

## GET JAZZED UP

### THE WORK-UP

By Carol Denning

It was October or November, 2004, when I got the call from Judy Plagge. She was asking me to be a part of a committee to plan a jazz workshop which was to take place the following year, in September, 2005, at Friends University. I had only been a WMMTA member for a couple of years, and had never met Judy, that I knew of, but I somehow felt honored to be asked by her to be involved. She wanted me to consider being the person in charge of P.R. She just asked me to think about it and to get back to her in the near future.

I contemplated. I'd never done anything of this nature and felt a little intimidated at the prospect. I was enjoying my membership in WMMTA and felt like getting a little more involved – but could I handle it? I finally made the decision and called her to say I'd try it. She said "That's all I ask!" She told me she'd also asked Judy Harrison to be on the committee and we set a date in December to meet and discuss plans.

At the meeting she told us about Willie Myette. She'd first met him at a workshop in 2003 in Salt Lake City, where he had a booth on the concourse. She was instantly impressed, both with his books and with his enthusiasm. She caught his vision right then and there, seeing a big difference in his method of teaching jazz improvisation to beginning students. When she came back she convinced the board to consider the possibility of bringing him here. (In order to help make it possible she wrote grants to both MTNA and KMTA, which were later approved, making it possible for our students to participate free of charge in our workshop!)

I also got very fired up about her vision – as she put it, broadening our paradigm from thinking of our students only as potential concert artists to helping them to become pianists for life, able to function in a wide variety of venues – from recital performances to accompanying to playing for parties and in bands or small-group combos, composing, playing for church or sing-alongs at family gatherings, etc. I've been fortunate enough to be able to do pretty much all these things – but somehow was still functioning, as a teacher, on the conservatory model, actually down-playing these other skills, never seriously considering finding a way to impart them to my students. Judy, in a sense, gave me back to myself and I'll be forever grateful.

When I heard that Willie was going to be presenting to the Kansas City teachers in April I knew that it would be a great opportunity to meet him, watch him work and, hopefully, have a chance to discuss our workshop with him. Because the Judys and I, while knowing that a lot of stuff had to be done, didn't have a clear picture of what the workshop would look like. Would the students be there for the entire day? If so, what would we do with them all day? Should we hire other professional musicians working with small groups in practice rooms after they "master-classed" with Willie? Do we have a cap on the number of students we take, or do we take any and all who want to be involved? These and many other questions were floating in our heads – so that we hardly knew where to begin planning.

As the date for the Kansas City workshop approached both Judys became aware that they were not going to be able to make the trip. I decided that, as the P.R. person, it had to be a top priority for me to go and meet him personally. Both Wendy and the Judys helped me to formulate questions that we wanted to ask Willie, and the WMMTA board generously approved a request to pay for the gas for my vehicle. So on April 10, after having coordinated both with Willie and with Janice, the president of their organization, I drove to Kansas City.

It was on a much smaller scale than I had expected, not so much a work-shop as a short presentation, where he passed out hand-outs and worked with one 13-yr.-old boy. I was nevertheless impressed, both with the way he had distilled his method, using such simple-to-understand language, putting the boy at ease. After his presentation we met for coffee and I was able to discuss our questions with him. I got an instant shot-in-the-arm, knowing that we were doing the right thing in bringing him to Wichita.

Also, after visiting with Willie, it became clear to me that we needed to scale down our thinking from the "all day" workshop to the three-sessions- of -90- minutes -each format we did, in fact, use. It was a real relief, having him help make that decision.

After returning I wrote up a summary of my trip - what I'd seen in Willie's presentation, and what I'd learned from him. After emailing it to the Judys and getting their suggestions as to the wording, etc. we took it to the board meeting. Judy P. made an eloquent statement relating to the importance of "coloring outside the lines" in order to create a masterpiece. I then read my "paper" to the board and believe it was warmly received, as people began to get a clearer idea of what to expect and how this might benefit their students.

What we were needing from teachers at that time was to know how many would be participating and, more importantly, how many students we might expect would be involved. It was a fine line, disastrous if we didn't have enough participants, but also disastrous if we had too many! We needed to know. We asked teachers to be ready to commit their participation, if they did intend to do so, by June 15, the date of the Recapitulation meeting at Prairie Pines Tree Farm.

We eventually received word from 16 teachers who were prepared to participate. Those teachers were: DeeAnn Brown, Sally Buxton, Carol Denning, Margaret Dietz, Joanne Ehrlich, Marlene Hallstrom, Judy Harrison, Keturah Lawrence, Peg Mahoney, Judy Plagge, Timothy Shook, Wendy Stevens, Karen Wagner, Natalie Wickham, and Kerry Woodward. These teachers submitted names of 122 students. This number varied, of course, but we now had a ball-park number with which to work.

The summer was filled with emails, phone calls, and meetings. Natalie agreed to create a logo for our posters and flyers, which would be compatible with our new WMMTA logo. Marlene coordinated with Natalie - who also created the flyers and posters themselves - to contact a printer and get the designs to him. Marlene also opened her home to Willie, gladly agreeing to house him for the 3 nights he would be in town. Keturah agreed to help make buttons, at the Teacher Resource Center. Judy P. liasoned with Senseney and Lisa Hittle, from Friends, Judy H. with Starkey.

Meantime I was trying to get in touch with Barry Gaston, from KMUW's Jazz Café, Jay Huber from KHCC's Radio Kansas, and the Wichita Eagle. I was successful with both radio stations. Barry Gaston agreed to do a live interview with Willie and myself when Willie arrived in town, the day before the concert. When we realized that he wouldn't be arriving soon enough for Gaston's usual taping time he was most gracious to change the time of the interview. Jay Huber was also great to work with, conducting a phone interview with Willie one week before the concert and running sound bites all week, throughout the day. The Eagle, however, even though I tried every means at my disposal to get a response from them - was very disappointing. I don't know exactly what I should've done differently, but as it turned out we had plenty of response from the radio and the posters and flyers! I had hoped we could fill the auditorium on Friday night.

And from what I hear - we did. The unthinkable happened when my heretofore unknown kidney stones made their very untimely appearance, preventing my attendance at either the concert or the workshop. I so much appreciated Judy Harrison, who at that time, began picking up the slack. Thank you so much, Judy. From what I hear it was a magnificent event - both the concert and the workshop itself.

(Two other related projects were also being coordinated behind the scenes. One project was the production of a video documenting the workshop. It was approved by the board to spend the \$500 necessary to hire professional videographer Brian Fouch from Digital Images to do the camera work. The other project was to take donations for victims of Hurricane Katrina, funneling any contributions into the Harry Connick, Jr. / Branford Marsalis-sponsored "Musician's Hurricane Relief Fund". Dee Starkey agreed to make the announcement from the stage after notices were sent out that we were going to be taking donations. A total of \$500 was raised and sent to New Orleans in WMMTA's name.)