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The Doctor of Jazz

Alumni and students raised their horns to salute Tom Streeter who has kept jazz music alive and swinging at IWU for 40 years.

Story by **RACHEL HATCH** Photos by **MARC FEATHERLY**



Forty years ago, Professor of Music Tom Streeter brought all the spontaneity and originality that is jazz to Illinois Wesleyan. A concert this spring at Westbrook Auditorium served as a coda to those four decades as Streeter said goodbye the best way he knows how: by sharing and celebrating the music he loves.

To join him in his farewell were 21 musicians spanning all four decades of Streeter's IWU career, from 1970s-era alumni to first-year students. Besides the fact that all held trombones, the performers had one more thing in common: they had all come to play for and honor a man they fondly refer to as "Doc."

As he had done countless nights before, Doc Streeter led the music with laid-back brio, nodding his head to the rhythm and wearing a smile of pure pleasure. Instruments gleamed in the stage spotlights as the group weaved through a *mélange* of musical styles, from Hayden and Schubert to Bacharach and the Beatles.

"Doc" Streeter is serenaded by trombone students.

Streeter kept the evening's tone casual. "We're just here to play a little music. Hope you enjoy it," he said to the audience — filled with current and former students, colleagues and admirers — before his customary "a-one and a-two" kicked off the next song.

The choir's subtle yet stirring rendition of the Adagio from Edvard Grieg's *Piano Concerto in A minor* might surprise those who don't know all a trombone can do in the right hands. Bringing the number to a close with a sweep of his arms, Streeter turned to the audience and said, "I can

only imagine that is what music must sounds like in heaven.” The trombonists responded with appreciative chuckles.

Held on April 15, the trombone concert capped a year of events marking the 40th anniversary of the University’s Jazz Program and celebrating the career of Streeter, who retires in July as a professor emeritus. The tributes began in October, when alumni musicians from each decade of Streeter’s tenure performed at Homecoming. In January, Grammy-nominated composer/trombonist Steve Wiest gave a special performance at the 36th annual Illinois Wesleyan Jazz Festival. Other events included the IWU Jazz Ensemble’s extended tour in New York City and Boston in March, and a performance by Charlie Vernon, principal bass trombonist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in April.



Streeter kicks off a number with his customary “a-one and a-two.”

“This is a great way to celebrate Tom’s career at Illinois Wesleyan,” says Dennis Bubert ’76, who was among the alumni performing in the trombone choir. Bubert grew up in Normal and enrolled at IWU to study bass trombone, which is Streeter’s own instrument of choice. Since 1981, he has been bass trombonist for the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. He also teaches and conducts the trombone choir at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Reflecting on Streeter’s lifelong influence, Bubert says, “You can learn to be a better trombone player anywhere, but a true success as a teacher is someone who helps make you a better person along the way.”

Bubert recounts a late-night conversation he and Streeter had while driving back to campus from a festival in Nashville. “He knew then I had aspirations to play professionally and how difficult that road would be,” says Bubert, who recalls that Streeter told him there are three sides to a musician’s life. Mastering your instrument and learning the business side of music were the first two. However, “it’s the third side — the personal life that takes a commitment to family — that is the one that matters.”

As a young man with a promising performance career in front of him, Streeter himself had to choose whether or not to make that commitment. It was that same choice which brought him to Illinois Wesleyan.

Las Vegas or Bloomington?

Streeter grew up in central Indiana, far away from the urban hubs where jazz was born and flourished. “I came off a farm that raised pigs near Kokomo,” says Streeter with a small smile. He discovered music at his high school, where he learned the trombone and sang in the choir.

When he enrolled at Indiana University (IU) in Bloomington, a new world opened. “My roommate’s dad was a jazz pianist,” Streeter says. “He had a lot of jazz records and that got me going.” The music of Count Basie and Duke Ellington enthralled him. “Jazz is very inspirational — the kind of music that touches you in a way no other music does.”

At IU, he also found a mentor in his professor, Lewis Van Haney. “What a wonderful, patient person he was as far as explaining how to play the trombone. He was at the New York Philharmonic for 20 years before coming to Indiana, and he was quite the influence on my playing.”



While at IU, Streeter met Al Cobine, who in the mid-1960s was one of the nation’s top bandleaders. “He needed a bass trombonist and called me up and asked me if I wanted to play,” says Streeter. “The band contracted for people like Henry Mancini, Bob Hope and Johnny Mathis, so I got to have all these great experiences when I was at Indiana University.”

Streeter earned both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music education at IU. When he finished in 1967, the Vietnam War was raging. Streeter decided to join the Armed Forces before he could be drafted into the Army Infantry.

Streeter auditioned for the Airmen of Note, the Air Force’s famed jazz band, and was accepted. For the next few years, he remained stateside, playing for the band based in Washington, D.C. While in the Air Force, he also earned his doctorate of musical arts at the Catholic University of America.

Streeter honed his performing chops with the USAF Airmen of Note.

Streeter was still in the Airmen of Note when word came about an opening for a trombone professor at Illinois Wesleyan’s School of Music. A short time later, he was offered a job to play at the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas. Weighing the fact that he and his wife, Christine, had a new baby girl (the first of six children and 17 grandchildren), Streeter says the decision wasn’t hard. “I thought Bloomington would be a better place to raise a family,” he says.

Before Streeter's arrival at the School of Music in 1971, "if anyone was caught playing jazz in a practice room they were asked to leave the building," he says. "Jazz was from the bars and the brothels. It wasn't considered legitimate."

Philip Jones '73 recalls a professor telling him "that jazz music would ruin my playing." Now a professional trombonist, Jones has accompanied such music legends as Elvis Presley, Isaac Hayes and Roy Orbison and also performed with Grammy winners Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass.

Jones and other jazz-loving IWU students "were dying for someone who could sit down and talk to us about what was really going on out there professionally. And [Streeter] had his foot in the business. The job seemed to be tailor-made for him."

Streeter developed jazz study courses and launched both the Jazz Ensemble and Jazz Lab Band. He also taught trombone and served as head of the School of Music's Woodwinds, Brass and Percussion Department. As a nationally recognized jazz educator, Streeter served as a clinician and adjudicator at events across the country. "Over the years, Tom's contributions to the School of Music and to the University in general have been of great consequence," says School of Music Director Mario Pelusi.



Streeter also created the Illinois Wesleyan Jazz Festival in 1976. Celebrating its 36th anniversary in January, the festival allows junior high and high school jazz ensembles to learn from top jazz performers and educators. "I wanted this to be an event where students could come without pressure, or feeling browbeaten to excel," says Streeter. He was warned that the festival's non-competitive format would ensure its failure. Within a few years "we were at capacity and have continued that way ever since, many years having to turn down several schools in the process."

"Doc," at left, and the 1973 Jazz Ensemble strike a relaxed pose on the Quad. In past years, the ensemble has played in faraway venues such as Japan and the Bahamas.

In teaching jazz, Streeter encourages a loose camaraderie combined with a strong sense of professionalism. As described in a 1979 Argus story about the Jazz Ensemble, "Streeter conducts rehearsals in a rather low-key manner, not much different from the way he appears on stage. ... The group is relaxed and constantly joking when they aren't playing. Each person is there because they want to be. As a result there is great motivation within the ensemble."

The ensemble's motivation can be seen in a story Streeter tells from 1980. "We were raising money for studio time and decided to hold a 24-hour jazz marathon," he says. The first few hours, the students played in Buck Memorial Library, then moved to Westbrook Auditorium. The result was an impromptu, New Orleans-style parade. "They played all the way across the Quad," Streeter says, laughing.

Playing by heart

As a seasoned performer, Streeter knows that playing to an audience is what transforms a collection of individuals into a true ensemble. "You need that time in front of an audience to become a unit. It's touring that brings you together, because you play multiple times a day," he says.

In addition to performing at countless campus events over the years, the Jazz Ensemble has taken extended tours over spring break and May Term, playing in venues such as New Orleans, the Bahamas and Italy. One highlight for Streeter was a 1999 trip to Asahikawa, Japan (Bloomington's sister city), where students stayed at residents' homes. "You should have seen the students, trying to come up with enough words in Japanese to communicate. They were so eager to soak up the culture, and their hosts were so giving," he says. "No one had trouble understanding the message the students conveyed when they played, though. That music gave us a chance to learn a new culture, even as it was crossing over cultures."

The ensemble's audiences are typically large and enthusiastic — but not always. Chris Davis '04 recalls a stop on a 2002 trip to England and Scotland. "We pulled into this coastal town, and the venue was deserted. I mean, there were probably 10 people there, and that includes the waitress and the bartender," says Davis, a trombonist who is the fellow for the Orchestral Training Program for African American Musicians with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. "We were really downhearted, but Doc looked at us and said, 'This is part of the business. It doesn't matter if you play for one person or 20,000 people. You still play your heart out.' I think that was our best concert of the tour."



President Richard F. Wilson congratulates Streeter

**on being named an emeritus professor at spring's
Honor's Convocation.**

Streeter's own commitment to
performing led to a prestigious solo spot
at the International Trombone

Workshop in Nashville in 1982. He also toured for several years with singer Andy Williams' annual Christmas show. "The performances kept me in the profession," says Streeter. His connections to the jazz world also helped bring top jazz acts like the Stan Kenton and Woody Herman bands to campus for concerts. "It's really a kick to have the best come to IWU, so the students have a chance to hang out with those folks."

Brett Dean '03 says Streeter's professional-music experience gave students great insight. "We intrinsically learned so much just by watching his conducting style, listening to his knowledge of famous tunes and watching the professional and polite manner he used to address every student," says Dean, who is music director of the Shout Section Big Band in Chicago and band director at Wredling Middle School in St. Charles, Ill.

"Doc was always a steady hand for me," says Davis. "In many ways, he's been a father figure. Even after I graduated, he has always encouraged me to take the right path, whether it was a musical decision or a personal decision."

For Streeter himself, the right path has also proved to be the most satisfying. "I love what I do," he says. "I tell everyone I have no idea where else you could have so much fun and get paid for it. Maybe that's why I've done it for 40 years."

Streeter wrapped up those 40 years with the jazz standard "Old Devil Moon" to close the trombone choir concert in April. Though the version was an instrumental, the song's words seemed fitting for the moment:

*Stars in the night
Blazing their light
Can't hold a candle
To your razzle-dazzle.*

After the horns lifted to a smooth crescendo and the last notes faded, both audience and musicians rose from their seats and clapped long and hard as Streeter smiled and nodded in acknowledgement. Pressing his hands together, the man known as Doc gave his final bow and said, "Thanks so much for coming. Adieu."

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