Traditionnal Jazz Series

Beginning our Third Decade!

Our One Hundred Fortieth Program 1999-2000

Benny Powell trombone
Ronnie Mathews piano
Earl May bass

In memory of the late Al Grey (1925-2000)

Sponsored by the Department of Music and the New Hampshire Library of Traditional Jazz

8 p.m. Monday, May 1, 2000, Johnson Theatre
Paul Creative Arts Center, Durham, NH
Benny Powell, Ronnie Mathews, and Earl May

We begin this epistle with best wishes for the speedy recovery of Jane Jarvis who recently suffered a leg injury which, much to her annoyance, has prevented her return to UNH for this program, one that actually was her idea. Nevertheless, we are confident that being nearly a decade younger than Fiddler Williams, she will have ample opportunity to enhance our environment in the future.

The death of our good friend, Al Grey, on March 24, gives us pause and an opportunity for reflection. (Many will remember that he, Jane, and Clark Terry performed together on last season’s series; Basie buffs will know that Al and Benny Powell both were members of the Count’s trombone section, separately and simultaneously.) Among other things one is led to more deeply appreciate how profoundly the personal voices of jazz artists have actually changed the norms of the instruments themselves. For example, for generations the image of the trombone was defined by such things as its solemnity in Mozart’s Magic Flute and its triumphant quality in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, not to mention the tradition immortalized in Meredith Wilson’s 76 Trombones!

But now the expressive and technical expectation for the instrument must embrace the range of sounds, colors, and challenges posed in venues like the very different trombone sections of the Duke Ellington and Stan Kenton orchestras, as well as in the variegated soloistic panoramas from Jack Teagarden and Tommy Dorsey to J.J. Johnson and Carl Fontana, a rich and complex history of which Al Grey and Benny Powell are an important part.

Benny understandably is most identified with the Basie band, but his distinguished 56-year career also includes significant associations with Lionel Hampton, Billy Taylor, and Thad Jones/Mel Lewis, among others. Scholar Leroy Ostransky writes of his “fluent technique, strong sense of melodic line, and ability to enunciate rapid notes clearly” (the latter hardly a factor for those restricting themselves to Mozart and Beethoven!). However, as the years have passed, perhaps more revealing is this comment from Basie’s autobiography concerning Benny’s departure from the band in 1963 after twelve years of service; “You know you are always going to miss him no matter who comes in there to replace him, because during those years you’ve seen him continue to develop as a wonderful musician and a wonderful person.”

How blessed we are to have Ronnie Mathews available to replace Jane on such short notice. His experience as a sideman reads like a history of jazz in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s – Max Roach, Freddie Hubbard, Art Blakey, Woody Shaw, Johnny Griffin, etc. But in the “small world” category we proudly observe that he played with Clark Terry on CT’s very first visit to this
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campus, in 1975, and we further note that he was with T.S. Monk’s superb group at Portsmouth’s Music Hall just a few years ago.

Earl May is another artist whose contacts are copious if not encyclopedic; for starters, Mercer Ellington, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Taylor, Chet Baker – and Fiddler Williams – and Dave McKenna! He was also Gloria Lynne’s music director, and toured with Sophisticated Ladies.

As we end another season devoted to preserving and enhancing this tradition, we both mourn and celebrate those who have passed, and cherish yet more lovingly those whose endless youthfulness inhibits our own aging. And when we have an opportunity to view the “big picture”, we see not only lots of young people playing in high school and college jazz ensembles, but also the nature of their music becoming more representative of the stylistic variety of a long heritage. We rejoice, and welcome three artists old to the tradition, yet new to our stage.

Tape recorders and cameras are not permitted due to contractual arrangements. Please turn off beepers and watch alarms. Your cooperation is requested.
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