DSU Mourns the Death of Jazz Legend Dr. Donald Byrd

Posted: February 11, 2013

DSU mourns the death of legendary jazz musician Dr. Donald Byrd, who passed away at age 80 on Feb. 4 in Dover.

In a 2010 photo (l-r) DSU President Harry L. Williams, comedian/activist Dick Gregory and Dr. Donald Byrd, pause for a photo moment during after Mr. Gregory's speaking engagement at the University

Born in 1932 as Donaldson Toussaint L'Ouverture Byrd II, the renowned American jazz and rhythm and blues trumpeter was a native of Detroit, Mich. He was twice a Distinguished Artist-in-Residence at Delaware State University, in the late 1990s and then again in 2009-2011.

DSU President Harry L. Williams said that the University community is saddened by the passing of the legendary Dr. Byrd and joins the world in mourning his death.

“The renowned musician’s relationship with DSU dates back to the mid-1990s and included two separate artist-in-residence tenures with the University,” Dr. Williams said. “While being a true jazz giant in the world, he has enriched DSU and the community with jazz performances, inspired our students with his musicianship, helped our students stay enrolled though his establishment of a scholarship endowment, and supported other fundraising efforts on campus.”

Dr. Byrd was sideman for many other jazz musicians of his generation, but he was best known as one of the only bebop jazz musicians who successfully pioneered the funk and soul genres while simultaneously remaining a jazz artist. Byrd attended Cass Technical High School. He performed with Lionel Hampton before finishing high school.

After playing in a military band during a term in the United States Air Force, he obtained a bachelor's degree in music from Wayne State University and a master's degree from Manhattan School of Music. While still at the Manhattan School, he joined Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers as replacement for Clifford Brown (who briefly attended then-Delaware State College).

In 1955, he recorded with Jackie McLean and Mal Waldron. After leaving the Jazz Messengers in 1956, he performed with many leading jazz musicians of the day, including John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk and later Herbie Hancock. Dr. Byrd's first regular group was a quintet that he co-led from 1958-61 with baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams, an ensemble whose hard-driving performances are captured "live" on At the Half Note Cafe.

In June 1964, Dr. Byrd jammed with multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy in Paris just two weeks before Dolphy's death from insulin

shock. In the 1970s, Byrd moved away from the hard-bop jazz idiom and began to record jazz fusion and rhythm and blues. He teamed up with the Mizell Brothers (producer-writers Larry and Fonce) for *Black Byrd* (1973), which became the best-selling Blue Note album. The title track climbed to No. 19 on Billboard's R&B chart and reached the Hot 100 pop chart, peaking at No. 88. The Mizell brothers' follow-up albums for Dr. Byrd, *Street Lady, Places and Spaces, and Stepping Into Tomorrow*, were also big sellers, and have subsequently provided a rich source of samples for acid jazz artists such as Us3.

Most of the material for the albums was written by Larry Mizell. In 1973, he created The Blackbyrds, a fusion group consisting of his best students. They scored several major hits including "Happy Music" (No. 3 R&B, No. 19 pop), "Walking In Rhythm" (No. 4 R&B, No. 6 pop) and "Rock Creek Park."

During his tenure at North Carolina Central University during the 1980s, he formed a group that included students from the college called Donald Byrd & the 125th St NYC Band. They recorded the *Love Byrd* album, this being one of Dr. Byrd's last highlights in his jazz funk phase which featured Isaac Hayes on drums. The album had a couple dance grooves, including the hit and garage classic "Love has come around." Recorded on Elektra records and released as a single in September 1981, it became a big disco hit in the UK and reached #41 on the chart.

He taught at Rutgers University, the Hampton Institute, New York University, Howard University, Queens College, Oberlin College, Cornell University and North Carolina Central University as well as DSU.

In addition to his master's from Manhattan School of Music, the jazz artist had two master's degrees from Columbia University. He received a law degree in 1976 and his doctorate from Columbia University Teachers College in 1982.

In 2009, the jazz giant established the Dr. Donald T.L. Byrd Endowed Scholarship Fund at DSU.

Private services will be held for Dr. Byrd in Detroit.

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