



Winter 1-12-2007

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Recommended Citation

Welzenbach, Rebecca, "Annual Jazz Festival to Feature Pianist Tony Suggs" (2007). *News and Events*. 4597.

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January 12, 2007

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Annual Jazz Festival to Feature Pianist Tony Suggs

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University will host its 32nd annual Jazz Festival on Saturday, Jan. 20, 2007. Throughout the day, 30 high school and junior high jazz bands will perform in the Main Lounge of Memorial Center and Westbrook Auditorium of Presser Hall. At 12:45 p.m., guest pianist Tony Suggs will give a concert in Westbrook Auditorium of Presser Hall.

All events are free and open to the public.

Coordinated by Thomas Streeter, IWU professor of brass instruments and theory, the Jazz Festival is an opportunity for high school and junior high jazz ensembles to perform in a non-competitive setting and receive feedback from a panel of adjudicators, or judges. Since its inception in 1976, the festival has featured a concert by a guest musician in addition to the performances by student ensembles.

This year's guest, Suggs, a native of East St. Louis, Ill., started playing piano at his church at the age of 12 and was introduced to big band jazz as a teenager. In high school Suggs learned the art of "swing" from director Ronald Carter, currently director of jazz studies at Northern Illinois University and one of the judges for IWU's Jazz Festival. In 1989, Suggs won the Illinois All State Music Composition contest, an honor that led to a full scholarship at Jackson State University of Mississippi.

In 1990, Suggs started a summer job as an orchestra pianist with Carnival Cruise Lines, where he continued to build an impressive reputation throughout the 1990s.

Suggs performed one number with the Count Basie Orchestra when Jackson State University opened for the ensemble in 1991. After the performance, he became friends with George Caldwell, Count Basie Orchestra's pianist at the time, and took over his position in 1999. Since joining the Count Basie Orchestra, Suggs has played with such artists as Nancy Wilson, Jon Hendricks, Manhattan Transfer, New York Voices and French entertainer Michele Leeb.