

Gudmundson speaks on Brevard jazz notes

BY VICTORIA ZGURA

Imagine working on a cruise ship, the open seas, enough food to feed China for a month, beautiful men and women lounging in swimsuits, beautiful island ports to go and play on, practicing your saxophone for hours on end on the sundeck and then performing with a band at night . . . That is what Jon Gudmundson did during the years he worked on cruise ships, whilst saving up to go to graduate school. "A cruise ship is a very, very easy gig. . . It was so nice, I mean, you work only two hours a day and that leaves you twenty-two to practice, so I was in good shape. . . sun, sand, surf, working out, eating right, reading a lot and practicing many hours a day - I was in the best shape ever!"

Within the famous music department lies an intense jazz program, and the person in charge is Dr. Jon Gudmundson, Instructor of Music and Jazz studies. He had a summer job most jazz musicians would kill for, and the time he spent practicing is primarily a reason for wanting the job.

The jazz program at Brevard is extensive and rigorous, but those who want to learn can walk away from it with "gobs of experience," according to Gudmundson.

The good doctor got his start in Seattle, his home town, at North Seattle Community College. He spent two and a half years there, then took some time off to play with the Harry James Band. Afterwards he received his bachelor's degree from Western Washington University. During a stint in his education, he played for a month with Pat Boone and Florence Henderson.

"The money was fantastic but musically it wasn't that great. It was good for me though, I had to play a lot of instruments. . ."

His master's degree came from Indiana University, where Gudmundson studied with David Baker, who is a trombonist, cellist, and piano player, but 'best known as an educator'. It was before and during Indiana that Gudmundson played on cruise ships. He recently finished his doctorate at the University of Northern Colorado, where he says the lack of pretty scenery cut down on distractions and fed directly into his philosophy on college:

"Colorado you think of as mountainous and pretty, but this part of Colorado is flat and stinky. There were a lot of cows out and it has like the world's largest feed lot."

Gudmundson's belief is that experience, and therefore practicing, is the key to becoming a better player.

"There are two kinds of learning: there's the kind of the 'real world' and the kind in school. And they're both good and they both have their purposes."

Gudmundson traveled from school to school and took time off in order to get experience, and one of the reasons he likes Brevard is that his students can get experience here they cannot get at big schools.

"Our music students walk out of here and they've directed, conducted, composed and arranged; and not just composed and arranged for an arranging class but they've composed and arranged and had it played at live concert in front of live people. By the time they're done here they've done all the stuff people from big programs are waiting to become grad students to do."

Cacophony fills the band room as students warm up their instruments. After they are prepared,

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- Jon Gudmundson

excited chatter takes cacophony's place. Enter the conductor. With a cup of coffee in his hand and maybe two seconds tardy he is ready to hear some jazz music. He pulls out a piece of music entitled 'Manteca' and slowly floats it back and forth so they know which piece to get out. "So who's soloing this time?" Hands go up and the name of each soloist is called out loud. "Anybody who won't be back next year, this is your last chance." A few more hands go up, then "Okay, from the top." Without hesitation Jon Creason comes in on his drums.

The music department is a strict and well disciplined major. Students rarely have time for extracurricular activities.

"We work them real hard but we also understand this is a small liberal arts college - it's just not Indiana, it's just not Julliard. But we want our students to be able to go to those schools."

Indeed many of the music faculty went to big name schools for both undergrad and graduate study. Ruth Still, trumpet instructor, not only studied at Julliard with Ivanovitch but also studied at the Paris Conservatoire in France and

Dr. David Kirby went to the Cincinnati Conservatory. Compared to where these teachers have studied, things are "ultra lax around here." So what does Gudmundson expect of his students?

"I really don't want to turn out Be-Bop nazis where that's all they can do, and not very well, like a bad version of Charlie Parker."

He doesn't want musical snobs either, he wants them to be well rounded. In Gudmundson's opinion "music is enormous," and musicians cannot be snobs today because in order to get a gig one must be able to play all types of

music, or at least many different types of music. The curriculum for a jazz emphasis includes 'basics'; they (students) will know Duke Ellington and

Count Basie, Charles Mingus and Charlie Parker. They will 'not just know who they are but know their music . . . by having a chance to play it.' Gudmundson believes that "They need to know the history and they need to know where this (music) is coming from. Then they need to know the mechanics, they need to know how to make music. That means they need to understand about jazz harmony, and they need to understand about jazz improv and the tools that the great improvisers use." He wants to educate and inform his students of all the music that is within the grasp of their talent and skill, and believes "well roundedness is the thing". What are major symphonies doing? 'An Evening At the Pops', 'A Tribute To Duke Ellington', 'Movie Night', because that's what pays the bills. If you show up and say, 'I can only do Bach, Beethoven and Brahms', then they look at you and say, 'Okay, well there's a line of about 200 trumpet players behind you who want this job, and we'll ask one of them if they can swing. SEE YA!' Gudmundson hopes that his students will finish as 'prepared musicians, who can go out in the



Photo courtesy of The Pertelote.

Jon Gudmundson

community and work, and do what they want and do it well.'

The jazz program is Gudmundson's baby. Before he was hired there was a jazz band but no program, students only studied classical music. Ben Boone was the conductor of that old band, as well as David Kirby. There are no immediate plans to make the program any bigger. However, Gudmundson does think it would be cool to

have a faculty jazz combo. That would require more teachers, and he said he won't get help until the size of the program merits help. But does he want the program to grow? He thinks that "small and excellent is way better than big and mediocre", but he wouldn't complain if jazz grew some.

Jon Gudmundson's preferred music is jazz from the Blue Note period. Blue Note was actually a record company during the fifties and sixties. Musicians from this period include Hank Mobley (tenor sax), Freddie Hubbard (trumpet), Wayne Shorter (composer, tenor & soprano sax), Herbie Hancock (piano, composer) and Joe Henderson (tenor sax). It is interesting to note, however, that Gudmundson's first love was rock 'n' roll. "I've got so much rock 'n' roll ingrained in me it's unbelievable." So the king of jazz at Brevard was once a hard-core rocker. He does very well. All of his students think highly of him, even when their playing is being torn apart.

Dr. Laura Phillips, Instructor of Percussion, says "He's a great colleague and his students love him. He's done a lot for jazz here".

But will he go on to do a lot for jazz at other schools? Many of his friends from college who went on to teach at bigger schools have to teach stuff they don't like along with stuff they do like. They get to run the jazz band but they also have to teach 'beginning music for non-majors, and all these horrible jobs few people want to do'. He says unless some 'killer' job opens up in the Pacific Northwest where he is from he plans on staying here. Gudmundson is very excited to be at Brevard. He teaches sax, runs the big band, the jazz combos, jazz history, jazz improv - "There's not a single bad thing I have to teach. . . I can't believe how good this job is, everything I get to teach I like!"