

Features

Hughes' "Ask Your Mama" a class act

By Kay Alton
Staff Writer

There is no need to ask your mama about the "Langston Hughes Project" concert given Jan. 25 in the Lipinsky Auditorium.

I was there, and I am telling you that it was a solid two hours of excellent music and dialogue.

The Project began after the death of Hughes in the 1960's and is centered around his 800-line poem "Ask Your Mama."

Hughes' poem is dedicated to Louis Armstrong, the beloved jazz trumpeter who gave us tunes to remember like "It's a Wonderful World" and his rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Armstrong's music was upbeat, for the most part, and made me want to sing and sway in a toe-tapping way.

Hughes' poem is very serious, as is the subject matter. He writes about struggles "in the Negro quarter" of the 1960s for artistic and social liberty in America and around the world.

The complete title of the performance is "The Langston Hughes Project 'Ask Your Mama: Twelve Moods for Jazz.'"

The musical cornerstone for the poem is "Hesitation Blues." It often began the musical jazz interlude be-



PHOTO BY ANTHONY GRECO

John Wright read Langston Hughes' poem, "Ask Your Mama: Twelve Moods for Jazz," at a performance of jazz and poetry on Jan. 25.

tween moods.

After each mood subject, such as "Cultural Exchange," "Shades of Pigmeat," "Ode to Dinah," "Gospel Cha Cha," and "Ask Your Mama," the musicians often followed with a musical introduction of "Shave and a haircut, fifteen cents."

The sing-song beat was used effectively after moods when the author responded to a rhetorical question like "Will the black wear off? The response is always: 'Ask your Mama.' Some recognizable songs

were played most effectively using the trumpet of Ron McCurdy as the musical voice for the poem's lament. He masterfully played "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" after Mood 4: Ode to Dinah.

Every note was boldly loud and punctuated the air of the auditorium as a voice lamenting about the end and disappointment of dreams in the "Negro quarter," McCurdy's control of the notes caused my heart to wrench.

Vapor rising from the trumpet valves during the perfor-

mance made me realize that the performance I effortlessly enjoyed came from a lot of this man's physical labor and disciplined talent. Different moods were played as the poem progressed. Hughes wrote in Mood 3, "Shades of Pigmeat," music so woeful and sad that McCurdy's flute wept with an anguish I could feel.

Other melodies played were not identifiable because the author purposefully left room for conversations in jazz to occur spontaneously

between the instruments.

The improvisation was the most entertaining part of the musical performance to me. It was fresh from the instruments and talent of four professional jazz musicians.

I mentioned McCurdy played the trumpet and flute; he also performed short solos extemporaneously to punctuate John Wright's excellent reading of the poem.

Terry Burns used his bass to present a beat that none other could have done. He had a feel for the energy and dynamics around the different eras projected.

When Wright read about broken dreams and promises unfulfilled, Burns' solo underscored the dismay with an improvisation melody where I could fill in the humdrum beat with my own words: "Oh well. So what's new. Another glimmer of hope extinguished."

"Horn of Plenty" and "Gospel Cha Cha" solos by pianist Russell Hoffman put me right on the main thoroughfare of New York City and Havana during the early 1960s when many of Hughes' contemporaries were popular and up-to-date. Hoffman used no written music because it came from within himself.

Drummer Philip Hey beat and cajoled his instruments as he manipulated jazz sounds to organize the room to the mood of the poem. Often he used a military cadence to indicate the march of time and global occurrences of the events.

"Ride, Red, Ride" talked about Leontyne Price, the very talented African-American opera singer from the 1960s. Whoever the star may be, the issue is the demise of the family in the "Negro quarter."

Hughes' poem discussed the dissolution of family ties with the arrival of the ubiquitous welfare check. Wright finished the mood with a description of a woman felled in death by a stray bullet.

Hey's dramatic hit the snare with an air-shattering beat, causing me to jump out of the chair. Honestly, it was so real I dodged the bullet.

So absorbing was the performance that when he did it again, I fell for it just as hard and jumped twice as high.

Wright began his reading sharply at the scheduled show time, which is what professionals do. The four musicians filed on stage dressed in subdued casual dress attire and quietly took their positions.

Stage lighting was controlled with minimal floodlights spilling in hues of red and purple at the right time.

I appreciated the fact that this performance was done well and professionally, and did not welcome laser lights, vulgar jiving, sloppy half-dress or any other glittering compensations often used by inferior musicians.

There can be no doubt these men were at UNCA to do real business. Their business was jazz executed in a gentlemanly fashion with no distraction to cheapen the work of Langston Hughes.

I enjoyed the visual artwork and photographs of relevant subjects which were projected onto a large screen behind the musicians. The two mediums used simultaneously helped me to understand the erratic and staccato works of Hughes' poem.

It was not a "fun" performance. I felt heavy and burdened for the writer and his subjects. It was two hours of very intense words, music and pictures.

After a very long concert, Wright opened the floor for comments and questions. The mood was destroyed when a young man yelled out "You guys are bad ass."

The comment was ignored until McCurdy took the microphone to explain his jazz arrangements for the music.

When he finished, he admonished the comment by saying: "Is that what they teach you here at UNCA?" As I said, this was a class act.

Review

Asheville Gentlemen demonstrate history of jazz

By Melissa Starnes
Staff Writer

The UNCA music department will present "A Musical History of Jazz Styles" on Feb. 6 at 4 p.m. in Lipinsky Auditorium. The Asheville Gentlemen, a group consisting of professional musicians, will play for this event, which focuses on the evolution of jazz music.

"We've done this for several years, and what people always tell us after we've done it is that they liked it,

and it was really fun, and they learned something," said Lloyd Weinberg, adjunct professor in the music department and director of the community jazz band. "So they had a good time, and they learned things they didn't know about the history of jazz."

During the event, The Asheville Gentlemen first talk about the different forms of jazz, and then they play a musical selection from each type of jazz. The different kinds of jazz include cool jazz, Latin jazz, jazz-rock fusion, Dixieland funeral music, ragtime, swing and the blues.

During the performance, they show what each person in the group does individually," said Weinberg. For example, they will tell what the piano player does, and how the piano's role fits into jazz music.

"We show them about the creative process of how you get a song

to work with a jazz group, and people like that," he said.

From what the audience says afterward about the concert, people have considered learning about how the individual parts work together to be the most interesting part of the event, according to Weinberg.

Weinberg said he hopes that the audience will not only appreciate the different kinds of jazz music, but will also understand it better.

"When they hear it in a movie, in a TV show or in a commercial, they'll go, 'Oh, yeah. That's that kind of jazz. I understand what those players are doing when they play,'" said Weinberg.

The Asheville community responds very well to jazz events, according to Weinberg.

Usually, for concerts by the music department, there are more people from the community at-

tending than students.

"However, we would rather have the other way," said Weinberg. "I am thinking this will be something students really like."

This event counts both for a humanities cultural event and an Arts 310 event.

A donation of \$5 is requested, except for UNCA students. The Asheville Gentlemen perform "A Musical History of Jazz Styles" about three or four times a year for a variety of people.

The group changes the performance depending on the age group of the audience. They have done the event for elementary school children, middle school students, high school students, college students, and the elderly.

"Everybody likes it," said Weinberg. "It just seems to grasp you no matter how old you are."

The Asheville Gentlemen formed in 1987 for two basic reasons. The first one is that through this concert, the group teaches people about the history of American jazz in an enjoyable way, according to Weinberg.

The other reason is because all of the members greatly enjoy playing music.

"About half the time we play concerts like this," said Weinberg. "We'll do them sometimes in the schools or sometimes we'll do them here at UNCA. The other half of the time we play for people's wedding receptions and dances."

The group has also played in the UNCA cafeteria and for Arts 310 classes. Some members played at the swing dance held on campus last December.

Weinberg and Dale Roberts, the

director of the Key Center for Service Learning, will play with the UNCA Community Jazz Band at the Valentine's Day sock hop on Feb. 13.

The Asheville Gentlemen group includes four faculty members from UNCA and one faculty member from Mars Hill College. Weinberg, the leader of the group, plays the saxophone and clarinet. Roberts plays the cornet and flugelhorn.

The other members include Charles Holland, adjunct professor in the music department, play the trombone and brass. Mo Hubbard, another adjunct professor in the music department, is the piano player for the group. Paul Babelay, the only group member from Mars Hill College, teaches percussion and plays the drums and vibraphone.

Upcoming

African-American poet Saul Williams will give a reading of his poetry in the Highsmith Center Lounge on Feb. 9 at 7 p.m. as part of UNCA's Black History Month celebrations. Williams is the author of two books of poetry, "She" and "The Seventh Octave." He also wrote the script for and performed in the Trimark Pictures film "Slam," which will be shown at 8 p.m. on Feb. 8 in the Highsmith Lounge. Both events are sponsored by Underdog Productions and UNCA's African-American Student Association, and are free to the public.

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