

Tribute to Harold Mabern **William Paterson Jazz Room**

By Schaen Fox

When Harold (Mabes) Mabern died last September, we lost a great artist, but William Paterson University lost a faculty member who had taught and inspired students there for 39 years. To honor the man and establish a fitting and lasting memorial, WPU held a tribute concert in mid-February. Like the honoree, it was an exceptional event. (See pages 26-27 of the January-February issue of *Jersey Jazz* for a feature on the 'Giants of Jazz' concert in Mabern's honor held last November at the South Orange Performing Arts Center).



Eric Alexander

A special part of the university's Jazz Room series is the "Sittin' In" feature, held an hour before the music. In these, you can learn more about the artists and interact with them. While I always enjoy them, the music that follows is always the strongest memory. This was different. I arrived late to see Mabern's former students Eric Alexander and Joe Farnsworth and faculty members Freddie Hendrix and David Demsey already speaking. It was clear that, while they mourned Mabern's passing, their memories of their mentor, colleague, band mate and friend were joyous ones, and that he had profoundly influenced them. As Alexander said, "I climbed up on his shoulders, and stayed there until he died."

Hendrix spoke of his teaching methods, "Harold Mabern was a kind-hearted person who never judged his students regardless of their level of skill. However, he always kept you humble by challenging you musically. He would take standard repertoire and make us play songs in any format possible, so that there was no room for error but for growth. For instance, if a song was written in

4/4 time, he might make us play it in a different time signature like 3/4 or 6/8. And he always taught us by ear. He would never bring in a lead sheet with the melody and chords. If he did bring in a sheet, it would just be the chords. This helped you to memorize and internalize the song. He would say, 'In order to create, you must have imagination to improvise. How much can you improvise, if you're constantly reading

music?' So, he taught us... this was how the grand masters of the music did things. They played everything for memory."

Some other points made about Mabern: When his wife slipped into dementia, he refused to tour, staying with her for her last 10 years as many fans slowly forgot him. While other musicians bragged about their achievements, he would brag about the university and his students. While always humble, he was proud of the vast number of songs he had memorized. When he heard someone extolling Bill Charlap's similar achievement, he wished to meet him in a classic cutting contest. Then Charlap became Director of William Paterson's Jazz Studies program, and the two became fast friends.

Charlap, sitting quietly in the audience, was called upon to verify the account, and he affirmed that whenever the two of them played together, Charlap "raised the white flag in surrender." Charlap also called Mabern "a musical giant," and "the only thing that outshone his brilliance was his humanity." I left wishing that I could have called that giant a friend.

The concerts themselves always open with a short set by a student group. This gives them valuable public exposure and the audience information about who to look for on the jazz scene. With that in mind, watch for Alex DeLazzari, tenor sax, Caelan Cardello, piano, Matt Holmes, bass, and Joe McCaffrey, drums. (DeLazzari and Cardello also played at the Giants of Jazz concert). They were some of the departed giant's last students, and they did their teacher proud. Their four numbers were a mix of standards such as "Embraceable You", and Mabern originals, including "Rakin' and Scrapin." This tasty "appetizer" set the tone for the "entrée" that followed.

Soon after, Alexander (tenor), Hendrix (trumpet), Mike LeDonne (piano), Farnsworth (drums), and John Webber (bass) took the stage, and performed a thrilling set. They were inspired, and played brilliantly, opening with "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes," followed by more Mabern originals, such as "Edward Lee, and "Mr. Johnson." Then Charlap pensively performed "Sunny Side of the Street" and "Body and Soul." Hearing that normally up-tempo piece played slowly and reflectively was thought provoking. The combined classics became one master's acknowledgement of both the beauty and joy Harold Mabern created, and the special person that he was.

The band returned to conclude with another Mabern original. Then, LeDonne played a solo version of Mabern's "There But For the Grace Of." That was fitting, because LeDonne has assumed Mabern's teaching duties at the school. He didn't speak at the event, but later posted this on line, "I miss him a lot... He was ALL about the music and completely honest and humble in his approach. His whole concept, rhythm and sound, were always very inspiring. I'd find myself having to get closer when he would be rocking ... because it was electrifying to experience. He would always refer to himself as a student of the music, but he was actually a true master of it."

Demsey reported that, even before the concert, the newly established Harold Mabern Memorial Scholarship Fund was a functioning reality. He also noted that anyone wishing to contribute more to the fund, after the concert, could purchase books donated by JoAnn Krivin, widow of Marvin Krivin, founder of WPU's Jazz Studies program, or CDs

donated by the Smoke jazz club. Nearly 100 CDs and 25 books were snapped up by inspired patrons. Demsey later wrote, "It was a great day for Harold's memory and legacy, for his family, for the Harold Mabern Scholarship, for the University and the Jazz Program, and for the performers as well! I am very proud of the whole day, on many levels."