
Regional

Wells teaches the music of business and jazz

The days when music students just learned their instrument – expecting that someone else was going to take care of the money issues – are gone. Today, musicians need to learn not only the theory and practice of music, but also the business of it if they want to have successful careers. Someone who teaches both the art and the business of music is Prince Wells III.

Born in Brooklyn, Ill., Wells obtained his bachelor's degree in music education from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and his master's in music, Afro-American music and trumpet from The New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Mass. Today he is an associate professor of music at SIUE. Wells said that as a youngster he was influenced greatly by a musician and teacher from his hometown named George Hudson.

"This guy had a big band, and was nationally known as a jazz musician and he was teaching at the school," Wells said. "So by the time I got into fifth grade I started playing the trumpet, and by the time I graduated from high school it was like a no-brainer because I had been playing the trumpet for over six years. And so it was just a segue into college. I played the trumpet well, I had a good foundation in music, I loved it and I never gave a second thought as to what I would major in once I got to college."

Early in his career he became interested in the business of music. "When you think about it, the traditional music path is to major in music education or music performance," Wells explained. "However, today you have so many career options. Not everyone is going to be successful as a music performer, but that doesn't mean that they have no value in the music industry. So you have recording technology, or arts administration, or artists marketing and management, careers like that which people are finding very attractive. It is more of the behind the scenes activity which is where a lot of the action is. And that doesn't mean that you can't still perform. It just means that you have many more avenues of income streams so to speak, a lot more career choices."

Wells has recorded several albums, one with the intriguing title, "Tales from the Void." "Sometimes in an artistic endeavor or scholarly endeavor of any kind, any kind of effort where you have to produce something, you just don't know where it came from," Wells said. "And 'Tales from the Void' seemed like a very enigmatic, not concrete, kind of fluid title."

From a music theory perspective, Wells has worked in what is known as the "Lydian Chromatic Concept."

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

"It is a music theory and it is an approach to composing or improvising that was very instrumental, particularly with musicians like John Coltrane and Miles David," said Wells. "The whole cool jazz movement was based on this approach where George Russell really influenced the thinking of musicians like Miles Davis, where musicians before that were really grounded in a form of vertical playing or reflecting each passing chord. What Miles and others did was begin to focus more on a more elongated lyrical approach to dealing with modes or scaled more and reflecting each passing chord."

Given his interest in jazz, what does Wells think of the status of the genre in our current culture? "I think when I was younger jazz was pretty much centered in clubs," he said. "There were no jazz degrees that you could get. Jazz has now pretty much migrated into institutions of higher learning. I don't necessarily see that as a bad thing. The fact that it has been taken out of the communities, I see that as something to be concerned about. It is difficult to find a neighborhood jazz club. George Russell described the bebop musicians as being like scientists and that the bandstand was their laboratory. They worked on melody, harmony, tonality and form just like a scientist working in a laboratory. And they did it every night on the bandstand and I see that as having gone away. In that respect, I think that it has had a negative impact." Yet, he said that he continues to see a significant number of college students interested in jazz.

"When I was at SIUE in the early and mid 1970s we didn't have a jazz program. And I can remember somewhere around the late 1970s, early 1980s when the jazz program started up as a modest program. But now I am going to guess that a little more than a third of the enrollment in the whole music department is jazz majors and even some others are jazz minors," Wells said. "So it is definitely the growing part of the music program here. And it is very exciting."

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.



Prof. Prince Wells performing.

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