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'77 alumnus, Richard Drexler, hits a career high note

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Richard Drexler played piano at the Holiday Inn here six nights a week while attending Illinois Wesleyan University. One evening, a group of his friends from the University of Illinois came to hear him perform. He wanted to impress them with his ability because, according to Drexler, he was "hot stuff."

One of his friends, however, did not share Drexler's opinion. After hearing his friend's criticism, Drexler resolved that he was going to be a great musician the next time his friends heard him play.

A 1977 graduate of IWU and current resident of Clearwater, Fla., Drexler has since become an accomplished musician. For those interested in Latin Jazz, "Senor Juan Brahms," Drexler's debut CD, will give listeners the opportunity to hear the classical music of Johannes Brahms in a jazzy style. Drexler sings and plays a multitude of instruments on the CD along with 20 other notable musicians. "Senor Juan Brahms" will be released in spring 2000 under the Songosaurus label on which he has appeared on seven other CD's.

Brahms, a German composer and classical pianist of the romantic period, wrote four symphonies, which are considered among the greatest in symphonic music. Drexler took the same melodies and harmonies of Brahms' works and added Latin rhythms to them along with his own improvisation.

Drexler also appears on trombonist John Allred's CD "Focused." Released in 1998 under the Applejazz label and recorded in just two sessions, "Focused" highlights Drexler's piano playing talent with "Love for Sale," "On the Street Where You Live," "Easy Does It," and "My Inclination."

The disc includes Kelly Sill on bass, Eddie Metz on drums, Rex Wertz on tenor sax, and Orlando Sanchez on percussion. The CD also contains a few of Allred's original compositions, old jazz standards and up-tempo bebop tunes.

Drexler has recorded with Nat Adderley, Gato Barbieri, Paquito d'Rivera, Manfredo Fest, Tom Harrell, Dave Liebman, Bob Mintzer, Claudio Roditi and Ira Sullivan. Drexler also has played with the likes of Buddy deFranco, Carl Fontana, Woody Herman Orchestra, Tommy Newsom, Tito Puente, Arturo Sandoval and many more. His diverse recording credits as a sideman extend to chamber music, country music, salsa, and even with the trash-metal group Saigon Kick.

He also has performed in shows with Bob Hope, Rich Little, The Coasters, Diamonds, Myron Floren, Four Aces, Frank Gorshen, Rockettes, Jerry van Dyke, Lawrence Welk All-Stars, "Will Rogers Follies" and "A Chorus Line."

Drexler has worked with singers Diahann Carroll, Tony Bennett, Frankie Lane, Mel Torme, Mose Allison, Susan Anton, , Linda Cole, Vic Damone, Connie Francis, Joel Grey, Al Jarreau, Carol Lawrence, Al Martino and Bobby Rydell. He has also performed with Alex Acuna, Jeff Berlin, Oscar Feldman, Eddie Marshall, Gumbi Ortiz, Jeff Rupert and Buster Williams.

Born and raised in central Illinois, Drexler discovered his love for music during his childhood. His parents Dwight and Maxine Drexler were professors at IWU, teaching piano and voice, respectively. "Because I grew up with a lot of music in my home, I just gravitated towards music," said Drexler. At the age of five, Drexler walked over to the piano and began playing along with "Christian Soldiers" in four-part harmony, something he had composed all on his own without having a single piano lesson. Shortly thereafter, Drexler began taking piano lessons although he was never interested in formal training, but rather, enjoyed playing by ear along with recordings.

While attending University High School, Normal, Ill., Drexler met his mentor, jazz pianist John Campbell. Campbell introduced Drexler to the bass instrument and the two students began playing professionally. After Campbell introduced Drexler to jazz music, Drexler began to use jazz, rather than classical music as a medium for expression. According to Drexler, "Jazz music is a personal expression in its improvisational manner. No one plays a jazz piece the same way as another person."

Drexler entered IWU at age 16 and followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a piano performance major. He also joined the IWU Jazz Band which allowed Drexler to continue developing his interest in jazz. In the second semester of his junior year, Drexler became the first IWU student to travel to New York and participate in the Great Lakes College Arts Association, a consortium of small Midwestern private colleges. The program gave students with an aptitude in the arts and considering a life in professional music, a semester to study under prominent artists. Drexler was apprenticed to composers Jackson MacLow, Charlie Morrow and David Horowitz.

Drexler rates his job satisfaction very high and feels fortunate "to be doing what he loves without having to get a real job." Drexler discourages people from entering the profession unless they have a deep, burning desire to pursue music.

Drexler admits that he would not have been able to do what he has career-wise if he had a wife and family--he has seen many marriages break up over the stress that comes with a musician's life. However, Drexler feels his musical career does allow him to learn constantly about himself and his music. "Being able to pursue music is very satisfying because the quest for wisdom and understanding never stops," said Drexler.