



**First
Donald Meade Legacy
Founders Award
Nathaniel Lawrence
January 4, 2024**

NATHANIEL LAWRENCE



**DONALD MEADE LEGACY
FOUNDERS AWARD**

What is a Griot?

The Griot emerged from West African traditions as a storyteller, historian, chronicler, and keeper of the timeline. The Griot in short, remembers through word and song all of the important events and experiences of a particular community. The Griot holds sacred the collective memory of a community preserving it for posterity.

For his influence and commitment to the Donald Meade Jazz Society, and jazz communities in Quad Cities, East Moline, and beyond, the Donald Meade Legacy Society and the African American Jazz Caucus, Inc. are honored to present the **Donald Meade Jazz Griot Founder's Award** to Nathaniel "Nate" Lawrence.



A true keeper of the timeline, Nate could be spotted with a still camera around his neck and a video camera at every jazz education conference (IAJE, JEN), Percussion Arts Society, and concert he attended. He was always ready to catch and document

every memorable moment, interview, and conversation. Much of these historical documents were captured while accompanying his Uncle, Donald Meade. On many occasions, he would put together photo shoots and offer inspirational conversations with young and old. When Donald Meade passed "Nate" was an integral part of continuing his legacy.

As a founding member of The Donald Meade Legacy Society, he gathered information, wrote, and designed the programs for

all of the award recipients, and documented all of their interviews. This was a tremendous task! He was always there to provide everyone with an uplifting spirit, and an unwavering push for excellence in our duty to promote the "oral tradition."

Many at JEN, were not aware (unless they talked to him) that, in addition to being a public relations savant, neighborhood advocate, and curator of live music, Nate Lawrence was the co/



founder of a long-standing grassroots non-profit group of community and cultural arts advocates called, "**Polyrhythms**" (with Shellie Moore Guy). Evolving from the Louie Bellson Festival, Polyrhythms was founded in 2002 and has continued to bring music to the Quad Cities for more than 20 years. Now entering its third decade, Polyrhythms started the "Third Sunday Jazz Series" as a vehicle for featuring world-class jazz artists, both local and international, and to

also produce student and community workshops. Locations were first at Davenport's Redstone Room, then moved to Bettendorf's Rivermont Collegiate. Their first "Third Sunday Jazz Series Concert" included jazz legends, Ed Thigpen-drums, Willie Pickens-piano, Marlene Rosenberg-bass, and Orbert Davis-Trumpet. An important element of the "Third Sunday Jazz Series" was the "Jazz and Blues Restoration Project (residency)" which brought musicians who were born in the Quad cities. "We believed that this music has the power to restore and that children need to see and engage with artists

who come from where they come from, who had made it to the top of their field,” Shellie Moore Guy wrote.

[Bix Beiderbecke \(1903-1931\)](#) and [Louie Bellson \(1924-2009\)](#) are Quad-Cities jazz legends who at one time both had annual local festivals named in their honor. The Bix Jazz Festival in Davenport celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2021. Nate Lawrence long wanted to elevate jazz pianist and East Moline native Bill Bell to that level of public consciousness. “Bix and Bellson are wonderful events. We just want to add to that mix,” he said in 1997 of his plan for an August festival to recognize nationally celebrated jazz musicians who have come from East Moline. In 2014 Polyrhythms developed the “Bill Bell Jazz and Heritage Festival” to celebrate the richness of “black culture” in East Moline. Nate stated, “If we don’t accurately tell our story, someone else will tell it inaccurately.” It celebrated several national jazz artists including; Bell (known as “The Jazz Professor”) was head of the jazz department at the College of Alameda, Calif., and a composer and pianist who recorded and performed with Duke Ellington, Carmen McRae, Joe Henderson, Benny Carter, Anita O’Day, Nancy Wilson, Lou Rawls and Dizzy Gillespie. Laurdine “Pat” Patrick (1929-1991) was a composer, arranger, and saxophonist who was a longtime member of the Sun Ra Arkestra, a progressive jazz group, and also played with Thelonius Monk, John Coltrane, Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, and Quincy Jones. Donald Meade was a jazz educator, historian, and former drummer who played with Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, Jon Hendricks, Oscar Peterson, Art Tatum, Johnny Griffin, Milt Jackson, Billy Taylor, and Charlie Parker. “This is a unique area that produced these musicians but nobody knew about them. We’re always looking for role models to emulate.” (Nate Lawrence)

Just days before this year's “Bill Bell Jazz and Heritage Festival” Nathaniel Lawrence passed away at his home. He was 82 years old and ironically did not start this journey as a community activist until he was 50. Nate was comfortable behind the scenes. He mentored many of the young jazz musicians, and others (including David Baker-radio host KALA) in that area of jazz and journalism. Lawrence did public relations with the King Center in Rock Island, running his firm, Homefolks Communications. He was a fierce advocate for human rights, city development, and education while serving on several boards for revitalization projects in East Moline and helped develop the riverfront community.

Special Words about Nathaniel Lawrence

Shellie Guy: “Nate Lawrence was the walking, living, and breathing representation of a community servant and leader. I have heard it stated that ‘there will never be another Nate Lawrence,’ and while that is certainly true, we should remember that Nate’s tireless efforts are important because he emphatically believed we all can contribute, change lives, and restore hope.”

Wes Julian (area jazz musician): This one hurts a lot...
[Nathaniel Lawrence](#) thank you for EVERYTHING! Thank you for so many opportunities. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for investing time in me. Thank you for imparting wisdom to me. Thank you for teaching and mentoring me. Thank you for trusting me. Just, thank you thank you thank you. You were a griot. An encyclopedia of history. A man with a way with words. One who stood ten toes down on what he believed in. A caring and loving soul.

I wouldn't be the person I am if it wasn't for this man. We're going to miss you down here, but trust we're going to keep going with the mission.

We weep at the passing of our Watertown legend, but we celebrate a legacy that will continue. Love you forever.

“Nate’s tireless work promoting jazz music in our community created opportunities for both local and touring musicians and rare opportunities for audience members to enjoy live jazz,” said **Tyson Danner, executive director of Common Chord (home of the Redstone Room)**. “His dedication made it all possible, and he will be sorely missed in our local music scene. “Common Chord was honored to provide a venue for the Third Sunday Jazz Series for many years,” he said.

“He loved this community and wanted to bring people of all ages and backgrounds together to celebrate the arts,” he said by e-mail. “Nate was not just involved with our community. He attended many events and conferences across the country and represented Polyrythms at the annual JEN (Jazz Education Network) Conference.”

In addition, Polyrythms sponsored the Donald Meade Jazz Griot Award, which celebrated the lifetime achievements of legendary jazz musicians and educators.

“Through Polyrythms, Nate has enriched the lives of countless individuals,” Crockett said. “He did so much to advocate music, art, dance, and literature in our community! But besides all of this, Nate was a dear friend to me. His humor and toothy grin would always brighten up the room. We could talk about anything and would often go on for hours. **Edgar Crockett, Director, Rivermont Music Academy**



