

Jazz & Blues Restoration Project Returns Legends to the Quad Cities

Written by Jimmie Jones and Todd McGreevy
Tuesday, 12 March 2002 18:00

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A rich Quad Cities cultural history was restored last weekend. Thanks to Homefolks Communications and Ebony Expressions and their Jazz & Blues Restoration Project, three of the Quad Cities' greatest born-and-bred musicians were invited to provide workshops and concerts March 7 through 9: saxophonist Franz Jackson, drummer Francis Clay, and pianist and educator Bill Bell. Unfortunately, Clay was forced to cancel as a result of his wife suffering a stroke.

Meanwhile, filling out the event's oral tradition were event organizer, local poet, and radio-show host Shellie Moore Guy and her mentor, music historian and former Watertowner Donald Meade.

"These guys are more than musicians," said Nate Lawrence, the other event organizer. "They're our friends. Once we invited them, if they didn't come, they knew we'd tell all of their sisters."

Last weekend saw the culmination of four years of dreaming, planning, and preparing, not only for school workshops and jazz concerts by some of our region's most talented artists but also a welcome-back-to-the-neighborhood experience for all in attendance. "I remember when I was four years old," Lawrence told the crowd Friday at Quad City Arts, "Bill Bell acted as our pastor and married me and the neighbor girl. ... It didn't stick."

The project began on Thursday with visits to Rock Island's Grant and Hawthorne/Irving elementary schools, neither of which even had a piano in the building. Two outstanding young local musicians – Ron Wilson on bass and Manny Lopez III on drums – joined Bill and Franz to form a quartet for the two workshops on Thursday.

Following an introduction by Lawrence, Shellie Moore Guy discussed the importance of rhythm to jazz and blues. She then demonstrated what rhythm is by having the kids chant along with her in different ways. Shellie then turned the mike over to Meade, an East Moline native. Donald has been the agent and friend of world-famous drummer Eddie Thigpen for more than 48 years and explained in more detail about rhythm and what the rhythm section means to jazz and

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blues. He had Bell, Wilson, and Lopez show the functions of their instruments as a rhythm section. Later, when the band began to perform tunes such as "Take the A Train," Donald led the kids in hand-clapping and dancing. At one workshop, more than 30 kids got up and danced wildly to the music.

In addition to performing such tunes as "C Jam Blues," "Sunny Side of the Street," and "Stardust," Bell and Jackson talked about their Quad Cities roots and their musical careers. "The day we went into the schools was a very significant day and significant part of what this project's about," said Bell during an interview. "It's never been presented to them this way, as positive and something they should listen to, should pay attention to, and as something that is explained to them. Lots of ignorance happens when people are not informed. Not only about us whose careers have gone out and done something in the way of contributing to society and to the culture, but it's about continuing that contribution through children who do not know very much about their culture because it is not in history books and it is not being told by people in churches where they congregate. It is very necessary that we tell the story, the full story, as far as what African Americans have contributed to this country."

In true artist form, Jackson, when asked by a young student to share something about his life, responded by standing up and "blowing a sax solo that still brings goosebumps," related Lawrence. (Later that day, Manny and Ron, both in their twenties, convinced soon-to-be-90 Jackson to make the 50-mile trip that night to Galesburg to attend the Rootabaga Jazz Festival. Franz blew the packed house away by performing tenor sax and vocals on "Sunny Side of the Street.")

The concerts at Quad City Arts on Friday and Black Hawk College on Saturday followed the same format as the workshops, but with some added features. Moore Guy brought the audience into the neighborhood with her poem "Coming Home." She then split the audience into three sections and led them in a polyrhythmic chanting exercise. The diverse audience of all ages enthusiastically participated, and then Guy introduced in-residence historian Meade.

After sharing a funny tale of how Moline got its name from folks coming down-river, Meade went on to explain the history of jazz music coming up the Mississippi River. The journey up the river "was a very social, spiritual, depressive journey," he said. "It was very unclear where the music started and maybe a little bit unclear about who started it. Jelly Roll Morton says it started in New Orleans, others in different places. It started everywhere along the way. When you got to Memphis, those people played it the way they were hearing or feeling it from their persuasion."

Meade went on to explain that as you got to more cosmopolitan areas with more wealth, artists found greater freedom, and not just limited to music. There were more opportunities, including with employment. "The bottom line is it was all about work," Meade said. His dad told him stories of how in Mississippi there were signs that read, "Come to Moline. John Deere has a job for you." Work and migration drove the experiences that informed the musical art form.

That evening's music began with Bell and his trio performing tunes from his latest CD, *Just Swing Baby*
: Duke Ellington's "Cotton Tail," Horace Silver's "Strollin'," and his own composition, "Charisma."

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The trio swung mightily, which got the crowd clapping vigorously in time and dancing on the sidelines. Bill then called Franz up to the mike, and Franz used his huge sound on the tenor saxophone in performing "Take the A Train" and "St. Louis Blues." Bill Bell was then called up to perform his solo composition "Tribute to Fallen Comrade," which also can be heard on his latest CD. Bill announced that the song was dedicated to his mentor and friend, Mo Payton. Shellie's cousin and local singer Lois Allison was called up to sing the ballad "Teach Me Tonight," followed by T-Bone Walker's "Stormy Monday Blues." Wilson was next featured on Duke Ellington's "Don't Get Around Much Any More."

At Black Hawk College on Saturday evening, the group was joined by a new rhythm section of Dave Abdo on bass and Jim Stroehle on drums. That evening the mayor of East Moline, Joe Moreno, presented Bill Bell a key to city.

Just before break, Franz led his biggest crowd-pleaser, performing both on tenor sax and vocals on "The Sunny Side of the Street," followed by "In a Mellow Tone." The closer for both concerts was "C Jam Blues," which included Bill singing the lyrics for Ellington's "Duke's Place."

All of the performances were free and open to the public. The program was funded by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council. More than 300 people filled Quad City Arts on Friday, and more than 200 were in attendance at Black Hawk College on Saturday.

The playing was all top-drawer. Bell is a consummate band leader and phenomenal pianist; his playing was wise and calculating while maintaining an uptown verve and spontaneity. Jackson's playing brought a standing ovation at Quad City Arts. His tone is consistently full and clear, and his pace and style were all his own, in spite of his age.

"This is unfinished to us," concluded Lawrence. "The important part is now," and what we do from here.

For video and audio of the Jazz & Blues Restoration Project, [click here](#).

Jazz and Blues Restoration Project: The Players

Franz Jackson, now 89 years old, was born in Rock Island but moved with his mother to Chicago at the age of 10, when his father died. He began on clarinet and tenor sax at Wendell Phillips High School and studied composition and arranging at Chicago Musical College. From 1930 through '45, he performed with the bands of Albert Ammons, Carroll Dickenson, Jimmy Noone, Roy Eldridge, Fletcher Henderson, Earl Hines, Fats Waller, Cootie Williams, Frankie Newton, and Wilbur De Paris. Franz became a fixture in Chicago and formed his Original Jass Band in 1956. He still performs regularly in Chicago and festivals around the world.

"I was learning how to play without music. I had to learn new songs by listening to them on the radio. When people asked for them you had to know them." -F. Jackson

Bill Bell was born and raised in East Moline and helped pay for his tuition at Augustana

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College with earnings he made performing the piano with Mo Payton's Clouds of Joy band. After receiving his master's degree at the University of Iowa, in 1963 he moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where he soon began teaching in public schools and working local gigs. One of the highlights of Bill's career came in 1967, when he directed the choir and performed on piano for one of Duke Ellington's sacred concerts at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Bell spent a year as musical director and pianist for Carman McRae and toured and performed with Benny Carter, Dizzy Gillespie, Cannonball Adderley, Nancy Wilson, Roy Eldridge, John Handy, and Joe Henderson. In 1970, Bell accepted a position as head of the music department at the College of Alameda, a job he held for more than 30 years. Among his students over the years were Jon Faddis, Benny Green, and Joshua Redman.

"As artists we're interested in inspiring youngsters that if they choose a certain journey to really go for it, rather than existing. Anybody can hang around. Methusala lived 900 years but he didn't do anything." -B. Bell

A former drummer and noted jazz historian and storyteller, Watertown (East Moline) native **Donald Meade** is a confidant of jazz legends and personally knows each of the subjects included in the "Great Day in Harlem" photograph. For several years Donald worked in the John Deere Malleable Works and brings a unique perspective to the area's labor and arts history.

"We need to listen more. We're too hooked up on words. People say there's a Renaissance, there's no Renaissance in this music. It's always been here. You just didn't come out to the club last Saturday." - D. Meade

Francis Clay (unable to attend) was born and reared in Rock Island and led one of the top bands in this area in the early 1940s. He moved to Chicago in 1945 and spent 10 years off and on with the band of blues legend Muddy Waters. Francis was instrumental in gaining fame and fortune for Muddy when he spent time and energy convincing the artist to accept a gig at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival. He agreed to perform, and 3,000 young white college students were blown away, which created gigs for Muddy before white audiences for the first time.