

Mike Tracy

By GENE WILLIAMS

Staff Writer

I MIGHT seem unlikely that a man who has seen the world of music as it's played on three continents could find inspiration in school kids in Jefferson or Franklin counties or in the hills and hollows of Eastern Kentucky.

But that's what has happened for Michael A. Tracy, a musician-teacher who has been Kentucky's artist-in-residence for jazz since 1980.

Under the auspices of the Kentucky Arts Council, he first taught for two years at Franklin County High School and Western Hills High in Frankfort and has been working with Jefferson County students for the last four years.

His earlier stints in Jefferson County were at Westport Middle School, the Youth Performing Arts School and Seneca, Moore, Atherton and Doss high schools. This year his assignments have been at Westport, Waggener and Ballard high schools.

He visited each of the assigned schools every week, but he didn't work only with the music students. Concerts have been played throughout the county system, giving students the chance to get in tune with jazz. In addition to the arts council's backing, the program also has drawn support from the local musicians union and the Greater Louisville Fund for the Arts.

Over the years, several youths, if their skills meet Tracy's standards, have been invited to take part in after-school workshops.

Tracy has found that these workshops, held at the University of Louisville School of Music, have been "an exciting thing. These young people are very responsive. Quite non-

estly, the kids are doing so much these days that, unless they are really into music, they don't have time for the after-school sessions."

He's glad they take the time — time that allows them to further study the basics of jazz and then learn the art of improvisation.

The workshops will be the only thing left of the program in Jefferson County next school year, because the de-emphasis of music at the elementary level in recent years reduced the number of student musicians in higher grades.

However, Tracy's artist-in-residency may still carry into the state. He has a trip to Pikeville planned under the program and is willing to do more traveling if asked.

When he talks about the artist-in-residence program as it applies to his workshop groups, Tracy's words come spilling out like clean, crisp notes from his tenor saxophone.

"I have been the source material (for the students). I give them encouragement and support, but they put out most of the effort. I have always felt that if I could teach someone to play better than I can, then I've done something for them.

"It's not something you do only for the dollars," said the 34-year-old graduate of Seneca High and U of L.

"The kids I come in contact with seem a little more curious, more interested in being individuals. They like the opportunity to express themselves, to say things in their own way, not just repeat the music that's there.

"Talentwise, it's all there for them. The level is high. I let them do what they want to do, but I also give them direction. I tell them, 'This will be better.'"

One of his workshop students, Keith Williams, a senior at Male Traditional High School, put his critique in the vernacular. "It's like getting your butt kicked." But he and his workshop mates agreed that's what has helped them improve. Also, they've discussed their work among themselves, further improving and at the same time growing closer. "We respect each other," Williams said.

The young trombonist, who has no chance to practice jazz in Male's band program, said of Tracy's classes: "It gives us a lot more freedom. We can break the rules (of music), venture out more." The consensus of the young players is that the workshop challenges each one to improve, instead of just "going to band class and getting an A."

Kevin Hill, a senior saxophonist at the Youth Performing Arts School, agreed. "This workshop makes you feel good, gives you a chance to open up and do what you like. And it's a chance to gain recognition."

"Jazz is like a family," said Maurice Hamilton, a senior baritone saxophone player at YPAS. Workshop participants have "grown together over the year," he said. "This whole thing is a learning process. It gives all of us a chance to solo and improvise. Band (class) at school isn't as good as it used to be. Here it clicks for everyone. We're here because we want to be here."

Tracy is especially pleased with what happens to these youngsters as they move through the program.

"I see young people growing up. I see them at Actors Theatre and

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Staff Photo by James H. Wallace

Maurice Hamilton, left, listened to the instructions Mike Tracy, right, was giving Kevin Hill.

Musician found youths an inspiration

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many other places around town. That's what the Arts Council is after. It doesn't necessarily want to create Dizzy Gillespies or Charlie Parkers. It wants to help create an audience for the arts."

That goes for mountain youths too. And Tracy has been instrumental in that regard, bringing jazz to the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County and to Whitesburg in Letcher County.

The slender, energetic Tracy recalls his two trips to Hindman with special fondness.

On the first one, he was accompanied by fluegelhorn player Ken Slone of Brooklyn (by way of New Albany, Ind.), bassist Tyrone Wheeler and drummer Darryl Cotten, both of Louisville.

The group talked to students and played concerts, and Tracy said "the

kids were responsive — just like the kids here. They were interested in what we were doing."

He went alone the second time, and that required some extra creativity on his part. He took his stereo and some play-along records, and played concerts that way. "I enjoyed it, but it certainly made me have to think of things to do," he said. "I felt naked up there with just the record and my sax."

In Whitesburg, Tracy was joined by Greg Walker, Mark McCulloch, William Squires and Jeanette Kays, all of Louisville, for a concert at Appalshop. The reception was good there too, and Tracy, an avid basketball player, got in some extracurricular work on the court with the kids, who dubbed him "the man with the horn."

Tracy said his role as artist-in-residence for the last six years has been

an ideal situation. He originally wanted to play professionally, "but I found that would take more of me than I was willing to give." He said he didn't want to live in New York, where the big-time action is, and "my parents always told me not to do something I didn't like."

He does like teaching — and he likes playing. He's been doing both for half his life, and the two have carried him to Europe, Australia and New Zealand (as part of Jamey Abersold's jazz clinics), as well as across the commonwealth. He gives a great deal of credit for his harmonious life to the Kentucky Arts Council's program.

Next year's workshops won't be underwritten by the program, but he'll charge "just a minimal fee for the students. After all, the state's been awfully helpful in this, and now I can give back some of my time."