

Composer Hale Smith featured at Amistad

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At the Greenwich Village Jazz Festival in 1984, Hale Smith, center, gets together with fellow musicians Dizzy Gillespie, left, and Benny Carter. (Photo by Ed Berger, from Amistad Research Center)

One step through the doors of the [Amistad Research Center](#) in Tilton Hall on the Tulane University uptown campus draws visitors into the life of late composer Hale Smith. Personal photographs, letters, drawings and mementos line the glass cases of the exhibition that explores his influence on the music world.

“By the time he was 8, he knew he wanted to be a musician,” said Melissa Smith, curator for the exhibit, “Contours: Reflections of the Life and Work of Hale Smith,”

which is on display until Dec. 18.

Born in Cleveland in 1925, [Hale Smith](#) began to connect with prominent artists while still in his teens. “When he was in high school, he had the opportunity to meet Duke Ellington as well as Langston Hughes,” Melissa Smith said. He maintained close relationships with both men throughout his life.

After serving in World War II, he returned to music first in Cleveland and then in New York. Separated from his wife and children, Hale Smith struggled to make ends meet for years before becoming a college music professor and bringing his family to the Northeast.

Much of his correspondence deals with the hardships of being an African American in the United States. Often, he argued that equality would come when artists were defined by talent rather than the color of their skin.

“One thing we wanted to show in this exhibition is the network that is oftentimes created between musicians, actors and writers,” Melissa Smith said. An address book with names from musician Dizzy Gillespie to actress Lena Horne contains Hale Smith's wide web of associates.

During the 1984 World's Fair (the Louisiana World Exposition), he traveled to New Orleans to perform his piece, “Meditations,” dedicated to the slaves aboard the ship *La Amistad*.

Hale Smith left many legacies, including his influence on the next generation of musicians.

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