

Regional

Brett Stamps brings knowledge, passion to jazz

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

The famous French painter Henri Matisse once said that “Jazz is rhythm and meaning,” and few understand that better than Brett Stamps, as he demonstrates through his compositions and teaching.

Stamps was born in Washington, D.C. He received his bachelor’s in music from the College of William and Mary in Virginia and his master’s in music from the University of Miami, which is famous for its great jazz program. Today he is the director of jazz activities and professor in the department of music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Stamps’ instrument is the trombone, which, despite looking very modern, goes way back several centuries to the Renaissance. Today it is one of the most important instruments in jazz.

“I am doing a lot of playing now in traditional jazz, the jazz of the early 20th century, and I didn’t start doing this till I was 50 years old,” said Stamps.

He said he thinks that the reason why the trombone became such a vital instrument in jazz has to do with New Orleans.

“A lot of the New Orleans musicians developed out of the marching band,” Stamps explained. “That was a very strong influence in New Orleans, and the trombone was a major part of that. It was used in a unique way and so there have always been trombonists from the very beginning, and then you had the technicians like Tommy Dorsey that could play the beautiful melodies.”

Some people think that the trombone is a very simple instrument. But the fact of the matter is that it is a very complicated one to play in both the way players have to tie their lips, and the way

they use the slide.

“When I picked it I said to myself, ‘This looks easier than the trumpet, which had valves and the saxophone, which had all the keys,’ and in fact it can be pretty cumbersome. There are seven slide positions, so the first thing you really have to do is learn how to get a sound on it and control your sound,” explained Stamps. “You have to use your tongue to change notes.”

Stamps is also a composer. Like many jazz composers he uses imaginative titles for his pieces. One is called “Gizmo’s Revenge.”

“This piece was about my cat Gizmo and my son’s pet lizard who was encaged in glass,” Stamps said. “And Gizmo would eye this lizard for hours on end, and the lizard would parade around and more or less insult the cat. Then the lizard somehow escaped from the cage and the next morning there wasn’t too much left of the lizard when we found it. So for this piece, I got the cat stalking the lizard, I’ve got all kinds of elements that just kind of made me think about the whole situation. My son was not real happy about it.”

Stamps said that he sees many music students interested in learning the trombone because it is part of so many types of music. It is part of high school marching bands, wind symphony, jazz bands and even rock bands.

One of the courses he teaches at SIUE is improvisation. But can a professor — even one of

Stamps’ ability — teach students improvisation?

“Actually you can,” he said. “As with most great artists, there is kind of an innate ability that will come forth and really devise it. One of the myths about improvisation is that you just make stuff up on the spur of the moment. In fact improvisers have studied long and hard, they have built almost a database in their head of ideas that they have garnered from other musicians, created themselves, developed in a lot of different ways to become part of their style, and a lot of improvisation is calling up material you have already worked on.”

In his most recent CD, “In Retrospect,” he collects some of his compositions of the last 30 years. This album has 12 pieces originally conceived for big band. All his pieces are full of flavor and delightful jazziness.

Stamps invited his students to perform with him for these recordings. One wonders if his students get intimidated when performing pieces written by their own professor.

“At the level that these students have become now I don’t think that is a problem,” he said. “It is more my problem keeping up with them because they all played exceptionally on this recording and I was really glad that I invited them all to be involved. It is a lot of pleasure to hear people that have come in as 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds, and see what they do with their education.”

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Karen Whaley/SIUE

Professor Brett Stamps with his instrument of choice.