

Jay Williams: 'I'm Eclectic As Hell'

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Essay Staff Reporters

Jay Williams? Isn't he the piano tuner at the School of the Arts? Yes, he is, but he also composes, plays trombone and synthesizer, teaches and has a two-hour radio show every week, conducts occasionally, holds a masters degree in theory and trombone from Indiana University.

When reporters arrived at his house for an interview, he was seated at a toy piano busily memorizing the John Cage sonata for toy piano which he will be playing in the Contemporary Music Festival to be held here later this month.

One wall of Williams' living room is stacked with electronic equipment. An old Victrola, a cylinder record player, his trombone, several old clocks, a strange assortment of furniture, stacks of records and tapes and various indescribable pieces of mechanical equipment are spread about the house.

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Williams received his B.A. in music from Boloit College Wisc. in 1963. He went on to Indiana for his masters degree and continued there working on a doctorate and later tuning pianos half time and teaching electronic music courses in association with Iannis Xeraks and John Eaton.

It was at Indiana that Williams first began composing seriously. "I composed a percussion piece about 12 years ago when I was in college. Then there was a big lapse until the day at Indiana when I almost decided to commit suicide."

He said he decided against it but "in desperation just to do something now that I was aware that I was alive and that I was probably going to stay that way for awhile, I ripped a tape recorder apart. When I put it back together it dawned on me that if I left out certain parts I could do things with it I wasn't supposed to do. I discovered for the first time that there was something in my life that I liked, and that was making crazy electronic music happen."

"From then on I decided that whatever else I do, at least I can compose. I've always been working on things ever since," Williams said.

Williams heard through Jerry Horner that the school needed a piano tuner. "About one month later, I found out that the dean at Indiana was thinking of firing me because I insisted on wearing a beard. I started doing things to get down here just so I could have a gig. That's why I'm here." Williams began working at the school in February, 1971.

"In the interview when I talked with (Chancellor Robert) Ward, I told him 'Piano tuning might be the way I make my bread but you better expect that that's not my main activity. I'm really a composer and performer and everything like that. I expect to be doing that and tuning pianos is my main way of staying alive and that's all,'" Williams said.

"Last year we had kids creating actual taped pieces in the public schools."

In the fall of 1971 Mr. Ward asked Williams to teach a course in electronic composition to his advanced students. But Williams said, "The class just totally fizzled within a couple of weeks...when they realized work was involved."

"I have at various times since then told people in the administration that I'm perfectly willing to teach some class be it in 20th century music or anything without increase in salary," said Williams. "Nobody has ever taken me up on it. In fact I even told (Scott) Schillin (assistant to the dean of music) that. "He sort of said 'Ya, well....' The best I'm doing is



Jay Williams plays trombone

Essay Photo by Bill Wren

teaching classes to perspective students on Saturday morning."

Williams' classes in the Saturday morning instrumental workshops included "improvising and looking at written down music of all eras." Williams also teaches electronic Music seminars in the public schools. "Last year we had kids creating actual taped pieces in the public schools." Williams said.

Every Monday night at 8 p.m. Williams can be heard on his WFDD radio show, which has been on the air since September, 1973. Williams presented himself at the radio station one day and asked to do a two hour radio show on 20th century music; "because nothing else was happening and I was starting to go insane because there was no outlet for what I'm really interested in."

"Let's face it the world is getting glutted with classical musicians."

Although Williams is very enthusiastic about his show he said: "I really think a show like that is just as sick as the rest of the musical establishment in that it absolutely disagrees with my crede and that we should totally, utterly get rid of this concept of time in music."

Williams is currently preparing for a recital of his music, scheduled May 15 at the home of Dr. Angus Randolph. The recital will include two pieces for tape and trombone which Williams will play and an instrumental piece which Williams will conduct.

We asked Jay to talk about his work in composition. "There are two sides of me that within my own feelings about things they never meet. On the one side there's this intellectual, analytical earthy thing which says 'anything that in this world, I'm absolutely a part of and I love it.' It seems like there is this other part that says, 'Oh yeah, but here's all these impossible weird things going on that nobody seems to know about.' Somehow it seems that compositions alternate between the two in what they're trying to do."

"I expect that whoever tries to listen to my music," he continued, "likes to use their ears and concentrate a bit. On the other hand, I'm not particularly oriented

in 12-tone things or things that are great on paper first of all and might just happen to work otherwise. I'm eclectic as hell. I have my own ideas as to what forms I end up using but I don't know if they appear that way to anyone else."

Williams then went on to talk about his views of music in general. "Music has just got to get off this pretentious stage and get to a local level again. Sure, for an orchestra you may need that but as for playing a toy piano piece, say in Carnegie Hall—why? It's kind of surrealistic, but I'd rather play out in the middle of a group of people where I'd hear people breathing around me. Music is a human thing; why make it inhuman? It's already pretty abstract, and you've got to make up for it by at least presenting yourself as a presence, as a human being."

"One of the things I most wish to do in every city would be to set up a group of demolition experts. What we'd do is plant dynamite caps under every conceivable parking lot over a certain size. Then at two A.M. Sunday morning after scouting around to make sure that there were no people around the parking lot, push one button and blow up all the parking lots and then put parks in their places. I'd really like to do that in every city."

Since piano tuning is his main interest, we asked him if he anticipates leaving this school for some other kind of work. He replied, "The thing that's keeping me here is that conservative sense of security that probably every one of us has in some way of another. Somehow I've been conditioned to want a steady gig. Basically, I do like piano tuning

although I like doing other things more. If I'm doing things that I really like doing, piano work is a gas.

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"If the school would allow me to teach a few courses, I certainly wouldn't mind working on pianos. If the school would shape up a little, if it would become a school of the arts instead of at best a school of crafts, if it really would recognize all the manifestations of the arts it proposes to teach, then it would be a great place to be. Music demands many different kinds of places for performance. Let's face it, the world is getting glutted with classical musicians. I find that what people really want is just to play and what they want to play is not necessarily classical.

"If it doesn't shape up, and if it goes on like this for very many more years, I might just go out on the road with somebody, somewhere, and see what happens. I've really gotten a lot of things done down here that I couldn't possibly have done at Indiana, all because the dean was thinking of firing me. That's what spurred me on. So what the hell; if they happen to decide to fire me here, who knows what I'll get into?"

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See Kathy. See Kathy laugh. See Kathy cry.

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