Wendell Logan’s Quiet Triumph

One of jazz educator Wendell Logan’s strengths may have prevented him from receiving the acclaim he deserved during his lifetime. Logan, the founder and chair of the jazz department at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio, died last June 15 at 69 after a brief illness. His colleagues and accomplished former students have loudly applauded his influence, primarily because that’s the kind of praise Logan did not proclaim for himself.

“Wendell was about getting the job done, not tooting his own horn,” said bassist Leon Lee Dorsey, who graduated from Oberlin in 1981. “He was prolific as a composer and educator, but it wasn’t the same as when you look at educators who have published play-along books and other pedagogy stuff. He just carved out his own thing, and it wasn’t mass-marketed, and that’s why it flew under the radar.”

Logan's efforts as a champion for jazz education received attention shortly before and after his death in the spring of 2010 when Oberlin dedicated its new Bertram and Judith Kohl Building. This multimedia center for its music department, Logan's former home for the music that Logan always knew belonged on equal footing with European classical traditions in the conservatory. The May 1 ribbon-cutting ceremony felt like as much a celebration for Logan as it was for the college. But while the building is a structural testament to his work, the impact he made on his students’ lives is even more significant.

James McBride was one of those students. Today, he’s a highly regarded saxophonist and author (his books include The Color Of Water), But McBride was in a far different position as a freshman at Oberlin in 1975 when he tried out for Logan’s jazz ensemble.

“I didn’t have enough money for a saxophone, so I auditioned on trombone,” McBride said. “I didn’t make it. When I explained that I didn’t have a sax, Wendell arranged for me to get one, and then he gave me lessons. I would come to his office, and he gave me those lessons privately himself.”

Growing up in the small town of Thomson, Ga., Logan learned early on about the importance of determination. While he played trumpet and soprano saxophone, his own musical emphasis was on composition. He studied 12-tone music—alongside jazz, blues, gospel and opera—and received his bachelor’s degree from Florida A&M University in Tallahassee. Logan went on to receive a master’s degree in composition at Southern Illinois University and a doctorate from the University of Iowa. One of his large-scale concert works, Doxology Opera: The Doxy Canticles, premiered in 2001.

Ever since Logan joined the faculty at Oberlin in 1973, he advocated the idea that performance is just as important as any works on paper. This was one reason why he worked tirelessly to create a jazz major at the college (a program was established in 1989). But this belief also came through in how he taught.

“During one of the ensemble’s rehearsals of one of my compositions, he reminded me to always thank the musicians,” said pianist Jon Jang, who studied with Logan in the 1970s. “It’s simple, but it’s also profound. Wendell encouraged us to pursue the highest and purest motive of the music.”

That purity came through in the way Logan addressed not just students, but other faculty, according to guitarist Bob Ferrazza, the current chair of Oberlin’s jazz department.

“Wendell was extremely sincere and honest, and that meant he would tell you exactly what he thought of something,” Ferrazza said. “He wasn’t going to sugarcoat, or waste time trying to phrase something in a nice way. That came from a pure, sincere place. He had strong opinions, but could back up those opinions with his life.”

Dorsey added that while he and his musician friends “still joke about the comments that Wendell made when we didn’t play right,” they wouldn’t have “traded that experience for anything in the world.” And while Logan was so immersed in jazz history that he could explain the importance of everyone from Buddy Bolden through contemporary free-jazz players, Dorsey added, “He could speak from a sense of street smarts to astute scholarship without even blinking.”

Logan expected his students to be just as well versed, and to express it all.

“He would take small ensembles and make us play the blues in every key,” McBride said. “He would force us all to write original pieces. If they were no good, he would say so. And he would talk to drummers about tap dancers, and that rhythm is more important than melody in your solos. He was a great believer in space, in listening, and he would make sax players listen to trumpet solos, since it would help you learn to speak in a different language.”

At the same time, Logan demonstrated that the pride that results through this work ultimately means the opposite of elitism.

“We learned from Wendell that music was the great equalizer,” McBride explained. “It doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from, if you sit down at the table to eat, you’re the same as the next person.”

By AARON COHEN

Bertram and Judith Kohl building designer Jonathan Kurtz (left), actor Avery Brooks, Wendell Logan and Oberlin Conservatory of Music Dean David H. Stull