

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

Johnnie 'Scat' Davis

Growing up in Brazil during the Roaring '20s, Johnnie Gustave "Scat" Davis did not ponder many career options. He was destined to be a musician.

After all, grandfather John Davis, the former director of the Royal British Navy Band, was a pioneer director of the Brazil Concert Band, America's oldest continually-existing community band, founded in 1863. His father J. Gus Davis, who could play all instruments and was a gifted composer, also led the concert band. Uncle Charles Schmidt was an accomplished pianist, and older brother Nelson, a trumpeter, was the student leader of the Indiana University marching band.



"Scat," a nickname Johnnie earned as a youth, was born May 11, 1910, and learned to play a cornet as soon as he could hold one. In 1924, he joined the Brazil Concert Band at age 13. The next year, Schmidt helped him get a professional job with Jack O'Grady and the Varsity Entertainers at the Grand Opera House in Terre Haute, western Indiana's entertainment hub. Davis traveled to work by bus until he could drive at age 16, arranging morning classes at Brazil High School to accommodate his bus schedule. After working for O'Grady, he played for Paul Johnson's orchestra at the American Theater and for Leo Baxter at the Liberty. Johnnie's younger brother Art also worked for Baxter.

When sound films became popular, Davis began playing one-night stands at the Trianon and Orpheum ballrooms in Terre Haute and sometimes trekked to Greencastle, Bloomington and Indianapolis. Upon graduation from high school in 1928, he joined Jimmy Joy's orchestra in Louisville. Later he played with Sammy Watkins' band in Cleveland and Austin Wylie's orchestra in New York, reuniting with old Terre Haute chum Claude Thornhill. In 1933 Ernest "Red" Nichols urged Davis to join the Park Central Hotel orchestra. In the mid-1930s, Davis joined the Fred Waring band, which took him to Hollywood, where he soon became a household name. His first feature film was *Varsity Show* in 1937, followed by *Over the Goal*, *Mr. Chump* and *Men are Such Fools*. Though he made at least 15 motion pictures — frequently playing himself — his most notable film was *Hollywood Hotel*, released in late 1937. He sang and played "Hooray for Hollywood," specifically written for him by Johnny Mercer and Dick Whiting, in the movie's opening scene. *The Cowboy from Brooklyn*, *Garden of the Moon*, *A Child is Born* and *Knickerbocker Holiday* and other movies followed.

By that time, Scat formed his own band. Brother Art joined him as a trumpeter and principal arranger. During the '50s and '60s, it was not unusual for Davis to return to the Wabash Valley to perform at nightclubs and showplaces like the Flamingo Room or the Club Idaho. He retired in the late '60s and was living in Arlington, Texas, when he died November 28, 1983, at age 73 while on a hunting trip in Pecos, Texas.

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