TRADITIONAL JAZZ SERIES

UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
SECOND OUR EIGHTY PROGRAM

DAVE MCKENNA

SPONSORED BY
THE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC
AND THE NEW HAMPSHIRE
LIBRARY OF TRADITIONAL JAZZ

8 PM MONDAY
MARCH 2, 1992
STRAFFORD ROOM
MEMORIAL UNION
DURHAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE
DAVE McKENNA

Solo pianism is the quintessential do-it-yourself venture, be it jazz, classical, parlor entertainment, or none of the above. It is fraught with contradiction on a number of levels—psychologically, the lonely pursuit of a crowded musical agenda minus the energizing interaction with other humanoids; physically, the necessity for total technical dominion with the most limited of personnel; in sum, two hands and one head doing the work of many. This doubtless explains the paucity of successful purveyors of the art, an issue made more challenging over the decades by shifts in taste; the near-extinction of the stride tradition some years ago was not just the result of an epidemic of left-handed sleeping sickness, but of aesthetic changes requiring a newly-demanding technique. There are, however, recent healthy signs in young performers like Marcus Roberts that the Endangered Species Act need not be invoked.

Given all of this, our protagonist is a particularly rare phenomenon, not because of what he does, but how he does it. He does not present us with a potpourri of historical styles, however salutary that might be, nor an impersonal display of the pyrotechnical potential of the medium; Dave McKenna gives us the truly unique sound of Dave McKenna—he sounds like nobody else, and nobody else sounds like him (as some of us know only too well!). This comes fundamentally from his rhythmic sense; Dave has a remarkable feel for swing which not only defies surface imitation but permeates a menu of southpaw deliveries, from stride to walking bass to guitar-like strumming, all in a manner readily identifiable, but transcendentally indefinable. Painters copy Rembrandt with more ease.

Born in Woonsocket Rhode Island, in 1930, Dave had lessons as a youngster from both his mother and local nuns, but essentially he is self-taught (students—and faculty—take notice!). He tried to duplicate the completeness that he heard on recordings, and the absence of a bass player on many early gigs was the ultimate necessity which mothered his invention. At 16 he joined Boots Mussulli (the noted Kenton saxophonist), and stints with Charlie Ventura and Woody Herman soon followed. After military service during the Korean War—he was an Army cook, appropriate for a devotee of Italian food, if not regularly operational under those circumstances—Dave worked with Gene Krupa, Stan Getz, Zoot Sims, and Buddy Rich, among others, and then played frequently with the retrospectively lyrical trumpeter Bobby Hackett. In fact, Dave attributes his retention of melodic virtuosity amid the temptations of virtuosity to his exposure to so many first-rate horn players.

Since 1966, Dave’s home base has been Cape Cod, with lengthy forays into Boston’s Copley Plaza, not to mention Fenway Park. He has recorded copiously, and at present his well-deserved and still-expanding reputation takes him to many parts of the traversable universe, including the very first concert in this series (1979) and several, if not enough, subsequent appearances.

Dave has been profiled in The New Yorker by Whitney Balliett (who dubbed him “Super Chops”), honored by Providence College and the State of Rhode Island, and recognized
for the number of celebrity artists (such as Tony Bennett and Oscar Peterson!) who drop in simply to listen. Yet he describes himself as just "a tune player of saloon piano"; those of musicological bent cannot help but recall that generations of classical composers have used "tunes" as the raw material for their themes and variations, and the elegance of Dave's melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic imagination justifies the comparison—and he is improvising!

When Dave McKenna last performed here in 1989, this writer was struck by the demeanor of his audience. Bodies and attached feet could not help but move to the swing emanating from the stage, but did so in hushed silence; there was so much else to absorb that the level of aural and mental concentration suggested the atmosphere at a program of late Beethoven, or contemplation of the infinite.

'Nuff said!

_Tape recorders and cameras are not permitted due to contractual arrangements. Your cooperation is requested._
THE SERIES

The UNH Traditional Jazz Series began in 1979. 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

THE SCHEDULE

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