The Bennie Moten Orchestra 1918-1935: 
A Kansas City Jazz Ensemble and its African American Audience 
(1998)

During the course of its career, the Bennie Moten Orchestra created a unique and influential style of jazz. It played a vital role in the transition of the music during the 1920s and 1930s from early styles, such as ragtime, to swing. The recordings made in the 1930s, the culmination of the band’s musical output, were among the most innovative of that decade. The band was also an important part of the culture of Kansas City’s African American communities. A symbiotic relationship between the ensemble and this culture was essential in the creation of its innovative style.

This study examines the Moten Orchestra from three perspectives: musical contribution, biographical events, and cultural context. The band’s recorded output, over one hundred records, is analyzed with the goal of illuminating its stylistic development. From 1923 to 1932 the band recorded at least once per year, and its development can be seen to gradually evolve. Graphs, music transcriptions, and oral history were employed to describe the progress from a primitive, five-piece band to an innovative ensemble.

Crucial events in the history of the Moten Orchestra are examined, primarily through oral history and newspaper articles. Their longevity as a unit, and the vast amount of recordings, is unique for a jazz band from the southwest region. The discovery of the ensemble by record executives, its tours of the east coast, and its ability to develop a following among whites are important reasons for its success.

This study also analyses the symbiotic relationship between the Moten Orchestra and Kansas City’s African American communities. This culture was characterized by class and economic factors that shaped the ensemble’s style. There was a complex intertwining of racial relationships, political maneuvering, and a love of music and dancing that formed the entertainment culture of these communities. Due to the demands of the Kansas City audience, the Orchestra developed the skills to play the blues, improvised jazz, or ballroom dances.