

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Philip Cohran

PERSON

Cohran, Phil, 1927-2017

Alternative Names: Philip Cohran; Phil Cohran

Life Dates: May 8, 1927-June 28, 2017

Place of Birth: Oxford, Mississippi, USA

Residence: Chicago, IL

Occupations: Trumpet Player

Biographical Note

Chicago music legend Philip Cohran was born Philip Thomas Cohran on May 8, 1927, in Oxford, Mississippi. His parents, Frankie Mae Green Cohran and Philip Thomas Cohran, who had ancestral ties to Rust College, sent their only child to the Oxford Training School and later to school in Troy, Missouri. Cohran attended Vashon High School in St. Louis, but graduated from Lincoln University Laboratory High School in 1945. Music teachers Ruby Harris Gill and Lewis A. Laird identified chemistry major Cohran as a Lincoln University prodigy. Drawn increasingly to music, Cohran played trumpet with a number of groups in the St. Louis area during the late 1940s.

In 1950, Cohran joined Jay McShann's touring swing band, playing with Charlie Parker and Walter Brown. He recorded with McShann for Houston's Peacock Records where he backed up Big Mama Thornton and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. Drafted that year, Cohran trained Naval bands at Annapolis, Maryland. Discharged in 1952, Cohran moved to Chicago where he studied the Schillinger system and played with Jimmy Bell and Walter Perkins. For the balance of the 1950s, Cohran was a part of Sun Ra's cutting edge Astral Infinity Arkestra where he played trumpet, zithers and harp on recordings such as Rocket Number Nine and We Travel the Spaceways. Cohran remained in Chicago when Sun Ra moved to Montreal in 1962, and briefly joined the Nation of Islam. A remarkable autodidact, Cohran amassed a huge library of books and media. His studies and research on science, health, history and music made him a community guru.

In 1966, Cohran's Artistic Heritage Ensemble included Amina Claudine Myers, Ajramu, Larry King, Eugene Easton, Don Myric, Aaron Dodd, Bob Crowder, Pete Cosey, Charles Hany, Louis Satterfield, Verdeen White and Maurice White. The latter three later formed the nucleus of the musical group Earth, Wind and Fire, utilizing the

thumb piano sounds pioneered by Cohran. One of his 1966 concerts at 63rd Street Beach in Chicago drew 3,000 people. As founding director of the Afro Arts Theater in 1967, Cohran hosted a weekly cultural extravaganza that featured poets like, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Carolyn Rodgers and Useni Eugene Perkins; dancers like Darlene Blackburn and Alyo Tolbert; and musicians from the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) that he founded with Muhal Richard Abrams. In 1968, Cohran left Affro Arts to teach at Malcom X College. From 1975 to 1977, Cohran operated Transitions East, a Chicago South Side venue featuring music and health food. In the 1980s, Cohran twice co-chaired Artists for Harold Washington. In 1987, he composed the award-winning music for the Sky Show at Chicago's Adler Planetarium. His music has been featured in countless venues including the Chicago Jazz Festival. Honored numerous times for his musicianship and teaching, Cohran was honored with the name "Kelan" by Chinese Muslims while on tour in 1991.

Cohran passed away on June 28, 2017 at the age of 90.

Related Entries

Lincoln University Laboratory High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Lincoln University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Jay McShann's Band [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Trumpeter

Rajas of Swing [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Afro-Arts Theater [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Sun Ra Arkestra [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Trumpeter

Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]