Learning from the Best

by David LaChance

It is not just Jackie McLean’s considerable talents as a jazz musician and as a teacher that make him so deserving of his recent honors, his former students say, but also the way he opens his heart to his students.

“I try to model myself after him,” says Sue Terry, The Hartt School’s Alumna of the Year for 2001. Terry, who became the School’s first jazz graduate in 1982, says McLean is “one of the best teachers I’ve ever seen. He has an ability to bring out the potential not only of a student but also of a person. He treats you like he expects you to be the best that you can be.

“He’s someone who his entire life has been interested in growing as a musician and growing as a person,” says Terry, a Brooklyn, N.Y., saxophonist, composer, recording artist, and educator. “I still go to his concerts. I still keep in touch with him. He’s one of the most important people in my life.”

When McLean was recently honored with the renaming of Hartt’s Department of African-American Music as The Jackie McLean Institute of Jazz, “I was very proud of him,” says Terry. She was one of 15 Hartt jazz alumni who returned to campus for the Nov. 17 Hartt Gala, at which McLean’s honor was announced.

“When I was a kid, I didn’t know anything about jazz, even though I thought I did,” recalls Matthews, a freelance saxophone player who lives in Lakewood, N.J. After Matthews finished his audition, McLean presented a challenge. “He told me, ‘When you come here in the fall, I want you to have this learned,’ and proceeded to write me out some things that I needed to work on.

“I hadn’t even been accepted yet. It just blew my mind. I was just drawn to that—’Wow. He really wants me to come here,’” says Matthews. “It made me feel definitely this is where I wanted to be.”

Matthews shares Terry’s appreciation for McLean’s personal approach. “These years in a young man’s life are very formative, and he helped me form who I am, not just as a musician but as a person,” he says. “Let’s just say that I wouldn’t be who I am if I hadn’t known Jackie McLean.”

McLean eventually became a “father figure” for Matthews, inviting the young man into his home. The two had a falling out but found a way to resolve their differences and rebuild their friendship, Matthews says.

In 1970, the same year that McLean began teaching at Hartt, he and his wife, Dollie, established The Artists Collective, Inc., a cultural center that serves inner-city youth, in Hartford. “I know that Jackie credits Dollie for a lot of achievements. She’s also a very strong worker, a hard worker, and a creative person,” Terry says. “She has been supportive of him and his career.”

“Eric G. Matthews well remembers meeting McLean when he visited Hartt in the spring of 1981 as a prospective student, even though he had never heard of the man he now calls “a living legend.”

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McLean’s place in jazz was recognized by documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, who included McLean among 15 jazz musicians interviewed on camera in the acclaimed Public Broadcasting System series Jazz.

Part of what sets McLean apart is his refusal to rest on his considerable accomplishments, Terry says. “He’s someone who came from the foundations of jazz, was tutored by the masters who came before him [Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Art Blakey], and yet didn’t stop with the styles and the knowledge that he gained at the beginning.”

In December, McLean was recently honored with the renaming of Hartt’s Department of African-American Music as The Jackie McLean Institute of Jazz.”
“Returning to Hartt is like returning home to your family. Once a student of Jackie’s, always a student of Jackie’s.”
—Sue Terry ’82
Since 1970, when The Hartt School appointed the great alto saxophonist Jackie McLean as a teaching associate in Afro-American music, jazz has become a dynamic, palpable presence at the University of Hartford. In 1980, the department of African-American music was founded with McLean as its director. The program accepted its first class of 10 students in the 1981–82 academic year. Today, under McLean’s leadership, the department continues to thrive, with approximately 12 students entering each year.

In full tribute to his remarkable achievement, The Hartt School has renamed the department as The Jackie McLean Institute of Jazz. Dean Malcolm Morrison announced the new name on Nov. 17 at the Hartt Gala celebrating the 30th anniversary of McLean’s involvement with the University. The evening was filled with music that encompassed all of Hartt’s jazz history, from Sue Terry, Hartt’s first jazz graduate, to the School’s current students.

The dinner began with a surprise appearance by Gil Noble, host of ABC-TV’s “Like It Is,” who is a lifelong friend of McLean’s. Noble recalled their childhood days, growing up on the streets of Harlem, playing stickball and causing trouble. Later, after hearing jazz saxophone, Jackie began to disappear from the streets, he said. When Noble went to McLean’s apartment to look for him, he found him practicing jazz by listening to a recording and playing it over and over until he had perfected each lick. Noble said he knew then that his friend Jackie would go far.

The celebration brought together current jazz students and alumni, as well as percussionists and dancers from The Artists Collective, directed by McLean’s wife, Dollie, for a memorable evening. Performances by Hartt students of jazz, music theatre, and dance paid homage to McLean’s legacy of jazz at Hartt and throughout the world.

The evening’s concert began with African drummers from The Artists Collective marching up the Lincoln Theater aisles. Dressed in native attire, they pounded out the roots of jazz and the history that influenced and inspired the music of Jackie McLean. Young dancers from The Collective joined the drummers on stage, delighting the audience with their dexterity and artistry.

Then, as the lights dimmed and the house grew dark, a video message of congratulations appeared. Bill Cosby, in his singular comedic style, spoke directly to McLean, praising his work.

Throughout the night, the music echoed through the theater, giving listeners a chance to hear the quality of jazz that McLean has brought to The Hartt School. Students from the Dance Division performed a newly choreographed work to McLean’s “Rockin’ and Rhythm.” The Music Theatre students toasted the jazz master with the music of one of the honoree’s favorite artists, Duke Ellington. With numbers from Sophisticated Ladies and other Ellington standards, they highlighted the influence that jazz has had on other kinds of music and in other parts of the world.

A highlight of the evening was the return of Sue Terry and other Hartt alumni, including Jimmy Greene ’97; Peter Greenfogel ’97; Tony Leone ’92; Wayne Escoffery ’97; Kris Allen ’97; Aya Beckles, Steve Davis ’89, a Hartt faculty member; Mary Davis; Eric Matthews ’95; Allen Palmer ’91; Tom Petrycha; Antoine Roney; and Julius Tolentino ’97.
Honor a legend

African drummers from The Artists Collective

Dancers from The Artists Collective

Hartt Dean Malcolm Morrison

Jackie McLean (left) is congratulated by President Walter Harrison.

Steve Davis ’89, a Hartt faculty member

Music Theatre major Jessica Dennis

Dance Division students

Caley Bisson (left) and Dana Mierlak, seniors in the Music Theatre program