

SONNY MONK

Of Laughton Hills, passed away on 17th July 2011 aged 85 years. Husband of Valerie, father of Caroline, father-in-law of Jonathan and grandfather of Amy, Hannah and Matthew. Private cremation followed by a Service of Thanksgiving at St. Andrew's Church, Foxton on Wednesday 27th July at 12 noon. St. Luke's Church, Laughton

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Jazz great and restaurateur Sonny Monk dies aged 85  
By Leicester Mercury | Posted: July 19, 2011

Leicester's Mr Jazz has died at the age of 85. Sonny Monk died in a nursing home on Sunday after a long illness. During a career spanning more than 60 years, Sonny performed in America, Canada and Europe, and even on the centre court at Wimbledon.

Sonny's widow, Valerie, of Laughton Hills, near Market Harborough, said her husband also played at stately homes such as Chatsworth and Althorp, and at The Ritz, The Savoy and the Cafe Royal in London. Valerie said: "He was a very special man and one of the most talented trumpeters in the country. He had been performing until last December."

Sonny, who grew up in Wigston Fields, took up the trumpet as a young man after being inspired by jazz legends Louis Armstrong - whom he later met - and Nat Gonella.

After leaving the Royal Navy in 1947, he played in Ivor Kenney's band in Leicestershire.

But he had to wait until his piano playing brother, Owen, was demobbed from the RAF in 1948 before he formed his first band, Sonny Monk and his Dixielanders. That same year he started Leicester's first jazz club, called Leicester Jazz Club.

Sonny went to America and Canada during the 1950s and was later invited to play with Benny Snyder's Hurricane Jazz Band in and around New Jersey.

He and Valerie married in 1957, after which Sonny returned to America, with his wife, where he played gigs in New York, Miami and San Francisco.

Returning to Leicester in the early 1960s after years abroad and in London, Sonny opened the Pancake House restaurant, in Leicester city centre, with Owen. They performed at the venue once a week with their latest band, Monk Brothers' Muted Jazz. The Pancake House later became The Good Earth vegetarian restaurant.

During the 1970s, Sonny played with many of the UK's best jazz musicians, including Roy Williams and Digby Fairweather, and in 1982 formed The Sonny Monk Society Jazz Band.

John Irwin, who played banjo and guitar in The Sonny Monk Society Jazz Band, said: "I started playing with the band in 1984 and I became a permanent member in 1987. I remember that year well because we played a gig at De Montfort Hall during the general election campaign and the Labour leader Neil Kinnock was dancing to us."

He added: "Sonny was great fun to be around."

John, 67, of Oadby, said the band performed on Richard Branson's paddle steamer as it travelled down the Thames, as well as at the world's most famous tennis venue.

"I'm one of the few people who can say they've played on the centre court at Wimbledon," he said. "It was in the mid-1990s in early spring, and we performed at a posh wedding."

John Stone, 77, the Leicester Mercury's former jazz critic, said: "Sonny was a very talented and widely respected musician. He was an ambassador for Leicester and his band travelled all over Europe."

Sonny also leaves a daughter, Caroline, and three grandchildren.