

## Legislation Text

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Honoring the life and legacy of music legend, activist, and Philadelphia native James Mtume, on the occasion of his passing.

WHEREAS, James Forman, who went by “James Mtume” for his entire adult life, was a musical innovator who left an indelible mark on a broad range of musical traditions, from jazz to R&B to hip hop to film and television; and

WHEREAS, Mtume was born on January 3, 1946, and grew up on the 1500 block of Wharton Street in South Philadelphia. He was the biological son of legendary jazz saxophonist Jimmy Heath, but was raised by his mother and James "Hen Gates" Forman, who was a professional jazz pianist himself; and

WHEREAS, Mtume grew up in a musical environment, with jazz musicians frequenting his childhood home, including Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Dinah Washington, and John Coltrane. His biological uncle, the jazz drummer Albert “Tootie” Heath, gave him his first conga drum and he taught himself to play piano and percussion; and

WHEREAS, Mtume was a star swimmer at Overbrook High School, where he became the first Black backstroke champion in the Amateur Athletic Union’s Middle Atlantic District. In 1966, he entered Pasadena City College on a swimming scholarship; and

WHEREAS, In California, he joined the US Organization, a Black nationalist cultural group that introduced the holiday Kwanzaa, and he took an African last name: Mtume, Swahili for “messenger”; and

WHEREAS, Around this time, he also turned seriously to music and made two jazz albums thematically focused on Black cultural identity. The first, *Kawaida*, was made under his uncle’s name, and also featured his father along with jazz legends Herbie Hancock and Don Cherry. However, Mtume was a major contributor to the album, not only lending percussion and vocals but also writing all of the songs; and

WHEREAS, During this time, Mtume developed a close relationship with renowned poet and activist Amiri Baraka, with whom he recorded a spoken word album. At Baraka’s request, Mtume moved back east to help elect Newark’s first Black mayor, Kenneth Gibson; and

WHEREAS, Now on the New York jazz scene, Mtume established himself among the elite, working with jazz lions such as Duke Ellington and Sonny Rollins and avant garde leaders such as McCoy Tyner and Pharoah Sanders. Ultimately, he joined Miles Davis’s band in 1971. He worked with Davis until 1975, touring and appearing on several albums, including *On the Corner*. Davis credited Mtume with influencing his turn towards Afrocentricity and even named a tune “Mtume” on the *Get Up With It* album; and

WHEREAS, In 1972, Mr. Mtume made his recording debut as a bandleader with *Alkebu-Lan: Land of the Blacks*, credited to the Mtume Umoja Ensemble. It opened with a spoken manifesto that praised “the role of Black music as a functional organ in the struggle for national liberation”; and

WHEREAS, In 1978, Mtume and Reggie Lucas, his former bandmate with Miles Davis, formed a band with Tawatha Agee called Mtume. The band distinguished itself for the sophistication, musicality, and sensuality of its music. After signing a major-label deal with Epic Records, the band had a number of hits, including “Juicy Fruit” and “You, Me, and He”; and

WHEREAS, In addition to his work as a bandleader, Mtume also became a prominent songwriter and producer, both individually and with Lucas. In that role, he worked with artists including Donny Hathaway, Roberta Flack, Phyllis Hyman, Teddy Pendergrass, and Stephanie Mills. Mtume and Lucas co-wrote Mill’s 1980 hit “Never Knew Love Like This Before,” which won a Grammy Award for best R&B song; and

WHEREAS, As hip hop evolved into a major musical genre, Mtume made his mark there as well. Hip hop artists came to draw upon Mtume’s work heavily, most notably “Juicy Fruit,” which has been sampled over 100 times, by artists including Notorious B.I.G., Alicia Keys, Warren G, Jennifer Lopez, Keyshia Cole, and Faith Evans. Mtume was also the subject of Stetsasonic’s hit “All That Jazz”; and

WHEREAS, Mtume also found success making music for film and television, most notably the 1990s TV series *New York Undercover*. In addition to the soundtrack, Mtume successfully advocated for the show to regularly feature scenes at a nightclub called Natalie’s. The scenes featured performances by both an older generation of musicians, such as B.B. King and Chaka Khan, as well as younger artists covering classic songs; and

WHEREAS, As a result of his work on *New York Undercover*, Mtume started working with a new generation of R&B artists in the 90s, including Mary J. Blige, D’Angelo, R. Kelly, and K-Ci & JoJo. Just like for Natalie’s, many of these tracks were remakes of classic songs, by artists such as Natalie Cole and Eddie Kendricks; and

WHEREAS, Mtume began to work as an on-air radio personality in the mid-90s, first at New York City’s KISS 98.7 FM and then on WBSL 107.5 FM. He was a co-host from 1995 to 2013 on the weekly show “Open Line,” where he discussed politics, activism, news, and culture. Mtume also recorded a TED Talk in 2018, “Our Common Ground in Music,” in which he discussed “the cross-pollination of culture, politics and art”; and

WHEREAS, Mtume is survived by his wife, Kamili Mtume; his brother, Jeffrey Forman; two sons, Faulu Mtume and Richard Johnson; four daughters, Benin Mtume, Eshe King, Ife Mtume and Sanda Lee; and six grandchildren; and

WHEREAS, James Mtume’s career had a profound and varied influence on music and the music industry, shaping the sound and sensibility of multiple generations of music. Moreover, he was not only a musical pioneer but an influential advocate and activist for Black culture and history; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby honors the life and legacy of music legend, activist, and Philadelphia native James Mtume, on the occasion of his passing.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to the family of James Mtume, further evidencing the sincere admiration and respect of this legislative body.