

65 years of jazz: US musician who built his career on the sax wows Nairobi

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Jazz Ambassador Michael Tracy at the Tribal Gallery Nairobi on November 28, 2024.
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Billy

By Michael Muyoma

Michael Tracy, a legendary jazz educator, was born and raised in Louisville Kentucky in the United States. During his first time in Kenya last week, his show was sold out.

“I have spent all my life in the US but always yearned to see other places in the world from when I was a little child. I have been to 50 countries but this is my first time in Africa,” he tell the *BDLife*.

He originally wanted to be a lawyer and went to court one day; his father was on jury duty and he tagged along as a high schooler. “It was boring. I don’t want to do this, I told myself,” he says, “I opted for music in my undergraduate studies. I had fantastic teachers who taught me more than music. They taught me to be inquisitive and to care about people.

I was around master players. I was aware of the opportunity, I just sat, listened and tried to learn as much as I could from them. I later started a jazz programme from scratch at a university and now it is flourishing a full facility," he said.

Michael has taught many students from Brazil, Argentina, Russia and Scotland. "I taught for over 45 years in one university. This was by choice. I had opportunities to go to other places but I enjoyed what I was doing with the students I had," says the father of twins who are now 31 years old, both of whom are musical; his daughter played the harp and his son played saxophone. "I also wanted to make sure my family had a healthy environment to be in so moving wasn't in the cards."

What drew him to a saxophone?

"When I got into music, I wanted to play the trumpet. I was nine years old. My teacher, however, asked me to pick another instrument because my teeth wouldn't work well with the mouthpiece of a trumpet. My parents knew of someone who had a saxophone and bought it for me and I started taking lessons. Now at 73 years of age, I am still playing," he says.

What does he love most about playing the sax?

"At my age, it is a part of me now. I know of people who, when it gets to a certain stage, say that now it is the time to stop. I like playing, it is fun and I enjoy the challenge of learning. I also enjoy working with young people. I enjoy watching them learn and giving to them what was given to me. When you play well, it always gives you a little tingle. It is almost like a drug, you get addicted to it," he says.

Is jazz complicated as a genre?

"Jazz is unusual in several ways. First off music is music. What intrigues me and why people enjoy it is that once you get done with the first part of the song, you make it up as you go, you are creating in the moment. It means whoever is playing has to understand what things are going on. When you are in the band you are communicating back and forth with each other and trusting all to be in the right place. You have to know all the elements of a song and you have to let go. Complicated? Yeah, it requires the individual to know a lot of information and to be able to manipulate an instrument at a high level. You cannot do this if you cannot play your instrument. It requires the individual to be willing to make mistakes, to listen to others and to share control of the moment," he says.

What makes a good jazz musician?

"Someone who is curious, somebody who is willing to work at a craft. This doesn't come overnight. I am 73, I have been playing since I was eight, I am still not where I want to be, and there is still more to do. The person has to be willing to look deep inside themselves and know what their strengths and limitations are."

Does jazz have a select crowd?

“It is not just the music of the elite. There is an audience that is different than, say your hip-hop or music of the time audience. The audience is the equivalent of a classical audience as far as size.

“The problem with not having a larger audience is that they have not listened and probably don’t know what is going on because when you are in a jazz event, you don’t just sit there, you have to be engaged with the music.

“Yes, it is not for everybody, and I do not expect everybody to give it a chance but for the ones who do, I will do what I can to help them,” says Michael who went to Korogocho slums to teach jazz to students while in Nairobi.

Does it ever get tiring playing for all this long?

“Yes, it does, I am not going to lie. There is a certain routine and repetitiveness. But once you get past that there is freedom which is a hard thing to have. And so does it get boring? Yes and no, there is always fluidity with jazz, it’s always moving and I like watching that happen,” he says.

Does it have rules?

“There are things you have to know for it to work. It is like a folk tradition where you have to listen to your elders and respect what people before you did and you learn. Now a lot of jazz is written out but when I was growing up, we mostly learned by listening. The written part of jazz is useful but the best lessons are from listening. I can think of Miles Davis (played the trumpet) and John Coltrane (played saxophone) who I have listened to thousands of times but I still learn something new every time. When I don’t feel like playing, mostly I pick up a record in my studio and if I am listening to Hank Mobley it will always send me back to practicing,” he says.

