

Memorial Covers

A Tribute to Those We Lost in 2025

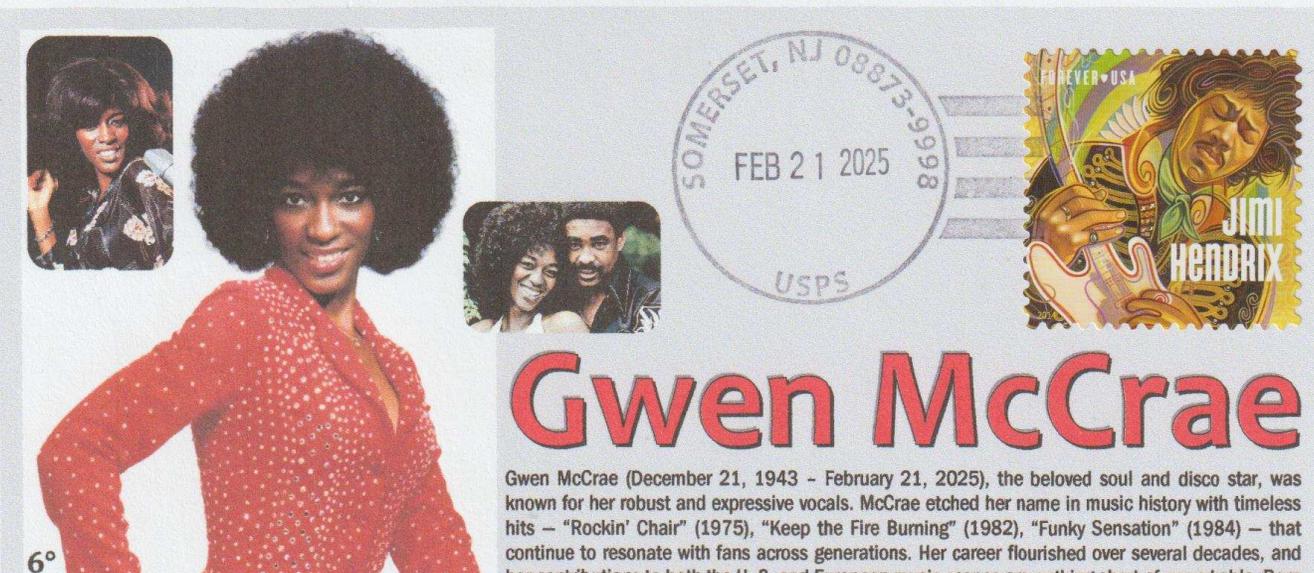
by Don Neal

We're remembering with memorial covers some of the beloved celebrities – from iconic politicians to popular musicians to legendary athletes to television personalities – who sadly passed away in 2025. Some of them may be familiar to you, others not so much, but all have made a historic contribution to the Black experience.

Grammy-winning singer and pianist whose intimate vocal and musical style made her one of the top recording artists of the 1970s – an actor and artist who rose to fame as a teen when he was cast as Theodore “Theo” Huxtable – the president of the New York state chapter of the NAACP and a lifelong civil rights advocate – the beloved soul and disco star known for her robust and expressive vocals with timeless hits like “Rockin’ Chair” and “Keep the Fire Burning” – the groundbreaking funk and psych-rock pioneer whose iconic, integrated, progressive, and indomitably idealistic group performed at the Woodstock music festival – often called the “Godfather of Neo Soul,” he left an indelible mark on jazz, funk, R&B, and hop-hop with a career spanning over six decades – known as “The Lion of Lenox Avenue,” he was a former U. S. Congressman and powerhouse in New York City politics – soul singer-writer who was the original lead singer of The Impressions – gold medalist Olympian boxer who became a businessman, minister, and author – a dancer who defied boundaries of race and age – the prolific actor who was a frequent collaborator of director Spike Lee



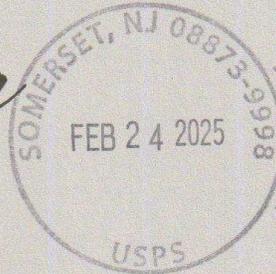
Jerry “The Ice Man” Butler, Jr. (December 8, 1939 – February 20, 2025) was a soul singer-songwriter, producer, musician, and politician. Butler – who was born in Mississippi but moved to Chicago – performed in a church choir then joined a gospel quartet. He became a part of a group called the Roosters which then turned into R&B vocal group, the Impressions, of which he was the original lead singer. Other original members were Curtis Mayfield, Sam Gooden, Fred Cash, and brothers Arthur and Richard Brooks. Butler was with the Impressions for two years before embarking on a successful solo career. During his time with the group, he co-wrote their 1958 hit “For Your Precious Love.” Butler left the group in 1960. He would continue to collaborate with Mayfield, however, and Mayfield wrote and sang background on some of Butler’s hits. Butler’s 1960 single, “He Will Break Your Heart,” hit No. 7 on the pop chart. Some of his other successful singles included “Find Another Girl,” “I’m A-Telling You,” “Only the Strong Survive,” “Let It Be Me,” “Hey, Western Union Man,” “Never Give You Up,” and “Ain’t Understanding Mellow.” He also was one of the first artists to record the song “Moon River.” Jerry Butler released more than 50 albums. He also was a songwriter, and he and Otis Redding co-wrote the latter’s hit “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long.” In 1991, Butler was inducted, along with the other original members of the Impressions, into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Butler served on the Cook County Board Commissioner in the greater Chicago area from 1986 to 2018.



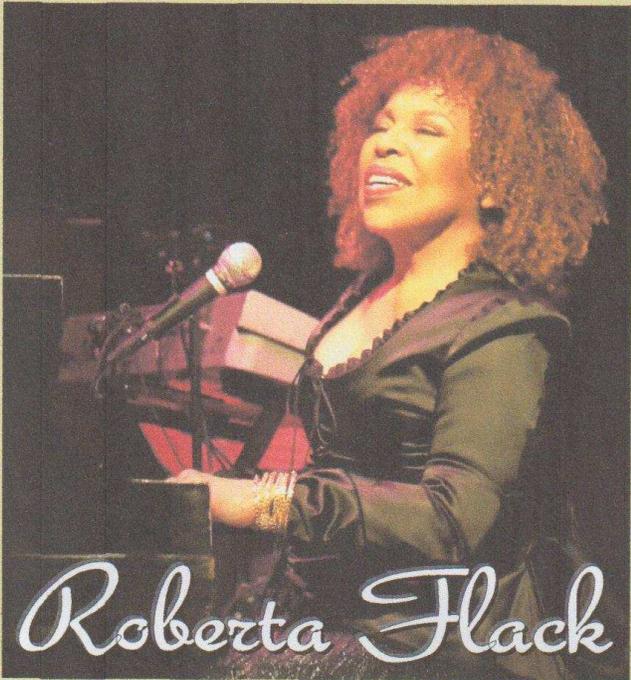
Gwen McCrae (December 21, 1943 – February 21, 2025), the beloved soul and disco star, was known for her robust and expressive vocals. McCrae etched her name in music history with timeless hits – “Rockin’ Chair” (1975), “Keep the Fire Burning” (1982), “Funky Sensation” (1984) – that continue to resonate with fans across generations. Her career flourished over several decades, and her contributions to both the U. S. and European music scenes are nothing short of remarkable. Born in Pensacola, Florida, McCrae’s musical journey began in church, where she sang in the choir from the age of seven. She actively pursued her passion throughout her teenage years, which led her to envision a career in music after high school. At age 20, she met fellow musician George McCrae (“Rock Your Baby,” “I Get Lifted”), married him, and began to perform together professionally in the mid-60s. Their musical partnership caught the attention of notable artists, including Betty Wright (“Clean Up Woman”), who ultimately introduced Gwen to Henry Stone, an influential figure in Miami’s music scene and the founder of Alston and TK Records. It was here that Gwen McCrae started her journey as a background singer before being catapulted into the limelight.



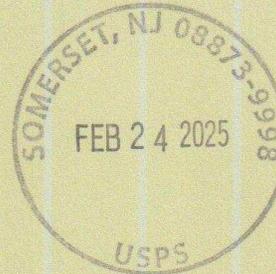
Roberta Flack



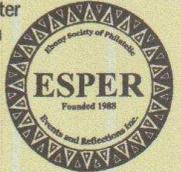
Roberta Cleopatra Flack (February 10, 1937 - February 24, 2025) was little known before her early 30s, but she became an overnight star after Clint Eastwood used "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" as the soundtrack for one of cinema's more memorable and explicit love scenes in his 1971 film *Play Misty for Me*. The hushed, hymn-like ballad, with Flack's graceful soprano afloat on a bed of soft strings and piano, topped the Billboard pop chart and received a Grammy for record of the year in 1973. Flack was the first artist to win that award in back-to-back years when "Killing Me Softly with His Song" won in 1974. The songstress was nominated for 14 Grammy awards, winning five - including a lifetime achievement award. A classically trained pianist so gifted she received a full scholarship at age 15 to Howard, the historically Black university in Washington, D. C. After graduating from Howard, she taught music in D. C. -area junior high schools for several years in her 20s, while performing after hours in clubs. Flack was signed to Atlantic Records and her debut album, *First Take*, came out in 1969. Her intimate vocal and musical style made her one of the top recordings artists of the 1970s with additional hits including "Feel Like Makin' Love" and three duets with her close friend and Howard classmate, Donny Hathaway, "Where Is the Love," "The Closer I Get to You," and "Back Together Again." In 1972, Flack sang at the funeral of Jackie Robinson, major league baseball's first Black player. In the 1980s, Flack began working with Peabo Bryson, including on the hit single "Tonight, I Celebrate My Love" and also had a hit duet with Maxi Priest with "Set the Night to Music." For years, she lived in Manhattan's Dakota apartment building, on the same floor as John Lennon and Yoko Ono. On TV, Flack sang "Together Through the Years," the theme song to the show *Valerie*, later known as *The Hogan Family* (1986-1991). A longtime goal, Flack released a children's book, *The Green Piano: How Little Me Found Music*, in 2023.



Roberta Flack

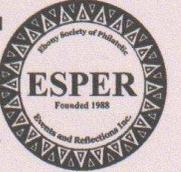


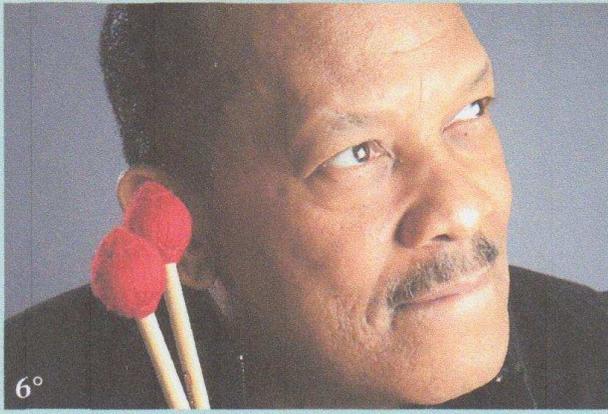
Roberta Cleopatra Flack (February 10, 1937 - February 24, 2025) was the Grammy-winning singer and pianist whose intimate vocal and musical style made her one of the top recordings artists of the 1970s and an influential performer long after. She was the first artist to win the Grammy Award for record of the year in back-to-back years - for "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" in 1973 and "Killing Me Softly with His Song" in 1974. The latter would go on to top the charts again three decades later with a cover by the Fugees. Flack's other hits from the 1970s included the cozy "Feel Like Makin' Love" and three duets with her close friend Donny Hathaway, "Where Is the Love," "The Closer I Get to You," and "Back Together Again" and "You Are My Heaven."



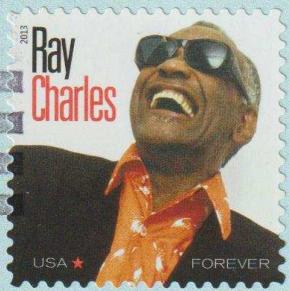
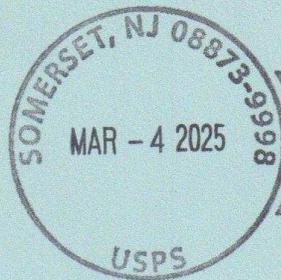
HAZEL DUKES

Dr. Hazel Neil Duker (March 17, 1932 - March 1, 2025) was the president of the New York State chapter of the NAACP and a lifelong civil rights advocate who fought tirelessly for voting rights, economic development, fair housing, and education. Duker helped lay the foundation for Black women to ascend to the nation's highest offices. In 1972, she took the stage at the Democratic National Convention to second the presidential candidacy of Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to run for the party's nomination. Duker was instrumental in former President Joe Biden's decision to choose Kamala Harris as his 2020 running mate. In 2023, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented Duker with the NAACP's highest honor - the Spingarn Medal.



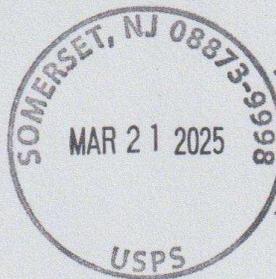
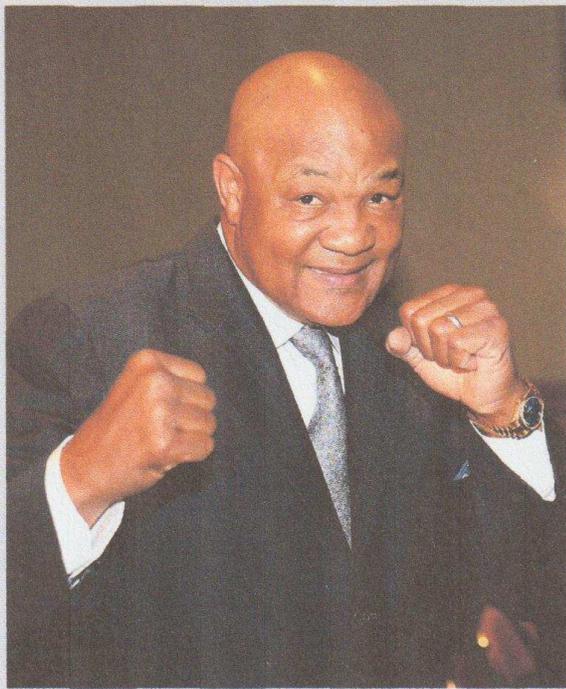


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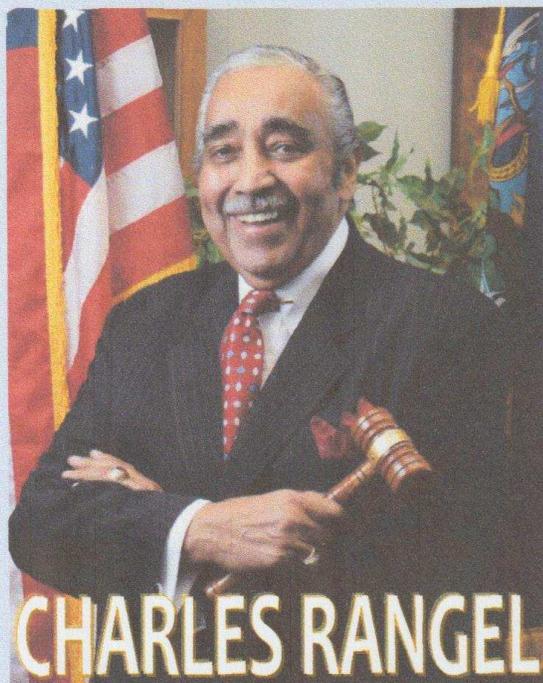
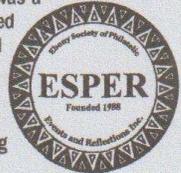
ROY AYERS

Roy Edward Ayers, Jr. (September 10, 1940 - March 4, 2025) was born in Los Angeles and grew up around a musical background and loved music from a young age. He was inspired to take up the vibraphone at the age of five after seeing Lionel Hampton's Big Band. Ayers later studied music theory at Los Angeles City College before launching his professional career in the early 1960s. Often called the "Godfather of Neo Soul," he left an indelible mark on jazz, funk, R&B, and hip-hop. With a career spanning over six decades, Ayers released his first album *West Coast Vibes* in 1963, followed by records like *Virgo Vibes* (1967) and *Stoned Soul Picnic* (1968), among dozen others, and became known as a pioneer in jazz-funk, with a slew of musicians sampling his music. His composition "Everybody Loves the Sunshine," from his 1976 album of the same name, has been sampled nearly 200 times by artists including Tupac Shakur, Dr. Dre, Mary J. Blige, and Snoop Dogg. Ayers' other hits include "Running Away" and "Don't Stop the Feeling." The electric piano hook from "Love," on the album *Ubiquity*— which introduced his group of the same name — was used in Deee-Lite's 1990 dance hit "Groove Is in the Heart." Ayers would go on to collaborate with various artists like Alicia Keys, Erykah Badu, The Roots, Fela Kuti, and Tyler, the Creator. He also made guest appearances on albums by Rick James, Whitney Houston, George Benson, the rapper Guru, and others. Ayers also made a name for himself in film soundtracks, composing the score for the 1973 blaxploitation classic *Coffy*, starring Pam Grier. In addition to being one of the masters of the jazz vibraphone, Ayers was a leader in the movement that added electric instruments, rock, and R&B rhythms, and a more soulful feel to jazz.



GEORGE FOREMAN

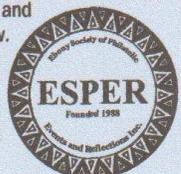
George Edward Foreman (January 10, 1949 - March 21, 2025) was a boxer, businessman, minister, and author. In boxing, he competed between 1967 and 1997, and was nicknamed "Big" George. He was an Olympic gold medalist at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Mexico. Foreman turned professional in 1969. After amassing a record of 32-0 (29 KO), he was ranked as the number-one challenger. He was a two-time world heavyweight champion having crushed undefeated heavyweight champion Joe Frazier, 29-0 (25 KO), in 1973, and toppled formidable challenger Ken Norton (who was 30-2) in 1974, both within two rounds. Foreman suffered his first professional loss to Muhammad Ali in "The Rumble in the Jungle" in 1974. Foreman later saw success, in his post-boxing career, pitching the now-omnipresent countertop grill that bears his name.

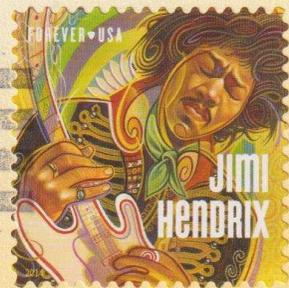
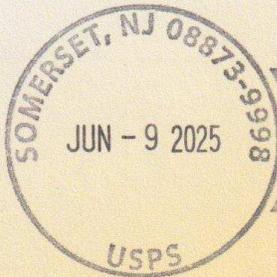


CHARLES RANGEL



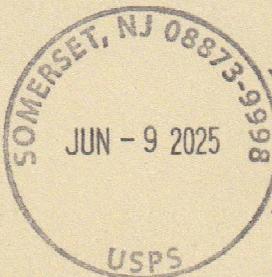
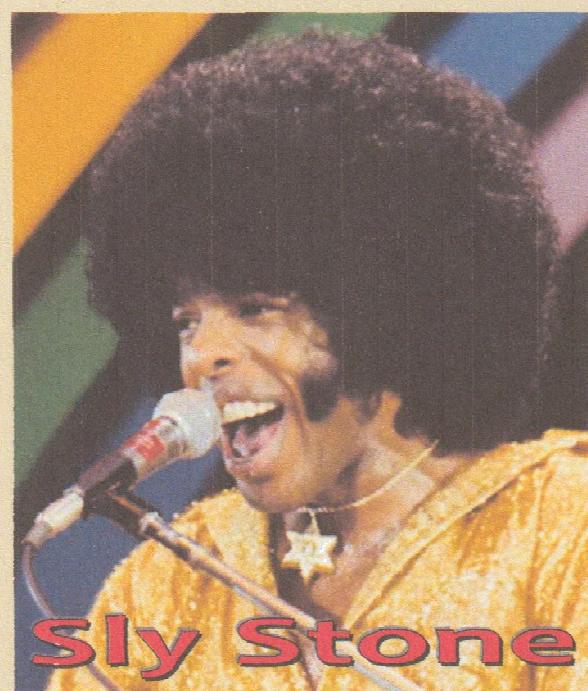
Charles Bernard Rangel (June 11, 1930 - May 26, 2025) was a former U. S. Congressman and a political powerhouse in New York City politics. Born in Harlem, Rangel, a Democrat, was the second-longest serving incumbent member of the House of Representatives, serving from 1971 to 2017. Known as "The Lion of Lenox Avenue," he was a true titan and beloved community fixture, serving as a representative for five different congressional districts. His list of accolades extend deep into the trenches of the Black community and Congress. He was elected to Congress in 1971 after defeating the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Dubbed an unapologetic champion of justice, Rangel won re-election for Congress every two years until his retirement — usually with over 90% of the vote. Rangel also was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus, and he was the first Black American to chair the influential House Ways and Means Committee.



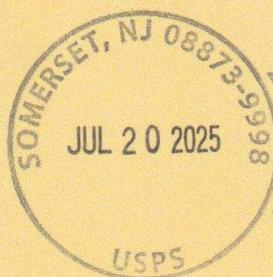
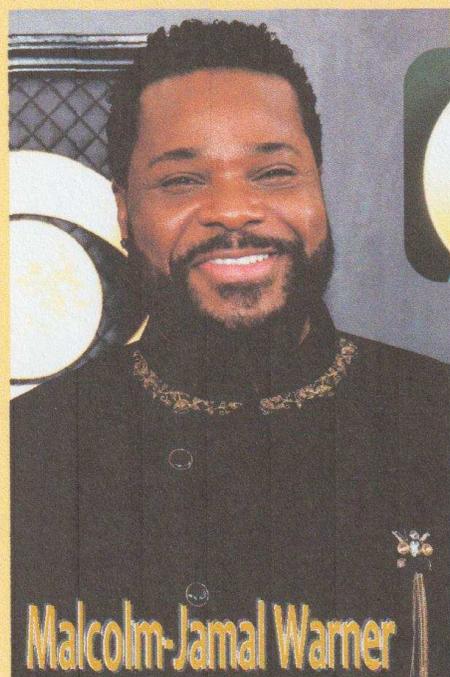
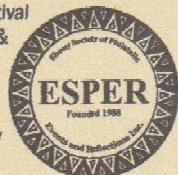


SLY STONE

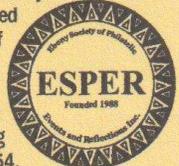
Born Sylvester Stewart in Denton, Texas, and raised in the Bay Area city of Vallejo in Northern California, Sly Stone (March 15, 1943 - June 9, 2025) was the groundbreaking funk and psych-rock pioneer who led the iconic Sly and the Family Stone group in the 1960s into the early 1980s. The group became the poster children for a particularly San Francisco sensibility of the late Sixties: integrated, progressive, indomitably idealistic. Their music, a combustible mix of psychedelic rock, funky soul, and sunshine pop, placed them at a nexus of convergent cultural movements, and in turn, they collected a string of chart-topping hits including "Dance to the Music" (1967), "Everyday People" (1968), "Sing a Simple Song" (1969), "M'Lady" (1968), "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)" (1969), "Everybody Is a Star" (1969), "I Want to Take You Higher" (1969), "Hot Fun in the Summertime" (1969), "Family Affair" (1971), and "If You Want Me to Stay" (1973) and acclaimed albums including *Stand!* (1969), *There's a Riot Goin' On* (1971), and *Fresh* (1973). On May 10, 1968, Bill Graham's Fillmore East had an atypical billing for the ages - Jimi Hendrix Experience/Sly And The Family Stone - featuring one of the biggest rock acts in the world, supported by a group that would soon join Hendrix at the mountaintop. Truly a night to remember! During the summer of 1969, Sly and the Family Stone appeared at the Woodstock music festival, stepping onstage at 3:30 am, several hours past their scheduled start time, and the grounds were soaked and muddy after a pissing rainstorm earlier in the day. Undaunted, they opened with a high-energy, euphoric rendition of "M'Lady," and the set only grew in intensity from there. The *Woodstock* movie showcased "I Want To Take You Higher, the climax of their blazing, ten-song performance. That same summer, Sly and the Family Stone also performed at the Summer of Soul concerts in Harlem and received an enthusiastic response from the large crowd. Sly and the Family Stone were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1993.

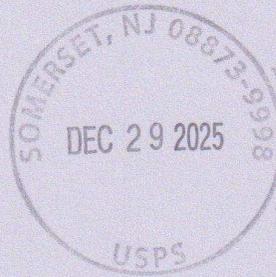
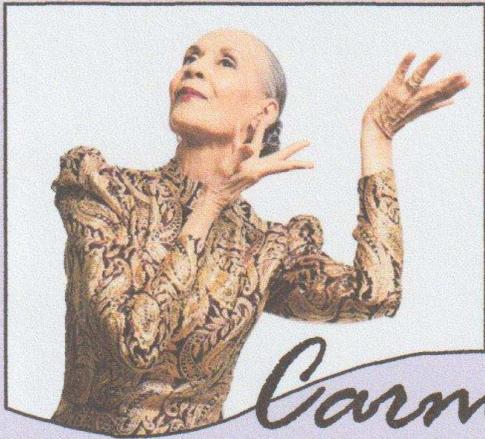


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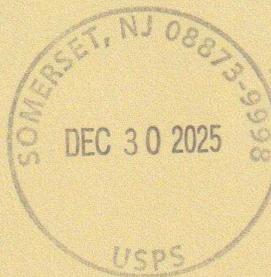
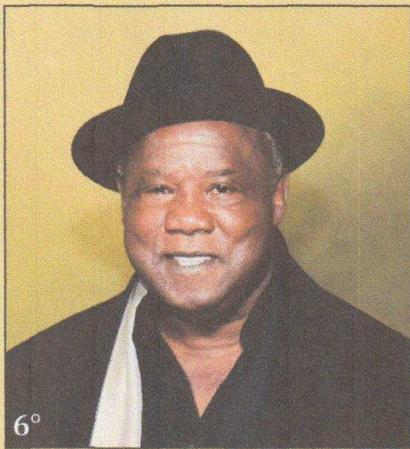
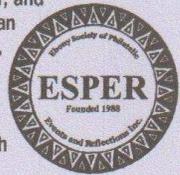
Malcolm-Jamal Warner (August 18, 1970 - July 20, 2025), an actor and artist who rose to fame as a young teen when he was cast as Theodore "Theo" Huxtable, the only son of Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad's characters, Heathcliff and Claire Huxtable, in *The Cosby Show*, which ran from 1984 to 1992. A native of New Jersey, Warner started acting at age 9, making appearances in shows like *Fame*. Warner continued working steadily in television throughout his career, with credits including *Touched by an Angel*, *Community*, *Key and Peele*, *Suits*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *American Horror Story*. Warner starred opposite Eddie Griffin in the sitcom *Malcolm & Eddie* and costarred with Tracee Ellis Ross on the BET sitcom *Reed Between the Lines*. Some of Warner's more recent acting credits include *The Resident*, *The Wonder Years* reboot, *Grownish*, and *9-1-1*. As much as he loved acting, Warner also worked hard to show how multifaceted he was, including being a Grammy-winning musician, a director, and a podcaster. Malcolm-Jamal Warner died in a drowning accident in Costa Rica when a current pulled him deeper into the ocean. He was 54.





Carmen de Lavallade

Carmen de Lavallade (March 6, 1931– December 29, 2025), a dancer who defied boundaries of race and age, touched almost every realm of the performing arts in a career of over six decades. She worked in theater, opera, nightclubs, film, and television alongside 20th-century luminaries like Alvin Ailey, Lena Horne, Agnes de Mille, Harry Belafonte, Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge, Pearl Bailey, and her husband of 59 years, the Tony Award-winning artist, actor, and dancer Geoffrey Holder (1930-2014). Ms. de Lavallade was foremost a muse whose versatility and creative drive never were confined for an extended period to any single dance or theater company. She performed with many companies, including Lester Horton Dance Theater, American Ballet Theater, and choreographed for or appeared with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Dance Theater of Harlem, and the Metropolitan Opera. Her noble bearing, high cheekbones, long, sinuous torso, and impressive wingspan revealed a wide portfolio of characters experiencing torment or ecstasy, including the troubled jazz singer Billie Holiday, the martyred Joan of Arc, and a sexually liberated Scheherazade. Duke Ellington once called her "one of the most ravishing women in the world." Ms. de Lavallade continued to dance through her 80s. In 2017, she received the Kennedy Center Honors award for lifetime achievement and contributions to American culture.



ISIAH WHITLOCK, JR.

Isiah Whitlock, Jr. (September 13, 1954 - December 30, 2025) was an actor best known for his role as corrupt state senator R. Clayton "Clay" Davis on the HBO television series *The Wire* from 2002 to 2008. He made the role his own when he developed the catchphrase for his character, "sheeeeeee-it." Whitlock also was a frequent collaborator of director Spike Lee on films like *She Hate Me*, *25th Hour*, *Red Hook Summer*, *Chi-Raq*, *BlackKkKlansman*, and *Da 5 Bloods*. Born on September 13, 1954, in South Bend, Indiana, Whitlock got his start as an actor while attending college at Southwest Minnesota State University, where he had a football scholarship and studied theater. He joined the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, California, after graduating in 1976. In 1987, he landed a role in the TV series *Cagney & Lacey*, in which he played a "man getting in a cab." Whitlock went on to book a few more roles in films like *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*, *Goodfellas* in 1990, where he played a doctor, *Eddie* with Whoopi Goldberg; the TV series *As the World Turns*; and more. Following *The Wire*, Whitlock continued to star in several TV series, including *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, *Rubicon*, and *Meet the Browns*. He also starred in the 2011 film *Cedar Rapids* and the 2008 film *Cadillac Records* alongside Beyoncé, Adrien Brody, and Jeffrey Wright. He went on to star in *Veep* alongside Julia Louis-Dreyfus from 2013 to 2015. In 2020, he starred in the TV series *Your Honor* as Charlie Figaro alongside Bryan Cranston, Hope Davis, Michael Stuhlbarg, and more. In 2023, Whitlock starred as Bob in *Cocaine Bear*. His most recent role was as Larry Dokes in the Netflix miniseries, *The Residence*, in which he starred with Uzo Aduba, Giancarlo Esposito, Randall Park, and more. In the upcoming 2026 Disney film *Hoppers*, Whitlock voiced the character of Bird King. The film also stars Jon Hamm, Meryl Streep, Kathy Najimy, and Dave Franco. Whitlock also voiced characters in the films *Cars 3* (River Scott) and *Lightyear* (Commander BUMSIDE).