

Charlottesville radio station celebrates a century of jazz

By David A. Maurer

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. (AP) - In the early 1970s, a young University of Virginia student, Russell Perry, had his musical world turned on its ear by a singular performance.

In a roundabout way, that memorable event has led to a wildly ambitious radio program that's celebrating 100 years of jazz in as many installments. Local station WTJU 91.1 FM recently aired a two-hour introduction to its series "Jazz at 100."

Perry is the enthusiastic host of the one-hour program, which airs Friday mornings. He recently talked about the series, which is tracing the history of jazz through a century of recordings.

"My introduction to listening critically to music was through WTJU, when I was a teenager," said Perry, who recently retired after a successful career as an architect. "I remember as a 19-year-old listening to John D'earth play the classic jazz tune 'Salt Peanuts.'"

"I still have a picture in my mind of listening to that and saying, 'What the hell is this music?' That was my introduction to jazz."

"Then, eight or nine years ago, Scott DeVeaux, who is on the music faculty at UVa, published a book (with Gary Giddins) titled 'Jazz.' It's a history of jazz, and it inspired me to start listening to jazz more regularly."

"In the jazz world, one thing always leads to another. So as I leap-frogged backward to learn about players and where this music was coming from, I ended up all the way back at February 26, 1917."

This watershed date is when the first jazz song was recorded - "Livery Stable Blues." Performing the instrumental tune were five Sicilian-Americans calling themselves the Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

Perry said there's still debate and speculation about when this style of music was born and who was most responsible for bringing it to life. What isn't left open to question is when the first jazz recording was made.

The milestone recording gave Perry a stepping-off point from which to start following the history of jazz forward. Fortunately, he has access to the extensive jazz recording collection at UVa and WTJU to help him along the way.

"I'm not a historian, and I'm not a musician," Perry said. "What I am is a total fan, and I bring the fan's perspective to the series."

"In the course of my personal survey, which started about eight years ago, I probably read 50 books about jazz. And as I read about something like Louis Armstrong's Hot Five Band and the song 'Hotter Than That,' I'd put the book down and listen to the record."

"The series is my way of sharing what I learned. So I'll read a bit of the description, and then I'll play the record so listeners can actually learn more about what they're hearing, as well as understand the sequence of things."

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With financial assistance from the Albemarle County-based Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, WTJU will be able to post the prerecorded series to the Public Radio Exchange for syndication. This enables other stations to put the programs on the air.

Nathan Moore, general manager of WTJU since 2011, said "Jazz at 100" is the type of programming that the station has become known for. He added that the series is a great way to help the station celebrate its 60th anniversary this year.

"I have always thought that WTJU is at its best when we're able to take these deep dives into explaining some of the best music out there," Moore said. "To trace it through its history, to trace its influences, to look at the genealogy of different music - that is really exceptional."

"I think that resonates with a lot of our listeners. We're still a small station in a lot of ways, but we strive to put together really tremendous programming that brings people together around great music."

This area is particularly rich when it comes to top-tier jazz musicians. Perry will be tapping into this wealth for expert commentary.

D'earth, a world-class trumpet player, will be contributing his knowledge to the program. Other guests will include bassist Pete Spaar, drummer Robert Jospe and jazz singer Stephanie Nakasian.

"Trying to connect all the events that have happened during a hundred years of jazz is a huge topic, and an incredibly ambitious thing that Rus is doing," said D'earth, who is the director of jazz performance at UVa. "Jazz music is so American, and it needs to be reconsidered."

"It's misunderstood in this country probably more than in most places in the world. I think the biggest importance for people who would listen to the show is to realize that there is a huge cultural and social contribution that was made to the world by black Americans that is called jazz music."

"When it started to be recorded, it went around the world and was accepted as a great gift - and became everybody's music. Jazz gave music back to the musicians."

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There's no question, Perry said, that the genesis of the genre can be traced back to black musicians in the South. And New Orleans was the hothouse where it grew and ultimately separated from the blues.

During the introductory program, which can be heard at wtju.net, Perry talked about a massive exodus from New Orleans during the second decade of the 20th century that resulted in jazz spreading throughout the country.

"Blacks are fleeing the social repression in the South, but everybody is fleeing an economic malaise, because the port of New Orleans is starting to fail," Perry said. "There are many other options where goods can be brought into the United States, so it's no longer important that you be at the foot of the Mississippi River."

"Musicians are fleeing, and these five Sicilian guys eventually go to New York City, where they are quite a spectacle. They're playing this raucous, loud dance music that no one has heard being played in the city before."

"They become quite a scene, and they're asked to make a record. To everybody's surprise, the record sells like crazy. The backstory, of course, is that this music has been developing for 20 or 30 years."

An interesting side note is that, in 1915, Freddie Keppard, a black cornetist, was given the opportunity to make a record. The man who was called "the King" in New Orleans' jazz circles refused, because he was afraid other musicians then would be able to figure out his secrets.

"Eventually, the first black group from New Orleans to record is Kid Ory, who is a trombone player who ends up playing with King Oliver, Louis Armstrong and others," Perry said. "He doesn't record until 1922."

"The act of trying to get my arms around this whole history, and then distill it down to a coherent series of programs within a specific time period, is a real struggle. But it's totally thrilling for me, and it's so much fun to be tackling it."

Perry is using CDs and vinyl records from his own collection - as well as the approximately 20,000 jazz recordings at UVa and the radio station - to tell the story. Prerecording the programs enables the host to spend 30 to 40 hours a week listening to music and creating the hour-long segments.

"Like all our programs, and this new one in particular, my hope is that it enriches our culture," Moore said. "One of our missions is to enrich the culture of this community and Virginia."

"And we try to bring people together through great music and conversation. I think the series is a tremendous example of both these things."

"We can bring the whole story of jazz music, which is one of the cornerstones of our programming, to our community. There's a lot of great jazz out there that we want to share with the world and tell its story."

Perry said one of the things that attracted him to jazz is its extraordinary range of emotional possibilities. Combine that with some of the greatest musicians who have ever lived, and one starts to understand why it continues to be a vibrant art form.

"You can't make it in jazz as a so-so player," Perry said. "It just doesn't work. You have to be good, or the other musicians won't let you play. I respect that."

"When people are experts at what they do, I think that should be celebrated. In fact, that's what jazz does - it celebrates expertise. I think the combination of emotions, and the respect for craft and practice, is why it now has 100 years of recorded history."

D'earth opined that jazz is the biggest thing to happen in music during the past 100 years. He said it's beloved in most countries, performed in all countries - and least understood and appreciated in its country of origin.

"Improvisation is at the heart of jazz playing," said D'earth, who has performed on more than 100 jazz albums and has worked with iconic jazz musicians such as Tito Puente, Quincy Jones, Pat Metheny and Joe Henderson. "Improvisation is like talking in music."

"When we talk to each other, we're improvising. We don't know what we're going to say next, but we're unconsciously following all kinds of rules."

"And that's what the great improvisers have in music. They speak in music, and they speak according to their feelings. It's poetry, because the swing and feeling of the music itself, which is a tactile, three-dimensional phenomenon, takes you on a trip."

It should be quite an enjoyable and educational trip following Perry in the many weeks to come. "I'm amazed at how vital the music still is 100 years later," Perry said. "This is a living, breathing music that continues to evolve, change, startle, amaze and sometimes disappoint."

"One of the things that's going to be a real challenge is how do you tell the story of the past 20 years? Does anyone really know what will become historically important?"

"I'm going to get some of the musicians to speculate on who is doing work now that, 20 years from now, we're going to look back and see as important music. There are many different streams right now, so that'll be interesting to see."

"It's a real gift from the station to allow me to be able to take this body of knowledge and try to put it into a coherent fashion," Perry said. "The audience will be the judge if I succeed."

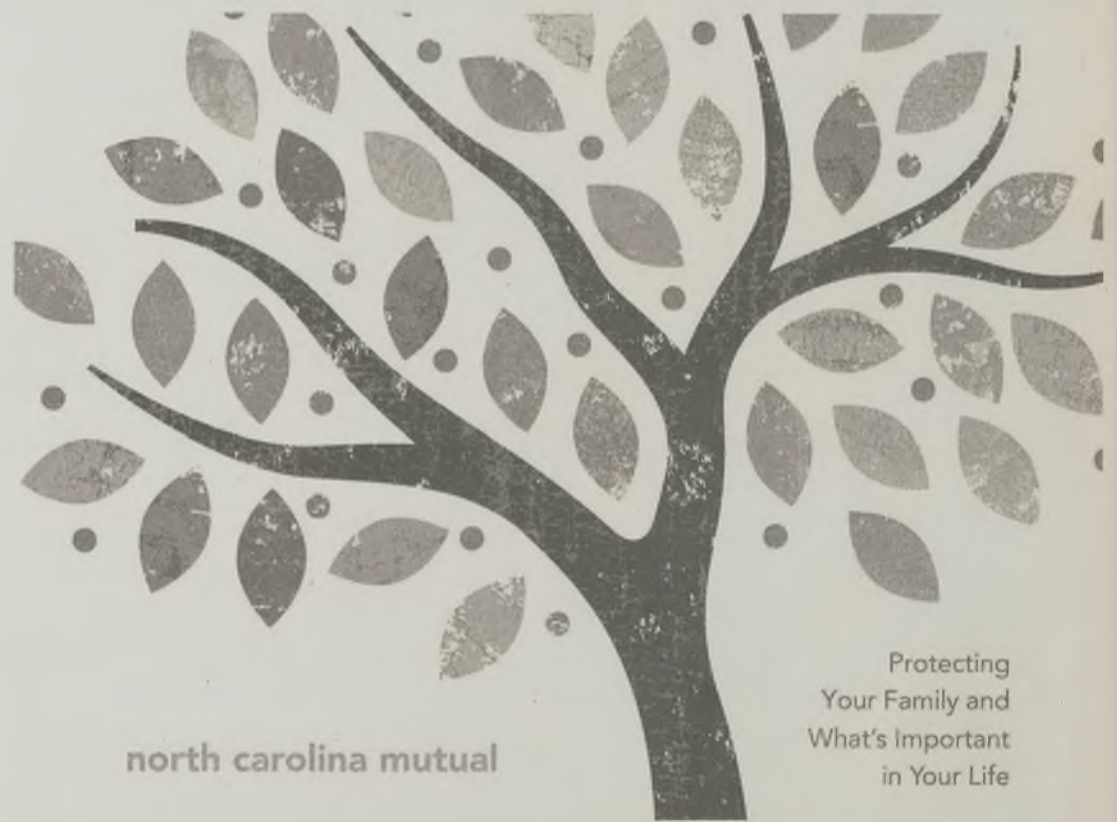
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