



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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ALVIN JOSEPH DOWNING

Major Alvin Joseph “Al” Downing, Tuskegee Airman, Squadron Commander and Leader of the 613th Army Air Force Band, was an influential Jazz Musician, Educator, and Civic Leader who in his later years wrote the music for the Tuskegee Airmen Theme Song. He was known as the "Ambassador of Jazz" for his work in preserving and promoting jazz music as an American art form in the Tampa Bay (Florida) area.

Alvin was born in 1916 in Jacksonville, Florida, to Ernest and Mary Washington Downing, the third of four children. His father was a contractor, railroad porter, and street musician, and his mother was a seamstress. By the age of five, Al had taught himself to play the piano. Later, his supportive family acquired a piano and arranged lessons for him. He started performing at the age of 12 and established himself very early as a brilliant musician; he organized his own band in the ninth grade, called “The Ten Clouds of Joy.”



Alvin attended Jacksonville’s Stanton High School. After graduation, he chose to attend Alabama State College, known for its excellent bands, but later transferred to another HBCU, Florida A&M College (now University), where he met his soon-to-be wife “Bunny.” He graduated in 1939 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Music.

Al settled in St. Petersburg, Florida and began a teaching career at Gibbs High School, the first (and for nearly half a century, only) high school in southern Pinellas County that served African American students. Al organized the first music program at Gibbs, initially forming a dance band. He later started a renowned marching band at high school. Al taught at Gibbs for three years before he was drafted into the U.S. Army Air Force in 1942. Before his departure, though, he helped establish the Florida Association of Band Directors (FABD), an association whose chief purpose was to provide feeders for the instrumental program at Florida A&M and other predominantly Black colleges in Florida. Prior to 1942, there were no instrumental music programs in Florida’s segregated Black public schools.

After he was drafted into the Army Air Corps in 1942, Alvin was assigned to Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama. Although he qualified to enter Pilot school, his asthma kept him from completing the program. Instead, Al applied to Officer Candidate School. Upon completing his training and receiving his commission in 1944, Al asked his college sweetheart and love of his life to pin his lieutenant bar on him. Later that same year, on December 20, Bernice “Bunny” Gause and Alvin were married.



Back in Tuskegee, Al was made Adjutant of the 613th Army Air Force Band. Two years later Lockbourne Air Base in Columbus, Ohio became home to the Tuskegee Airmen. Al was promoted to Squadron Commander and leader of the 613th Army Air Force Band. As Special Services Officer, he spearheaded a series of weekly squadron competitive entertainment shows called “Operation Enjoyment.” This musical program was created in the aftermath of the Freeman Field Mutiny, a series of protests by African American officers following the reprehensible treatment of 61 Tuskegee Airmen who had been unjustly arrested for entering an all-White Officer’s Club at Freeman Army Airfield in Indiana. It was hoped that this program would counter some of the myths and stereotypes about African American

soldiers in the military and create a better working relationship with the White military and civilian residents of Columbus, Ohio.

Initially, Al organized a talent show that required one squadron to entertain a different squadron every week. This successful effort was the forerunner of the variety show "Operation Enjoyment," created with the help of Private First-Class Calvin Manuel, a professional actor before entering the service. "Operation Enjoyment" was so successful that "Colonel Joseph F. Goetz, Chief of the Entertainment Section of the USAF, persuaded the Air Force to sponsor it on a tour of bases throughout the United States." The show was expanded and renamed "Operation Happiness." Daniel "Chappie" James, the first African American four-star General in the U.S. Air Force, served as the Master of Ceremony, and Al was the creator and Band Director. The show consisted of an all-soldier musical extravaganza, with magic and comedic acts, dancing and singing, and ended with a "thrilling piano battle between Private First Class [Ivory] Mitchel and Lieutenant Al Downing, in which the entire cast sang the Army Air Corps song, 'Into the Wild Blue Yonder.'"

During Downings' time in Columbus, Bunny gave birth to two daughters, Dierdre in 1948 and Evelyn in 1950. Following his assignment at Lockbourne Air Base, Captain Downing and his family did two tours in Japan, punctuated by a stint in Washington, D.C., where daughter Alvinette was born in 1955. While serving as an Air Force ROTC Instructor at Howard University in Washington, he earned a Master's Degree in Music from Catholic University. Returning to Japan for his second tour in 1956, he was a featured musician playing for Japanese soap operas on the NHK television station and made several recordings with Japanese jazz artists.

In 1960, the family returned to the U.S., and Bunny and the girls lived in Bartow while Major Downing was stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. Though he enjoyed his service to his country, Al's passion for music was his true calling. In 1961, after 21 years of service, Major Alvin J. Downing officially retired from the military with an accumulation of medals and awards. That same year, the Downings returned to St. Petersburg, FL. Years later, Major Downing would pen the music for the Tuskegee Airmen Theme Song.



Al resumed his career in music education at Gibbs Junior College, created in 1957 to serve African American students, initially sharing the Gibbs High School campus. In 1967, Gibbs Junior College (by then relocated and renamed Skyway Campus of St. Petersburg Junior College (SPJC)) had ceased operations, and Al was transferred to the Clearwater Campus of SPJC (now St. Petersburg College). He taught piano, organ, brass, woodwind and instrumental percussion techniques, music theory, and applied music courses. A phenomenal musical talent as well as a gifted teacher, Al played and taught every instrument.



In 1966, Al became the first African American ever appointed to the St. Petersburg Housing Commission; in later years, he earned the distinction of being the first African American to perform with the St. Petersburg Symphony Orchestra, and the first African American member of the American Federation of Musicians Board, Clearwater, Florida. He was also an active member of the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Urban League.

In the early '60s, the Hammond B-3 was the keyboard of choice in the jazz community, and artists who were proficient with the B-3 – like Alvin Downing – were in high demand. Saxophonist Ernie Calhoun, leader of a well-known and eponymously named local jazz band, offered Al a job as his organist, and Al accepted. The partnership established between Al and Ernie helped introduce Al to the extensive network of local musicians.

Shortly thereafter, Al started his own band, "Al Downing and The All Stars," which through the years featured a wide array of musical talents of different ages, musical backgrounds, and races.



Upon his return to St. Petersburg, Al noticed quickly that there were few outlets for established players or young students interested in jazz, especially African Americans. Though there were many job opportunities for

musicians in other genres in the Tampa Bay Area, prospects for jazz artists seemed to be diminishing. Al began several organizations for the preservation of his favorite form of music. In 1973, he incorporated the Allegro Music Society, Inc. as a not-for-profit organization, dedicated to providing young jazz musicians, including the Downings' daughter Evelyn, with a safe and family-oriented venue to hone their skills. During its too brief existence, the organization trained young players and sponsored concerts, frequently in area restaurants. Sadly, the Allegro Music Society was forced to end operations due to opposition from the local musicians' union.

Al's newly formulated band "Al Downing and The All Stars" helped bring new life to the Tampa Bay Area jazz scene. He founded Al Downing's Music Enterprises, as well as Downing's Music Publishing Firm, affiliated with BMI. His daughter Evelyn was an extremely talented jazz vocalist, and their musical collaborations created an outlet for her talent to be expressed. In 1976, AJD Records released the album *Evelyn Downing Sings... "Angel Eyes"* Featuring Al (A.J.) Downing Jazz Quintet. The label also produced the LP *Al Downing and Friends Do Jazz* (c. 1980).

In 1981, Al and Bunny founded the Al Downing Florida Jazz Association to renew, continue, and expand the mission that Allegro had begun – this time without union opposition. Al served as President, Bunny served as Vice President, and Evelyn was the first member of the association. In 1989, it merged with the Tampa Bay Jazz Society, founded by Al's old collaborator Ernie Calhoun, and was rebranded as the Al Downing Tampa Bay Jazz Association, Inc. To this day, the organization continues to award scholarships to talented youth pursuing a career in music.



Al received numerous awards and honors, including the Key to the City of St. Petersburg, FL for outstanding community service, the 1983 Friends of the Arts Award from the Pinellas County Arts Council, and the 1984 Martin Luther King Jr. Drum Major for Justice Award from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. At 75 years old, Al was honored at the 12th Annual Clearwater Jazz Holiday with the "Ambassador of Jazz" award from the Jazz Holiday Foundation, in recognition of his outstanding contributions to jazz in the Tampa Bay area as a performer and teacher. He was the first person to receive the award. In 1996, he was inducted into the St. Petersburg Downtown Hall of Fame.

In honor of his 80th birthday, Al's family organized a celebration at the Dolphin Beach Resort on St. Pete Beach.



A host of Bay Area Musicians showed up to help, including Al's old friends and colleagues, jazz greats Nat Adderley, John Lamb and Buster Cooper, who comprised the featured act, a live jazz combo.

In the new millennium, Al's health began to falter. Near the end, the Florida A&M University Alumni Singers gathered around his bed, serenading Al with his favorite songs, and sang him to his final rest. On Feb. 19, 2000, Al died peacefully at home, surrounded by his beloved family.

In 2011, Al was posthumously named "Favorite Artist" by *Players Magazine*. That same year, Al was inducted into the Gibbs Junior College Hall of Fame and was named Professor Emeritus by St. Petersburg College.



Since his transition, Al's legacy has been celebrated in public art throughout the city. Inside the vestibule at the entrance of Perkins Elementary's Al Downing Theater, a mural designed by local artist Herbert Davis depicts the legendary jazz artist surrounded by elements of the school's history, including a children's choir and musical instruments. In 2004, local artists and members of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Suncoast placed Al's likeness in the role models mural in their newly renovated, historic Royal Theater performing arts center. More recently, just a block away from the Boys & Girls Club, artist Zulu Painter (aka Carlos Culbertson) created a larger-than-life mural of Al on the north wall of the historic Lorene's Fish & Crab House. This 2023 mural was a new rendition of an earlier one in Tampa.

In December 2025, Alvin Joseph "Al" Downing was inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame, in recognition of his lifetime commitment to providing performance and educational opportunities for jazz musicians, and to the preservation of jazz music as an American art form.

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN



75th ANNIVERSARY

1941 ★ 2016