

JAZZ ALUMS TO HIGHLIGHT ANNUAL JAZZFEST

By Andy Jaffe, Artist-in-Residence in Jazz

For six years, the presence of Jazz at Williams has been evidenced in part by our hosting the Annual Intercollegiate Jazz Festival each Spring, when regional college and University ensembles convene to perform for the public and for adjudication by distinguished jazz musicians.

This spring, in mid-April, the Festival will expand, co-sponsored by the Williamstown Chamber of Commerce and the Music Department, to feature concerts by The Mingus Big Band, The Ted Rosenthal Trio with Reggie Workman and Yoron Israel, and performances by ensembles led by Williams alumni Art Lande '69 and Joe Mulholland '74. Neither the presence of jazz, nor hosting a jazz festival, is new to Williams, however, as I found in researching this article (begun by Ira Boudway '00).

The origins of the music we have come to know as "jazz" undoubtedly date back 500 years or so to the first interactions between European and African musical cultures on American soil. Still, it was not until the early part of this century that this phenomenon was named, its stylistic traits identified, and the music had become a subject of criticism and scholarly discourse. The first "jazz" recordings were made just prior to the 1920's, and it was during this culturally fertile decade that jazz-related dance music first appeared at Williams, performed by College musicians.

The two dominant poles prevalent in the music of the 1920's were what Ellington referred to in his famous lyrics as "sweet" and "hot." Loosely translated, this meant the lyrical, symphonically-influenced style epitomized by Paul Whiteman and his ensemble, on the one hand, and the "gutbucket" (to again borrow an Ellingtonian phrase), earthier, and more blues-based jazz music of the dance halls and nightclubs of the "Roaring Twenties."

While Armstrong was the dominant early force in hot music, with his style quickly adapted to fit the evolving larger ensembles of Fletcher Henderson, and then Ellington, neither style was by any means the exclusive purview of white or black musicians, and the ascension of radio quickly broke down barriers of accessibility to the music for musicians and dancers throughout the country.

Since the 20's, the duality of jazz as both an artform and an entertainment music has been a subject of intense discussion among musicians, critics, and listeners. Indeed, the entire history of the music can easily be framed in terms of the art/entertainment debate. And although jazz has in fact been a music of the concert halls for a select few since these early days, most jazz musicians throughout the history of the music have found their economic fate to be inexorably linked to the dance hall and night club circuit, a circumstance which continues to exist today both on and off campus, notwithstanding the advent of formal academic jazz programs.

In the 20's campus ensembles included the "Purple Pirates" and the "Purple Knights." According to Carl Johnson '32, former curator of The Whiteman Collection, they performed throughout New England. Influenced by the Dixieland revival of the 40's were the "Spring Street

Stompers" (1951-56), who appeared on the Tonight Show and recorded for both the Jubilee and Columbia labels. In the early 60's, Al Oerle, Mike Scott, and Bill Robertson (all '62) continued this tradition. Art Lande '69 has become one of the preeminent pianists in contemporary jazz. He is a truly eclectic musician whose style successfully integrates elements of his roots as a "stride" pianist in the style of Thomas "Fats" Waller with forays into the most contemporary harmonies and formal experiments. His recordings with his San Francisco-based band, "Rubisa Patrol," his ECM recordings with Jan Garbarek, and his solo piano recording "The Eccentricities of Earl Dant," are among his best-known, and he has visited Williams several times in the past decade to perform and conduct workshops with the Jazz Ensemble. Lande was followed in the 70's by pianist/composers Mulholland and the late Clyde Criner '75, professional performers and recording artists. (Mulholland, who teaches at Berklee College of Music, plans to lead his sextet April 11 as part of the Jazz Festival, splitting the bill with Lande's duo).

While student ensembles continued to perform at the Rathskeller and other informal venues throughout the 70's (as they continue to today at "Currier Club"), it was during a 1974 Winter Study workshop led by New England Conservatory of Music faculty member Carl Atkins that our current Jazz Ensemble had its genesis.

Pianist and award-winning author Tom Piazza '76 was the ensemble's first director, and was instrumental not only in leading the band, but also in producing a series of annual jazz festivals which boasted an astonishing line-up of historically important musicians - Buddy Tate, Milt Hinton, Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Machito, Weather Report and others. Trumpeter and entertainment lawyer Steve Robinson '79, who also plans to perform this Spring, followed Piazza, and continues to perform in the New York area. Award-winning composer and current music department chairman David Kechley gave the ensemble professional direction beginning in 1986, and I took over from him in 1989.

Today, the curriculum includes courses in jazz theory, improvisation and jazz history. Last year, I taught a Winter Study on the music of Duke Ellington, and this coming winter will offer a course on Coltrane's music. Over the past decade, I have had many students pursue independent studies in areas such as jazz arranging and thesis composition. Private study is offered in jazz piano, saxophone, and bass.

Among our most outstanding students during this decade have been Chris Lightcap '92, now enjoying a career as a bassist in New York, and Mark Sutton '93, whose ensemble, "The Motion Poets," which has two CD's out, gave a concert in Brooks Rogers recently as a part of an east coast tour. They also plan participation in April's Festival. Finally, we must acknowledge that the fulltime presence of jazz in the curriculum is due in large part to the generosity of Lyell B. Clay '46, whose gift to the College endows the position of the artist-in-residence in jazz.