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DIANE ELLIS CHOSE HER WAY

BY DON BUDZINSKI

In the pantheon of jazz luminaries much is known about the Marsalis family and the Heath Brothers but here in Chicago are some kin firmly ensconced in the category of “talent deserving wider recognition” – the Ellis family.

endeavor which eventually led to classical recitals. One fateful day at age nine the band director in a recruitment mode visited her classroom to demonstrate all the instruments for the children. Her inclination was towards the alto saxophone, having been already exposed to its allure through Uncle Jimmy. This enthusiasm was stymied by her parents who felt that the saxophone was a “man’s instrument” and they insisted that she continue as a pianist.

Headstrong and determined, Diane signed her father’s name on the consent form and proceeded to emulate her uncle with fervent saxophone study and practice, none

of which could be done at home due to this slippery scheme. It went on for almost two years at which point her parents happened to be in attendance at a PTA meeting where the concert band was the entertainment. Diane’s ruse was thereby exposed but her parents were so won over by the obvious talent being displayed that their reaction was more like “That’s my girl!” instead of “You’re in big trouble, young lady!”

In high school she really came into her own as a musician with membership via audition in the All-City Concert Band and All-City Jazz Band. One year behind her at

South Shore was none other than Steve Coleman, the alto saxophonist who has since achieved worldwide renown. Diane playfully related a tale of flirtation that involved Coleman offering to “trade lessons” on their respective instruments, a transparent ploy to become her boyfriend. Coleman in a conversation with this writer had high praise for Ellis and confirmed that had it not been for this set of circumstances he never would have switched from violin to alto saxophone. In another bit of dramatic intrigue, Coleman wound up taking ►

PHOTO: COURTESY OF DIANE ELLIS



DIANE ELLIS BLOWING SONNY STITT OFF THE STAGE.

Morris the trombonist and Jimmy the saxophonist are now retired (or semi-retired) but their niece Diane is still going strong – both as a performer and public school band director.

Her childhood exposure to musical performance was in keeping with Grandma’s insistence that all the grandchildren learn piano, in Diane’s case with a very early start at age four and a blossoming in that

saxophone lessons from Jimmy Ellis, a development that stoked the competition with his girlfriend on alto and somewhat soured their romance.

A full scholarship to Bradley University provided Diane with a well-rounded education in music and a Bachelor's Degree in Music Education. Ten years on the road as a jazz saxophonist (which included an extended stint with organist Jimmy McGriff) eventually segued into a teaching position in the Chicago Public Schools, first for four years at Ryerson Elementary on the west side and then for seventeen years at Dixon Elementary on the south side where she still serves as the director of the marching, concert, and jazz bands.

"Every kid in this school plays something," she proudly proclaimed and then proceeded to spin an evocative tale of a roomful of first-graders playing Duke Ellington's "C Jam Blues" on kazoos.

Equally ebullient was her description of an annual contest. A cash prize is offered for the three students who can most smoothly deliver the melody of a designated Charlie Parker tune. Last year's quest involved "Au Privave," a Bird line that had her kids obsessively bopping in a good-natured mode of jazzy competition. They came to know every note and nuance of the tune and would skip lunch to render repeatedly that gymnastic melody. Diane's enthusiasm and glee were evident in her portrayal of the contestants working their little fingers to the bone navigating those riffs. It got to the point that they would sing the melody as a greeting when passing Ms. Ellis in the hallway instead of just saying hello.

Another lively anecdote explained how the students march into the classroom to music – alternately via "HUP-two-three-four" or "SWING-two-three-four" as a way of teaching them to differentiate between straight time and jazz rhythm.

Trumpeter Marquis Hill, a former student of Ms. Ellis, is now a rising star on the Chicago jazz scene and soon will attain his certification as a K-12 music educator. (Chicago-area principals, take note!) Marquis waxed eloquent when asked to recall his years at Dixon under her tutelage. "Ms. Ellis set very high standards. It wasn't like we were just treated as kids squeaking and squawking. Every rehearsal and performance were put forth very seriously, as if we were high school students or even aspiring professionals." He also has fond memories of all the kids at a very young age dancing around the classroom to jazz music by the great masters.

In another significant tale of jazz mentoring, Diane became animated while relaying her story of meeting Gene Ammons and then Sonny Stitt. Ammons was on his death bed and the spunky teenager talked her way into his hospital room because she felt compelled to make a pilgrimage to the saxophonist who was so closely associated with "My Way," a tune that she listened to and practiced incessantly. When Ammons passed away and Stitt came to Chicago for the funeral, Diane made her way over to her alto idol at the service and blurted out, "I'm a saxophonist and I can blow you off the stage!" Her challenge was accepted and a few nights later she was side-by-side with Stitt on the ➤

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PHOTO: COURTESY OF DIANE ELLIS

PHOTO OP WITH SONNY STITT.

stage of the Apartment Lounge playing “There Will Never Be Another You.” Diane could hardly contain herself as she flashed back to that magical night: “I was on Cloud Nine and then some. Of course I couldn’t wait to brag to Steve Coleman and make him jealous about my triumph so I certainly did!”

At Ammons’ funeral Stitt played a mournful version of “My Way.” When Stitt died eight years later, Diane traveled to Washington, D.C. for the service where she was asked to play a song in tribute. Her grateful offering? “My Way.”

Ms. Ellis continues to identify and nurture er talent – some at a very young age. For example, a promising drummer named Kenari Allison is now ten years old but was first spotted as a natural on drums in first grade. “He could very well be the next Max Roach”, she stated with parental pride.

Also inspiring is her role as a feeder for Lincoln Park High School when her students with an urge to continue their development as musicians move on to the secondary level. The band director at Lincoln Park is Phillip Castleberry, a longtime friend who played alongside her in their glory days at South Shore High School where the music teacher, Alvin Lawson, was a product of the legendary Captain Walter Dyett at DuSable High School. Such is the continuum of jazz education and the perpetuation of this profound art form.

How sad it is to read article after article about budget cuts eliminating music programs at public schools nationwide. What Ms. Ellis imparts is so valuable for a knowledge of their cultural history, the joy of creative endeavor, the self-discipline and pride achieved by learning a musical instrument. Indeed, I can think of no better argument for cloning: an army of Dianes throughout the land! ■

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