



Fall 9-21-2012

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Recommended Citation

Grabavoy '13, Natalya, "A Life of Music: Keith Zimmerman Celebrates 60 Years in Saxophone" (2012). *News and Events*. 1950.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1950>

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A Life of Music: Keith Zimmerman Celebrates 60 Years in Saxophone

Sept. 21, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Most students attend college in hopes of taking the first steps toward achieving their lifelong dreams. Illinois Wesleyan professor Keith Zimmerman is a prime example of turning such aspirations into reality. Celebrating his 60th year playing saxophone, Zimmerman's career has been highlighted with accomplishments such as study at the Academie Internationale d'Ete in France, playing lead saxophone for the Ringling Brothers Circus and performing as both a soloist and ensemble member around the world. However what might surprise some is that Zimmerman chose to dedicate nearly the entirety of his career not only to performance, but also to teaching.

Zimmerman, along with Illinois Wesleyan Professor of Music and pianist William West, will present a free **faculty recital** on Sunday, Sept. 23, at 3 p.m. in Westbrook Auditorium of Presser Hall (1210 N. Park St., Bloomington).



Professor Keith Zimmerman

"I've always subscribed to the philosophy that you teach through music, you don't teach music. It's extremely rewarding to watch students grow and develop musically, and also as individuals. I now have students who are students of my former students. That's a wonderful cycle to sit back and watch," he said.

Zimmerman's success has been widely recognized. He serves as a founding member of the World Saxophone Congress and North American Saxophone Alliance and was recently featured in the May/June 2012 edition of the international *Saxophone Journal* as a follow up to his cover story feature in the January/February 2002 edition.

According to Zimmerman, his initial desire to take up saxophone was overwhelmingly influenced by dance band radio programs that were popular in his youth. In addition to these broadcasts, he shared another surprising inspiration. "I always thought the shape of the sax was really cool."

Zimmerman explained that after years of private lessons, he realized in high school he would continue with music professionally. It was also in high school that he first experienced teaching. Along with a fellow classmate, Zimmerman volunteered to teach music theory to choir students. He believes the class provided a learning experience in more ways than one. "Part of what we were doing was teaching our classmates about music theory, but we probably learned just as much about teaching as they did about music," he said.

Zimmerman continued his studies at Illinois Wesleyan, where he earned an undergraduate degree in music education in 1967, and a master of music in saxophone performance in 1970. While at this point the saxophone was not widely recognized as a serious focus of study in the United States, Zimmerman continued to pursue a great deal of post-graduate work, including study with pioneer American concert saxophonist Cecil Leeson, and Canadian concert saxophonist Paul Brodie. Ultimately, Zimmerman received an opportunity that could not be rivaled. He was offered a scholarship by the French Ministry of Culture to study saxophone with the highly respected instructor Daniel Deffayet at the Academie Internationale d'Ete which was closely tied to the Paris National Conservatory.

He explained that there were many opportunities to study the instrument in France, as a majority of early saxophone music was written in that country. "To study saxophone and learn the literature in the country it was written in, perhaps even seeing the man who wrote it, was an incredible experience," said Zimmerman.

After returning from his studies in France, Zimmerman continued with his position as director of bands for the Lincoln Elementary Schools and Lincoln Jr. High, in Lincoln, Ill. He maintained this position for over 30 years, retiring in 2000 after having completed 878 performances. Today, Zimmerman continues to privately tutor many students, while serving as a professor of music at Illinois Wesleyan and Bradley University.

Regarding the progression of music education over the course of his career, Zimmerman recognizes that there are far more opportunities for saxophone study today.

"Overall, I think students now are at a higher level of performance, as they have greater access to opportunities to study. For saxophone, it helps that students can now find others who play that instrument to study with, which was difficult to find when I was a student," he said.

As an instructor, Zimmerman believes it is vital not only to be a teacher, but also a performer. "We are better teachers if we keep active in our art and continue learning; we're better able to relate to the students' learning process, as each student is different," he explained.

Reflecting back on his astounding 60-year career in saxophone, Zimmerman expresses only contentment. "The sax has always been my first love. And in my case, it's like my time in music education. I can't imagine what else I would have done."

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