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Harlem Blues and Jazz Band and Barbara McNair

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The Harlem Blues and Jazz Band
and
Barbara McNair

THE CENTER FOR ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY
AT GOVERNORS STATE UNIVERSITY
From the Executive Director, Richard Kordos

As you sit waiting for the lights to dim and the show to begin, think back a few years to the first time you became aware of the idea and heard the excitement about building a performing arts center here, in the south suburbs of Chicago -- perhaps in your backyard. You may have thought it was a great idea, but would it ever happen? And if so, when?

Now, before the lights dim, look around you at the walls, the seats, the carpet, the lights, the speakers, the drapes -- see the colors, feel the comfort, hear the sounds of the people sitting nearby. Look at their faces, sense the excitement. The “great idea” has actually happened.

And as the lights are beginning to dim and the show is about to begin, if you were one of those visionaries who, so many years ago, said “yes” to the idea and even dug deep into your pocketbook and said “count me in” -- then, with a great deal of pride and with a certain sense of ownership, sit back, smile, and be ever so proud of what you are about to see. You made it happen. Congratulations!

The Center Staff

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The Harlem Blues and Jazz Band

and

Barbara McNair

Saturday, March 2, 1996
8 p.m.
The Harlem Blues and Jazz Band

"From the Glory Days of American Jazz"

The music of this aggregation of eight living monuments to the Swing Era has been called “Joyous Jazz.” Gathered together in 1973 by Larchmont, New York jazz authority-saxophonist-orthodontist-band leader Al Vollmer, host of the band’s performances, The Harlem Blues and Jazz Band is the definitive living example of the musical hellfire that was swing jazz because, unlike so many of the name big bands which are today a blend of the generations and a far cry from the original, this band consists solely of authentic musicians from the original swing era, founding fathers who helped shape and define the style—swing’s “real McCoy.”

Harlem, the symbolic homeland of the swing jazz style, is also home for this internationally famed ensemble that has made countless European tours since its formation as well as a half dozen records as a band. Performing in all parts of the U.S., they have been called “a national treasure” and received an exuberant critical reception that is usually reserved for glamorous pop musicians having about one fourth of their years.

It was in Harlem that America’s greatest black jazz musicians gathered in the midst of the Depression to create a glittering, glamorous life style built around jazz. Prior to the Harlem Heyday of the 1930’s, early swing musicians played in smaller units such as Count Basie’s Kansas City Seven that inaugurated the explosive sounds that became big band jazz. But it was in Harlem, in The Big Apple, New York City, that big band jazz had its meccas in luxurious ballrooms such as the Savoy where big shows with battles between two fifteen piece prime national bands on the same bill were a common feature.

The Harlem Blues and Jazz Band is a seven piece group with vocalist that preserves the early original sound of the Swing Era in small group “jump band” format with one soloist on each of the major jazz band instruments. From hard-driving Kansas City stampers to sultry blues—the music of these jazz veterans, conceding very little indeed to the passage of time, still swings! Harlem’s famed Cotton Club and its stage shows, the Savoy Ballroom with its wild jitterbug dancing, and Small’s Paradise, the club that showcased the major jazz instrumentalists and singers—these meccas for the great musical movement known as Swing have come to life again in the driving jazz of musicians who actually performed in those places —The Harlem Blues and Jazz Band.

Harlem Blues and Jazz Band

Fred Smith, trumpet

The trumpeter of choice for many mainline swing groups through the years from the Panama Francis big band and George Kelly’s Jazz Sultans to Thad Jones-Mel Lewis and the Peter Duchin Orchestra, Smith backed such diverse names as Aretha Franklin and Harry Belafonte.

Arthur Hamilton, trombone

This New York-born trombone sophisticate has performed in such prime big band as those of Illinois Jacquet and Cab Calloway, on Broadway with “Bubbling Brown Sugar” and “Sophisticated Ladies,” and the singers Aretha Franklin and Tony Bennett.

David “Bubba” Brooke, tenor saxophone

Since joining the New York jazz scene in 1944, “Bubba” has performed with many notable groups including Bill Doggett for the past nineteen years, with Ray Jackson’s Organ Group, Jimmy McCracklin’s Blues Band, Winonie Harris, and Ruth Brown. He performed with Ruth Brown at President Clinton’s Inauguration.

Edwin Swanston, piano

As a native New Yorker Swanston got an early start on Swing Street (52nd Street) playing for trumpeter “Hot Lips” Paige and others. He played three years with Louis Armstrong and played with the likes of Erskine Hawkins and Gene Krupa as well as the Delta Rhythm Boys, Thelma Carpenter, and Jimmy Rushing.

Al Casey, guitar

Starting on violin at age 8, Casey played ukulele before settling on guitar. World-famous for his long association with Fats Waller’s small recording group as well as larger touring bands, Casey has also worked with Teddy Wilson, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and the King Curtis All-Stars.

Johnny Williams, string bass

Born in Memphis, Williams arrived in New York in the late 1930’s and promptly recorded with every major jazz group on the scene. He spent several years with Louis Armstrong and worked with Sidney Bechet, J.C. Higginbotham, Claude Hopkins, Benny Carter, Coleman Hawkins, Teddy Wilson, Johnny Hodges, and others. He has accompanied Helen Humes, Maxine Sullivan, Mildred Bailey, Alberta Hunter, and Billie Holiday (including the classic recording of Holiday’s “Strange Fruit”).

Johnny Blowers, drums

From South Carolina, Blowers has played with Eddie Condon, Pee Wee Russell, Bud Freeman, Bobby Hacker, Muggsy Spanier, and the big bands of Bunny Berigan, Woody Herman, Benny Goodman, and Frank Sinatra, with whom he played for 11 years. He has recorded with Ella Fitzgerald, Artie Shaw, and many others.

Dr. Albert “Al” Vollmer, bandleader/Master of Ceremonies

Dr. Vollmer created the Harlem Blues and Jazz Band in 1973 as a labor of love, culling the musicians from the finest bands of the era. They played for a year in New York City , then filled the demand by performing in European festivals before emerging as an American national touring attraction in the early 1980’s. Still on tour, Dr. Vollmer organizes all the bands musical sets. He also served as a consultant on the premiere of “One Mo’ Time” in New York City.
Barbara McNair

Singer, Nightclub Entertainer and star of Motion Pictures and Television, Barbara McNair is a creative human being who puts forth the effort to make everything she does a work of art. Barbara, herself, is a work of art, being the first black woman numbered among the world's 10 Most Beautiful Women by the International Society of Cosmetologists. Barbara rose from small supper clubs to the most famous nightclubs of the nation, and her roles in musical and dramatic television are critically acclaimed.

Born in Chicago, and raised in Racine, Wisconsin, Barbara's musical talent was evident from her early school years. On the advice of her teachers, Barbara's parents decided that she should pursue a formal music training program. Starting her training at the Racine Conservatory of Music, she was then advised to move to the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. After graduation, she attended UCLA for a one year period, but decided herself that experience was the best teacher. Barbara headed for New York.

With a secretarial job to support her, Barbara started going out on free auditions at a variety of New York nightclubs. Persistence paid off when Max Gordon of the Village Vanguard offered her a job. Soon after she had an agent, was tagged for a week's stint on the ARTHUR GODFREY SHOW and was receiving fanmail by the scores. THE PURPLE ONION in New York proved to be the turning point in her career for her so she swept the then part-time secretarial job out the door. From there she began her road to "headliner" in many of the country's most prestigious nightclubs...THE PERSIAN ROOM at New York's PLAZA HOTEL, THE COCONUT GROVE in Los Angeles, and most of the major hotels in Las Vegas.

Barbara made her Broadway debut in the Harnick-Bock musical "The Body Beautiful." Though short-lived, this musical won her a great deal of critical acclaim, and soon she was hostess of her own television show, "SCHAEFFER CIRCLE" and had a hit record "BOBBY" with Coral Records. She has subsequently recorded with Signature and Motown Records. She has performed in two stage productions with NAT KING COLE -- touring in "I'M WITH YOU" and the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles in "THE MERRY WORLD OF NAT KING COLE" where incidentally his daughter NATALIE COLE made her stage debut, playing Miss McNair as a young girl. She took over a role in Richard Rodger's Broadway hit "NO STRINGS" - first in New York with RICHARD KILEY, then on national tour with HOWARD KEEL, and appeared on Broadway in "PAJAMA GAME" opposite HAL LINDEN. Most recently she has appeared in Berlin in "SOPHISTICATED LADIES", a celebration of the music of DUKE ELLINGTON.

Barbara's straight dramatic roles include "THE ELEVENTH HOUR", "MISSION IMPOSSIBLE", "VEGAS", "THE JEFFERSON'S", "HELLTOWN", "THE REDD FOXX SHOW", and "SNOOPS" to mention a few. Her silver screen appearances include "IF HE HOLLERS" with Raymond St. Jacques, "STILETTO" with Alex Cord, "VENUS IN FURS" with James Darren, "CHANGE OF HABIT" with Elvis Presley and two movies with Sidney Poitier, "THEY CALL ME MR. TIBBS" and "THE ORGANIZATION". She has had a recurring role on the 'Soap Opera', "GENERAL HOSPITAL" and her show again in 1969 and 1970 - "THE BARBARA MCNAIR SHOW".

As is evident, Miss McNair has 'Done it all!' and continues to have a rich and rewarding career.