



Tommy Jacquette-Halifu

Tommy Jacquette-Halifu (1943-2009) was a co-founder of the annual Watts Summer Festival in 1966, a founding member of the organization Us, executive director of the Watts Summer Festival for over 40 years, a highly-respected social activist, community organizer, and veteran of the 1965 Watts Revolt. And although he was best known for his work as executive director for the Watts Summer Festival (at times featuring Coretta Scott King, Myrlie Evers, Betty Shabazz, Sammy Davis Jr., Richard Pryor, Sammy Davis Jr., Isaac Hayes, Muhammad Ali, Quincy Jones and a host of elected officials as grand marshals of the festival parade), he was also worked with the Watts Christmas Parade, Watts Willowbrook Chamber of Commerce, the Watts Gang Taskforce and organizations and community programs. He was born in Los Angeles, California, the eldest of six children, and grew up in the Imperial Courts in Watts, a residential district in the southern part of Los Angeles, California.

Jacquette-Halifu is survived by his wife, Carmen Eatmon of Los Angeles; four sons, Derek and Raymond of Los Angeles and Damien and Juba of Phoenix; two daughters, Julienne Jacobs of St. Louis and Denise McFall of Los Angeles; his mother, Addie Young of Los Angeles; a brother, Bob Henson of Carmel; two sisters, Brenda Lake and Diane Young of Los Angeles; 23 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

In memory of Tommy Jacquette-Halifu, Congresswoman Maxine Waters gave the following statement at the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. on November 19, 2009.

"Mister Speaker:

I rise in memory of Tommy Jacquette, my dear friend of over 40 years, who passed away this week. I know that the community of Watts and the greater Los Angeles area are grieving with me, because we've all lost a truly unique, larger-than-life friend and activist who had his finger on the pulse of the community.

Born in South Central Los Angeles in 1943, Tommy as a young man became part of the Black Power Movement of the 1960's and sharpened his leadership skills during his studies at Cal-Poly Pomona. He was acutely aware of the problems and issues facing the African-American community, and he wanted to make a difference.

Tommy especially loved Watts, and he dedicated his life's work to enriching the community. He was the founder of the Watts Summer Festival at Ted Watkins Memorial Park (formerly Will Rogers Park), which became an annual tradition in the community following the 1965 insurrection, which were riots that shook the Watts community and surrounding areas.

Tommy created the Festival to honor and celebrate our roots, our talents and our culture, and it subsequently helped to spark African-American festivals across the country: today it's known as the 'Grandfather' of all African American cultural events.

Even in years when he struggled to get funding for the Festival, when traditional donors such as the business community and others wouldn't contribute, he always came through and was able to put on a Festival, using the resources he had and his amazing life skills, largely stemming from being a self-made man. Just this year, I joked with him that if he had two dimes to rub together, there would be a Watts Summer Festival.

I have no doubt, however, that in making the Festival possible each and every year for almost a half-century, Tommy knocked a few heads together. This tall, handsome and fatigue-wearing man made his presence known, often using his penchant for colorful language to drive home the point! His confrontations with City Hall, L.A. County, and other elected officials and community leaders are legendary. He spoke his mind, and was bold and uncompromising in his support of the Black community.

So when he was mad, you knew it. However when he was pleased and happy, you knew it too, because he had a smile that would light up a room and a hearty laugh that would resonate throughout an entire building.

The Watts Summer Festival is uniquely Tommy, bringing people together and focusing both on local and national talent, always with an Afro-centric theme.

Tommy was an inspiration to me and to so many other people. He was daring, fearless and bold, helping us to gain the courage to openly discuss and deal with race, discrimination and inequality in a way that few had been able to before.

I will truly miss his presence and the long conversations we would often have, which would usually start when he'd say "Hey Mac, what do you think about that?" He was an incredibly deep thinker. He was especially an inspiration to young people in the community, often speaking at high schools, colleges and universities to encourage them to succeed, to give back, and to hold their heads up high.

There will never be another Tommy Jacquette, and I know that the legacy he has left behind is enshrined not only in the Watts Summer Festival, but in the larger community. I look forward to working with his family and the Board of Directors to make sure that the Festival continues, though there will be a big hole that can never be filled.

I thank him for all that he was and all that he was not, for all the lives he reached, and for his friendship. I will miss him dearly, but am comforted because I know Tommy Jacquette's life was one of impact, purpose, and fulfillment.

Thank you."