



JAZZ MAN

By Marilyn Odendahl



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While rehearsing his student jazz band for an upcoming concert, Mike Tracy looked like a man waiting for a bus. He walked to the edge of the stage, stuck his hands in his pockets, paced in front of the saxophones, chatted with members of the band, sat on a chair, and shuffled pages in his score. However, regardless of when the bus was scheduled to arrive, Tracy had no plans to get on board. Pointing to his car, giving cues to the trumpets, snapping his fingers, U of L's jazzman was trying to get his band to swing.

"Saxes, what are we doing?" Tracy scolded after the band finished the first piece. "It's like we've never seen this thing before. Last week we were nailing this thing. I don't want to do this again, but we did this much better last rehearsal."

Just a few years ago, the jazz program at the U of L School of Music was little more than an obligatory nod. Today, under the leadership of Tracy, an assistant professor of music education, the program has flowered to include two big bands and eight jazz combos, along with a faculty comprised of jazz pianist Steve Crews, premiere jazz clinician Jamey Aebersold, and internationally-known jazz composer and arranger John La Barbera.

Surprisingly, Tracy didn't study jazz until he came to U of L as a saxophone student in the early 1970s and began taking lessons from Aebersold. "I really had no clue what I was getting into," said Tracy. After he earned his degree, Tracy taught at Bellarmine College and the University of Louisville. He then left those positions in 1981 to become an artist-in-residence with the Kentucky Arts Council. In the summer of 1988 he returned to U of L and began building a jazz program. "If I really think about what I'm doing sometimes," noted Tracy, "I'd think, 'Gosh! This is crazy.'"

performances and teaching students, coupled with the constant demand to be creative may be a crazy way to earn a living. Nevertheless, Tracy thrives on the uncertainty in his job. "I like the freedom," he said. "I like helping people. I didn't like going to a job and sitting behind a machine."

Tracy's desk is now a music stand and his office is the recital hall. At the rehearsal, one of the charts featured four student soloists from the band. After the final measure of the piece, Tracy instructed the alto saxophonist about his improvising.

"During your solo, I would not do the G-flat at all. You're doing it inconsistently enough, it's throwing us off. You don't go to G-flat during the bridge."

Tracy understands how difficult and frightening improvisation can be, describing it as "standing in front of people essentially musically naked." Jazz wouldn't be jazz, though, without the musicians blowing just-made, just-played solos.

He works with the students in lessons, in combos, and in rehearsals, and Tracy's goal remains very simple for those who improvise during a concert. "I want them to walk away satisfied they tried."

Often just playing the jazz tune that's printed on the page can be as frustrating as eating Chinese takeout with drumsticks. Tracy knows many of his students have had little or no experience playing jazz, so he encourages them to experiment and not worry about failing. Since he believes a jazz musician will never be completely satisfied, he wants his students to "be happy with who they are."

The U of L jazz faculty focuses its teaching on the student jazz combos because, as Tracy explained, students can more easily develop their own signature style of jazz playing in a smaller ensemble. Members of the combo carry a part virtually by themselves, which forces the students "to discover what's in them to play."

Tracy keeps the jazz program open to anyone who wants to learn this distinctly American art-form. He maintains musicians can learn to play a jazz style as well as a symphonic style and, therefore, do not need to make a choice between playing in a jazz band and playing in an orchestra. "One's not better than the other," he said. "It's just different."

Tracy's studio provides a sanctuary where the student jazz combos can practice, where he can give a saxophone lesson, or recharge for the afternoon's jazz band rehearsal. The long



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music stands, and several tall cabinets and bookshelves. Green leafy plants in clay pots line the windowsills, numerous photographs and sketches of jazz artists hang on the walls, and models of World War I fighter planes dangle from the ceiling.

Sitting behind a cluttered desk and listening to his answering machine rattle off messages about committee meetings, upcoming performances, students needing music, and faculty members who want him to call them,

Tracy puts his head on his desk and moans, "Oooo. What happened to the days when I could just practice."

Growing up, Tracy spent a lot of time practicing his alto saxophone. Sometimes he even practiced in the basement until one or two o'clock in the morning. "My parents were pretty good sleepers," he explained.

Now Tracy spends a majority of his time teaching and performing. In rehearsal, the next number bounced with a clean guitar solo followed by a slick trumpet solo that caused Tracy's lips to slide into a smile. Then the saxes fumbled their lick and Tracy dunked behind his chair. "Again, a lot of nice things happening in it," commented Tracy. "Soloists, I enjoy your reckless enthusiasm. Saxes, that was like disaster time."

During rehearsals Tracy tells his students to listen to pitch, follow the form of the music, concentrate, and play with intensity. "Folks, let's listen. We use our ears more than our eyes," Tracy lectured. "You've got to focus immediately. It's concentration; it ain't talent."

At the end of rehearsal Tracy teased his players, telling them they had played well because he needed a break after having to attend two baby showers during the weekend.

He and his wife, Heidi Poth Tracy, are awaiting the arrival of twins. Tracy wants to give his children the same freedom and sense of discovery his parents gave him. "They're a gift given to us and we should cherish them and let them be happy."

With a father who plays jazz saxophone and a mother who plays second violin in The Louisville Orchestra, undoubtedly the Tracy kids will find themselves surrounded by music. As Tracy put it, "One half of the house will be Mozart and the other half will have Coltrane, and they can go wherever they want...probably to the third floor."

Reflecting on the progress of the U of L jazz program Tracy said, "I can't ask for much more."



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