Jazz director Rodney Whitaker leads MSU to its groove

Ken Glickman For the Lansing State Journal 12:05 a.m. EDT April 14, 2015

With a grimace, Rodney Whitaker remembers his first year as of Director of Jazz Studies at Michigan State University 15 years ago.

“There was so much to do, and I just wanted to do it all right away. I learned, as they say, you can’t eat an elephant all at once, it has to be eaten one bite at a time.” he said.

The jazz program had no full time teachers or professors - only adjunct or part-timers. And a degree in jazz wasn’t offered.

Whitaker had gold-star credentials, but no college degree, not unusual for a performing arts college.

“I went to Wayne State for two years, but then I got a gig so I left,” Whitaker said.

Whitaker quickly points out he didn't lack education. “I was arranging and writing music and conducting at age 16. I learned it all from the greats.”

Also he studied under the principal bassist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestras. “I began at age 7 with the violin. I loved the violin and loved playing the melody, something the bass does not do. But my orchestra director needed basses so he switched me.”

One can also suppose MSU valued Whitaker’s seven years as string bassist with Wynton Marsalis in his Septet and the legendary Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra — or touring the world with the likes of Diana Krall, Wycliffe Gordon, Kenny Burrell, Cassandra Wilson, Betty Carter, Chick Corea and many others.

Despite Whitaker's knowledge, it was a challenging first year at MSU. A dejected Whitaker even wrote a letter of resignation to James Forger, Dean of the College of Music. Forger declined his resignation; he assigned Whitaker two mentors, himself and Ruth Hamilton from the sociology department.

“The mentorship was a tremendous help, Ruth helped me organize my work, and I started reading tons of books on leadership,” Whitaker recalled.

It worked. Today, MSU has one of the county's most respected jazz programs, and Whitaker advises about four universities a year on ways to improve.

In 2013, Whitaker was honored with the highest award a faculty member can attain: the University Distinguished Professor designation. Whitaker, now 47, was the youngest professor ever to get that honor.

Although some College of Music profs have received the award, Whitaker is now the only full-time professor with a UDP.

This week four concerts will showcase the spectacular jazz program at MSU through its 35th Annual Jazz Spectacular.

The week will feature lectures, concerts with small combos, a swing dance at Demonstration Hall and the High School jazz Band Competition.

Some concerts will feature great Cuban jazz artist Bobby Carcassés, trumpet, vocalist, and congas, and his son, Roberto Carcassés on piano.

Whitaker had few resources to build the program when he first came to MSU. Now, internationally known artists come in for a week of residency with his students. The program has eight full-time professors 70 jazz majors, offers three degree programs, and two administrators assist Whitaker.

Once Whitaker found his groove, the program grew rapidly — and so did his reputation.

“The way I was able to hire professors and offer scholarships was because I got three offers from other schools,” he said.

MSU realized they had a winner when Northwestern, University of North Texas and Julliard tried to hire Whitaker away to head up their programs.

Why didn’t the jazz man leave to join those prestigious schools?

“I believe in being committed. I was born and raised in Detroit, and now I live in East Lansing. I like to stay put.
"And I really like East Lansing — most of the time. I have seven children, and the ones still at home go to good schools and in safety. Of course, sometimes when I want to go out at 3 a.m, and everything is closed, I realize that this is not a big city like Detroit."

Now he finds his choice to stay at MSU was the right one. Support from the college of music and MSU's administration has created a jazz program with more resources than any of the schools that recruited him.

Whitaker has a vision of jazz education: Jazz folks aren't born with the talent. "Lots of people like to make jazz seem mystical – you're born with it. To me, everything is learned, and everything can be taught. I learned a sense of rhythm because my family used to drum everything on the kitchen table. For me rhythm was a part of life.

"And you have to listen. Listen to Basie and Ellington and the other greats, and you learn to model what they're doing. I heard a record with John Coltrane when he was 17. He was terrible. He learned to be a great saxophonist. Later he became Coltrane."

"And that's what we do at MSU we teach the fundamentals of jazz and we teach the culture."

IF YOU GO

35th Annual Jazz Spectacular Schedule

• **Thursday, April 16**, 7:30 p.m., Fairchild Theatre, MSU Auditorium. **Four Jazz Octets**, conducted by jazz faculty and graduate students, blend the sounds of big band with small-group performance to open the 2015 Jazz Spectacular. **Tickets:** $10, $8 seniors, free for students

• **Friday, April 17**, 8 p.m., MSU Demonstration Hall Ballroom. **Swing Dance, Jazz Orchestras MSU Jazz Orchestras**, under the direction of Rodney Whitaker, with special guests: Bobby Carcassés, trumpet, vocalist, and congas, and his son, Roberto Carcassés on piano. Dance to rhythms in rumba, cha-cha, mambo and the music of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Mario Bousa, and Dizzy Gillespie. Also part of "Latin IS America Festival." **Tickets:** $10, $8 seniors, free for students.

• **Saturday, April 18**, 8 a.m. – 6 p.m., MSU Union, Main Lounge. **Jazz at Lincoln Center Essentially Ellington High School Jazz Band Regional Competition**. High school jazz bands perform the music of Duke Ellington and other big band composers before Jazz at Lincoln Center clinicians and other jazz professionals. **Free and open to the public.**

• **Saturday, April 18**, 8 p.m., Fairchild Theatre, MSU Auditorium. Wrap-up Concert preceded by the Outstanding High School Jazz Band of the Day. Enjoy an encore visit from guests Bobby and Roberto Carcassés as they join Jazz Orchestra I (the Be-Bop Spartans, directed by Rodney Whitaker) and MSU Professors of Jazz. **Reserved seating tickets** are $25 for adults, $20 for seniors, and $15 for students — available from the College of Music box office — in person at the Music Building, Room 102, 333 W. Circle Drive or over the phone at (517) 353-5340 — online at music.msu.edu, or at the door one hour before the show.

Read or Share this story: http://on.lsj.com/1ypA8ST