

John M. Kuhn

Biography

John M. Kuhn was born on the Fort Peck Reservation, Montana, in 1882. A member of the Assiniboine Tribe, he learned euphonium at the Fort Shaw Indian School in Montana and switched to Sousaphone at the Haskell Indian School in Kansas in 1903. He used the name “Red Cloud” as a member and soloist with three of the most important bands of the early twentieth century, led by Bohumir Kryl, Patrick Conway, and John Philip Sousa. Newspaper reports from the time referred to John Kuhn as “the finest tuba player in the country,” and “the best tuba player in the world.”

As a member of the Isham Jones Orchestra—a popular Chicago-based dance band—he recorded dozens of tunes that featured his distinctive, beautiful sound, and superb rhythmic pulse and style. Kuhn endorsed Conn Sousaphones throughout his career, and he designed the Conn “Chief” tuba mouthpiece in 1923. He collaborated with Jaroslav Cimera and co-authored the Kuhn-Cimera Method for Tuba that was published in 1941; it remains in print today. From 1930–1955, Kuhn played tuba in the NBC Radio Orchestra in Chicago where he recorded thousands of radio programs that were heard by millions of listeners.

By the time of his death in 1962 just a few months before his 80th birthday, John Kuhn was recognized as one of the most influential tuba players of the first half of the twentieth century. Some career highlights:

- 1904: Performed at the St. Louis World’s Fair with the Haskell Institute Band
- 1910, 1911, 1912: Member and soloist with Bohumir Kryl’s band
- 1915, 1919, 1920: Member and soloist with John Philip Sousa’s Band
- 1920–1925: Member of Isham Jones’ Rainbow Orchestra, Chicago
- between 1922 and 1926: Performed as member of Patrick Conway’s Band
- 1924: Developed the C. G. Conn “Chief” tuba mouthpiece
- 1933: Endorsed Holton Sousaphones; assisted in design of Holton short-action valves

Words about John:

"Kuhn remains a very interesting figure in the history of tuba performance. This includes several innovations in valve design (special short action valves) and he co-authored an instruction book with Jaroslav Cimera. I feel that his contributions should be recognized..." - Don Harry

"His impact in the tuba world was tremendous, significant, and notable. The prestigious honor of an ITEA Lifetime Achievement Award is long overdue for this extraordinary person." Dr. Deanna Swoboda

"It is not an exaggeration to say that we can look at [Kuhn] today as one of the most accomplished and influential American musicians on any musical instrument at any time. John Kuhn stands tall as an American original, and his birth on the Fourth of July 1882 – at a time before most Native Americans were even allowed to be citizens of the United States – puts an exclamation point on his American roots. After all, who could be a more American musician than John Kuhn, a proud member of the Assiniboine Nation? His people were here first."

Douglas Yeo