjoyed being a letter carrier.

He had spent a year with the 173rd Army Ground Forces band during World War II, before returning to Washington.

The mural’s artist, Arizonan Joe Pagac, told the crowd that this was “the tallest mural I’ve ever done” and described the weather-related challenges involved.

Asked by *The Postal Record* what the day meant to the family, Hill’s son-in-law, Cedric Fryar said, “It means everything. It just means so much.”

Hill’s great-grandson, 5-year-old Teagan Lomax, lauded by relatives for playing a mean set of drums, said, “I’m proud of my great-granddaddy.”

Teagan’s response when asked what he wants to be when he grows up raised the prospect of another dual career in the offspring: “I want to be a train conductor.” **PR**

