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Founder of the IWU Jazz Program to Retire in May

March 28, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The hot riffs and cool rhythms of jazz music can electrify and inspire. Born on the streets of New Orleans in the early 1900s, the music was a backdrop to the rattle and hum of the cities. The music swelled across the United States, glorying in the Jazz Age of the 1920s, and drifted into the swing of the 1940s. It wasn't until the 1970s that the raucous party that was jazz came to the sedate halls of Illinois Wesleyan University. Professor of Music Tom Streeter came with a trombone, a vision, and all that jazz.



Professor Tom Streeter, when he was playing for the USAF "Airmen of Note" in Washington, D.C.

Before Streeter's arrival, the playing of jazz at Illinois Wesleyan was discouraged, to say the least. "Up until I arrived if anyone was caught playing jazz in a practice room they were asked to leave the building," said Streeter, sitting in his brick-lined office in Presser Hall. "It was considered risqué music at the time." Streeter, who founded the Jazz Program at Illinois Wesleyan in 1971 – and created and led the Jazz Lab Band and the touring Jazz Ensemble – knew people judged jazz because of its birth in the rough parts of town. "Jazz was from the bars and the brothels," he said. "It wasn't considered legitimate."

Streeter grew up far from the birthplace of jazz, on a quiet farm in Indiana. "I came off a farm that raised pigs near Kokomo, Ind.," said Streeter with a small smile. He discovered music at his high school, where he learned to play the trombone and sang in the choir. When he went to Indiana University (IU), a new world opened. "My roommate's dad was a jazz pianist," Streeter said. "He had a lot of jazz records, and that got me going. Jazz is very inspirational. The kind of music that touches you in a way no other music does."



Streeter (third from the right) at Indiana University.

Through the needle of the record player, Streeter began his journey to jazz through the sounds of Count Basie and Duke Ellington. On the other side of the stereo, he found a mentor. "My professor was Lewis Van Haney – what a wonderful, patient person he was as far as explaining how to play the trombone," said Streeter. "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 connected with a musician named Al Cobine, who led a big band orchestra that would back up touring performers. "He needed a bass trombonist and called me up and asked me if I wanted to play," said Streeter. "The band contracted for people like Henri Mancini, Bob Hope and Johnny Mathis, so I got to have all these great experiences when I was at Indiana University." He graduated in 1965, and remained for a master's degree. When he finished in 1969, the Vietnam War was raging. Streeter decided to join the armed services before he could be drafted into the Army infantry.

Streeter auditioned for the famed USAF "Airmen of Note," the Air Force's 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.

When his service was done Streeter, who was now married with a new baby girl, lined up two potential opportunities – one in Las Vegas, Nevada, and one at Illinois Wesleyan. "Though the Las Vegas job meant professional playing, I thought Bloomington would be a better place to raise a family," he said.

Coming from the Airmen of Note to Illinois Wesleyan in 1971, Streeter signaled the acceptance of jazz music on campus, said 1973 alumnus Philip Jones. "Before Streeter came, I actually had a professor tell me that jazz music would ruin my playing," said Jones, a professional trombonist who has played for Grammy-winning bands such as Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass, and was a contract musician for RCA, playing for names such as Elvis Presley, Isaac Hayes, Roy Orbison and Dolly Parton. His sophomore year at Illinois Wesleyan, Jones and several fellow students bucked the conservative view on jazz and started an off-campus jazz band that became popular for on- and off-campus events.

Streeter wasted no time in infusing jazz into the world of Illinois Wesleyan. Using music he brought from the Airman, and tunes Jones had commissioned for the student players, jazz could soon be heard from the walls of Presser Hall. By the spring of 1972, Streeter formed the Jazz Ensemble and took the group to tour around area high schools. The year 1973 gave the University the first-ever Contemporary Music Symposium to feature jazz music. In 1974, the city of Bloomington declared March 23 "Sackbut Day," in honor of Illinois Wesleyan hosting the Midwest Trombone Festival. "Sackbut is the name of the original trombone," said Streeter, who noted around 80 trombonists attended the event.



Streeter (far left) with the 1972-73 IWU Jazz Band

In 1976, Streeter created the first Jazz Festival at the University, drawing junior high and high school students to jazz. Guest artist Roger Pemberton worked in "master classes" with the festival participants, and later played with the Jazz Band. "The festival just celebrated its 35th anniversary," noted Streeter, who added how much he loves watching the students work with professional musicians in master classes.

During his time on campus, Streeter pulled performers from the world of jazz to Illinois Wesleyan, organizing concerts from the Stan Kenton Band, Woody Herman and his Thundering Herd and his former Air Force band, the Airmen of Note. "It's really a kick to have the best come to IWU, so the students have a chance to hang out with those folks," Streeter said.

Always a musician, Streeter never stopped performing, with gigs that included a guest trombone soloist spot at the International Trombone Workshop in Nashville, Tenn., in 1982, and touring with the annual Christmas show for singer Andy Williams from 1985 to 1991. "The performances kept me in the profession," said Streeter.

Streeter's experience as a professional musician gave students amazing insight, said Brett Dean, a 2003 Illinois Wesleyan graduate. "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," said Dean, who is the music director of the Shout Section Big Band in Chicago and the band director at Wredling Middle School in St. Charles, Ill.

As a performer, Streeter knew that playing in front of an audience transcends music into another dimension, hurtling it into an interactive volley between the stage and seats. "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 said. Streeter began extended tours with students in the Jazz Ensemble in 1978.



Streeter with Japanese schoolchildren during a trip with the IWU Jazz Ensemble.

Throughout the years, the Ensemble has performed over spring break, and later May Term, in areas as far away as New Orleans, the Bahamas, Italy and the UK. Streeter recalled one of the most memorable tours came in 1999, as the Ensemble flew to Asahikawa, Japan, on an exchange with Bloomington's sister city, where the students stayed in the homes of residents. "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 said. "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."

No matter where they traveled, Streeter always returned to Bloomington, where he and his wife Tina raised six children, who now have given them 17 grandchildren. The concept and commitment of family was another lesson Streeter taught – letting his students know that in life setting down roots is just as important as a career. That lesson made an impact on alumnus Dennis Bubert. The 1976 graduate has been a member of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra since 1981, and is also a visiting assistant professor of trombone and conducts the trombone choir at University of Texas at Arlington.

"We were driving back from a festival in Nashville," said Bubert of Streeter and several students. "He knew then I had aspirations to play professionally, and how difficult that road would be." That night, Streeter gave Bubert advice he says stayed with him throughout his life. "He said to me that there are three lives in orchestras. There is the life of professional demeanor that rules the technical side of how to play. There is the political side that comes alive when you have to deal with contracts, employers and unions," said Bubert. "But that third life –the personal life that takes a commitment to family – that is the one that matters." Bubert said the words that stuck with him most were when Streeter looked him dead in eye and added, "As long as you always try to relate to people as people first, then all those lives will fall into place."

Streeter said he carries many memories with him into retirement. One of his favorites includes an impromptu New Orleans-style parade across the Quad in 1980. "We were raising money for studio time for the Jazz Band, and decided to hold a 24-hour jazz marathon," said Streeter. The first 8 hours, the students played in Buck Memorial Library, and then moved to Westbrook Auditorium for the remaining time. "They played all the way across the Quad," laughed Streeter.

No matter the challenges, perhaps jazz music calls those who are meant to play it, just as teachers are called to teach. Streeter believes he is lucky he had the chance to do both. "I love what I do. I tell everyone I have no idea where else you could have so much fun and get paid for it," said Streeter. "Maybe that's why I've done it for 40 years."

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