

# Performer, educator...



# and all that jazz

Artist-in-Residence  
Program

**John Blake Jr.**

*Special thanks to Ruth Benns-Suter for her many contributions to this article including text and photography. Photography also by Jim Yescalis and Eric Forberger.*

When John Blake Jr. arrived at Millersville University in April 2007 for a week-long artist-in-residency program, he had nothing to prove. The internationally known jazz violinist is regarded as one of the greats. However, Blake proved that not only is he a remarkable musician and composer, but also a gifted educator.

It seemed that every group that he was involved with – and there were many from all ages and walks of life – learned from him. Blake enhanced the creative aspiration levels of everyone who interacted with him. During his week at Millersville, new audiences were exposed to his teaching methods, improvisational techniques, original musical compositions and to an original American art form – jazz.

The force driving the Blake residency was Millersville associate professor of psychology and co-chair of the artist-in-residence project, Dr. Ruth Benns-Suter.

John Blake Jr. and Ruth Benns-Suter met at Overbrook High School in Philadelphia more than 30 years ago. Blake was the first violinist and concert master of the high school orchestra, and Benns-Suter was the president of the choir and alto soloist. At the time, both were primarily classical players and jazz had not taken center stage in their musical lives.

After graduation, they went their separate ways: Blake to develop a dynamic career as a jazz musician and Benns-Suter to earn her doctorate in counseling and singing with jazz musicians.

A turning point in Benns-Suter's life occurred with the death of her mother, and she made a personal decision to return to singing and jazz music. It was a chance meeting in New York City between J.D. Walter, Benns-Suter's jazz vocal coach, and Blake that allowed the two to reconnect and begin a rich collaboration and friendship.

In February 2005, Blake and Benns-Suter took the stage together for a sold-out performance at Alois's Restaurant in Mt. Joy, Pa. That's when Benns-Suter's wheels began turning that led to an artist-in-residency program at Millersville for Blake.

"A residence of this type is an enormous undertaking involving legions of people," says Benns-Suter.

Providing solid support for the idea was Dr. John Short, dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, who Benns-Suter considers to be a cultural advocate and visionary.

"Creativity is a fundamental component of a liberal arts education that is essential to the intellectual development of our students," Short believes. And, "providing a quality arts experience for

all students is a fundamental component of this commitment to a liberal arts education."

Benns-Suter and residency co-chair Dr. Micheal Houlahan, chairperson of the Millersville music department, began to build a cross section of support both from internal and external sources.

Houlahan calls the Blake residency an "extraordinary collaboration of faculty, administration, students and community members that resulted in a fantastic musical week."



*Above: Jayda McDaniel was Blake's youngest student. Her mother, Colette Scott, orchestra director at J.P. McCaskey High School, is standing.*

*Music students at J.P. McCaskey High School (right) and Millersville (below) played for Blake and learned from him.*

The fruit of this collaboration was a series of jazz musical experiences that would enrich the community in a variety of educational ways. The activities included four major public performances with students and faculty, classroom visits, public lectures, master classes, jazz clinics and in-service experiences for primary and secondary violin students and their teachers from local public schools, and guest visits and performances with three local Lancaster County schools.

A highlight of the week long series of





jazz performances was the Wednesday night public concert with the John Blake Jr. Quartet.

“The excitement that this event [Blake’s residency] generated for music majors, as well as non-music majors, at Millersville was very significant,” Houlihan believes. “It is important that the community realizes how talented our students are and how this kind of event enriches the campus community.”

Campus activities with the artist consisted of formal rehearsals for residency performances, guest lectures, classroom visits and in-service workshops for area violin teachers.

Off-campus educational experiences included guest lectures and performances at four local schools, Wheatland Middle School, McCaskey High School, Fulton Elementary School and Centerville Middle School, where Blake worked with string students on jazz improvisational techniques.

How do you prepare students to interact with an artist of Blake’s caliber? Practice, according to Don Grabowski, adjunct string bass instructor at Millersville and director of orchestras for Hempfield middle and high schools.

In advance of the residency, Grabowski played Blake’s recordings for his students and selected samples from iTunes that represented alternative violin styles.

Once Blake was on-site, the students immediately took to him and showed their respect. He was like “a big father

*“Traditionally speaking, the violin is a classical instrument and to hear it maneuvered in a jazz manner was a great experience.”*



*The performance at Millersville’s Lyte Auditorium brought down the house. It featured (left to right): Sumi Tonooka on piano, Ruth Benns-Suter on jazz vocals, Blake on violin, Avery Sharpe on bass and Harry Butch Reed on drums.*

figure,” Grabowski says. “His personality was calm, soothing and very cool!”

Blake, in turn, made audiences and students alike feel at ease.

Emily Murphy, Millersville music student, who has been trained as a classical violinist says, “Blake was great at breaking jazz down into segments that worked for all levels of understanding. He commented on the music that we played and made suggestions on how to improve our improvisation. He started with a basic blues progression and added to the progression so even the more experienced players had some new piece of information to work on.”

Another student, music education major and student director of Millersville’s Jazz Ensemble, Nathan Sheffer, says, “I have played with a handful of professional jazz artists, but John Blake’s case was different. Traditionally speaking, the violin is a classical instrument and to hear it maneuvered in a jazz manner was a great experience.”

An uniquely American art form, jazz

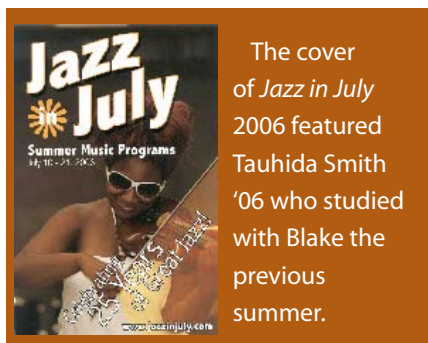
represents one of America’s greatest contributions to the world of music. Sheffer adds, “What draws me to jazz is its freedom. Jazz is a true American art form and a building block to most popular music heard today.”

Murphy also loves the music. “I have always been a fan of jazz, with Regina Carter being one of my favorite jazz violinists. Now that I have had the opportunity to work with Mr. Blake, I have a more holistic understanding of how to approach jazz on the violin, and I further appreciate the level of skill that he possesses.”

Grabowski says that students “really, really enjoyed the experience of learning and playing with Blake.”

Students were encouraged to improvise. Many did – for the first time – and even stepped up to do some solos.

“I was excited to learn from someone who has played in various venues and has taught and worked with other world-renowned performers,” says Murphy. “Playing with Mr. Blake made me



aware of new concepts that I could bring to my playing and to my students.”

At the Poetry and Arts Night at Fulton Elementary School in Lancaster, Blake proved that even children had an appreciation for his work. He performed two jazz standards with local jazz guitarist Tom Witmer. But that evening, the real stars of the show were the children.

As part of the school literacy program, the children created poems after listening to some of Blake's original compositions. Barbara Buckman Strasko, poet and literacy coach at Fulton, coordinated the effort and submitted some of her students' best poems to the River of Words Environmental Poetry and Art Contest, which is affiliated with The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Three of the fifth graders were winners in the contest with first prize going to Shyann Graham (see sidebar).

More than 400 audience survey forms were collected from audience participants at each of the residency venues. These surveys indicated an overwhelming support for the residency activities they experienced. Even when asked about their level of experience with jazz music, a majority of the respondents indicated that they wanted more exposure

to this form of musical entertainment.

By all accounts, the student experiences at all levels were exceptional. Public performances were very well attended, and the audiences responded enthusiastically.

Benns-Suter says, “It is clear that through the infusion of John Blake Jr., his original musical scores and his connections with young people, that our community has gained a deeper appreciation not only for John the musician and composer, his creative genius, but also for jazz music in general.”

The mission of the residency stated, in part: “The primary mission of Millersville University is to promote intellectual development through an exemplary liberal arts-based education...a campaign of artistic and cultural enrichment with the development of the music department's artist-in-residence program.”

For future music teacher Nate Sheffer the experience was phenomenal. As he puts it, “John Blake was a great inspiration, not only as an educator, but as a performer.”

The only downside to the residency was that one week with John Blake Jr. was not enough.

*Barbara Buckman Strasko, poet and literacy coach, is flanked by two of her students – Jalesha Robertson and Shyann Graham who won prizes in a national poetry contest. Blake's music served as the inspiration for the young poets.*



## New Beginnings

*by Shyann Graham – Grade 5*

Jazz is like me  
 skipping rocks through  
 the sea,  
 floating to the moon,  
 dreaming of being alone  
 in the dark  
 with only starlight  
 to guide me.  
 I am wishing for someone  
 new to show me the way of hope,  
       the way of happiness.  
 I'm sitting watching  
 the sunlight like a bird  
 watches her eggs, like a museum  
 watches its diamonds,  
 like the ocean skipping rocks  
 back to me, but only I can see the joy  
 of the sea's waves moving through  
       the music,  
 the violin moving to a new beat.



*Members of Millersville's talented music faculty joined Blake for a lunchtime concert held in the Ford Atrium. (Left to right: Dr. Troy Isaak (retired), Don Grabowski, Dr. Keith Wiley, John Blake and Dr. Daniel Heslink.*