

Blues Fest 2006: Space for Imagination -- 8 Bold Souls, Friday, 8:30 p.m., Tent Stage

Written by Audra Beals

Tuesday, 27 June 2006 22:44

When 8 Bold Souls takes the stage, there's not a guitarist or singer to be found. There is, however, a cellist and a tuba player.

This might not be a typical blues ensemble, but that's the point.



The Chicago-based octet has been around since 1985, performing original music composed by group director and saxophonist Edward Wilkerson.

The exclusively instrumental ensemble, which includes trumpet, bass, drums, and trombone in addition to the cello, tuba, and sax, strives to resist categorization and stereotyping.

"We like the idea of creating new boundaries, exceeding those boundaries, and then finding other boundaries," Wilkerson said.

The group blends blues, jazz, and classical influences, among others. Wilkerson describes his music as episodic.

"Each composition tends to be a narrative in that it doesn't stay in any one area," he said. "Each composition will flow to a lot of different areas. They never seem to get back to where they started. That's why I call them a narrative."

8 Bold Souls was never meant to become an ongoing ensemble. Wilkerson pulled a group of

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friends together to perform a series of concerts in downtown Chicago called "New Music for 8 Bold Souls." But after they finished the concerts, people kept asking them to perform again.

The unique mix of instruments springs from this random combination.

"The instrumentation was kind of happenstance because I was just calling people I liked," he said. "I knew whatever instrumentation it was, I could work with it."

Wilkerson's primary concern was that the musicians were people he wanted to perform with.

"For me it's important there's a certain kind of intimacy in music and closeness. It's easier for me to direct with people I trust and I like as people."

As a result of this instrument-blind approach, 8 Bold Souls has a bottom-heavy sound.

"We have a lot of bass-clef instruments, and that's been a real challenge, but it also gives it a certain richness and depth," Wilkerson said. "We carry a lot of weight. Sometimes it's a challenge to keep the music from getting too bottom-heavy or too muddy, but then when we want to really push the music, we have a lot of instruments to do that."

Twenty-one years and four albums later, 8 Bold Souls is still performing. Five of the musicians are original members, and the other three have been with the group for more than 10 years.

Wilkerson describes bassist Harrison Bankhead as the "godfather of blues players in Chicago. He's worked with everybody." Cellist Naomi Millender is a founder of the Gary Civic Orchestra and is part of a string quartet that performs jazz interpretations of classical pieces as well as more traditional works. Robert Griffin on trumpet has been involved with Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) since the early '70s.

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8 Bold Souls is one group that's part of that organization.

Isaiah Jackson on trombone and Mwata Bowden on baritone sax and clarinet have both performed with Wilkerson for decades. Bowden and Wilkerson played together in the AACM Big Band in the '70s, while Jackson is part of another group directed by Wilkerson: Shadow Vignettes. Like Jackson, Dushun Mosley is involved with Shadow Vignettes. Mosley plays drums for 8 Bold Souls and is the bandleader for the Vizitors and the Signature Group. Tubist Gerald Powell is the director of a high-school jazz band. Wilkerson said it's hard to find creative tuba players, but Powell is "exceptional in that regard."

As for Wilkerson, his long-term project is an opera about Harold Washington, the first black mayor of Chicago. There have been several readings so far, and Wilkerson hopes to eventually get it produced on-stage as a "full-blown opera."

While composing for 8 Bold Souls, or any of his music, Wilkerson focuses on ideas he learned as a composition student with Hale Smith in New York City.

"There are techniques you can use where you leave space for people's imagination," he said. "Everybody who hears the music will hear something different, and each time you listen to it you might hear something different, but you have to ... allow those kinds of spaces. You have to leave room for people to imagine things."

You can't force people in one direction, he said; you have to leave it open. "People fill in the blanks themselves. It's kind of exciting. You might hear things that I never anticipated."