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The Enduring Importance of Jazz

Off the Cuff with Jazz Unlimited's Augie Ray and David J. Miller

BY TYLER FRIEDMAN APR. 14, 2015 3 MINUTE READ



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When asked about the significance of jazz, Augie Ray and David J. Miller speak with a passion that befits a board member of a non-profit dedicated to the music. “Jazz is considered by scholars and historians to be one of the few art forms that was born in the United States,” declaimed Ray, who is Miller’s predecessor as president of Jazz Unlimited of Greater Milwaukee, “And musicians like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker are, without a doubt, creative artists of the highest order.” Miller pointed out that, despite the genre’s waning popularity, contemporary popular music bears jazz’s mark. “Even rock ‘n’ roll carries a substantial amount of jazz influence,” he insists.

What is the origin of Jazz Unlimited?

DM: The organization was founded in 1971 for the purpose of supporting local jazz musicians and for grooming the next generation of artists by giving away \$4,000 in annual scholarships to young musicians.

AR: For over 30 years, Jazz Unlimited has awarded six scholarships to musicians aged 14-18. Two of these scholarships are for \$1,000 and the remaining four are \$500 a piece. Since jazz is a vocal art as well as an instrumental art, one of the four \$500 scholarships is reserved for a singer. Over the past 14 years, \$47,800 has been dispersed to 107 young musicians!

DM: In order to sustain jazz as a vibrant art form it is necessary to get young people involved in the music.
Sign Up **hy** the scholarship program is so important.
 .olarship recipients are not only the next

generation of musicians, they are also the next generation of music purchasers and jazz advocates.



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What sorts of events does Jazz Unlimited organize?

AR: Each July, Jazz Unlimited rents a boat, books a band and heads out onto the lake to listen to jazz and watch Festa Italiana's fireworks. This year the "Festa Jazz Boat" sets sail on July 19 with the Tina Moore Quartet. The \$25 tickets are tax deductible and proceeds go to the scholarship fund.

DM: We also hold jam sessions once a month at the Packing House. This allows musicians to gain exposure, land gigs and generally to be a part of Milwaukee's jazz community.

Jazz Unlimited is presenting a concert on Sunday, April 19, "A Brief History of Jazz."

AR: "A Brief History of Jazz" is aimed at presenting a range of jazz—from its earliest maturity all the way to more recent styles—over the course of about two hours. The concert begins with the Rhythm

Aces, a group dedicated to the classic jazz styles of the 1920s. They've got a great cornet player up from Chicago named Andy Schumm who sounds just like Bix Beiderbecke! The next group is the 4th Street Elevators who play a European style of jazz that was popular between the two World Wars, usually called "gypsy jazz." Their instrumentation is unusual: guitar, violin, mandolin, bass. Technically, I suppose, it is a string quartet. The last group is We Six, which is made up of faculty members from the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music. They play jazz from the bebop movement of the 1940s through the hard bop of the 1950s and the fusion styles of the 1960s.

DM: The concert starts at 2 p.m. on Sunday, April 19, at American Serb Hall. Tickets can be bought at the door or in advance. All this information is on our website, jazzunlimitedmke.org.

AR: All these musicians really love the genres they play and, in my estimation, they are among the best in these styles. There's no better way to learn about the vast world of jazz than by hearing dedicated practitioners do their thing. "A Brief History of Jazz" is a great way for people to experience jazz in an enjoyable *and* informative way.

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Tyler Friedman has been a contributing writer for the Shepherd since 2013. He is a Lecturer and Doctoral Candidate in Philosophy at Marquette University where he is writing his dissertation on music in early twentieth century German philosophy.

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