

# Ronald McNair

**Ronald Erwin McNair** (October 21, 1950 – January 28, 1986) was an American NASA astronaut and physicist. He died during the launch of the Space Shuttle *Challenger* on mission STS-51-L, in which he was serving as one of three mission specialists in a crew of seven.

In 1976, he received a Ph.D. degree in Physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology under the guidance of Michael Feld, becoming nationally recognized for his work in the field of laser physics.

In 1978, McNair was selected as one of thirty-five applicants from a pool of ten thousand for the NASA astronaut program. He flew on STS-41-B aboard *Challenger* from February 3 to February 11, 1984, as a mission specialist becoming the second African American and the first Bahá'í to fly in space.

Following this mission, McNair was selected for STS-51-L, which launched on January 28, 1986, and was subsequently killed when *Challenger* disintegrated nine miles above the Atlantic Ocean 73 seconds after liftoff.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1971, he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Engineering Physics, magna cum laude, from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, North Carolina.<sup>[2]</sup>

After graduation from MIT (receiving four honorary doctorates, a score of fellowships and commendations while achieving a 6th degree black belt in taekwondo), he became a staff physicist at the Hughes Research Lab in Malibu, California. McNair was a member of the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>[3]</sup>

He was survived by his wife, Cheryl, daughter Joy Charey McNair and son Reginald Ervin McNair. McNair was a member of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Contents

- Background
- Music in space
- Public honors
- See also
- References
- External links

## Background

Ronald Erwin McNair



|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Born</b>             | October 21, 1950 <div>Lake City, South Carolina, U.S.</div>   |
| <b>Died</b>             | January 28, 1986 <div>(aged 35)</div> <div>Cape Canaveral, Florida, U.S.</div>  |
| <b>Nationality</b>      | American  |
| <b>Occupation</b>       | Physicist   |
| <b>Awards</b>           |    |
| <b>Space career</b>     |   |
| <b>NASA Astronaut</b>   |   |
| <b>Time in space</b>    | 7d 23h 15m  |
| <b>Selection</b>        | 1978 NASA Group   |
| <b>Missions</b>         | STS-41-B, STS-51-L  |
| <b>Mission insignia</b> |   |

Born October 21, 1950, in Lake City, South Carolina, his parents were Pearl M. and Carl C. McNair. He had two brothers, Carl S. and Eric A. McNair. In the summer of 1959, he refused to leave the segregated Lake City Public Library without being allowed to check out his books. After the police and his mother were called, he was allowed to borrow books from the library, which is now named after him.<sup>[4]</sup> A children's book, Ron's Big Mission, offers a fictionalized account of this event. His brother, Carl S., also wrote the official biography, *In the Spirit of Ronald E. McNair—Astronaut: An American Hero*.

McNair graduated as valedictorian of Carver High School in 1967.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Music in space

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McNair was an accomplished saxophonist.



Astronaut candidates Ron McNair, Guy Bluford, and Fred Gregory wearing Apollo spacesuits, May 1978

Before his last fateful space mission he had worked with the composer Jean-Michel Jarre on a piece of music for Jarre's then-upcoming album Rendez-Vous. It was intended that he would record his saxophone solo on board the *Challenger*, which would have made McNair's solo the first original piece of music to have been recorded in space<sup>[6]</sup> (although the song "Jingle Bells" had been played on a harmonica during an earlier Gemini 6 spaceflight). However, the

recording was never made, as the flight ended in disaster and the deaths of its entire crew. The last of the *Rendez-Vous* pieces, "Last Rendez-Vous", had the additional name "Ron's Piece". Ron McNair was supposed to take part in the

concert through a live feed.

## Public honors

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McNair was posthumously awarded the Congressional Space Medal of Honor in 2004, along with all crew members lost in the *Challenger* and *Columbia* disasters.

A variety of public places, people and programs have been renamed in honor of McNair.

- The crater McNair on the Moon is named in his honor.
- The McNair Building at MIT (a.k.a. Building 37), his alma mater, houses the Kavli Institute for Astrophysics and Space Research.
- The McNair Center for Aerospace Innovation and Research at the University of South Carolina is named in his honor.
- Watson Chapel Jr. High was renamed the R. McNair Jr. High School in his honor.



Some of NASA's first African-American astronauts including Dr. Ronald McNair, Guy Bluford and Fred Gregory from the class of 1978 selection of astronauts.



Challenger crew: (front row) Michael J. Smith, Dick Scobee, Ronald McNair; (back row) Ellison Onizuka, Christa McAuliffe, Gregory Jarvis, Judith Resnik

- Ronald McNair Boulevard in Lake City, South Carolina, is named in his honor and lies near other streets named for astronauts who perished in the Challenger crash.
- The U.S. Department of Education offers the TRIO Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program for students with low income, first generation students, and/or underrepresented students in graduate education for doctorate education.
- On January 29, 2011, the Lake City, South Carolina, library was dedicated as the Ronald McNair Life History Center.<sup>[5]</sup> When Ronald McNair was nine, the police and his mother were called because he wished to check out books from this library, which served only white patrons before he arrived. He said, "I'll wait," to the lady and sat on the counter until the police and his mother arrived, and the officer said, "Why don't you just give him the books?" which the lady behind the counter reluctantly did. He said, "Thank you, Ma'am," as he got the books.<sup>[4]</sup> The episode as recalled by his brother Carl McNair has been depicted in a short animated film.<sup>[7]</sup>
- Several K-12 schools have also been named after McNair.
  - McNair Memorial Park in El Lago, Texas, is named in his honor.<sup>[8]</sup>
  - Ronald E. McNair Middle School in Lake City, South Carolina, was renamed from Carver High School in his honor (he was a high school graduate of the facility).
  - Dr. Ronald E. McNair Academic High School in Jersey City, New Jersey<sup>[9]</sup>
  - Ronald McNair Elementary School currently under construction in Greensboro, North Carolina
  - Ronald McNair Elementary School in Germantown, Maryland
  - Ronald E. McNair Prince Hall Masonic Lodge No. 146 is named in his honor in Suitland, Maryland<sup>[10]</sup>
  - Dr. Ronald E. McNair High School in Atlanta, Georgia
  - Ronald E. McNair Middle School, San Antonio, Texas – Southwest ISD
  - Ronald McNair Middle School in Decatur, Georgia
  - Ronald McNair Middle School in College Park, Georgia
  - Ronald E. McNair Administrative Center in University City, Missouri
  - Ronald E. McNair Elementary School in Hazelwood, Missouri<sup>[11]</sup>
  - Ronald Ervin McNair Elementary School in Denton, Texas (Denton ISD)
  - Ronald McNair Middle School in Rockledge, Florida
  - Ronald E. McNair Elementary School in Dallas, Texas (Dallas ISD)
  - Ronald E. McNair Academic Center in Chicago, Illinois
  - Ronald E. McNair Junior High School in Huntsville, Alabama<sup>[12]</sup>
  - Ronald McNair Middle School<sup>[13]</sup> in East Palo Alto, California
  - Ronald E. McNair High School in Stockton, California
  - PS 5, Dr. Ronald McNair School in Brooklyn, New York
  - PS/MS 147 Ronald McNair in Cambria Heights Queens, New York
  - McNair Elementary School in Compton, California.
  - Ronald E. McNair Building: KIPP Believe College Prep. New Orleans, Louisiana
- A building on the Willowridge High School campus in Houston, Texas, is named in honor of McNair.
- Dr. Ronald McNair Junior High School in Pearland, Texas (Alvin Independent School District), is named in honor of Dr. McNair.<sup>[14]</sup>



Dr. Ronald E. McNair memorial in his hometown, Lake City, South Carolina



Dr. Ronald E. McNair tomb in his hometown, Lake City, South Carolina



Ronald McNair Park in Brooklyn, New York City



Ronald E. McNair South Central Police Station of the Houston Police Department in Houston, Texas



- There is a memorial in the Ronald McNair Park in Brooklyn, New York, in his honor.<sup>[15][16][17]</sup>
- The Dr. Ronald E. McNair Playground in East Harlem, New York City, is named after him.<sup>[18]</sup>
- The Ronald E. McNair Space Theater inside the Davis Planetarium in downtown Jackson, Mississippi, is named in his honor.
- The Naval ROTC building on the campus of Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana is named in his honor.
- The Engineering building at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, NC, is named in his honor.
- The McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, which operates at 179 campuses in the U.S. (April 7), awards research money and internships to first-generation and otherwise underrepresented students in preparation for graduate work.<sup>[19]</sup>
- McNair was portrayed by Joe Morton in the 1990 TV movie Challenger.
- The song "A Drop Of Water", recorded by Japanese jazz artist Keiko Matsui, with vocals by the late Carl Anderson, was written in tribute to McNair.
- The Jean Michel Jarre track "Last Rendez-Vous" was re-titled "Ron's Piece" in his honor. McNair was originally due to record the track in space aboard Challenger, and then perform it via a live link up in Jarre's Rendez-vous Houston concert.
- There are over 150 federally funded McNair Scholars/Achievement Programs across the United States designed to encourage juniors and seniors who are first-generation and low-income, or members of groups that are underrepresented in graduate education college to enter doctoral study.<sup>[20]</sup> Michigan State University and Washington State University are two examples of these programs and both offer Summer Research Opportunity Program as additional program components.<sup>[21]</sup>



Ronald E. McNair Hall, On the campus of North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina

## See also

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- List of African-American astronauts
- Space Shuttle Challenger disaster
- Rendez-vous Houston

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## External links

- McNair Foundation to encourage and mentor science, mathematics and technology students (<https://web.archive.org/web/20060204205122/http://ronaldmcnair.org/>)
- Spacefacts biography of Ronald McNair ([http://www.spacefacts.de/bios/astronauts/english/mcnair\\_ronald.htm](http://www.spacefacts.de/bios/astronauts/english/mcnair_ronald.htm))
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- Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/triomcnair/index.html>)
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- Ron's Big Mission – A story about an event in Ron's childhood (<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/5955260-ron-s-big-mission>.)
- Ronald McNair (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/7693>) at Find a Grave
- Ronald McNair (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/6353930>) at Find a Grave

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