Our Twenty-ninth Season

Our One Hundred Eighty-Eighth Program
2007-2008

JOHN KIRBY’S JEWELS REDISCOVERED
THEONYX CLUB SEXTET
DIRECTED BY WAYNE ROBERTS

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

8 p.m. Monday, April 14, 2008
Johnson Theatre, Paul Creative Arts Center, Durham, NH
The Onyx Club Sextet

To those below a certain age the name *Onyx Club* will evoke no response, but some of us with longer pasts may accurately remember (or guess) that sometime prior to mid-20th century it was a venue, probably not bejeweled, on New York’s 52nd Street (not to be confused the 42nd Street); those with particularly vivid experiences from that era might even recall that it was distinguished for being the home base for an ensemble usually designated as *John Kirby and his Orchestra* although it was actually a sextet. Within that paradox lurks the secret of its uniqueness; small groups—three horns and a rhythm section, for example—usually featured collective improvisation in the front line interspersed with solos, the atmosphere being generally loose, whereas larger units composed of full reed and brass sections and various combinations of same depended upon written orchestrations and the disciplined results thusly conveyed. Kirby (b. 1908), a reformed tubist and one of the first memorable string bassists of the swing era, has been quoted as follows, “The boys and I realize that apart from our ability to improvise, we need to develop a distinctive ensemble style and to prove, by arrangements, our ability to execute them.” Although the syntax may be a bit clumsy, the artistic point is clear; Kirby wanted to infuse a small ensemble with values customarily associated with the big bands, but at no cost to improvisatory imagination.

The group’s heyday was circa 1938-43; known as “the biggest little band in the land” it had a stable personnel of Charlie Shavers on trumpet, Buster Bailey on clarinet, Russell Procope on alto, Billy Kyle on piano, O’Neil Spencer on drums, and of course Kirby on bass. Each of these artists was a richly gifted professional experienced in both large and small groups; they all became prominent in the history books—look them up! This was unusual stuff 70 years ago; strangely, nobody seemed to make a serious attempt to imitate it, and the concept puzzled some of the critics. But even if it did not immediately influence other groups it certainly anticipated the aesthetic emerging much later in phenomena such as the *Birth of the Cool* and the *Modern Jazz Quartet*. And quite obviously someone was listening, since Kirby’s group recorded over 100 selections!

Wayne Roberts, a New England Conservatory and Juilliard grad, has transcribed over 50 of these arrangements and assembled a roster of first-rate performers upon whom he can draw to re-create this music with the freshness, sophistication, and humor that tapped many a foot and beguiled many an ear those many decades ago. These gentlemen are all new to our stage, and we welcome them with gratitude for their enthusiastic enlargement of the historical repertoire.
Bonus Anecdote:

This is sort of a "small world" story. When the venerable Benny Carter was here for a few days in 1988 and this writer was chauffeuring, he recounted the following: (Trust me! I am quoting his words of 20 years ago with aging memory!), "I had my very first airplane ride in New Hampshire! It was in the early 1930s. John Kirby and I were driving up to Concord for a gig with Fletcher Henderson's orchestra when we came upon a barnstormer in a field offering brief plane rides for a modest amount. John pulled over and we tried it, returning safely!" I thanked him for this piece of NH aeronautic history, thinking how different jazz history would have been had the flight not been successful!

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

The UNH Traditional Jazz Series began in 1979 through the imaginative vision and generous commitment of the late Dorothy C. Prescott. It promotes the enjoyment and understanding of the art through concerts featuring musicians of regional, national, and international prominence. The program represents a unique endeavor to expand interest and honor outstanding talent and achievement.

Musicians wishing to do so are encouraged to offer their recordings for sale or mail order during intermission; a brief announcement may be made. The sponsors have no financial interest in such sales beyond offering a courtesy service to the artists and the public.

Program Notes -- Paul Verrette
Production -- David Seiler
Program essays from the entire UNH Traditional Jazz Series now can be accessed on the internet. http://www.izaak.unh.edu/nhtj

2007-2008 SCHEDULE

September 17: For Lionel, Red, and Bunny: The Ed Polcer Sextet

October 15: Decades of Songs in Her Heart: Sheila Jordan

November 19: Youthful Vibrations: Stefon Harris and Blackout

February 4: Luminous Rays of Pianistic Elegance: Tim Ray

March 10: Great Scott!: The Multidimensional Mr. Robinson and His Colleagues

April 14: Rediscovered Jewels: Onyx Club Sextet Led by Wayne Roberts

OTHER SPECIAL JAZZ PERFORMANCES AND EVENTS

October 26: Family Weekend Concert, UNH JAZZ BAND and COMBOS, Dave Seiler and Thomas Palance, directing. Strafford Room, Memorial Union Building, UNH.

January 22: Harry Jones Memorial Concert with the Seacoast Big Band, Dave Seiler, directing with special guest, composer/trombonist John Fedchock. Johnson Theatre, Paul Creative Arts Center, UNH.

January 30: Faculty Jazz Sextet. Johnson Theatre, PCAC. Free and open to the public.

March 16: Gala Jazz Concert, DR. CLARK TERRY, trumpet and flugelhorn, and his "Real" Clark Terry Quintet, with Stantawm Kendrick, saxophones, Don Friedman, piano, Marcus McLaurine, bass, and Sylvia Cuenca, drums. Johnson Theatre, Paul Creative Arts Center, UNH.

For tickets call (603)862-2290