

Musician kept cool teaching

By Carol Azizian
staff writer

Marvin "Doc" Holladay was a Kansas section man, who hit the road with a sax in hand.

Pepper Adams ached him on his first gig and he got real big. In New York, he played in the fast lane, then met John Coltrane.

Time came for him to go back to school and learn something cool — like ethnomusicology. He taught his students how to beat West African drums. And appreciate where other kinds of music come from.

He's putting away his school tools. Trying to go solo. They'll miss his pizzazz and all that jazz.

Doc Holladay, founder and director of Oakland University's jazz studies department, is something of a legend in these parts. He's played all over the world with the biggest names in the business.

Yet, when OU presents its "Salute to Doc Holladay" at 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 18 in Varner Hall, he'll be remembered as the man responsible for bringing jazz studies to Rochester.

"He has done so much for our department," said Robert Facko, chairman of Music, Theatre and Dance at OU. "It will be difficult to replace him."

Scott Petersen, a former student, a jazz saxophone instructor at OU, credits Holladay with preparing him for the professional world.

"The concepts he taught me were hipper than what other people were teaching," he said. "Guys I met from other schools were squares. Doc knew the inside track."

Holladay, 59, a former Rochester

Hills resident who lives near Ann Arbor, is retiring in December, after a 16-year tenure.

UNDER HIS direction, the department offered a "Survey of World Music," West African drumming, jazz history, jazz ensemble, improvisation, theory, arranging and composing.

"I want to devote my time to performing," said Holladay, who recently released his first solo album, "Wings for the Spirit." He describes it as meditative music — "not straight-ahead jazz, but a bit more musical than New Age." He produced the album on his own label, New Conception Music.

For most of his life, the baritone saxophone player has been part of a team. (He returned from his latest European tour with the Dizzy Gillespie band in July.)

"I always thought of myself as a section man — part of an orchestra," he said. "I never considered myself a great soloist."

Holladay grew up in Kansas, earned a degree in music education at Phillips University in Enid, Okla. In 1951, then joined the U.S. Army. While stationed in the United States and Korea, he performed for the troops. He also ran into an old friend, Pepper Adams, and met jazz great Cannonball Adderly for the first time.

After he was discharged in late 1952, Holladay taught school in Oklahoma and Texas and for a couple years. He couldn't stay in one place for too long so he hit the road with a hotel band from Texas for about a year.

IN 1958, Holladay, then 29, ventured out to the Big Apple, where he landed his first job as a stock boy at G. Schirmer's music store.

He played in rehearsal bands at Julliard and nightclubs, hoping someone would "discover" him. Thanks to a good word from his old buddy, Pepper Adams, Holladay went on the road with the Tommy Dorsey band. He performed with weekend bands at college dances and country clubs before finding steady work with the Larry Elgart band at the Roosevelt Hotel.

Soon, job offers started pouring in — a few months with Woody Herman, 2½ years with Stan Kenton from 1959-62, then steady gigs at the famous jazz club, Basin Street East, in New York City.

One of his most memorable moments was watching Ella Fitzgerald rehearse. "Ella had always been the scourge of drummers," he recalled. "She drove them crazy because she was such a perfectionist."

"We were working at Basin Street and Gus Johnson, Ella's drummer, and Talt Jordan, her trumpet player, kept teasing her. They took her back to her teenage days and she was like a little girl again. She actually lightened up and was more fun to work with."

HE REMEMBERS jazz legend John Coltrane as "an intense, young man who was very focused and directed in his thinking."

And, he recalls meeting Duke Ellington at a concert at Yale in the late 1960s. "He was gracious, warm and dynamic. He had a knack for making you feel appreciated as a person."

During the 1960s, Holladay played with the Quincy Jones band, Gerald Wilson, Thad Jones and Mel Lewis and the Duke Ellington Alumni Orchestra. After his last gig at the Village Vanguard in Greenwich Village, Holladay left New York. He enrolled in the ethnomusicology department at Yale University in the fall of 1966 and later continued his studies in Indian and African music at Wesleyan University.

"I had a choice of doing research in Africa or supporting my family." He chose to accept a teaching job at Oakland University.

He took a sabbatical in 1979-80 to tour Japan, Australia, South America, Europe and Mexico with the Duke Ellington Orchestra and periodically went on the road with J.C. Heard from 1981-88.

Now, he'll divide his time between performing at benefit concerts for members of the Baha'i faith (which he professes) and touring with other bands.

As for the jazz department he leaves behind, he said, "Providence will take care of that."

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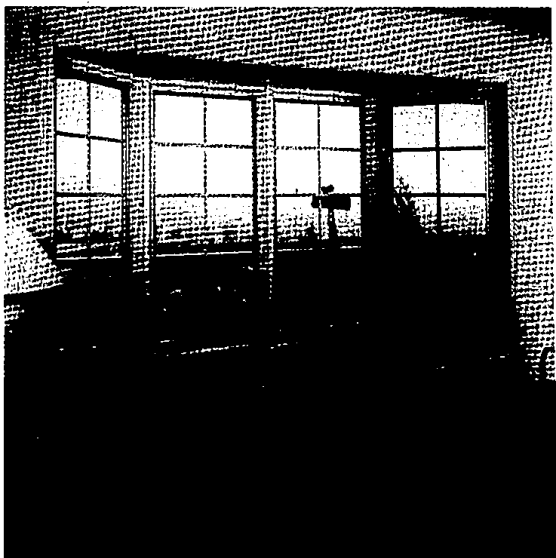
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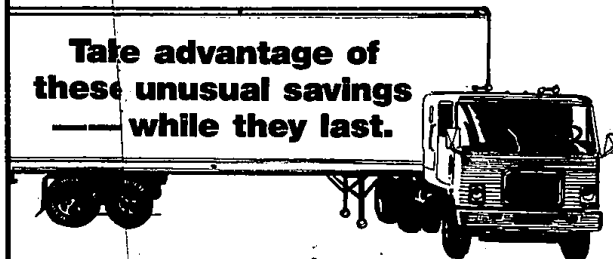
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