EDUCATION IN JAZZ: Masters Whitaker, Charles hand down some lessons

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Cliff Bellamy

CHAPEL HILL — When bass player Rodney Whitaker and trumpeter Etienne Charles speak of jazz, they talk about an art form in which elders pass on the tradition to the next generation.

Learning from a master “is part of your education in jazz,” Whitaker said. “You have to have an elder to come in and show you how to do it. … We’re being featured, but it’s not really about us,” he said.

Charles quotes trumpeter Clark Terry’s philosophy that imitation is the first step in playing jazz. By listening to older players, their sound becomes part of your subconscious. As you continue playing and studying, “it becomes a part of you, and you take it forward. It becomes a lineage,” Charles said.

Whitaker and Charles are this year’s guest artists for the UNC Music Department’s annual Carolina Jazz Festival. Friday’s headline performer is percussionist Brian Blade and his Fellowship Band. Blade will perform at 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 20 in Memorial Hall. Whitaker and Charles will perform with the UNC Jazz Band at 8 p.m. Saturday in the Kenan Music Building.

Whitaker and Charles are recording artists, educators and clinicians. Whitaker is professor of jazz and director of jazz studies at Michigan State University. He also is a former director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra’s Civic Jazz Orchestra. Charles is assistant professor of jazz trumpet at Michigan State University.

In a rehearsal Wednesday, they were passing along some of their knowledge — also learned from older musicians — to students in the UNC Jazz Band. Whitaker soloed on bass on the composition “Three and One.” After the last note, he told UNC Jazz Studies Director Jim Ketch that he wanted to do some more work with the band’s rhythm section. “We’ll have a little boot camp tomorrow,” Ketch said. On an arrangement of the Thad Jones tune “Groove Merchant,” Charles took a solo on...
Both Whitaker and Charles have arranged some original compositions for Saturday’s concert. Whitaker arranged his composition “Summer the Sweet Goodbye” for the big band. Charles did an arrangement of the classic “Night Train,” which he called “a bass feature,” and his original composition “Douens,” which reflects the trumpeter’s Caribbean musical roots. They also chose a number of jazz standards, including Duke Ellington and other composers.

Ketch gave the band pointers about dynamics and articulation. “I think we’re overblowing this,” he told the horn players during a run-through of Whitaker’s composition. “We get excited,” he said. On the Ellington piece “Jack the Bear,” he told the horn players to “build the density” like Ellington would with his band. “Keep it hot. Don’t taper,” he said of the final note.

The process of rehearsing jazz charts is collaborative, with lots of give-and-take. “You’re not really the conductor,” Whitaker said of the role of band leader. “You’re the editor in chief. You still have to let them [students] make decisions.”

Whitaker and Charles had just arrived in Chapel Hill, and Wednesday was their first rehearsal with students. More clinics and rehearsals were planned during the festival. The guest artists had good words for the students and the initial session. “You sound good” Charles told sophomore drummer Atticus Reynolds after the run-through. “Keep it up.”

Here is a list of events Friday, Feb. 20 and Saturday, Feb. 21. Except where noted, admission is free.

FRIDAY

— Open rehearsal with UNC Jazz Band, 1:25-2:15 p.m., Kenan Music Building, Room 1201.

— UNC Jazz Combos concert, 4-6 p.m., Kenan Music Building, Room 1201.

— Brian Blade and the Fellowship Band in concert, 8 p.m. Memorial Hall, UNC. For tickets, call 919-843-3333 or visit www.carolinaperformingarts.org.

SATURDAY

— 10th annual North Carolina Regional Essentially Ellington High School band sessions, with performances from high school bands. Performances are from 8:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. in the Kenan Music Building, Room 1201, and in Hill Hall, Room 107.

— UNC Jazz Band in concert, 8 p.m., directed by Jim Ketch with performances from guest artists Rodney Whitaker, bass, and Etienne Charles, trumpet. Concert is in the Kenan Music Building Rehearsal Hall. General admission tickets at the door are $10.

GO & DO

WHAT: UNC Jazz Band, with guest artists Rodney Whitaker and Etienne Charles

WHERE: Kenan Music Building

WHEN: Saturday, Feb. 21 8 p.m.

ADMISSION: General admission tickets at the door are $10